Pogo, Pop and Politics: Robert Benayoun on Comics and Roy Lichtenstein

Gavin Parkinson

Abstract

This article examines for the first time the writings on comics and pop art by the surrealist Robert Benayoun in the 1950s and 1960s. Analysing Benayoun’s repudiation of Roy Lichtenstein’s work especially, it argues that these writings offer one means of navigating the rarely assessed overlap between surrealism and pop. Benayoun claimed immense significance for comics and derided Lichtenstein’s appropriation of the form from a political position gained from his immersion in surrealism; this position is only fully understandable through examination of surrealism’s theory of culture and its historical and cultural context of the 1950s and 1960s. Ultimately, I want to show not only why surrealism prefers Pogo to pop and Li’l Abner to Lichtenstein, but also how its occultist theory can accommodate culture where pop art sustains a conflict, in spite of what many have perceived as the collapse of high and low in pop.

Keywords: Benayoun, high and low culture, Lichtenstein, pop art, surrealism

Surrealism, Comics and Politics

There was never a published debate or enquiry on comics within the Paris surrealist group, or even an authoritative statement from any single French surrealist that might have led to an agreed position, as there were at one time or another on artistic practice and on many individual artists, as well as on poetry, the novel, psychoanalysis, the occult, communism, the Algerian War and any number of other individuals, practices, genres, events or incidents. Moreover, the poet André Breton, who is usually identified as the leading spokesperson and theorist of
surrealism, seems to have disliked comics, if we are to believe the testimony of the surrealists’ favourite editor, Éric Losfeld:

Breton dédaignait la bande dessinée. J’ai même su que Matta l’en avait dégoûté d’avance, quand ils étaient tous deux en Amérique, en essayant de le persuader que c’était capital: Breton a fait alors un collage, avec des ‘bulles’ très élaborées, très lyriques, et l’a intitulé: Tragic à la manière des comics. Mais il y avait des jeunes qui s’y intéressaient. Bien plus tard, un article de La Brèche a été illustré de dessins parus dans Barbarella, avec l’accord de Breton.

[Breton scorned comics. I even know that [the artist] Matta had put him off them in advance, when the two of them were in America, by trying to persuade him that they were important. Breton then made a collage with very elaborate speech balloons, it was very lyrical and it was titled Tragic, in the Manner of Comics [1943]. But there were young people [in surrealism] who were interested. Much later, an article in La Brèche was illustrated with drawings that appeared in Barbarella, with the agreement of Breton.]\(^1\)

The images of the science fiction bande dessinée heroine Barbarella had been in circulation since 1962 before they were commandeered for the 1965 enquiry into erotic representation in La Brèche, the last surrealist periodical Breton edited. This can be viewed as part of the process of contemporisation brought about by the influx of younger members of the group onto the editorial boards of surrealist journals after 1951, in which year Breton had reduced his own activity in the group, and a major secession of older, prewar surrealists had taken place following the so-called Pastoureau affair.\(^2\)

The appearance of Barbarella in La Brèche was probably made on the suggestion of one of the younger surrealists who joined around that time, the Morocco-born Robert Benayoun (Fig. 1). After making initial contact with the group in 1948, Benayoun would become one of surrealism’s foremost polymaths for the next twenty years. Although he is best known for his film criticism, initially with the magazines St. Cinéma des Prés (three issues, 1949–1950), L’Âge du cinéma from 1951 (where he was editor in chief), Positif from 1952 and then La Méthode (1960–1963), his interest in film was almost matched by a love of comics, on which he

---

was one of France’s foremost experts by the 1960s. Sometimes the two overlapped, as in his contribution to the number of *La Méthode* devoted to ‘Les Comics’ in February 1963, where Benayoun gave insight into his teenage passion for both film and comics when he recalled hearing the show *Dick Tracy in B Flat* on the U.S. War Department’s radio programme *Command Performance* on 15 February 1945, starring, among others, Bing Crosby as Dick Tracy, Bob Hope as Flattop, Frank Sinatra as Shaky, Dinah Short as Tess Trueheart, Judy Garland as Snowflake Falls and Jimmy Durante as Mole. 

---


Benayoun had discovered American comics following the arrival of U.S. forces in Morocco in November 1942 at a time when they were banned in France under the occupation. He wrote on the subject in a surrealist publication for the first time in June 1953 when the French were still gorging on the backlog, contributing a very brief and laudatory notice on Walt Kelly’s initially mild though increasingly satirical Pogo (1948–1975) to the rare, single-sheet Parisian surrealist publication Médium: Informations surréalistes (eight issues, 1952–1953), in which Kelly is compared with Edward Lear and called a precursor of René Magritte in his preoccupation with the relation of word and image.

Comic books had been under fire in America and Europe for years by then, and the industry would go into retreat between 1948 and 1954. They serve as an example of U.S.-led commercial culture adopted by the surrealists for their potentially subversive, fantastic qualities when other, Marxist intellectuals in France were condemning comic books for a permissiveness that they tied to the ‘American way of life’, even as they were being attacked for precisely the same reason by American conservatives. This is to say that it is probably not a coincidence


6 Robert Benayoun, ‘Pas de rime pour la raison’, Médium: Informations surréalistes 8 (June 1953), n.p. Benayoun was no doubt unaware that his short appreciation came two years after the ‘affinities’ between avant-garde writing and Pogo had been conjectured and that strip even called ‘something like automatic writing for the common man’ by Walter J. Ong, ‘Bogey Sticks for Pogo Men’ [1951], in Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 100. It might have been Benayoun who wrote the equally brief note about the May 1948 comic ‘Captain Marvel Fights the Surrealist Imp’, which delighted the surrealists the following year: Anonymous, ‘D’ailleurs’, Médium: Communication surréaliste 2 (February 1954), 4.


8 See, for example, the two articles by American critics of comics published in Jean-Paul Sartre’s review: Gershon Legman, ‘Psychopathologie des “comics”’, trans. Henri Robillot, Les Temps modernes 4(43) (May 1949), 916–933 (complaining of violence, illiteracy and even homosexuality in American culture as represented and promoted in its comic books, this first appeared as the main article in an American review as Gershon Legman, ‘The Psychopathology of Comics’, Neurotica 3 [Autumn 1948], 3–30);
that Benayoun’s communication on Pogo in Médium appeared a few weeks after Kelly had waded deep into political territory in May 1953 with his controversial caricature of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the form of the bobcat Simple J. Malarkey. In that year, in the latter part of the McCarthyite period, the United States Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency was established, and Senator Estes Kefauver was in the chair when the public hearings reached comic books in 1954. Although they failed to provide strong evidence of links between comics and delinquency, the unfavourable press coverage that followed the hearings, along with the publication that year of Fredric Wertham’s distortive, scaremongering Seduction of the Innocent (Wertham had persuaded Kefauver to investigate the comics industry and testified to the subcommittee that year, just before Kelly, appearing on behalf of the National Cartoonists Society as its president with Milt Caniff beside him) helped bring about the Comics Code Authority in the United States.

