

part one
COMICS AND THE MASS MEDIUM

It occurs to me — as I surf around the fifty some- odd television channels I get — -that television is an infernal device. Literally. Lucifer Morningstar, the Light-Bringer, Satan. Television is, after all is said and done, a little box of coloured lights with sound. Expressed a little differently, television is the sun and movies are the moon — television being a light source and movies being images that reflect a light source (the projector) from a separate surface. Right now I'm in the middle of reading Billy Budd Sailor and Other Stories, Herman Melville's last work. It's not exactly tough sledding, apart from the occasional word with which I'm unfamiliar or 19th-century concepts and expressions no longer widely used. It's a very rewarding book. The closer I pay attention to what I'm reading, the more I get out of it — particularly with a writer like Melville. Many layers of meaning which can be interpreted many different ways. Sill, I find myself drawn back to the television set.

I watch it, primarily, with the sound off. It takes a great feat, these days, for me to push the mute button to determine what is going on apart from the visuals. "Visuals." What a degraded, television-age term. The pictures, the images. All of television is degrading. I find the act of watching television to be 'degrading. Channel-surfing seems to me to be an act of small integrity — as if, by refusing to watch less than a second here and a few seconds there of Lucifer's Guided Tour of the various circles of his realm, I am somehow keeping my addiction to the sordid goings-on at a slight remove from myself. The Importance of Being Earnest is what the Light-Bringer is trafficking in these days to an unconscionable degree. Everyone on television is in deadly earnest. Their expressions are earnestly happy, earnestly concerned, earnestly saddened, earnestly outraged. They're not, of course They are just earnestly whatever-they-are-being-paid-to-be-earnest-about — or earnest about whatever got them into Lucifer's Realm in the first place if they're "real" people who are just visiting. I have yet to listen to any part of an episode of Jerry Springer — the one who has taken the Donahue/Winfrey formula and stripped it down to its purest essence — but I have watched a great deal of it. Everyone is earnest on Jerry Springer. Jerry Springer is, the audience members are, the hysterical-verging-on-homicidal victims/objects are. Even with the sound off (perhaps *particularly* with the sound off) the "game" is given away at least three or four times in each fifteen-minute segment. In the midst of snarling, snapping, weeping, and raging, the victim/objects will smirks self-consciously. Clearly — to them — the point is not what is being discussed. The point is not what a shambles their lives are or the crisis that has brought them to their ruinous and degraded state. No, the point is that their ruinous and degraded state has bought them temporary entrée into Lucifer's Realm, a Realm which, hitherto, they had only been able to watch like starving urchins with their noses pressed against the bakery shop window. And, clearly, they consider their temporary entry via to be quite an achievement. Quite an achievement. They are scarcely able to contain their joy at this achievement, and three or four times per fifteen-minute segment they are unable to do so. It is in these moments that the façade of what television portrays itself to be — as opposed to what television is, has been, and always will be — develops wide

cracks. The mask of portrayal slips, and the face of television's reality becomes plainly apparent. And the Light-Bringer trembles apprehensively upon his dark throne.

Rick Veitch, who does not own a television set (blessed and benighted individualist that he is), mentioned to me that the last time he had occasion to watch *Lucifer's Realm* in all its inglorious glory, he was struck by the extensive use of print on television as compared to his last visit. He's exactly right. Since nothing is being discussed on Jerry Springer's program, it becomes necessary to print an encapsulation of the "topic" in the lower left corner of the screen — "She Thinks She's So Hot" or "My Daughter-in-Law is a Slut" — the combination of the printed provocation and the depicted verbal mayhem, one supposes, being sufficient to compel the average channel-surfer to pause and hit his or her mute button. Commercials use printed messages even more extensively (having given up the ghost that we surfers can be compelled to hit our mute buttons lest we miss the lies being mouthed at each other by actors and actresses during a commercial interruption). Fifty years into television's short history, comic books have thus won a philosophical point: words and pictures together are inherently more compelling than sound and pictures together where there is a lack or a nearly total absence of meaningful content. More on this in subsequent installments.

Now, to be fair to the Prince of Lies, Old Nick, to give the Devil his due, there was a time when television was necessary. Television was necessary during the fight for civil rights in the American South. Without the televised pictures of civil rights marchers being attacked by police dogs and assaulted with jets of water from pressurized hoses, it is doubtful that civil rights would have come as far as they did as fast as they did. But, beyond this and a handful of examples — and viewed in the context of television's complete failure as a medium of communication (again, more on this in later installments) — television (daily and nightly) makes an unpersuasive case for itself.

There is a wonderful book Steve Bissette gave me called *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. It's the most wonderful, pointless book I've ever read. Pointless, because you could no more eliminate television than you could eliminate prostitution, gambling, recreational drugs, or any other powerful human addiction. I would contend that television is the worst of the human addictions for these reasons: a) its addiction base is nearly universal and b) it is consequently not perceived as an addiction by those addicted to it. Everyone watches television ergo television is not addictive. It's just something that everyone does. It's not only something everyone does, it's something everyone does and lies about. "Social" drinkers hate to be reminded of that six-hour binge last Sunday (hey, that was football — and, oh yeah, 60 Minutes, but 60 Minutes is educational. I learned all about that whatsiseame guy in the Middle East and that wattayacall organization of his and I forget what the other two segments were about, but they were educational too. Oh, wait — one was on Madonna, but it was still interesting), Yes, but you said that you only watch four or five hours a week (I DON'T WATCH AS MUCH TELEVISION AS SOME PEOPLE). What are you getting so angry about? Often a newspaper columnist of one kind or another will share with us the ordeal of how he or she and his or her family went without television for two weeks or a month or three months. Usually on a bet or to prove a point. The withdrawal symptoms are

described graphically as are illicit visits to neighbours or friends to get a “fix.” The article concludes with platitudinous observations about the improved family relations that were experienced, the diversity of interests pursued, etc., etc., even as the closing paragraph metaphorically presents the family decamped in the living room wrapping elastic bands around their biceps, plumping up their veins, and reaching for the cooking spoon and the matches and the syringe.

Picture the collective reaction if you substitute “prostitution” or “gambling” or “recreational drugs” in the above: “How My Family Gave Up Crack Cocaine For a Month” by Betty Hausfrau (Betty Hausfrau’s columns appear Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in the Gazette).

All protest against the analogy makes me snicker, you know? I mean, I am an addict. I’m a cigarette smoker. I’m a drinker. I know all of the rationalizations an addict uses; I know the paralogic inside and out It’s not hurting me (perhaps not, but is it doing you any good?), I work hard, I’m entitled to a few little vices (when did vice become an entitlement?), I enjoy it, all right? (isn’t there a world lull of better things to enjoy?), I DON’T WATCH AS MUCH TELEVISION AS SOME PEOPLE (what are you getting so angry about?).

Anyway, this is just preamble to my initial point — the foundation for this series of essays: There is only one mass medium: television. Beside it, newspapers, novels, comic books, movies, etc., etc. are of a size comparable to...oh...Cold Cut Distributors as compared to Diamond Comic Distributors, various breeds of house pets — big dogs and small dogs — standing around an elephant, tax revenues in any industrialized country placed next to that country’s accumulated deficit (deficits — talk about coloured lights and sound).

People in the comic-book field who are obsessed with making comic books more acceptable to The Mass Audience, to me, are overlooking the only salient fact which applies to the discussion. The Mass Audience has found its drug of choice. They’re all mainlining heroin (We’re all mainlining heroin), and we — comic-book people — wonder why they — non-comic-book people — don’t want any of this ginseng tea we’re offering. It gives you a pleasant mild euphoria, and we drink a LOT of it over here. What’s wrong with everyone else (we ask ourselves, hunkered down in our living rooms, tying off our biceps with an elastic band, plumping up our veins, etc., etc.)?

Television Rules!

What do most people watch on television? They watch the television that everyone else watches: the Most Popular Show on Television as the Purest Expression of Democracy in Action. Is it Seinfeld or ER? Roseanne or Friends? It used to be hard to tell, but now you can just watch Entertainment Tonight or the Hollywood Minute on CNN. We’re such total junkies We’ve gotten really curious about how and where they make the stuff. We’re even interested in what the people who make the stuff do when they’re not making the stuff. Answer? They’re shooting up too! Wow, I wonder what stuff the guy that

makes wry favourite stuff shoots up when he shoots up! What's Jerry Seinfeld's favourite TV show? I read in the paper that he's going to answer the question on 20/20 tonight. That's on at 9, isn't it?

