# The "Half-Real" as Created by Photomontage: Acclimated Bodies, Movement, and Photographs

Yamamoto Tadahiro

## Introduction

This paper focuses on photomontage, a technique in Mexican comics (also known as *historieta*), to examine the relationships among media, techniques, and characters in materials related to the comics artist and editor José Guadalupe Cruz Díaz (José G. Cruz) and the *El Santo* series on which he worked.

Although further details will be given later in the paper, photomontage is a technique that involves cutting out photographs of characters and re-pasting them against drawn backgrounds. Rather than using the photographs in each panel that is positioned on the pages of the comic book, the photographs are cut out, resized, and made to "fit in" with the background drawing; this "blending" is a vital aspect of photomontage. This "blending (acclimating)" of drawing and photography, comics and Mexican reality, is a part of the creator José G. Cruz's strategy of realism. Such a fusion became the impetus for the transformation of the El Santo character—the topic of the present paper.

Narrative formats that use photographs are by no means limited to Mexico. Italian *fumetti*, North American and Latin American photo comics, and even, in the broad sense, photo essays in the American magazine *LIFE* can be said to have a similar format. In Japan, so-called photo novels were published in the youth magazines *Shōjo no tomo* and *Nippon shōnen* in the 1910s. Unlike illustrations for serial newspaper novels, the photographs in photo novels played a major role in the narrative, with each panel containing a photograph combined with text. In some cases, a technique that was the reverse of photomontage was used, with characters drawn onto a photo background (Note 1). Furthermore, photo novels existed not only as original stories but also as magazine versions of films, which were called film novels or film stories. From the late 1920s, photo novels started being published as the magazine version of films. Through the medium of photographs, these magazine-films functioned as a bridge between film media and written media (Note 2).

Moreover, when discussing the "mediatic" relationships between the different types of media, Hidaka Ryōsuke referenced Jonathan Sterne:

> Media itself does not mediate reality as an autonomous entity. It mutually references the features of other forms of media, quotes them, and recomposes them, manifesting itself in the form of media at that point in time (Note 3).

Hidaka stated that "new media incorporate the ways in which old media are used" and that in contrast to "remediation," including the "single-track development of new media that perform better mediation," the term "mediatic" emphasizes the cross-referential relationships between forms of media (Hidaka, 2021). In many ways, this "mediatic" relationship applies to the relationship between Mexican comics and photographs/films. To jump ahead somewhat, photomontage can be said to act as a bridge between the media types of comics and photographs/films, blending them together to create new value and a return current

between the two types of media.

Here, let us examine how photomontage was introduced.

**José G. Cruz's Innovations and Realism Strategy**

In the context of Mexican comics, José G. Cruz is thought to be the person who first conceived of the technique of photomontage and put it to use in his art; a detailed career history can be found in the materials included in this volume (February 2022, forthcoming). Cruz was not only an artist but also the founder of his own publishing house, Ediciones José G. Cruz, and a notable innovator when it came to comics. The Director of the Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum, Rubén Eduardo Soto Díaz, made the following remarks regarding Cruz.

> He made comics more serious, working in a novelistic style that dealt with humanistic content and introducing the groundbreaking format of having the beginning and ending set from the start. He started to implement an unprecedented method, formulating a novel on the premise of serializing it over a period of two to three months and then drawing all the panels using the *medio tono* technique (Note 4).

*Medio tono*, a characteristic technique of Mexican comics along with photomontage, was invented by one of Cruz's influences, Alfonso Tirado, in his "El Flechador del Cielo" (*Pepín*, 1938). The technique creates a halftone image that is drawn with diluted ink, thereby adding rich gradients to the comic images that used to have stark black and white contrasts.

Furthermore, the comics magazines of the 1940s were published in a daily format that lent itself to sporadic content and was not packaged for long-term narratives. However, Cruz wrote original novels in advance, on the condition of serialized publication, and subsequently turned these novels into comics himself. The transformation from serializing fragmented stories to serializing a single story in fragments not only enabled the development of the mixture of media between novels and comics, but also addressed the issue of realism. Despite the issue of daily publishing cycles, a story that was updated daily would eventually gain continuity, and as the story was told in a single moment (that is, time) and location (that is, space), the daily format allowed the reader and the story to synchronize (Note 5).