If anything, France’s National Assembly was even more panic-stricken than America’s Congress when it came to hypothesising the effects of comic books on the young, comfortably passing the law of 16


10 For some detail about the hearings, see Wright, Comic Book Nation, 165–172.

July 1949 to protect French youth and hopefully the future of the nation from ‘debauchery, delinquency, and corruption’ through the Commission for the Oversight and Control of Publications for Children and Adolescents. Although a committee of concerned citizens in Cincinnati had found ‘some objection’ with Benayoun’s favourite Pogo a few years earlier in an investigation of comic books strategically aired at the Senate Subcommittee hearings, it was hardly first in the firing line for the CCA in America or the law of 16 July 1949 in France, but the advent of censorship (the very use of the terms ‘authority’ and ‘control’) and accusations of the corruption of the young by comic books would have only increased Benayoun’s interest in the comics genre. In fact, the French commission’s insistence that comic books “‘avoid excessive fantasy”, “remain logical”, and not contradict the “laws of science”’ sounds as much like an antisurrealist programme as an anticomics one.

Benayoun’s enthusiasm for comics extended well beyond Pogo. This was declared ten years after his comments made in Médium on Kelly’s classic in a more substantial but still relatively brief article in La Méthode, where Benayoun gave a wide-ranging overview of the exchange between comics and film. Observing the structural similarity of the cinema versions of Flash Gordon and Batman to their comic originals, he also indicated the cinematic properties of Caniff’s Terry and the Pirates and Steve Canyon, as others had before him. Benayoun even went so far as to suggest that Steve Canyon seems modelled on the directorial style of Howard Hughes and Hal Foster’s Prince Valiant on

13 Harvey, Meanwhile, 665.
15 Benayoun, ‘Comics et cinéma’, 2. See the observation made in the mid-1940s in the New Republic that ‘[t]he major influence on the new strips seems to be the movies, and anything that influences movies’, and the same author’s ultimately mixed remarks a few years later in the Nation about ‘miraculous cinematic inkers like Caniff’: Manny Farber, ‘Comic Strips’ [1944] and ‘Comic Strips’ [1951], in Heer and Worcester, Arguing Comics, 90, 93. Adam Gopnik would make the same observation about Caniff’s Terry and the Pirates at the beginning of the 1990s, viewing the comic book since the 1930s, not unreasonably up to a point, as ‘a parasitical form, feeding, above all, on the movies’, even though comics from Alex Raymond and Don Moore’s Flash Gordon (1934) to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s Watchmen (1986) have obviously lent themselves as much to the movies and continue to do so: see Adam Gopnik, ‘Comics’, in High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 182, 183. Ironically, the best-known reading of Steve Canyon chose the comic to exemplify the ‘semantics of comics’: Umberto Eco, ‘A Reading of Steve Canyon’ [1965], trans. Bruce Merry, in Comic Iconoclasm, ed. Sheena Wagstaff (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987), 24.
that of Michael Curtiz, also comparing Al Capp to Frank Tashlin and Chester Gould to Fritz Lang.\textsuperscript{16}

Benayoun’s preference for the comics of Capp and Gould – mainly to do with the sheer ‘surreal’ oddness of their characters and situations, but also with what he viewed as their cinematic sources (Capp’s character Li’l Abner based on Henry Fonda, Gould’s Dick Tracy on Edward G. Robinson) – would have sanctioned the enthusiasm held for comics later on in U.S. surrealism.\textsuperscript{17} Although that later generation of Chicago surrealists came into contact with such material well before the 1960s, Benayoun’s writings (and, from 1965, probably his friendship) must have encouraged their investigation of the same comics.\textsuperscript{18} Led by Franklin Rosemont, they would go on to extend Benayoun’s advocacy by analysing the surrealist attributes of George Herriman’s \textit{Krazy Kat}, Milt Gross’s \textit{Count Screwloose}, Elzie Crisler Segar’s \textit{Popeye}, Bill Holman’s \textit{Smokey Stover}, Jack Kent’s \textit{King Aroo} (where surrealism was even mentioned on one occasion), Basil Wolverton’s \textit{Powerhouse Pepper} and Winsor McCay’s \textit{Little Nemo in Slumberland} (as well as the ‘fascination of Evil’ enshrined in Gould’s \textit{Dick Tracy}) in the 1970s, in writings that to this day constitute collectively the closest thing to a group position on comics from within surrealism.\textsuperscript{19}

**Surrealism, Comics and Pop Art**

Benayoun wrote on surrealist art and was a private artist and more public collagist, showing in surrealist journals and exhibitions. Drawings and watercolours in his notebooks (Fig. 2) dating from 1950 to the 1980s demonstrate a consistent experimentation with automatism and a landscape surrealism exhibiting tropes of eroticism and cruelty reminiscent of Salvador Dalí, Matta and sometimes Wolfgang Paalen (Fig. 3). Typically for surrealism, his collages often show the prevailing

\textsuperscript{16} Benayoun, ‘Comics et cinéma’, 2.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{18} For a testimony of the assistance given by the English-speaking Benayoun to the future founders of surrealism in Chicago, Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, on their arrival in Paris in 1965, see Penelope Rosemont, Dreams \& Everyday Life: André Breton, Surrealism, Rebel Worker, SDS \& the Seven Cities of Cibola in Chicago, Paris \& London – a 1960s Notebook (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2008), 61, 62, 77.
\textsuperscript{19} See Various, ‘Surrealism in the Comics’ [1979], in Surrealism \& Its Popular Accomplices, ed. Franklin Rosemont (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1980), 68. Beyond these, the Chicago surrealists reserved particular admiration for individual comics \textit{Bugs Bunny and the Magic Sneeze} (1952) and the Uncle Scrooge story \textit{The Seven Cities of Cibola} (1954): Rosemont, Dreams \& Everyday Life, 35–36, 240; Rosemont, Surrealism \& Its Popular Accomplices, 71–72.
impact of Max Ernst’s extraordinary œuvre of the 1920s and 1930s, but they are made up of only a few components, and when this economy is combined with surrealist violence and the whimsy we might expect from Benayoun as an admirer of the tradition of English nonsense, the results can be extremely effective (Fig. 4).

Most relevant for the purposes of this article are works such as an untitled watercolour of 1952 (Fig. 5) in which pastel shades from either end of the colour spectrum convey an eroticised landscape in which floating, semirecognisable objects, levitating comedy breasts and a rain cloud veer towards the simplified and absurd language of comics through a clean-lined cartoon formalism. Several of these lower, hovering objects are collaged onto the sheet in this instance, although those additions are difficult to perceive as such in life and impossible to discern in reproduction. In this picture, they conspire in precisely the excessive fantasy and contravention of logic and the laws of science that comics in France were concurrently being warned off, and that were long established by the 1950s as the theoretical and programmatic incentives for the production of the stereotypical visual languages of the surreal.

