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Comics and the Complicit Reader:
Closure as a Transgressive Technique in *Transmetropolitan*

by
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In 1997, comic book writer Warren Ellis and artist Darick Robertson released *Transmetropolitan* #1, a satirical look into a bleak, corrupt future possessing a social structure and culture uncannily similar to the present. 60 issues and five years later they finished constructing a world where technology could fabricate any necessity from scavenged refuse, grown limbs and organs could repair any physical malady, and cancer itself had been banished to distant memory (as long as one happened to have the material prosperity to pay for such a treatment). The promise of happiness and plenty that this would seem to suggest, however, contrasts sharply with the hordes of the poor, child prostitutes and genetically modified drug users pressed to the fringes of society by corrupt politicians who have ceased to even be challenged by their subjects. Between this possibility of heaven and this reality of hell stands Spider Jerusalem, Ellis and Robertson's truth-obsessed messiah, an unorthodox and disgusting journalist who nevertheless refuses to let political machinations dwell in shadow. Throughout the course of the series, Jerusalem dedicates himself to revealing the seedy underside of the City, as Ellis and Robertson use the series as a whole to attempt to reveal our real-world social problems by guiding readers into an internal confrontation with the ethical and moral values that lead to the problems plaguing their fictional city.

Transmetropolitan exemplifies the transgressive techniques that have made a subset of comic books highly controversial since the beginning of the medium. For a significant period of its history, the comic book industry as a whole vehemently opposed fiction that pushed the ethical boundaries, dating back to the pivotal publication of *Seduction of the Innocent*, by Dr. Fredric Wertham, in 1953. His book launched a brutal attack upon the comic book industry, eviscerating them for selling a product he believed was extremely detrimental to children. Among his list of charges were that many offensive comics "stimulate unwholesome

fantasies...suggest criminal or sexually abnormal ideas... [and] may tip the scales towards maladjustment or delinquency” (118). His attacks eventually led to an investigation by a Senate subcommittee, during which his ideas were pitted against the argument of William Gaines, owner of then-popular EC Comics. Gaines didn’t deny the offensive nature of his work. Instead, he claimed that the extreme content of his comics wasn’t harmful to children; in fact, one particularly violent story was actually “designed to show the evils of race prejudice and mob violence” (Nyberg 62). Gaines defended his works of popular culture as ways to expose and confront societal ills by engaging with unseemly situations but, in spite of his testimony, the proceedings ultimately led to the establishment of an industry-wide code of censorship and the destruction of his company (Nyberg 65-67). For decades, transgressive comic books would remain outside of the mainstream due to a perceived corrupting influence; comics bore the stigma of a “childish” medium, and the industry forbade graphic content for any purpose.

The comic book industry and scholars alike have been increasingly embracing Gaines’ perception of the beneficial possibilities of his work. That *Transmetropolitan* can be critically examined (let alone distributed by a mainstream American comic book company, DC Comics) at all depends on a change in attitude towards transgressive fiction in the medium. With an aging target audience, the attitudes towards offensive content have relaxed and critics increasingly value the role of transgressive fiction. *Transmetropolitan* took the burgeoning freedom in the industry as a license to push sensible tastes to the limit; surprisingly, it achieved widespread popularity and, more recently, the increasing attention of critics and scholars. Though previous scholarship has so far left much of the formal and technical aspects of the series unexamined, numerous scholars have analyzed the manner by which Ellis and Robertson seek to affect their audience. The presentation of current problems, extrapolated to a potential they could reach if

left unaddressed, has led scholars to declare that, “*Transmetropolitan* is, at its core, a work of social satire” (Witzke 8). This satirical approach frequently involves mocking the reader while attempting to confront them with their perceived misdeeds; Kevin Thurman, who has produced multiple pieces on Warren Ellis and his work, describes the style of the series as refusing “to pander to [its] readers,” but neither does it insult their competence. Instead, he argues, Ellis is shouting at his readership to face the world around them with the intelligence he knows they possess (137). He seeks to evoke righteous anger in his readership by confronting them with distasteful images, frequently ones that are meant to make the reader question their own involvement; he holds “his readers’ eyes up to what they’re doing and to how their lack of care has produced this injustice” (Thurman and Darius 142). Ellis and Robertson take a satirical and transgressive approach, pressing the reader into confrontation with offensive content in order to inspire social change, primarily through the evocation of shame and anger. Though previous scholars identified this in the thematic content, they have as of yet neglected to analyze the formal structures that achieve these goals.

This essay will examine the complex use of the formal technique of “closure” within *Transmetropolitan*, as Ellis and Robertson use it to implicate and involve their readers in the travesties of Spider’s world in order to generate ethical engagement in the audience. Comics rely upon the active participation of the reader in order for the sequence of images to form a logical whole, using “learned competencies” to interpret the intentions of the author and mentally construct the implied scenario (Hatfield 135); Scott McCloud famously analyzed an ax murder in his seminal work, *Understanding Comics*, by saying “I may have drawn an ax being raised...but I’m not the one who let it drop...that, dear reader, was your special crime” (68). McCloud termed this inherent act in the reading of comics “closure.” Within *Transmetropolitan*, Ellis and

Robertson skillfully employ closure in a variety of manners in order to subtly create the keystone transgressive art emotion of shock by placing the reader in an intimate participation in acts that would normally offend the reader. Shock primarily operates to induce feelings of shame and defamiliarization, both of which compel the affected party to reevaluate the ethics of the situation which inspired the shock. Closure doesn't operate as a static entity within the text, but performs a variety of complex functions: it can prompt empathy and identification with stereotyped groups, or it can evoke righteous anger by coercing the reader into committing mental atrocity. Closure can promote internally-focused shame, or it can create externally-focused disgust. Creators even play with the formal structure of closure, manipulating the narrative connections between two images to draw attention to the process of mentally constructing the story world. This versatile technique allows Ellis and Robertson multiple methods to promote their transgressive aims.

