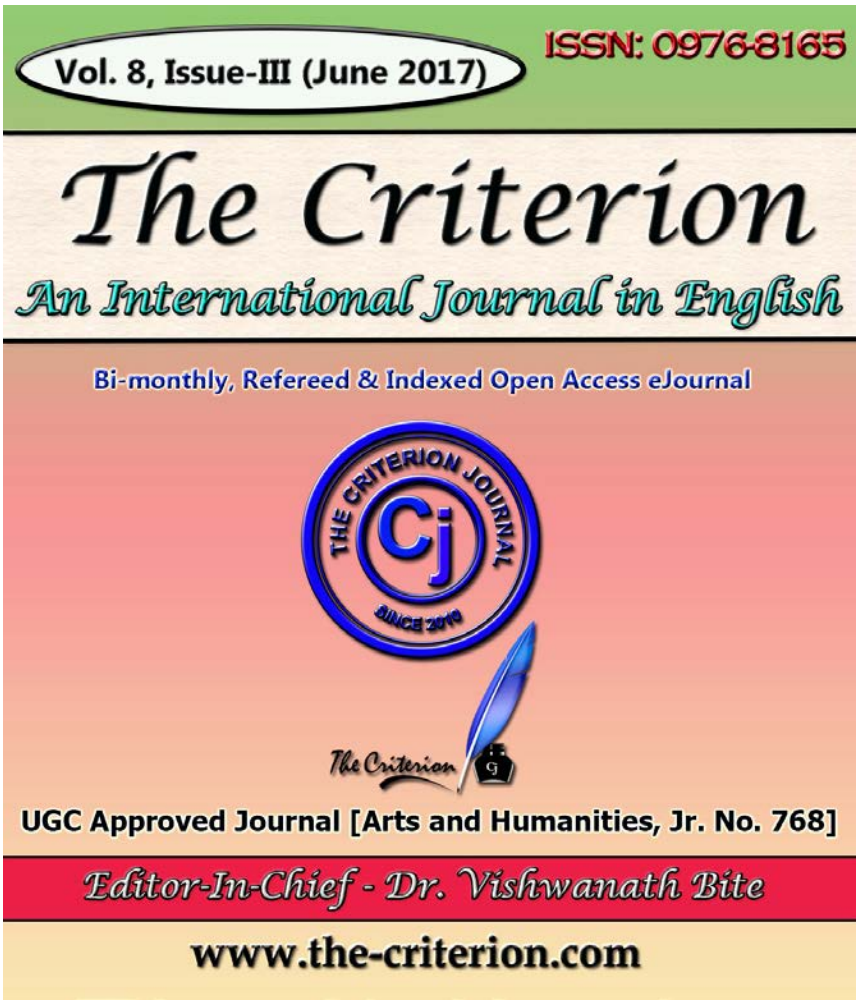

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Negotiating and Renegotiating Popular Culture through Comics: The "Art" of Comic Reading explored through Analytical Reading of *Calvin and Hobbes*

Suniti Madaan
PhD Research Scholar,
Centre for English Studies
JNU

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Abstract:

Popular Culture has always been under a prejudiced scanner of most cultural theorists. Frankfurt School Cultural theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Lowenthal saw it as mass culture and had little regard for it. While TV was seen as numbing, comics had a notorious reputation especially after Frederick Wertham's book called, *Seduction of the Innocent*. Since then many artists such as Eisner, Groensteen and McCloud have attempted to rescue comics by seeking for it academic legitimacy. Not fazed or influenced either by its popular status nor reeling under the academic pressure, Bill Watterson's successful comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*, bridges the so called divide between high and low art. The paper explores the content of these comics to see how Watterson's exceptional skill allows him to resist any conformity to labels.

Keywords: Popular culture, comics, *Calvin and Hobbes*, Scott McCloud, high art, low art, Lowenthal, carnivalesque, Bakhtin, grotesque, meta narrative.

> The counterconcept to popular culture is art. Today artistic products are losing the character of spontaneity more and more and are being replaced by the phenomenon of popular culture, which are nothing but a manipulated reproduction of reality as it is; and in so doing, popular culture sanctions and glorifies whatever it finds worth echoing...This philosophical aphorism throws light on the unbridgeable difference between art and popular culture: it is the difference between an increase in insight through a medium possessing self sustaining means and mere repetition of given facts with the use of borrowed tools. (Lowenthal, 188)

The distinction between "art" and "popular culture"(which is apparently not art) is often drawn in the above context, where the means and medium of popular culture are shown to be emerging from a culture of mass reproduction propelled with the intention of distribution and not artistic purpose. Not only the creative intention of representing reality is questioned in the popular culture but the medium itself is disregarded for taking recourses to borrowed tools. However these borrowed tools from popular culture (comics in this case) can be in fact used to question this basic dichotomy on which this presumption of high and low art is based. The paper argues how Watterson's comic strips *Calvin and Hobbes*, which ran in

newspapers from 1985 to 1995, use the medium of popular culture not only to question the meta narratives of society, and ideology but also try to negotiate this essential divide between art and popular culture in terms of creative intention. The paper resists reading the popular as some form of top down ideology tool, simplified and repeated for effect. In fact it shows how popular has to suffer the ideological determination of what qualifies as "respectable" art.