Given this interest in art and comics, as well as his own surrealist practice as an artist alongside his activity as one of the group’s leading polemicists on surrealist ethics, it might have been expected that Benayoun would take a strong position on pop art’s reprocessing of comics and other mass-produced imagery when the new art began to appear in 1961, but this was not the case at first.\footnote{Perhaps his best-known polemic is the annihilation in the first number of \textit{La Brèche} of the book by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, \textit{The Morning of the Magicians} (1960); see Robert Benayoun, ‘The Twilight of the Wheeler-Dealers’ [1961], in \textit{The Surrealism Reader: An Anthology of Ideas}, ed. and trans. Dawn Ades and Michael Richardson with Krzysztof Fijalkowski (London: Tate, 2015), 145–150.} Benayoun wrote on the subject of that ‘desperation device’, word balloons, in \textit{La Brèche} at the same time as he published on comics and cinema in \textit{La Méthode} in

\textit{Figure 3:} Robert Benayoun, Untitled, 1952. Ink drawing, 22.1 × 16.4 cm. Private collection, London. © Estate of Robert Benayoun.
February 1963. Sprinting through a brief history of the uses of word balloons mainly in satirical drawings from the late fifteenth century on, he soon arrived at their premier deployment in comics, the origins of which he dated to 1896, as is often the case in historical narratives of the genre, since that was when Richard Fenton Outcault’s *Yellow Kid* first appeared as a set of sequential drawings with word balloons. Concerned mainly with the economy and instantaneity of that device in comics, Benayoun compared them with hieroglyphs and rebuses as well as the pictorial means by which names among the Dakota Sioux were given representation, making a case study of *Pogo* because Kelly ‘a d’ailleurs donné au ballon une liberté sans précédent’ [gave to the word

---


balloon an unprecedented liberty] by varying the lettering between characters to give expression to individual personality in the strip. Benayoun also reminded readers of La Brèche that although some looked with contempt upon the supposed vulgarity and puerility of the kind of materials he was taking seriously in his article as a means of synthesising word and image, such discussion had already been carried out in the art and writings of Magritte, not least in his 1929 essay ‘Les Mots et les images’ in La Révolution surréaliste, to which Benayoun had referred a few years earlier in an article on the same subject that was titled after it.

Ibid. This innovation in Pogo was heralded by the Gothic script used at the end of May 1950 for Deacon Mushrat’s pronouncements: Kelly, Pogo, 124. For more on the creative uses of word balloons and lettering in the strip, see Breslin, ‘Foreword’, in Kelly, Pogo, 11.

Benayoun, ‘Le Ballon dans les bandes dessinées’, 50–51; Robert Benayoun, ‘Le Mot et l’image’, Le Surréalisme, même 4 (Spring 1958), 32–37. See René Magritte, ‘Les Mots et les images’, La Révolution surréaliste 12 (15 December 1929), 32–33. For a translation of this, some remarks on it in the cultural context of comics and especially Krazy Kat, as well as its use as a lead-in to a broader discussion of word and image, see homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~mfram/Pages/3035-surrealism.html (accessed 5 November 2015);
The final footnote of Benayoun’s text in *La Brèche* reads:

À peine cet article était-il écrit que les expositions de rentrée nous révélaient l’emprise soudaine des bandes dessinées sur la peinture. Des artistes aussi divers que Roy Lichtenstein, Achille Perilli, Peter Foldes, ou Pierre Alechinsky renouvelent le comic-strip. Plusieurs d’entre eux font un usage systématique du ballon.

[This article was barely complete when recent exhibitions revealed the sudden influence of bandes dessinées on painting. Artists as diverse as Roy Lichtenstein, Achille Perilli, Peter Foldes and Pierre Alechinsky are renewing the comic strip. Several of them make systematic use of word balloons.]

In fact, as I have already shown, there was evidence of this ‘influence’ over the preceding forty years. Benayoun knew about Breton’s *Tragic, in the Manner of Comics* but not the appearance of the cartoon (with word balloons) by Tad Dorgan in Stuart Davis’s *Lucky Strike* (1924) (though he was aware of the earlier 1921 painting with the same title), nor Kurt Schwitters’s use of comics in his collage *Untitled (for Kate)* (1947) and certainly not Philip Pearlstein’s peculiar canvas *Superman* (1952), painted in a modernist style reminiscent of Chaim Soutine or Oskar Kokoschka.27 Benayoun was already an admirer of Robert Rauschenberg, so he might have been aware of snippets from comics such as Frank Willard’s *Moon Mullins* pasted into collages and Combine works like *Collection, Untitled (Red Painting)* and *Charlene* in 1954, but he did not know about and would not have cared for Jasper Johns’s incorporation and concealment of V.T. Hamlin’s strip in *Alley-Oop* (1958), one of the few comics Lichtenstein recalled liking as a child.28 Nor could Benayoun have been aware of the depictions of comics like *Eagle* and *Captain Marvel* in Britain by Peter Blake, as in the two paintings both

and for further evidence that Magritte’s art has become a landmark for theorists of the genre, see McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 24–25.


titled *Children Reading Comics* (1954 and 1956) and *Litter* (1955), or heard about the remarkable *détournement* of *Dick Tracy* in collages of 1953–1959 by then obscure San Franciscan artist Jess (Collins), compared to the boxes of Joseph Cornell in their ‘small-scale, Surrealist dreaminess’ by Adam Gopnik; or the comparable repurposing of *Krazy Kat* in the oil paintings of Öyvind Fahlström, an artist who had exhibited with the surrealists alongside Rauschenberg and Johns in the years just preceding Benayoun’s article, carried out over the period the surrealist was writing about comics in the first half of the 1960s.29

Of the artists Benayoun did mention, Perilli did not continue in this vein, and Foldes, a former animator, was not successful and is now obscure. Alechinsky had been showing in Paris for nearly ten years by 1963 and would form strong links with the surrealists. Although he was not a member of the group, he allowed them to hang his painting *Central Park* (1965) in their 1965 exhibition *L’Écart absolu*, where the boxed, monochrome surround reveals clearly enough the debt owed to comics and clarifies what Benayoun saw as a recent and sudden ‘influence’. But what about pop art and Lichtenstein?

Roy Lichtenstein’s work would be seen in Paris for the first time at Ileana Sonnabend’s gallery in May 1963, three months after Benayoun’s article on word balloons appeared in *La Brèche*. His first solo exhibition in the capital would follow at the same location in June, featuring instantly canonical paintings such as *Hopeless* (1963) and *I Know . . . Brad* (1963) as well as other, provocative and obviously carefully chosen ambassadors of pure Americana created that year such as *Hot Dog* and the cowboy-themed *Fastest Gun* (then titled *Draw*). But Lichtenstein’s comic strip imagery had been gaining a wide audience since his first show at Leo Castelli’s gallery in New York from 10 February to 3 March 1962 had sold out before the doors opened. Given that pop would only come in for concerted criticism in America in that year, and then increasingly so in the one after, Benayoun’s neutral tone on


Lichtenstein and these other artists in a passing mention early in 1963 can be explained partly by the newness of their work, particularly in France.

Bearing in mind the vitriol Benayoun would later dish out to Lichtenstein, we should also observe the particular conditions surrounding the surrealist reception of pop art, which was by no means uniform. Surrealism gave a generally negative response to the new styles and attitudes that had been quickly collected under that heading, due to what was perceived to be the overly measured nature of the styles and the conformism of the attitudes. However, the art critic, former surrealist and unusually persistent acquaintance of Breton, Alain Jouffroy – unfortunately immortalised as ‘Juquois’ soon after in the transcript of the artist’s comprehensive interview for the Archives of American Art – published a flattering essay in the catalogue of the Lichtenstein show at Sonnabend’s gallery.