Cruz also brought realism into the content of his works. The following is the opening narration to *Ventarron* (*Pepín*, 1943):

> One lonely gray afternoon, there was a grimy old man clothed in rags, in a dark corner between the old buildings of the factory district. … He was just one of many beggars (Note 6).

This opening line clearly shows Cruz's intention to connect the numerous poor people of Mexico, that is to say, the readers of comics, to the protagonist of the story. He was attempting to transform comics from stories of fictional characters, or stories of "someone else," to stories of "us." In *Muñequita* (Ediciones José G. Cruz, 1952), Cruz presents a comic with a story that features real-life characters as protagonists (Note 7).

Photomontage becomes one element of the realism strategy Cruz employs in his comics. Cruz's introduction of photomontage was devised gradually. Under José García Valseca, a publishing house owner who had obtained the rights to use domestic and foreign film images in the 1940s, Cruz produced *fotonovelas* as

the comic book versions of films. A *fotonovela* is the magazine version of a film in which the original is simplified and its images are put into a panel layout in combination with lines from the film. However, Cruz was dissatisfied with the craftsmanship of these magazine-films. Soto, the Director of the Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum stated

> These works were too cold, too static, they were not quite snappy enough. So when he boldly experimented by incorporating collages of drawings and photographs into comics, his works became popular with readers, and this is how the photomontage technique came to be (Note 8).

Aside from the issue of realism, the introduction of photomontage was also connected to the issue of streamlining comic book production. The unusual publication cycles of daily magazines were unavoidable for comics creators, which raised the serious question of how to make the production process more efficient. Even before photomontage, Cruz had transformed the comic production process. In comics production studios, although a “rubber-stamp-based production system was created and put to use” (Note 9), its use was limited. Consequently, Cruz made images of the parts of characters’ faces ahead of time, aiming to maximize the efficiency of the process by reusing these images.

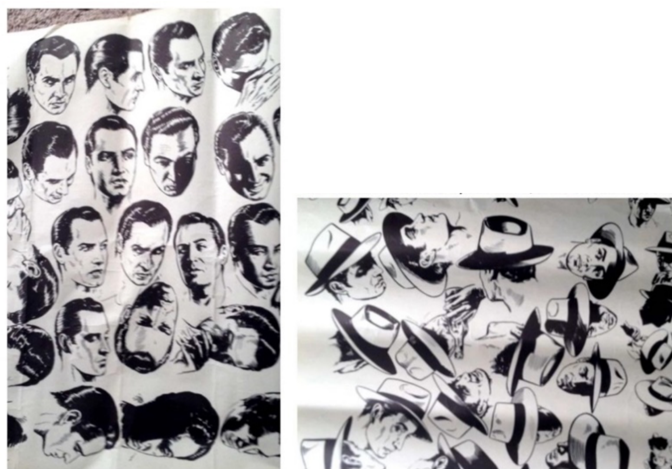

Figure 1. Face drawings (from the archives of José G. Cruz’s family)

In relation to optimization, photomontage is a direct extension of the aforementioned turn of events. The images in Figure 1 are depicted with a touch of comic strip style, with the characters’ expressions drawn such that the images can be sorted into symbolic categories; these examples show that Cruz approached drawing comics in a symbolic manner, as with the manga symbol theory of Tezuka Osamu. The term “symbolic drawing” tends to bring to mind rough sketches with sparse lines. However, as Figure 1 shows, the issue of lines and the issue of symbolizing expressions are not in conflict; rather, the two can be understood as able to coexist.

It is worth mentioning that only the characters’ heads were symbolized and reused. Although it is impossible to fully verify the actual circumstances of production at the time, the images in Figure 1 suggest a process in which the heads were copied and pasted, after which the bodies were drawn to fit them. This process itself would have the same structure as photomontage. In other words, the mixture of copying heads and drawing

bodies follows the same process as mixing character photographs and backgrounds or special effect lines in a drawing.

Such a melding of reality in storytelling—this innovation in the images of comics—came to a head with Cruz’s major hit comic *El Santo*.

**The Birth of El Santo**

El Santo was a fabled Mexican professional wrestler, known as a *luchador* in *lucha libre* (namely, professional wrestling); his name means “The Saint.” El Santo, or Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta, first debuted as such at the Arena Mexico in 1942. Until his retirement in 1982, his fame was not limited by the borders of Mexico. El Santo’s popularity grew through film and comic book appearances as he became and built a kind of “character” beyond that of a mere *luchador*.