This essay argues that an analysis of closure in *Transmetropolitan* illuminates our understanding of the ethical aims and formal complexity of this landmark series. This analysis will focus on three case studies of the use of closure: depictions of sexuality (especially the role of child sexuality) and the construction of sexual taboos; the representation of violence; and subversive and deceptive forms of closure. As these case studies reveal, closure guides readers into ethical engagement with taboos and social patterns in the pursuit of a beneficial change in real-world activities. Ellis and Robertson struggle throughout the series to force their readers into facing and defeating their "reckless narcissism," as a prominent *Transmetropolitan* scholar describes it (Thurman 139). Closure facilitates this goal, pulling the readers from the safety of their own personas and placing them as responsible parties in uncomfortable situations. The

ability to violently disrupt perspective grants the use of closure a position of privileged importance as a transgressive technique in *Transmetropolitan*.

Shame and Defamiliarization as Transgressive Goals

To understand how the formal techniques utilized by Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson support the content of the series, a concept of the operations of transgressive art must be developed. In her book, *Transgressive Fiction*, Robin Mookerjee dates the first use of “transgressive fiction” to 1993, when it was used to characterize a growing body of writing by authors that “deliberately include unpleasant content – taboo sex, violence, and drug use – solely to provoke the reader” (1). Though the term itself does not date back beyond the last century and the proliferation of transgressive fiction has greatly increased in the past few decades, Mookerjee sees the roots of the genre extending backward through techniques that were “perfected by the earliest satirists” (2). Like writers of satire, transgressive artists tend to provoke their readers in order to bring to light uncomfortable truths; unlike pornographic material, the offensive quality is not meant to be a source of enjoyment. The ability of these images to shock the audience occupies a pivotal role. Keiran Cashell identifies an ethical and an aesthetic engagement that a reader can experience while interacting with art; according to his argument, transgressive art provokes a “visceral reaction that refuses to be processed according to the disinterested modality” (12). This inability to remain disinterested is a form of moral engagement: the audience is compelled to consider the work at a level of principles and values. Cashell sums his argument up by concluding that this moral engagement is useful because it represents an opportunity “that something fundamental will occur as a result, that we will be changed in some way...” (15). Like the satirists, writers of transgressive fiction such as Ellis and Robertson attempt to evoke a response that will cause the reader to ethically evaluate the text.

Though shock can be used in general to describe how transgressive art accomplishes this goal, the technique can produce a variety of differing responses in readers. One particular effect of shock that *Transmetropolitan* uses effectively is shame. In these instances, the transgressive writer targets the audience directly, trying to cause them to take offense that is directed internally. As noted by Cashell, shame acts as a powerful impetus for behavioral change because “it is stimulated by coming to terms with and assessing our behavior as witnessed by potential observers” (146). This inward gaze causes readers to evaluate their actions in a light previously unrecognized. Shock strips away the artifice that covers actions and portrays them frankly. In the depiction of depraved situations that can be linked to the reader’s responsibility (such as showing the horrific conditions of those living in extreme poverty and then showing that poverty as a consequence of a common belief or action), transgressive writers demonstrate the ability to “deliver ground-level truths instead of the usual platitudes” (Mookerjee 22). Thus the transgressive function of shame fills a central position in the text. Ellis and Robertson seek to provide their version of bare truth throughout *Transmetropolitan* as, in the words of Kevin Thurman, they expose the reader’s “forms of reckless narcissism that continue to fuel the destruction of our homes and cities...” by using the components of their series as “mirrors turned black against our reflection” (139). To Cashell, shame is “*the* crucial moral motivator,” and these instances in *Transmetropolitan* open up the possibility for moral contemplation (156).

Transgressive artists also use the powerful tactic of disruption of previously held beliefs and perspectives to evoke ethical engagement. The disruption effect focuses more on upsetting views of the outer world, as opposed to the inward orientation of shame. Robin Mookerjee sees this as another link between the satirists and the transgressive writers, both of whom hold an “uncompromising aversion to all formulae that organize experience” (8). Transgressive fiction

seeks out common narratives used by readers to construct reality (the insecure bully, the unmotivated poor, the innocent child victim, etc.) and violently upsets them. Not only does this jarring moment “wreak havoc on our usual ways of ordering and understanding the world,” but “the after-shocks can reverberate in the psyche for some time” (Felski 113). Because the reader doesn’t quickly recover from this disruption, they continue to absorb the work in a manner which requires more intense thought; the usual methods of explanation have been damaged, and each scene begs for alternative interpretation. In this chaotic place, ethical engagement flourishes as, using Brian Finney’s analogy, the limits that define our moral code are swept away like so many lines in the sand (Finney). When transgressive writers (such as Ellis and Robertson in *Transmetropolitan*) attempt to disrupt the stereotypes and ideological systems of their audience, they implore their readers to evaluate others and the treatment of others in new ways.

Though transgressive fiction frequently challenges standard morality through the depiction of intensely offensive scenes, it does not promote immorality. Cashell discusses the function of transgressive art, saying “to appreciate moral goodness it may be crucial to understand the provenance of unethical acts and evil dispositions” (45). Thus, prompting consideration of crucial moral principles, as well as engagement in other realms, remains the ultimate goal of ethical engagement as created by transgressive art. Maggie O’Neill and Lizzie Seal, two prominent scholars on transgressive fiction, discuss critical audience engagement and highlight “the possibilities it creates for mobilizing social and political engagement” (156). This occurs because both shame and disruption of perspective expose the possibility for change; shame indicates flaws within the reader, while the disruption of the framing systems makes visible the possible improvement of the outside world. The destruction of these boundaries presses the reader into forming new ones; where the satirist and transgressive writer erase lines

of morality, new lines “can only be drawn by the reader...there is no objective limit... We have to reinscribe [sic] our own limits” (Finney). This call to redefine moral limits is the essential task of transgressive art, and the primary goal of *Transmetropolitan*; Ellis and Robertson consistently push on their readers, pressuring sensibilities and good taste in order to spur deeper consideration of difficult issues. While the story content of the series achieves this, the formal construction of the work enhances these aims and deepens the effect of the transgressive moments.