Entertainment Tonight, the Hollywood Minute, 20/20, and suchlike bring the insurmountable problem into even sharper focus. The audience for a television show about television shows still dwarfs the audience for anything else by a very wide margin.

So, that is the foundation for this series of essays: television is the only mass medium. In part two, I'll explain why I've lumped movies in with comic books, novels, newspapers, etc. If there's space, I'll explain Way rock'n'roll was a good rear-guard action which failed to stem television's overthrow of human awareness, before moving on to the actual relationship between comic books and The Mass Medium.

But first, why television – the sun – and movies – the moon – are reaching towards a “size” ratio comparable to their Solar System counterparts.

Part two Calling Down the Moon.

part two

COMICS AND THE MASS MEDIUM

Call it the Alexander Syndrome, the largely submerged human instinct towards world conquest. Alexander, St. Paul, Martin Luther, Hitler — each in their own ways and with individual motivations attempted to convert/conquer their “known world.” Consider the Beatles, mindful of their place in the conquistador- scheme-of-things. While their music is still very widely listened to and their influence in popularizing the United Kingdom and marijuana, East Indian philosophy and garish Edwardian clothing (to name four disparate elements of their influence) is undeniable, it is girlishly long hair where their conquest is indisputable. Elvis had long hair but it was not girlishly long. It was hoodlumishly long (to coin a word). By the standards of 1963 most men now have girlishly long hair. That is world conquest.

Television has conquered the known world.

Like any great conqueror, Television absorbed what it could not destroy. It absorbed Movies (please note that these media are being denoted as Proper Nouns for a reason: I am dealing with them here as manifestations, icons, philosophies, expressions of collective conscious and unconscious thought — in short, as Beings). Picture every movie ever made in one huge pile. Now, mentally divide that pile into three piles: 1) movies that are being shown in theaters around the world at the present moment (not each individual print. That would be cheating. Every print of Independence Day would be represented by one print of Independence Day), 2) movies which are warehoused by their corporate owners or are otherwise unavailable to the public, 3) every movie that is being shown on television in the next lunar cycle (since Television is the Sun and Movies are the Moon, that seems to me an appropriate time frame), every movie that is available as a

videocassette, every movie available on every Pay-TV channel, every movie owned by Ted Turner.

Only Pile #1 could be properly termed Movies, and it is a very small Being as compared with Pile #3. Pile #1 exists in two forms: a handful of art-house films too small or (by Television's schoolmarmish standards) too suspect to be included in Pile #3 and whatever-else- Television-has-not-yet-absorbed-but-soon-will — that is to say, new films which have not been converted into videotapes, have not been shown on Pay-TV channels or Pay-per-View channels YET. In short, Movies are supplicants before the throne of Television.

Is supplicant too harsh a term? I don't think so. Consider that movies experience their debut on television in the form of saturation and super-saturation and unsaturated advertising. Movie studios render millions of dollars in "tribute" to television stations and networks in advance of a film's release. On the Today Show, the Tonight Show, Entertainment Tonight, et al., actors and directors plead their case to the mass conscious mind from the Faerieland box of coloured lights and sounds. It is Television that deems which of these worthies is to be granted such consideration (undoubtedly culled from a nearly infinite number of contenders). The movie then does very well financially, not so well financially, so-so financially, or bombs completely and is reincarnated into the respective Faerielands on that basis (the lands, in descending order of desirability, are: Pay-per-View, Pay-TV Channel Headliner, Pay-TV Channel Also-Ran, Advertised Video Release (TV, newspapers, radio), Advertised Video Release (newspapers, radio), Advertised Video Release, Unadvertised Video Release, and (The Horror. The Horror.) Direct-to-Video. A movie must prove itself to Television, and Television's judgement is final. That, I would maintain, is a supplicant.

Consider it another way (all you Movie snobs who are bristling at this). Let's take Humphrey Bogart as an example. Throughout his career as a component of the Being known as Movies, Bogart appeared — literally — larger than life. Projected onto a theater screen, Bogart's head would (in a close-up shot) be larger than the average basketball player. In considering the number of times Bogart will appear in this way in the next lunar cycle and comparing it to the number of times he will be appearing in miniature on television screens, there is clearly no comparison. Bogart is a Television being now far more than he is a Movie being.

Call it the Revenge of the Faeries, the Wee Folk, the Sprites, and the Pixies: tiny people who glow in the dark. You think I'm being facetious here. I'm not. What else is television-viewing, dispassionately observed, than big people who don't cast their own light watching tiny people who do? In reviewing the human history of the 20th century — which began with the Movies Being rising to prominence and which is ending with the Television Being preminent — could it not be fairly said: "We were Giants in Those Days" and added, ruefully, "And Now We are Faeries."

The thing about world conquest is that it must be pursued to its utmost. It is in the nature of this very human instinct that enough is never, well, enough. Carpe diem and, for the

Television Being, the day has proven to be quite a long one (for which the Television Being is grateful, for there is so MUCH to seize). The trick of course is to extend the hegemony without fundamentally altering the nature of the devouring presence (the Catholic Church was awfully good at this up to a point). Fortunately for Television, Television-as-Being amounts to a box of coloured lights and sound, an incredibly basic and, consequently, flexible nature. The transformation of Giants (Movies) into Faeries (Television) was really rather a simple trick for so flexible an entity. Conquest was inevitable at the exact moment that the first movie studio licensed the first movie for broadcast on TV. Music was also an easy

Being to co-opt — though the battle was a more protracted conflict. Already severely weakened in its Upper Genius range by the arrival of the phonograph and Movies and radio (whereby Tin Pan Alley, Gilbert & Sullivan Opera Lite, and other popular entertainments largely supplanted and displaced, radically, the significance of the Symphony and other Great Works in the awareness of the average individual), Music committed suicide as it contemplated the arrival of Television on the scene (decades of Music to be pumped through those tinny little speakers. The Horror. The Horror.) as the only honourable course left to it. Since Music is immortal it rose, phoenix-like, from its own ashes, assuming the most degraded incarnation imaginable: rock 'n' roll (it will take another one hundred years to determine whether those r's become capitalized), which had two articles of faith orbiting about its plan for survival vis-à-vis Television: Loud and Lewd. This was practical, implying to me Music's insight that Television was going to devour everything in a very short space of time (a cosmic eyeblink of a decade or two) and that its only hope lay, in occupying territories anathematic to Television. The situation, of course, was Alamo-like in its one-sidedness. Music infected Television with an Elvis (elvin?) Virus — the Faerie Who Wiggled in Our Living Rooms First. The Wiggling was universally known but was not depicted (above the waist only), and Television experienced its first setback in its portrayal of itself as an Accurate Communicator. Elvis was inducted into the army, and Television warmed itself at the hearth of news footage of those lewd, greasy locks being shorn. What an experience to be that Faerie, that First Faerie. The mass unconscious mind detected a Nativity, and Elvis squirmed as the walls of blasphemy closed in upon him. I love the story of Elvis, the good southern Baptist, worriedly asking Jerry Lee Lewis if he thought newspapers and Television were right: that rock 'n' roll was the Devil's Music. Reportedly, Jerry Lee grinned and said, "Son, I think you ARE the Devil." No doubt there ensued a sleepless night behind the fabled Graceland gates.

Loud and Lewd, for a time Music managed the nearly impossible trick of governing its own domain and using Television to expand its sphere of influence. Music countered the shorn locks of the First Faerie with the girlishly coifed Beatles, a subtle chess move, indeed, Music temporarily opting for displacement from its central lands of Lewdness for the more ambiguous outback of androgyny. These boys didn't wiggle, but they did rock gently in a teasing fashion imitative of the subtlest male sexual rutting rhythms. Television missed that one completely (Television at its most adept is transparently Unsubtle, as are most conquerors, and so is unable to perceive anything which has any subtlety about it). Loud and Lewd had almost a decade of sovereignty before Television

had had enough and created the Monkees (imitative creatures, monkeys), thus presenting the mass consciousness with “Beatles-minus-the-Loud-and-Lewd.” John Lennon, in his own mind First Faerie to Elvis’ John the Baptist Faerie, lewdly declared the Beatles more popular than Christ. Which was accurate, of course, in certain circles. What was missed in the ensuing brouhaha was that there used to be a clear demarcation between a Great and Fundamental Truth and a large popularity. Television is undoubtedly to blame for that line of demarcation being obliterated. The Alamo finally fell with the advent of MW where, in short order, Television learned that Lewd was nothing to be feared and that sweeping vistas of the profane, the imbecilic, and the hideous could be co-opted effortlessly by stopping just this side of the Explicit. The remnants of Music huddled in the root cellar of the Alamo’s smoking ruins, feeding on the thin gruel of what little Television would still not permit within its confines. Video by video those confines were expanded until even concert footage of band members spitting on their audience went from being the last allowable extreme of the Explicit to a de rigueur identification of genre. Expelling snot (one would suppose) is the last barricade before the metaphorically “true dead end” of nipples, vaginas, and penises (at which point Music doesn’t stand a chance against Hard Core Pornography in THAT particular Video Derby).

