Ecofeminist Themes in Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri's *Morbus Gravis*

by Matthew Jones

Abstract

A semiotic analysis informed by ecofeminist theory was performed on Serpieri’s *Morbus Gravis* series of erotic graphic novels, which feature his well-known female protagonist, Druuna. Prevailing themes identified and discussed include mind/body dualism, internal conflict, technological transcendence, and objectification/destruction. Implications exist for understanding the potential impact of phallocentric epistemology on the environment. In addition, this analysis further demonstrates the capacity of the medium of comic art to take on complex philosophical issues and deal with them in a way that both entertains and enlightens.

Introduction

1. The investigation of comic books as a means of prying into the subconscious fantasies and fears of their readers is not a new approach. Adams (1981, 1983) and Titus (2000) provide examples of how comics have given insight, from a psychoanalytic perspective, on the anxieties and desires of readers. Adams (1983) submits that “one of the major psychological functions of comic books as purveyors of ‘myths of passage’ is to fling open the door to the unconscious and depict the terrifying monsters that lurk there as the residue of growing up” (p. 458). Carrier (2000) further legitimizes this use of comics by suggesting that “we the audience project into a comic our fantasies, fears, and hopes” (p. 83).

2. Informed by this understanding of comics as an exterior projection of internal turmoil, this paper seeks to examine the significance of ecofeminist themes in Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri’s internationally acclaimed and widely circulated (Lambiek, 2004) *Morbus Gravis* series of graphic novels.

3. As a metatheoretical perspective that provides a critique of many facets of Western culture, ecofeminism predicts global consequences of catastrophic proportion if current interrelated systems of oppression are permitted to continue to exist (see Bigwood, 1993; Caputi, 1993; Johnson, 1993; Plant, 1989; Plumwood, 1993; Vance, 1993). The exploration of ecofeminist themes within the context of a comic series that is rife with elements of horror and erotica is helpful in terms of gaining insight into how ecofeminism is represented to a demographic which would intuitively seem unreceptive to its overarching concern with systems of patriarchal oppression. McCloud (2000) observes that women and minorities have been vastly underrepresented in both comic art readership and production. Further, many comics (particularly erotic comics) present the reader with violent, degrading and frightening images of women (Horn, 1977; Laity, 2002). Thus, the question of how ecofeminist themes function within a comic text that is presumably read by white males who enjoy viewing sexually violent images of women becomes central to this project.
4. Johnson (1993) and Plant (1989) point out the importance of ecofeminism as an inclusive movement that requires both men and women to oppose destructive and oppressive social structures. According to Plant, this will be a particularly difficult task for men since they must “struggle long and hard to overcome their own upbringing” (p. 3). A detailed look at Serpieri’s *Morbus Gravis* will provide insight on this complex struggle and reveal how a series of graphic novels, popular for elements of horror and erotica, is capable of reaching out to a readership that would otherwise seem opposed to ecofeminist concerns.

**Ecofeminism: Key Concepts**

5. Ecofeminism has been defined in a number of similar ways. Warren (2000) writes that: “Ecological feminists claim that there are important connections between the unjustified domination of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature” (p. 1). Others including Gaard (1993), Roach (1996), Ruether (1993), Spretnak (1993) and Vance (1993) similarly observe the relationship of mutual oppression and domination that exists regarding women and nature.

**Dualism**

6. Central to the mutual subjugation of women and nature is the concept of dualism. From the perspective of many ecofeminists, dualism serves as an interrelated system of divisions that ensure the domination of one group or class over another. Johnson (1993) defines dualism as “a two-tiered vision of reality that privileges the elite half of a pair and subordinates the other, which is thought to have little or no intrinsic value of its own but exists only to be of use to the higher” (p. 11).

7. Related sets of dualism are named by Bigwood (1993), Johnson (1993), Mies (1993) and Primavesi (1991) among others. Common dualisms cited among these authors are those of mind vs. body, culture vs. nature, man vs. woman and self vs. other. It is important to note, however, that although these dualisms are listed discretely, they are actually joined in an overarching system of patriarchal oppression. Bigwood observes, “All these dichotomies, however, are so closely interwoven that they confirm and support one another” (p. 191).

8. Perhaps the most polarizing dualism of all, however, has to do with the way we, as human beings, know the world around us. The dominance of the scientific method over experiential knowledge highlights an epistemological dualism that has implications for oppression. Gruen (1993) notes that “devaluing subjective experience, reducing living, spontaneous beings to machines to be studied, and establishing an epistemic privilege based on detached reason, the mechanistic/scientific mindset firmly distinguished man from nature, woman and animals” (p. 64).

**Mechanical and Organic**

9. Bigwood (1993) describes masculine epistemology by observing that a male “being…reinforces a purely instrumental relation to nature, for the gap between the alienated human “I” and everything else external or “other” to that self is bridged
by tools and instruments” (p. 193).