Closure as a Tool in Reader Participation

Throughout *Transmetropolitan*, the unique act of reader participation required in comic books enhances the goals of transgressive fiction as outlined in the above section. Comic books necessitate that readers forge mental connections between panels of still art to render a cohesive narrative flow, a process termed “closure” by Scott McCloud in his foundational work on sequential art, *Understanding Comics*. The idea of closure, though specific to sequential art alone, draws heavily from theories regarding audience engagement in both literature and art (logically, as comics are themselves a marriage of the written word and visual artwork).

Wolfgang Iser’s theory of the implied reader, with its claim that readers can become thoroughly engaged in literature if “the privileged spectator can be made into an actor,” demonstrates the value of reader participation in creating the ethical engagement sought after in *Transmetropolitan* (37). Iser claims that the reader becomes an actor through “gaps” in the text, and that readers engage by “filling in the gaps left by the text itself” (280). Because these gaps present an opportunity for agency on the part of the reader, the events of the story take on greater import; they are not solely the property of the author, but are created in part by the reader. Closure replicates this process, though in an image-based medium.

Critical theory of artwork also plays a role in the understanding of closure. David Carrier, on his essay on “Caricature,” draws a compelling link between the act of closure and Arthur Danto’s work regarding the enthymeme (113). Danto claims that artwork is frequently, if not always, rhetorical; it seeks not to factually reproduce the world for the audience, but “to represent it in such a way as to cause us to view it with a certain attitude and with a special vision” (167). To effect this viewpoint, artwork uses certain rhetorical devices. The enthymeme, in particular, resembles very closely the use of closure in order to persuade readers. An enthymeme can be described as “a truncated syllogism, with a missing premiss [sic] or a missing conclusion,” requiring the missing portion to be supplied by the reader or audience as opposed to the “framer” (170). Thus the audience is not didactically instructed, but must engage by “participating in the common procedure of reason,” thereby causing the audience to reach the conclusion for themselves. Similar to Iser’s theory, Danto refers to this necessary piece of the rhetoric as a gap. The spanning of that gap lets the viewer “persuade himself more effectively than he could be persuaded by others” (170). The enthymeme develops into a tool through which the viewer of art becomes more engaged with the rhetorical argument of the artwork by taking up agency in the construction of that argument.

Scott McCloud’s theory of closure contains elements of both the implicit reader theory of literature and the enthymeme theory of visual art. At its most basic level, McCloud defines closure as “observing the parts but perceiving the whole” (63). The format of the comic book necessitates this unique form of mental construction; as individual panels are simply static images, the book cannot become a piece of narrative fiction without the linking of the images. Closure is the act of integrating these two images, receiving the first image and mentally generating explanations that could link it to the second image. McCloud emphasizes the role of

the “gutter” prominently, the “space between the panels.” In his theory, “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” within this fertile blank space (66). In the spirit of the “gaps” discussed by Iser and Danto, this space (in comic books, a true physical emptiness) requires the reader to turn an absence on the part of the text itself into a substance, to “mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). Whereas McCloud argues that closure happens automatically in mediums such as film (because film is made of still images, albeit moving too fast for the viewer to recognize that they are performing closure), he emphasizes that the operation is much more willful and purposeful in comic books. In fact, the role of closure occupies a place of such importance that McCloud states “the reader’s deliberate, voluntary closure is comics’ primary means of simulating time and motion” (69). For the constant stream of images of a comic book such as *Transmetropolitan* to become a cohesive unit of some sort, the reader must take up the responsibility of agency by performing the act of closure countless times.

This constant agency within the text due to the operation of closure leads to a reading experience unique to the comic book form. McCloud sees this interaction as extremely valuable to the medium; he claims that “no other art form gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well” (92). While this statement may be exaggerated, closure does lead to a number of powerful effects. McCloud uses a murder scene to illustrate that, in comics, each author has “an equal partner in crime known as the reader” (68). Writers and artists create scenarios, constructing images that evoke the *possibility* of violent or offensive acts; however, in the realm of sequential arts, the ultimate party responsible for the consummation of those acts is the reader. In the murder example, McCloud indicts his audience with “all of you participated in the murder. All of you held the axe and chose your spot” (68). The agency provided by closure

operates to place the reader in a close engagement with the work; this is especially true in transgressive fictions such as *Transmetropolitan*. The offensive content implicates the reader through participation, thus enhancing the ethical engagement discussed by Cashell as the reader is no longer able to view the scenario from a detached mental standpoint. Similarly, closure operating as Danto's enthymeme bolsters the ethical conclusions reached by considering the work, due to the reader playing a role in the creation of the argument meant to persuade them. McCloud's theory of closure is thus central to comics in general, but it also operates in unique and interesting ways throughout the transgressive scenarios of *Transmetropolitan*. Closure places the reader within the ethically challenging work, forcing a confrontation with Ellis and Robertson's disturbing view of the future.

