Gendered Visions of Graphic Fiction: Adrian Tomine’s Summer Blonde

by Bianca Isaki

1. Adrian Tomine’s graphic story collection, Summer Blonde (SB hereafter) traces the urban landscape of the young middle class in the modern San Francisco Bay Area. What prevents these stories from becoming unhappy, banal episodes about the personal problems of a few individuals? In conjunction with SB’s focus on the operations of everyday life, I find one suggestion in Adrienne Rich’s insight: “A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us” (981). In SB, the perversities of everyday life are performed in the space opened by the fictive. As fiction, SB activates an imaginative ‘grappling’ with the production of social aberration as anomaly. Put otherwise, SB “keys to” (Bal 1997) the mediating codes of everyday life, “ways of operating,” [1] to create space in which to postpone identification of social perversity as aberration.

2. Although largely adherent to comic book genres, [2] SB effectively draws on other media. Thus, I render discussions of literary and visual works by Rey Chow, Nancy Armstrong, and Mieke Bal instructive to a reading of the textual modes that inhere in SB’s narration of graphic stories. [3] My essay concerns SB’s self-reflexive engagement with the notion of reading itself, although this is not to assert that SB merely reiterates formulas familiar to literary and visual narratology. Rather, it is through its work as fiction that SB creates a space that is precisely not a theoretical position, but rather initiates departures from the ideological interpretations of the “bare bones” of the text. Read in the most reductive way, these four stories are about a stalker in “Summer Blonde,” a prank phone caller in “Hawaiian Getaway” (HG hereafter), a formulaic coming of age story in “Bomb Scare” and a cheating boyfriend in “Alter Ego.” SB shows how such readings are inaccurate understandings of social aberration through rhetorical cues that dramatize the ways that reading practices entwine fantasy and the verifiable.

3. SB takes on full meaning only if read through its rhetorical cues, which disallow it from being about individual pathologies. In the text, these cues frequently function by referring to the way that spectatorship—reading itself—is gendered. The cultural specificity of the gendering of spectating and reading practices have connections with Frederic Jameson’s careful discussion of a cultural dominant in the “logic of late capitalism.” [4] That he insists on a separation, however complex, between systems of political economy and cultural production provides a framework within which I locate SB in specific relations to socioeconomic organizations of late capital. In SB, social alienation is linked to frustrated efforts to become located in complex urban economies. However, textual cues complicate the relationship between political and social psychical economies beyond a narrative of economic determinism. The discreet box-format of each image, a comic book convention, emphasizes the uniform isolation of the characters.
Except for the last few scenes in “Summer Blonde,” characters rarely interact within the same frame, even when speaking to each other. Instead, an alternating series of close-up images mediates between speakers. As a graphic and literary medium, SB directs textual meanings through a culturally informed collaboration between the codes of fiction and visuality. Facile interpretation of the relation between the visual and narrative production of images is complicated by the degree to which reading images are inescapable as modes of being-social. My reading works from Jameson’s insight that, “the very sphere of culture itself has expanded, becoming coterminous with market society in such a way that the cultural…is consumed through daily life itself…Social space is now completely saturated with the culture of the image” (Jameson 1998, 111). The culture of the image is not ubiquitous or universal in this collaboration, but rather medium-specific, and thus provides a reference point from which I discuss cultural everyday-ness.

4. My reading examines how SB advocates an ethics of the everyday by addressing two potential contradictions between the immanent qualities of the everyday and a medium that re-presents. The reader inhabits the first potential inconsistency—her organizing view from above seemingly undermines the irreducible present-ness of the everyday. A second point concerns the supposition that if the political import of everyday life resides in the authenticity of experience, any mediation would be opposed to “real lived experience.” There is a seeming contradiction between taking lived experience as both datum and the ground of an awareness of life as narrative structure. Fictive portrayal of the everyday, which is definitively non-abstract if understood as pure experience, emphasizes that experience cannot exist without reference to a differentiating system that enables experience to be intelligible in the first place (Colebrook 691). Tropes of vision and technologies of social mediation address the formal qualities of SB, as fiction, which complicate the notion of fiction’s advocating an ethics of everyday life. Both tropes run through all of the stories, yet due to lack of space, my reading focuses on how the former works in “Summer Blonde” and the latter in HG.