10. Opposing epistemologies have resulted in opposing conceptions of human creativity. The masculine approach tends to adopt a mechanistic orientation to production whereas the feminine approach tends to adopt an organic orientation to production. Bigwood (1993) describes the difference between mechanistic and organic in terms of *techne* and *phasis*. She explains that “A central way of distinguishing between *techne* and *phasis*, then, is that the motion involved in the creation of a cultural product comes from the outside, whereas the coming-to-be of a natural being comes from the inside” (p. 145). Thus, the mechanical (*techne*) emerges from being transformed by an outside human force and the organic (*phasis*) emerges from itself according to its own internal predisposition. Bigwood further asserts that “*Phasis* is thus the most fundamental mode of bringing-forth, and *techne* should be understood as ultimately a mode of *phasis* and not in opposition to *phasis*” (p. 139).

11. This mechanical and organic dichotomy has implications for the goals of the masculine epistemology. Because to give birth one must be female, women seem to “participate in *phasis* to a much fuller extent than men” (Bigwood, 1993, p. 139) since babies emerge from within a woman’s body and not from instruments. In this light, the creation of mechanical things (by men) would seem to be a compensatory effort to achieve organic creativity.

12. Man’s “vagina envy” became well instituted during the industrial revolution when the organic world became reconceptualized as mere matter to be manipulated through science (Merchant, 1980). Through technology, man has sought to remake the organic world in such a way that “*Phasis* is no longer understood as the most original mode of bringing-forth but, rather, as a kind of *techne*, as a producing of raw products” (Bigwood, 1993, p. 149).

13. Perhaps this mechanical retrofitting of the organic is most strikingly clear in reference to the science of obstetrics. Diamond (1994), Haraway (1991), Harding (1991) and Mies (1993) all observe the intrusive role that technology has come to play in the birthing process. Diamond goes so far as to predict “Having a ‘healthy’ baby will no longer be seen as a gift of good fortune, but as the result of correct screening and testing” (p. 96).

14. This mechanistic orientation may evolve into the gradual reconstruction of all things through technology, including children, the earth, and even us, resulting from what both Johnson (1993) and Primavesi (1991) observe as the tendency of science to view nature as a machine. Primavesi specifically comments, “The female earth and virgin earth spirit were to be subdued by the machine” (p. 62). Even with regard to our own physical being, Heidegger (1976) observes, “it seems as if modern man rushes headlong towards this goal of producing himself technologically” (as cited in Bigwood, 1993, p. 151).

15. Through a mechanistic reconstruction of the body, man has asserted the ultimate subordination of the organic by remaking it into the mechanical. In this way man has fled the body altogether (Diamond, 1994). Similarly, a flight from the earth permits a transcendence from and subordination of the earth. For Plumwood (1993), this retreat from the organic results in alienation. She concludes, “the dilemma of the ghost in the machine is to be resolved by evicting the ghost and embracing its exoskeleton, the empty but serviceable mechanism of the world
which is left” (p. 121). Thus by abdicating body and earth, mankind also abdicates spirit. Perhaps because of this potential, Bigwood (1993) notes that the greatest danger of technology is “the eventuality that the essence of technology comes to define existence as a whole, replacing phusis as the essential originating order of all beings” (p. 148).

**Endgame of the Masculine Epistemology**

16. One symptom of technology coming to define existence is the alienation that is integral to the objectivity requisite for scientific inquiry. To approach things scientifically, one must engage in an act of voyeurism since observation, rather than participation, is considered to be the source of scientific knowledge. The observer, in this sense, is necessarily detached and alienated from the observed.

17. Ultimately, the earth itself becomes a distant object of contemplation to which we are no longer connected. In reference to earth observation satellites, Litfin (1997) writes that “Rather than being embedded participants in the reality depicted, Earth system scientists become disengaged observers of that reality” (p. 5). Diamond (1994) similarly observes that “our awareness of global interconnections tend to be abstract and removed, as is so well symbolized by that cherished postmodern environmental icon, the NASA-produced whole earth photo” (p. 141).

18. Some ecofeminists suggest that the final result of such a detached and objective concept of the earth will lead to its destruction (see Vance, 1993; Plumwood, 1993). Speaking to this point, Plumwood (1993) states that “Since he [the master] is set on a course of devouring the other who sustains him, the story must end either with the death of the other on whom he relies, and therefore with his own death, or with the abandonment of mastery, his failure and transformation” (195). Because the spirit is inseparable from the flesh and cannot be transplanted into a machine or brought into existence through human technology, the aspiration of “the master” is a hopeless fantasy that will lead to the destruction of the world in the process of an ill-fated attempt to attain the creativity of phusis through technology. This destructive fantasy is played out to its full extent within the pages of *Morbus Gravis*.

**Context – The Story of *Morbus Gravis***

19. *Morbus Gravis* is a complex series of graphic novels that weaves together elements of psychology, metaphysics, horror, erotica and science fiction.

20. The caption on the back of *Morbus Gravis* volume one reads as follows: “In a plague-ridden city where humans degenerate into hideous mutations, a beautiful woman makes an astonishing discovery that sends her racing to prevent her world from destroying itself.” The discovery that this woman (Druuna) has made (with the help of her lover named Shastar) is that the planet earth has long ago been poisoned, destroyed and forgotten. The remnants of humanity, left to float aimlessly in search of a new home aboard an enormous spaceship called “The City,” live only to perpetuate the existence of the master (a man named Lewis who was the ship’s first commander).

