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"Man, you split wood like a *girl*."

Gender Politics In '*Y: The Last Man*' –

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1. INTRODUCTION

Acknowledgements

Writing a thesis is a very solitary activity. Many hours and days are invested in reading articles, re-reading articles, analyzing them and finally writing down the conclusions that come from all this research. However, writing this thesis could not have been possible without the help and support of other people.

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Research Question

When I first read *Y: The Last Man,* I noticed that the comic had a lot more to offer than mere entertainment, and I was certainly not the first and only one to come to this conclusion. Reviewers praised the comic for "its mature and complex look at gender politics" (Heidkamp: 2008), being "the most entertaining satire about gender in recent memory" (Wolk: 2008) and offering a "startling insight into gender roles in modern society" (Paul: 2002). Altogether this spurred me to undertake a more thorough investigation of the role gender plays in the series. By gender I mean the psychological and socio-cultural construction of femininity and masculinity, which in my opinion plays an important role in our society. In my research I will try to look for examples in the series which call into question and challenge traditional gender norms, for example by reversing or satirizing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. What makes the notion of gender worth studying is that as we will see in popular culture in general and in comics in particular, gender norms are often still sustained, even though these norms have often discriminated both sexes. However, in this research mostly female body will often be at the centre of discussion. This is because I am convinced that the portrayal of the female body in popular culture and in this particular case comics deserves to be thoroughly studied in a society that has never been more obsessed with outward appearances. Furthermore, in the past two decades, the academic and critical acclaim for comics has been growing and growing. *Maus* by Art Spiegelman won a Pulitzer Prize and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* was included in the 100 Greatest Novels Of All Time-list in Time Magazine. The stories that are told in these comics also find their way to bigger audiences than ever before. That is because in recent years Hollywood seems to have discovered and acknowledged the appealing stories comics can offer, resulting in a stream of comic adaptations to the big screen (examples include *Watchmen*, *Batman*: *The Dark Knight*, *Spider-Man, Iron Man* etc.) of which some have been real box office successes. As these stories reach bigger audiences, so do certain gender stereotypical representations. With this analysis of *Y:*

The Last Man I do not claim to perform any groundbreaking work. My only intention is to discuss the way gender is treated in a form of popular culture which might have been largely ignored or treated rather superficially in previous academic research. I also want to stress that even though I completely stand behind the arguments I provide in this thesis, I do realize that much of this kind of analysis is subject to interpretation. To cite Richard Dyer: "cultural forms do not have single determinate meanings- people make sense of them in different ways, according to the cultural (including sub-cultural) codes available to them" (Dyer 1993: 2)

Structure

This work consists of three main chapters, 'Women & Comics', 'Y:The Last Man & The Female Body' and 'Patriarchy In Y: The Last Man' and these are all heavily interrelated with each other. In the first chapter, I will try to give the reader an impression of certain trends that have been existing since the comic book medium arose on the basis of a historical overview. Further on in this chapter I will try to explain these trends using analytical frameworks which originate in diverse areas of research, being film theory, cultural theory in general and feminist theories. First, the history of women and comics will be explained through Laura Mulvey's concept of 'the male gaze' followed by a very similar analysis of John Berger. After this, I will introduce the concept of 'objectification' which offers a more general and analytical way to analyze comics. These three frameworks will therefore also be used for the analysis of *Y: The Last Man.* After a short introduction to the story of *Y: The Last Man*, we will start with the analysis of the series to try to see how gender is being treated in the series. The second main chapter therefore will focus on the dualism that has existed between men and women, with the female body at the centre of our discussion. In this chapter, I will draw heavily on the studies of Mulvey, Berger and the objectification theories of Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton, this in combination with recent but also less recent feminist and female voices. Finally, in the third part of this work I will discuss

the notion of patriarchy, and how it relates to the series, demonstrating the overall influence of patriarchy on issues such as labour and sexuality.

Defining Comics

During the course of this thesis the word 'comics' will pop up on a very regular basis so that it might be helpful to provide a small definition. Defining comics has proved to be a difficult task. In the first chapter of *Understanding Comics,* Scott McCloud comes to the following definition: "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (McCloud 1993: 9), admitting that a shorter definition of comics as "sequential art", a definition coined by Will Eisner in *Comics and Sequential Art* will be appropriate in most cases. In recent years the fashionable term graphic novel -instead of comic- has been used frequently in the media, which was defined by Stephen Weiner (2002) as "a sophisticated story told between two covers". The notion that it is "sophisticated" somehow implies that other forms of sequential art are maybe less sophisticated and that is why the term graphic novel has not always been received with open arms in the world of comics. While it can be a useful term to distinguish between an ongoing series and a shorter finished story, the term sometimes seems more like a shrewd marketing strategy than a useful distinction, or as Douglas Wolk claims: "The cheap way of referring to them is 'comics' or 'comic books'; the fancy way is 'graphic novels'"(Wolk 2007: 61). Furthermore, a distinction can be made between American comics and European Comics. European comics are usually forty-six page albums, hard-cover and mostly in full colour (Beaty 2007: 7). Within this European tradition Tintin by Hergé certainly is one of the most renowned examples. On the other hand, American comics are magazines of a smaller size than their European peers, usually soft-cover and mostly associated with superhero stories (Wright 2001: xiv). These comics also tended to be on the periphery of the European comics market, stigmatized as commercial products of mass culture (Beaty 2007: 113). To over-generalize these distinctions would be to minimize the broad variety in formats and genres that comics have

offered, but nevertheless, these generalizations apply to many comic books. is important to stress that these

Defining 'Y: The Last Man'

Y: The Last Man is an American comic book that tells the story of a young man who is the only male to survive a plague that kills all other males on the planet. In terms of genre, it is hard to classify the comic. It does not feature superheroes, and its basic plot sounds very sci-fi, yet at the same time the characters and their environment are portrayed in an everyday fashion. The series was published monthly in separate 'issues' of 24 pages (advertisements not included) and later collected in volumes called 'trade paperbacks', which is a normal procedure for most of the comic books that are published nowadays. (Lavin 1998a: 33). Even though it is very likely that there are certain similarities between the role of women in American comics European comics, *Y: The Last Man* is an American comic book and for that reason this research and the framework will be oriented to the American comic book scene.

2. WOMEN & COMICS

2.1. A History Of Mainstream & Non-Mainstream Comics

Before I discuss my specific research on *Y: The Last Man* I will begin my study with an overview of the history of women and comics. I believe that it is useful to provide this short history to position *Y: The Last Man* within the extensive tradition of comics and with regard to the portrayal of women in comic books. In this chapter I will not only discuss comic book characters but I will also pay attention to the comic book market in general and the creators of some works. We will soon learn that the history of comics and the world of comics for the largest part have been "an annoyingly male world" (Wolk 2007: 70). I do want to emphasize however that this chapter of course offers only a brief overview of the history of women and comics. An overly detailed research would lead us to far of the main subject (the analysis of *Y: The Last Man)* and therefore the primary purpose of this chapter is to provide an insight into certain trends that have existed throughout the history of comics, from its earliest forms to more recent works.

2.1.1. Mainstream Comics

In the decades before comics reached the height of their popularity, another form, very similar to comics, already demonstrated that the masses showed great interest in this form of "sequential art", as Will Eisner would name it (cf. supra). This precursor of the comic book was the newspaper comic strip (Wright 2001: 2), a form that we are still quite familiar with nowadays from newspapers or magazines. These 'funnies' as they were also called due to their humorous content often featured families and their everyday lives as the main topic (2). Originally, the protagonists of these comic strips were children, portrayed in a funny-looking, cartoony way. (Robbins 2002) However, as Trina Robbins observed, male artists such as George McManus soon started a new tradition that was quite different from the earlier portrayals. Robbins called this tradition "the beautiful woman and the funny-looking man". An example of this tradition can be found in George McManus classic comic strip *Bringing Up Father,* a cartoon strip that was

published for more than eighty years. If we take a closer look at an abstract of this strip we can see that the discrepancy Robbins is actually quite obvious: the young daughter of the family is portrayed in a realistic manner, her mother as something in between realistic and cartoony, and the father of the family as a typical cartoon figure.[1] (Fig. 2) On the other hand, female cartoonists of the same generation as McManus such as Nell Brinkley, Robbins noted, drew their men and women according to the same style so that the remarkable gender inequality of the characters in McManus' strips is not present in her work. (Fig. 3)

In the course of the 1930s comic strips gradually made way for a new and longer form of sequential art: the comic book. One particular comic book character literally created the industry and was also its first star: Superman (Wright 2001: 14). Thinking of Superman, we immediately imagine his muscled body and his supernatural strength, representing the "ultimate power fantasy" (Sabin 1996: 57), but we also think of his peculiar relationship with Lois Lane, an ambitious reporter. Contrary to her image of the "tough, self-sufficient career woman" (Lavin 1998b: 94) Lois Lane often served as a mere means to develop the plot, or as Wright (2001: 9) explains: "Lois's chief function was to be captured and await rescue by her hero". Another noteworthy female character in the Superman series is Supergirl, Superman's cousin and a fellow-superhero(ine). Even though she possessed supernatural powers, during her first appearance in *Action Comics* (May, 1959) her cousin Superman immediately finds it necessary to ease Supergirl's mind by reassuring her that he will take care of her "like a big brother" (Lavin 1998b: 94), thereby implying that her superpowers will not suffice to survive in the dangerous world of superheroes. These two examples of female comic book characters demonstrate that in spite of their intellectual or physical capacities, Lois Lane and Supergirl are prime examples of what Lavin

[1] The framework for classifying these figures as realistic or cartoony is Scott McCloud's 'Big Triangle'(1995: 52-53) in which McCloud categorizes cartoon characters and other characters according to three criteria: 'reality', 'meaning' and 'picture plane'. In this triangle George McManus's male protagonist of *Bringing Up Father* is also featured, and the characters can be found at a considerable distance of the 'reality' corner of the triangle, whereas cartoon figures resembling the style in which the daughter of the family is drawn are positioned much closer to the 'reality' corner. (Fig.1)

refers to as "the uneasy contradiction between strength and dependence" in the history of female comic book characters (Lavin 1998b: 94).

Apart from the contradiction between strength and dependence, another opposition Lavin observes is that between women as role models and women as sex objects, a contradiction that suits Wonder Woman interestingly well (Lavin 1998b: 94). "As lovely as Aphrodite, as wise as Athena, with the speed of Mercury and the strength of Hercules" were the words William Moulton Marston used to introduce Wonder Woman to the public (Sabin 1996: 88). Wonder Woman was supposed to be the female counterpart of Superman and Marston believed that she could be the bearer of a feminist message, fighting for equal rights and promoting a feminized society for the female comic book audience (86). In actual practice this feminist message was embodied by Wonder Woman's superpowers but also through an interesting role reversal. Whereas Superman always needed to rescue the helpless Lois Lane (or his cousin Supergirl), Wonder Woman on the other hand needed to save her love interest Colonel Trevor from any danger (Lavin 1998b: 94). Despite this positive, female-empowering image, the comic also "managed to appeal to boys due to its undisguised eroticism" as Sabin (1996: 86) points out. This type of "undisguised eroticism" could be linked to Wonder Woman's sometimes erotic appearance but substantially more disturbing was the recurring theme of bondage in these early Wonder Woman comics.[2] With her magic lasso Wonder Woman could make every man or woman obey but at the same time she was also quite often literally the object of situations involving bondage (Wright 2001: 21) (Fig. 6). This bondage theme culminated in a 1948 story that featured seventy-five panels of men or women tied with ropes (Lavin 1998b: 96). In addition, the fact that Wonder Woman despite the good intentions of its creator did have its flaws with regard to gender stereotypes is further shown in that when the comic book superheroes 'went to war' during World War II, all the male superheroes joined an armed military service branch while Wonder Woman served as a nurse (Wright 2001: 43).

[2] Although it must be pointed out that the first cover of *Wonder Woman* (1942) (Fig.4) does not seem very eroticized, it is interesting to see that by issue No. 7 she has already traded her skirt for a pair of hotpants. (Fig.5)

During the war women were also active in the comics industry to fill the vacancies that occurred after many men had enlisted in the army (Wright 2001: 33), turning them into the Rosie the Riveters of the cultural sector.[3] However, when the war was over these female artists were replaced by their male predecessors and it would take many years before women could play a significant role in the creative process again. Roger Sabin confirms this at the end of his chapter on women and comics: "This survey of American comics for girls and women would not be complete without making the important point that almost all the comics were produced by men" (Sabin 1996: 90). Furthermore, what is highly ironic is that the works produced by these women for the servicemen in wartime were more sexually explicit and objectifying than ever before. The sexual aspect of these comics becomes noticeable in the name that was given to this type of comics. Critics would later ironically refer to these comics as 'good-girl at' and readers would call these books 'headlight comics' (Lavin 1998b: 95), a rather coarse reference to the emphasis placed on the female character's breasts. A clear-cut example of these headlight comics is the character of Torchy, a character that seemed to exist only to satisfy the male reader, and in which the ultimate objective of the storyline was that Torchy and her friends would appear practically unclothed (95) (Fig. 7). Around the same time the stories of the 'jungle queens' that were initially aimed at girls also proved to be very popular. However, these jungle girls still attracted a largely male following. (Sabin 1996:89) This is hardly surprising bearing in mind that as Roger Sabin remarks, the heroines in these comics "tended to wear little other than leopard-skin bikinis" (89) with *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle* as a paramount example of this type of comics. (Fig.8)

[3] Rosie the Riveter is a term that is used to refer to the women working in factories and other sectors replacing the male workers who served in World War II (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

As the images in many comics became more explicit with every issue, concerned critics all over the country started to join forces in a campaign against this relatively unregulated industry.[4] One of the most fierce adversaries of comic books was the psychologist Fredric Wertham (Wright 2001: 94). Wertham was so indignant and concerned about the content and the imagery provided in these comics that after years of protesting against the medium he decided to write a book to express his concerns. In *Seduction of the Innocent*, he linked violence in comic books to juvenile delinquency and also warned the masses for the influence of the explicit sexual imagery on the development of young boys and girls (95). His charges made such an impact that it led to hearings for the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency where Wertham could defend the statements he made in his book. Under pressure of the public opinion and consequently the growing opposition of politicians the comic book industry decided to take this matter in its own hands. In 1954, the year that *Seduction of the Innocent* was published and at the height of the popularity of comic books with over one billion copies sold (Lavin 1998a: 34), the industry finally got together to create the Comics Magazine Association of America and to publish a Comics Code (Wright 2001: 96). This Code was a list of rules that gave instructions about the graphic and narrative content of comic books (Sabin 1996: 68). Essentially, this set of rules banned all images referring to or depicting sex, violence and 'inappropriate behavior' in general. Comic books that did not follow this set of rules did not receive the Comics Code seal that was crucial to get distributed (Sabin 1996: 68). Despite the often very far-fetched evidence Wertham provided in his crusade against comics, the critical voice he added to the debate surrounding comics was perhaps necessary to reflect upon certain trends.[5] According to Lavin, "today, Wertham is vilified as a reactionary whose strident position nearly destroyed the comic book industry. In hindsight, Wertham made at least one valid point: the comic books of his day portrayed women as sex

[4] The concern over comics did not only focus on sexually explicit images but also on the increasingly violent images. (Lavin 1998b: 96)

[5] Wertham for example reprinted images such as that of a man's shoulder, claiming that the shadow on his shoulder was meant to represent the image of a vagina (Fig.9): "In ordinary comic books, there are pictures within pictures for children who know how to look" (qtd. in Wright 2001: 161).

objects" (1996b: 96). When the Comics Code was implemented the Code certainly worked as a wake-up call to the industry and even caused some of the more offensive publishers to go out of business (96). However, the uproar caused by Wertham and the rules implemented by the Comics Code did not lead to fundamental changes in the output of the industry in the following decades. A possible explanation for this status quo could be found in the emerging youth culture of the time:

> In 1956 the controversy over crime and horror comic books effectively came to an end. […] Those who linked the products of mass culture to juvenile delinquency shifted their attention away from comic books to focus on movies and television. At the same time, rock-and-roll was emerging as the newest and seemingly most threatening expression of youth culture. By the second half of the 1950s, comic books seemed like kid stuff by comparison. (Wright 2001: 177-178)

The 1950s and the previous decade still was a time when the audience for comic books was largely diverse due to a wide array of genres that also aimed at a female audience. According to the Market Research Company of America almost half of the U.S.. population read comics and the comic book audience was neatly divided between boys and girls (qtd. in Wright 2001: 57). Titles of popular comics in those days include teenage humor books such as *Archie Comics* and the so-called 'romance comics' like *Young Romance* by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (Lavin 1996b: 96). The latter comic was one of the first in its genre and created the basic formula for such stories, in which the central premise always contained the idea that women needed a man, further promoting domesticity and obedience to the husband. (Wright 2001: 128-129) The degrading portrayal of these female characters was perhaps more subtle and rather narrative instead of visual in comparison with the explicit 'headlight comics' of the time, but the underlying message was nevertheless clear:

> Young women were expected to marry early and embrace their role as supportive wife, busy homemaker, and doting mother. Female promiscuity, independence, and career ambitions degraded the domestic ideal, and these perceived threats spawned social crusades as fervent as anticommunist tactics to guard against them (127).