With almost everyone going “topside” (if they let us do anything on television, what are we down here eating this thin gruel for?), what remains of Musical “Purism” divides between twin perceptions: “if it’s on television it is no good” and “if it isn’t on television it isn’t good enough.” In the No Man’s Land between the two viewpoints those who attempt to occupy Purist territory find themselves twisting slowly in the wind as the object of their Purist affections has a “break-out, heavy rotation video” (The Horror. The Horror.) appear on the tube. Some purists scramble to safety, abandoning and seizing ever-more-esoteric and marginalised objects of veneration in their own answer to “heavy rotation” (the sort of Cerebus fans who would wince visibly at the list of favourite bands they had immortalized above their signatures in Aardvark Comment a few years ago); others grudgingly compromise their purism, attributing the very least level of quality to MW- “inspired” music but still acknowledging that televised music is not inherently or implicitly bad. With MTV’s foot wedged tightly iii that door, most of the music industry has become Television’s newest, albeit somewhat grudging, supplicant.

At the furthest and darkest corner of the root cellar below the smoking ruins of Music’s Alamo is the truly marginalised, “lowest of the low” — Real Musicians, which is to say those musicians who produce their creative works out of the irresistible inner compulsion to do so, musicians with an understanding of and an appreciation for Music Herself (or Himself, but I’m pretty sure Music is a Female), Her rich history, and all the myriad points of large innovation which plot Her Trajectory from the folk ballad to the madrigal to the symphony to jazz, etc., etc. Most, if not all, of these individuals resemble the Real Comic-Book Creator in their sensibility — Dan Clowes picking from the smorgasbord of his chosen medium’s stylists, innovators, pioneers, and touchstones. Kurtzman looms-large within the confines of his work. Ketcham gets more than a passing nod. Like the musician at the outer reaches of his field (the outer reaches, post- 1950s, being any creative field’s territory at the greatest remove from Television), his work is sustained by a small but devoted band of followers. His fortunes rise and fall and rise again and fall

again. “Lot of folks here tonight” consisting in equal measure of the pleasing moment (“Nice to have a lot of folks here tonight”), rueful retrospect (“Weren’t a lot of folks here lost night”), and cheerful fatalism (“Might not be a lot of folks here tomorrow night”). Such a musician might watch MTV from time to time, but his (or her) relation to it would be comparable to Dan Clowes watching *The Simpsons*. It is possible to enjoy it or not enjoy it for what it is, but the reaction is completely divorced from any kind of identification (except for the less-distant relation between Eightball and Groening’s *Life in Hell*, say) or (perish the thought) envy. For that creative personality, television is just the same dime bag of heroin that it is for any other individual in the waning hours of the 20th century — to succumb to or resist or work around, depending on how strong or how weak the individual’s flesh and spirit are at the time.

To Television’s Legion of Junkies this appears as affectation and has the stink of the poseur about it. One is viewed by the Legion of Junkies as being either afraid of one’s best efforts being rejected by Television (cast down from the Hollywood Hills, as it were) or brave and heroic, staring down the Devil and his temptations, or simply inadequate to Television’s high purpose (a thoroughgoing junkie is always going to see high purpose in his drug of choice). In those territories where music and the comic-book field most resemble each other (really, the only place where they do resemble each other — contrast Superman’s *Wedding Album* and a Rolling Stones concert at the “high end” of commercial application), there is nothing of fear, bravery, or inadequacy. The musician creates his or her music and that’s all. The comic-book creator creates his or her comic book and that’s all. Everything else is just, well, everything else. And that — inexplicable as it might be to the Legion of Junkies (and inexplicable it is) — includes Television. Mercifully, I am now done considering Television at close proximity (apart from the footnote on *Those Foolish Computers* which follows this installment — subtitled *Scott McCloud, God Bless Him, Is a Big Weenie*).

In the next installment: Where Television has Skewed the Comic-Book Field.

footnote

THOSE FOOLISH COMPUTERS

Computers, to me, are Television’s desperate attempt to extend its hegemony to characteristically absurdist extremes. The most heavily addicted of its Legion of Junkies (hooked ?in television’s smack from birth) really see the Internet and related cyberspace environments as the wave of the future. Not content with its virtually universal dominance of human society, Television now deludes itself that it is time to eliminate Print and put Print on Television. Where Television is the central fact of existence to the exclusion of everything that isn’t Television (people who don’t read books or newspapers, see plays, watch live sports, or play sports — which is to say everywhere),

nothing could be more sensible than to put everything on television. If you can slip on a helmet and walk down the Champs Elysées, why pay for a plane ticket and hotel? As the technology develops, why listen to the Beatles' music or read a book about the Beatles when you can just slip on your helmet and be one of the Beatles? Performing at Shea Stadium while your cyber gloves pick out the chords to "I Feel Fine." I think I'll be John tonight. Feel Paul's sweat and spittle striking your face as you do the harmonies. Grin back at Ringo. Run across the infield to deafening applause (crank the applause to 11 if you want).

As the saying goes, for those who like that sort of thing, that's just the sort of thing they will like. To me, this is lotus-eating deserving of proper noun status: Lotus-Eating.

Television is pixilated. Computer screens reproduce typewriter pictures of presidents. You type ten X's, five commas, twelve X's, and so on, line by line, and when you've followed the instructions to the letter (sorry), voilà, it's a picture of George Washington. When it's placed next to a computer-generated image of George Washington the, difference, to me, is one of the smallest shading of difference. An original line drawing of the least complexity (say, a Schulz Peanuts strip) in its original printed form and on a computer has much in common with the difference between a straight razor, and an electric razor. However thin the screen is on an electric razor, it is still a screen and consequently provides inadequate results. If you're going to shave, shave.

Whenever I have seen original oil paintings (the Impressionists are favourites) at a gallery, I always think that I will pick up a poster of one of the paintings. Then I look at the poster with its state-of-the-art, 10,000-colour, computer-generated, layered separations, and it is so... feeble, such a withered shadow of the actual painting, that I can't bring myself to purchase it. I have nothing but pity for people who call up on a screen a postage-stamp-sized copy of every painting currently being exhibited at the Louvre and convince themselves that they are experiencing the pictures in any meaningful sense of the word "experience."

Greatly amused pity, mind you, but pity nonetheless.

And — relative to the comic-book field — that's all have to say about computers.

Scott? I love you, man, but you're a Big Weenie.

part three
COMICS AND THE MASS MEDIUM

Comic books were popular culture only in their infancy and their adolescence. Well positioned in the early '50s (garish and lewd to rock'n'roll's loud and lewd) to survive and flourish against the encroachment of Television, they were undone by the Kefauver investigations into the causes of juvenile delinquency. I would maintain that the Kefauver Hearings were less important for their U.S. Senate origins than for the fact that they were Televised. Television found intolerable any Visual Appeal that lay outside of Its own

jurisdiction and limits. By compelling comic books — salacious, vivid, gore-spattered, and near-blinding in their colourfulness — to conform to its own mundane, lowest-common-denominator limits of portrayal, Television effectively clipped the caged bird's wings and assured that its only significant rival in Visual Appeal (the complete absorption of Movies having already been set in motion) was destined for a position of obscurity and marginalization in popular art and entertainment culture.

It is time — long past time — to admit that our medium was beaten and beaten cleanly by an unworthy juggernaut of an adversary in Television. The debate over the origins of the Comics Code Authority — the hairsplitting difference between Steve Bissette's assertion that comic books were not given a clean bill of health at the conclusion of the Kefauver Hearings and Frank Miller's insistence that they were — misses, to me, the larger point. Our predecessors. (publishers, of course, not creators) caved in, in the face of Televised hearings. All impulses today to institute a movie-style ratings system should be recognized for what they are: a retrogressive urge to cave in still further — evidence of the widespread belief that a Pop Culture Utopia can be achieved by comic books through the further laundering of our efforts and that we can achieve Television-style preeminence through the imitation of Television's rules of conduct. This is the Stockholm Syndrome writ large, whereby we become hostages adjusting to our captivity and powerlessness by identifying with our captors.

