



Irony in The Dark Knight Returns

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Irony in The Dark Knight Returns

The Comics Grid, September 15, 2012

En ligne : <http://blog.comicsgrid.com/2012/04/adapting-coppolas-dracula/>

Note : Dans sa version en ligne, cet article se compose d'une image unique, en long bandeau vertical. Il n'est donc pas conçu pour la lecture paginée proposée ici.



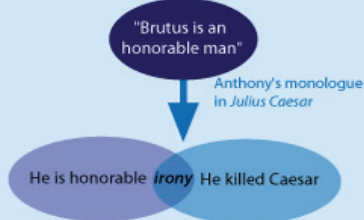
Miller, Frank; Janson, Klaus and Varley Lynn (1996)
The Dark Knight Returns (NYC: DC Comics, 119, 8-9)

I read these panels as ironical

Irony implies a reader. It can be intended or not and it exists as part of the reception process.

Why ?
How does irony work here ?

Drawing on linguistics, Linda Hutcheon suggests that irony happens when a signifier has two signifieds, and when these two signifieds are perceived at once (1994: 59-64).



However, "signifier" is not a concept we can use directly about comics

...AND THOSE CUTE LITTLE CORIO MALTESE PEOPLE, THEY WANT US THERE, JUST YOU ASK THEM... MEANWHILE, DON'T YOU FRET... WE'VE GOT GOD ON OUR SIDE... OR THE NEXT BEST THING, ANYWAY... HEH...



Text
Content
Tone
Lettering

Picture
Content
Style

The panel as an integrated unit.

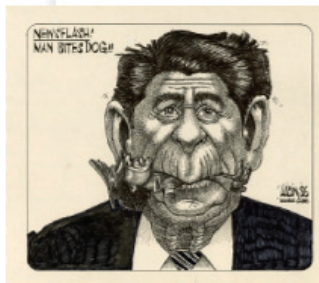
The panel within the page (its lieu)

Additional subdivisions could be added.

The signifier is a set of potentially conflicting elements.

This approach of irony contradicts Thierry Groensteen. According to him, the panel should be studied as a unit, with smaller components unlikely to yield any theoretical innovation (1999: 5)

How does the interaction of these components lead to irony ?



Aislin, "Man Bites Dog!", 1986
from the Mc Cord Museum collection

The text itself is innocuous enough, funny ("God or the next best thing"), but not ironical in itself. Its lettering and its placement in a caption above the picture are both unremarkable.

The drawing style is also fairly neutral, compared to most Reagan caricatures

The content is more noteworthy: repetition (the stars, the overcoded Americanness of the president)

* and the wink, of course.

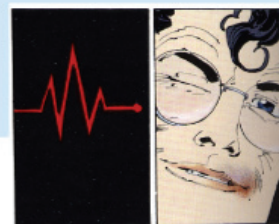
Irony is *revealed* by repetition, overemphasis, and a wink.

The wink also an intertextual function, echoing and displacing Clark Kent's friendly wink to the reader in classical Superman stories.



Cameron, Don; Plastino, Al (1948)
"A Job for Superhombre", *Superman* n°53

... but also foreshadowing the return of that wink at the end of *Dark Knight Returns*, which underlines the restoration of an acceptable order.



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Irony is signaled by the picture

As a rule, in *The Dark Knight Returns*, television sets imply wrongheadedness. The reader is necessarily wary at this point in the narrative.

YOU MIGHT SAY BATMAN
COMMITTS THE CRIMES...
USING HIS SO-CALLED
VILLAINS AS NARCIS-
SITIC PROXIES...



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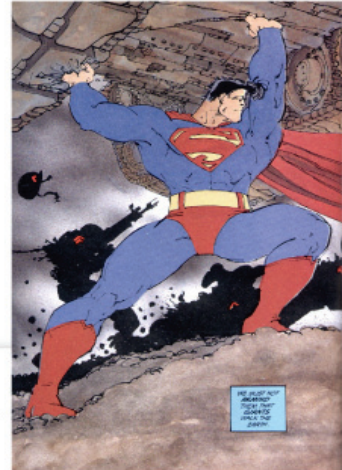


Yet it resides in the text

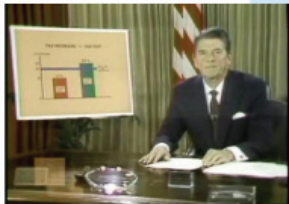
As read in the context
of the book and in the
larger context of the
Reagan presidency

...AND THOSE CUTE LITTLE CORDO
MALTESE PEOPLE, THEY WANT
US THERE, JUST YOU ASK
THEM... MEANWHILE, DON'T
YOU FRET... WE'VE GOT GOD ON
OUR SIDE... OR THE NEXT
BEST THING, ANYWAY... HEH...

It works by contrasting overcoded confidence (in the institution, in the man) with what we know of the horrifying situation: a promised nuclear war



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Ronald Reagan gives a televised address
from the Oval Office, in July 1981
Photo from Wikipedia

The context of the book is not sufficient, however. The irony of the scene also works because of the contrast it provides with other mediated images : Reagan on television, talking about nuclear war is not just a comic book situation, but the US did not have "the next best thing to God" on their side. Irony also functions because the farcical is *simultaneously* deadly serious.

The context is necessarily
circumstantial, textual and
intertextual (Hutcheon
1995: 143)

Would the scene function as irony or as a general satire, for readers unfamiliar with Reagan and with the political situation during his two terms ?

Editors' note:

"Irony in *The Dark Knight Returns*" by Nicolas Labarre is the first article published by **The Comics Grid** presenting ideas in a modular -rather than strictly linear- format. In the words of the author, "modularity was a way to include footnote digressions without relegating them to a marginal space."

REFERENCES

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