21. A computer (called Delta), which was designed to keep Lewis alive, has taken over and will not permit him to die. Out of a desire to die, Lewis persuades
Druuna to attempt to destroy Delta. When Druuna learns that the destruction of Delta would lead to the destruction of Lewis and “The City” (because Lewis and Delta have literally merged with it), she changes her mind and saves humanity from termination.

22. With the passage of time, “The City” has mutated itself into a huge lump of organic matter. Lewis is close to death and Druuna is trapped with nowhere to go. Another spaceship (containing a crew whom has also fled their home planet) discovers the mutated remains of “The City.” Will (the ship’s commander), Doc (a scientist) and other crew members venture out to explore the massive object. Upon finding Druuna, the crewmembers take her back to their spaceship.

23. Druuna dreams of being reunited with Shastar (who has since died and somehow merged his mind with Lewis). Meanwhile, the terrible mutating plague called “evil” has broken out on the spaceship. In order to learn about the antidote, Doc and Will send Druuna on a telepathic voyage through CP-1 (the spaceships computer) back to “The City” where she learns about the Mandragore – a therapeutic flower which can be used to fight the plague.

24. The spirit of Shastar (her dead lover) rescues Druuna from “The City” just before Lewis dies causing the entire place to be obliterated. Lewis is dead at last and Druuna is alone, floating in space aboard the spaceship.

25. At long last, Druuna emerges from a deep sleep to find herself in a nightmarish world where she is the only fully organic human. Only cyborgs and robots hungry to breed with a human partner populate this bizarre city. Upon finding Shastar (who is now a robot with a human spirit), Druuna is transformed by him into a similar robot. In the latest volume (Clone, 2003), Druuna is cloned to restore her humanity and left to wander a mechanical city in search of the forgotten world of humanity that Shastar had promised.

Mind over Matter

26. Due to the fact that phusical creation comes to be internally and technological creation comes to be externally (Bigwood, 1993) the subordination of phusis under techne mandates an arbitrary division between mind and matter wherein the mind is placed and valued over and above matter. Johnson (1993) notes, “The self, in this view, is essentially solitary and disembodied, the body being an alien material clothing that insulates the discrete psychic substance that is the rational mind” (p. 13). Ecofeminist theorists (see Johnson, 1993; Primavesi, 1991; Spretnak, 1989; Starhawk, 1989) call attention to the artificiality of such a division, contending that the mind itself is composed of matter. As will be established over the course of this analysis, the crux of the problematic masculine epistemology rests on this artificial division between mind and matter.

27. Morbus Gravis calls repeated attention to the mind/matter dualism and its consequences. One way in that this is accomplished is through the act of brain theft in which the imaginary split is underscored and exaggerated by a literal separation between mind (the brain) and matter (the body). For example, Lewis explains to Druuna that Delta “stole everything he could from by brain” (volume 1, p. 59). In a more graphic example, Terry (a crewmember) uses a large syringe to suck the brain out of a mortally wounded officer. As she performs the gruesome
act, she explains “his scientific knowledge had to be preserved” (volume 4, p. 16). When she is done, she states “He’s only a body, a body with no memory, no conscience, too rotten to be recycled” (volume 4, p. 16). The act and its explanation highlight a clear distinction between what is mental and what is physical.

28. One of the most graphic and telling examples of mind/body separation occurs in volume six when Will (the commander of the ship) describes his psychic vision to Doc (the scientist). In the last panel of page twenty-two, Will encounters the ghost of Shastar (Druuna’s lover) who is a foreboding figure cloaked in a dark trench coat. The panel is divided in half by Will’s body, making him the focal point of struggle. To the left of Will is Shastar’s ghostly, disembodied presence who warns Will to “Keep all emotions and feelings separate from you” (p. 22). To the right is the image of a naked woman with large breasts and hips. She stands, in all of her Rubenesque physicality, before a mass of human bodies stuck together in an orgiastic lump. Through the dynamics of composition within this panel, the disembodied mind (Shastar’s ghost) stands in powerful counterpoint to the physical body (the plump woman and the mass of bodies).

29. In the three large panels that compose the following page, the heap of bodies engulfs Will, tearing off his clothes and sexually consuming him. Each panel plays off the others, crowding Will and nearly dissolving him into the mass of intertwined bodies.

30. On page twenty-four, Druuna appears in front of Will as one of the bodies. She looms above him with pendulous breasts as an anonymous hand reaches out penetrating Will’s skull in a bloody grab for his brain. At this point, Will is back in reality explaining the vision to Doc. He states, “These clammy bodies! How awful! Those claw-like hands…that kept trying to rip out my brain…but the most horrible thing was the feeling that they wanted to annihilate my mind, my identity, my very being…” (p. 24).

Figures 1a, 1b, 1c © 1997, Bagheera Editeur / Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri

31. Within this sequence, Will is signified as masculine through his muscular torso
and chiseled features while the mass of bodies (although composed of both sexes) is signified as feminine through its comparative softness and abundance of visible breasts. The nightmarish quality of the vision highlights Will’s masculine fear of incorporation into the feminine mass of phusical creativity and the loss of individual “mind” and “identity” that would result. In such a state where the group subsumes individual agency, phusis regains the upper hand over techne and the power of creativity is turned over to women who appear “to participate in phusis to a much fuller extent than men” (Bigwood, 1993, p. 139). Also relevant here is the suggestion that “experiencing oneness with the natural world is feared by many men as a horrifying engulfment: either one guards his individuality, freedom, and particularity or he surrenders his being to an overarching monster, oneness” (Spretnak, 1993, p. 265). Adams (1983) identifies a similar male fear of incorporation as common across a variety of comic books.