More pointedly, Benayoun’s friend José Pierre, who was another of the leading figures among the younger generation of postwar surrealists, was one of the first in France to welcome pop art, especially those elements that spoke towards surrealist concerns. After his series of three articles on pop in *Combat-Art* from July to December 1963, he would publish a eulogy to James Rosenquist in *La Brèche* in June 1964 in the same month that the Rosenquist exhibition at Sonnabend’s gallery began. Pierre wrote the essay for the catalogue of that show, which also carried brief, admiring passages on the artist extracted from two essays of 1963 and 1964 by surrealist sympathiser Édouard Jaguer reprinted from the review *Phases*. Moreover, from the first showings of pop, art critics in America looked to the earlier surrealist painting of Dalí, Ernst and especially Magritte to develop a historical logic and critical language for the new art, usually reluctantly, since surrealism had

31 This response can be found mainly in three essays: José Pierre, ‘POP! POP! POP! D’une esthétique des lieux communs’, *Combat-Art* 102 (1 July 1963), 2; José Pierre, ‘POP! POP! POP! D’une esthétique des lieux communs II’, *Combat-Art* 103 (7 October 1963), 2; José Pierre, ‘Longue vie au “Pop”’, *Combat-Art* 105 (9 December 1963), 2. Much of Pierre’s writing of the period on pop has been examined by Jérôme Duwa, ‘Le Pop art dans le miroir du surréalisme (1959–1965)’, *Pleine marge* 38 (December 2003), 57–70. I am grateful to Krzysztof Fijalkowski for alerting me to Duwa’s article.


been regarded by the vast majority of U.S. art critics and art historians since at least the mid-1940s as a tainted subject.\textsuperscript{34}

In fact, to my knowledge, the first time such ‘[e]choes of Surrealism’ were detected in pop it was through comparison of Lichtenstein’s painting with Magritte and ‘Dalí and his concept of the dream postcard’ by the sceptical but soon-to-be-converted Max Kozloff in March 1962.\textsuperscript{35} Lichtenstein himself would soon profess his own lack of interest in surrealism;\textsuperscript{36} however, he would go on to utilise the work of Dalí, Ernst and Magritte in 1976–1979 to memorialise through irony or parody the critical commentary on this early period of pop soon after he had distanced himself from both of those terms (and still later, clumsily referring apparently without irony again to his ‘surrealist work’ of the 1970s).\textsuperscript{37}

If the obvious overlaps between pop art and surrealism, broadly understood, in their often shared technique, imagery and materialist evaluation of the object made surrealists like Pierre bold in their critical comparison of the two movements in 1963–1964, this did not extend by then to Benayoun, who, like the rest of the surrealists, had now seen pop art close at hand in Paris. In the same June issue of \textit{La Brèche} in which Pierre praised Rosenquist, Benayoun assailed pop art generally, using Happenings as an initial means of doing so. Benayoun’s broadside set out to define the new art through Happenings because the surrealist felt that the immediacy and theatricality of Happenings

\textsuperscript{34} For a comprehensive historical account of and bibliography for the supposed pop/Magritte axis, which Magritte himself disavowed, see the opening pages of Sandra Zalman, ‘‘Secret Agency: Magritte at MOMA in the 1960s’’, \textit{Art Journal} 71(2) (Summer 2012), 100–113; and Sandra Zalman, \textit{Consuming Surrealism in American Culture: Dissident Modernism} (Farnham, U.K., and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 81–106. And for a recent attempt at the same, see Michel Draguet, ‘‘The Treachery of Images: Keys for a Pop Reading of the Work of Magritte’’, in \textit{Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images} (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2006), 29–41.


transferred to what he saw as the showmanship or cult of celebrity that contaminated the studio practices of pop, where he believed artists sought to foreground their own personalities rather than create effective or lasting art. While Happenings ostensibly professed the subversion of the economies and institutions of the art world, Benayoun complained that, in fact, they were as much in compliance as pop itself with the rampant consumerism demanded by capitalism, acting as the acquiescent movement’s edgy, avant-garde ballast:

On soupçonne que la révolte contre les marchands de tableaux n’a rien de bien sérieux, que les ateliers des popartistes sont trop douillets pour être soumis à l’anarchie momentanée des entrepôts et arrière-boutiques, on soupçonne surtout que les œuvres pop, quoiqu’on en dise, n’ont pas d’autre fonction que d’être exposées, comme le reste, dans ces belles galeries léchées où seuls peuvent apparaître somptueux les pare-chocs de limousine, les toiles à sac, et les agrégats de detritus.

[One suspects that the revolt against the art dealers is nothing very serious, that the studios of the pop artists are too cosy to be submitted to the momentary anarchy of the warehouses and backs of shops; one suspects above all that the pop works, whatever people say, have no other function than to be shown, like the rest, in those beautiful, toadyng galleries; there alone, limousine bumpers, sacking and assortments of rubbish can appear sumptuous.]\(^{38}\)

For Benayoun, assemblage, junk art and pop art were determined and defined by their ultimate location in the art market and gallery, and any pretence they made towards subverting the codes of fine art either through their materials or content had to be measured against the fact that it was the very ironic spaces of the art world that validated them as art; in any other context than the swanky gallery, orderly museum or wealthy bourgeois collector’s home they would lose their potency or, more likely, be overlooked altogether.

Emphatically ‘decorative’ or at least depthless in their self-avowed reproduction of urban Americana as opposed to the purported sounding of the unconscious carried out by the surrealist ‘artist-seers’, pop icons such as those by Warhol had no place in more meditative environments alongside the likes of Giorgio de Chirico or Yves Tanguy, Benayoun argued, because of the dearth of metaphor in pop, indicated by Dore Ashton in one of the earliest debates on the new art and quoted as an epigraph at the head of Benayoun’s article.\(^{39}\)


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 17, 21. Ashton remarked on the disobedient operation of metaphor in ‘ready-mades’ and pop art at the legendary symposium on pop published in *Arts Magazine* in
Benayoun believed pop art in the United States was both late in its discovery of industrial art and apparently lay prostrate before it, illustrating the charge with Warhol’s now well-known remarks about wanting to be a machine as they were published in *Art News* in November 1963. He also quoted the opinions of Stanley Kunitz and Leo Steinberg from the *Arts Magazine* ‘Symposium on Pop Art’ that year on the essentially ‘bourgeois’ nature of pop; ‘to out-bourgeois the bourgeois’, as Steinberg had said, ‘to move in on him, to unseat him, play his role with a vengeance – as if Lichtenstein were saying, “You think you like the funnies! Wait till you see how I like the funnies!” Benayoun thought pop was characterised by an ‘imitation vengeresse’ [vengeful imitation], through ‘une exaltation de la laideur américaine’ [an exaltation of American ugliness], especially through the placid presentation of violent subject matter by Warhol and others to a politically comatose nation. But Lichtenstein was his main target.