Children as Sexual Objects and the Reinforcement of Sexual Taboo

Throughout *Transmetropolitan*, the creators occasionally depict children in offensive situations of a sexual nature. The involvement of children in obscene literature is, according to O'Neill and Seal, a common transgressive tactic. They claim that it matters little whether the children are the victims or the transgressors. Either way, shocking moments involving children are interpreted as representing an "underlying sickness in the wider culture" (20). Children hold such power in transgressive fiction because childhood represents potentiality, things to come rather than things as they currently are. They are expected to be "society's hope for the future," and the attacks Ellis and Robertson make in *Transmetropolitan* by portraying them as both sexual victims and cannibals, corrupt and distraught, call into question the validity of that hope (O'Neill and Seal 26). It is no coincidence that, in a series so concerned with the ways society will change and adapt through future developments, the symbols of hope regarding that future fall prey to some of the most offensive images. The use of closure heightens this sensation by

manipulating readers not only into considering the corruption of children, but in forcing them to mentally take part in both the sexual predation and the cannibalistic contamination of the children. The creators are prompting readers to thoroughly feel these violations through participation and to consider how they can move to create a better future. These children are “fears about the transformation of society and the loss of the seemingly stable foundation to social life,” and Ellis and Robertson want their readers to intimately share their fears (O’Neill and Seal 26).

One of the most poignant examples of closure functioning as a transgressive tool within *Transmetropolitan* occurs in an issue unrelated to the main storyline, one in which Spider constructs a piece based around the poverty stricken homeless children of the City and the lengths they go to in order to survive. The reader observes the scene below; largely devoid of narration or dialogue, the sequence demands readers to construct their own narration of the pictures presented (See fig. 1-2). Throughout this sequence the images somewhat subtly suggest actions, but don’t explicitly reveal any offensive events taking place. Children standing outside a bathroom, a man entering at the same time as one of the children, the man and child leaving at the same time; even the key question “business?” vaguely suggests a monetary transaction for sex, but requires the reader’s interpretation in order to do so. The typical reader will, however, clearly understand the language being spoken by Ellis and Robertson: a man is paying an eleven year old child for sexual favors. The work of this understanding operates in the spaces the reader isn’t privilege to, “the space between the panels,” the “gutter” as it is labeled by McCloud (66). Readers fill in the gaps, building upon their past experiences to infer the meaning of “business,” of a dirty bathroom, of the short sounds which suggest discomfort that seem to be coming from behind the door. Thus the reader performs “closure,” the process that allows readers to “connect

these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud 67). Without the reader’s interaction, the still images of this sequence hold little narrative meaning.

Fig. 1. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan* v. 7, pg. 77-78

Fig. 2. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan* v. 7, pg. 79-80

That isn't to say that the image is utterly ambiguous, or even that it leaves any realistic alternative interpretations open to the reader. The comic medium relies on the act of closure for the creation of a sense of reality, and typically (as in this case) only one interpretation is expected, as a multitude of plausible situations would lead to confusion and the inability of the creators to convey their message with clarity. Indeed, Ellis and Robertson do *not* want their readers to be mistaken about the sequence of events. Closure, as described by Charles Hatfield, "requires the invocation of learned competencies; the relationships between pictures are a matter of convention..." (135). A dialogue exists between the creators and the readers in this scene, one in which the creators rely upon common experiences among the readers that will be necessary

for them to correctly interpret the implied action occurring in this scene. Though the creators expect the reader to reach a particular outcome, the very necessity of that interpretive act compels the reader into generating the sexual scenario, heightening the transgressive effects that the image provokes within the reader. They force the reader to engage in the creation of the prostitution scenario in order to maintain the idea of a consistent reality between the images, and the application of this agency places the reader uncomfortably close to child prostitution. The sequence triggers a sense of offensive shock because it requires the reader to “go there,” to build a reality behind the restroom door and thus to engage mentally in an act of pedophilia, albeit not for the reader’s pleasure but for the sake of a consistency in the narrative structure. Ellis and Robertson use the necessity of filling in the formal “gutter” to manipulate their readers into stepping into a moral gutter of their own.

The offensive content of this scene may be empowered by the use of closure to involve the reader, but it likewise assists in the fulfillment of the ethical aims of the text. This particular instance employs shock through both shame and defamiliarization, interestingly mixing the two forms. It seeks to make “the viewer ashamed for looking,” ashamed to have become a participant in this perverse act, however unwillingly that participation was given (Cashell 26). The introduction of shame places the reader in a position to interact with the content on an ethical level as they attempt to understand the emotions being evoked by their participation. Ellis and Robertson aim in this scene to bring about this heightened engagement with the text in order to shed light on social problems they perceive as existing in the real world. Their goal lines up with Spider Jerusalem’s reasons for writing this article about children who sell sex and barely manage to endure their circumstances through illegal drug use as a coping mechanism: as the director of the orphanage where the children stay later puts it: “it’s the easiest thing in the world to gloss

over, because it's the last thing any of us wants to know. But that does no one any good" (Spider's Thrash, 93). Shame prompts immediate confrontation with the real-life social practices that lead to orphaned, abused, mistreated children. Ellis and Robertson aren't seeking to bring pedophilic scenarios into their comic as a way to generate controversy or be perverse; they are attempting to force their readers into facing the social irresponsibility that creates these horrendous problems, to generate a source of shame that won't allow readers to simply "gloss over" suffering.

The transgressive use of closure in this instance serves a purpose in addition to drawing attention to the socioeconomic situation that leads to child prostitution. It also operates to defamiliarize the reader by attacking assumed stereotypes that cling to both the perpetrator and the victim of child sexual abuse. O'Neill and Seal, in their consideration of transgressive images in literature, describe the utility of this process as the disruption of commonly held views in order to avoid "cheap convictions and stereotypes" (156). While the story is clearly attacking child prostitution, the gruff nature of the children and the fact (revealed later on) that they choose this occupation themselves clouds the situation somewhat, destroying the convenient idea of these victims as innocent and pure. Indeed, the director of the state home the children stay in says that they have "everything they need," and that they spend their considerable income "on luxuries. Some of them maintain apartments" (Spider's Thrash 95). Ellis and Robertson deny the reader any easy conclusions, depicting the children as calloused enough and bearing some degree of choice so that they bear at least a degree of responsibility for their own situation. The text no longer offers support to the standard ethical perspective, and the reader must reinterpret the situation carefully.