In 1952, El Santo was brought into the world of comics when José G. Cruz worked on a script for a short series of films that featured him. What kinds of expressive devices were used when an actual *luchador* became a comic book hero? Here, we will examine El Santo’s “debut fight” in the comic *Santo el Enmascarado de Plata*.

The weekly publication *El Enmascarado de Plata* (*The Silver-Masked Man*) was launched on September 3, 1952, featuring the following text on the cover and in the opening narration:

> Starting today, *lucha libre*’s biggest idol is the most exciting comic book hero.
>
> How did the thrilling legend of the character known as “El Santo” or “El Enmascarado de Plata” begin? Where was he born? What kind of person was he? No one can say.
>
> One day, he appeared out of nowhere. The only thing everyone knew, everyone understood, was his love for and profound devotion to the powerless, the weak, and those in trouble. The people of Santa Cruz revered him and made him a hero.
>
> Wherever it may be, if someone is in trouble, this mysterious figure will always come to their aid (Note 10).

However, contrary to the promotional line on the front cover, the essential figure—El Santo himself—dies in the first volume.

Volume 1 can be briefly summarized as follows. To begin with, a burglar sneaks into the mansion of Don Samuel, a rich Santa Cruz moneylender. El Santo appears and fends off the burglar after a fight but is shot in the chest. The moneylender, who had been lining his pockets by charging high interest, was detested by the people of Santa Cruz, so it might seem suspicious that El Santo would help him, but El Santo admonishes him to redress his past behavior and live righteously as he bleeds from his open wound. Then, sensing that he has reached his final hour, El Santo goes home to the room of his sleeping son and entrusts the role of “El Enmascarado de Plata” to his son with his dying breath (Fig. 2). Volume 1 is 24 pages long; a period of 15 years passes up to page 9, and on the remaining pages, we see the beginning of the depiction of the son as El Santo.

Thus, in his comic book debut, El Santo ends up passing the baton to the next generation. For an idolized *luchador* to become a comic book hero, he had to “die once to be resurrected” as a Christ-like “saint” in the Catholic tradition.

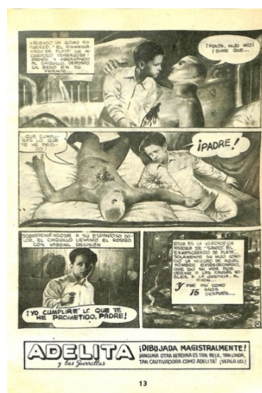


Figure 2. El Santo’s “succession” scene
José G. Cruz, *El Enmascarado de Plata* (Ediciones José G. Cruz, September 1952, Volume 1, p.13)

Naturally, this is Cruz’s realism strategy at work. As a *lucha libre* idol, El Santo and his spectators would have had an asymmetrical relationship across the distance set by the ropes of the wrestling ring. However, Cruz, in attempting to meld comics with reality, introduced the storyline of a succession as a device to highlight El Santo’s continued connection with an impoverished public, as a “hero who shows up wherever someone is in trouble in our town.”

In the current world of *lucha libre*, such a succession is nothing special in itself. The son of Guzmán, the real Santo, also took over the role of “El Santo,” and similar successions have happened for other *luchadores* such as Black Shadow and Blue Demon. However, at least in the 1950s, successions had yet to become customary, and Cruz’s strategy for drawing readers into the comic preceded reality.

Furthermore, the opening narration, similar to that of the aforementioned *Ventarron* and *Muñequita*, connected the ongoing story with the circumstances of Mexico in which most readers would have been situated. In the second half of Volume 1, a child is also cast as the corresponding opponent of the second-generation El Santo. In this episode, the child is caught stealing by El Santo; however, the child says that he had no choice because his father told him to do it. The child’s theft demonstrates a direct link to the actual problems of Mexico in which the child’s father was engulfed. Here, too, the child (along with his circumstances) is brought into the world of the narrative as an avatar for the reader.