Looking-in

5. Everyday, Neil, the central character of the title story “Summer Blonde,” purchases a card from the store where Vanessa works in order to have even mundane contact with her. Vanessa has two boyfriends, Carlo and Whit. The slow delineation of Neil’s earnest but awkward efforts to move beyond his isolated voyeurism belies interpretation of his actions as uniquely predatory. The third person narration allows presentation of the normative social modes of other characters as equally, if not more, pernicious. His “stalking” seems benign compared with the blatant commodification of sexual relations that is the modus operandi of his work and the characters that Neil watches: Vanessa describes her accumulative dating as a “salad bar” (47) and Carlo rehearses the misogynist line of “getting tired of the same pussy” (46). After a disastrous effort to connect with Vanessa, during which she accuses him of stalking her and rebuffs his attempts to apologize, Neil unsuccessfully tries to commit suicide by overdosing on medications. That night, he clandestinely watches Whit jealously assault Carlo.
The next day, Neil tells his therapist that he somehow feels his emotional problems have been resolved. Although this summary can only do injustice to the text, it provides a road map from which an expanded reading can emerge.

Figure 1. *Summer Blonde* page 47.

6. The reader becomes a confounding position in *SB* ’s invention of a placed-way of being that is not ordered by an external point of view. *SB* makes viewing/reading a focal point for thinking the seeming paradox of the fictional performance of everyday lives. Specifically, it problematizes, without prescribing against, viewing as a transcendent gaze. The peek-a-boo book cover design (Tome is the writer, illustrator, and cover artist of *SB*) encircles a young white woman’s face as she warily glances behind her—positioning the reader as voyeur as she enters the text without allowing that position anonymity. The focusing circle exposes the ‘looking’ of the reader and thus suggests an inverted gaze. That is, it tells us more about the looker than subject. Recalling the violent implications of the male gaze,
which the unsympathetic male roommate in HG explains—“Don’t look so disgusted… Guys are just a lot more visual”(82)—this image initiates a series of self-reflexive meditations that structure SB’s narrative. Entering the text through this mode of “seeing without being seen,” also instigates an identification between the reader and Neil.

7. In SB, the reader is asked to enter the text through the desires of an other, perhaps Neil’s, the author’s, or any other reader’s. This ambiguous arrangement of watching images is enacted in SB’s story plots. Visual narration throughout the text prevents summative rejection of Neil’s actions as an inappropriate invasion of privacy by gendering the way the narrative dramatizes spectatorship. Visuality works with narrative ellipses in SB to present characters as enigmatic objects. We, as readers, are directed to want to see into their (feminine coded) desires. In her discussion of photography, Nancy Armstrong argues that modernism’s efforts to distinguish high-art from mass culture were accomplished by gender coding the production of images. This, “redefinition of the relationship between the object and the observer,” coded the former as elusive and feminine and endowed the latter with, “the qualities of an optical predator” (53). Gendering effects do not solely operate in the presentation of female subjects; “Even the male body is feminized” when positioned under the viewer’s gaze, “because we see it as a distortion of another body image” (62). That is, these image-reading systems create a way of looking at, “subject matter [that] dramatizes limits of the visible and lay claim to a truth beyond it” (68-69). This is not rehearsing an indictment of the male gaze, which was famously articulated by Laura Mulvey as the narrative structuring of the ways images are looked at, while the viewer remains hidden. Instead, Armstrong introduces a third lens into the male/female binary between viewer and object, the photographer’s way of viewing. The spectator, perhaps more so than the subject of the gaze, is made passive in relation to the imaging agency of the photographer. This articulation of gender in viewing visual images introduces a plasticity into the relationship between reader, viewer and viewed, which allows vision a quietly creative role.