Aside from this fear of brain theft and loss of individualized technical agency, the fantasy of the detached mind controlling matter is repeatedly portrayed. In these fantasies, large nerve centers are depicted as having authority over the terrestrial realm. Lewis, Delta, Shastar, Doc and Will are all presented as nerve centers at one point or another. For instance, Doc (volume 4, p. 1) and Will (volume 4, p. 32) are each shown at the controls of the spaceship, immersed by computer technology that permits control over the environment (the spaceship).

33. **Figure 2.** © 1993 Bagheera Editeur / Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri
Much more drastic than a man’s mind interacting with a ship’s computer, however, is Lewis’ strange state of existence as a shriveled, disembodied head floating in a tank of formaldehyde. A tangle of tubes and wires emerge from his cranium and connect to a host of thicker cords that are gathered into conduits that surround the tank. Lewis is a literal nerve center, a “pure mind” that manipulates and exploits the surrounding matter to which he is connected, but is not actually a part of. In volume three of the series this mental power over matter is emphasized further still as Lewis’ dreams and nightmares actually transform the physical terrain of the environment.

Variations of this detached, nerve-center image occur throughout. The energy flow through which Delta (the computer) manifests itself is a culmination of pipes and wires connecting to intersecting laser beams which form an electrified face at the center (volume 2, p. 56-61). Delta’s quality as a mind detached from matter is articulated still further by the presence of the semi-nude figure of Druuna whom
he addresses in the following way: “Feminine organism, I am Delta. I represent the ultimate evolution of the human spirit….” Through this reference to Druuna as “feminine organism” and to himself as “the ultimate evolution of the human spirit,” Delta not only emphasizes his own transcendent disembodiedness as compared to Druuna’s corporeality, but also calls attention to her gender. Thus what is female is associated here with what is matter and placed outside of the realm of the mind. This distinction that Delta makes is the ideological seed that allows for the combined domination, oppression and exploitation of women and nature that is of central concern to ecofeminism.

35. A final way in which matter is separated from and dominated by mind in Morbus Gravis is through technological interaction with the physical body. Druuna’s female body is apprehended by technology almost constantly. At one point, Doc attaches her head to the computer and says “Don’t move now, every molecule of your body is under our control” (volume 5, p. 14). The computer protests, reporting: “The female’s mind is completely foreign to me because of its human and organic nature” (p. 15). Following her transportation through the computer, her body becomes lodged in network of metal pipes, juxtaposing her soft flesh with hard technology surrounding her. Similarly, at the conclusion of the seventh volume during the process when Druuna is transformed into a robot, every orifice in her body is plugged with tubes and wires that are attached to mechanical devices. In these examples, technology literally violates and invades Druuna’s body.

36. Figure 3. © 2001 Bagheera Edituer / Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri
This violation of the female body through technology is an attempt to reappropriate phusis through techne. Nowhere is this clearer than in the depictions of medical practice that recur through the series. In one example of this, Druuna is strapped to a gurney and undergoing a gynecological examination (volume 5, p. 44). More clearly illustrating the point, however, is the sequence in which Druuna dreams that she is pregnant. Here she finds herself captured by surgeons who strap her to a bloody operating table surrounded by menacing instruments and perform a bloody forced cesarean section on her. In this act, the ultimate attempt to steal phusis from the feminine and replace it with a masculine techne is highlighted. The creativity of her body is literally stolen by the surgeon and his scalpel. This is also a potent symbol for how the medicalization of birth, in general, serves to

37. Other examples of technological interaction with the physical body are present in the form of the androids and cyborgs that abound throughout the series. Most notable among these are the priests that populate the first two volumes. These priests, when stripped of their robes, are revealed to be human skulls mounted upon robotic bodies. Once again, in this example, the concept of “pure mind” separated from and controlling body and matter is presented.

38. Plumwood (1993) correctly observes “In dualistic construals of the mind/body division, mind and body are assumed to belong to quite different orders, being seen as so different as to give rise to the classic problem of how they interact” (p. 70). This problematic interaction between mind and body become the source of internal conflict that is the second integral theme of this analysis.

**Internal Conflict**

39. Starhawk, a theorist who has focused on the spiritual aspect of ecofeminism, notes that under patriarchy “men are encouraged to identify with a model no human being can successfully emulate…they are at war with themselves” (1979, p. 9). A similar internal struggle is brought to the fore within Morbus Gravis. To begin with, Shastar (Druuna’s lover) is infected with the plague and is in constant conflict with his body. His conflicted internal state is evidenced when he says, “the beast that is in me could take over at any moment…I have to repress that…it’s terrible” (volume 1, p. 45). Near the conclusion of the first volume, Shastar convinces Druuna to kill him for her own safety. As he is mutating and preparing to attack Druuna he pleads with her: “You have to kill me! Right now! Point it right at my heart, Druuna…You have to free me…the pain is intolerable…It’s the beast, the beast…I feel it…It’s eating me…kill it…free me…” (volume 1, p. 58).