This failure of will, this self-loathing (this cowardice, as Frank Miller puts it in his way of calling a spade a spade) is the source of the misapprehension that there exists a back-door access to Pop Culture Status and Acceptance. By the blurring of distinctions between Television icons and the medium of comic books (so the misapprehension goes) we appoint ourselves included in Popular Culture. Television, comic books, Beatles gum cards, Marilyn Monroe calendars, action figures, computer games, I-Files (how degraded the environment has become that it feels a proprietary interest and stake in the letter "X" as in "X-Men" even where that is the only point of commonality), video games, Manga, etc., etc., ad nauseam. If the Previews catalogue features them all in one inglorious lump and Comics Retailer follows suit and Wizard stuffs its glossy pages full of these too-slender-to-be-called-tenuous connections and if Overstreet's Fan dutifully imitates Wizard, then surely it is just a matter of time before the great mass of humanity shares the hallucination, yes?

No. We dealt away our trump card — our luridness and our colourfulness — at the only time in human history when either would have any meaning: the 1950s. To try to find, at this late date, a point of intersection — let alone of connection — with Television and Pop Culture is the equivalent of gangs of neo-Nazis in the United German Republic petitioning the U.N. to let them refight the battle of Stalingrad.

It is my view that the unconscious mind of the comic-book environment has begun to absorb the lesson that the conscious mind of the comic-book "industry" still refuses to accept: that, far from assisting in the achievement of Pop Culture Status and Acceptance, Television sorbs, withers, and destroys all that it touches.

The conscious mind of the comic-book “industry” — from the fabled towers of Rockefeller Plaza down to the smallest comic-book store in North America, including all peat and near-great and small presences in the distribution chain and catalogue and glossy magazine staffs (in short, all who lay claim to the “comic-book professional” identity) — clings tirelessly (and now not so tirelessly) to the vain hope that the comic-book field will soon be grafted onto Television and be nourished by It even as it nourishes It in turn. Roused to near-climax by anticipation ‘again and again and still again — Superman movie, Supergirl movie, Batman movie, Batman Forever (forever a Television entity being the obvious, yet overlooked, subtext) — senses heightened, hanging on by its metaphorical fingernails in anticipation of the day, or rather, The- Day when the World will see that Comic Books and Movies and Television are now fully joined in the bonds of Holy Matrimony — Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie, The Mask movie, The Crow movie, Barb Wire movie — when will it finally happen? WHEN?!? — The Tick on Television, Cadillacs and Dinosaurs on Television, X-Men on Television, Iron Man on Television, Spider-Man on Television.

Even as the conscious mind of the comic-book “industry” clings to this faint hope (which is no hope whatsoever), the unconscious mind of the comic-book environment — which believes so wholeheartedly in homogenization and the blurring of distinctions — is coming to resemble in its dawning awareness nothing so much as Marilyn Monroe: dragged, kicking and screaming, to the inescapable truth that Jackie is not going to be displaced as the First Lady of the Land, that one is not even The mistress but merely A piece of ass. At the greatest point of reduction one isn’t even to be allowed, the consolation-prize beau in the form of the Attorney-General, and the Justice Department and the White House are both now closed-off, walled-off, inaccessible, and off-limits even by telephone.

“I feel passed around,” Ms. Monroe is reputed to have said at the nadir of events. It is unchivalrous, but accurate, to point out that if one passes oneself around, one is likely, indeed, to feel “passed around.”

As each successive defeat is felt by the unconscious mind of the comic-book environment, as each sacrificial offering is placed upon Television’s crimson altar (achieving a Television presence somewhere in the declension of Realms from Pay-per-View to Direct-to- Video), as the sacrificial object enters a steep decline in its presence in the comic-book environment, as the theaters (alas, woe is us) fail once more to empty their patrons in furious stampede to the neighbouring comic-book store in search of the original comic-book form of the entertainment just viewed or the comic-book adaptation of same (it is only the “industry” mind that sees the remotest chance of this; how much more likely— if even the most obsessive “industry” mind gave it a passing thought — that a Barb Wire enthusiast would hurry home to catch a Baywatch rerun²), the unconscious comic-book mind detects what the conscious comic-book “industry” mind denies and refuses to accept: the participants are beginning to feel “passed around.” The “passed around” super-heroes and their “industry” acolytes and priests (high and low), distraught and perplexed that each Television success serves only to shrink still further their already shriveled environment, resemble enthusiastic blood donors hitting

the Red Cross clinic three times a month and wondering why they're feeling a little listless and run-down these days.

Am I unkind here? Yes, a little. I would maintain however, that the extent of the readers' woundedness at the preceding paragraphs will vary in direct proportion to the extent they deceive themselves about Television and its inescapable nature. Let me (more kindly) point out that those fans and retailers who ask me at signings and comic-book conventions, "So, when is the Cerebus movie coming out?" often, to me, have much in common with the archetype! immigrant parent, unwise in the ways of the world but sincerely and simply wanting all of its riches and glories for his offspring (Cerebus, without question, being among the first-born of the direct market). At one level or another those fans are not ignorant of the fact that such a course would carry Cerebus away from them, into W.H. Smith and Waldenbooks and large chain stores. There is a genuinely touching (and I'm speaking here as someone who prides himself on remaining largely untouched) selflessness represented in the question, essentially wishing me well — VERY well — in my transmigration into Lucifer's Realm.

For others, "When is the Cerebus movie coming out?" constitutes the naming of a large fear etched with defeatism and a preparation for a disappointment they see as inevitable anyway: "You'll leave us. Everyone leaves us. Hell, I'd leave if I had the chance."

Fear and Self-Loathing would be an apt title for a Television documentary on the comic-book field. It is this self-loathing that mirrors itself in the Comics Buyer's Guide letters page "Oh, So?": super-hero comic-book stores in disarray, unkempt, their proprietors, managers, and clerks absorbed in desultory and sullen conversation with each other, pulling subscription copies randomly and haphazardly (if at all), eyeing the theater patrons departing from Barb Wire who spare not a glance at the window display with the movie poster as its centerpiece and the comic-book incarnations sprawled beneath it. "Industry" comic-book minds are in denial, attempting to chart illusory and fleeting trends in lock step with their competitors blocks away while biding their time until the breakthrough Comic-Book/Television event the "industry's" sad variation on Waiting for Godot. Have Magic cards lost their magic? Now about Bad Girl Art? Is it time to stock up in anticipation of the Spawn movie? Will the Superman animated cartoon make the Man of Steel a hot comic-book property on the heels of Lois & Clark's failure to do so? Clearly, these are weighty concerns. No time to waste seeing if all the volumes of Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell's From Hell are in stock, or where to locate the Hate #18 missing from that "weird, independent guy's" subscription file.

No, let's leave that for part four.

Batman readies himself for his fourth film even as the sales of his various comic books find new lows in his nearly sixty-year history. To the Legion of Television Junkies (maintaining their state of denial) the 1989 film was confirmation of one of their central articles of faith: if Batman could just be done Right — stripped of Zap! Bam! Pow! and its 1960s camp/Warhol/Lichtenstein trappings — it would be a great success. Overlooked (and, again, only the "industry" mind is capable of overlooking it) is the inescapable fact

that Batman was a success — that Batman even got made at ALL — because Jack Nicholson agreed to play The Joker, because Tim Burton had had enough of a success with Beetlejuice to warrant a studio's investment, and because the star of Burton's previous success, Michael Keaton, agreed to play the title character. The rest was merely expensive special effects, expensive hardware, and expensive sets. They probably spent more on Nicholson's trailer on the set than they did on the script. Nicholson, Burton, and Keaton had a great success. The Mask was successful because it was Jim Carrey's next film after Ace Ventura. The movie did well, and Jim Carrey became a bigger and higher-paid success. Like everything else attached to Television it is a hit-and-miss proposition: witness Sylvester Stallone and Judge Dredd. Hmm. Oh, well — maybe it's time to do another Rocky film.

Let me add — with great kindness, again — that the comic-book field is not the first to suffer from the delusion that Television's "exposure" to millions upon millions of the great unwashed constitutes a resource for anything or anyone but itself — that Television/movie/Hollywood can assist in garnering popularity for ex-a-Television efforts.

Word association test:

East of Eden.

James Dean, right?

James Dean in a cowboy hat.

James Dean covered in oil.

Uh. Rock Hudson, right? Elizabeth Taylor (was Taylor in that one?).