8. Neil has the outward identifying traits of a misogynist stalker. His job at the Metro Weekly seems to consist solely of editing the layout of the “classifieds and hooker ads.” Thus, Neil is repeatedly shown studying pictures of half-naked female bodies on a computer screen. The comic book format allows for scenes with Vanessa, the woman Neil stalks, to be positioned alongside a hooker ad that pictures a woman bearing a generic resemblance to her, without explicitly recognizing any connection between the ways both images are viewed. In SB, moments of imaginative staging suggest what might be missing in models of identity politics that flatten the scope of the setting to work of fiction and visuality by insisting on a transparent correspondence between representation and the materialization of meaning. By comparing the staging of different images, Tomine’s text posits an “undertheorized relation between economics... and fantasy and identity” (Chow “A Phantom Discipline” 1393) Carlo’s particular brand of multiculturalism (he is shown dating black, Asian, and white women) is presented alongside a ‘hooker ad’ depicting ‘exotic’ sex workers. Rather than overt pornographic exhibitions of female bodies, these images banalize the voyeuristic gaze, because they are qualified by their location as marketing tools in back-page classified ads.
Figure 2. *Summer Blonde* page 65.
Neil’s position as viewer is a marginalized one, a consequence of his exclusion from the comparatively busy social space of Carlo and Vanessa, rather than one of unaccountable inscrutability. His relatively inert position is part of why the closing frames, in which Vanessa finds herself lodged next to Neil on a crowded subway, do not initiate a narrative of Neil as sexual predator. Their close proximity of the space through a full page of frames, which are gradually blacked out, emphasizes their momentary connection. With the subway crowd closing around them, the page layout creates a hopeful moment of contact between Neil and Vanessa in contrast to the prior isolating images. This studied being together recalls a similar scene between Vanessa and her (woman) friend Pilar, which further erodes any sense of threat in Neil’s one-sided familiarity with Vanessa. Neil again attempts to apologize to her, “I don’t blame you if… I mean, I’m sure you really… hate me;” to which she replies, “Yeah… but no more than anyone else” (66). This idea of being “no more than anyone else” (66), is the closest SB comes to advocating for a social issue, as it emerges from within the logic of late capitalism.
10. Tomine’s description of the autobiographical leanings in his works also presents a tempting alibi for a paraphrasic reading of *SB*. However, simply reiterating authorial intention becomes an excuse for critical analysis (Bal, “Autotopography”). Without acceding to the “easy way out” or a contradictory biographical critique, my reading acknowledges the text’s locus of enunciation by emphasizing the its insistence on place. Bal writes: “Within biographism, a peculiar blending occurs…the appeal to the artist’s intentions…as it combines with the psychoanalytical slant of criticism. This is contradictory, because these two narrative models of explanation utilize a different, if not radically opposed, conception of subjectivity and agency” (“Autotopography” 182). *SB* presents an everyday infused with contradictions to the dictates of intelligibility—making under capitalism, but not within a program of resistance. Noting its ability to complicate the notion of transparent representations, Chow has posited a privileged relationship between cinema and modern identity systems that can “teach us about interactivity-cum-commodification” and “the radical implications of cinema’s interruption of the human as such—indeed, with its conjuring of human beings as phantom objects” (“A Phantom Discipline” 1393). The implicit irreducibility of the everyday to a unified directive stands in contrast to the continuity between cinema and capitalist value coding, the dissolution of singularities into intelligibilities. *SB*, I argue, probes the logic of ‘the culture of the image’ and the ways it shapes an incalculable social landscape by inventing, rather than re-presenting, a practice for a particular time and place.
Figure 4. *SB* Opening, Bay Area Rapid Transit Map (inside front cover)

11. Underscoring the place-specific address of the stories, *SB* opens with a Bay Area Rapid Transit map. By such visual gestures, *SB* insists that there is no sense of a social body organized as a civic polity. Explicit references to the nation or state emerge only in their disavowal or to emphasize their distance from the everyday.