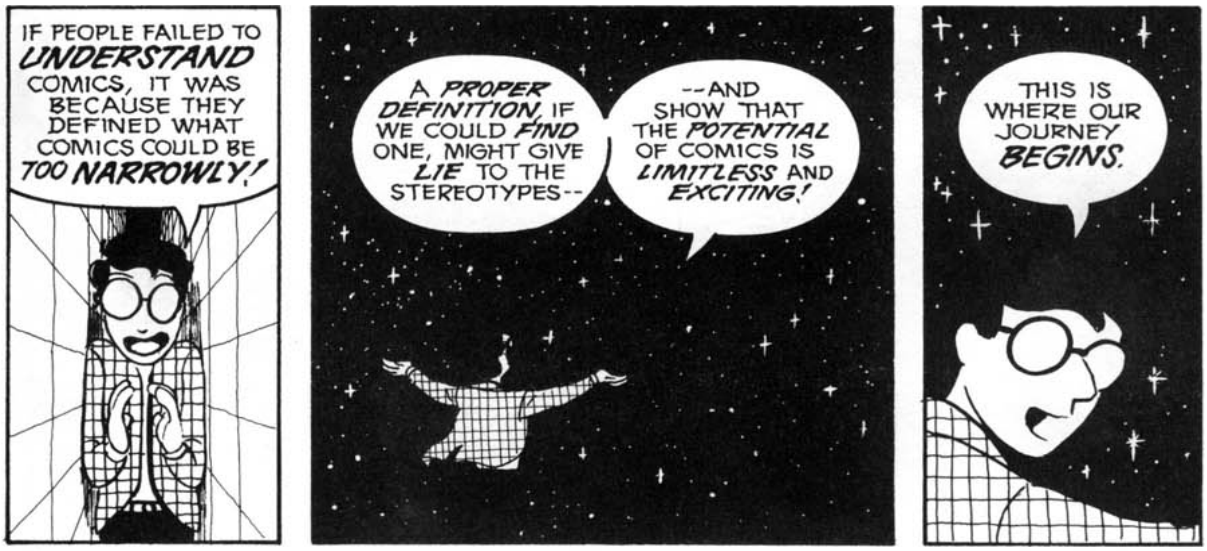

Fig.1. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink Press-Harper Perennial. 1994. Print.

Scott McCloud in his book, *Understanding Comics*, takes up the task of theorising, defining and explaining the conceptual, graphical and ideational tools involved in creation of comics. McCloud takes up from Mark Eisner's *Comics as Sequential Art* as his beginning point to talk of this field of art that has not only been misunderstood but has also therefore been undermined regarding its creative and conceptual potentialities. McCloud talks of the art of comics as limitless varying from genres, to ideas, to structure, to style, to concepts, etc:

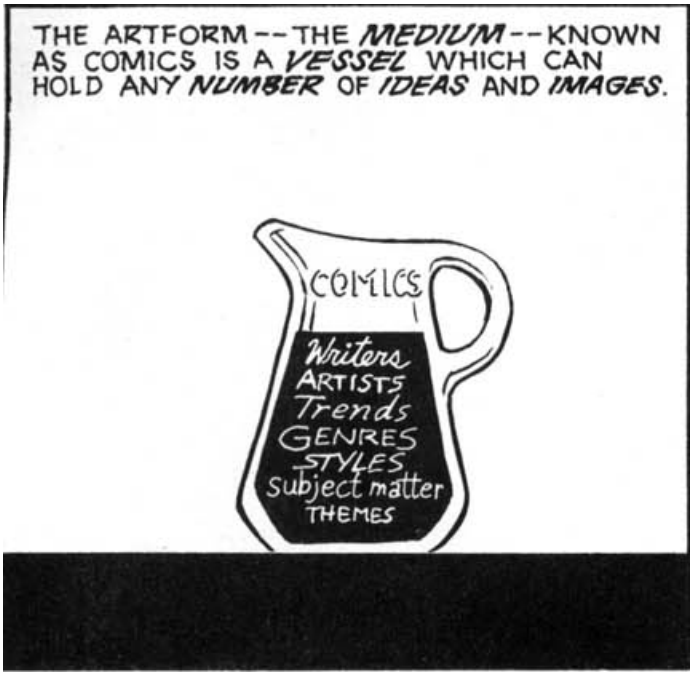

Fig. 2.*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink Press-Harper Perennial. 1994. Print.

Thus McCloud talks of the popular culture media as a vessel to carry ideas that do not always have to be normative or conventional or merely poor representations or reflections of reality, produced in bulk for mass consumption (Lowenthal). The medium he explains is only the vessel through which the idea, purpose, concept, themes, and subject matter can be communicated and expressed. Thus, as against the given belief of popular media being conforming, binding and restrictive, McCloud suggests that the medium can be used as any other cultural carrier that can therefore be both conformist andhegemonic or else subversive, transgressive, and even disruptive depending on authorial intention. In his "Comprehensive Theory of Comics and Art in General" McCloud bridges the gap between comic art and other art forms showing how both display ideological tendencies whether populist, radical, or equivocating. He argues that the medium alone cannot disqualify the sophistication that the comic art might be able to offer. However, the expectation of sophistication itself would be suspect when discussing popular culture.

Fig 3.*Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink Press-Harper Perennial. 1994. Print.

Fig 4. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Kitchen Sink Press-Harper Perennial. 1994. Print.

For McCloud the common ally for both "serious" art such as literature, painting, sculpture, or otherwise popular genres such as comics and cinema is the purpose or the authorial intention. Watterson's Calvin and Hobbes however resist such simplistic classification already complicated by McCloud.

Bill Watterson, in his speech *at* the Festival of Cartoon Art, Ohio State University, talks of the inspiration he drew from the works of *Peanuts, Krazy Kat* and *Pogo*.

> Part of the problem is that the very idea that cartoons could be art has been slow to take hold. I talked about *Krazy Kat, Pogo,* and *Peanuts* to show that the best cartoons have a serious purpose underneath the jokes and funny pictures. True, comics are a popular art, and yes, I believe their primary obligation is to entertain, but comics can go beyond that, and when they do, they move from silliness to significance.

Echoing the sentiments of McCloud's 1993 book, *Understanding Comics*, both the comic artists insist on the potentiality of the comic medium to provide pleasure and at the same time communicate significant ideas when the purpose of the author is to do so.The question then is not really whether comics can make serious art or not, because popular culture would challenge that dichotomy, but that the medium itself is flexible enough just as any other literary or popular medium. It was mostly academic prejudice that desired to keep this distinction intact, while allowing movies to make that overstep.

Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* however, embraces itself as comics that are mass produced and engages in self reflexive humour that retains its popular audience as well as resists repetitive templates in doing so. The story of *Calvin and Hobbes* is that of a precocious six year old Calvin, and his imaginary/real/stuffed toy Hobbes,who lives his life on a day to day basis in different social circles like home and school. It is not co-incidental that the names of the two principle characters are after one of the two most significant western philosophers. It was not only to lend the comic strip some intellectual leverage but it was also meant to bring to make philosophy and social criticism accessible and ubiquitous by juxtaposing the names with the playfulness of the characters. Their most profound thoughts, about human nature or philosophy, occur when they are taking wild rides down the hill. They yank the reader with questions, but instead of giving answers they withdrawinto their world of being 6 year old and an imagined pet. This curious juxtaposition of words and the graphics creates the cumulative effect of amusement and humour.

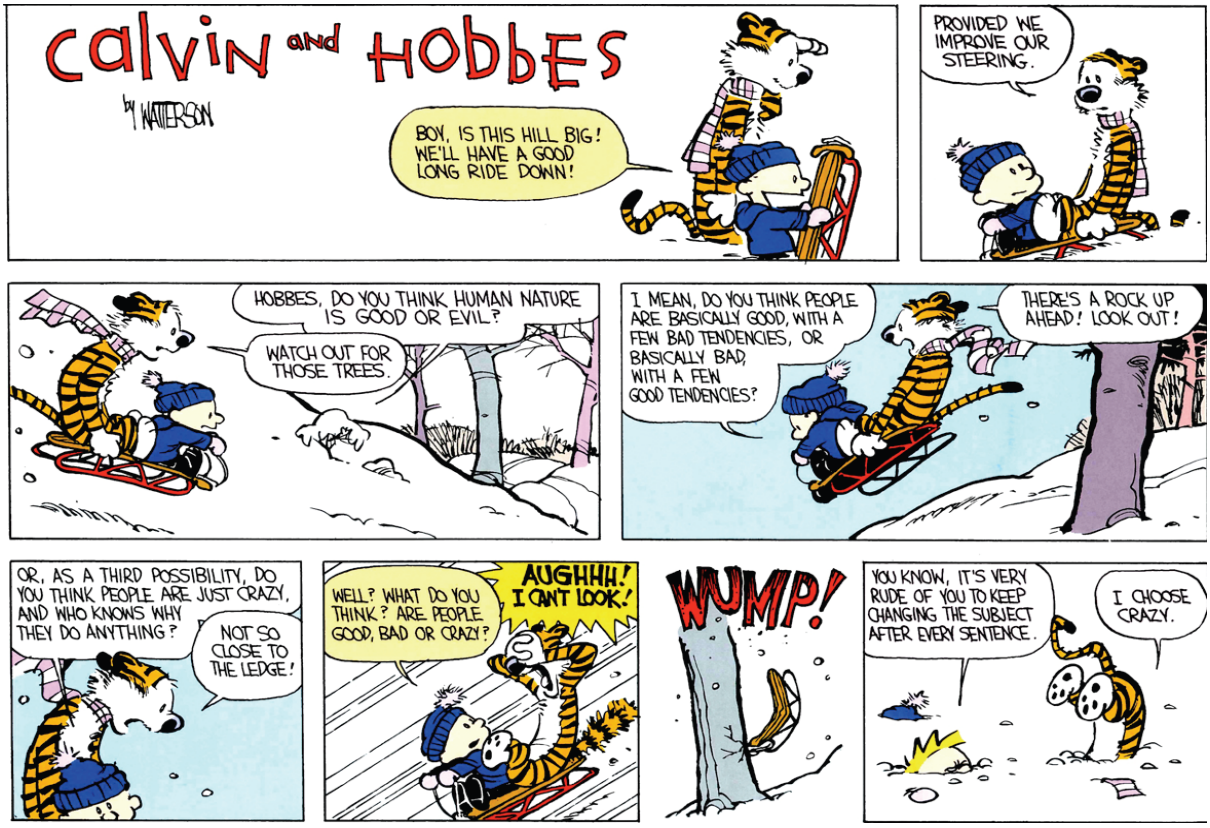

Fig. 6*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.* 2005

Taking a few illustrations from the comic strips, the paper will try to draw attention to the intellectual and philosophical potential of the comics, however maintaining the contention that the basic intention of the comic is to create humour and therefore provide pleasure to the reader. The comic tries to simplify and decode complicated concepts like capitalization of economy, consumerism, existential anxiety, normalcy, etc., and words them into the mouth of the 6 year old kid, with an indignant nature, unruly hair, and his love for anarchy, and his imagined pet, who is beyond the scope of the capitalist society of America and its menacing grip as he has no material existence

> There is considerable agreement that all media art are estranged from values, and offer nothing but entertainment and distraction-that ultimately, they expedite flight from an unbearable reality. Whenever revolutionary tendencies show a timid head, they are mitigated and cut short by a false fulfillment of wish-dreams, like wealth, adventure, passionate love, power and sensationalism in general. (Lowenthal, 195)

This rather pessimistic remark by Lowenthal in his article about popular culture seeks to sever the medium of any individuality or subjectivity. It assumes the popular art to be necessarily reduced to the purpose of debased sensationalist pleasure which in turn is also frowned upon. Notwithstanding that the bias against mere pleasure in art is itself questionable, the proposition that all popular culture art is only instrumental in creating false realities of wish fulfillment can also be contested. Watterson, ingeniously uses one popular medium to direct a critique towards the stereotyping, sensationalizing and mass selling of commodified concepts and ideas which is characteristic of the television and thereby contests the Marshall McLuhan maxim that "medium is the message".