**Comics in Pop Art: The Case of Roy Lichtenstein**

Ultimately, it was pop’s use of comics that confirmed Benayoun’s aversion to the new movement, magnified, not diminished, by his own long-standing love of the form. It is long established in histories of U.S. pop that Warhol hit upon the idea of comics as a potential ‘style’ and alternative to a still dominant yet increasingly repetitive nonfigurative art in 1960–1961 in a handful of paintings including *Dick Tracy* (1960), *Nancy* (1961), *Popeye* (1961) and *Superman* (1961). He abandoned the genre in 1961 once he saw the cleaner-cut paintings of Lichtenstein at 1963 to sink the claim for their ‘realist’ status, as had been argued by Lawrence Alloway: ‘The artist who believes that he can maintain the “original status” of an object deludes himself’, she argued. ‘The character of the human imagination is expansive and allegorical. You cannot “think” an object for more than an instant without the mind’s shifting. . . . Not an overcoat, not a bottle dryer, not a Coca-Cola bottle can resist the onslaught of the imagination. Metaphor is as natural to the imagination as saliva to the tongue’, Benayoun, ‘Où rien n’arrive’, 12; Dore Ashton quoted in Various, ‘A Symposium on Pop Art’ [1963], in Madoff, *Pop Art*, 70. (Benayoun’s quote is a partial translation of Ashton, abbreviated.)

42 Steinberg quoted in Madoff, *Pop Art*, 72; and see Kunitz quoted in Madoff, *Pop Art*, 80.
Leo Castelli’s gallery (and Castelli made him aware of a conflict), where the brushstroke, by contrast with Warhol’s efforts, leaves no immediate evidence of the artist’s intervention, and which included Lichtenstein’s own *Popeye* as well as the now fabled first go at the style by the former abstract artist, titled *Look Mickey* (1961; Fig. 6). These precede the mature style of the classic paintings, which was soon arrived at in the same year in canvases like *I Can See the Whole Room! . . . And There’s Nobody in It!* In such works, a prodigious balance was struck between a preoccupation with form, a self-consciously blank stare at one slice of Americana and a string of lame art in-jokes that even their author saw as ‘very shallow humor’, winking about previous painting such as abstract expressionism as well as Lichtenstein’s own current art and growing reputation. It was a package that proved utterly seductive for collectors instantaneously, for critics gradually and for art historians definitively, rising to a noteworthy spectacle of sycophancy in our own day.

One argument goes that Lichtenstein was merely taking from what he saw in the culture of mass reproducibility that had increasingly engulfed the urban environment after the Second World War in the same way that an artist like Paul Cézanne took from what he saw in the natural environment for his landscapes or Picasso from the museum environment in his adaptations of Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* in 1957. Yet Lichtenstein’s painting ‘swiped’ its source material from largely unknown living artists and illustrators, usually with only minor alterations (beyond the extraction of individual panels and their enlargement) that sometimes went unperceived even by the professional eye, poaching and staging the matter of modernity with the minimum of modernist ‘comment’.\(^{46}\) Given their closeness to the originals, Benayoun felt on viewing these that the labour of the comics artist – not the copyright,

\(^{46}\) See the off-the-cuff symposium remarks by Peter Selz and Ashton in Madoff, *Pop Art*, 78, 80.
for this is an ethical, not a legal, argument – had been stolen, abused and misused by the new art, as did many workers in the industry and admirers of comics, none of the latter of whom seemed to be pop artists or art critics.\(^{47}\)

Most of the early writings on Lichtenstein focused on his use of comics. In this, there was at least some understanding of comics as ‘art’, unlike advertisements, and through this as holding an antithetical relationship with Lichtenstein’s work as ‘fine art’.\(^{48}\) In one of the very first breakout statements defending pop that was published the month before that artist’s first Paris show, the contrary American art historian Robert Rosenblum had called comics a ‘vulgar literary medium’, assigning them to ‘the ugliest and most ubiquitous kind of commercial imagery’ along with diagrams and advertisements.\(^{49}\) And in what has become a rare interpretation, partly due to the artist’s own denials, Rosenblum regarded Lichtenstein implausibly as a kind of social scientist in the tradition of Gustave Courbet, intentionally providing ‘shocking sociological observation’ in his case through his decontextualisation of panels from comics, advertisements and so on.\(^{50}\)

Benayoun and the surrealists must have been aware of Rosenblum’s remarks, because they were translated into French for their conveni-

\(^{47}\) For a partly historical and theoretical account of the resentment felt by many in the comics industry towards Lichtenstein, arguing for the role played by his work in the separation of comics and art and the subordination of the first to the second, see Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art* (Toronto, Buffalo, NY, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 51–69.


\(^{49}\) Rosenblum, ‘Roy Lichtenstein and the Realist Revolt’, 192, 190.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 191. Another critic had already asserted that ‘Lichtenstein’s hairspray carries a moral judgment’, John Coplans, ‘The New Painting of Common Objects’ [1962], in Madoff, *Pop Art*, 44. However, in an interview in 1965, Lichtenstein denied that his painting carried any conscious approval or disapproval, and he opposed the idea ‘that popular life has a good social effect’; in fact, he said, ‘I think just the opposite’, quoted in Jones, ‘Tape-Recorded Interview with Roy Lichtenstein’, 27. For recent attempted revivals of Lichtenstein’s work as cultural critique and as leverage against the gendered codes of mass media (which seems improbable or at least unsuccessful given the toothlessness of his work towards, and astonishing success with, the very corporate interests served by such codes), see Diane Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1993), 113–121; and Hal Foster, *The First Pop Age: Painting and Subjectivity in the Art of Hamilton, Lichtenstein, Warhol, Richter, and Ruscha* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 79, 99–103.
ence and published in an edited version alongside Jouffroy’s essay in the catalogue of Lichtenstein’s first solo show in France at Sonnabend’s Paris gallery. Far from performing a poetic, emancipatory service for the imagination and a revolutionary one for the individual in society, however – as the surrealists expected of their own decontextualising efforts and Benayoun expected of comics themselves (as opposed to pictures of comics) in the face of capitalist exploitation and its sop, mass consumerism – Rosenblum’s conclusion about Lichtenstein’s paintings was as complacent as some of his critics felt the works themselves to be, believing that they ‘may even help to reconcile us to the horrors of the Brave New World in which we live’. That speculation seems to have been justified by the instant success of Lichtenstein’s work in America and France among wealthy collectors, which did not help his reputation among surrealists or those in the comics industry, especially since many comics artists were underpaid, unknown and experienced tenuous working conditions.