How long do you suppose it took John Steinbeck to write *East of Eden*? It's one of his larger works by a wide margin. A year? Two years? Beginning with his scattered notes, developing his characters, researching wealthy oil families and oil communities, researching the oil-drilling operation itself, evolving his text and his subtexts, revising and adding to his manuscript. Was there a showdown with his editor or publisher over a too-salacious passage? What were the reviews like? How many copies sold in hardcover? How much did Hollywood pay him? How long a period of uninterrupted work did the amount represent to him? Did the money, in fact, last that long?

Say, was Steinbeck even alive at that time?

I don't know. I've only read *The Pearl*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Cannery Row*, and nothing about Steinbeck himself. Did he get the money or was it his widow? An ex-wife? Several ex-wives? Interesting questions.

Assuming he was alive, was he living well, was he just getting by, or was he hopelessly in debt? Was he healthy or ill? Did he write another book with the time his *East of Eden* movie money bought him? Would you or I recognize the name of it? Was it made into a movie? Have I seen it on Television?

East of Eden.

James Dean.

Now, granting all benefit of the doubt that comic- book creators who take their creations to movies or Television REALLY believe that what they are doing is nobly expanding the presence of comic books in the Real World, that they TRULY believe that throngs upon throngs of movie patrons will be jammed elbow-to-elbow into comic-book stores, a surging, money-throwing mass of humanity desperate to buy the original comic-book incarnation of the movie they just saw..., even granting all benefit of the doubt that these creators' self-interest (an airplane hangar filled with vintage sports cars, a mansion in Bel Air, entree into the Academy Awards, first-class air travel, limousines, the long-desired and lusted-after bitter envy of their enemies since grade school, and the likewise long-desired and lusted-after admiration and deference of friends and relatives, leggy supermodels by the score clamoring for their smallest attentions, jewels and designer clothes for the wife, boarding school and an Ivy League university for their offspring) is a mere afterthought to their noble and selfless dedication to gaining Real World Acceptance and Status for the comic book in general. ..I mean, I don't believe it for a minute... but even granting all benefit of the doubt that these selfless individuals truly believe that they will bestow their bounty upon us as altruistic alumni, doing it all for their beloved alma mater, Comic-Book U...

It doesn't work. It hasn't worked. It won't work. There is not the least scrap of evidence that a movie or a Television show based on a comic book will provide any obvious or even hidden benefit for the comic book upon which it is based, and still less evidence (if such a thing can be imagined) that it will benefit comic books in general. In fact, month by month, year by year, movie by movie, Television show by Television show, the evidence mounts on the opposite side of the ledger — that each movie, each Television show leeches still more of the life's blood of the environment, leaving it smaller and smaller and smaller. Pollination it is, but not cross pollination. Comic-book pollen (where it is chosen for "elevation") is borne aloft to enrich Television's poisonous and crimson flower, while the comic-book "industry" is left to wither on the vine.

If I sound rather disinterested and unconcerned about all this, it is because.. I am disinterested and unconcerned. Truth be known — from the vantage point of a comic-book creator who wants to make a living from his efforts and be able to create without meaningless distractions — I am as exhilarated as I have ever been. Having in no way offered up Cerebus as a sacrifice on Television's crimson altar, and with the machinations of the past two years initiated by Marvel now at an end — with Diamond Comic Distributors as the clear and undisputed winner, Capital City as the most unfortunate casualty, and Marvel as the most appropriate casualty, a previously

unimaginable calm has descended over the entirety of the comic-book world. The phone simply doesn't ring anymore. There's nothing left to be said. Hallelujah. To me, a comic-book purist, the first real Golden Age in comics history is now very possible. Not assured by any means, but nearer to hand than at any previous time in its sixty- some-odd-year history. I think my arguments against Television being perceived as any kind of asset to the comic-book environment are pretty close to irrefutable — at the very least constituting a more workable “model” on which to move forward than is the “Television = Wider Exposure = Higher Profits ‘model” which simply doesn't have any evidence to support it.

Next issue, part four will conclude “Comics and the Mass Medium,” focusing on the two halves of the equation for success that have remained central to the direct market since its inception: creators and retailers. In both cases, I want to focus on the opportunities being presented by the newly configured direct market, as well as present an equation that, in my view, makes sense in a way that “Television = Wider Exposure = Higher Profits” simply doesn't (and, on the retail end of things, with a working model to prove it).

I've found myself led to the inescapable conclusion that there are now two comic-book fields — one centered around Television and one centered around (oddly enough) comic books — drifting away from each other.

Which way the latter field is drifting — where it is going and why it is going there — in part four of “Comics & the Mass Medium.”

part four
COMICS AND THE MASS MEDIUM

Ultimately (I would maintain) Television has to fail in its plan for total conquest. Television — once it merges completely with computers and becomes inseparable from them — will divide human society into The hypnotized and the non-hypnotized. After that happens, I believe that comic books will begin to achieve greater prominence, because comic books at their best and most effective — are informed by individual awareness, insight, and inspiration. One everything that *can* be put on Television *is* put on Television, once every human discipline and interest which can be reduced to binary code and pixilated has been reduced to binary code and pixilated, what remains will be the last enclave of human existence: individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

We aren't ready. in my view, we aren't ready to take our natural place in the arts-and-entertainment scheme of things. But that's okay. There's plenty of time, and (in my view) we are moving inexorably in the right direction.

The biggest impediment — as is usually the case— is with ourselves — or, rather, with the portrayal of who we are (but actually aren't) in Comics Buyer's Guide, Comics Retailer, Fan, Wizard, and at comic-book conventions. A portrayal which would lead any impartial investigator to conclude that we are tremulous, fearful creatures, clawing anxiously at Television's door, dragging action-figure toys, X-Files and Star Wars

merchandise behind us like Jacob Marley's chains and ledgers and counting boxes. Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration are viewed (in this portrayal) as curious by-products and minor keys in the symphony of the comics "industry" — instead of as our only hope for a secure future.

Again, that's okay. As I read the above-mentioned publications or on those rare occasions when I find myself at a comic-book convention or in a comic-book store, I just accept the fact that (for the time being and in the foreseeable future) they represent what at least passes for the majority view in the comic-book field — that what has saved us and what will save us is our tenuous connections with Television and movies. As I've explained in the first three installments of "Comics and the Mass Medium," I consider this a completely mistaken notion. What I do find gratifying is that all reliable evidence indicates that that view — the "industry" view — is completely doomed. By its own definition — that comic books are successful only insofar as they have been absorbed and transmogrified by Television — the "industry" guarantees that it will be drained of its lifeblood incrementally but irrevocably, surviving just, long enough to ease the transition from a comic-book field centered on Television to a comic-book field centered on comic books. The Legion of Junkies — the fully hypnotized of the "industry" — will be unable to see merit in my arguments, which I find even more gratifying. How suitable a repercussion that the parasitic "industry" which fed for so many years on the lifeblood of writers and artists now finds itself attached to Television — the biggest parasite of them all — and is so thoroughly in a state of denial that it won't even begin to conceive of detaching itself before it is a drained husk, breathing its last.

I believe that the comic-book medium does have a nascent Spirit (how appropriate that that is the name of Will Eisner's character, which was the first genuine ineffective carnation of individual insight, awareness, and inspiration in our medium's history) — and that this Spirit was both shocked and offended at its very core when the last of the "industry" trade shows were taking place in '94, where monolithic and fascistic booths (Who could forget Tekno Comics' giant mailed fist grasping its lightning bolt, the dry ice clouds, its virtual reality pods, and its wall full of Televisions — Nimoy, Spillane, Gaiman. Nimoy, Spillane, Gaiman? The Spawmnobile? DC Time-Warner's black corporate skeleton likewise punctuated with Televisions? Liefeld's spaceship with its little Television?) ascended towards the heavens like soulless and implacable steel and glass skyscrapers. A threshold had been crossed and everyone, even Californians — who exist in Television's very Heart of Darkness and thus qualify as the Most Hypnotized of the Hypnotized Society — knew it. Very little was said in print, the Hypnotized comics media waxing enthusiastic as attendance figures were fudged upwards and the myth was advanced that "a good time was had by all," when all verifiable reports were of stricken and discombobulated "industry" adherents lurching around the site wondering aloud: "Where will it all end?"