In the following decades the controversy of the 1950s and the competition of other media of popular culture led to a crisis in the industry. The genre of the superhero comic that had created the industry (cf. Superman) regained its dominance once again and other genres barely got the chance to grow on the audience (Lavin 1998b: 96). In addition, the comic book industry suffered from historically low sales from the early 1960s on with an absolute low of forty-eight million copies sold in 1979, which is very poor compared to the more than one billion copies sold in 1954 (Lavin 1998a: 34). Because of the crisis, publishing companies seemed desperate to regain the audience they had lost. Publishers like DC and Marvel even tried to incorporate feminist messages (e.g. Wonder Woman lost her provocative costume) but those experiments were soon abandoned (Lavin 1998: 97). Furthermore, when writers tried to incorporate super-heroines in their stories, these super-heroines were often subordinate in strength and importance to other male superheroes: the Invisible Girl of the *Fantastic Four* or Marvel Girl from the *X-Men* exerted impressive powers over their adversaries, but because they fainted all the time they functioned as the most useless parts of the team (Wright 2001: 219-220).[6] In an interview artist and writer Trina Robbins (2007) argues that the remarkable decrease in comic book sales was related to the type of comics that was offered to the audience: "the average girl is not interested in superheroes, so suddenly, girls weren't reading comics anymore because there were no comics they wanted to read". While it seems probable that there must be some truth in her statement regarding the simultaneity in the distinct decrease in sales and the gradual 'comeback' of the

[6] The Fantastic Four and X-Men are 'superhero teams', which means that they form a group of superheroes.

superhero genre, Robbins' claim appears to be quite severe and also somewhat gender-stereotypical. The success of comics like Wonder Woman showed that – in spite of the considerate amount of male readers and the sometimes erotic subtext- the superhero genre could also appeal to female readers. In addition, other forms of entertainment such as rock-and-roll music or television competed with the comic book medium to receive youngster's attention. (cf. supra) Another aspect that might have played a role in the loss of a female audience were the distribution channels (Sabin 1996:157). Over the years, comics were no longer sold at new-stands but in specialized shops. These 'fan shops' were completely geared towards a male audience's desires:

> The shops sold an endless array of superhero comics, which to an outsider seemed like pointless riffing on the same theme, but which to a fan were continually fascinating, and hence limited their clientele to males between the ages of about twelve and twenty-five. (157)

Instead of trying to attract female and other readers again, it seemed that in general the industry was satisfied with the idea that females didn't read comics. Therefore, the amount of female-oriented comics was very restricted and the world of comics was becoming more male-oriented every year, of which we will find further evidence in the following paragraph.

In the 1990s the evolution towards a completely male-oriented market manifested itself in the 'bad girl art' trend, which became a real hype in the comic books world in the 1990s (Burrows 2008). In comparison to the women depicted in the 'good-girl art' comics these women were less one-dimensional, "women with an attitude" (Burrows: 2008). These bad girls often carried the consequences of a tragic past full of pain and misery with them and were actively looking for vengeance. However, there was something not quite right about the appearance of these bad

girls. Laura DePuy (2001), a comic book artist, sarcastically addressed her concerns about the bad girls in a series of articles on the comic book industry webzine Sequential Tart: "Female characters must be presented in exaggerated sexual postures to display their physical assets as much as possible. No sagging allowed". In these articles Depuy criticizes the unnatural and sexually provocative poses these bad girls took. They were typically drawn with breasts larger than their heads, unrealistically long legs, often wearing nothing more than a costume that barely covered their breasts (Burrows: 2008). Publishers typically associated with this type of female comic book characters were amongst others Image and Chaos! Comics, a company started by Brian Pulido who was one of the founders of the bad girl art and responsible for creating the iconic Lady Death character (Lavin 1998: 98). Lady Death possessed all of the aforementioned traits and was a real hit among –male- comic book fans in the 1990s (Fig.10). From the middle of the decade on until around the turn of the century bad girls comics such as Lady Death (Image) or Fathom (Top Cow) ranked on top of the sales charts alongside Marvel and DC superhero titles. At its height in August 1995, two Image issues of *Spawn* (a superhero comic that also featured some typical bad girls) and a *Lady Death in Lingerie* comic formed the top three of the most popular comics ("August 1995 Comic Book Sales Rankings").[7] The bad girls of the 1990s were a quite short-lived phenomenon in terms of popularity but when these bad girls left the scene, this did not mean that the extreme representation of female bodies would stop. If we return our attention to Wonder Woman, the character originally created by William M. Marston, and compare the artwork of one of the more recent issues of the series with an image of Lady Death then the similarity in portrayal is quite striking (Fig. 10 & Fig. 11). Even though Lady Death is drawn in a more extreme way, the same style of portraying is used, focusing on these characters physical features (breast, legs etc.) and their tight costume. Furthermore, after the rapid decline of the bad girls at the end of the decade there appears to be a new interest in this kind of comics. After that the series had been suspended for 3 years, Lady Death is being published again

[7] These rankings do not include Marvel comics of that month.

since 2010 (Davidsen: 2010). In addition, some popular bad girls seem to have found their way to the theatres. In 2005, actress Jennifer Garner starred as Elektra in the eponymous Hollywood production (IMDB.com), Elektra being one of the precursors of the bad girl art (Burrows: 2008) and created by the well-known artist and writer Frank Miller. Finally, in the coming years a film about the Fathom series will feature famous actress Megan Fox as Aspen Matthews, the protagonist of the series (Fleming: 2009) It seems that if the bad girls of the 1990s ever really left the scene, they are now back with a vengeance.

As for the creators, nothing much seems to have changed since the very brief interlude of female artists during World War II. A touring exhibit in 2006 that went by the name "Master of American Comics" included fifteen cartoonists but all of them were men. (Wolk 2007: 71) In addition, in a research on comic creators conducted by Erik Melander (2005) he came to the conclusion that webcomics, in contrast to print comics, have a much higher number of female creators and contributors. [8] Even though his research was not conducted in a very scientific way he did offer numbers that were quite clear with respect to the gender imbalance in the industry, finding a number of 8 female contributors on the list of the best sold print comics of January 2005. [9] Webcomics did significantly better with a percentage of at least 25% of the contributors being female with the possibility existing that this number is even larger because often a certain percentage of the contributors were unknown. Consequently, the internet seems to offer more chances to female creators or definitely seems more accessible than the classic print-based industry.

Currently, the dominant genre in comics still is the superhero genre. If we take a look at the sales figures for comic books in 2010 ("Comic Book Sales Figures 2010") then the top ten is

[8] Webcomics are comics published on a website.
[9] Melander explains that if a creator featured on several sites he or she was counted several times. In addition, only the contributors that featured on the website were counted so that some contributors might have been left out.

entirely dominated by superhero titles like *Avengers*, *Blackest Night* and *Siege* and this 'superhero domination of the sales charts' applies to all the previous years. Claiming that the entire mainstream comic book scene consists of superhero titles would do injustice to the variety of genres and titles existing, but it remains a fact that superheroes continue to dominate the scene.

2.1.2. Non-Mainstream Comics

Despite this overview, it would be wrong to argue that the world of comics in general has always been an exclusively male-oriented world in every aspect. As the mainstream comic scene was booming, gradually an alternative scene started to develop in the margins. Reacting against the restrictions implemented by the Comics Code of 1954 (cf. supra) an underground movement called the 'comix movement' marked the beginning of a rapture in the comic book world (Pustz 1999: 62). The artists creating these comics started to depict explicit sex scenes, drug abuse and violence to shock the public and to violate and destroy the taboos that had existed since the outrage of 1954 and that were created by the establishment (64). However, these comix also contained sexist images the same way mainstream comics did. Therefore, a group of female artists including the aforementioned Trina Robbins started to create and publish their own comics. Highly concerned with a feminist agenda titles such as *It Ain't Me Babe* and *Wimmens Comix* somewhat ironically formed a reaction against what was already a reaction against the restrictions of 1954 (64). By the mid-seventies the subversive character of the comix had worn out and artists were looking beyond this form of comics that basically existed for its shock-value. This is also what Art Spiegelman had to say about the topic in 1987:

> […] what had seemed like a revolution simply deflated into a lifestyle. Underground comics were stereotyped as dealing only with Sex, Dope and Cheap Thrills. They got stuffed back into the closet, along with bong pipes and love beads, as Things Started To Get Uglier. (Lopes 2009: 87)

Out of the ashes of the underground comix movement, the 1980s saw the rise of 'alternative comics' "moving the comic book medium toward new 'literary' heights" (Lopes 2009: 89). The quintessential figure of the alternative movement was Art Spiegelman himself, who was the artist and writer of *Maus*, one of the most critically acclaimed comics of all time. The alternative comics industry also offered many chances to women and gay artists to grow in their trade so that they could later become well-respected artists (Lopes 2009: 122). It is also out of this broad scene that many critically-acclaimed works were created, such as for example *Ghost World* by Daniel Clowes, a comic that features two realistically portrayed teenage girls as the main protagonists (Robbins 2002).

This overview of women and comics demonstrates that apart from the alternative comics scene, female characters were often discriminated both in the visual aspects of comics (i.e. their depiction) as in the narrative aspect (i.e. the role they play). Furthermore, female artists seem to be a rarity and the offer in terms of genre seems to be very one-dimensional in comparison to the earlier years of comics. The analysis of *Y: The Last Man* further on in this thesis will clarify which position the series obtain on the axis of mainstream comics and alternative comics and with regard to gender stereotypes, but first the theoretical framework will expose and explain some of the mechanisms behind the often discriminative history of comics.

2.2. Interpreting The History Of Women & Comics

2.2.1. Laura Mulvey & 'The Male Gaze'

A particularly useful concept to come to a better understanding of the visual (and also narrative) discrimination of women in popular culture and more specifically in comics is the concept of 'the male gaze' by Laura Mulvey, a term originating in film theory. This term was

coined by Mulvey in an article titled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". This article, with an obvious interest for feminists as Mulvey claimed so herself (Mulvey 1975: 837) was originally published in 1975. In this article Mulvey tries to deconstruct traditional Hollywood cinema, "demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (833). Drawing on psychoanalytical theories from Freud and Lacan, Mulvey discusses "a number of pleasures" involved in watching a Hollywood film. These pleasures are the voyeuristic process of scopophilia (the pleasure of looking at another person as an erotic objet) and the process of narcissistic identification with the protagonist seen on screen, which also gives pleasure to the spectator. In the voyeuristic process, according to Mulvey (837) the male spectator is the one who gazes and the female actress is the one who receives the gaze and the one that is coded with the notion of "to-be looked-at-ness" (837). Within the process of identification the male spectator identifies with the "ideal ego" of the male protagonist and not with the female actress, who only serves as a means for his sexual pleasure and desire and "by means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (840). All these notions are used by Mulvey to illustrate her stand against "the monolithic accumulation of traditional female conventions" (844). She ends her plea by saying that "women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret" (844).

Interestingly enough, a lot of the mechanisms of Hollywood cinema that Mulvey describes can also be used to explain some of the remarkable female portrayals in the history of comics since the experience of Mulvey's male spectatorship offers some interesting resemblances with the world of comics. According to Mulvey (836) "the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) […] helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation". The isolation Mulvey mention can be equally applied to the reading of a comic book or reading in general, which is mostly a very personal and solitary activity. Furthermore, the

notion of scopophilia arising "from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (836-837) is reminiscent of the way female comic book characters were portrayed and which we discussed in the previous chapters, from Wonder Woman and the character of Sheila, Queen of the Jungle in the 1940s to bad girls like Lady Death and Fathom the 1990s. In what follows I will provide a contemporary example of this when I discuss comic book artist & writer Frank Miller's portrayal of the Vicky Vale character in a Batman comic. In addition to the isolated activity of reading a comic or watching a film and the scopophilic dimension which also can be find in both mediums, comic book artists can control the dimension of time (through editing and their control over the narrative) and the dimension of space (through changes in distance and editing) in the same way that cinema according to Mulvey uses these codes to create a gaze and "an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (844). The same way a director carefully selects and manipulates what his audience gets to see in the theaters, so does a comic book artist choose what his readers get to see and what not. If a reader of a comic book is confronted with an image of a provocatively dressed bad girl, then we can assume that in most cases the artist and the writer chose exactly how this bad girl was portrayed. The practices of looking and the practices of creating that a large part of the comic book audience and many comic book creators act upon can thus be compared to the mechanisms that Hollywood film makers used and still use to please the male viewer.

Perhaps a contemporary example of a mainstream comic could clarify and strengthen this comparison: let us consider artist and writer Frank Miller, the creator of the critically acclaimed comic *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and a well-respected name within the world of comics. In a blog post on her website 'Girls Read Comics', Karen Healey (2006) discusses Frank Miller's work for *All Star Batman and Robin.* In this post she pays particular attention to the character of Vicki Vale, a classic Batman character:

> In Miller's hands, photographer Vicki Vale becomes a gossip columnist "gadfly" who struts around her apartment in lacy lingerie and fluffy heels, sipping a martini, and dictating to herself while Gotham City gleams in the huge, uncurtained, picture windows behind her. (Healey: 2006)

Healey then provides some images of Frank Miller's Vicki Vale parading in her lingerie which allows the voyeuristic process of scopophilia to take place since she is quite clearly drawn with a strong sense of to-be-looked-at-ness (Fig.12) Healey also supplies us with the director's editions that were included in the comic.[10] In these comments Frank Miller gives artist Jim Lee clear instructions on how to portray Vicki Vale: "She cocks her head, tossing her hair. Detail her BRA. It'll drive them crazy, Jim". Miller's tone is practically identical in the next comment:"Ok, Jim, I'm shameless. Let's go with an ass shot. Panties detailed. Balloons from above. She's walking, restless as always. We can't take our eyes off her. Especially since she's got one fine ass". (Fig.13) With these images and instructions, Miller gives a perfect example of the definition Mulvey herself provided of the male gaze:

> The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (1975: 837)

Through these images, Miller's fantasy of Vicki Vale turns her into an object that can only be associated with its physical features.

[10] The instructions the author gives to the artist of the comic.

Miller's male gaze also found its way to the big screen in *Sin City,* an adaptation of the eponymous comic book with Frank Miller as a co-director (IMDB.com) which was praised at the time for its visual qualities.[11] In an article following the release of *Sin City,* journalist Kevin Maher (2006) criticized the adaptation for being so "steeped in fetishistic adolescent imagery and casual misogyny that it overexposes the sinister appetites of its hardcore fan base" further on stating that "the movie unwittingly reveals the frank and masturbatory hatred of women that is fundamental to any understanding of the comic-book geek". While the overall tone of the article is very harsh and often over generalizing in its claims about the comic book world, Maher does have a point when he says that the imagery of the film often places women in what Mulvey calls the 'to-be-looked-at' position. Particularly noteworthy is a scene featuring the character of go-go dancer Nancy Callahan, played by Jessica Alba. According to Mulvey:

> Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen (1975: 838).

The character of the show-girl such as for example the character of Nancy Callahan then "allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude"(838). In this particular scene police-officer John Hartigan (Bruce Willis) walks into a bar where Nancy works as a dancer. As he enters Nancy is starting her go-go dance using a lasso which reminds us of Wonder Woman's empowering yet also erotically-inspired weapon. However, rather than empowering Nancy, this lasso only serves to catch the gaze of the male customers in the bar and the spectator of the film,

[11] The film was nominated for several awards in the cinematography category and even won the Technical Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival (IMDB.com)

while the camera is shifting between the point of view of John Hartigan (which is also the spectator's point of view) and shots of the other men in the bar gazing at Nancy's erotic dance, exemplifying the point Mulvey made on the character of the show girl.[12] (Fig.14)

Most of the criticism Mulvey received on her theory was that it did not include female spectatorship and also included only one form of sexuality (heterosexuality) in the pleasure of looking (Chandler: 1998). While it is certainly true that in everyday life or while watching a film men are not the only ones who can find pleasure in looking, Mulvey's theory certainly possesses the merit that it brought up the issue of female objectification in this form of popular culture. That the male gaze can also be regarded as a recurring feature in a certain amount of comics should in fact not be surprising because, as we have seen, comic book creators are mostly male and so is an overwhelming part of its (target) audience. Therefore Mulvey's male gaze is a particularly useful concept to explain the portrayal of women in comics and women in *Y: The Last Man*. Furthermore, Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, which contended that female actresses in Hollywood cinema were often nothing more than mere objects existing for the sexual desire of the male spectator, also holds that the narrative role women played in Hollywood cinema was connected to their object-like status. Men mostly were the protagonists, "the active one […] forwarding the story, making things happen" while women were there to be looked at (838).

2.2.2. John Berger's 'Ways Of Seeing'

Despite the influential character of Mulvey's study, her claims on spectatorship and artistic norms were not entirely new. Three years before Mulvey's theory was published, in 1972 John Berger examined artistic traditions in Western art in his *Ways of Seeing*.[13] In this work Berger came to very similar conclusions as Mulvey. Berger begins the third chapter of his *Ways of Seeing*

[12] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1k2MX-3cpUs and (Fig.14)
[13] *Ways of Seeing* was both the name of a television series and the name of a book based on the series.

by saying that "according to usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means overcome, the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man" (Berger 1972: 45). Comparable to what Mulvey did a few years later, Berger also indicated the difference in cultural representations between men and women and the behavior expected from them: "*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at (by a male spectator)" (47). Whereas Mulvey discussed Hollywood cinema to expose the persistence of an active/passive dichotomy, Berger used oil paintings and more particularly oil paintings depicting nudity, in which women were "the principal, ever-recurring subject" (Berger 1972: 47). Berger's conclusion is very similar to that of Mulvey since he notes that it had always been taken for granted that the 'ideal spectator' was male and that the woman depicted in these paintings was there to visually please the male spectator (64). If we would apply Berger's conclusions about paintings to the artwork in comic books then we could contend that the artwork of a considerate amount of mainstream comics (e.g. the 'good-girl art' en the 'bad-girl art') indeed often seemed to be created with a male spectator in mind.

The duality between male/active vs. female/passive was already present at the very beginning of the foundations of our Western culture. Aristotle, Susan Bordo states, saw fertilization as "the vitalization of the purely material contribution of the female by the 'effective and active' element, the male sperm" (1993: 12). Though it is true that the semen has to travel through the body to get to the egg, Bordo notes that "our expectation that the male will be the 'effective and active'" is so strong in our culture that we forget that the egg has not been passively waiting for the semen but has to 'travel' as well after it leaves the ovary.