Additionally, at the conclusion of volume two, Lewis explains that he has been in constant conflict with Delta. Since it is repeatedly stated that Delta is mentally fused with Lewis, this constitutes a sort of internal conflict. Along these same lines, Will expresses internal conflict in saying “I feel torn between two opposing forces” (volume 3, p. 27).

40. A particularly strong metaphor that encapsulates this general internal conflict appears in the form of a two-headed mutant near the end of volume one. In this example, the heads are in conflict: one head represents reason and the other desire and emotion. At one point, the rational head says of the emotional head “He’s bad…a pervert and a sadist…I don’t approve of him…I hate him…” (p. 53).

41. Beyond these general expressions of internal strife, there is a more specific manifestation that occurs in the form of thwarted desire. Desperate, hungry arms are forever reaching out in vain for Druuna’s tempting, voluptuous body. When Druuna is crossing over a pit filled with mutants (volume 2, p. 53), she nearly slips and falls into the sea of outstretched claws. Similarly, the beginning of volume five finds Druuna, half-naked and narrowly escaping the grasp of cloaked zombies.

42. Likely the most telling example of thwarted desire exists between Druuna and
Shastar, whose separation from one another and desire for one another is one of the primary motivations of the story. One example of this occurs in virtual space next to a giant wall. When Druuna begins to touch Shastar he disappears into thin air because he is only an energy flow. He states “My body died a long time ago… only my mind…” (volume 4, p. 47). This scenario repeats itself when Druuna travels back to “The City” and encounters Shastar as a holographic image. Shastar warns Druuna “If you touch me, my image could fragment and disappear” (volume 5, p. 21). Within these examples, the results of the mind/matter separation are played out. Mies (1993) suggests that a key conflict results from the distance that man has placed between his mind and “his own organic, mortal body, which, nevertheless remains the source of all happiness and enjoyment” (p. 137). Thus the desire to overcome and transcend the flesh has created a conflicted and alienated relationship to both environment and body.

43. Another sort of internal conflict that repeatedly plays out in *Morbus Gravis* is the “fearsome, vulnerable, or even terrifying” (Spretnak, 1989, p. 129) male post-orgasmic state frequently referred to as “la petit mort” or the little death. This articulation of desire which ends in death occurs either literally or metaphorically at least seven times throughout the series. In one instance, Shastar is harpooned with spears while having sex with Druuna (volume 1, p. 42), another depicts Monk (a thuggish soldier) being devoured alive while raping a young woman (volume 2, p. 25).

44. Volume five (*Mandragore*) features two sequences which best display the meaning of *la petit mort* within the context of masculine internal conflict. Druuna is sent back to “The City” to discover the antidote to the sickness that is plaguing the spaceship. The antidote is known as *mandragore* and it derives from a flower that sprouts from the semen of men who have been hanged during orgasm.

45. In what follows, Druuna is taken hostage and used as a tool to induce orgasm so that semen can be harvested for the mandragore flower. In one sequence (pp. 53-56) Druuna must induce orgasm in a man who is collared to the back of a throne. She climbs on top of him and, during the last moments before orgasm, demands that he tell her the secret. In his last breath he gives up the secret of life: "mandragore" (p. 55).

46. In this event a crucial aspect of masculine conflict is underscored. In reaching orgasm and ejaculating semen, the male ends his role in phusis as the female who will use it to engage in the physical creativity of pregnancy usurps his sperm. By giving up the name of the secret ingredient to Druuna at the moment of his death, this act of giving away life is magnified and made even more salient.

47. In the other sequence (pp. 36-41), Druuna is brought into a chamber that is crowded with gawking spectators. At the center of the chamber is a bed with two naked men on it, each with a noose tied around his neck. Druuna performs oral sex on one of the men and, at the moment he reaches orgasm, demands that he tell her the antidote. In his last breath he gives up the secret of life: "mandragore" (p. 55).

48. In this sequence, the act of sodomy represents masculine frustration and conflict regarding the male role in procreation. By penetrating Druuna’s anus, the second
man metaphorically robs Druuna of her role in phusis since pregnancy will not occur from anal intercourse. Supporting this assertion, historian and scholar of the erotic, Hans-Jurgen Dopp (2003) notes that because of its lack of productive potential, the anal region “represents worthlessness within the framework of the body” (p. 3) and that it is “the part of the body where sexuality is an expression of male dominance” (p. 70). Illustrating this point, there are many examples of forced anal intercourse within Morbus Gravis. Druuna is anally raped by a soldier named Jock (volume 2, p. 38), by mutants (volume 6, pp. 11-14), by Neanderthals (volume 4, pp. 28-31) and by an anonymous sadist (volume 4, pp. 8-11).