Lest I be accused of ivory-towerism (interesting environment where when you expend time, energy, and money going out to promote your work, you are accused of demagoguery and shameless self-promotion, and when you stay home and do your work, you're accused of rein treating to your ivory tower), I can understand these "industry"

quirks when I face the centerpiece of my own Television addiction: the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team. The Leafs are the good guys, and all other teams (especially the Montreal Canadiens) are the bad guys. The Leafs trade away Wendal Clark and I hate the guy; the Leafs reacquire him and I love him again. Like “industry” adherents with their inexplicable love of the Fantastic Four or Batman and their unswerving belief that these trademarks have inherent value, I am inexplicably loyal to those little blue uniforms gliding around my little box of coloured lights and sound resembling little, blue tropical fish or strangely mutated blue fireflies. I am making progress in willing myself to disengage my loyalties and in moving the Leafs step by step away from the core of my being. It isn’t easy — it isn’t easy at all — and I consequently empathize with those fighting a similar addiction whose ultimate “high” is seeing anything born in the comic-book field represented on Television.

The first signs already exist that individual awareness, insight, and inspiration will ultimately prevail against the “industry.” Creator ownership, long overdue in the field, has gone from a marginalized quirk to an inescapable centerpiece in what comic books are. Even while the majority of comic-book stores are filled with this month’s hot crossover, flash-in-the-pan special, or hyped and ballyhooed first issue, creator-owned titles are making incremental progress in relative sales. Cerebus goes up and down the distributor sales charts like a yo-yo (Peter Bagge alluded to the same syndrome in a recent issue of *Hate*): #161 this month, #217 next month. Up forty-five places and then plummeting fifty places. Always with the same approximate sales. Sometimes rising relative to Television comic books (Batman, Spider-man, et al) even when the circulation has declined by several hundred copies.

You don’t have to be at this game for the twenty years that I’ve been at it to reach the conclusion that these numbers are largely — if not completely — meaningless and that the genuine forward progress of the medium is taking place elsewhere: in the manifold realms of individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Barry Windsor-Smith is doing some very interesting things with word balloons in *Storyteller*, playing with the eye’s movement across the page and developing new ways of reading the page in the process. Each innovation that he develops — when it “works” and even when it doesn’t — leads to the realization that creators have just begun to scratch the surface of what is possible in the comic-book medium. The most significant observation in recent years was Howard Cruse’s retrospective admission that he started *Stuck Rubber Baby* thinking, “300 pages. I can fit the history of the world into 300 pages,” only to discover just how limited 300 pages can be: It is an experience I shared in the 500 pages of *High Society* which led me to leave *Church. & State* open-ended, to allow it to grow internally, and which allowed me to make more effective use of 500 pages of *Jaka’s Story*. Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell’s recently completed *From Hell* (besides being a contender for best graphic novel to date) demonstrates clearly just how much Alan learned about the implied confines of the comic-book medium in doing *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, and *Killing Joke*, and what progress he has made in individualizing his work since those earlier experiments. It is for this reason — the evidence of how much is yet to be discovered in the “how” and “where” of creating

comic books — that I say that I don't think we are ready. And it is for another reason — the glacial pace at which Television and computers are merging — that I say I think there is time.

Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Donna Barr, in her recent Comics Journal interview, shows herself to be one of the heralds of this forthcoming age — doing her comic books in such a way as to satisfy her own insight, awareness, and inspiration. Clearly, this leads her to be impatient at several junctures with her largely sympathetic interviewer. In explaining her fascination with World War II from the (German side of things; “Both the major event of the 20th century and people who were its central focus have been a focus of my attention, and ever since I can remember. I have no answer for this, because I don't know it myself. I'm obsessed. I'm possessed. It's completely subconscious. It probably has something to do with bloodlines, or with mythological interpretation of the 20th century, but if I got into that it would take up a whole book and interest no one but me.” Her point is well taken by someone (like myself) who sees individual awareness, insight, and inspiration as the point itself, the defining characteristic of the Spirit of comic books as a medium. To the Television-centered, Barr's work is profoundly inexplicable. What about the Jews, the veterans, the homosexuals who would be offended by what you're doing? As is only appropriate, the question is, in its turn, inexplicable to Donna Barr. Having studied centuries of German history, everything she is doing is informed by wider perceptions than those allowable within Television's confines, where “Nazis = Bad Guys” suffices for the Legion of Junkies and eliminates “the major event of the 20th century” from further consideration.

Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Donna Barr and Howard Cruse don't experiment much with structure in their use of the comic-book medium. Barry Windsor-Smith and I do. Alan Moore doesn't. Awareness, individualized, pursues its own preferences along its own preferred avenues of exploration. For some it is content exclusively. For some it is structure and content. One of the first effects of creator-ownership as a rising element in the comic-book field has been the turning away from the collective environment by individuals who understand, whether consciously or unconsciously, that introspection is of greater value than is extroversion. There is no “right” or “wrong” way for a creator to create his or her comic book — there is only the exploration of those avenues the individual creator is inclined to explore and the pursuit of individual preferences — sometimes for a page or two and sometimes for the entirety of a career. “Where are we going, and what are we doing?” — the fundamental question posed by the very existence of Comics Retailer, Comics Buyer's Guide, Wizard Fan, and comic-book conventions (and to which the only sensible answer is: “We're going in every direction at once, and we're not doing very much”) — has less to do with the future of the environment (in my view) than the individual answers to be obtained from asking, “Where am I going, and what am I doing?”

This is true of retailers as much as it is true of creators. The vast majority of retailers are imprisoned, by choice, within the confines implied by 4'Where are we going, and what are we doing?" Their stores are living testimony to the two-decades-old answers to that question: "We axe buying way too many corporate-owned and -controlled comic books and storing them in our back rooms and basements." "We believe what the corporations who publish these books tell us about them no matter bow well or badly they sell." "We believe that X-Files, Star Wars, and Star Trek will attract new customers into our stores."

There are a handful of stores begun in the last two or three years which do not subscribe to these views, of which Nottingham, England's Page 45 is the foremost example.

Page 45 sells a lot of super-hero comics — which I hadn't realized until I saw a computer printout of their sales. Super-heroes are the biggest selling item at Page 45. The largest difference between the traditional store's answers to "Where are we going and what are we doing?" and Page 45's is the decision to answer the second question first: 'What are we doing?' Page 45 is selling comic books to interested customers. Their first priority is their subscriber list and filling — accurately — each subscriber's pull-file order. The fact that they are drawing subscribers away from all the other stores in the area (including the pop-culture-wannabe shop next door which is awash in X-Files, Star Wars, and Star Trek ephemera) points up the central flaw of "industry" stores not having "pull-file reliability" as their first priority. It's not that Page 45 is willing to get their subscribers a copy of Patty Cake and Hilly Rose (though they are in the extreme minority of stores in that they are willing to do this); it's that they can also guarantee each issue of a Spider-Man or Batman title. This is a pretty basic, simple, and sensible answer to "What am I doing?": building a subscriber base and ordering comic books to fill the immediate demand.

They display a small percentage of the available DC, Marvel, and Image material that they order — anything that they have confidence in as a display item: Sandman, Marvels, Kingdom Come. Watchmen, Dark Knight, The Maxx, A Distant Soil — essentially books with the maximum allowed and allowable creator control in the corporate context. This approach is not only sensible as an answer to "What am I doing," it merges very well with "Where am. I going?" It presupposes that once the creator-control genie is out of the "industry" bottle, it is inevitable that stores are going to rely on creator-controlled books rather than corporate-controlled books for their "bread and butter." It also presupposes that — whether it takes a decade or two OE three — creator-control will supersede and virtually eliminate corporate-controlled books. Page 45 is structured in such a way that it is going where comic-books-centered-on-comic-books are going — at a 90-degree angle to where comic-books-centered- on-Television are going. Their subscriber list for corporate-controlled titles will wax and wane, surge and subside, and virtually disappear in the fullness of time, leaving their store fundamentally unchanged — an outlet for state-of-the-art individualized expressions in the comic- book medium. Since they have no need to consider how many cases oil-Files trading cards they're going to need, whether to invest in a "dump" for Star Wars action figures or role-playing games, Stephen and Mark actually have time to devote to their second — and equally sensible priority — developing and maintaining an ongoing supply of the best the comic-book medium has to offer: opening up direct accounts with those publishers and self- publishers whose books

aren't readily available through distribution channels. What makes these works "the best the comics medium has to offer"?

Sales and Stephen and Mark's awareness, insight, and inspiration.

Of course!

It's their store.

"What am I doing?"

1. I am reliable in supplying comic books to my subscribers.
2. I am developing and maintaining a supply of what I consider to be the best the comic-book medium has to offer.
3. I look for new comic books to support and maintain in stock.