Instead, points of contact between the traced-lives in *SB* are constituted through city networks. As in other urban-centered stories, much of the interaction between characters occur as a result of the closeness of city space—running into each other at stores, cafes, and mass transit systems. Place weaves these stories together to insist that they be read as more than stories about individual problems, and instead to illustrate a situated cultural body, much as Elizabeth Grosz has discussed regarding the integration of bodies and cities; “the city is a site for the body’s cultural saturation, its takeover and transformation by images, representational systems, the mass media, the arts” (249). In Grosz’s view, neither a causal relationship, wherein humans make cities nor an analogous isomorphism (cities are made in the image of the social body) adequately expresses the mutually constitutive relationship between the metropolis and humans. The concept of the melting together of bodies and the myriad systems runs together with my reading of *SB* as inventing, though not prescribing, an ethics of being “no more than
anyone else.” Through the staging of everyday life, SB poses a series of questions about how to engage other bodies in the close quarters of the city. This co-immersion of life and non-life constitute an ethical basis for these engagements.

12. HG, which stars Hilary Chan, an unskinny Chinese American woman in her late 20s, depicts the alienating experiences of an Asian American woman, but rhetorical cues do not indicate that her life be read as a metonymic representation of a politicized collective. Instead, they direct the political to another space, that of the fictional presentation itself. Subheadings for each act, and other references to theatrical conventions, frame each event in Hilary’s life to underline their presence in visual media. These rhetorical gestures towards the staged-ness of the story hypothesize the paradox of imposing a fictional structure on the immediacy of lived experience. While SB does not represent the political as such, it does tell us something about watching from the sidelines. In this idiom, spectatorship becomes something other than a imposing gaze, but rather a semiotic mode. Bal describes this mode as, “pursuing a knowledge that is more profound for being unacknowledged; …a gaze that enables subjects to communicate without giving themselves away” (Looking in 191). This inverted gaze drives the most enigmatic scenes in HG. Crucially, the female first person narration of HG disallows the voyeuristic distance that the preceding story, “Summer Blonde,” encouraged. Instead, the reader is positioned within Hilary’s interpretations, while simultaneously receiving information from the external graphic dimension of the text. The difference in narrative point of view suggests the different foci of the two stories. In “Summer Blonde,” the motion of the narrative can rely on the causal logic of events. However, the otherwise disarticulated events in HG are dependent on Hilary’s subjectivity. The format of SB’s multiple modes of narration disallows unitary interpretation. Bal has persuasively argued for differently oriented modes of reading the same text enable competing frames of interpretation that refuse pressures exerted towards the resolution of contradiction (“De-Disciplining the Eye”). Bal’s argument for fractured readings resonates with theorizations of the radical ethics of everyday life as non-actualized potential, the ‘sense’ that is used to live within contradictions. This sense of the everyday derives from disjointed narration of disparate events in HG, which, “are not conscious disruptions of that order, but unintended dilations, wanderings, or events that occur beyond all sense of order” (Colebrook 699). The ethical, in this conception, departs from agendas that seek to overcome mediation but rather recognize the creative and inappropriable acts that constitute everyday life.
13. Hilary’s self-conscious narration ceases as she begins the prank phone calls; of this absence she states; “I kept the phone to my ear, listening to the dial tone. I felt like I was some other person, and that the real me was sitting across the room, watching in disbelief” (80). The effect of this scene is to position her with the reader’s critical distance, outside of the text and to thereby call attention to the textual mode itself. This outcome is visualized by showing a rear view of Hilary gazing out the window as she protests that “the real me” is also watching from across the room with the viewer.
14. Narrative framing refuses to dismiss or celebrate Hilary as a depressive, self-absorbed and perverse prank phone caller. Disjunctions between her narration and visual illustrations convey the understanding that her isolation proceeds from her mis-takes of others. These failings are in turn linked to technological mediation by staging them within the dis-connects between different social modes; the protocols of telemarketers, baristas, roommates, etc. are jumbled together. In these textual events, the profusion of mediation is problematized by the ways that it enables misrecognition and/or displaces responsibility. Hilary’s covert surveillance is not vicious, but rather signals her abject isolation. In another scene, she audiotapes her roommate while he is having sex, and later masturbates while listening to the tape. While disallowing entry into her self-understanding (Hilary’s
narration “is absent”), the narrative does not condemn her intrusion. Hilary’s behaviors remain enigmatic rather than being dismissed as ridiculous or pathological because they are narrated as her frustrated reactions to the alienating logic of technological mediation itself. Hilary is fired from her job as a telephone customer service agent for acknowledging the identity of a celebrity caller while he was placing an order: “We’ll beam these right up to you, Mr. Shatner” (70).