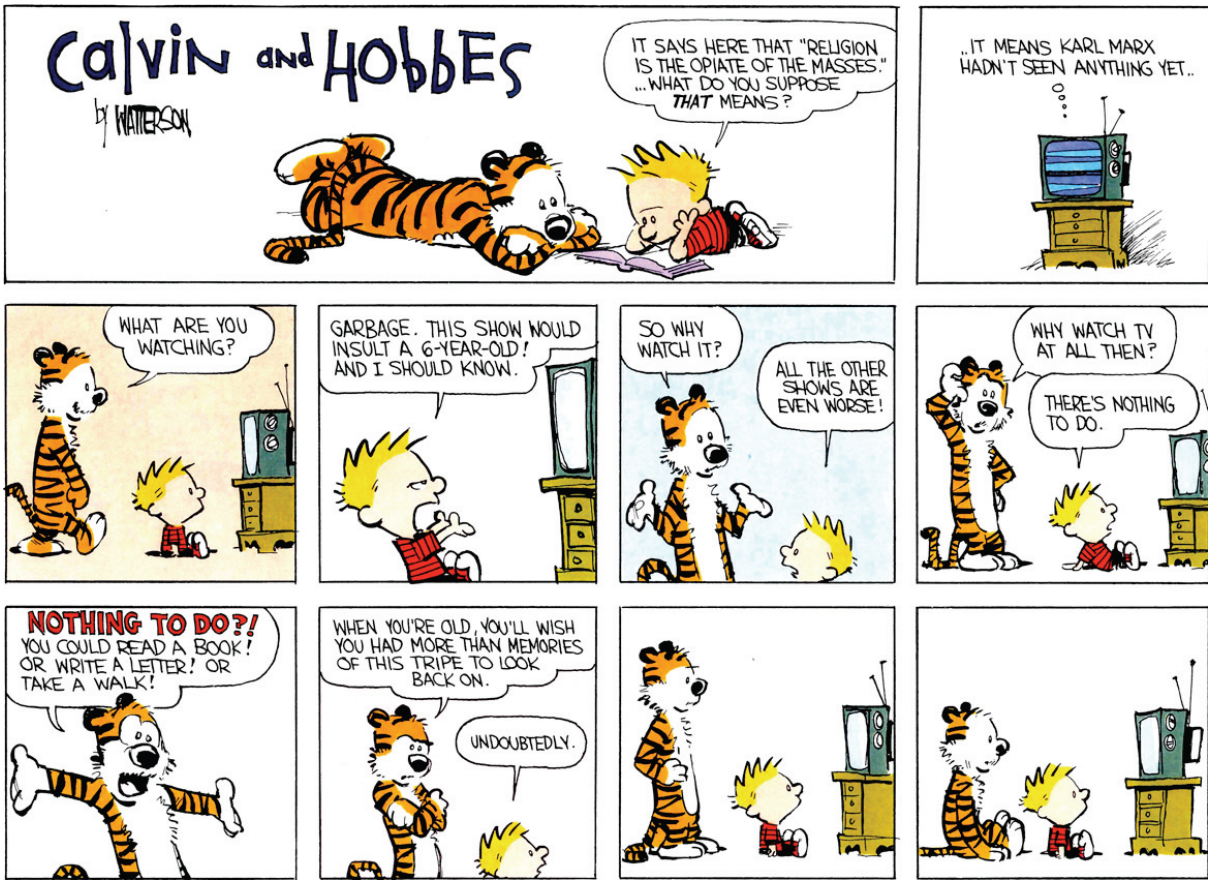

Fig. 7*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.* 2005

The above comic makes the reader conscious of how they have been ideologized and pulled into the vortex of the industry of television, which in its most debased form seeks to numb the senses of individuals, and stunts their creative potentials and their physical development. It makes the reader aware of its own participation in this project of mass stereotyping so that individual voices are curbed and any possibility of subversion or questioning is co-opted through redistribution and cathartic humour. In this comic, Watterson tries to unpack the systematic and rather covert means of conformism that the popular mediums such as the television undertake also at the same time emphasising on the mesmerisation of the medium such that both Calvin and Hobbes are hooked to it despite knowing better.

Another such comic is about the way popular discourse of nationalism is sold to the masses. The stereotypes are stressed to the point that they begin to appear normalised; however, the comic questions this normativity by ridiculing it by reducing the rhetoric of war to its most basic reality.