Individual awareness, insight, and inspiration.

We are going somewhere. In fact, we're already there. We just aren't ready yet. Such is the nature, I suspect, of individualizing. For all of us whose lives revolve — to one extent or another — around Television and its supplicants, movies and music, it is almost impossible to perceive how different an environment made up of individuals is from a collective environment. Television deals with the illusory "We," collectivist feelings and prejudices, communities and societal notions which presuppose the need for Good Guys and Bad Guys. Us and them. "We" know "we" are good, because "they" are bad. Small wonder — in the aftermath of the Berlin Wall coming down — that Television has seized upon the comic-book fundamental best suited to its purposes: the clear demarcation between Good Guys and Bad Guys. It is a dying viewpoint (a persuasive argument could be made that the Berlin Wall coming down was the final nail in its coffin) being overtaken by the inescapable fact that, ultimately, nothing exists beyond individual perceptions (wait a minute — didn't homosexuals used to be the Bad Guys?).

We are going somewhere. Mercifully the process cannot be hurried, hinging as it does on the exact (and unknown) number of creators who are choosing to rely on their individual awareness, insight, and inspiration, and retailers who are willing to do the same. Progress is fitful or — to be more accurate — the perception of progress is fitful. The comic-book environment which is centered on comic books (creators and retailers going about their business, three steps forward, two steps back) resembles a major airport in the middle of a winter storm only (I would maintain) because of those "industry" adherents of the comic-books-centered-on- Television, who — if they aren't whining about their flight being cancelled — are trying to rebook on another airline to another destination or are telling everyone who will listen that the airport itself is structurally unsound and could collapse at any moment. Just so many tedious Chicken Littles who differ only from their children's story counterpart in the fact that the sky is falling. But, I would maintain, it is only their sky — corporate-controlled comic books and comic books-centered-on- Television — which is plunging earthward.

There is no way of telling how advanced the process of individualizing is, whether among creators or retailers. It can't be discussed intelligently because — as Donna Barr points out—it would, indeed, take a book to describe each individual's history and progress, and the book would be of interest to no one except the individual himself or herself. It is clear that a dissatisfaction with Television and a dawning awareness that Television represents a wildly inaccurate portrayal of human existence is something of a precursor to the individualizing process, and that — once set in motion — the individualizing process itself makes the collectivizing impulse (wherever it occurs) an object of disinterest.

Creator ownership and the 'control of their individual creativity by individual creators is at the root of the upheaval in the direct market and the actual source of alarm (whether they recognize it or not) among the 'industry' adherents of collectivized thought and action. Industry roundtables, conferences, and symposiums appeared briefly and have now vanished. Much verbiage is still expended in the direct market over how to "grow" the market, how to reach out to non-comics readers and create a diversity of titles. The fact remains that — unless the individual in question is willing and able to sit down and write and draw a comic book or a graphic novel or is willing to open a store which emphasizes creator controlled and owned series instead of corporate controlled and - owned series — there is really nothing that they can do apart from buying more good comics (whatever they conceive "good" to be).

I would suspect that those retailers who have retreated from the comic-book environment, grasping at the Television straw of diversification into X-Files and Star Wars and Star Trek, were never really in the comic-book environment to begin with. They have learned their adherence to (rends, their adherence to brand names, their adherence to Television icons from Television (as I learned my adherence to the Toronto Maple Leafs from Television). DC, Marvel, Image, and Dark Horse are — to them — ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox, month-by-month winners and losers, Good Guys and Bad Guys. Of course, there is no accurate Television analog in the comic-book field. That is the strength of the medium, the strength of the Spirit of comic books. It is inconceivable that a writer would own his own television show and be solely responsible for every aspect of production and have the last word governing content and direction. Completely inconceivable. But, because DC, Marvel, Image, and Dark Horse are represented as ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox, it is the rare retailer who can even conceive of comic books existing outside of that structure. They could read every word of the Fantagraphics catalogue and — having no Television network analogy for Fantagraphics see nothing there. And, seeing nothing there, would be content to watch their comic-book business erode to nothing rather than perceive something outside of the Big Four Networks.

Donna Barr's assertion that she is both obsessed with and possessed by her work is a direct implication of creator control and ownership. If you consider how many creators who own and control their books have hung on through each successive wave of turmoil in the direct market, who have hung on through years of hand-to-mouth existence, successive publishers, various formats, and who still produce, who still bring their work to market, it speaks volumes about the addictive nature of exploring your own creativity.

Certainly there have been few creators in the last decade who — having achieved some semblance of a good living from their books — have elected to throw in the towel and pursue some other venue for their creativity. Even the least viable, least marketable titles seem to soldier on — sustained by the promise of each small rise in circulation, each substantial (and sometimes insubstantial) order and reorder. If a sufficient number of Page 45 stores were to come into existence, how many of these titles would be required to sustain them? From Stephen and Mark’s standpoint, enough titles already exist — their display problem is far more one of selecting material from the plethora of available candidates, than it is trying to figure out how to fill their shelves. This is why I say that in answer to the question “Where are we going?” it seems self-evident that we are already there. And also that we are not ready yet.

Not ready for what? Not ready for another boom, another exponential expansion. Collectively, we haven’t grown up a bit, we haven’t learned a thing, and we are just waiting for a chance to repeat our mistakes. A sudden surge in sales like the one which followed the Image launch in the summer of 1992 and which rolled through the environment for a year or so, and we would simply find ourselves up to our eyeballs in the latter-day equivalent of Tekno Comics, Valiant, Defiant, and all the other orate wannabes.

It seems clear that Ron Perelman’s ill-fated ownership of Marvel Comics mirrored the misapprehensions of the direct market. With his theory of buying up trading card companies, focusing on the trademarked characters, planning a chain of Planet Hollywood-style Marvel restaurants, buying a substantial interest in Toy Biz, and getting as many Marvel cartoons on Television as he could, the difference between his (forgive my bluntness) stupidity and that of the average retailer amounted to the number of zeroes on the end of their respective cheques. It all made perfect sense to the Legion of Junkies — a vertically integrated entertainment empire touching on and controlling everything that made comic book stores successful. In my view it was doomed to failure from the precise moment that Tom DeFalco informed Perelman’s suits that the defection of the Image creators was unimportant and that they would be forced to come back to Marvel when Image failed. The theory that artists and writers were interchangeable, expendable, and unimportant was firmly entrenched at Marvel for a number of years — dating back at least as far as Jim Shooter’s reign I, of terror. Over a reasonably short period of time, everyone at Marvel who could remotely be considered in the comic-books-centered-on-comic-books camp was fired (or moved to the periphery) and replaced by a comic books-centered-on-Television adherent. Gary Guzzo — if one of the former group—told me about one of his last meetings with the powers-that-be, where one of the topics of discussion was what to rename the creator-owned Epic line of books. Guzzo suggested “Timely Comics” and — in the ensuing debate — came to the realization that he was the only one in the room who knew that Marvel Comics was originally called Timely.

We aren’t ready. For even as Marvel Comics fell to at nuns in lock step with the misapprehensions of comic book stores across North America — believing in everything except comic books — the comics media, dominated as they are by the Legion of

Junkies, were swift in their assessment. Marvel's ruination was the result of not having a successful, big-budget-movie version of one of its characters. If only Brad Pitt had agreed to play the Spider-Man! If only Jack Nicholson had agreed to play the Green Goblin! If only Martin Scorsese had agreed to direct Spider-Man.

Brad Pitt.

Jack Nicholson.

Martin Scorsese.

We aren't ready. Linda Medley's *Castle Wailing* merits a sidebar or a single column in *Wizard Fan*. *Comics Buyer's Guide*, while *Lobo vs. the Mask* warrants the cover slot and a full and detailed examination of the creative committee delegated to bring it to life. Could a *Lobo* movie be in the offing? Be still, o beating heart of the Legion of Junkies! If only the *Fantastic Four* had had time to cross over with a movie star like the Mask — *The House That Jack Built*, the House of ideas might have been saved from the ignominy of Chapter 11. This viewpoint — so widespread as to be nearly universal — is too depraved, too perverse, too symptomatic of the dying "industry" to be contemplated without one's gorge rising.

We aren't ready.

Can the Legion of Junkies adjust their world view sufficiently to perceive that maybe— just maybe — DC's credibility in the direct market might — in some small measure — have something to do with Vertigo being an imprint known for granting a larger measure of creative control? (Let's leave aside the fact that the Vertigo contracts are undoubtedly made up of the smoke-and-mirrors of reversion clauses — i.e., 'if we think the property is exhausted, you can have it back — assuming we don't renew the copyright just for laughs and to piss you off.')

