

THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF FICTION IN COMMUNICATION:
A PREFACE TO THE STUDY OF THE HISTORIETA

By

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Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention,
Acapulco, Mexico.
May, 1980

Preface

This paper was originally intended to be a study of the conventions of the super-hero genre as concretely expressed in the enormously popular Mexican historieta (comic book) Kaliman, El Hombre Increible. Late in March of this year, after considerable work on the project, I encountered, to my horror and chagrin, a lengthy article in the latest issue of The Journal of Popular Culture 'Winter, 1980' by Harold Hinds, Jr., entitled Kaliman: A Mexican Superhero. As Hinds asserts, practically nothing has been written on Latin-American comic books. Nothing until now. Perhaps great minds move at the same time in the same arena. In any case, I was "scooped" by Hinds. His paper covered virtually the same ground as my own study in progress. Like Hinds, I wanted to compare Kaliman to norte-americano superhero genres such as Superman and Spiderman, in the attempt to discern cultural differences which might represent contrasting value systems or ideologies. Because I do not believe in redundant research, I have reformulated my study into a theoretical, often polemical, set of perspectives which question the exclusion of fiction from the realm of the legitimate objects of communication research.

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If an American tourist in Mexico seeks proof of his own cultural superiority, he is likely to find it in the spectacle of Mexican adults buying comic books. The norte-americano has been raised to believe that books have cultural value, comic books do not. As Jules Feiffer has argued, in the United States the comic book is disgraceful "by its very appearance." In the context of United States cultural values, the comic book is nothing but "junk," according to Feiffer. ¹ Those who wish to consider the Mexican to be an essentially undeveloped man in an "underdeveloped" country may point out that according to the norms of the civilized world, the comic book is fit only for children. The presumption is that only childish, immature minds could possibly be entertained by some thirty-two pages of garishly illustrated cliches, that "underdevelopment" is not only an economic but also a cultural category. The notion of "underdevelopment" assumes that both the economies and the value-systems (the ideological formation) of the United States and Western Europe are the models which Third World societies must imitate if they are to "progress" towards full membership in the world of adult, civilized nations. According to the "diffusionist model" of development, backward economies can be modernized primarily through the massive infusion of capital from the more "developed" nations. Opponents of the diffusionist model argue that the price of capital is control, that not only underdeveloped economies but the culture-industries of Third World countries have fallen under the control of the [quote] "imperialists," that material and cultural production is dominated either by the fact of foreign control or by adherence to foreign models of value. In Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, indeed, throughout the Third World, marxist intellectuals speak of the need for cultural decolonialization, believing with the Argentine film-

makers Solanas and Getino that the culture "of a neocolonialized country is just the expression of an overall dependence that generates models and values borm from the needs of imperialist expansion."² A Mexican critic of the historieta medium writes that:

" In the same way that we lost a good half of our territory to the United States, we have lost much more than half of our values and tastes, consuming the products which they disseminate world-wide. For example: the heroes of Walt Disney, Batman, Superman, Archie, Spider Man, Captain America, etc. we are losing the values which define our identity as Mexicans, as a Spanish-speaking people."³

These critics point out that the most popular superheros of the historietas actually produced (not merely licensed) in Mexico are Kalimán and Fantomas, both white-skinned non-latinos in physical appearance, both of which prefer to pursue their adventures in Europe, Africa or Egypt, avoiding the realities of Mexican culture.

The historieta is condemned on two fronts: not only do norte-americanos ridicule the medium as evidence of the debasement of Mexican culture, but Mexican intellectuals condemn it as a particularly pernicious variety of cultural imperialism. Apparently, the historieta is a thoroughly disreputable genre, with no redeeming qualities. Although some 70 million historietas and fotonovelas are sold every month in Mexico (more than one copy for each inhabitant of the country),⁴ when the medium is discussed at all among the educated classes, it is treated as a scandal, an object of shame.

As I mediated on this phenomenon, I began to wonder if the shame was evidence that (1) Mexicans have assimilated the norte-americano value system to the extent that historietas can be consciously regarded as appropriate only for children or imbeciles or, (2) the social prestige of literacy in Mexico (as in the U.S.) automatically consigns those who read picture-books to the ranks of sub-humanity (indios, campesinos), that the consumption

of historietas is proof of inferior social status, or (3) the appetite for fantasy is itself a source of shame since adults, by definition, have given up "play" activity and deal seriously with those aspects of existence regarded as "reality."