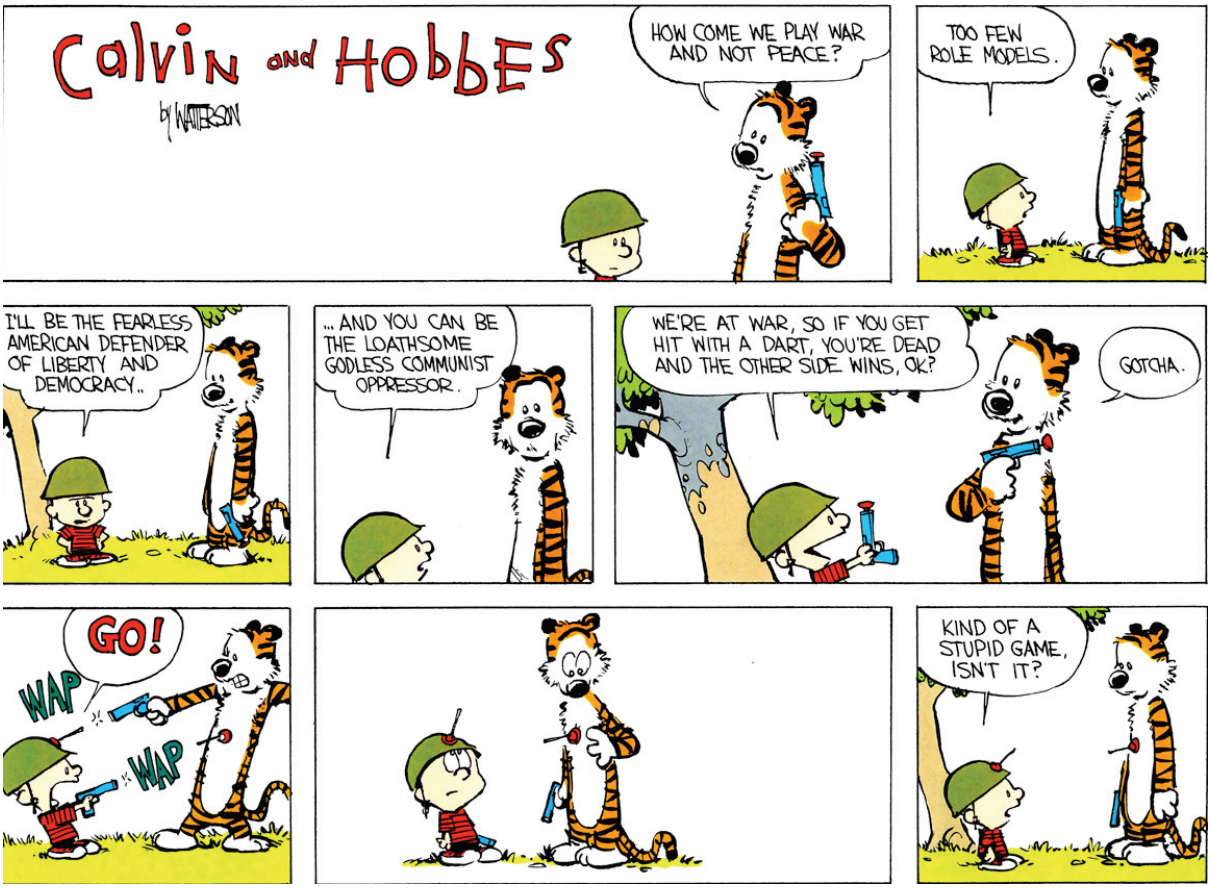

Fig. 8*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. 2005.

However, while in Figure 8, we can laugh at the rhetoric of war and critique it with Calvin and Hobbes, in Figure 7, Calvin and Hobbes still choose to watch television despite their knowledge of how it is exercising in curbing their organic selves. Thus the reader is also drawn into the narrative with Calvin and Hobbes and made to reflect on his/her implication into this complicit relation with popular media. Thus, the critique is not objective and distanced, but is in fact drawing the reader consciousness into the comic so that it is personalised through the comic portrayal. Dominic Strinati, in his book, *An Introduction to Popular Culture*, talks about Barker's ideological analysis of the genre of comics in terms of the "contract" that is formed between the reader and the text, and the meaning of the text arising from this social relationship.

> A 'contract' involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognise. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspect of our lives in our society. … I have been illustrating the way specific comics offer a contract to some aspect of the social lives of their readers. … It is from this that I want to formulate the central hypotheses of the book: (1) that the media areonly capable of exerting power over audiences to theextent that there is a 'contract' between texts andaudiences, which relates to some specifiable aspect(s) ofthe audience's social lives; and (2) the breadth anddirection of the influence is a function of those sociallyconstituted features of the audience's lives,

> and comesout of the fulfilment of the contract; (3) the power of'ideology' therefore is not of some single kind, but variesentirely—from rational to emotional, from private topublic, from 'harmless' to 'harmful'—according to thenature of the 'contract'…if all comics, all media, involvea dialogue between text and reader, then to study one side without implicitly assuming the other, would be likeistening to one end of a telephone conversation withoutthinking about the other person's part…we need tounderstand ideology as dialogical.(238-239)

Thus, the perspective of the audience is implicated in the comic, through the responses given by Calvin or Hobbes. The reader's response to the popular media is addressed and the contract is established through the responses given by Calvin and Hobbes in several of the comics. They aren't philosophers trying to unpack concepts and ideological dilemmas but in fact are ordinary, much like the readers themselves, naive, gullible, corruptible and yet having the potential to transgress, to question and to quiver the order with irruptions. The child is not entirely innocent, unlike other portrayals of children generally. He is shown to be impressionable and easily corruptible by power and a gullible victim of future conformism via mediums such as formal education, news, religion, and television. Thus the critique is not didactic, he shows how individuals are implicated into this vicious cycle, making the criticism self reflexive and personal.

Fig. 9. *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.* 2005

The comic, being in the popular media and also creating humour, is an excellent candidate for an irruptive subversive subculture. The characters of Calvin and Hobbes are transgressive aberrations on the edge of society, barely understood by even his own parents and teachers. Both Calvin and even his imagined tiger, Hobbes, flout and challenge all normalcies.

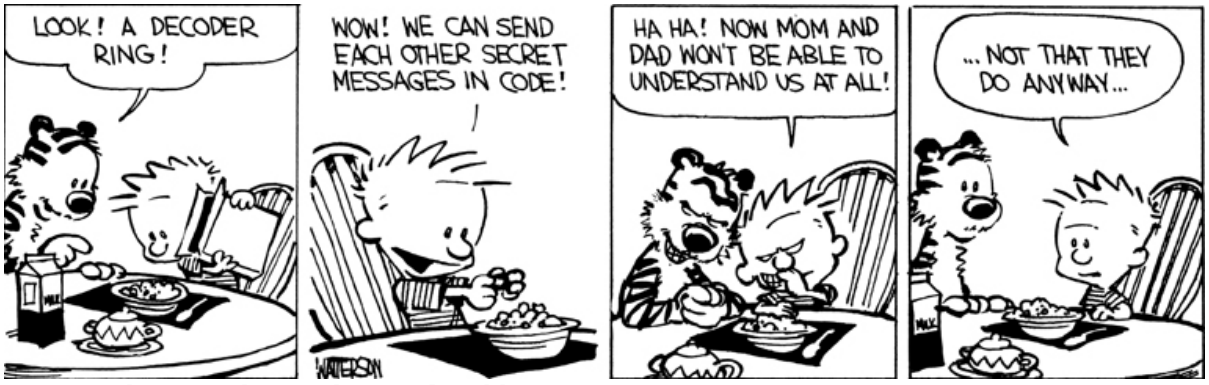

Fig. 10. *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. 2005

The transgressive element as also the comic factor enables a Bakhtinian reading of several of the comics. The comics in their portrayal of the organic life of Calvin and Hobbes defined with unbridled and unquestioned freedom of thought and imagination is also a potential site to read Bakhtin'scarnivalesque humour of inversion and the grotesque.