2.2.3. Objectification

Women's association with their bodies in Western society and the cultural manifestations

of this type of association have been analyzed in the works of John Berger and Laura Mulvey, but another yet very similar theory that has developed over the last decades into an interesting analytical framework will help us further to analyze the female portrayal in *Y: The Last Man* in a more profound way. Objectification is a notion that involves the seeing or treating of a person as an object ("usually a woman") and is a central concept to feminist theory (Papadaki 2010). In the 18th century, Immanuel Kant was one of the first to discuss the concept of objectification in his *Lectures on Ethics* (Papadaki 2010). Kant noted that "man has an impulse directed to others, not so that he may enjoy their work and circumstances, but immediately to others as subject of his enjoyment" (155) Kant found this impulse to be highly problematic: "[…] there lies in this inclination a degradation of man; for as anyone becomes an object of another's appetite; all motives of moral relationship fall away; as object of the other's appetite, that person is in fact a thing […]" (156). Kant thus puts objectification in the sexual realm, much like feminists will do many years later. In the 1980s and 1990s some feminists influenced by Kant such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin believed that objectification came from a gender inequality that is created and sustained through pornography and men's consumption of it (Papadaki 2010). Objectification as Kant, MacKinnon and Dworkin described it, can be summarized in Sandra Bartky's definition of sexual objectification as "the form of an often coerced and degrading identification of a person with *her* [my italics] body" (1990: 23). We should note that Bartky explicitly says 'her' and not 'his or her' since objectification has always been central to feminist theory because women were considered to be the objectified sex. However, it must be noted that over the last decades men also seem to become an objectified sex. According to Rohlinger (2002), "men in advertisements increasingly display the visual cues of objectification", indicating that men are also becoming the victim of the practices of objectification. In order to use the concept of objectification for the analysis of *Y: The Last Man* Martha Nussbaum's article on objectification provides an interesting analytic framework. Nussbaum claims that the "idea of treating *as an object"* involves seven possible notions: 'instrumentality', 'denial of autonomy',

'inertness', 'fungibility', 'violability', 'ownership' and 'denial of subjectivity' (Nussbaum 1995 : 257). This does not mean however that all of these notions are always at work in the process of objectification: "[…] objectification […] is to treat a human being in one or more of these ways"(258). To expand the framework, Rae Langton added three other notions of objectification. Those notions are 'reduction to body', 'reduction to appearance' and 'silencing' (Langton 2009: 228-229). All this provides us with a total of ten features to form an analytical framework that will help us to analyze objectification in *Y*: *The Last Man*, in combination with the insights in John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze.

2.3. Recent Content Analysis Of Comics

In recent content analysis studies of comics and comic strips that focus on gender stereotypes, much of what Mulvey and Berger discussed almost forty years ago still seems to be valid. First, in 2005, Jessica Zellers undertook a study of the 'graphic novel' collection at the library of the School of Information and Library Science, which is part of the University of North Carolina. In this paper, titled "Naked Ladies And Macho Men: A Feminist Content Analysis Of A Burgeoning Graphic Novel Collection", she analyzed the portrayal of male and female characters focusing on three different aspects: the sex of the protagonists, the sex of the perpetrators of violent acts, and finally the clothes male and female characters were wearing in these comics (Zellers 2005: 6). The results of her research were clear. First of all, with regard to main roles and subordinate roles, Zellers discovered that for the sample of comics she discussed, six out of the fifty-four protagonists that featured in these comics were female. (22) Moreover, not one of these six protagonists played the main role herself. All of these characters always had a male companion, just like the 'weak' female characters in the superhero teams of The Fantastic Four and the X-Men (cf. supra). Furthermore, this also corresponds to Mulvey's conclusions that men are often the protagonists, whereas women play minor roles or are there to be looked at. As

Zellers points out, "there is nothing inherently anti-feminist about a male protagonist, and there is nothing necessarily pro-feminist about a female protagonist" (which the example of the bad girl art has illustrated), but what bothers her is the complete absence of independent female protagonists in the collection she studied, which goes against "the equal-opportunity philosophy of feminism"(23). Second, with a ratio of nine to one, acts of violence are also coded male. This stereotype of the 'powerful man' and the 'helpless woman' confirms Berger's 'men act and women appear'-theory and is furthermore negative for both sexes (29). Through this stereotype men are portrayed as the violent sex while the idea of women that is spread is that of not being able to take care of themselves, an idea that was also proclaimed in the early Superman comics which portray Lois Lane and Supergirl as dependent on Superman's protective powers (cf. supra). In the final and third part of her analysis Zellers discusses the "sexual suggestiveness of attire" (33). Her research shows that nearly twenty-five percent of the female characters in this comic book collection were depicted naked whereas only two percent of the men were portrayed in that way 34). These numbers point out that Mulvey & Berger's conclusions about the portrayal of women seem to be confirmed in Zeller's research, which confirms the suspicion that comics do not escape the visual and narrative gender inequality.

An analysis of comic strips by Glascock and Preston-Schreck (2004) showed comparable stereotypes: women were underrepresented and more often associated with their looks. Moreover, women were more likely to be married but not as likely as men to have work, and if they did, their work was of a lower status (Glascock and Preston-Schreck 2004: 424) These gender-role stereotypes about gender and the work sphere are not strictly reserved to comic strips. For example the genre of the 'romance comics' (cf. supra) also promoted domesticity and subordination to the husband in that women should be married and preferably stay at home, if not they were shifty temptresses.

Another form of content analysis can be found on the website Women in Refrigerators. Started in 1999, the goal of this website was to uncover a trend that has dominated many comics: the fact that not only women were often secondary characters but that they were also often physically hurt or killed, as mere plot devices (Simone: 1999). The somewhat strange name of the website comes from a *Green Lattern* comic in which the male protagonist finds his girlfriend's corpse in a refrigerator (Condon: 2002). Gail Simone, a comic book writer and one of the persons behind the website explained on the main page of the website that it had occurred to her that "it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics" (Simone: 1999). That is why on this website you can find a very extensive list of female characters who have been depowered (losing for example, their super hero forces), injured or killed.

These studies confirm that the discrimination of female comic book characters is not a rarity but rather something that seems deeply embedded into the world of comic books. Naturally this type of discrimination does not apply to all the comic books that are being published (cf. supra 'alternative comics') but it will be interesting to see whether *Y: The Last Man* follows or resists existing gender stereotypes in comics and in general.

3. 'Y: THE LAST MAN': PLOT SUMMARY & ORIGINALITY

3.1. Plot Summary

Before we begin with the actual analysis it might be useful to summarize the first part of the story so that the main storylines and the main characters do not have to be introduced further on:

July 17, the summer of 2002: Yorick Brown, an amateur escape artist, is talking on the phone to his girlfriend Beth whom he is about to propose to. He is interrupted when a second line calls in: it is his mother, Congresswoman Jennifer Brown, who reminds him not to forget his father's birthday that day. Through an intercutting of several scenes ranging from Washington D.C. to the West Bank in Palestine the plot slowly builds towards the gigantic MacGuffin that had already been foreshadowed in the first panels of the comic. [14] In these first panels we see a female police officer staring into the distance while another woman approaching her is covered in blood and cries for help because "her boys are throwing up blood" (*Unmanned*: 4). The shocked police officer acquaints the helpless woman of the situation: "It's too late. It's Like this everywhere. My partner. My husband. All over the city. All over the world, maybe. It's the men … all of the men are dead" (1). As we are later informed, a plague of mysterious origin has instantaneously slain every (male) mammal with a Y chromosome, including every fetus and sperm. The only male survivors of this gendercide as it is called throughout the series are Yorick and his pet monkey Ampersand. Two months after this plague struck, Yorick finally arrives in Washington D.C. after a trip that had started in his home town, New York City. In Washington D.C. he finds his mother alive and well in the White House, and shortly afterwards a new president, Margaret Valentine, is installed. As Secretary of Agriculture she was the next in line for

[14] A MacGuffin is "plot element that catches the viewers' attention or drives the plot" (WordNet).

the presidency since the Secretary of the Interior died in a plane crash during the gendercide. For the sake of mankind, the president sends Yorick on a journey to Boston to the lab of Dr. Allison Mann, an expert in genetics with a particular interest in cloning. The main objective of this journey is to find and explanation on how and why Yorick and Ampersand survived, since they seemed to be immune to whatever caused the plague. On his journey he is accompanied by Agent 355, a secret agent skilled in martial arts who works for the Culper Ring, a mysterious secret agency. In Boston they easily find Dr. Mann, but after having a devil of a job looking for Ampersand who ran when he saw the needle Dr. Mann was going to inject him with, they discover that Dr Mann's lab has gone up in flames. Because of this incident, they will have to cross the country all the way to California, to Dr. Mann's back-up lab. In the meantime Yorick still craves to see his girlfriend, who was actually in Australia at the moment the plague struck. However, The Last Man is not allowed to carry through with his wish, because the new president thinks a journey of this length would be far too dangerous in a post-apocalyptic world that is still recovering from losing nearly half of its population. Therefore, Yorick, Agent 355 and Dr. Mann set out on a journey to California through a disarranged and 'unmanned' America. (*Unmanned*)

3.2. Originality

The point of departure Brian K. Vaughan uses, a world with (almost) no men, is a common trope in fiction. Both in science fiction and in feminist literature there have been examples of female writers who worked around the same theme. However, as we will see, Vaughan seems to be well aware of his female predecessors. The first 'modern' example seems to come from Charlotte Perkins Gilman, an American writer most famous for her feminist novella *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In her novel *Herland,* she writes about a society without men in which women reproduce through the concept of parthenogenesis.[15] (Gilman 1909: 30) Herland is the

[15] Parthenogenesis is human conception without fertilization by a man (WordNet)

name of "this strange country where no men lived -only women and girl children" and it is visited by three men who discover a utopian society, where things as poverty do not exist (40). As an early feminist, Perkins Gilman in her work also addressed subjects such as women who in their role as mothers and through their domestic work are confined to the home (cf. infra *The Yellow Wallpaper*). A second, more recent predecessor is *Houston, Houston, Do You Read?* (1976), a science-fiction novella by James Tiptree, Jr., which is a pseudonym for Alice Shelden (Strickland). The novella tells the story of a plague on earth that wipes out the entire male population, leaving only a beheaded part of the female population alive who are able to reproduce through cloning (Strickland). The only three men that survived the plague find themselves in a space ship, circling around the planet (Strickland). The fact that Vaughan is very much aware of his female predecessor is shown in the series in a very subtle way. Just after the 'gendercide' has struck, there is an image of the Johnson Space Center in Texas in which a voice coming from a speaker asks "Houston, Houston, do you read?" (*Unmanned*: 33), which is probably an allusion to the title of James Tiptree Jr.'s novella. Another work that might have inspired Brian K. Vaughan was Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Shelley's *The Last Man* is also explicitly referred to in a play performed by a group of actresses who name themselves Fish & Bicycle productions. Cayce, the director of the group admits that her play on the last male on earth is "a little tip of the hat to Mary Shelley" (*One Small* Step:149).

4.'Y: THE LAST MAN' & THE FEMALE BODY

As we have seen, images of women in popular culture show that women have often been associated and also often equated with their bodies. This association of women with their bodily features is also responsible for many stereotypes that existed and continue to exist in our society. Susan Bordo asserts that female bodies "are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity" (1993: 165). The female body is also often considered to be essentially weaker and less stable so that the female body is used by men to reduce women to this body and thereby restricting it, also limiting their economic and social roles (Grosz 1994: 14), as we will see in the following chapter. According to Grosz "women are *somehow* more biological, *more* corporeal and *more* natural than men" (14). Kathy Davis perfectly illustrates the duality that exists between males and females:

> The mind-body dualism has permeated Western thought, dividing human experience into a bodily and a spiritual realm. [...] The female body becomes a metaphor for the corporeal pole of this dualism. Images of the dangerous, appetitive female body, ruled precariously by its emotions, stands in contrast to the masterful, masculine will, the locus of social power, rationality and self-control. The female body is always 'the other': mysterious, inferior, threatening to erupt at any moment and challenge the patriarchal order (1997: 5).

Examples of such discrimination can be found in early essentialist beliefs that claimed that women were very prone to hysteria. As Elaine Showalter notes, healers used to believe that a uterus travelling through the female body was responsible for women's 'hysteric behaviour' (1997: 15). The aforementioned author Charlotte Perkins Gilman was one of the victims of these essentialist ways of thinking. Suffering from what we would now call a postpartum depression, she was ordered a rest cure by psychologist S. Weir Mitchell (1997: 63). This rest cure involved –

among other things- confinement to the bed and complete isolation (Zabus: 2010). Gilman's own experiences inspired her to write the partly autobiographical work *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) in which the main character Jane was also prescribed a rest cure her husband -who is also her physician- and is confined to her bed in the attic of the house (Zabus: 2010).

4.1. Male Emotions vs. Female Rationality

If we compare the male and female characters in *Y: The Last Man* based on their rational or emotional behaviour in the story, then there appears to be trend that male characters are portrayed as being ruled by emotions, whereas many women are able to act rationally when necessary. Yorick and his 'bodyguard' Agent 355 are a first example of this bursting of gender stereotypes. In most situations, Agent 355 is the oracle of common sense opposed to Yorick, a character who is mainly ruled by his emotions. Agent 355 always overlooks every situation so that they can travel as safely as possible, because she realizes that the discovery of a living male would cause great uproar. For example, in the beginning of the series, when they are still located in Washington, Agent 355 does not pay attention to Yorick's puns about her code name and instead gets to the order of the day, suggesting that they will need motorcycles to travel to Boston because the roads are too congested after the very sudden way the plague struck (*Unmanned* 85-86). This sort of rational and well thought-over considerations are a constant throughout the series, in which Yorick 355 often functions as Yorick's common sense. Even though Yorick fully realizes that his body is mankind's only hope for reproduction and to discover what caused the plague, he is driven by his romantic yet irrational and rather improbable hope to be reunited with Beth, the girl he proposed to on the telephone just before the gendercide took place (cf. supra). Also in the beginning of the series, before he meets Agent 355, Yorick arrives in Washington where he finds his mother, Congresswoman Brown, in The White House (51). The atmosphere of joy because of their reunion soon comes to an end when they engage in a heated discussion on

Yorick's intention to leave for Australia to find Beth. Yorick believes that he can prevent the extinction of the human race through his relationship with Beth, whereas his mother -addressing him in a way a mother would address a five-year old child- ("Sweetie, Adam and Eve to the contrary, you can't do that with just two people" (57)) confronts Yorick with the reality of the situation. Not entirely convinced whether he will listen to her advice, she decides to lock Yorick in the fallout shelter underneath the White House, a similar practice to the way women sometimes were confined to their homes or their beds because they were considered to be hysterical (cf. Charlotte Perkins Gilman). "I'm sorry honey boy. But I couldn't risk you doing something *stupid* up there", his mother informs him (65). After this incident, and even before he and Agent 355 have left Washington D.C. behind them, Yorick's emotions dominate any rational thinking for a second time. As he witnesses that the Washington Monument, a gathering place for mourning women after the plague, is being daubed by The Daughters of the Amazon, a group of fanatics, he forgets about the importance of his mission and starts lecturing these women, despite being informed by the woman he is talking to that he should not interfere because "those people are dangerous" (94). The only other living males as far as the reader knows of are the two astronauts in space and they show similar signs of irrationality. A few hours before they are planning their return back to earth, they start fighting because Vlad suspects Joe of puncturing his suit (*One Small Step*: 36) Luckily Ciba, the female astronaut is there to stop them and remind the men of their objective. Joe blames the men's behaviour on "the oxygen deprivation" which is making them "psychotic", but strangely enough Ciba does not seem to suffer from this oxygen deprivation, which suggests that in these tense moments before their return to earth, Ciba is the only one who seems to be able to let her mind rule over her body (39). These examples of female rationality and male irrational behaviour are of course not the only examples, but they should indicate that the idea of the female body, "ruled precariously by its emotions" as opposed to the "masculine will, the locus of [...] rationality and self-control" (cf. supra Davis: 1997) is seriously contradicted in several scenes in the series.

Women are also portrayed as capable leaders (Rustad 2008). President Valentine, the former Secretary of Agriculture, who only became the president because all the other men in line had died, deconstructs the stereotypical image that women cannot be good leaders because they are ruled by their mentions, in contrast to men's strong will (cf. supra Davis). Instead, from the moment she gets to the White House she displays her leadership. When Yorick, in the beginning of the story is trying to lecture the arguing widows of the Republicans and some members of the Democratic Party, Yorick himself gets lectured by the then not yet installed president: "That's *enough,* young man. These women have suffered more than you can imagine. They don't deserve to be lectured by a self-righteous *child*" and after the she immediately orders Agent 355 to arrest all the women who were involved in the armed struggle, including members of her own party (77). Once she installed into her office in the White House, she is the one who gets to the order of the day ("All right, ladies, we can finish our small talk *after* the U.S. male here tells us about his plans"(78) and comes up with the idea that Agent 355 will be Yorick's chaperone.

Nevertheless it is important to note that these types of oppositions do not apply to *every* character in the series. Whereas many female characters often display the skill to think rationally when necessary, other female characters seem to be indeed primarily ruled by their emotions. The Daughters Of The Amazon, who travel around the country, looking to wipe out all the remaining traces of patriarchy (i.e. also Yorick) form a perfect example. One could interpret their role in the series as representing the cliché of extremist feminist behaviour. However, as Rustad (2008) notes "the female cast is not all made of 'sugar and spice', nor is it purely evil. *Y: The Last Man*'s women are capable of the entire range of human behavior and emotion." Therefore, even if some women act in a very irrational way, this should not mean that the other oppositions lose their gender-bending aspect.

4.2. Female Brain Power vs. Male Pelvic Power

The mind-body dualism between men and women Davis (1997) refers to is also quite literally reversed through the characters of Yorick and Dr. Mann. Historically, women were characterized for their pelvic 'power' and men were said to possess the brain power (Zabus: 2010). In the comic this opposition cannot longer be hold: Yorick is the character who has the power to reproduce and Dr. Mann, the geneticist accompanying him, has the brain power. This is very well-illustrated in the scene in which Dr. Mann explains to Yorick how he was able to survive the plague. While Dr. Mann is trying to explain the reason of Yorick's immunity to the plague, Yorick constantly asks Dr. Mann to simplify her explanation. "Is there any chance we can dumb down the *technobabble* about a thousand percent?" (*Ring of Truth*: 146) Yorick asks and when Dr. Mann continues her explanation Yorick interrupts her ("Dumber!" (147)) until finally Yorick understands what Dr. Mann tried to explain him: "Whoa, back up. Expelled? *Feculence?* You mean the reason I'm the last man on earth… is *monkey shit?*" (147-148) According to Dr. Mann, an antibody that was present in Ampersand's fecal matter made Yorick immune to the plague, so that Ampersand's 'shit-slingering' as Yorick called it is actually what saved his life. In addition, the birth of a male baby (*Safeword*: 141) of Russian scientist Ciba Weber who was on board of the International Space Station diminishes in some way the status of most valuable body which Yorick possessed until then. Despite these two events, Yorick's association with his reproductive functions and Dr. Mann's scientific work and her overall intelligence provide a reversal of the mind-body dualism in that Yorick is the one who is associated with his body, and Dr. Mann with her brain.