This last speculation inspired me to think of the status of fiction among the social sciences, particularly the science of communication. I began to consider why I was reticent to submit even a proposal for the study of Mexican comic books to the Annual Conference of the International Communication Association. The more I re-read communication journals, the more I became convinced that the discipline prefers to ignore the existence of fictional texts, or regards them as illegitimate objects of study. Presuming that this hypothesis is tenable, I devote the remainder of this paper to examining why communication systematically excludes the study of fiction.

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Traditionally, communication scholars ignore the fictions of television, movies and the print media, choosing instead to study that section of media production which presumes to represent "reality." Apparently, fiction is either considered to be irrelevant to the study of communication because art is defined as a domain opposed to reality, or the fictional realm is judged (and usually condemned) according to standards of "accuracy" derived from the sciences and journalistic practice. According to this second approach, the "value" of a fiction lies in the degree of its correspondence to an empirically observed, ^{relatively} non-mediated reality. Thus The Grapes of Wrath may be a fit object of study for communication science, but Star Wars and King Kong fail to pass the communication threshold because they refer to no empirically given set of "facts".

The idea that fiction is inherently unreal seems to be a variation of the Romantic notion of artistic practice as a rebellion against the constraints of the social world. According to this "art for art's sake" position which proclaims the artist's freedom from the ~~role~~ of the lived-world, the aesthetic sphere is the domain of free play — play as opposed to work, fantasy opposed to reality. Art is the realm in which both the artist and his "readers" escape; it transcends the empirical world. Through its construction of bubble-worlds - alternative realities - artistic practice is judged to be the antithesis of scientific enterprise: instead of discerning the laws which govern material and social existence, it abolishes, with a single blow, the truth of the "given" world.

If art is a domain of escape, a repudiation of the world, why should we, as students of communication, study an activity which ignores our empirical truths, ~~annuls~~ our facts to pursue a fantasy - a nonreality? Because, despite the Romantic prejudice of both artists and social scientists, neither fiction nor fantasy is polarly opposed to fact. I believe that it is equally misleading to consider fiction as an escape from reality or as a direct reflection of the material and social world. As we say in film theory, both fiction and documentary re-present and ^{transform} ~~produce~~ reality - neither can reproduce it. Fictions and documentaries on film present, if you will, a visible and audible model of reality. The difference between the two modes lies in the extent that pre-given reality is "worked" - reorganized, refined, scripted, re-enacted, etc. But reality is never presented "raw" on the screen; it is always, to some degree, "staged." The film-maker selects an "appropriate" reality, chooses various partial "angles," or points of view, reshapes or edits the pro-filmic world to achieve a coherent statement which more or less fits the rules of the genre and the expectations of the intended audience; he films according

to the conventional codes which mark his effort as fiction or reality. Yet both fictions and the "realities" of documentary or news productions are reconstructions, and, in a sense, abstractions from the empirical world of persons and things, forces and materials. Each is a model of reality; the difference lies in the degree of the modeling and the claim or disclaimer that this representation is accurate.

From an ontological point of view, both scientific studies and oral or written fictions are farther removed from perceptible reality than the moving photographs on the theatre screen. The modeling is more extreme, because we are no longer dealing with the relatively direct presentation of the image but with symbols which are conventionally understood to represent a reality which has been transformed into concepts. Excluding the fotonovelas, Mexican historietas combine the printed word - the symbolic representation of emotions and concepts - with line drawings. Although these drawings are less individuated, more conventionalized, thus more abstract, than photographs in that they present fewer of the details of reality, but reduce a face or a landscape to its essential features, they are not yet symbols but rather the context—the supposed reality to which the characters' words refer. Unlike scientific texts or novels, historietas present both a perceptible reality (of sorts) and the conceptualization, the symbolization, the human "meaning" of this reality, at a single glance. In the language of semiotics, the historieta combines an iconic or motivated sign (in which there is a natural, perceptible, relation between the signifier and the signified) with an unmotivated, arbitrary sign - (the written symbol which is not a faithful (or accurate) representation of what it claims to represent. In at least one sense of that ambiguous word "real," it can be said that historietas represent more reality than either newspaper accounts of news events or research reports