Druuna’s meetings with Dr. Ottonegger (a physician) further reinforce the idea that sodomy is a spiteful method of nullifying the feminine role in phusis. In the first meeting (volume 1, pp. 28-31), Druuna agrees to let Dr. Ottonegger sodomize her in exchange for medicine. What is particularly alarming about the event is the fact that, before penetrating her, he attaches a complex mechanical device to his penis that is apparently composed of metal linkages and rubber tubes. In supplementing his penis with this mechanism and performing anal sex, Dr. Ottonegger doubly undermines phusis: first by circumventing procreativity and second by making use of technology. The second meeting (volume 5, pp. 44-47) is similar to the first except for the fact that Dr. Ottonegger takes a pill to transform himself into a Neanderthal before sodomizing Druuna. In this instance, technology (in the form of a pill) has become more sophisticated, permitting the manipulation of his organic body in a perverted imitation of creativity through phusis.

The Delusion of Transcendence

Mies (1993) suggests that in giving birth, women “experience their own body’s natural creativity and productivity…that living power in their body which permeates nature” (p. 138). Deprived of the possibility of this transcendental experience, males seek technological alternatives to surpass themselves. This struggle is articulated in several ways. One illustration of this occurs when CP-1 (the spaceship’s computer) enters the “sixth level” (volume 3, p. 23). Although it is unclear what a “level” is, there is an obvious allusion to the biblical story of creation when, on the sixth day, God created humanity. Thus CP-1’s arrival at the sixth level is an indication that, through technology, man has become capable of creating life. This is what Bigwood (1993) might refer to as the danger of techne “replacing phusis as the essential originating order of all beings” (p. 148).

Another example of this technological transcendence is evident in an argument that Druuna has with her dwarven companion whom, in volume seven, has been reconstructed as a robot. The dwarf states, “The machines are indestructible! Even if something breaks, they can always be repaired. Not so with humans. The perfect human has to be mechanical so as to limit the negative effects of the passing of time” (p. 60). This assertion is exemplary of what Plumwood (1993) refers to as “reductionistic materialism” in which the “empty but serviceable mechanism” (p. 121) of the physical world comes to eclipse the human spirit.

Reductionistic materialism is even further represented when Shastar (now in the form of a highly sophisticated robot) engulfs Druuna in his circuits and transforms her into a similar robot (volume 7, pp. 61-64). After the transformation, Shastar
tells Druuna “Our thoughts, our feelings, or memories are human, but our bodies aren’t anymore!” (p. 64). Further, Shastar describes his intentions of yet another sort of transcendence: “Look, I know that over there, beyond the mountains, there exists something, something so different...different from all this...There exists a planet where it is still possible to live, think, love...an ancient planet...a forgotten planet” (p. 64). At this point the title of the volume – *The Forgotten Planet* – is invoked to remind the reader that it was this very same desire for transcendence which created the problem to begin with. If the “world-earth-home” (Bigwood, 1993, p. 201) was not “poisoned forever” (volume 1, p. 62) by the technology used to satisfy man’s desire to transcend in the first place, there would be no need to transcend now. The story ends in a vicious catch twenty-two with our protagonists attempting to gain what they have lost using the tools and ideas which created the loss initially. All of volume 8 (2003) dwells heavily on this idea, depicting a world of “failed prototypes” that have been unable to achieve humanness.

53. The initial model for this desire to transcend may have come from the child’s birthing experience. At the beginning of volume three, Will dreams that he is trapped in a womb and cannot escape. He bursts forth from the amniotic sac as a tiny infant and quickly grows to an adult who is unable to escape from the confines of the womb (volume 3, pp.1-3). In similar fashion, Doc recalls his own uterine experience when he traverses the boundary of the universe in volume four (pp.56-58). Will expresses this experience in the following way: “This oppressive universe is like a womb from which I should fight to get out...the symbols on my screen...that image that is always in front of me and has come to obsess me...is my ship...My ship is drifting...lost in the vast empty space within me” (volume 4, p.32).

54. From this it appears that, in the absence of the possibility of participating in giving birth, men perceive only transcendence (based their own birth) and work from this as a model to comprehend their place in the universe. Paradoxically, in working from this model, man’s place in the universe is outside of the universe. Gebara (1999), Plumwood (1993), Ruether (1993) and Spretnak (1993) each take note of this out of control masculine drive to transcend. However, when technological transcendence fails, which, in Morbus Gravis, it does, another set of circumstances still continue to exist - alienation, objectification, and destruction. These will be the subjects of exploration for the final theme.

**Alienation, Objectification, and Destruction**

55. Incontestably, the primary object of desire within Morbus Gravis is Druuna. Her curvaceous figure decorates the cover of every volume in the series. In addition, volumes four and six include extra pages dedicated to nude drawings of Druuna at the conclusion of the story. Beyond this, three supplementary volumes including *Druuna: X* (parts one and two) and *Obsession: In Search of Druuna* exclusively feature Druuna’s naked figure. Within each of the seven volumes themselves, Druuna finds herself in multitudes of sexual situations and is almost perpetually nude or in some state of undress. Due to these facts it is reasonable to conclude that Druuna is, on some level, presented as a pornographic object to the reader.
56. Mies (1993) observes that in the case of pornography, sexuality is reduced to “a simple optic stimulus – response mechanism in which not even a relationship to one’s own person exists” (p. 135). Such an alienation from one’s object of desire and from one’s self fosters an emotional distance that creates the conditions under which the alienated self yearns for the object that it eventually will destroy (Mies, 1993). But before destruction there must first be objectification.