> The carnival emphasis on orifices, both physical and conceptual, emphasizes the absence of individual boundaries in the medieval imagination. Mouths, for instance, are always open, eating and drinking, laughing, shouting: they take in and commune with the outer world and never shut it out. This openness corresponds to a cosmic openness: nothing is fixed in Bakhtin's carnival world, and everything is in a state of becoming. (Elliot, 130)

These Bakhtinian exegeses of the carnivalesque, resulting in the inversion of order, as also the employment of the function of the grotesque to irrupt the normal and conventional social order even if momentarily, is of considerable significance for reading *Calvin and Hobbes* and its subversive tendencies. It might be possible that Watterson was unaware of the ideological understatement in his comic strips, however, several comics display this tendency of temporary transgression and an upturning of order but which is contained within the scope of that particular comic. The grotesque is not only imbued in the comics but is in fact even what essentially defines it and makes it popular. He is inherently transgressive and can only seek an escape from the conforming enforced by his parents and his school teacher and principal by taking recourse to the grotesque and thereby by inverting the power structure even if it be in his imagination. The grotesque that disgusts the others in fact arms Calvin and keeps him from being co-opted into the mainstream by virtue of his imagination. However, much like the medieval carnival, the order is restored as the comic comes to an end, with the intervention of authority, which is either Calvin's parents or his teachers.

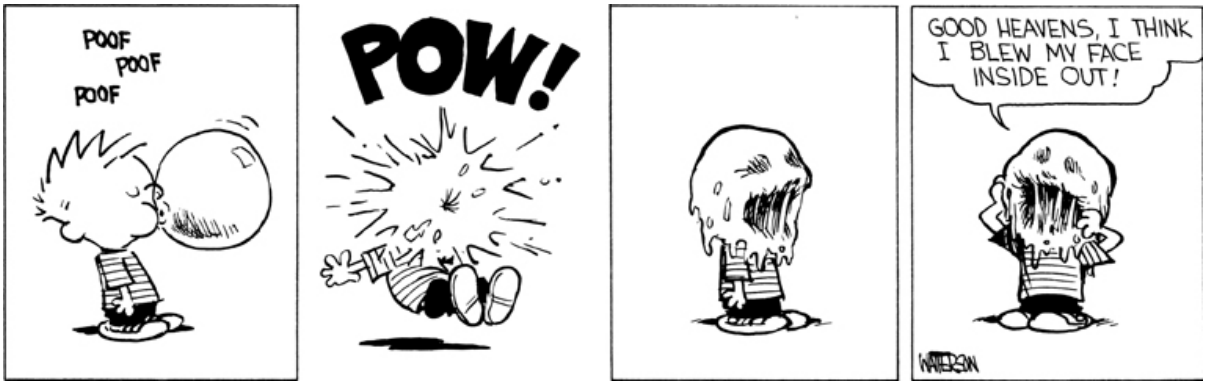

Fig. 11*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. 2005.

The grotesquing of the bodies is not limited to Calvin himself, he pulls everybody into this portal of imaginative recreation and therefore implicates them into this act of narrativisation and fictionalisation. The characters exist in the fictional world of the comic strip as well as the imaginative narratives of Calvin.

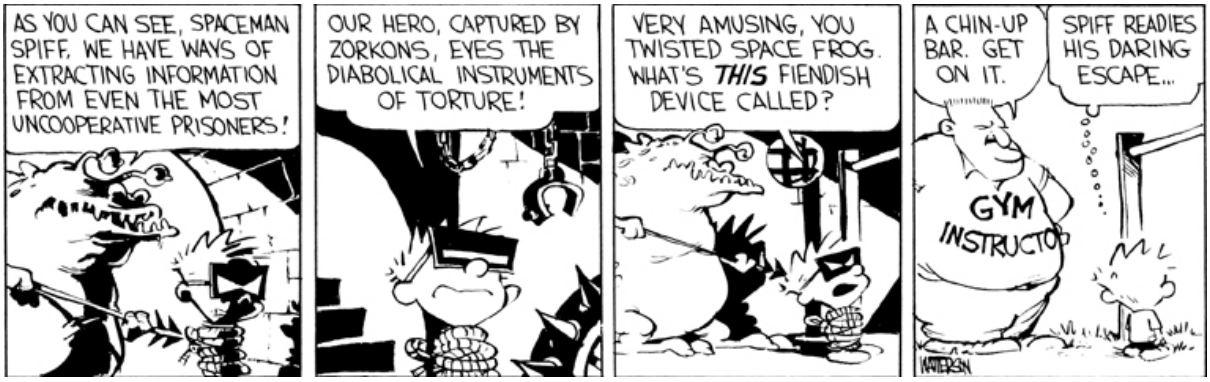

Fig. 12*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*, 2005.

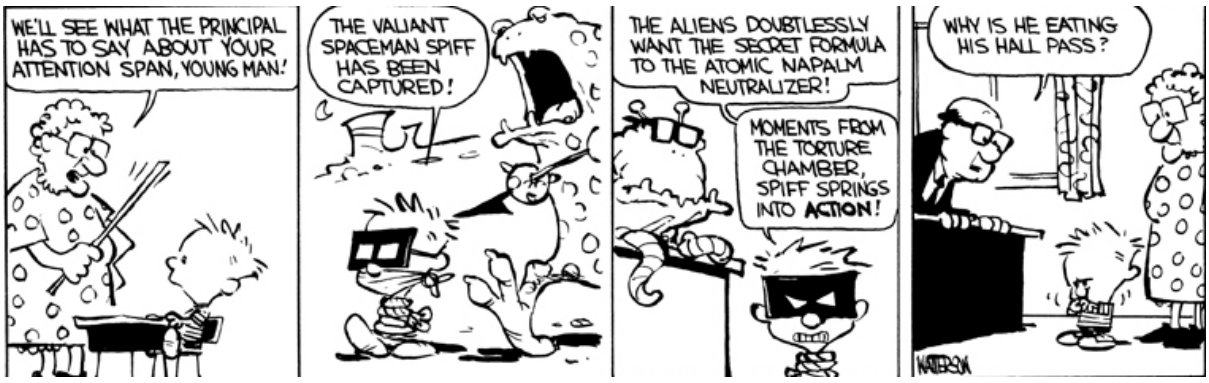

Fig. 13. *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*, 2005.