The offensive scene the reader constructs through closure defamiliarizes the views towards the offending party as well. The artwork compliments the uncomfortable disgust generated in this scene; the dull, slack face of the “buyer” subtly emphasizes the banality of his crime (see fig. 1). Nothing about the pedophile suggests a predatory nature, but instead suggests a man committing evil half-heartedly, accepting the proposition rather than initiating. This echoes one of the sentiments of the text; evil is generally caused by sleeping members of society, harming others out of ignorance and ambivalence. In the use of closure, the reader must identify in some ways with this man by mentally enacting his actions behind closed doors. In pressing identification with a figure despised by most of society, Ellis and Robertson subtly indicate our own complicity in the ills of society. We, like the pedophile, create harmful situations in a half-conscious manner, doing evil without malevolent intent. The scene, though requiring a small amount of closure with only one plausible narrative construction, attacks the crucial stereotypes surrounding child sex abuse and opens up a largely ambiguous realm of interpretation.

Transmetropolitan consistently frames situations to deny readers this defense mechanism, this detachment that allows them to depersonalize and stereotype both the child victims and the adult perpetrators. Only the reader can answer the questions of where blame and responsibility fall.

While the rather long child prostitution sequence requires very little closure to produce an extremely morally ambiguous scene, other instances occasionally require more readership involvement in the narrative construction of a scene. Though sex acts are not explicitly displayed in the above sequence, the length of the scene and the discussion that follows within the text leave little room for plausible alternative interpretations. Thus, though the reader must still create the scenario and implicate themselves in the action, the level of closure required is relatively low. In some instances, however, Ellis and Robertson demonstrate an exceedingly high level of

skill (as well as an intricate understanding of the assumptions made by the human mind) by generating offensive content that is crafted in such a way as to be easily understood but yet could depict an innocent scene if framed slightly differently, thus placing an even greater burden on the reader to correctly interpret the scenario. One example of a scene requiring a higher level of closure occurs when Mary, a cryogenically frozen woman, is awakened by a scientist in a world utterly foreign to her after the passage of decades (see fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan v. 2*, pg. 103

The man's hand position in the middle of the three panels is the act requiring interpretation in this scene. Ellis' omniscient narration vitally fills in a piece necessary for this

interpretation; the lecherous thoughts of the councilor looking for “a woman prepared to do all the horrible things in bed that he required” prepare the reader mentally to interpret Robertson’s images in a sexual manner (Lust for Life 103). The average reader will likely interpret this image as the man groping himself in response to the nude, vulnerable female before him; while Ellis and Robertson expect this, it is important to recognize the level of closure involved in this scenario. If we strip away the text boxes, the action becomes much harder to interpret. Likewise, if the frame of the panel had been extended to include the entirety of the man rather than centered on his groin, it would become much easier to view this as an innocent clothing adjustment or even (if the lines around his hand meant to imply a back and forth motion weren’t visible) as simply an in-between image of his hand ascending from his side to the bathrobe hanging from his shoulder. Though the outside narrative provided in the text boxes isn’t technically part of the scene, the correct interpretation is only possible when the viewer chooses to integrate the narration and apply it to the provided imagery. Because the scene requires a much stronger act of closure (as the gesture would likely be irrelevant without the text), the reader’s involvement in an already voyeuristic scene becomes even more so.

This scene generates a transgressive effect of perversion and voyeurism, operating through a generation of shame. The counselor himself clearly engages in a perverted act (one that is only consummated through the reader’s willingness to interpret it as such), which is meant to unsettle the reader. But this sequence is particularly interesting because the *reader* also occupies the space of voyeur, due to the craft of Ellis and Robertson. The tactic of unexpectedly placing a viewer in such a role occurs frequently in transgressive art: Kieran Cashell discusses this type of artwork in his book on shocking pieces and their effects on viewers, *Aftershock*. He describes a statue of naked young girls that at first appears to be a sign of childish innocence. On closer

examination, however, viewers realize that many of the faces of the girls incorporate sexual organs. This statue therefore causes the viewer to first think of innocent art, and then to place the viewer unexpectedly in the realm of “the covert pervert” (Cashell 88-89). Ellis and Robertson use this same transgressive effect; in reading a science fiction story of a young woman awakening to a new world, readers unexpectedly find themselves watching a pervert take pleasure in the young woman. He appears seemingly unaware of a viewer, and the images force the reader to perversely observe him. The reader’s disgust heightens not only because of the complicit involvement in creating the counselor’s act, but also in the realization that the reader, in covertly watching the counselor indulge his desires, participates in an equivalent act.

The two scenes both use closure to fulfill the transgressive function of reaffirming taboos by depicting the fracturing of those limits; as Kieran Cashell describes this effect, the “evocation of the imaginary cancellation of the taboo is the very mechanism that preserves it in its appalling yet fascinating significance” (105). Both scenes actually argue for conservative morals by depicting child sex abuse and adult sexual predation in very negative lights. Beyond this, however, the use of closure differs considerably. The first scene prompts readers to identify with victim and perpetrator alike, recreating their actions and evoking a complex moral situation. The second scene only prompts identification with the pervert, as no closure is required with regards to the stationary victim. The first scene requires very limited usage of closure, but what is required leads to a very ambiguous ethical engagement in which the moral message raises more questions than it answers. The second scene allows for much more ambiguity from a narrative standpoint, and readers could arguably create a plausible alternative interpretation. The ethical engagement that it creates, however, is a very simple production of shame through voyeurism. No stereotypes are challenged, and very little ethical uncertainty is raised. In both scenes, closure

allows apparently transgressive material to operate in defense of a socially established moral code.