57. Examples of Druuna’s sexual objectification are abundant throughout the series; however, this objectification is made most poignant when other characters within the story are objectifying her. The first instance of such objectification occurs when Druuna is confronted by a priest who demands she strip off her clothes so that he can inspect her for the plague (volume 1, p. 8). Another example occurs when Druuna is captured by Lornah’s tribe (volume 3, pp. 33-34). Here she is groped and inspected by multiple men as she speaks to Lornah. At one point, Druuna protests saying “Hey…stop touching me! I’m not an animal” (p. 34).

58. Volume seven contains a multitude of examples where Druuna is inspected as an object. This is perhaps because volume seven provides the most alienated account of masculinity. In this world only men seem to exist and they all take the form of robots that have abandoned their physical bodies. Thus Druuna is a curious object of study with instrumental value in terms of learning the secret of regenerating the life that has been lost.

59. **Figure 4.** © 2001 Bagheera Edituer / Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri

On the splash page of volume seven, a man with a giant mechanical eyeball inspects Druuna. The layout of the page is such that his face, with its strange mechanical eye, hovers above two smaller images of Druuna in which she is barely coming into consciousness. Druuna is clearly the object, not only of a human gaze, but of a scientific and technological gaze as well. Further along, Druuna is captured by a group of cyborgs dressed in hooded cloaks that strip and inspect Druuna’s body (pp. 12-13). Soon after this, Druuna finds herself trapped in a prison cell. She is naked and being observed by cameras that are mounted on the walls (pp.22-23). When the cell disappears, Druuna is on stage encircled by an assembly of cloaked cyborgs (pp. 26-27). The leader speaks to Druuna: “You come from outside city? You female…organic species…you live outside?” In this instance, Druuna is again being identified as the other, and, as this happens, the distance between the observing cyborgs and the observed Druuna is called to
Aside from these specific examples, the eyeball as a symbol of objectification and detached observation comes to permeate the world of Morbus Gravis. First of all, the computer terminal CP-1 is depicted on a monitor as an eyeball, complete with pupil and iris. Far less subtle than this are the two instances in which “The Living God” (the computerized blend of Lewis, Shastar and Delta) is portrayed. Both illustrations (volume 3, pp. 20 & 48) depict a monstrous eyeball, furious in its appearance and bloodshot with intense ocular veins symbolizing the ultimate gulf of insurmountable distance and inescapable objectification.

Detached objectification is an avenue that leads cruelty. Someone who is objectified is placed outside of the realm of the subjective experience, impeding identification and severely limiting feelings of compassion and empathy. This cruelty resulting from detached objectification is heavily present in Morbus Gravis. Each volume contains acts of cruelty that are presented as enticing and titillating to the reader. There are several sequences, though, which stand out as particularly symptomatic of detached objectivity.

First among these occurs when Shastar is leading Druuna to the upper level of “The City” in volume one. On their way, Shastar and Druuna encounter a sector that has been shut down by soldiers. Everyone has been brought to safety except for one woman who is trapped behind the gate. The woman’s husband pleads emphatically for the guards to lift the gate and free her, but they refuse. Instead, a crowd of spectators gather and watch as the woman is brutally sodomized and devoured by a terrible, mutated creature. After the event, spectators observe from safety and comment without emotion. One man calls out “Look at that!” A woman states “What a slut! She seems to like it!” Another man calmly reports the incident as follows: “First he raped her, then he tore her to bits and ate her!” It is worth noting as well that all of the spectators had eyes that were opened unusually wide and mouths that were twisted into sinister grins (volume 1, p. 49). A similar scenario is repeated in volume five when Druuna encounters a number of figures standing around a deep pit (pp.24-25). When she looks into the pit, Druuna sees a mass of naked bodies, some are already dead and bleeding, others are cowering in the corner, as a monstrous beast rapes and kills the helpless victims.

Another scene of cruelty and objectification occurs at the beginning of volume four when Druuna is beaten and sodomized in front of a crowd of people (pp. 8-11). A man with a riding crop stands before the crowd as they encourage his brutality. Comments from the crowd include: “Teach her a lesson…beat her!” – “She’s a whore…I bet you she’ll like it…” – “Yeah…go ahead…hurt her…fuck her…I can’t wait…..” As the sequence progresses and the abuser climbs on top of Druuna and enters her, he transforms into a terrible beast complete with claws and fangs.

These three instances highlight not only the vicious and cruel act in itself, but also the cruelty of the spectator’s gaze. It should also be noted that in calling attention to the cruelty of the spectator’s gaze, there is a reflexive referral to the readers gaze from outside of the text which effectively points out to the reader his own enjoyment of cruelty and suffering.

Other sequences indulge in pure torture and brutality without referring specifically to any message about objectification or spectatorship. One such example occurs...
when Druuna is taken to be tortured in “room 77” (volume 2, pp. 44-45). Outside
of the room she is “prepared” by being stripped and beaten furiously with a riding
crop. As this transpires, the door to “room 77” opens and the previous victim is
dragged out in a bag which holds only dismembered remains. Another example
shows Druuna gang-raped by a group of primitive looking men while a hooded
mutant holding a bullwhip repeatedly lashes her (volume 4, pp 26-31). A large
panel on page thirty features the hooded mutant pressing the handle of the
bullwhip into Druuna’s anus. As this occurs, she cries out in pain.