In the above figures, the official figures of authority are morphed, made grotesque and ugly. Calvin is "Spaceman Spiff" who is the only human figure in this alien mental landscape. There exists for him and the reader, simultaneously, two parallel worlds of existence, of which in at least one he is attempting to overcome authority ideologically. He is shown to have lack of attention span, which is directed towards attempts to destabilize authority and order. However, being the six year old precocious kid, creative or not, his imagination is always interpreted as ill founded and his intelligence evaluated through his

performance on his school scorecard. Calvin expresses a desire for grotesque, for the unnatural and for that which is forbidden. He harbours the tendency and the potential to disrupt. However, he is often reinstated into the ordinary towards the end of the comic. He is therefore essentially performing the Bakhtinian function of introducing the possibility of abruption even if in imagination. By extension, Watterson is laying out this possibility of subversion through the medium of comics which is socially acceptable. He conforms at the end of the comic strip only to re-invoke such transgressive tendencies in the next.

There are several comics that question the normal by opening possibilities of alternative realities, which are however curbed and silenced within the narrative of that comic strip. These alternative realities, although imaginary and therefore fictional, (as also the fictional world of Calvin), force the reader to question the assumptions of reality and normativity. Beginning from the "suspension of disbelief" on part of the reader in order to accept Hobbes as a real figure with individualistic ideas and a personality, to the existence of imagined monsters under Calvin's bed, the comic seeks to challenge the separation of reality from fiction. The world of Calvin often ranges between his lived reality (which is fictional for the reader) and that of his imagination that is fictionalised at two levels, thus making questions about reality and verisimilitude even more thought provoking. However, the comic does not seek to offer simple solutions to these complicated and complex ideas, it only simplifies them so as to allow the reader to interpret them in relatable terms and then contemplate over them.

The comic also posits a postmodern possibility by showing multiple realities existing in dimensions not understood by the rational world. Drawing from Dominic Strinati's book on popular culture, one can almost read the postmodernist tendencies in contemporary popular culture and how it is distributed to its consumers in a form like comics especially. The fracture of a unified self, and the breakdown of the presumptions of unity of time and space have concerned not only intellectual elites but have also intrigued the producers of popular culture. The thematic concerns of contemporary popular culture have found their voice and expression in various media including comics.

> The growing immediacy of global space and time resulting from the dominance of the mass media means that previously unified and coherent ideas about space and time begin to be undermined, and become distorted and confused. Rapid international flows of capital, money, information and culture disrupt the linear unities of time, and the established distances of geographical space. Because of the speed and scope of modern mass communications, and the relative ease and rapidity with which people and information can travel, time and space become less stable and comprehensible, and more confused and incoherent (Harvey 1989:part 3).(214)

Figure 14*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.* 2005.

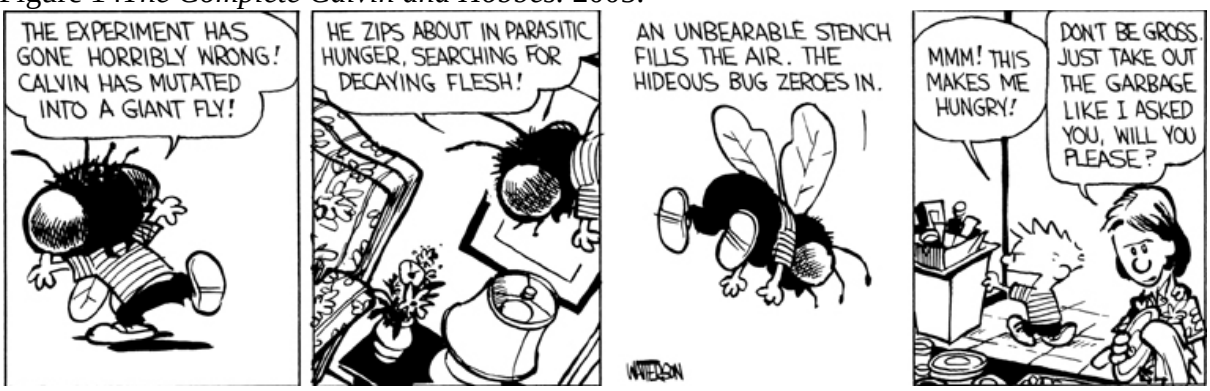

Fig. 15. *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. 2005

The wildered imaginations of Calvin not only about aliens and extraterrestrial spaces but also about alternate subjectivities of his own self can be located in this postmodernist sense of distorted identities that have been created by the media of television and newspaper. It has often been suggested in the comic strips that the information that Calvin is playing around with is derived from these mediums. These mediums therefore construe a sense of globalised time zones and spaces that are free floating and unstable and are therefore responsible for the self to take form of and acquire different identities. One can also locate in the comics postmodernist tendencies to decline metanarratives that have sought to ideologize and indoctrinate in the past.

> Meta-narratives are ideas such as religion, science, art, modernism and Marxism which make absolute, universal and all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth. Postmodern theory is highly sceptical about these metanarratives, and argues that they are disintegrating, losing their validity and legitimacy and increasingly prone to criticism. It is argued that it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to organise and interpret their lives in the light of meta-narratives of whatever kind. This argument would therefore be relevant, for example, to the declining significance of religion as a metanarrative in postmodern societies. (Strinati, 215)

The metanarratives of science, religion, art and other conceptual isms are questioned in several comic strips by making them appear ludicrous and absurd. The post-modernist self might have multiple personalities, but the politics of defiance in Calvin and Hobbes remain constant, challenging the foundations of post-modernist assumption.

Fig. 16.*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes.* 2005.

The intention of the comic, however, predominantly is that it relies on sheer enjoyment. Calvin’s purpose in doing what he does with his imaginary friend/stuffed toy Hobbes is nothing but premised on the principle of pleasure. The act in itself is the purpose, thus closely mirroring the pop culture argument of the pleasure principle in pop art and culture, where pleasure becomes the only driving force for any action. In the comic Watterson is trying to show the social dichotomy of the unbridled freedom and imagination propelled by desire and pleasure of the precocious six year old Calvin and on the other hand, the restrained, guarded, serious and uptight lives of the adults, which is almost pitiable. However we do see the scope and site for the escape of the adult, where the strange whims and idiosyncrasies of Calvin’s father are shown. The author’s contention being that there is a Calvin in most people, but societal norms, and the conventional pattern of accepted behaviour restrict the so called normative adults from exercising their childish fantasies.