4.3. Active Women vs. Passive Men

4.3.1. Female Courting

If Western artistic traditions according to Berger and Mulvey portray men as active and women as passive (cf. "Men *act*. Women *appear*"), then *Y: The Last Man* offers an interesting twist on these assumptions, which can be noted in Yorick's romantic encounters with members of the opposite sex. Yorick, being the only male person that survived the plague could have been depicted as an active stud impregnating every woman he meets, but this is not how he is portrayed. Instead, Yorick is rather passive when it comes to other women and he tries to stay true to Beth. In spite of his intentions, in the course of this adventure which takes him around the world, Yorick does have a few flings. However, on these rare occasions Yorick is rarely the one who takes action. On every occasion Yorick either gets seduced or is dominated by the women he meets.

The first time Yorick is taken by the charm of another woman is in Marrisville, Ohio, a community of former inmates who were released by the few guards that survived the plague (*Cycles*: 69). The reason for Yorick's stay there is that he was found unconscious by Sonia, one of the inhabitants of Marrisville (26). When he wakes up and tries to get out of bed, Yorick's is naked but his private parts are not shown to the reader and remain strictly reserved for the eyes of Sonia who utters an absent-minded "um…" when she gets to see Yorick's naked body (Fig.15) (32). In this case, Vaughan seems to invert standard cultural representations because Sonia's look at Yorick's naked body is exactly the opposite of Mulvey's male gaze as it puts Yorick in the to-be-looked-at position and Sonia as the spectator of his naked body, transforming the male gaze into a female gaze. Furthermore, Yorick's nudity and the female spectator of this body (Sonia) also form the exact opposite of the tradition in oil paintings John Berger discussed, in which the underlying idea according to Berger was that women were depicted naked to offer visual pleasure to the male spectator. Sonia's way of seducing is also very direct in that she very actively seeks to find Yorick's (sexual) attention. The process of seduction is entirely led by Sonia. First she emphasizes her heterosexuality very clearly ("it would take a hell of lot more than all the men

dying to make me eat pussy") as to Yorick's question if all the women in town are lesbians (58). Further on, she confesses to Yorick that the only reason Yorick she would leave the village is him (63) and while they are talking about Yorick's status as the last man on earth, she tells him that if she would be in his place she would "try to bang as many girls as possible, too" (63). Yorick however seems perfectly able to resist the temptation and to stay loyal to Beth. But then Sonia starts to pursue her objective more actively: she starts stroking through Yorick's hair and later she confesses to him that she is not wearing any underwear (65). Not much later they finally kiss, and Sonia's active role in the seduction process seems to be emphasized in that she is the one standing on her toes to kiss the taller Yorick, instead of waiting for Yorick to bend his head down (Fig.16) (66).

Whereas the first example showed a woman who dominated the process of seduction, in this next case of Yorick's flings Yorick takes the initiative to kiss Beth, not to be mistaken with his girlfriend whose name is also Beth. (Fig.17) (*Ring Of Truth*: 26). However, immediately after their first kiss the other Beth takes over Yorick's active role: it is she who decides that they will have unprotected sex ("Forget about condoms, I want to feel--" (Fig.18) (27) After they have had sex, Yorick feels bad about this because he realizes he has cheated on his girlfriend, but the other Beth hushes him ("Shh, come here. You're so sweet") and then starts kissing him, which confirms the transfer in activity to Beth (33).

A final example of women as active bodies can be found in Yorick's short romance on board of The Whale, a ship that is sailing the Pacific (*Girl on Girl*) When she meets Yorick, Kilina, the captain of the ship, decides to hold Yorick in her cabin, much against the will of Agent 355 (17). It does not take long before Yorick and Kilina end up kissing in the captain's cabin, but when Yorick suggests that maybe they "should slow down" Kilina does not take into account Yorick's feelings and basically orders him to take off his clothes, which implies that she is the one

in command of the situation. (Fig.19)(61).

These three examples demonstrate that every time Yorick gets involved with another woman he is reduced to the status of a passive body, a body that has to obey the dominating and active bodies of Sonia, Beth and Kilina, deconstructing the idea that females should passively wait for their 'knight in shining armour' to court them and that men act and women appear. Although it could be argued that in letting the women do the courting, the series only confirms the cliché of 'the female temptress', still this shows that these women do not simply "appear" but also "act".

4.3.2. The Cover Art

The gender-bending aspect of showing women as active and men as passive man not only appears inside the book, but also on the outside of the comic, in the cover art. For the analysis of the cover art, John Berger's theories on Western art are very suitable since comic book covers can be considered as the 'paintings' of comic books. This is because the cover is usually the only space in a comic book where there is room for an image the size of a whole page, detached from any speech balloons or 'the gutter'.[16] Comic book covers are of course also a form of advertising: by means of one image, the comic has to try to attract the attention of the comic book fan or the passer-by. This implies that the image on the cover of a comic book should give a clear idea on the content of the comic. Therefore, the cover of a comic book can also reveal whether the story inside follows or deconstructs underlying gender norms and stereotypes, as we have seen with the covers of the 'headlight comics' or the 'bad girl 'comics (cf. supra).

Similar to the way the story inside deconstructs the active-passive dichotomy, so do most

[16] The blank spaces between the frames (McCloud 1995: 66).

of the covers bend the artistic traditions that represented men as active and women as passive, there to be looked at. On the covers we see that Yorick's ability to act is often literally restrained. Whether he is chained (Fig.20 and Fig.21), bending over his head because someone is holding a gun to his head (Fig.22) or tied down to a chair when he is an old man (Fig.23), Yorick seems to be pushed into a passive, subordinate role. Moreover, Yorick's body seems to be coded with a certain amount of 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. For example, on the cover of the fourth issue (Fig.20), Yorick is almost naked, only covered by a few chains attached to his body. Behind Yorick's body, a female pair of lips is hovering over him, adding an extra degree of to-be-looked-at-ness because these lips suggest that a woman is watching him. Once again Yorick seems to be the subject of a female gaze (cf. Sonia), which is yet another reversal of standard cultural norms of looking. Contrary to Yorick's passiveness, the women depicted on these covers are practically always occupied in some kind of activity. On several of the covers women are depicted engaging in active behaviour (e.g. Fig.24, Fig.25, Fig.26, Fig.27, Fig. 28 etc.) because as we can see they are either holding a gun or some other weapon, which implies that these women really "act" in the story and do not simply "appear" (cf. supra Berger). This does not mean 'the male gaze' is entirely absent: there is one cover near the end of the series that depicts Agent 355's in such a way that the image focuses quite explicitly on the physical aspects of Yorick's companion: her waist is much thinner than usual and her breasts seem to be too large for the outfit that she is wearing, practically turning Agent 355 into a bad-girl character (Fig.29). Interestingly, the cover artist of the series is a man (Massimo Carnevale), while the artist responsible for the artwork inside is a woman (Pía Guerra) so that the probability of a male gaze is further raised. Another cover that possibly involves the male gaze displays the character of Waverly. Waverly is a former super-model who is now as a garbage collector since the plague struck. Rustad (2008) observes that "we see the garbage truck supermodel posed with her hip jutting to the left, her gaze off to the right, and her nipples poking forward toward the gaze of the observer—a stereotypical, male-oriented pose" (Fig.30). However, despite the fact that the image seems to follow stereotypical

norms of representation, the motives for using this image might be less stereotypical and rather an implicit critique on the way society imposes the ideal of the perfect body to women On the inside of the comic, Waverly explains her look to Yorick: "I used to have a modeling contract […] worst part is I spent *three grand* on my boob job just before everything happened. Fat lot of good our tits do us now, right?" (*Unmanned*: 41). Generally speaking, we can conclude that the cover art indeed offers a good indication of the gender-bending aspect of the series, since the active female vs. passive male dichotomy is carried on inside the comic book as well.

4.4. "*Man*, You Split Wood Like A Girl!": Female Strength & Male Weakness

The deconstruction of gender norms is also shown in other instances, such as in the issue of physical strength. According to Iris Young (qtd. in Bartky 1990: 35) "the norms of femininity [i.e. gender norms] suppress the body potential of women. [they] grow up learning that the feminine body is soft, not muscular, passive, incapable, vulnerable." However, as Rustad (2008) notes, many of the female characters in the series "display exceptional physical strength", whereas Yorick is portrayed as the more passive and physically much weaker character. In the beginning of the story, Yorick gets involved in a fight with the Daughters of the Amazon and initially he seems convinced that he can 'take them on', but during the fight he is quickly overpowered and we see Yorick laying on the ground saying that he is "seriously re-thinking" his "no-hitting-women policy"(*Unmanned*: 84). Yorick now seems to have learned that his stereotypical opinion about women as defenceless creatures who should not be touched is incorrect, or as Rustad (2008) remarks: "Clearly women are as much a threat to Yorick's personal safety as any man could be". Moreover, his comment seems a bit ridiculous with regard to later scenes in which Yorick has to use his assumed male strength. In physical confrontations throughout the story, Yorick is overpowered many times by other women and these women include members of his

own family. When he sneaks into his mother's office in the White House, she is so surprised by the sudden sound coming from behind her that she throws Yorick over her shoulder (*Unmanned*: 51) Further on in the series, when Yorick finally meets his sister Hero who is know a Daughter of the Amazon, she literally beats Yorick to the ground (*Cycles*: 74). Yorick's lack of physical power is also shown in other non-fighting situations. When he tries to chop wood Sonia makes fun of him saying "*man*, you split wood like a *girl*". Vaughan mocks the stereotype that being a male equals physical prowess by means of a simple word-play. The fact that he is physically quite weak also implies that Yorick would not be able to look after himself in this post-gendercide world. Therefore, Agent 355 is appointed by the president to be Yorick's personal chaperone (*Unmanned*: 79). In terms of physical strength, Agent 355 is again the exact opposite of Yorick, (cf. rational vs. emotional behaviour). Agent 355 is an agent skilled in martial arts and she also has to use these skills constantly throughout the story, mostly to save or defend Yorick such as for example in his reckless fight against the Daughters of the Amazon (99).

Despite these non-stereotypical representations of strong women and a physically weaker male character, Yorick becomes remarkably tougher as the series progress. After a heavy fight on a train to Paris, Agent 355 compliments Yorick with his fighting-skills. Again Vaughan plays with the opposition masculinity – femininity when Agent 355 compliments Yorick that he "finally learned to stop hitting like a girl" (*Why and Wherefores*: 11). Yorick's progress in fighting-skills culminates in one of the final scenes of the series, in which Yorick wins a fight against Alter, a very experienced colonel of the Israeli army. Although it could be argued that the series perhaps works towards a masculinising of Yorick (cf. "you finally stopped hitting like a girl"), the path towards his manhood does not follow the basic rules. In a world without men, it is Agent 355 who is responsible for turning Yorick into a more active and physically stronger character, seeing that she learns Yorick the tricks of the trade. If we would categorize *Y: The Last Man* as some sort of Bildungsroman, then Yorick is completely shaped by the women surrounding him and most

importantly by Agent 355, who serves as an example of physical strength and rational behaviour, characteristics Yorick is clearly lacking in the beginning of the story.

4.5. Objectification in 'Y: The Last Man'

4.5.1. Ten Notions Of Objectification

Objectification is a notion central to feminist theory and involves the seeing or treating of a person as an object, that person usually being a women (cf. supra Papadaki). Using objectification theory as an analytical framework, we will discuss ten features that involve objectification (according to Nussbaum (1995) and Langton (2009) and apply them to how Yorick is treated throughout the series by the people he meets. Also in this aspect, the series proves to be gender-bending because we will see that the way Yorick is treated complies with almost every aspect of objectification that has been put forward by Nussbaum and Langton.

Instrumentality

For Nussbaum instrumentality entails that "the objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes" (1995: 257), which corresponds to the way Yorick is treated by some people. Throughout his journey Yorick constantly serves as an instrument for other people's purposes because of his status as the last man alive. When Yorick's mother contacts Alter Tse'Elon, the chief of the general staff of the Israeli Army, she implores Alter to find Yorick and bring him into safety because she does not trust The Culper Ring, the organization Agent 355 works for (*One Small Step*: 31). However, her trust in Alter seems to be completely misplaced as later on in the story it is made clear that Alter considers Yorick as an instrument in her military strategy and has no intention of returning him to his mother. "We only need one man to ensure our nation's security"(89), Alter tells one of her officers. However, Alter does not see Yorick as a soldier for

the Israeli army but instead she is convinced that "without an outside 'evil' for its citizens to hate, poor will eventually turn against rich, white against black, and.." (61), by which she means that if they 'steal' Yorick from the Americans, all the attention will go to external conflicts instead of the internal conflicts simmering through the country. Near the end of the series Alter and her soldiers are still chasing down Yorick but in the meantime it has become clear that Alter did not chase Yorick out of pure patriotic beliefs. Rather than chasing Yorick for the sake of her country, we learn that Alter saw Yorick as an instrument to confront her with her own survivor's guilt. Alter sees the last man as the only person who is worthy enough to kill her: "I have a right to die in *battle*! And not at the hands of… of some *girl*! (*Whys and Wherefores* :112) However, also on this emotionally (much) more complex level, the instrumentality of Yorick is maintained because Yorick has been chased, physically abused and even his own mother was killed by Alter, only because he is a tool in Alter's processing of the plague and her traumatic past in the Middle East.

Denial Of Autonomy & Denial Of Subjectivity

Nussbaum defines denial of autonomy as a situation in which "the objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination" (257). In the series, Yorick's autonomy is limited from the beginning on. He does not have the choice to do as he pleases and has to obey other people's orders constantly. First from his mother who does not allow him to search for Beth (cf. supra) and later on during his journey it is Agent 355 who decides where Yorick can and cannot go. Interestingly, Nussbaum mentions the way parents treat their children as a situation which "almost always involves a denial of autonomy"(263). This reminds us of Congresswoman Brown's treatment of her son, as she approaches Yorick in a very similar way to how one would address a small child (cf. supra "Sweetie, Adam and Eve to the contrary, you can't do that with just *two people*"). Yorick's denial in autonomy also implies a denial in subjectivity. In being denied to travel to Australia to find his girlfriend Beth, 'the object's (Yorick) feelings are not taken into

account.

Ownership & Fungibility

Ownership, according to Nussbaum, involves an objectifier who "treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold" (1995: 257). Nussbaum further mentions that "ownership is by definition incompatible with autonomy". Yorick's restriction not to go wherever he wants (his "denial in autonomy") involves a certain kind of ownership by the state. Yorick is a body that is owned and protected by the government (Agent 355).There are however much clear examples of 'ownership'. When Waverly (cf. supra) has discovered that Yorick is in fact a man, she forces Yorick to get inside her truck, holding him at gunpoint (*Unmanned:* 47). Yorick is confused by her sudden threat and asks Waverly: "Then... what *are* you gonna do?", to which she replies "I'm going to sell you" (47), which is a perfect example of ownership applied to Yorick. Another example of ownership is provided in a scene that takes place early on in the story. Yorick finds himself trapped in a house in the village of Marrisville, Ohio which is surrounded completely by the Daughters of the Amazon. Victoria, the leader of the Amazons, then informs the women of Marrisville that if they want to repay "their debt to society" (before the plague they were all prisoners at the local women's facility) they'll have to hand over the last man to her (Cycles: 79), turning Yorick into an object, a commodity that can be owned by another person or a group of persons.

At the same time, in the eyes of Victoria and Waverly, Yorick has a high degree of fungibility. Fungiblity, signifying for Nussbaum a situation in which "the objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types" (1995: 257). For Waverly, Yorick is "interchangeable with object of other types" because she wants to sell him in exchange for food, whereas Victoria treats Yorick as interchangeable

with "otber objects of the same type", i.e. other men. During Victoria's speech she calls Yorick "one of our oppressors" (78) and Yorick is told that he will pay for "the sins of *every* man" (88). He is put on par with all the men (the "opressors") that lived before the plague, which further denies Yorick's personal way of treating women.

Violability

Victoria's hatred for men also causes her to see Yorick as a violable object , lacking in what Nussbaum calls "boundary-integrity". For Victoria, Yorick is an object that is "permissible to break up, smash, break into" (1995: 257). As the leader of the Daughters of the Amazon she also manages to transfer her violent intentions to all the other members of the gang, including Hero, Yorick's own sister. In a conversation with Hero, Victoria even manages to convince her that she should kill her own brother: "Then what must the Daughters of the Amazon do with this brother of yours?" (*Cycles*: 53), she asks and Hero's answer shows that she has taken over Victoria's treatment of Yorick as an object by saying that she will "kill *it* (my italics)". These violent thoughts are transformed into violent actions in Marrisville, when the Daughters of the Amazons are surrounding Yorick and his friends. Hero manages to knock down her own brother twice in a short space of time (74 & 87) and the violent behaviour towards Yorick culminates to the point when Victoria is ready to pull the trigger on Yorick to cause "the fall of man" until suddenly Sonia (cf. supra) saves Yorick from being executed by throwing an axe at Victoria, which instantly kills the leader of the Amazons.

Inertness

A final feature of Nussbaum's seven notions that involve objectification is inertness, defined by Nussbaum as a situation in which "the objectifier treats the object as lacking in

agency, and perhaps also in activity"(1995: 257). As we have seen in earlier, Yorick is already a rather passive character and this is enforced by the way other people treat him. Whenever something dangerous happens, Yorick is told by Agent 355 "to stay back" (e.g. *Cycles:* 19) or to hide in a safe place away from any danger. The degree of inertness imposed on Yorick by others is a constant throughout the story. Yorick gets locked up by his own mother, or is captured by the Israeli Army and the Amazons etc. and the objective is always the same: to stop Yorick's activities and to turn him into an object lacking in agency. This is also shown on the cover of the fifth issue of the series, in which Yorick is depicted in chains that are completely restraining his body of any possible agency (cf. supra Fig.20). Luckily for Yorick, his hobby as an escape artist often helps him to find a way out of several perilous situations. Because of his skills as an escape artist, he avoids being a completely passive and inert character, despite the fact that he is treated that way constantly. Yorick's inertness is also maintained from the very beginning of the story until the very end. The first image of Yorick is an image showing Yorick hanging upside down in a straitjacket, practicing his escape artist skills while he is on speakerphone with Beth (*Cycles*: 5) (Fig.31). In the final issue of the series, Yorick is shown a similar state of inertness. Sixty years after the plague struck, Yorick has become an old man, locked up in a cell in Paris in the Palais de l'Élysee. This time however, the straitjacket he is wearing is not there to practice his skills but instead he is forced to wear the straitjacket because of a failed suicide attempt (*Whys and Wherefores*: 132) (Fig.32). To prevent Yorick from killing himself his daughter, now the president of France and the result of his short but intimate and unprotected moments with 'the other Beth' (cf. supra), put him in a dark cell, surrounded by clones of his dead monkey Ampersand. These two images of an inert Yorick can also in a way symbolize the fact that from the beginning of the adventure until the end of his life, Yorick's ability to move and act freely has been constantly impeded.