66. Beyond cruelty and torture is death – a pervasive theme throughout the series. Doc
sums up the morbidity within Morbus Gravis succinctly when he states “Death is
a liberation of sorts…” (volume 4, p. 55). The title itself – Morbus Gravis –
conjures the notion of death in the mind of the reader even before the texts are
opened. Further, Druuna encounters death constantly in her voyage throughout the
strange worlds of this series. She makes love to Will after he has died (volume 7,
pp. 36-40); she wakes up next to death when she emerges from sleep (volume 7, p.
5) and she is even euthanized by Doc at the end of volume four (p. 55).

67. Throughout the first six volumes of the series, Lewis wishes desperately for death.
He proclaims, “I’ve been waiting for death for so long…yes, for death…you
cannot understand what it means not to be able to die” (volume 2, p. 60). In
volume three, Will discovers Druuna in a world of death and decay. She is
standing on a balcony before a putrid swamp when she says “Look at that…It used
to be the sea, a beautiful, clean, clear and sparkling sea…and the sand…it was so
wonderful to lie on the sand and let the sun’s rays soak in…he used to say that that
was what we’d lost” (volume 3, p. 9). She further states (referring to Lewis) that
“He’s dying…and everything you see is dying with him” (p. 9).

68. In volume seven and eight, life has become so scarce that the remaining androids
grope for any sign of it, hoping that some kind of regeneration will be possible.
When Druuna is captured and interrogated by the androids, the leader says to her
“We must regenerate life, we need to renew the host biological apparatus”
(volume 7, p. 27). Later, when Druuna asks her dwarven companion what the
robots want from her, he responds: “They want what everyone wants: life!”

69. At the conclusion of the seventh volume, with Druuna’s transformation into a
robotic body, the final hope for humanity is extinguished. When she realizes what
has happened, Druuna states, “Nothing will ever be like it was before…look at
me…it’s over…nothing exists anymore” (p. 64). This predicament echoes
perfectly what Plumwood (1993) refers to as “devouring the other” (p. 192)
wherein the “master” consumes and destroys the very apparatus that sustains him.
Shastar, in his attempt to preserve Druuna and transcend nature, has done nothing
but destroy both. All he can offer is another plan, another idea, another
 technological fantasy, and another place to seek what has already been
permanently lost.

Conclusion

70. Clone, the most recent volume in the Morbus Gravis series, continues from where
The Forgotten Planet left off. Druuna, having been transformed into a cyborg by
her lover, Shastar, is cloned from her own body. Transformed into a reproduction
of herself, she ultimately encounters a cyborg whom she makes love to. Afterwards, the cyborg discovers (through the use of a machine) that intimacy with Druuna has brought him to the brink of becoming human. Using the machine herself, Druuna discovers that she is 99% human. A single tear drips over her cheek as she realizes that she is no longer fully organic.

71. The principle message repeated throughout the series and underscored in this most recent volume is that a world in which male technological creativity overcomes female physical creativity reduces our humanity and the value of life. The reader is informed of this through identification with Druuna who, at this point, transcends her role as sex object and becomes the stand-in for the 100% human reader who cannot help but mourn the loss of the last organic being in the dead world of Morbus Gravis. By personifying all of life in the feminine body of Druuna who was the last living human being, Morbus Gravis makes a strong ecofeminist statement about the negative consequence of a strictly masculine scientific epistemology which seeks to separate mind from matter, replace phusis with techne, retrofit nature with machinery and in the process destroy the very things which are sought: transcendence, creativity and life.

72. Overall, Morbus Gravis could be characterized as a cautionary tale disguised in a costume of science fiction, horror and erotica. However, it is not a story with an unambiguous moral message. Its effectiveness in terms of promoting an ecofeminist consciousness derives from the fact that, although it begins by sexually objectifying Druuna, it ultimately appeals to the reader through identification with Druuna. This identification, though, is not based on her nationality, race, culture or religion, but upon her gender and her status as a human being. In compelling the male reader to identify and empathize with the feminine protagonist and the humanity that is being drained from her, Morbus Gravis achieves a level of cultural penetration for ecofeminism that would be impossible for even the most profound scholarly text.

73. At last, it is worthy of mention that, in the world of comics, Morbus Gravis is not alone in easily lending itself to an exploration of ecofeminist themes. Noh (2005) has explored similar concepts in Korean science-fiction girls comics, identifying a theme of “nostalgia for organic society” (p. 19) in which “the old/nature/human is praised as positive connotation, while the new/science/technology is disparaged as negative feature” (p. 20).

74. In addition to Italy (Serpieri’s home) and Korea, comic artwork by Loisel (France) and Conlon (United States) also have the potential to easily lend themselves to ecofeminist readings. It is advisable that this particular theme be explored to its fullest since it has the potential to serve as a forum for discourse on the shared anxieties and reservations that we, as a global community, have concerning the future relationship between technology and nature.

75. References


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