The destabilizing of social codes by communication technologies thematically recurs, not as technophobia, but as a disconcerting arbitrating logic (for example, Hilary endures telephone conversations with her mother and sister, receives cold notes from her roommate, and has an unfeeling sexual exchange with a much older radio disc jockey). However, these modes of relation are not distortions of genuine human contact, but constitute a part of everyday life. As Claire Colebrook notes, “Life is not pure power so much as a disparate collection of parts with the collection tending towards disconnection and misrecognition. Nowhere is this more evident than in everyday life, the domain of contingent, perverse, and resisting bodies” (702-3). SB does not categorically dismiss technologies of social mediation, but brackets them by performing their perverse logic. A stranger reaches out to Hilary during one of her prank calls; they have one promising meeting, and Hilary waits for him as HG closes. While problematic according to the topical parameters of conventional romance (with the ‘heroine’ left waiting for a man to redeem her), the rhetorical substance of the narrative arrests such a reading. Hilary matter-of-factly accedes to the possibility that this man will not meet her and instead turns toward a ‘fantastic’ memory of curling up into a suitcase while on a family vacation in Hawai‘i. Postcard perfect portraits of an empty Waikiki and fragmented sequencing are the visual cues that admit this reading of fantasy (Bal 1997). Thus, HG closes with Hilary’s melancholic recognition of an experience that transforms her inability to plug into society, which the reader has been directed to understand is central to her alienation.

**Ethics Beyond the Everyday**

15. I have tried to show how SB advocates an ethical way of being within the particular locus of the West’s late capitalism. The point is not that Vanessa’s identification of Neil as a stalker is unwarranted, or that Hilary’s prank calls were unproblematic, but that these dysfunctional attempts at sociality mark the perversity in the everyday. In contrast to its nuanced accounts of everyday life, the calculated actions of socially successful—characters like Carlo and Grace, Hilary’s yuppie sister—are parodied because of their lack of imagination in inventing an other way of being. Grace advises Hilary to learn to adopt social norms by reading a book, “Mastering Small Talk” (75), and Carlo is a ridiculous stereotype of the self-absorbed, handsome and untalented musician. Everyday life, in its refusal to locate its politics beyond itself, exists as the negation of such contrived strategies.

16. SB engages with unreality/fantasy in life in ways that may lead to an enchanted conception of the everyday. “Enchantment,” writes Bennett, “[is] a state of openness to the disturbing captivating elements in everyday experience” (131). Bennett’s enchantment suggests a bridge between SB’s exploration of everyday life in fiction and an ethic that inheres in its practice. My reading has employed
concepts that are indebted to Colebrook’s articulation of the political in rethinking the potential of everyday life. By evidencing the “persistence of non-life in life” (she identifies genetics, drugs, morphology and affect) “everyday life offers no norm or principle” (689). Work on cross-species encounters, fetishism, collecting, and the post-human have suggested an ethical value of enchantment with (perhaps) non-sentient beings/objects; unverifiable and uncoercive ways that, like fiction, create possibilities for thinking-otherwise. Relationships within an animated world of things (such as images) become ways of creating openings for the ethical by positing them as exercises of the imagination. The ethical potential of this enchantment, “resides in its ability to persuade without compelling, to structure experience without insisting that this structure is the one that must be duplicated” (Bennett 27-28).