Reduction To Body

According to Langton (2009: 228), a person is reduced to his or her body when "one treats it as identified with its body, or body parts". Since Yorick disposes of the most important and most craved body on the planet because he is literally the last man, it is offers no surprise that Yorick gets reduced to his body or body parts throughout his adventure.

A first instance of 'reduction to body' happens when he is on his way to his mother in Washington D.C., when he meets the former supermodel Waverly. She discovers that Yorick is a man because Ampersand accidently pulls the gas mask off of Yorick's face, one of the many disguises to hide his manhood (*Unmanned*: 46). To make sure Yorick is a real man and not some male impersonator she puts her hands in Yorick's trousers, which confirms her suspicion. "I don't believe it", she says "you're a real man … but just barely". (*Unmanned*: 46), making fun of the size of Yorick's phallus. In performing this examination of Yorick's genitalia she also sexually objectifies Yorick. According to Bartky (1990: 26) (cf. supra), "a person is sexually objectified when *her* [my italics] sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of *her* [my italics] personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing *her* [my italics]". In this example, Yorick's sexual parts are separated from the rest of his personality. Yorick is reduced to his body parts, which makes this an interesting example of sexual objectification and a reversal of the expected gender roles, also shown in Bartky's use of the feminine personal pronoun 'her' (cf. supra). Second, another instance of 'reduction to body' can be found in a comment by Alter while she and her Israeli troops are searching for Yorick. In defence of the long and up to that moment futile search for Yorick she justifies their long journey all the way from Israel by calling Yorick "the only functioning sperm factory", which makes Yorick a precious object, only because of his body (*One Small Step*: 42). By comparing Yorick to a 'sperm factory', Yorick's sexual functions (the ability to reproduce) are separated from the rest of his personality representing him.

The 'reduction to body' reaches its height in one of the most interesting and remarkable images of the series: a frontal nude image of Yorick (Fig.33). In this image, Yorick is completely reduced to his naked body. (*Paper Dolls*: 28) The reason why Yorick all of a sudden is posing naked is because he was held at gunpoint by a 'paparazza' and forced to strip off his clothes, so that she could give the readers of her tabloid newspaper (The Monthly Visitor) proof that the rumours circulating about the last man are indeed true. The high degree of objectification of this nude photograph is strengthened in several aspects. First of all, the fact that the first example of full and frontal nudity in the comic is male is highly exceptional in mainstream culture. Mainstream culture, and more particular Hollywood cinema (in many ways comparable to the world of mainstream comics, cf. supra) still has a double standard concerning nudity: in film, a nude scene with a female actress is often regarded as something perfectly natural, whereas male nudity in mainstream film still forms some kind of taboo. An article by Douglas J. Rowe (2004) on Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* and the taboo of male nudity argues that "scenes with full-frontal male nudity usually can be timed with a stopwatch while those with nude women can be measured with a sundial". The taboo of male nudity in Hollywood cinema recently surfaced in 2009, when the film adaptation of *Watchmen*, the critically acclaimed comic by Alan Moore, made its way to the theatres and a lot of media attention went to whether or not the penis of the character Dr. Manhattan would be shown or not. In the run-up to the screening of the film articles with titles such as "Confirmed: Dr. Manhattan's Penis is in the Watchmen Movie!" (comicbookmovie.com), "Outrage: *Watchmen* Movie's Doctor Manhattan to Have Large Penis" (Brown: 2009) appeared and also after the release the commotion did not stop. Another article on nymag.com ("Dr. Manhattan's 'Gigant Blue Wiener' Gets 'Glowing' Review") reports what some important movie critics had to say on the issue of Dr. Manhattan's penis, showing that this nudity was not just a small anecdote but a big event to all these –mostly male- reviewers (Graham: 2009). In Rowe's article he lets several professors in cultural studies provide

explanations for this double standard. Sarah Riddick attributes it to the "male-dominated business" that Hollywood still is and the fact that "men are more likely to show female nudity." Her comments seems to suggest that Laura Mulvey's concerns about Hollywood cinema in the early 1970s that is Hollywood Cinema was male-dominated an discriminative towards women might still be valid these days (cf. supra). Furthermore, in the article Elayne Rapping, a well-known critic of popular culture and a former professor in women's studies and media studies, mentions that the double standard in nudity is just a continuation of a trend that goes back ages: "You can look back to classic paintings of the 17th and 18th centuries and see fully clothed men with nude women", supporting John Berger's research on the representation of women in a selection of European paintings (cf. supra). Finally, Elayne Rapping also argues that "for a man to reveal his private parts is to be reduced to the position that women have always been reduced to- which is to be examined and judged". Therefore, when Yorick's has to strip off his clothes, he is reduced to his naked body, a vulnerable position which is much more common for a woman than for a man in the majority of popular cultural representations.

Another aspect that intensifies Yorick's objectification in this situation is the fact that the image of a nude Yorick is in fact a photograph taken by the 'paparazza'. Susan Sontag, in her collection of essays *On Photography* (1977) argues that photography is a tool of power (8) and that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (4), which inherently makes photography already an act of objectification. Through this photograph the *paparazza* obtains power over Yorick and over Yorick's body, which gives her also a certain sense of 'ownership' (cf. supra) over Yorick's body. In addition, according to Sontag, "to photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves […] Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is sublimated murder" (14-15). Not only does she violate Yorick because she photographs him, she also had to hold him at gunpoint to make him take off his clothes, which adds the notion of violability to the situation. Furthermore, because of this

photograph Yorick is made into an instrument (cf. instrumentality) in the *paparazza's* objective to sell more copies of her newspaper. Moreover, by taking this photograph she also denies Yorick's subjectivity (cf. denial in subjectivity) and Yorick's autonomy (cf. denial in autonomy) because Yorick has no other choice than to follow the woman's instructions despite the fact that he is obviously not very happy to pose naked, judging by the look on his face. Finally, the photograph turns Yorick into an article of consumption -one of the main effects of photography according to Sontag (110)- because his nude body will soon be on the cover of every issue of The Monhtly Visitor in the post-gendercide world, with readers ready to 'consume' the picture of his naked body. In conclusion, this nude photograph of Yorick intensifies the notion of objectification because of two reasons. First of all because it deconstructs standard popular cultural representations of nudity. Secondly, because the act of photography itself and the way the paparazza treats Yorick to shoot her picture bring along several other notions – apart from 'reduction to body'- involved in objectification which we have discussed earlier in this analysis.

Reduction To Appearance

Seeing that Yorick is being reduced to his body, it would make sense that he also gets reduced to his appearance, which would mean that he is primarily treated on how he looks and how he appears to the senses (Langton 2009: 229). Another analysis of Yorick's short-lived romances (cf. supra) should give us an idea whether or not Yorick is reduced to his appearance. His first crush Sonia is very direct in her approach but she hardly reduces Yorick to solely his appearance. Even though Sonia clearly takes the initiative in seducing Yorick there is never any indication that she is only interested in Yorick because of his looks. In fact, the first indication that she might be interested in Yorick (and the other way round) is when she completes the lyrics to a David Bowie song Yorick referred to (*Cycles*: 33) and they both exclaim the title of the song at the same time, staring into each other's eyes (Fig. 34). In the case of the second short-lived romance Yorick experiences (with 'the other Beth'), it becomes a lot more complicated to

determine whether Yorick gets reduced to his appearance or not. Before they kiss, Yorick and Beth have a very long conversation about serious issues such as religion and death yet their conversation at times is also very playful and peaceful. Their kiss could be considered as the logical consequence of the respect and appreciation they both feel for each other, avoiding that Yorick gets reduced to the status of the desirable last man. However, Beth then admits while they are passionately kissing: "It's all I've been thinking about since you took off that mask"(*One Small Step*: 27) By this, she confesses that perhaps she was much more interested in seducing Yorick than in listening to his story. Finally, Yorick's romantic adventure with Captain Kilina on board of The Whale is very similar to his romance with Sonia. Kilina and Yorick have the same interests as they both have an English major (*Girl on Girl*: 22) and even though Kilina is clearly attracted to Yorick, again there are no real indications that she reduces Yorick to his appearance.

Silencing

The notion of silencing, involves the treatment of someone as lacking the capacity to speak. Speech being a distinctive capacity of a person, almost as much as autonomy (Langton 2009: 229). Even though 'the other Beth' and Kilina do not reduce Yorick to his appearance, once they have Yorick under control, they completely ignore whatever objection Yorick might have. After Beth and Yorick have had sex, Beth even literally silences Yorick. "Shh, come here" (*One Small* Step: 33) she addresses him when she sees that Yorick regrets being unfaithful to his girlfriend. This illustrates that Yorick's feelings are largely ignored, as if she does not hear or wants to listen to what he has to say.

4.5.2. Context Of Objectification

Despite the fact that how Yorick is treated by other persons throughout the story corresponds to at least nine out of the ten notions involving objectification, what is crucial to

understanding these examples is the overall context in which the objectification happens. As Nussbaum (1995) argues, "in the matter of objectification, context is everything" (271). This also applies to all the examples of objectification provided through the ten notions of objectification.

Possibly one of the clearest ways to illustrate this is by performing a closer reading of the storyline that takes place halfway through the series. Yorick is left in the hands of former Culper Ring Agent 711, when Agent 355 decides that Yorick is not joining her and Dr. Mann on their trip to the hospital. For the umpteenth time Yorick is denied the right to do what he wants to do and to go where he wants to go (cf. supra denial in autonomy/subjectivity). In Agent 711's place things soon get out of hand. While Yorick is drinking from a cup Agent 711 offered him he feels he is going to be sick (*Safeword*: 25). The next moment Yorick finds himself naked and tied with ropes, and he is spoken to by Agent 711 who has been transformed into a dominatrix (Fig.35) who calls him a "faggot" (35). During this session with Agent 711, Yorick is treated as an object corresponding to several notions of objectification that are on Nussbaum's list.

First, Yorick's autonomy is denied and he is made inert by the fact that he is tied with ropes so that Agent 711 can decide what she does with the helpless and restrained Yorick. Furthermore, Yorick also suffers from a high degree of violability: Agent 711 slaps him in the face with her bare hand (45) and hits him with a whip (34). After being injected with a hypodermic, Yorick starts to hallucinate and he starts to relive sexual traumas from his childhood, his adolescence and the paramount traumatic experience of the aftermath of the plague. Agent 711 also literally tries to violate Yorick by forcing him to have sex with her. She craws all over Yorick who is now tied to a bed: "This is your duty. Your sperm is mankind's last hope" (68) she informs Yorick, thereby denying Yorick's subjectivity and reducing him to his bodily functions. When Yorick sees no other option than to allow Agent 711 to have her way, she refuses and takes him to a sort of indoor pool where she continues to ask Yorick all kinds of questions. "Ever since the plague killed every other man more than a year ago, why have you constantly put your own life in jeopardy?" (55), she asks Yorick while she mentions all the occasions on which Yorick's irrational

behaviour had put his own life in danger, since this is all mentioned in the diary Agent 355's left behind. In the end it seems as if Agent 711 tries to drown Yorick but then suddenly Yorick gets an epiphany. He sees something or someone in the twilight zone that he himself is also in and this vision gives him the force to escape from Agent 711's domination. "I don't wanna die" (65) he screams and to his own surprise, the exit door of the room with the pool gives out to Agent 711's cabin, where Agent 711 informs Yorick that everything she did to him was all part of a suicide intervention, "le précedé d'enfer" as she calls it (67). Therefore, what first seemed like a case of extreme sexual objectification and maltreatment, in hindsight turns out to be an intervention that was necessary to help Yorick cope with his survivor guilt. The context and the explanation for Agent 711's behaviour towards Yorick change the idea of objectification in a most striking way. In the end, the Yorick's objectification by Agent 711 can be called a form of positive objectification, a possibility Nussbaum (1995) also supports in her article, saying that the concept of objectification can be used in a positive spirit and that in some cases, "objectification has features that may be either good or bad, depending on the overall context" (250). In the context of positive objectification we can also come to a better understanding of some other instances of objectification Yorick goes through. In particular the examples of Agent 355 and Yorick's mother who often deny Yorick's autonomy and subjectivity receive a new meaning in this context. They are concerned for Yorick's well-being and that is why sometimes they deny his sense of agency and his autonomy. Of course this notion of positive objectification cannot be applied to all the situations in which Yorick is treated as an object. Persons with less positive intentions such as Alter, Victoria and the *paparazza* treat Yorick as an object but there is hardly any positive elements to be found in their motives.Thus, the suicide intervention in Agent 711 cabin learns us that as Nussbaum argues "context is everything" and that "in many if not all cases, the difference between an objectionable and a benign use of objectification will be made by the overall context of the human relationship in question" (271).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the objectification of Yorick is not a positive form of gender-bending, as opposed to the gender-bending aspects of showing women as active and rational beings. However, in turning Yorick into the objectified the series again breaks traditional patterns which mostly show women as the objectified, as we have seen in Laura Mulvey and John Berger's work.

4.5.3. Objectification Of Women

Clearly, the male objectification in the series does not rule out any objectification of the female characters. However, even though some female are sometimes treated in an objectifying way as well, not one of them go through the same objectification as Yorick. Hero, Yorick's sister perhaps comes closest to the degree of objectification her brother is exposed to. Victoria, the leader of the Daughters of the Amazon treats Hero as an instrument for her purposes, hereby fulfilling the conditions of instrumentality Nussbaum suggests (1995: 257). Victoria needs someone to find the last man who was spotted in Washington D.C. and fate decided that this person will be Hero. That this person is Hero is important for the further development of the story but not for Victoria, because any of her 'sisters' who can help her destroy the last remnants of the male dominators is useful, which means that the notion of fungibility applies here since Hero is interchangeable with any of the other Amazons. Victoria also does not respect Hero's subjectivity: Victoria denies Hero's initial objection against chasing her brother by smashing Hero in the face, adding violability to her treatment of Hero and at the same time silencing the confused Hero (*Cycles*: 52). However, unlike her brother, Hero is not reduced to her body or her appearance and this is a general trend throughout the story. This lack of female objectification is noticeable in the artwork as well. Unrealistic bosoms and tiny waists are rather exceptional, which adds to the quality of the characters (we will however discuss some examples of the male gaze cf. infra.) Perhaps telling for the scarcity of examples of the male gaze and sexual objectification of women in the series is a particular scene in the beginning of the fourth volume (*Safeword*). In this

scene Dr. Mann shows her breasts to a mounted group of rangers to prove to them that they are not Amazons, because adhering to ancient traditions, the Amazons in *Y: The Last Man* mutilate their breasts. However, Dr. Mann's breasts are not shown as the image stops above her breasts, which avoids any possibility of a male gaze (*Safeword*: 17).

4.6. Coloured Lips

In spite of the mostly laudable representation of the female body, avoiding and reversing many gender stereotypes, there is one aspect of the female character's bodies that seems to follow stereotypical representations of women. Rustad (2008) notes that all of the female characters in the story have coloured lips. From the Israeli soldiers (Fig. 36) to secret agent Agent 355 (Fig.37), from P.J. – a mechanic- (Fig.38) to the woman on board of the International Space Station (Fig.39), all of them have coloured lips. Rustad (2008) explains the presence of coloured lips as a visual code, a pragmatic means to indicate a character is female. However, in a world full of women and only one man, giving women coloured lips seems a bit ridiculous since there is only one person of the opposite sex alive so that there can be hardly any confusion for the readers about the sex of any of the characters. Therefore, "while serving a pragmatic purpose [these coloured lips] entrench traditional conceptions of gender difference" (Rustad), which makes the use of coloured lips a notion that goes against the other gender-bending aspects.

5. PATRIARCHY IN 'Y: THE LAST MAN'

Apart from being the focus of objectification and several other gender stereotypes (cf. previous chapter), women's bodies have also been used against them to limit their development in other aspects of society such as labour and sexuality (cf. supra Grosz) Therefore, in this following chapter we will discuss how the male power structures have discriminated women in these aspects, and to what extent *Y: The Last Man* is gender-bending in these issues. In this chapter the body still occupies a central place, because as Adrienne Rich notes, "the woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (Rich 1976: 55). The central notion to this chapter will be 'patriarchy'. Adrienne Rich also offers a concise yet comprehensive definition of what patriarchy is according to her:

> Patriarchy is the power of fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men- by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor - determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. It does not necessarily imply that no woman has power, or that all women in a given culture may not have certain powers. (1976: 48)

It will be interesting to see to what extent patriarchy is still present in a world inhabited by billions of women and only one man.

5.1. The Heritage Of Patriarchy

Through several examples it is illustrated in the series that patriarchy clearly influenced and continues to influence the fictional world of the series, even though all of the men except for Yorick are dead.

That patriarchal power was very much present in the pre-gendercide world is for instance illustrated in one of the opening scenes of the series. In this particular scene we see Yorick's mother, Congresswoman Brown –or Representative Brown, as she prefers - engaged in a discussion with a Senator from her party (*Unmanned*:10). The subject of their discussion is an amendment on abortion, and the Senator counts on Representative Brown's support. To avoid any cliché, Representative Brown is the one who is against providing foreign aid to organizations that perform abortions while the male Senator is in favour of providing this aid. "Jesus, Jennifer, what kind of woman *are* you?" (10) the Senator reproaches her, before he starts threatening her. "Well, thanks for your time then. I hope you enjoy what's left of your term." the Senator says, and he ends the discussion by warning her: "You got lucky once, but you won't get elected again… not without my help." (11) This conversation clearly indicates that in the pre-gendercide world patriarchal power exercises a large influence on women , even on high-ranked women such as Yorick's mother. But then suddenly, not even half an hour later the gendercide takes place and all of the men all over the world drop dead. Images of the Tokyo Stock Exchange paved with bodies and a shocked and lonely woman among the corpses at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas immediately show the impact of this gendercide (Fig.40) In the beginning of the second volume of the series (*Cycles*), an introductory page titled "The end of the world as we know it" (3) gives a brief overview of the consequences of this gendercide:

> 495 of the Fortune 500 CEOs are now dead, as are 99% of the world's landowners. In the United States alone, more than 95% of all commercial pilots, truck drivers, and ship captains died… as did 92% of all violent felons. Internationally, 99% of all mechanics, electricians, and construction workers are now deceased… though 51% of the planet's *agricultural* labor force is still alive. 14 nations, including Spain and Germany, have women soldiers who have served in ground combat units. *None* of the United States' nearly

> 200,000 female troops have ever participated in ground combat. Australia, Norway, and Sweden are the only countries that have women serving on board submarines. (3)

As Rustad (2008) notes, the men's death and the consequences for the post-gendercide world "point out just how disproportionately male present-day power holders are and how much structural sexism remains in Western societies". Therefore, the gendercide will torture all the women on the planet for many years after the plague. Food is scarce because it cannot get distributed, electricity is a luxury provision because almost all the electricians are dead and travelling by plane is impossible because there are no mechanics or pilots. This also hampers the Yorick, Agent 355 and Dr. Mann's journey considerably. They have to continue their journey on foot or travel by train and at one point in the story Yorick gets very sick from what later turns out to be a form of food poisoning after eating from an expired can of tomato soup (*Ring of Truth*: 133). These examples are just a small selection of the countless inconveniences the threesome has to go through, caused by the gender imbalance that existed before the plague.