Benayoun drew upon his long-standing interest in the relation between word and image to indicate in his article on pop in *La Brèche* in 1964, as others had before him, Lichtenstein’s tendency in paintings such as *Live Ammo (Tzing!)* (1962) and *Torpedo ... Los!* (1963) (Fig. 7) to ‘isoler dans les comics, des éléments agressifs et guerriers, des mitrailleuses, des chasseurs à réaction, des torpilles ou des Marines en action, épeler avec insistance les *Takka-Takka*, les *Tzing!* ou les *Ack-Ack* des fusillades fascistes’ [isolate in comics aggressive and warlike elements, machine guns, jet fighters, torpedoes or marines in action, spelling out insistently the *Takka-Takka*, the *Tzing!* or the *Ack-Ack* of fascist gunfire]. Lichtenstein had earlier responded to similar charges in the 1963 Gene Swenson interviews that Benayoun had read, explaining that he used fascist prototypes or military stereotypes gleaned from comics ‘for purely formal reasons’. Such an explanation struck Benayoun as dubious since, as I noted earlier, what came out as ‘art’ was a means of

fathoming the self for surrealists, not a way of reaching compositional solutions, let alone the ‘impersonal form’ created in the service of a ‘new classicism’ as touted by Lichtenstein in another early interview.\(^{55}\) It might appear evasive to us too, even though no writer on Lichtenstein has yet turned their attention to such an interpretation of this imagery in spite of the shift in the scholarship from the object to the subject in studies of pop art generally and Lichtenstein’s work specifically in the twenty-first century,\(^{56}\) and the artist’s own concession as far back as the 1960s that ‘in my own work I wanted to look programmed or impersonal but I don’t really believe I am being impersonal when I do it’.\(^{57}\)

The frankly offensive nature of such imagery for the surrealists, which dates almost exclusively from a use of contemporary comics in 1962–1964, existed in a specific historical dimension: Lichtenstein’s work first came to their attention towards the bloody end of the Algerian War of Independence.\(^{58}\) The surrealists had protested French military action and torture since the beginnings of the colonial war in 1954, most significantly and damagingly for them as individuals in the contribution they made to the writing and distribution of the Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War or Declaration of the 121 in September 1960. Condemning military fascism and asserting the legitimacy of resistance to colonialism in Algeria and aid given to Algerians from France while defending conscientious objectors and desertion from the French army, the Declaration of the 121 was an incendiary document, and both Benayoun and Pierre had signed it with the other surrealists.\(^{59}\) If Lichtenstein’s brazen use of militaristic imagery

---

58 Lobel, Image Duplicator, 143 (I extend Lobel’s dates of 1962–1963 to accommodate the given dates of CRAK!).
59 Various, ‘Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War’ [1960], in Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations, ed. and trans. Michael Richard-

in the early 1960s was irritating to them, the denial of its conscious and unconscious determinants by the artist, shielded behind talk of its formal properties, must have seemed like an abdication of his basic humanity. Lichtenstein’s use of comics and therefore the aesthetic value of his work were accordingly undermined ethically by their author’s inability or refusal to track their sources, for good or ill, in the self; more so because he dropped the comic theme at the very moment that opposition to the Vietnam War began to grow.60

Surrealism in Comics: The Cases of Krazy Kat and Li’l Abner

Lichtenstein’s response to questions about content by recourse to form or, elsewhere, to ‘seeing’ already made a partial answer to Benayoun’s other demand: Why war comics?61 Why did Lichtenstein not reproduce ‘les images exaltantes et poétiques de Flash Gordon, Mandrake ou Krazy Kat ou les comics satiriques et libéraux comme Pogo ou Li’l Abner’ [the exultant and poetic images of Flash Gordon, Mandrake [the Magician] or Krazy Kat or satirical or liberal comics like Pogo or Li’l Abner]?62

It is well-known today that after his very first experiments with comics in 1961, where the work of George Tuska and William Overgard for Buck Rogers and Steve Roper, respectively, were among those used for his source imagery – as well as a panel derived from Milt Caniff, creator of Benayoun’s favourites as cited above, Terry and the Pirates and Steve Canyon – for Mr. Bellamy that year, Lichtenstein narrowed his field to the comic art of Jack Abel, Ross Andru, Jerry Grandenetti, Russ Heath, Joe Kubert and Irv Novick, as their work appeared in patriotic titles such as All-American Men of War, G.I. Combat, Our Army at War, Our Fighting Forces and Star Spangled War Stories; and that of Tony Abruzzo, Ted Galindo, Arthur F. Peddy, Jay Scott Pike, John Romita Sr.
and Mike Sekowsky in comics that might be called the stereotypically
gendered others of those, namely, *Girls’ Love Stories, Girls’ Romances, Heart Throbs, Secret Hearts, Young Romance* and others.\(^\text{63}\) Also better
known now are the changes Lichtenstein made to the frames he chose
to enlarge, which were apparently invisible to Benayoun and others,
even though Lichtenstein spoke about this in his earliest interviews,
including the one with Swenson in 1963.

As Lichtenstein said then and on several occasions subsequently, the
individual frames from these specific comics were chosen and the alter-
ations to them carried out for aesthetic purposes, in the services of ‘uni-
ification’\(^\text{64}\). The ‘exultant’, ‘poetic’ and certainly satirical and humourous
properties of the comics that Benayoun admired were too intrusive to
the formal ends Lichtenstein was trying to achieve through his friv-
olous sources. Better to seek out anonymous, anodyne and purely
adolescent examples of the genre, which were thought to carry fewer
self-consciously literary associations and less intellectual interest than
the likes of *Krazy Kat*. In this sense, Herriman’s timeless creation was a
particularly bad counterexample to Lichtenstein’s comics for Benayoun
to wield, since it was already legendary by the 1960s – becoming ‘the
other most popular comic strip character quoted by artists’ alongside
Superman, according to one writer – and therefore massively compro-
mised for Lichtenstein’s precise and limited purposes, even as it was an
indispensable one for surrealists.\(^\text{65}\)

By the time Benayoun complained about the pop artist’s choice of
sources, he had become involved in the activities of Le Club des bandes
dessinées. The CBD was founded in 1963 as a means towards further-
ing the popularity in France of American strips (which had still not
fully recovered from the suppression brought about by the law of 16 July
1949) by *Barbarella* creator Jean-Claude Forest and Alain Resnais (its

\(^\text{63}\) Gopnik, ‘Comics’, 195. The attributes of other romance comics artists are praised over
Lichtenstein’s (deliberate) mannerisms by Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 163. The source
image for *Mr. Bellamy* and other paintings by the artist can be viewed at the ‘Decon-
structing Lichtenstein’ project at the following address: davidbarsalou.homestead.
com/LICHTENSTEINPROJECT.html (accessed 1 February 2016).

\(^\text{64}\) Lichtenstein quoted in Swenson, ‘From “What Is Pop Art? Part 1”’, 109. Also see the
remarks about ‘unity’ and ‘unified perception’ in ‘Oral History Interview with Roy
Lichtenstein’, n.p.; and ‘unifying the elements’ in a 1966 interview, Nicholas Baker, ed.,
*Some Kind of Reality: Roy Lichtenstein Interviewed by David Sylvester in 1966 and

\(^\text{65}\) Sheena Wagstaff, ‘Comic Iconoclasm’, in *Comic Iconoclasm*, 15. For the Rosemonts’
insistence on the ‘essentially Surrealist character’ of *Krazy Kat* (on the unconvincing
claim it was ‘one of the triumphs of pure psychic automatism’), see Rosemont, *Surre-
realism & Its Popular Accomplices*, 61.
vice president), which counted Chris Marker, Edgar Morin and Alain Robbe-Grillet among its members and was renamed the Centre d’études des littératures d’expression graphique (CELEG) in 1964 and would be remarkably influential in spite of its precipitate demise in 1967. Like Resnais, Benayoun had already accumulated a substantial collection of comics and had become one of the leading authorities on Al Capp’s astonishingly successful tale of life in the Deep South, *Li’l Abner*, which had edged steadily further into the territory of the absurd since its launch in 1934. Benayoun’s archive was pivotal to the special number of *Giff-Wiff*, the bimonthly periodical of CELEG and the ‘first magazine in the world devoted to the history and documentation of the comic strip’, given over to *Li’l Abner* in 1967 (Fig. 8). Benayoun gave there an abbreviated biography of Capp and outlined the main features, characters and history of the strip, also praising the ‘suspense perpétuel’ [perpetual suspense] sustained by Capp in the main, unconsummated relationship between Abner and Daisy Mae that drove *Li’l Abner*.