The Mixed Moralities of Personal and Detached Violence

While aberrant scenes of sexuality are a staple in transgressive texts, gruesome and explicit violence possesses an equally common presence as an alternative method to invoke shock in readers. While closure is used to defend social taboos in regards to sexuality, closure works to invert typical views towards violence by suggesting value in personal violence and decrying impersonal use, such as that employed by police officers and soldiers. Spider Jerusalem, in spite of all his wild antics, shies away from serious violence throughout the series (he causes minor harm frequently, but one point the creators emphasize repeatedly is his refusal to carry a gun). The choice by Ellis and Robertson to present a hero that doesn't view killing as a solution becomes interesting when considered next to the considerable amount of violence that occurs in the series. Warren Ellis has openly addressed concerns about his frequent use of brutal violence in media interviews. In an article titled "Blood in Your Eye: Why We Need Violent Stories," Ellis describes his belief in a need for graphic stories. He expresses anger at those who would avoid excessively violent works and the real-life problems that they illuminate, responding with "You can't ignore a tumor." Humanity can only understand violence, in his opinion, by examining the causes through fiction. He pronounces that "the most horrible things in the world...have to be interrogated." He intends for scenes of gratuitous violence within his work to operate as examinations of violence in society, provoking thought and disgust through the process of offending the reader.

Many graphic depictions of detached violence (performed by operatives in the line of duty, such as police officers, soldiers, and various bodyguards, without any personal hatred of

the victim) take place in the series, such as the sequence below directly inspired by the Kent State shootings of 1970 (see fig. 4). The closure required to interpret this scene demands minimal reader imagination; though the soldiers and their victims never appear together within a panel and thus the reader must make the connection, Ellis and Robertson clearly want this sequence to be as powerful and devastating as the event it commemorates. The copious amounts of blood and dramatic poses underscore the seriousness of the event, taking away the reader's ability to optimistically hope for the survival of the victims. The creators allow construction of the events by their readers, but that construction cannot dispense with the extremely negative outcome. Closure, however, remains necessary for the reader to link the fallen victims with the soldier's guns. Scott McCloud's analysis of violent acts that occur between panels speaks of the reader becoming responsible in these violent moments. While discussing an off-panel ax murder, he says "I may have drawn an ax being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop...that, dear reader, was your special crime" (68). Every reader becomes involved in the massacre by creating the scene. Interestingly, closure in this sequence heightens the emotional impact by disrupting the link between killer and victim. That they never share physical space on the page creates the sense of an emotional detachment as well; readers don't see a man looking into the eyes of his victim, but simply into the distance (enhanced, of course, by the faceplates that further remove them emotionally by denying them individual faces). This leads the reader to the sensation that these men *aren't*, in fact, seeing victims, but merely performing their job with cold, ruthless efficiency. Because of this seeming detachment and the brutality it signals, the scene takes on an added sense of horror and generates the transgressive element of shock. In this instance, closure elevates the repulsiveness of the moment by involving the reader but also by

separating the perpetrators from their victims, strangely placing readers in a deeper level of engagement than the soldiers appear to display.

Fig. 4. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan* v. 10, pg. 51,54

Ellis and Robertson appeal not just to reason, but to powerful emotions as a morally reforming force. Scholars have taken note in the past of Ellis' penchant to incorporate righteous anger into his work; Kevin Thurman and Julian Darius, in their recent book about Ellis' body of work, state that "anger in Ellis's work is something almost Biblical" (141). This anger arises from a perceived state of wrong in the outer society rather than a personal slight, much like how Spider Jerusalem enters a state of rage due to these shootings, though he wasn't in any way connected with the events. The authors describe this as a "revolutionary rage" "against social injustice and abuse of power" (142). The closure within this scene seeks to provoke outrage, a

righteous anger towards soldiers who would shoot innocent civilians. The scene tackles the issue of impersonal violence, emphasizing through the physical separation of victim and killer on the page the moral repugnancy of committing violence without a personal reason to do so. This anger isn't meant to be directed towards a fictional organization; after all, the incident takes inspiration directly from the real-life Kent State shootings, and *Transmetropolitan* is begging readers to remain vigilant against similar future occurrences. Ellis provokes his readers knowingly in this way because, as Thurman and Darius put it, Ellis knows that “anger can lead to epiphanies that change the world” (152). In this instance, the creators intend for the minimal closure required to be painful and forced; Ellis and Robertson know that their readers won't enjoy becoming involved in the massacre, and they coerce them to do so in hopes of inspiring useful moral outrage.

Though uses of impersonal violence committed by the police, soldiers, and similar figures throughout the series repeatedly receive condemnation as in the scene above, Spider does occasionally inflict harm in his quest for truth. These depictions possess much more fluidity in interpretation, inviting the reader to enjoy the violence. The sequence below represents one moment in the text where violence appears to occupy a more liminal space, obviously not condemned but retaining an impish quality as well, as opposed to wholesale approval (see fig. 5). The man Spider appears to be using his “bowel disrupter” weapon on is known as the Beast, the incumbent president who citizens universally revile for his brutal social policies. As one of the two main villains Jerusalem faces throughout the series, this moment is meant to be read as a humorous bit of violent justice.

Fig. 5. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan* v. 2, pg. 24

The use of closure in this scene invites a higher degree of reader participation than the university massacre scene. This primarily arises due to the lack of any scenes showing an outcome; Spider's triumphant walk from the restroom implies that something appealing to him has occurred, but the consequences of his bowel disruptor remain unrendered. In some instances, the mystery induced through the lack of visual representation satisfies more than if the creators had actually depicted the scenario. Wolk touches on this point when discussing the operation of closure and the gutter. He argues that "leaps of the imagination are an enormous pleasure," then proceeds to argue that the gaps between panels in a comic represent a particularly fertile space for these leaps to be engaged in (133). Readers aren't hindered by being kept outside the

restroom door in this scene; they are instead free to indulgently create the scene as they wish. Every reader envisions the use of the “bowel disruptor” in their own way, and this freedom allows the scene to be more satisfying than if the possibilities were constrained by a visual representation of the outcome. *Transmetropolitan* uses closure in this scene to cause readers to identify with Spider’s actions by taking pleasure in generating the suffering of his enemies. This directly contrasts with the use of closure in the massacre scene, in which readers are expected to be revolted by their participation rather than relish the humorous possibilities thereby created.