An exception to the sometimes post-apocalyptic landscapes Yorick, Agent 355 and Dr. Mann go through is the town of Marrisville, Ohio. This is also the town where Yorick met Sonia, the first of his flings and also the village where the Daughters of the Amazons nearly manage to execute Yorick (cf. supra). In Marrisville, much to Yorick's surprise and opposed to almost all the other places they have visited, there is electricity and fresh food. (*Cycles*: 49) Later, Yorick learns that all of the women living in Marrisville are actually all convicts who were released from their cells after the plague (69). However, these women are not portrayed as ruthless criminals. We learn that Sonia is a former drug addict who got set up by her former boyfriend (68) and it is also suggested that the other women ended up in prison because they revolted against their violent husband or an abusive father. The isolated town of Marrisville shows that, despite the circumstances, women *can* provide in their own needs as longs as they are able to detach

themselves from the heritage of patriarchy, which makes Marrisville some sort of mini Utopia like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland (cf. supra) in an otherwise apocalyptic and ravaged landscape.

Patriarchy and its heritage are perhaps best embodied by Dr. Matsumori, Dr. Mann's father.[17] As it revealed near the end of the series, Yorick is not the only living male on the planet. The reason why Dr. Matsumori survived the gendercide is that he was the one who actually raised Ampersand, and as we have seen Ampersand's "shit-slingering" is what made Yorick immune to the plague (cf. supra). Similar to Dr. Mann he was also occupied with cloning and succeeded in impregnating his lover Dr. Ming with a clone. But when he saw that his daughter of who he had been separated for many years was very much advanced in creating her own genetic double, he decided to sabotage her work. However, Dr. Matsumori's initial strategy to undermine his own daughter did not work out according to plan. First of all the monkey (Ampersand) he sends to Dr. Mann ends up with Yorick (cf. infra) and second, because the serum he injected Ampersand with seemed to have an adverse effect since it did not poison Dr. Mann's clone but eventually saved Yorick. Therefore, he decides to send his assistant to his daughter to poison her child "in a more *conventional* manner":

> Ming was days away from giving birth, and though you were weeks behind our efforts, I couldn't risk you reaching even *premature* delivery before us. So I had Toyota, who's been good enough to shadow you ever since, lace one of your meals with an *abortifacient* to terminate your pregnancy. Hours later, Ming's contractions began in this very room. Labor was surprisingly easy, but what came next was not. The second my clone of you took her first breath, the *global misery* for which I am responsible began.

[17] Dr Mann changed her name from Matsumori to Mann when she was an adolescent to irritate her father.

Not only did Dr. Matsumori try to sabotage his own daughter, his work also seems to be responsible for the gendercide. As he explains, "men have long been a necessary evil for the continuation of this species, but the moment that evil [men] became *obsolete*, nature righted its course", i.e. because of the birth of a clone men became redundant in the process of reproduction, since the clone he impregnated Dr. Ming with was that of his own daughter. Therefore, we could say that in the end patriarchy caused the downfall of patriarchy. In *Y: The Last Man,* "patriarchy is the power of fathers [...] [that] determine[s] what part women shall or shall not play" and in this case the power of fathers ironically led to the end of their direct power.

5.2. Women & Labour

5.2.1. Women & Labour Inside The Comic

In the series, many of the women Yorick meets are doing stereotypically male jobs or have a typically male occupation. From Waverly, the garbage collector he meets on his way to Washington D.C. (*Unmanned*), Kilina and her pirates in *Girl on Girl,* the *paparazza* in *Paper Dolls* to P.J. the motor mechanic in *Safeword*, Yorick's world is filled with women who do the work that is normally reserved for men. By letting Yorick meet all these women who are doing these typically male jobs Vaughan also passes the message to the readers that women can do what men do (in the spirit of gender equality) and at the same time he also shows the reader just how deeply rooted these stereotypes are because the image of female garbage collector or a female motor mechanic are images that would strike most readers as a striking feature. Therefore, interestingly enough the gendercide at the same time showed the enormous influence of patriarchy on this fictional world because of the ravage it brought with it, but also gave the opportunity to women to practise jobs which would have been much less accessible in a pre-gendercide world, of which President Valentine is the paramount example. Before the plague she was only the Secretary of Agriculture, but due to the gendercide she is able to exercise her capacities in the most important political function of her country. Furthermore, the countries that followed a more gender-equal

policy in their military strategy before the gendercide have an advantage on all the other nations. As illustrated in *Girl on Girl* The Australian Navy rules the waves of the Pacific Ocean because they have female soldiers who can navigate a submarine, and Alter and her company o the Israeli Army dominates the mainland because "in Israel, all women between the ages of 18 and 26 have performed compulsory military service in the Israeli Defense Force for at least one year and nine months" (*Cycles*: 3).

The series also works gender-bending on other levels. According to Susan Bordo, there is a "gendered division of labor in which men strive, compete, and exert themselves in the public sphere while women are cocooned in the domestic arena (which is romanticized as a place of peace and leisure)" (117-118). However, in the series the gendered division that puts males in the public sphere and women in the private sphere is partly reversed. Within his close circle of family and friends, Yorick is the only one who does not have a job. His girlfriend Beth is doing anthropological work in Australia, his mother is a Congresswoman and his father is a lecturer specialized in Shakespeare (which explains Yorick's and Hero's names[18]). While all of the people in his environment are active in the public sphere, Yorick is muddling on spending his time on practicing his escape artist skills. This is also translated to the artwork: while Yorick is in his apartment (cf. Fig. 31) confessing to Beth "that he didn't get the job" we see Beth running around the Australian desert and Yorick's mother hurrying from one appointment to another (*Unmanned*) (Fig.41). Like the main character in Perkins Gilman's story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) (cf. supra), Yorick is confined to his home, in this case his apartment and he realizes this himself: "I'm the escape artist who can't escape his apartment" (17). However, in contrast to the situation of the female protagonist in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, Yorick is not compelled to stay at home in his room, it is his own decision. Only when the plague strikes, Yorick is forced to leave his home and this marks the end of his stay in the private sphere and his entrance in a public

[18] Yorick is the name of the court jester in *Hamlet,* Hero is the name of a female protagonist in *Much Ado About Nothing.*

sphere, dominated by women.

The comic's awareness of women's struggle in the work sphere is also more explicit on some smaller occasions. During his stay in Marrisville, Lydia, one of the oldest inhabitants tells Yorick about the labour division during the Second World War:

> Back in '42 […] girls weren't *part* of the workforce… we *were* the workforce. I was fifteen when I started bucking rivets at Lockheed[19] for war stamps. At sixteen, I got a job welding 50mm shell casings. There was *nothing* I couldn't do. (*Cycles*: 44)

This reference to Rosie the Riviter, the term used for women who worked in the factories during the Second World War (cf. supra) shows that Vaughan is very much aware of (historical) issues concerning gender and labour. Another example of this awareness can be found in *Kimono Dragons*. While talking to Yorick and Agent 355 about how she managed to rescue them You, a Japanese woman, explains: "Let's just say that glass ceilings seem to have disappeared with the men." (*Kimono Dragons*: 95) The glass ceiling You refers to is "a ceiling based on attitudinal or organizational bias in the work force that prevents minorities and women from advancing to leadership positions" (Wordnet). It is because of the absence of patriarchal structures that You was able to infiltrate into the Yakuza and save Yorick and Agent 355. Something that would not have been possible before the plague. Another explicit reference to patriarchy and gender inequality in the work sphere can be found in a scene that features two male baggage handlers at an airport somewhere in the United States (*Paper Dolls*) As they walk through the depot where everything is stored, one of them complains about how their female colleagues think about going on strike because "they say female baggage handlers only earn seventy-seven cents for every buck *we* make" (125). His colleague replies that these women can also carry only half of what they do,

[19] The name of an American aircraft manufacturer.

which would imply that according to his calculations "they're already making, like, fourteen cents too much" (125). However, when they notice that two monkeys are missing from their cage one of the men says: "Come on, let the girls on *night shift* deal with this" (127), implying that their female colleagues are only good for the dirty work. Moreover, through their behaviour they also demonstrate that there is no valid reason why women should not earn as much as men, because they pass on the harder work (capturing the escaped monkeys) to their female colleagues.

The female characters in the series do not only work as a politicians, secret agents or doctors, some women also try to revive the cultural work sphere. In *Y: The Last Man* a group of actresses who call themselves Fish & Bicycle Productions and tour around the country form a most intriguing addition to the overall story. It all begins when the director of Fish & Bicycle Productions, Cayce coincidentally finds Ampersand. This incident urges her to write a play about the last man on earth (*One Small Step:* 133), later on admitting to her actresses that her play is influenced by Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (150) (cf. supra). On the opening performance, the first act is received with applause because they seem to give the public what they want, as the act ends with a male-female couple kissing each other. (Fig.42) However, the moment the play starts to get more subversive (a whole group of half-naked actresses entering the scene asking the last man to have sex with them) the mayor of the town, who initially asked Cayce if they could perform a soap opera starts protesting. "I've seen *enough!* This play is a *mockery*! (*One Small Step*: 140) Her protest is supported by some voices in the public and ends in a fight with one of the actresses on stage. Later on in the series, Cayce has moved to Hollywood where she is in the middle of directing a Hollywood film. However, the actresses are not convinced of Cayce's attempt to try and subvert "the trappings of a male-dominated cinema" (*Motherland*: 128) and one of the actresses calls it "nothing but another garbage action movie, exactly what the *patriarchy* used to churn out" (127) They leave the set, which leads Cayce to the conclusion that "Fish & Bicycles Pictures is officially *dead*" (129). What makes Cayce's actions so interesting is that in each

of her attempts she fails because she does not take into account the male domination in the cultural sphere. According to Bartky (1990: 35) "women are clearly alienated in cultural production" and "most avenues of cultural expression- high culture, popular culture […] are instruments of male supremacy". Therefore, it is possible that Cayce's subversive art is not understood by the audience or the actors because the patriarchal domination of the cultural field has shaped all these women's taste and ideas about art. Cayce tells one of her actresses that they "have to start *exploding* myths about gender" (*One Small Step*: 128), which explains why the script of their 'The Last Man' performance suddenly changes from a typical happy ending story to a more challenging level. In the spirit of Laura Mulvey, she also tries to subvert the classic Hollywood cinema, "*appropriating* the trappings of male-dominated cinema, and *subverting* them to make the first truly female action hero" (*Motherland:* 128) but unfortunately for her, no one seems to be on the same wavelength. Cayce's final attempt to spread her message is a comic book about the supposedly last woman on earth. Despite the objections of her friend who warns her that "girls just want to read trashy romances that remind them of simpler times", Cayce goes through with her idea saying that "it's stupid to think that *all* women want to read the same thing" (137). This final attempt seems to be Cayce's most successful attempt since Yorick tells Agent 355 that he heard that this "quasi-feminist sci-fi thing" is "the bestselling series since old-school Superman" (142).The success of the comic suggests that in this case and after all this time women finally seem to have left behind the old patriarchal cultural codes so that they can appreciate Cayce's work. However, when Agent 355 asks Yorick if he likes the comics, Yorick replies with an indifferent "meh.", suggesting that Yorick as a male still prefers the old patriarchal cultural conventions.

5.2.2. Women & Labour: The Creators Of 'Y: The Last Man'

It might also be interesting to consider the labour division of the series considering the persons team that created the series since they are responsible for the visual and narrative content. Research by Erik Melander (2005) on comic book creators already showed that the

comic book industry, and especially the world of print comics is still very much a male business (cf. supra). If we take into account every writer, penciller, inker, cover artist and colourist that worked on *Y: The Last Man*, we come to a total of nine men and two women who worked on the series. These numbers are little surprising and even above standard if we compare them to the numbers Melander provided. But even though the inker, letterer and cover artists are important people in the artistic process, one could argue that the writer and the penciller are the persons that influence the direction a comic book takes the most. If we single out the writer and the penciller of the series, then the gender imbalance changes into a gender balance, for we have a male writer (Brian K. Vaughan) and a female penciller (Pía Guerra). Because of the duration of the series, Guerra was not always available to do the drawing, so at times she was replaced by a male artist. In the fifth volume, *Girl on Girl*, most part of the art is drawn by two male artists (Goran Sudžuka and José Marzán, Jr.) and even though, as we have seen, the series for the most part avoids a male gaze, in these particular issues a close reading perhaps exposes a male gaze in the artwork. The first image of Captain Kilina shows her standing in the door opening with her blouse opened and her nipples exposed (Fig. 43) (*Girl on Girl*: 14), coding her with a strong sense of to-be-looked-at-ness. Adding to the suspicion that this might be a case of the male gaze is the fact that her exposure in no way serves the storyline, unlike for example Yorick's frontal nudity (cf. supra). This rare example of the male gaze should not immediately relegate the comic to the status of a sexist comic, but it shows that in order to avoid objectification and the male gaze, a balanced division of labour in the industry itself might help.

5.3. Patriarchy & Sexuality : Heteronormativity

For some feminists patriarchy not only discriminated women in cultural practices or economic roles but also in aspects of their general sexuality. Adrienne Rich (1980) was a firm critic of the notion heterosexuality, which she called an oppressive political institution (637). For Rich, heterosexuality was not a choice but a compulsion, imposed by a patriarchal society:

> The assumption that 'most women are innately heterosexual' stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for many women. It remains a tenable assumption, partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease; partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic; partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and 'innately' heterosexual (648).

As an alternative for heterosexuality, Rich advocates for what she calls 'the lesbian existence' and a 'lesbian continuum'. Under the lesbian continuum Rich categorizes all woman-identified experiences, not only sexual experiences (648). For Rich, patriarchal power can be seen for instance in "the idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage in art, literature, media, advertising, etc" (638-639). This idealization can be translated to the concept of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a term coined by Michael Werner and is used to indicate that heterosexuality in all its aspects is still considered to be the norm in Western society, denying the possibility that homosexual relationships can be regarded or treated as 'normal', like Rich already indicated:

> Het[eronormative] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist. (Warner: 1993 xxi)

"The idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage" (Rich 1980: 638) and heteronormative culture can also be seen in most comics. Superman and Lois Lane, Wonder Woman and Steve Trevor, Spider Man and Mary Jane Watson... the list of heterosexual comic book couples is

endless. In the world of mainstream comics heterosexuality is mostly seen as the norm and homosexuality as an exception. This is shown in the media attention every time a homosexual character is featured in a mainstream comic. For example, when DC presented the new Batwoman as a lesbian character, all the attention went to this feature of her sexuality, this to great dismay of Greg Rucka, who reacted very annoyed to all the attention that was paid to Batwoman's sexuality: "Yes, she's a lesbian. She's also a redhead. It is an element of her character. It is not her character. If people are going to have problems with it, that's their issue. That's certainly not mine […] And frankly, she should be judged on her merits" (Renaud 2009) Thus, in comics like in basically any form of cultural representation according to Rich (1980), heterosexuality is the norm.

At first sight Yorick's romantic quest for his girlfriend Beth might seem to define the series as resolutely heteronormative. Rustad (2008) claims that Beth and Yorick's relationship completely follows storybook norms: Yorick is the "knight in shining armor" on a dangerous journey to find his beloved Beth, while Beth is the "princess in the high tower". For Rustad, "as far as the readers is concerned, she [Beth] is a passive, static object of desire". While this may seem correct at the beginning of the series, we will see that near the end of the series not much is left of Beth & Yorick's storybook romance. When Yorick finally is reunited with Beth, she confesses him that she was going to break up with him when he was on the phone with her, the minute before the plague struck. (*Whys and Wherefores*: 64) Yorick, who is completely shocked by Beth's confession leaves the room, despite the fact that she tells him that now, she would no longer break up with him ("You're not the same person you used to be! You've *changed*!" (67)). At this point in the story, the heteronormative storybook love is for the first time threatened since Yorick is no longer interested in his princess. After this incident, Yorick goes searching for Agent 355 and when he finds her he reveals to her that the epiphany he had during the suicide intervention in Colorado (cf. supra), actually featured her (85). It was the thought of Agent 355

that gave him the strength to live, a feeling he always repressed until now (86). But then suddenly, as she stands in front of him, Agent 355 falls to the ground because she has been hit with a sniper operated by Alter, the Israeli commander. In the short space of a few hours, Yorick parts from two persons he loved and so the possible heteronormative happy ending that would let Yorick live happily ever after with either Beth or Agent 355 is ruined two times.

Despite the deconstruction of the happy end, one could argue that the story is decidedly heteronormative because of the importance that is attached to the failure of these heterosexual relationships. However, perhaps one of the most surprising outcomes at the end of the story deconstructs the heteronormative aspect of the series for a third time. Through a series of clues throughout the series it is made clear that there is an air of mystery surrounding Beth. Yorick's nightmares and visions are dominated by a constant failure to save Beth or to come near her. His first nightmare shows Beth covered in blood, warning Yorick: "don't come Yorick. Don't come for *me*. Stay away. You know why…(*Unmanned*: 106) At the very end of the series the reader finally is acquainted with what these nightmares had been foreshadowing. In the final issue, there is a flashback of Yorick in which we see Yorick visiting his sister. Apparently, Hero is seeing someone, or that is what the reader can derive from Yorick's remark: "Wow, you're even starting to *sound* like her" (*Whys and Wherefores*: 137). On the following pages it is revealed that the 'she' Yorick was referring to is Beth, his former fiancée, who now forms a couple with Hero. Initially this seems far-fetched, but there are some other clues in the story that suggest Beth might be a lesbian. When Yorick visits the anthropology centre in Sydney that Beth was associated to, he stumbles upon a writing on the wall that says: "Beth – Are you alive?? If so. Come to Palmers! Just get the fuck out of *here*! – Margo" (*Paper Dolls*: 18). Further on in the story Yorick learns that Palmers is "an old fag bar" and when he decides to visit Palmers to ask for Beth, the owner reacts very surprised: "You know Bangin' Beth Deville?" (70). In the end, all the nightmares in which Yorick and Beth's romance failed were actually foreshadowing the impossibility for Yorick

to be happy with Beth. This is furthermore stressed because Dr. Mann, who is also a lesbian, This could lead us to the conclusion that *Y: The Last Man* to a certain extent breaks the heteronormative pattern in showing Beth and Hero as a couple in the end and avoiding the storybook ending of Yorick living happily ever after with Beth or Agent 355.