> "Official" authority is subverted most of all by laughter, a current of slippery ambivalence. Through laughter, "the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint...Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter" (Bakhtin1968:66). It is not the objects of laughter, though, that interest Bakhtin so much as the perspective laughter brings. Laughter emphasizes movement and draws attention to the forms of relationship, rather than the components within the relationship, which are often fixed in onesided, hierarchical meaning: "The serious aspects of class culture are official and authoritarian; they are combined with violence, prohibitions, limitations, and always contain an element of fear and of intimidation...Laughter, on the other hand, overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations"(90). (Elliot, 130-131)

Fig. 17, 18.*The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*, 2005.

It is a comic that tries to resist conforming into the mainstream popular culture by condemning it, despite its own popularity proving otherwise. In addition it denies the status of satirical, political humour, by having strips that are inane and unconcerned with politics as a 6 year old would be. The subcultural underpinning in the comics is their refusal to be tied down to a single reading. What remains constant is the intention of creating humour, which in its basic nature is often interpreted as transgressive and subversive. However the comic also provides for a vent for the average reader, who not only derives pleasure and humour from the sheer madness of the ideas in the comic, but can also relate to Calvin's and Hobbes' ponderings over philosophy, politics, art, and life in general. The order is restored in the end of every comic, however the possibility of transgression and upheaval is introduced, also the fact that Calvin is only 6 and Hobbes is not even real, makes the radical transgression funny and somehow makes one aware of our limitations.

Despite comics asserting a subcultural tendency in *Calvin and Hobbes*that seeks to define itself as separate from patterned definitions thrust on them, there are attempts to recuperate this subversive force of humour and laughter into the world of academics and literary studies. Similarly there is a pull exerted by the market forces to commodify and reconfigure the dynamics of the comics by marketing them through syndicate houses. Watterson's comics were also syndicated but he talks of the ills of the system and how he resisted it.

> Strips that once had integrity and heart become simply cute as the business moguls cash in. Once a lot of money and jobs are riding on the status quo, it gets harder to push the experiments and new directions that keep a strip vital. Characters lose their believability as they start endorsing major companies and lend their faces to bedsheets and boxer shorts. The appealing innocence and sincerity of cartoon characters is corrupted when they use those qualities to peddle products. One starts to question whether characters say things because they mean it or because their sentiments sell T-shirts and greeting cards. Licensing has made some cartoonists extremely wealthy, but at a considerable loss to the precious little world they created. I don't buy the argument that licensing can go at full throttle without affecting the strip. Licensing has become a monster. Cartoonists have not been very good at recognizing it, and the syndicates don't care. (Kenyon College Commencement Speech, "Some Thoughts on the Real World by One Who Glimpsed It and Fled")

Watterson's criticism of the syndicate houses voices his concern over the commodification of comic writing and also raises question about the market forces' attempts to co-opt and recuperate comics onto mainstream by sanitizing it of its transgressive tendencies. Thus he actively resists either of the two positions and is happy for the comics to speak for themselves.

Hebidge in his essay on subculture of punk also similarly discusses how any subculture runs the risk of such mainstreaming through merchandising and commodification, where even ideas and concepts get commodified and packed into polythene packets and sold in the markets.

> The relationship between spectacular subculture and the various industries which service and exploit is notoriously ambiguous. After all, such a subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. It operates exclusively in the leisure sphere...it communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown. It is therefore difficult in this case to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures. Indeed the creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the defusion of the subculture's subversive power... (Hebidge, 222)

Watterson was aware of this risk posed by the market forces in beguiling him in his purpose of creating comics that were independent in their voices which would not be muffled through commodification. He resisted the merchandising licences which could have earned him millions but which would have taken away his individual voice in the comics, reducing it to being only a market fetish. At the Kenyon College Commencement speech, he said,

> Selling out is usually more a matter of buying in. Sell out, and you're really buying into someone else's system of values, rules and rewards...The so-called "opportunity" I faced would have meant giving up my individual voice for that of a money-grubbing corporation. It would have meant my purpose in writing was to sell things, not say things. My pride in craft would be sacrificed to the efficiency of mass production and the work of assistants. Authorship would become committee decision. Creativity would become work for pay. Art would turn into commerce. In short, money was supposed to supply all the meaning I'd need. (Kenyon College Commencement Speech, "Some Thoughts on the Real World by One Who Glimpsed It and Fled")

Watterson is therefore wrestling with two opposing forces that are perennially insisting to contain his comic art. He is resisting any set of definitions for his comic art. He introduces significant issues such as philosophy, politics, satire, gender relations, discussing alternative and parallel realities and subversive and transgressions in a medium which is emerging from and feeding into the popular culture. At the same time he is resisting the co-option and conformism imposed by the excessive mass popularisation by selling out. He maintains his stand against merchandising of his comic so as to retain its voice and expression. Also, since several of his comics are about "nothing" in particular, he seeks to celebrate the idea of deriving pleasure for the sake of it. Thus, Watterson balances his subversive art by not condemning it into a singular definition. The purpose appears to entertain, however, it is constructively also used to lend voice to both sophisticated and complicated philosophical and socio-political and cultural issues as also to the ordinary and inane concerns of an average American citizen. Neither is it entirely satiric or didactic to serve a higher political and critical purpose, nor is it merely about creating humour with stereotypes and their mindless repetition. The intention is to create humour and also not just that, thus claiming a niche for itself by carefully treading on the edges of the almost free floating and ambiguous boundaries of meaningful art and catering to popular culture.

Thus Watterson exploits the popular nature of the medium of comics to not only raise important political and humanistic concerns but at the same time to provide entertainment and pleasure, thereby retaining the subversive and subcultural potential of the popular culture of comics.

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