17. Expanding the scope of thought, or the exploration of the “daily work of imagination” is a unique skill of the fictive. The space of invention, SB suggests, may be found in the irreducible plurality of learning to be just-anybody within a matrix, like the metaphoric city, that can affirm singularity without becoming an alibi for ethical responsibility. Colebrook describes the ethical in everyday life as a radical passivity, an ability to let go of power and transform relations through forces that unfold beyond power. The danger of this model of ethics is the founding of an object of knowledge within the self-in-mediation. Spivak writes: “Ethics are not a problem of knowledge but a call of relationship… If we see ourselves only as subjects (or ‘selves’) of a knowledge that cannot related and see the ‘self’ as writing, our unavoidable ethical decisions will be caught in the more empirical, less philosophical ‘night of non knowledge,’” a “decenter[ing] of the subject, as is easily said, without challenging anew the bond between, on the one hand, responsibility, and, on the other, freedom of subjective consciousness or purity of intentionality… a parade of irresponsibilizing destruction, whose surest effect would be to leave everything as it is, and to flatten” (“Echo” 32). Such narcissism, often marked by supposedly well-intentioned critical self-reflection, dismisses of the agency of the Other and thereby denies ethical responsibility.[12] In SB, agency is neither denied nor found whole in selves or others, but is always uncertain and estranged. By refusing to celebrate perversity, nor to suggest any heroic avenues towards redemption, SB nevertheless suggests ethical potential in the negative space that is left.

18. Notes

[11] In de Certeau’s formulation: “These ‘ways of operating’ constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production. They pose questions… to perceive and analyze the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life… not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (xiv-xv).
I am thinking of academic work on comic books that focuses on the significance of the graphic medium as it inflects meanings of overtly social issues and appeals to different audiences; See Art Spiegelman’s Maus or Joe Sacco’s graphic novels on Palestine and Bosnia: Safe Area Gorazde: The war in Eastern Bosnia 1992-95 and Palestine, including Christopher Hitchen’s foreword to Safe Area Gorazde.

Shapiro discusses Art Spiegelman’s formulation of the comic book form as “commix,” a co-mixture of images and language (31-34).

Jameson insists that the “lateness” of capitalism is not exclusively a periodizing referent: “to grasp postmodernism not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant” (4). He notes that the term late capitalism originated with the Frankfurt School, however he submits that its use denotes the preconditions for new cultural system as it emerges alongside economic shifts (Postmodernism xviii-x). See also Spivak’s discussion of periodization and culture in Jameson’s text (Critique 312-336).

Chow’s discusses this notion of coding in her of treatment of Georg Lukács exploration of the interactions between writing and visual fields in fiction (“Seminal Dispersal” 157).

Chow refers to Karl Marx: “Money is the external, universal means and power (not derived from man as man nor from human society as society) to change representation into reality and reality into mere representation… In this respect, therefore, money is the general inversion of individualities, turning them into their opposites and associating contradictory qualities with their qualities” (Karl Marx: Early Writings, 192-193); See also Armstrong “Who’s Afraid of the Cultural Turn?” 23; and Marx, “The Commodity Fetish and its Secret” in Capital. Vol. I. Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Random House, 1977.

One exception occurs in “Bomb Scare,” where the main characters decide to ‘move to Canada’ if they are drafted into the Gulf War. As the television shows images of the Gulf War, they comment; “It looks like a video game” (Tome 110).

See Haraway Simians, Cyborgs, Women, 119-121; Coetzee, The Lives of Animals.

Rey Chow writes that the “obscure allure of material objects,” can illuminate the social locatedness of human subjectivity (“Fateful Attachments” 287). I am also thinking of Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the collector; “To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them… The collector dreams his way… into a distant and bygone world… in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful” (9).

See Haraway’s Simians, Cyborgs, Women and Hayles’ How We Became Posthuman.

I borrow this phrase from Geyer and Bright: “For the first time, we as human beings collectively constitute ourselves and, hence, are responsible for
ourselves… this condition of globality is the integrated global space of human practice... In the past, such humanity has been the dream of sages and philosophers and, not to be forgotten, of gods, but now it has become the daily work of human beings. This daily work needs imagination” (1059-1060).

[12] Shu-Mei Shuh develops this argument in a critique of the ethics of anti-Orientalism (95-97).

19. References


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