It's a peculiar legacy, to be sure, but isn't Vertigo really an attempt to close the barn door after Alan Moore had already fled? Come back, come back! All right, then. We'll show you — we'll have a creator friendly division and make all of your fellow Brit writers as rich as Croesus! We'll give them all the creative freedom you wanted and more! We'll go to bat for them against the corporate overlords! We'll show you..., you... Alan Moore. you. It is perhaps not the strangest chapter in the history of creator ownership and control but it would be hard to come up with a stranger one. The façade slipped, briefly, last year when Truman Lonsdale, DC, and Time-Warner were sued by the Winter Brothers for defamation. In pretty short order (doubtless on Paul Levitt's orders), Karen Berger cut the boys loose, hung 'em out to dry, and made noises that DC would invoke the clauses in the contracts indemnifying DC against any responsibility for lawsuits brought against the company by any third party because of content. Cooler heads prevailed — doubtless in the course of more fully contemplating the chilling effect being experienced by others of Vertigo's creative citizenry (excuse me, Mr. Levitt, sir — but didn't you just throw Mr. Tim and Mr. Joe to that pack of rabid wolves over there?). It came out that Karen Berger misspoke — or didn't speak at all — or didn't mean what she didn't actually say (good old ditzy Karen — what could she have

been thinking of, Paul?). Even the strangest stories can have a happy ending. And a watershed moment in the painstaking history of creator control in the comic-book medium passes with scarcely a mention outside of the pages of *The Comics Journal*. Would that the comics media's astonishment at this strangeness and its coming-to-pass had minored what was, doubtless. Paul Levitt's own: Holy smoke! We really *do* believe in creative freedom. Holy smoke! We *have* to!

Alas, there were multi-page articles to prepare on Superman's nuptials, lists to be composed of the legion of artists and writers delegated to document the proceedings (by all accounts on a crushing deadline imposed by the producers of *Lois and Clark*. When Television says "jump," Paul Levitz asks "how high?" on the way up). Who could be bothered with monitoring or chronicling watershed moments in the history of creative control when Superman was about to get married — and only four years after he died.

We aren't ready.

Or maybe we are. Or maybe we are closer to being ready than we are able to perceive because the comics media lag so far behind the actual learning curve that we are all fooling ourselves that all those splashy articles — unreadable computer-coloured type against garish computer-coloured Imagery — in any way reflect the comic-book field as it exists today. One would search in vain for anyone over the age of fourteen who sees *Fan*, *Wizard*, *Comics Retailer*, *Comics Buyer's Guide*, and the bought- and-paid-for editorial content of the *Previews* catalogue as "informative" — let alone "indispensable."

With Marvel Comics about to be fractured into a million pieces (which might already have happened by the time this sees print), with DC Comics maintaining its presence in the direct market largely through its creator-owned and son-of-creator-controlled imprint *Vertigo* (again, dealing with the perception and not the reality of same), with Rob Liefeld's pseudo-Marvel comics company cast down from proximity to Todd McFarlane's *Pearly Gates* (Thou shalt not indulge in work made-for-hire to that extent, you moron), and with *Image* and *Dark Horse* contending for the title of *More Creator-Friendly Than Thou* (Larry Marder's announcement that *Matt Wagner's Mage 11* would be released by *Image* was uncharacteristically gleeful, coming from the usually inscrutable Nexus of All Comic-Book Realities), with Jim Valentino having rung down the curtain on *Shadowhawk* and writing for Liefeld/Marvel in favour of the individual awareness, insight, and inspiration of *A Touch of Silver*, with the demise of *Tekno* and *Broadway*...

At the very least it can be said that creator ownership and control in the comic-book field have made enormous strides. If *Comics Buyer's Guide*, *Fan*, *Wizard*, *Comics Retailer*, and the editorial pages of *Previews* don't reflect this — well, who can blame them? As the genuine fire of individual awareness, inspiration, and insight blazes ever brighter at the margins of *Dark Horse* and *Image*, intermittently and unpredictably at *Vertigo*, here and there — in somewhat greater proportions — at *Mad Monkey*, *Slave Labor*, *Fantagraphics*, *Caliber's Tapestry* imprint, *Drawn & Quarterly*, and among the waxing and waning ranks of self-publishers, their ambition each individual's ambition —

becomes survival, pure and simple. and, if need be, meager subsistence whatever the personal toll, Comic-book newspapers and magazines, like their “real”- world counterparts, are driven by their advertising, and to take Comics Retailer as an example — if the thousands of dollars needed to mount an advertising campaign are only forthcoming from role-playing-game manufacturers, then, well, small matter to infer that role-playing games are an integral and necessary part of any comic-book store. Likewise the conventions — those summer extravaganzas of X-Files, Star Wars, Star Trek Magic Cards, role-playing games, Penthouse trading cards, Spawnmobiles, and Televisions, Televisions, Televisions blaring their conquistador intentions from every aisle and booth — who can fault them for knowing which side of the bread their butter is on? If the Toronto Maple Leafs decided to buy ten thousand dollars’ worth of booth space and print up special Toronto Maple Leafs Salute The San Diego Comic Con drinking cups and eyeshades, can any among us imagine that Faye Desmond (or any other Big Con Director) would deny them the opportunity? With their colourful blue costumes (like super-heroes) and their propensity for thumping, grinding, pounding conflict, wouldn’t the Toronto Maple Leafs have at least — at least — as much in common with the comic-book field as role-playing games and video games? Conversely (from the vantage point of the Big Con Director), of what importance are creator control and ownership in the comic- book field if it chooses to use its meager resources to keep itself alive and pay printing bills on its next issue or its first trade-paperback collection instead of approaching the Chicago Comicon with its chequebook at the ready and every intention of sponsoring a dinner or a cocktail party, an awards ceremony or a Creator Control Day at that night’s White Sox game (just consider the Television exposure!).

For the time-being, there seems to be little more that can be done than to be patient and derive what meager enjoyment is to be had in watching the residual St. Elmo’s Fire of corporate control writhing upon the scrap-heap of history as it is portrayed and as it portrays itself in the pages of Comics Buyer’s Guide, Comics Retailer, Fan, Wizard, the editorial pages of Previews, at those wacky summer cons, on comics’ own Television show, The Gravity Room (oh, please, don’t get me started on that one), and all other misapprehensions born of the larger misapprehension that comic-books-centered-on-Television are destined for anything besides a one-way trip to oblivion. The mere act of turning off your Television, staying away from your computer, and participating in the new and irresistible wave of individual awareness, insight, and inspiration washing clean the Television-infested corners of the comic-book environment is all the reward any one of us could ask. Each individual with his or her own contribution as creator or retailer — or as a genuinely creator-friendly publisher or as a new distributor willing and eager to nurture a creator-owned title up from sales of 700 an issue to 1000 to 1200 — prepares the way for the new environment, based on individual awareness, insight, and inspiration..., three things that will, in a decade or two, prove to be as resistant, as unassailable, as anathematic and indigestible to the Television Beast as was the loudness and lewdness of rock ‘n’ roll four decades ago.

It will be a lot of hard work, and many individuals will not make the grade, but hard work, in my view, is its own reward to the wise — not an insurance policy promising that someday no work will be required and the rewards will continue unabated. In my

experience, I have never met a creator who regretted experimenting with creative freedom despite the toll it took in a reduced standard of living or a diminishment of creature comforts. Quite the contrary — once creators experience total creative freedom, they become single-minded in their quest to achieve it again whether by adhering to a creator-friendly company or by self-publishing. Once individual awareness, insight, and inspiration take hold, hard work and required sacrifices become, not a price to be paid, but, rather, a key element in bringing individual awareness, insight, and inspiration to full flower.

At this point in the direct market's history — whether consciously or unconsciously, acknowledged or unacknowledged — everything (except the comics media and comic-book conventions) is reshaping itself around the perceived needs of comic-book creators, adjusting its own needs to accommodate the requirements of creator control and creator ownership. Small wonder that everything has gone so quiet -after the major convulsions in the distribution end of things. Creator control and creator ownership are best served by the calm and quiet within which individual awareness, insight, and inspiration flourish best.

We may not be ready — each individual creator and retailer — but the environment is certainly changing in such a way to enable us to be ready.

And if that is the case, then the -future is — for all intents and purposes — already here.

And Television and the Legion of Junkies be damned.