When Ellis and Robertson make the engagement in violence satisfying for the reader, they are furthering the transgressive goals of their work. Brian Finney describes one of the functions of transgressive works of fiction as helping readers to reexamine their moral boundaries. These limits “are continuously subject to slippage,” as “there is no objective limit.” Transgressive fiction acts to blur these delineations by creating situations in which the reader is exposed to a set of limits that are most likely much different than their own. Thus, when the reader participates in the aberrant violence employed by Jerusalem against the Beast, they engage with these limits and are prompted to reconsider where the line should be drawn. The pleasure that the act of closure creates in this instant enhances this effect. Not only do readers participate and observe the transgression of the moral limit, but they enjoy the act as well. This enjoyment of crossing the line links with the transgressive technique of defamiliarization. In presenting the torment of a president (a position invested with immense authority) by a journalist in an appealing light, the creators call into question strong ethical boundaries in place in society. They upset the assumptions both that personal violence is wrong, and that strong sources of authority should be revered and respected, not humiliated through the embarrassing violence of a bowel disruptor. Ellis and Robertson perform the sort of action that Finney discusses by leaving

the matter up for discussion: Spider's actions may aid the readers in facing the boundary line, but the readers "have to reinscribe [sic] [their] own limits," as Finney describes it. Spider isn't a perfect hero, and the creators use him in this situation (and in many others) in the same way that he utilized the bowel disruptor. He shakes things up, making the reader uncomfortable and unsettling ethical notions. Spider's use of violence receives tacit endorsement because it challenges authority and injustice.

These two scenes of violence demonstrate how closure can operate to serve vastly different transgressive goals within the same text. The first scene denounces impersonal violence, and this is supported by a rigid use of closure that involves the reader unwillingly by pressing them into engagement with a horrific slaughter. The second scene endorses personal violence to some degree, if the victim is judged to sufficiently deserve it. Closure operates quite differently in this scene, remaining much more open-ended and playing upon the willingness of the audience to create humor and derive pleasure from the scene. Both of these scenes serve to "reject beliefs considered assumptive" in American culture in regards to violence, a common practice in transgressive texts (Mookerjee 102). While the dominant culture tends to present impersonal violence in the service of the government (whether through military or law enforcement operations) as honorable and personal violence as detestable, Ellis and Robertson invert this relationship. They instead draw attention to atrocities committed in the name of a higher authority while simultaneously highlighting the pleasure derived by personal violence targeted at those who spend their lives hurting others. The revision of the ethics of violence holds a central position in the series, and a thorough understanding of the usage of closure illuminates the varied techniques through which that revision is enacted.

Transgressive Presentation: The Subtle Formal Variations of Closure

While the previous sections have focused primarily on subtle complexities regarding the usage of closure to address particular themes, the formal structure of the closure performed has conformed to the standard presentation as described by Scott McCloud. McCloud's concept of closure frequently presents as an act that takes place between two panels as a mental narrative connection, but it can take on interesting formal variations in some cases, such as when the same mental process occurs in single panel images. The image below occurs as a full page spread, a single panel that occurs without any clear narrative connection to the pages before or after it (see fig. 6). This image appears during a story arc centered around groups of impoverished outcasts deemed the "New Scum," and Ellis and Robertson make frequent use of these stand-alone images within this story to convey the general atmosphere of the world they are creating. Each one consists of a single snapshot, seemingly out of place in the narration, that creates an emotional tone for the ongoing story.

Fig. 6. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan* v. 2, pg. 24

The children in the lower left quadrant of this page hold the key to the transgressive nature of the image. They appear to be eating a piece of human flesh, which readers are most likely to assume is the “roast leg of bastard” advertised on the food cart behind them. This assumption, however, requires that the reader engage in a more exotic form of closure. David Carrier discusses this operation in one of his essays on comic aesthetics, “Caricature.” He uses the example of a man hanging over a river with what appears to be a weight around his neck; the clear interpretation of a man committing suicide is only possible if viewers are able to “envisage earlier and later moments of an ongoing visual narrative” (107). This possibility of such an interpretation exists because viewers make assumptions based on previous experience, such as a familiarity with suicide. In the *Transmetropolitan* image, readers must perform closure between two physically nonexistent blank spaces on either side of the image: the implied past and future. In regular examples of closure, the connection forms between two visible points, like connecting dots. In single image panels, the closure requires extrapolation from a single point outwards to imagined past and future points. This places a greater degree of responsibility upon the readers, as they are given less material and therefore retain more control over the constructed narrative outcome. The reader becomes complicit in the act when they create a past where this hunk of meat becomes a human leg bought at the cart; similarly, the reader’s own expectation of horror creates the future in which it is assumed these children will actually consume the flesh and will likely do so without any sense of guilt or unease. Nothing in the image excludes a future in which the children spit out the meat, call the police and have the meat peddler arrested. As Carrier argues, “that we seemingly freely choose the next scene reveals our double nature. We enjoy cruelly imagining disaster” (113). These children engage in cannibalism because the reader

actively creates that scenario through a unique act of closure, choosing to see the image in a dark and perverse way that is only suggested by the static image.