Plainly, nothing could be further from the dry, reserved humour of Lichtenstein’s comics-inspired paintings than the noisy, gormless comedy of *Li’l Abner*, adored by Jerry Lewis fanatic Robert Benayoun. But then, contrary to what Leo Steinberg thought, the ‘funnies’ would have made poor raw materials anyway for Lichtenstein; unlike war and

---


67 For Resnais, comics and the CBD and CELEG, see Francis Lacassin, ‘Dick Tracy Meets Muriel’, *Sight and Sound* 36(2) (Spring 1967), 101–103.

68 Ibid., 101.

romance comics, they were already saturated in irony by a self-conscious excess of environment, character, figure, behaviour, theme, situation and plot that would have obliterated the measured irony Lichtenstein sought to orchestrate in his paintings, which must be why Lichtenstein discarded his *Popeye* subject matter so swiftly after the two paintings of 1961. He came close to articulating this himself but broke off after being asked by David Sylvester in 1966 why he did not choose the funnies as his source materials: ‘[W]hen the original work already looks interesting, or inventive, it takes away I think from – well, maybe this isn’t really a reason, but whatever the reason was, I seem to prefer rather straightforward cartoons’.70

More than Capp’s fertile characterisation and raucous subplots, Benayoun gave most space in his *Giff-Wiff* article to the advent in *Li’l Abner* of ‘créatures imaginaires comme le shmoo, le kigmy, le shtoonk, le bald iggle ou le mimiknik’ [imaginary creatures like the shmoo, the kigmy, the shtoonk, the bald iggle and the mimiknik], which were entirely conducive to the surrealist inclination towards modern myth under the guise of the fantastic.71 Capp’s introduction of the shmoo late in August 1948, in a story line running mainly into early October but residually so up to the end of the year, is now regarded as a major event in comics and even cultural history. When Li’l Abner comes across the friendly two-legged creatures in the Valley of the Shmoon, he is warned by an apoplectic Ole Man Mose that they are the ‘greatest menace to hoomanity th’ world has ever known’.72 This is not because they are bad, but because they are too good. Shmoos can be ridden by adults, and children love to play with them. They spontaneously provide milk (in bottles), eggs (in cartons, often hard-boiled), butter, all types of cheese (‘domestic an’ imported!!’) and occasionally cheesecake and cupcakes with chocolate frosting. When cooked, shmoos make the finest pork steaks and when fried the best chicken, leaving no bones. Their eyes can be used as buttons for braces and their whiskers as toothpicks, while their hide makes the finest cloth or leather, depending on how thickly it is sliced, and when it is dried it makes better houses than wood. As well as providing for all human needs, shmoos do not eat,

they breed instantly and they die spontaneously from joy when looked upon with hunger (Fig. 9).

Providing free everything in inexhaustible quantities for everybody forever, shmoos relieve humans of the necessity to work and therefore entail the utter collapse of the economy. This is quickly noticed in *Li’l Abner* by businessmen, led by the enraged ‘pork king’, J. Roaringham Fatback, and Brewster McRewster, ‘czar of the egg industry’, who arrange for shmoos to be ‘exterminated’, in Fatback’s frequently used term. Accordingly, the slaughter of shmoos is carried out six at a time by the shmooicide squad, aided by Li’l Abner, who ‘respecks big words’. This takes place in routine, not especially disturbing, but definitely peculiar scenes of pointless cartoon carnage, drawn by Capp only three years after the end of the Second World War and discovery of the Holocaust.

Capp and *Li’l Abner* were already very well-known, but the shmoo parable caused a sensation, featuring in *Time* and *Life* magazines while making a fortune for Capp in merchandising and, indeed, suitably relieving him of all earthly wants. In *Life* in December 1948 it was interpreted as nothing less than a statement for the requirement to develop capitalism further, though, as recorded by Benayoun, who cited both magazines and the shmoo craze in his *Giff-Wiff* article, it was its

---

perceived anti-Americanism at the height of McCarthyism that had given the shmoo its seditious potential. However, in the aftermath of the shmoo story line, claimed Benayoun, Capp ‘se sentait brimé, et harcelé par les McCarthyistes’ [had felt bullied and harassed by the McCarthyists], who had interpreted subsequent imaginary creatures like the kigmy as symbols of anti-Americanism. This led to the downward slide of the once subversive strip, he argued, which was signalled further by the marriage of Abner and Daisy Mae in 1952 and Capp’s own subsequent political conservatism and hatred of students, intellectuals, beatniks, pacifists and the Left generally, which was well entrenched by the time Benayoun wrote about *Li’l Abner*.

All this outwardly explains, in political terms, why Kelly’s resilient liberalism in *Pogo* was admired by the Chicago surrealists while Capp and *Li’l Abner* went unmentioned by them in their examination of comics in the late 1970s, which I referred to earlier. They had been beatniks, activists and leading figures of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the 1960s at the time when Capp was satirising the same individuals and organisation in *Li’l Abner* and making his most reactionary statements in campus talks. For Benayoun, this ‘delayed McCarthyism’ was Capp’s regressive calamity, the ‘American tragedy’ of his article. But the temporal directionality of Benayoun’s phrase also marks the inward, more occultist and surrealist explanation for the success and failure of Capp’s comic and of all great art. Capp had been a ‘jeune homme généreux, dissident et visionnaire’ [generous, dissident and visionary young man], wrote Benayoun, who then diametrically recanted his earlier self to ‘rejoindre les rangs de ses ex-ennemis’ [join the ranks of his former enemies]. That is to say that as far as the surrealist was concerned, Capp forwent his obligation as a seer. He abandoned the mediumistic means by which a poet or artist plots the progressive movement of a society or people by bypassing mere conscious reflection and tapping into his own unconscious desire, where the modern, collective myth is to be found. This is a view and

---

75 Ibid., 6–7.
76 Ibid., 7.
77 Ibid.
78 This theory of art, by which ‘art is no longer a question of the creation of a personal myth, but rather, with Surrealism, of the creation of a collective myth’ – in the sense that a myth was a metaphorical expression of an age deriving from the unconscious and could, quite literally, indicate the future of that age insofar as it was a chart of the manoeuvrings of desire – was given most expansively in April 1935 in the Prague lecture by André Breton, ‘Political Position of Today’s Art’ [1935], in *Manifestoes of Sur*
exercise of the activities and creations of the mind that makes irrelevant the supposed difference between high and low art as consented to by Lichtenstein and sustained by his art, its admirers, commentators and market; but it is also one that runs counter to the hyperdeliberate choices made and ‘programmed’ appearances sought and apparently found by that artist in his work.\textsuperscript{79}