which construct symbolic models of actual human communication events. However, my purpose is not to denigrate the reality of communication research but to close the gap between reality and fiction. I am attempting to show that fiction is not opposed to reality as a realm of nonbeing is the negation of being, but that fiction reorganizes and "models" reality - (a perspective on) reality. Fiction is indeed a structure of communication. It communicates value-systems, ideologies - cultural realities. And indirectly, in its "realist" mode, fiction communicates material and social realities. Empirical research tries to describe what is; the communication proclaims its objectivity, disclaims that it looks through an ideological lens. In a sense, fiction is the richer communication, for while denying that it does so by the mere device of calling itself fiction, it tells us both what is and what should be, admitting that it is the biased repository of cultural values, ideals, ideologies, at the same time that it openly judges reality from the perspective of its value-system.

In his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Ernst Cassirer writes that every concept, whether fictional or a supposed statement of scientific fact, "must annul 'presence in order to arrive at 'representation'." ⁵ As Wolfgang Iser expands Cassirer's concept:

"The concept, as a paradigm of symbol usage, makes an existing object knowable by translating it into something it is not. . . . There must always be an element of the nongiven in the given, if the latter is to be grasped at all, from whatever angle. . . . Symbols enable us to perceive the given world because they do not embody any of the qualities or properties of the existing reality; in Cassirer's terms, it is their very difference that makes the empirical world accessible. Perception and comprehension are not qualities inherent in the objects themselves, and so the world must be translated into something it is not, if it is to be perceived and understood. But if symbols enable us to perceive the existing world and are yet independent of the visible, they ⁶must also in principle enable us to see a non-existent world."

Communication research does not study contingent reality as such but models or concepts of reality already brought into the social world by the act of communication. If communication communicates models of reality rather than reality itself, then communication research constructs models of the models, concepts of the concepts in an attempt to discern certain laws of this modeling activity. According to General Systems Theory, the academic study of communication would be a system which reorganized communication phenomena into a definitive order in order to discern a regularity. The operation of certain principles of exclusion whereby "wild" or dangerous, elements which cannot be integrated into the system without "jamming the gears" - without calling its fundamental practice into question - are consigned to the extrasystematic periphery as being without value, for the purposes of this system.

I suggest, in conclusion, that the science of communication systematically excludes fictional or otherwise "playful" texts (like tv game shows) from its domain of legitimate objects of study precisely because communication must define itself as the study of an empirical reality in polar opposition to fiction - fantasy. A system defines itself in terms of what it is not as much as by what it considers itself to be. Communication science requires the nullity of fictional texts in order to assure itself that it studies real phenomena. In order to believe in its own scientific status, communication must consider the modeling, conceptualizing activities of fiction and science to be distinctly different in kind, not only in degree.

And so, apart from a few film and television specialists, communication as a discipline is largely free of contamination by non-reality. Fiction is excluded from the system, or tolerated as a form of quasi-communication. Yet the fact remains that most human communication is the communication of beliefs,

attitudes, values, emotions rather than the objective or accurate representation of "reality." In interpersonal communication, as well as in the mass media, we send and receive more fictions than facts. I realize that in the context of a conference which studies the reality of communications, mine is a scandalous text. But I believe it is high time that we, in communication, begin to retool our discipline to include fictional texts - not only historietas and fotonovelas, but commercial cinema, televised melodramas and situation comedies. We should include them not as a peripheral, illegitimate realm of stereotyped, deformed realities, but as the reality of a communication that is preferred by the majority of individual subjects in both American and Mexican society. If we do not embrace the study of fiction, if we continue to regard it as an escape from reality, we are worthy of the name "communication," no longer in fact, but only "in fiction." For fiction is a reality of the communication phenomenon, if not the discipline. We can no longer afford to ignore it.

Notes

1. Jules Feiffer, The Great Comic Book Heroes (New York : Dial, 1965).
2. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Hacia un tercer cine," Cine, cultura y descolonizacion (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1978), p. 60.
3. Irene Herner Reiss, "Las historietas y la cultura nacional," in Sabado, supplement to Uno Mas Uno (newspaper, Mexico City), 18 Agosto, 1979.
4. Ibid.
5. Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, 1953), III, p. 307.
6. Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading (Johns Hopkins: Baltimore, 1978, p. 64.