Forging the link between the reader and the act of cannibalism functions to create sensations of transgression and offense. In this case, the offense should clearly be interpreted in a satirical manner, mocking society and drawing attention to social ills. To an attentive reader, the image of the food cart and the children may evoke the memory of Jonathan Swift's claim that "a young healthy child well nursed is... a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food..." (Swift). In his day, the famous satirist was protesting the treatment of the impoverished Irish at the hands of the English by suggesting that they may as well eat the young children, a reflection of how cruelly the Irish were being treated. Ellis and Robertson clearly use this invocation of the shocking act of human cannibalism to draw attention to societal injustice as well. The food cart proclaims "French people" and "roast leg of bastard" as menu choices, with "dolphin nuggets" and "puffin" clearly visible as well. This operates to place certain underprivileged minority groups (the series appears to continually portray the French as a derided nationality) as equivalent to animal meat, fit for consumption by other human beings. The creators urge their audience, like Swift did in 1729, to avoid the mistreatment of human beings to such an extent that they lose value as anything but fuel; they bolster this argument by incorporating this potent form of closure to place greater responsibility for the construction upon the reader, thereby deepening the offense.

Other formal complexities of closure arise when Ellis and Robertson draw attention to the mental processes required by reading comics in order to further their message, a self-aware form of closure that contrasts with the typical silent presence closure inhabits. The sequence of images below appears to be quite humorous; Spider, in his typically unstable fashion, appears to beat an

old woman attempting to sell him roses (see fig. 7). At this point in the series, the creators have gone to great length to establish his eccentric ravings and derangement, and the reader easily categorizes this scene as just another outburst. When his assistant chastises him for his cruelty two pages later, however, he reveals that “that ‘poor woman’ is a veteran secret service man called Adolf who routinely overcharges in his sideline of narcotics dealing” (Year of the Bastard 35). In this case, Ellis and Robertson have subverted the typical use of closure; they have taken Hatfield’s “learned competencies” and used them to deceive the reader into creating a consistent narrative that they are then able to reveal as a sham, a construction that causes the reader to question their ability to correctly interpret events. They are, in a sense, executing the ability wherein “a cartoonist can temporarily hijack a reader’s visual imagination,” as described by Douglas Wolk (133). The reader’s expectations (and therefore, the very process of closure that proceeds from it) become a false guide.

Fig. 7. Ellis, Warren and Darick Robertson. *Transmetropolitan* v. 2, pg. 24

This deception through closure acts to push the theme of searching for the truth that resonates throughout the series. In his article on *Transmetropolitan* and the questioning of authority, Chris Murphy highlights one of the goals of Ellis and Robertson. He says that Ellis “begs the reader to not trust those with power and to not take it for granted that they will want to help” (25). Spider’s quest concerns itself with uncovering authority figures who are deceitful, and much of the rhetoric in the series seeks to show that sources of truth are often far less pure than they appear. Though the series constantly directs these criticisms at political figures and media moguls within the fictional setting (reflecting our own politicians and newsmakers), this particular scene provides one instance in which the creators show themselves to be equally untrustworthy. Robertson and Ellis, by betraying the implicit trust required between creator and reader in order to craft coherent narratives, demonstrate their point by showing themselves to be deceptive. Incorrectly interpreting the situation provides humor for the reader as well as a pleasurable assurance that their hero, while unrefined and impulsive, has not crossed a moral line that would remove him from his prophet-like position in the series. While this scene might appear to be lighthearted, the implicit argument it makes about authority is chilling: the world and those who run it, as well as the perceived moral and ethical standards the reader might believe in, can be as deceptive as the kind elderly woman who in actuality is Adolf, the drug peddling security officer.

In both of the scenes described above, Ellis and Robertson demonstrate a refined control of the closure technique. They utilize these uncommon forms of the technique sparingly, and to great effect. Single panel images require the reader to invest more of their imagination in the construction of the narrative, and thus can enhance the transgressive power of the image. They handle this carefully and infrequently, however, as such deviation from the regular image-

closure-image formulation always flirts with the perilous loss of narrative control. Used infrequently, this form calls attention to the unreliable nature of creative authority; often attempted, and readers lose the ability to believe in the narrative at all, too wary of tricks and dupes. They also understand the danger of using the self-aware form of closure from the latter example too often, as the method of reading comic books relies on a trust between creator and reader, a trust that can only be infringed upon rarely. When Ellis and Robertson manipulate the function of closure within *Transmetropolitan* in ways that undermine the trust between audience and creator, they further encourage their readers to carefully and critically evaluate the series in an ethical light by removing the option of easily trusting in a packaged moral message.

Conclusion: Comic Books as Ethical Texts

This essay has examined the complex use of closure as a transgressive technique within Warren Ellis and Darrick Robertson's landmark series, *Transmetropolitan*. It has explored the diverse and various ways in which closure can cause shock through shame and defamiliarization, leading to an enhanced ethical engagement with the text through reader participation. Spider Jerusalem's wild antics and the disgusting nature of The City that he violently struggles with are not simply obscene entertainment meant to pander to perverse tastes; the creators purposely crafted the offensive material to serve a higher artistic aim. A focus on these formal techniques makes a clear case for interpreting the series as a piece of transgressive art.

The importance of comprehending the transgressive operation of closure within *Transmetropolitan* extends beyond the series itself into the larger realm of comic book studies. Critical attention to the medium has developed considerably since the days of William Gaines and the pandemonium over horror comics' ability to sway young minds. Yet, scholars continue to focus their attention on a thematic rather than a formal approach to the genre. This analysis of

Transmetropolitan suggests the rewards of formal analysis for appreciating the ethical, political, and aesthetic complexity of the genre. Clearly, comic books should not merely be studied as artifacts of popular culture, important only for their ability to captivate large audiences; many works, like *Transmetropolitan*, aim at a higher purpose, attempting to evoke moral contemplation and change within their readership, and drawing upon nuanced and sophisticated techniques to do so. Warren Ellis once said that a writer has “a responsibility to ask very uncomfortable questions at a very loud volume” (Meaney and Thurman 84). *Transmetropolitan*’s use of closure demonstrates that comic books have the ability to affect readers in a manner unique to the medium, and we would do well to continue to study those special effects and techniques that belong solely to the world of sequential art.

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