5.4. The Irony of The Last Man

Despite the overall gender-bending content of the series, the story of Yorick is in a way very ironical if we take into account that indeed the whole plot is built around the only man alive. An interesting concept to test this statement is the Bechdel Test. The term originates in *Dykes To Watch Out For* , a comic strip by Alison Bechdel, in which one of the characters says to her friend that she only goes to a movie "if it satisfies three basic requirements" (Fig.44). These requirements are "that it has to have at least two women in it, who talk to each other, about something besides a man" (cf. Fig. 44). While the series meets the first two criteria without any doubt, the third criteria gives some food for thought. Although Agent 355 and Dr. Mann also seem to talk about other things than Yorick, Yorick is clearly the main subject of their discussions. This also the case for the conversations between Yorick's mother and Alter, or conversations between the Daughters of the Amazon. Furthermore, Yorick's existence, as Brown (2006) notes, signals the end of women's hope "for a world without patriarchy, structural oppression, and the future". The character of Captain Kilina illustrates this when she is talking to Yorick while her ship is sinking:

> You stupid, selfish *asshole.* [...] It was too late for me the second I found about *you.* [...] My whole life, I've always been a...a *supporting character* in somebody else's story. Daughter, student, fuck buddy, first mate, *whatever.* But when the plague went down, I finally saw a chance to *change* that. I wanted to be a *leader.* I wanted to help as many women as I could. I wanted to give them an *adventure.* [...] And then the last *man* on earth shows up. [...]

> Now that you're here, I'm just another crazy bitch fucking up the world *you*'re gonna save. It figures. An entire planet of woman, and the one *guy* gets the lead. (*Girl on Girl*: 91-92-93)

In his role of the last man, whether he wants this or not, Yorick represent the patriarchal order that existed before the plague: "the last man on earth signals a return of the past social order and the future it promises, the limitations of male power on woman's options [i.e. patriarchy]" (Brown: 2006). Therefore, Kilina sees no other option than to go down with her ship, to avoid being the victim of a possible return of patriarchy.

6. CONCLUSION

Overall, the way gender is treated in the series is quite remarkable, confirming what critics had to say about the series. In the history of comics, female characters but also female creators and the female audience were often discriminated. Through concepts such as 'the male gaze' of Laura Mulvey or the notion of objectification these forms of discrimination in the world of comics could be explained but that was only the first step in the analysis of the series. The second step was to apply these theories to *Y: The Last Man,* this in combination with feminist and female voices who also denounced gender politics in a more general way. Applying these theories to analyze *Y: The Last Man* we came to the conclusion that standard cultural representations of the female body were often reversed. Women were portrayed as strong, active, rational beings, whereas the few men who appeared in the series were quite often depicted as being passive and irrational. The paramount example of these reversals was the fact that Yorick, as a male, seemed to be constantly objectified by other people, which historically and also in the history of comic was typically reserved for women. Although it should be noted that by reversing gender stereotypes the other sex gets discriminated, the series main strength is that it exposes gender stereotypes on an implicit and an explicit level. Therefore, we can conclude that in terms of gender politics, the series succeeds in avoiding normative representations of women in general, and also with regard to the history of comics, in which the female body was often the victim of patriarchal structures.

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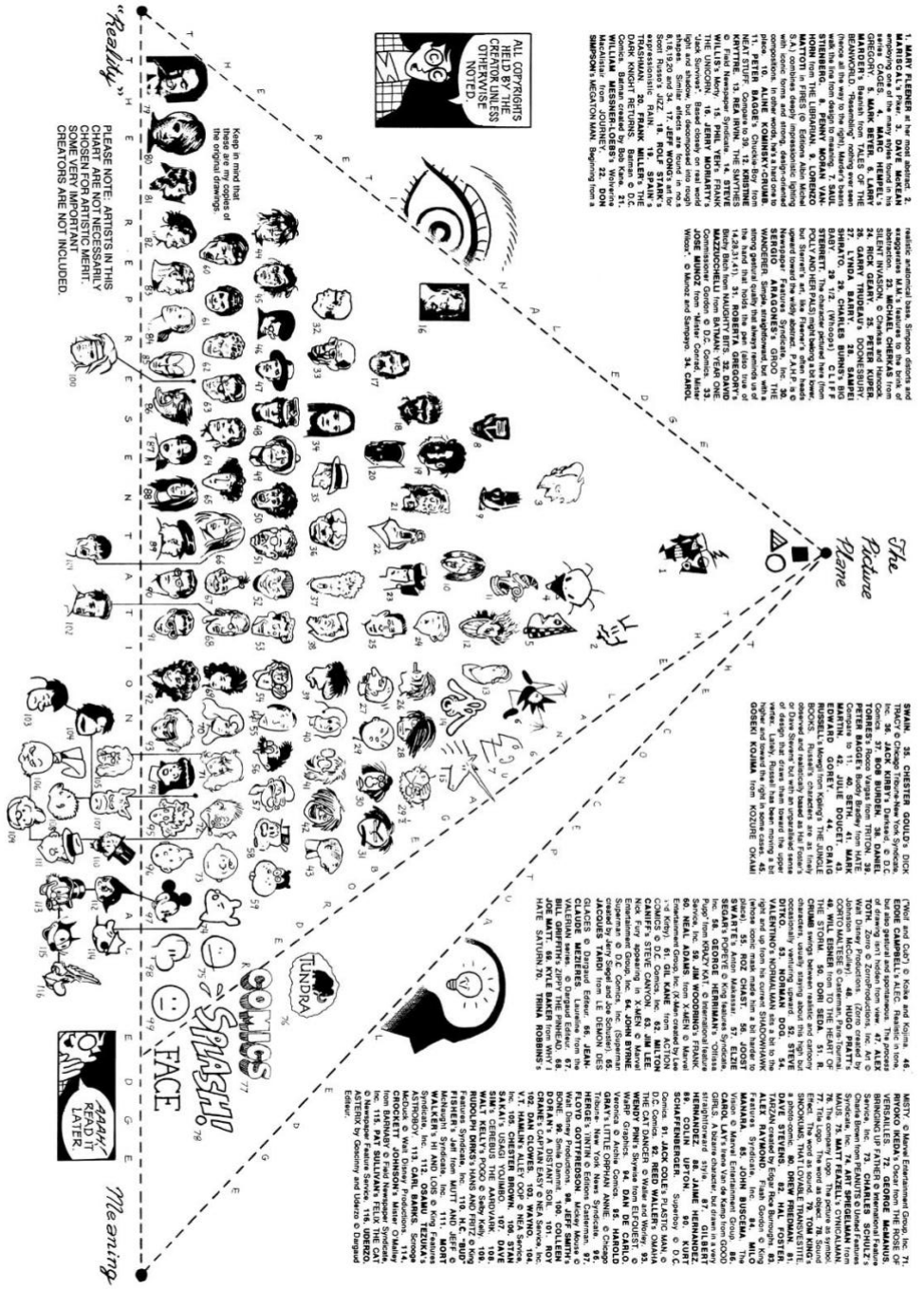

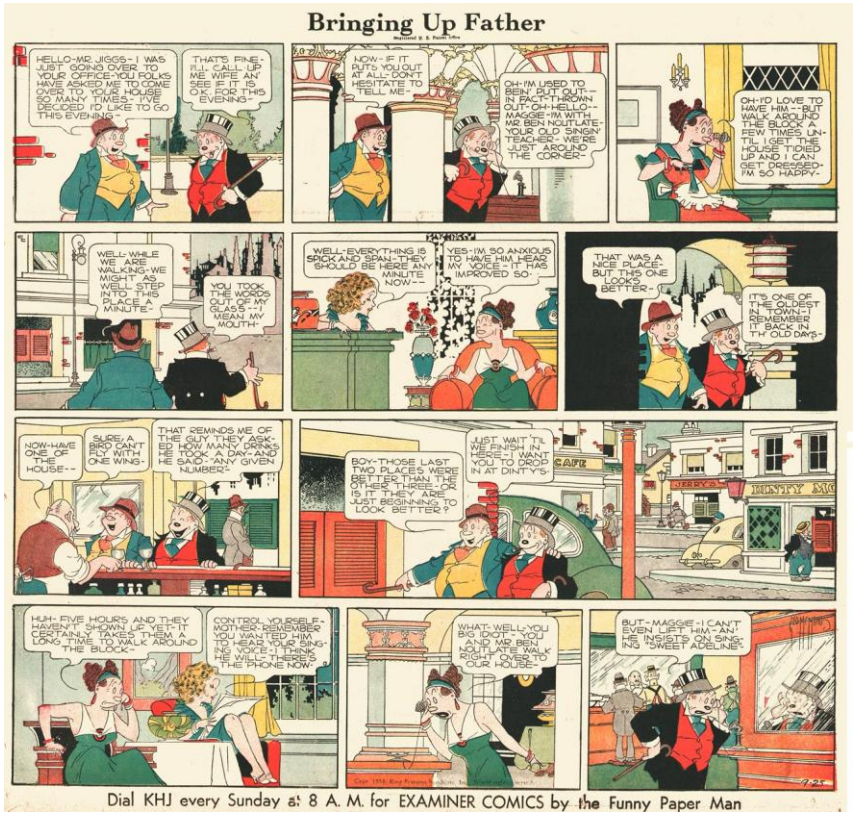

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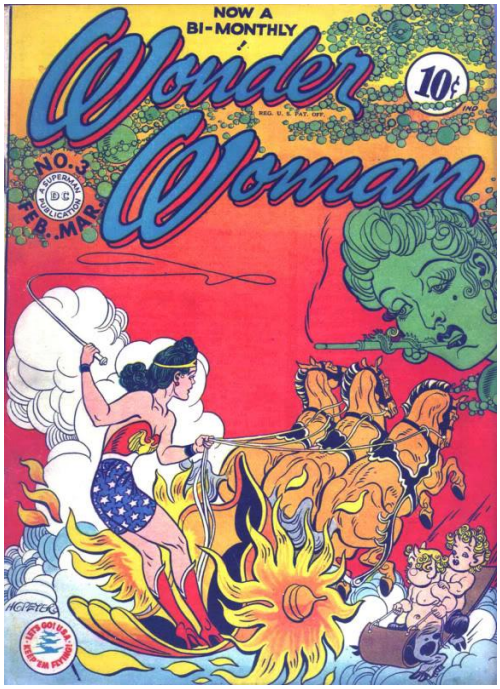

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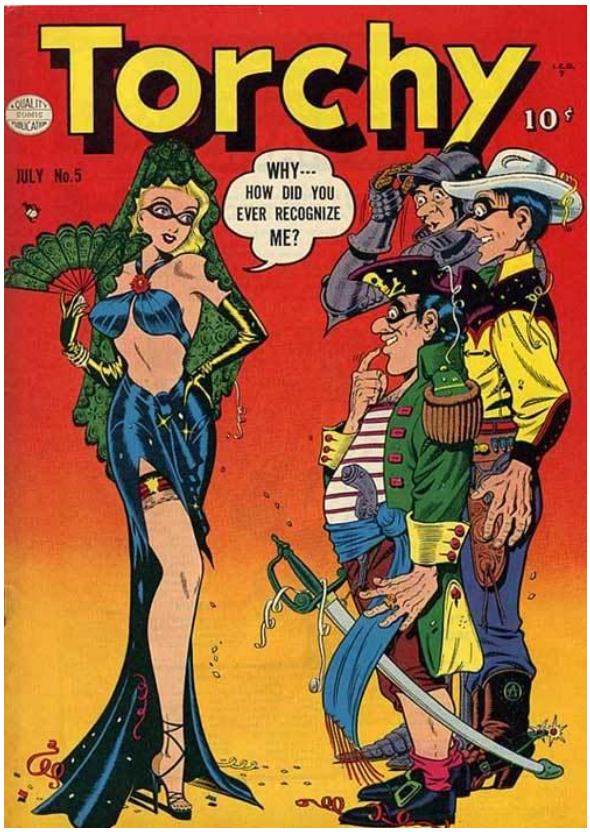

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PAGE FOUR

1.

CLOSER—MEDIUM ANGLE—VICKI continues. She cocks her head, tossing her hair. Detail her BRA. It'll drive them crazy, Jim.

OK, Jim, I'm shameless. Let's go with an ASS SHOT. Panties detailed. Balloons from above. She's walking, restless as always. We can't take our eyes off her. Especially since she's got one fine ass.

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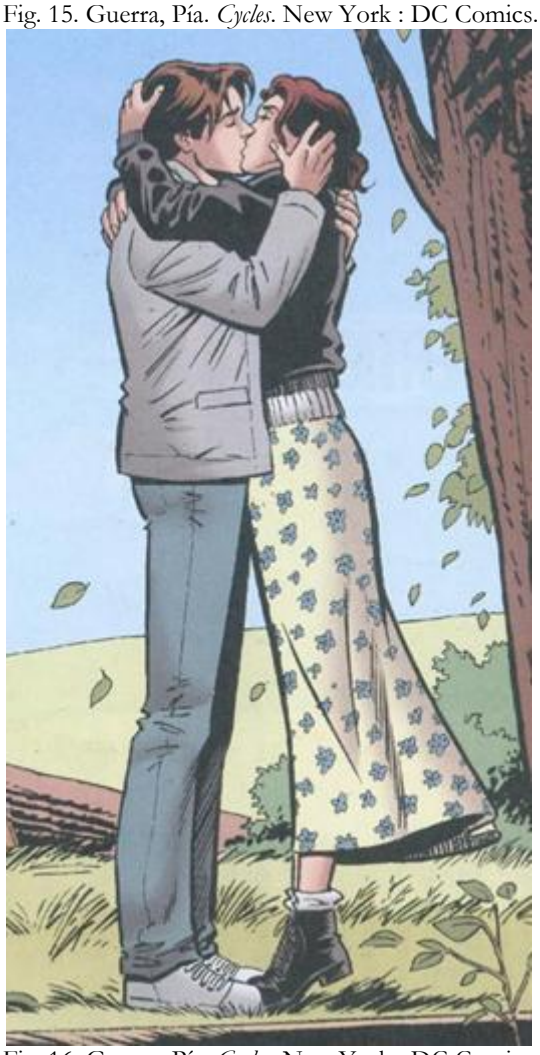
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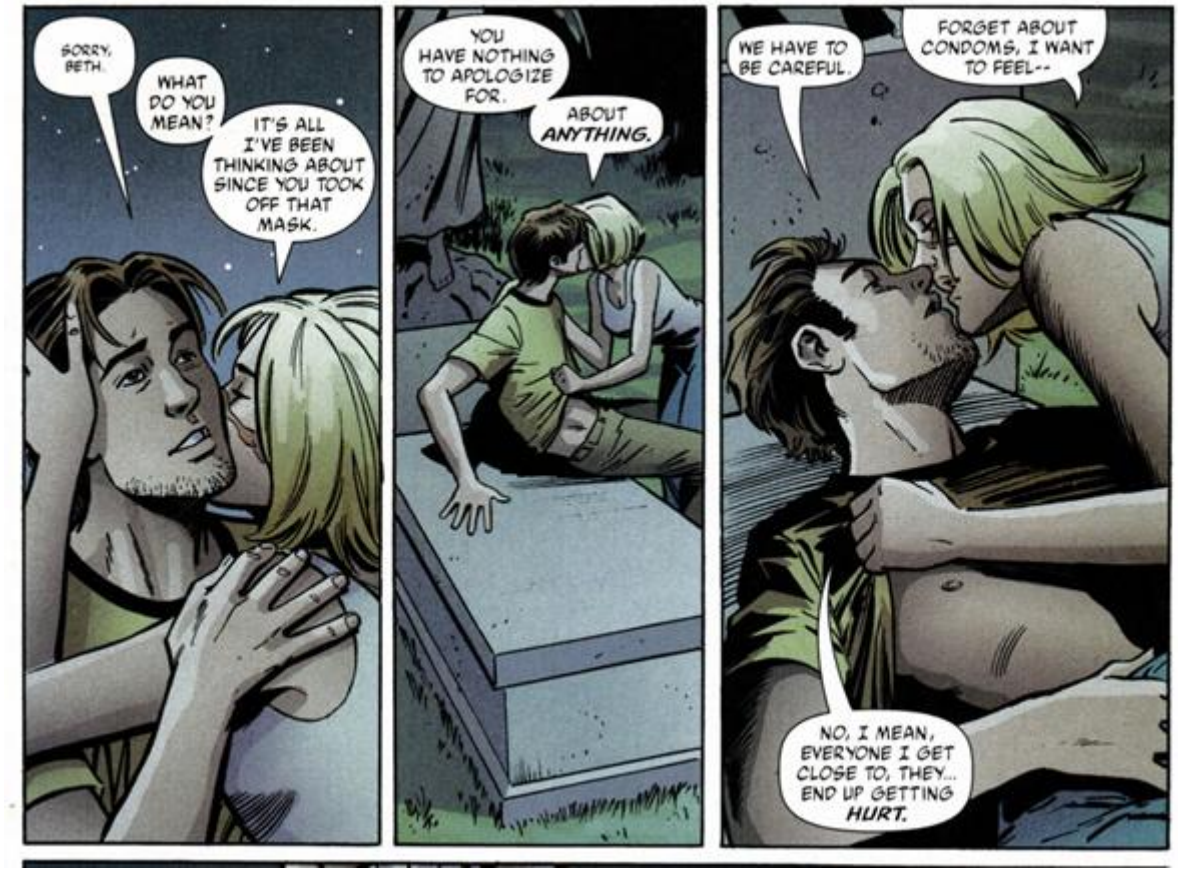

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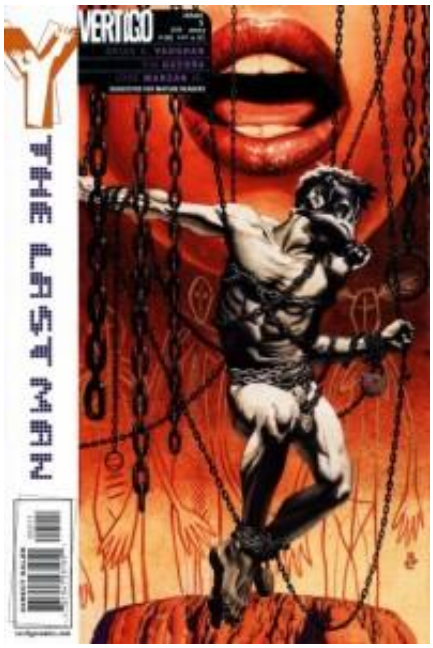

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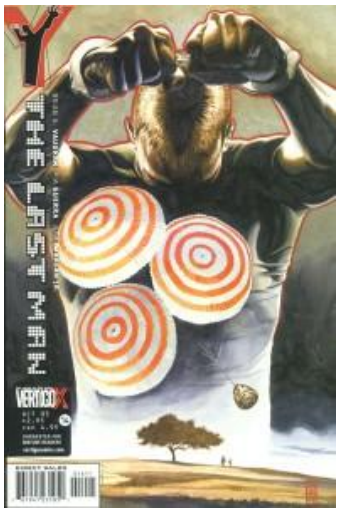

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Fig 23. Carnevale, Massimo. *Whys And Wherefores*. New York : DC Comics. 2008. Print.