**Conclusion: From Pop to Pogo**

Benayoun repeated and refined his rejection of Lichtenstein and pop while condensing his evaluation of the comic strip in his 1968 book *Vroom, tchac, zowie: Le ballon dans la bande dessinée* [Vroom, bam, zowie: The speech balloon in comics],\textsuperscript{80} an expansion of the 1963 article on word balloons in *La Brèche*. It appeared the year after the Musée des arts décoratifs had hosted the exhibition curated by Gérald Gassiot-Talabot titled *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative*, whose accompanying book was immediately translated into English as *A History of the Comic Strip* and became a canonical publication in the comics bibliography.\textsuperscript{81}

Although Benayoun took issue with the praise heaped on Lichtenstein’s decontextualisation of the comic panel in the chapter of that book contributed by Gassiot-Talabot on ‘narrative figuration’, several of the artists who had appeared in the exhibition and were examined in the volume were those whom Benayoun had mentioned only in passing alongside the pop artist in his article in *La Brèche* – Perilli, Foldes and Alechinsky – and they were now discussed more expansively in *Vroom, tchac, zowie*.\textsuperscript{82} Additionally, Benayoun followed Gassiot-Talabot in giving special attention to the ‘excellents résultats’ [excellent results] achieved by Öyvind Fahlström’s interpretation of *Krazy Kat*, while adding his admiration for Jess’s repurposing of *Dick Tracy* over Lichtenstein’s appropriations because he had created nothing less than ‘une bande


nouvelle, surréeelle et fonctionnant selon les lois inhérentes au genre’
[a new surreal strip functioning according to the inherent laws of the
genre].

Benayoun’s book was published a few months before Albert Boime’s
endorsement of the pop artist in the *Art Journal*, ‘Roy Lichtenstein and
the Comic Strip’, arguing that the ‘most significant element in his com-
positional structure is the balloon’. Boime went on to state in a thor-
oughly ‘formalist’ mode in line with the artist’s own statements about
his work that Lichtenstein ‘eliminated all dead space from the [original]
panel’ and ‘eliminat[ed] the ponderous balloons in the original panel’.
This meant that his project had to be read as one of improvement on
its sources and therefore a judgement on culture in a way that, say,
Cézanne’s was not (while the wording speaks volumes as to the crit-
ical fate of the comic source). Moreover, Boime’s rich if abbreviated
introduction to the visual, aural, indexical, ontological, conceptual,
narratological and identificatory role of the word balloon almost sinks
Lichtenstein’s art in bathos once Boime reduces its use there to a purely
compositional one.

This is especially the case in retrospect, since Thierry Groensteen
showed (with brief yet rare reference to Benayoun’s study) the extra-
ordinary readerly and compositional complexity of word balloons in
the unification of word and image (not only image) by comics artists
across whole pages (not only single panels). In his own study of word
balloons and writing in *Vroom, tchac, zowie*, then – and in spite of their
shared interest in the onomatopoeic function of language in comics,
evident in word lists made by both – it is not surprising to find Benay-
oun deriding Lichtenstein’s choice of both strips and individual panels
by comparison with Herriman, Foster, Alex Raymond and Lee Falk,

nor to discover him leaping on Lichtenstein’s remarks in the Swenson
interviews on his formal and unifying ends, stating that to ‘séparer le
ballon de sa justification dramatique, sous prétexte de lui prêter un sens

---

83 Benayoun, *Vroom, tchac, zowie*, 106.
84 Boime, ‘Roy Lichtenstein and the Comic Strip’, 204.
85 Ibid., 204, 205.
86 Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* [1999], trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen
(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 81–85; orig. pub. as *Système de la
87 See the word list in Robert Benayoun, *Vroom, tchac, zowie*, 63; and the similar though
shorter, undated ‘Hand Written Word List’ from the Lichtenstein archive reproduced
in the publication that accompanied the show at the Louisiana Museum of Art, *Roy
Lichtenstein: All About Art*, 29.
88 Benayoun, *Vroom, tchac, zowie*, 102.
formel nouveau... c’est... pratiquer un esthétisme de la regression’ [to separate the word balloon from its dramatic justification under the pretext of lending it a new formal meaning... is... to practise an aestheticism of regression].

As well as synthesising his larger argument for comics and against pop along some of the lines I have set out in this article, Benayoun’s Vroom, tchac, zowie made a special case for Pogo, the first strip he had directed the surrealists’ readership towards in Médium back in 1953. Due to its remarkable inventiveness with word balloons, Pogo is the most reproduced comic in Benayoun’s book, closely identified with the surrealist merveilleux [marvellous]. Kelly’s strip is regarded in Vroom, tchac, zowie not just as a triumph of political satire but as exemplary of the function of desire in its unification of thought and action, as, for example, when Albert the Alligator thinks of a cigar, then takes it from the thought word balloon and smokes it, indicating ‘un point de rencontre visuel entre la pensée et l’action qui est aussi une forme de la métaphore poétique la plus prisée’ [a visual point of encounter between thought and action, which is also the most popular form of poetic metaphor].

I have argued in this article that Lichtenstein’s art had, by contrast, to keep at bay the characteristic unruly comedy of the comics to retain its ultradeliberate, cool, dry pose. Benayoun’s guileless praise for the form in Vroom, tchac, zowie and elsewhere also demonstrates that surrealist poetics could overcome the typical cultural hierarchy, while showing that Lichtenstein’s art largely gained its effect from an ironic purchase that delivered an emphatic confirmation of a qualitative difference between comics and art. Art historians and Lichtenstein’s supporters have claimed over the years that it narrowed the gap between the two, of course, even as the artist consistently proclaimed otherwise, but we can see now that the purpose behind this campaign about narrowing was to police and further enforce the perceived cultural distance between the likes of pop and Pogo.

89 Ibid., 103–104.
90 Benayoun, Vroom, tchac, zowie, 108.
91 An example of this overfamiliar contention can be found in Dick Hebdige, ‘In Poor Taste’, in Taylor, Post-Pop Art, 94; that position was regarded as ‘premature’ by Jim Collins, who argues that pop in the 1960s ‘still respects those binary oppositions’ represented by comics and pop, ‘perpetuating them as it contests them’: Jim Collins, Appropriating Like Krazy: From Pop Art to Meta-Pop’, in Modernity and Mass Culture, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 221.
Gavin Parkinson is a senior lecturer in European modernism at the Courtauld Institute of Art, editor of the Routledge series Studies in Surrealism and a former Reviews Editor of *Art History* (2011–2016). He lectures and writes on European and American art and culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and has a particular interest in art and science, comics and science fiction. His books are *Futures of Surrealism: Myth, Science Fiction and Fantastic Art in France 1936–1969* (Yale University Press, 2015); *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (Yale University Press, 2008); and *The Duchamp Book* (Tate Publishing, 2008). He is also the editor of the collection of essays *Surrealism, Science Fiction and Comics* (Liverpool University Press, 2015). He has just completed a book on the surrealist reception of late nineteenth-century art, titled *Enchanted Ground: André Breton, Modernism and the Surrealist Appraisal of Fin de Siècle Painting*. 