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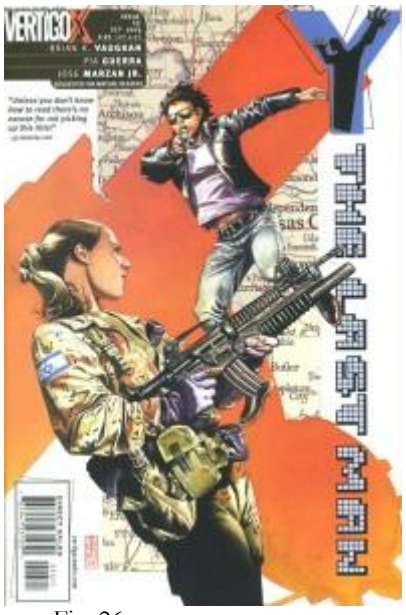

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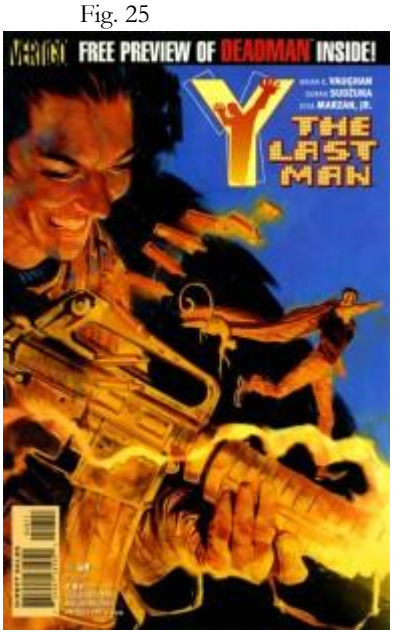

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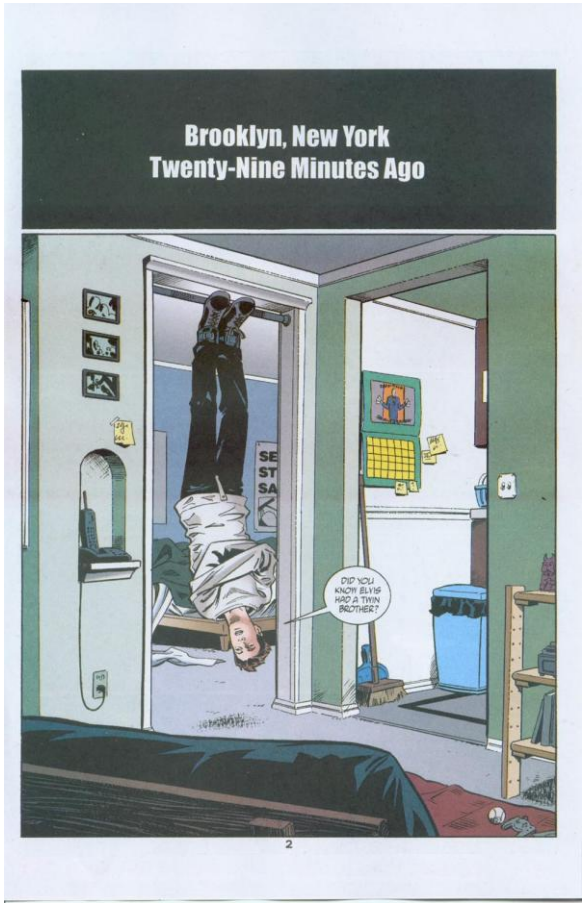

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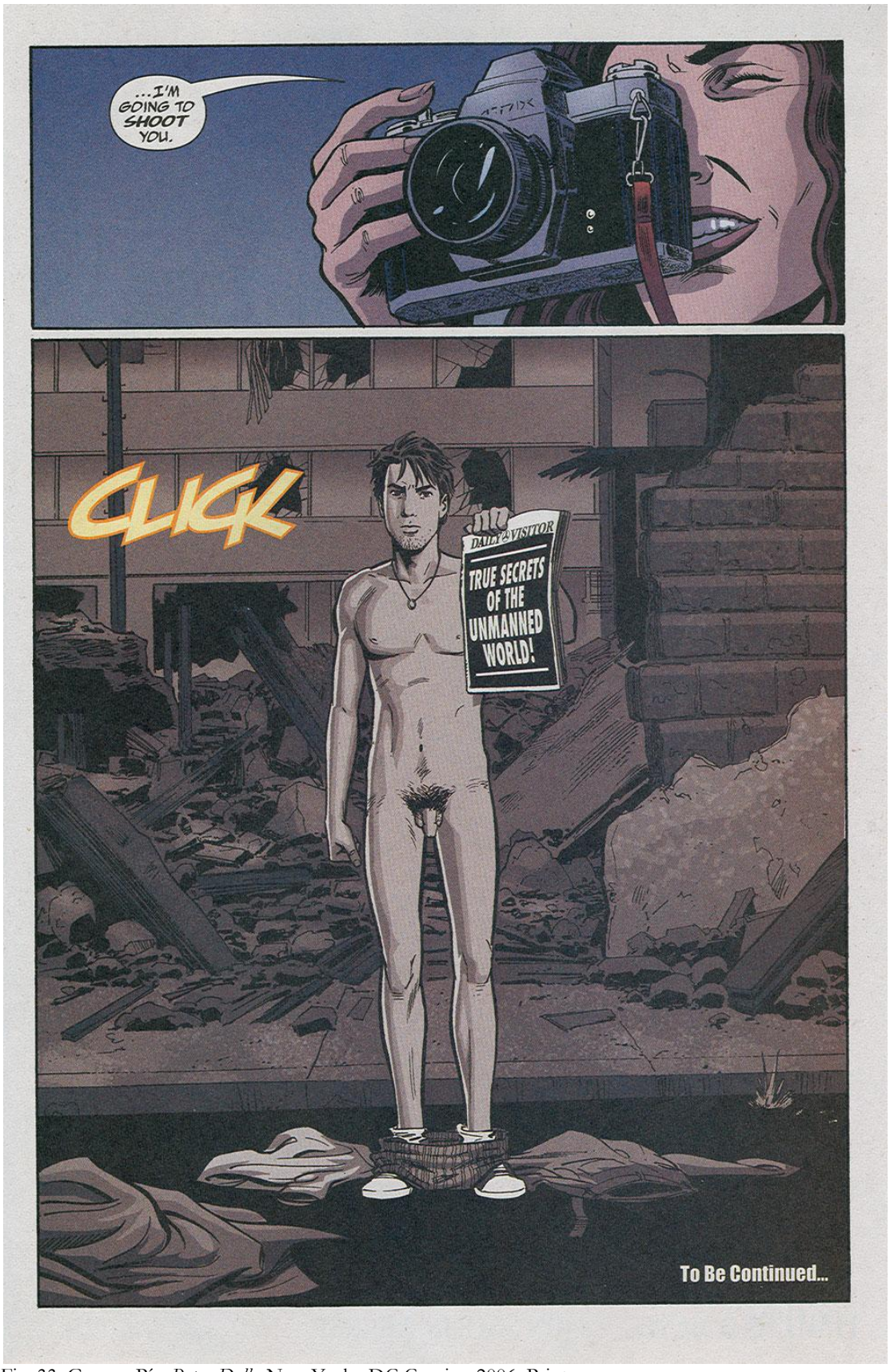

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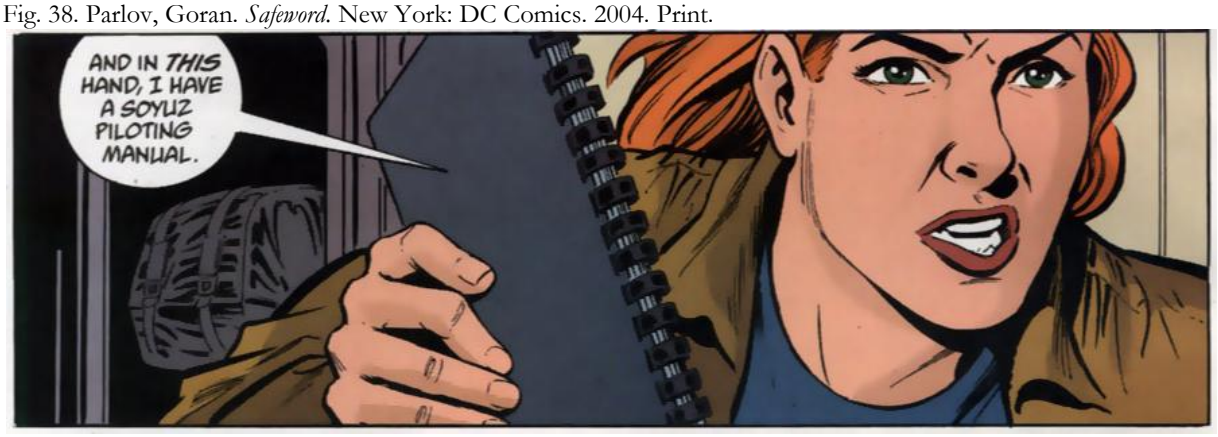

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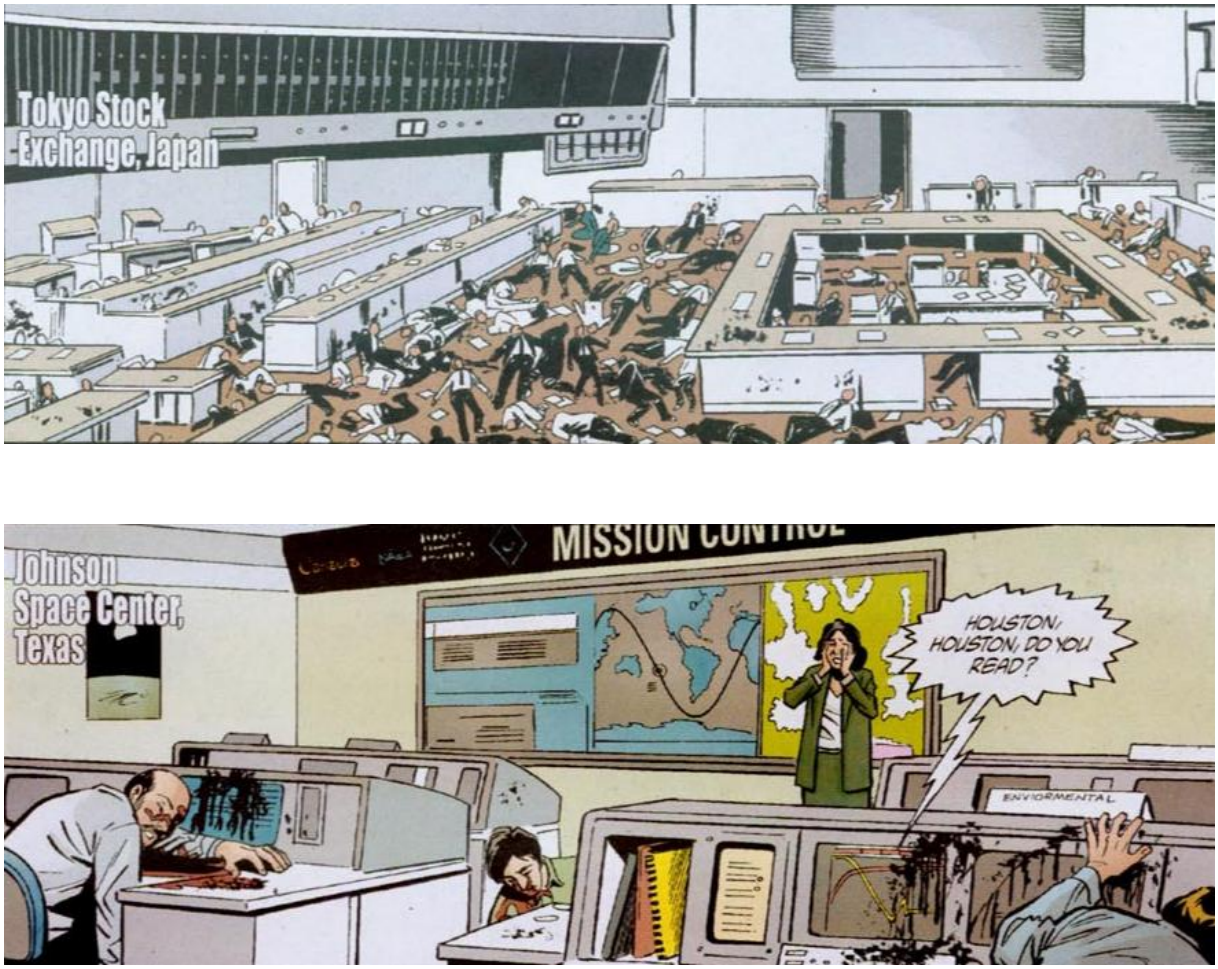

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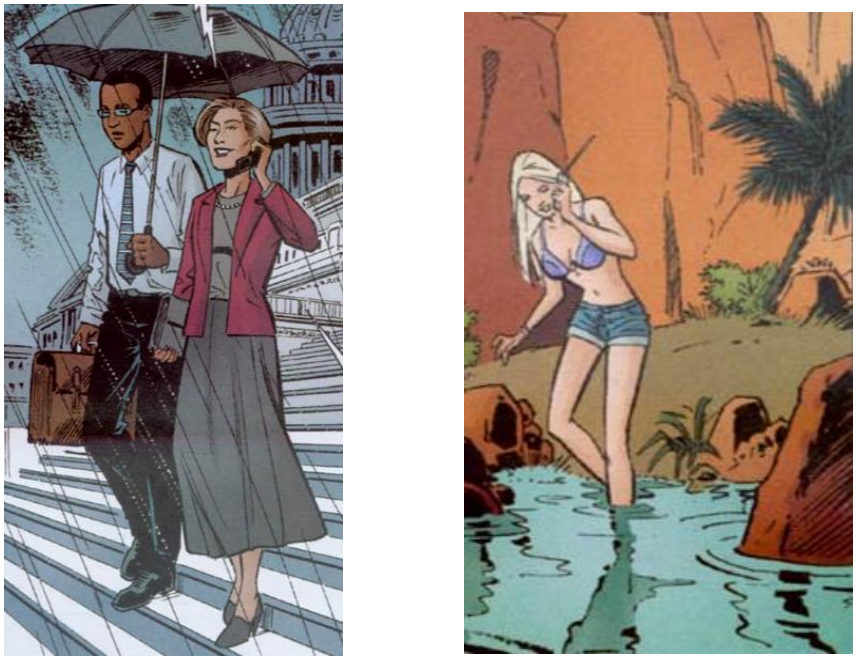
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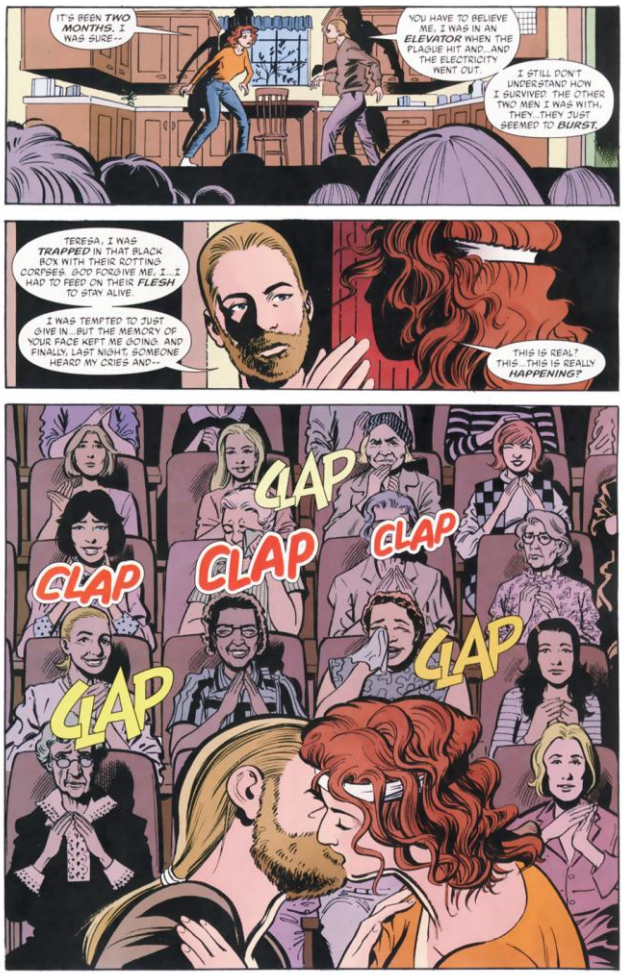

Fig. 42. Guerra, Pía. *One Small Step*. New York: DC Comics. 2004. Print.

Fig. 43. Marzan Jr., José & Sudžuka, Goran. *Girl On Girl*. New York: DC Comics. 2005. Print.

Fig. 44 Bechdel, Alison. *Dykes To Watch Out For.* 1985. Web.

<http://alisonbechdel.blogspot.com/2005/08/rule.html>