Here, let us discuss the production system and comic book page composition. On the title page, in addition to Cruz, Trinidad Romero is credited for “Realización” (production) and Horacio Robles for “Fondos” (backgrounds). The basic production system for *El Enmascarado de Plata* was that Cruz wrote the script, Romero produced the actual pages of the book, including the photomontages, and Robles drew the backgrounds. Since Cruz was working on scripts for several projects at the same time, he delegated parts of the actual production to others.

Apart from Volume 1, all the title pages of each volume had the same layout, while the other pages comprised one of three different types of panel layouts. The title page had a large panel, with another panel that was demarcated to the lower right and the title and narration written in the upper section. The panel layouts for other pages were as follows: (1) two panels (upper and lower); (2) three panels in two levels, with one of the two segmented; and (3) both upper and lower

sections segmented for a total of four panels on the page. In other words, each page consisted of relatively few panels: between two and four. These three layouts were partially used in Volume 1 as well; however, the composition of the title page was different, generally split into three different levels of panels, while the first page had four to six panels—a relatively large number. This is related to the introduction of photomontage: it seems that reducing the number of panels was a method to make the photography and panel production more efficient after the first volume was produced.

In the next section, we will examine the characteristics of El Santo, who became a comic book hero through photomontage.

**Half-Real Physicality**

In *El Enmascarado de Plata*, El Santo is frequently shown as flying from high places such as trees and house windows (Fig. 3). However, even if the real Santo might have dove off the top rope of the ring, he could not move around by flying freely, and, in the same vein, neither can his comic book equivalent (Fig. 4). This manner of limited "flight" is made possible with Cruz's photomontages and is something that emblemizes El Santo as a comic book hero.

One key characteristic about his flight is that El Santo does not fly freely against gravity, namely, from below to above, but is made to fly downward from, for example, a window. The photograph cutout of El Santo is positioned at a downward slant with his arms and legs stiffly stretched out and white flight effect lines drawn in. If he were merely leaping down from a high place, there would be no need for such a pose, and a feet-first descent posture would have been sufficient. This peculiar kind of "flight" (which abides by gravity but is expressed such that it seems as though he can fly) forms a standard for the realism of the heroes in Mexican comics and assures readers that the hero is—just like the people of Santa Cruz—human. In fact, the Santo in this story has a vulnerable physicality, which includes his bleeding and eventual death in Volume 1.

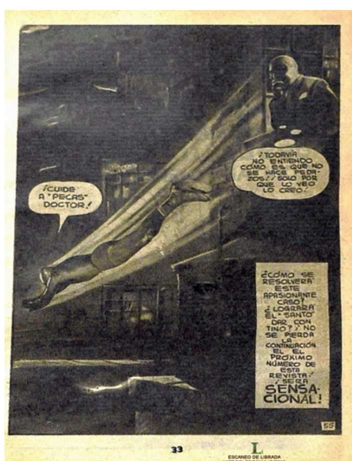


Figure 3. El Santo's gravity-bound "flight"
José G. Cruz, *El Enmascarado de Plata* (Ediciones José G. Cruz, September 1952, Volume 2, p.33)

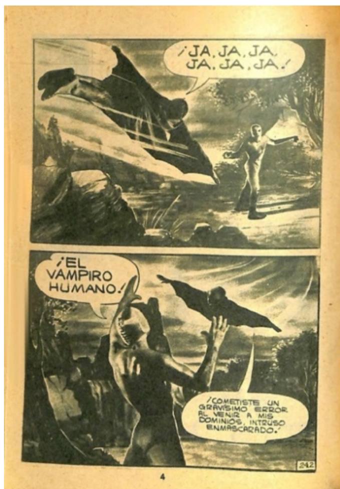


Figure 4. A soaring vampire and El Santo
José G. Cruz, *El Enmascarado de Plata* (Ediciones José G. Cruz, October 1952, Volume 9, p.4)

Initially, El Santo’s villains are primarily humans who commit theft and other crimes; however, nonhuman, imaginary monsters are also introduced later. For example, there is a vampire in Volumes 7–10 (this vampire also wears wrestling leggings and is drawn like a *luchador*). The showdown scene, as shown in Figure 4, depicts the vampire soaring freely through the air, on cape-like wings, while El Santo, who is unable to fly, cannot chase him. Instead, a scene is depicted with a “witch” who carries both herself and El Santo while flying on a broom. Regarding this question of reality and fiction, Jesper Juul stated the following about video games as a kind of “half-real” phenomenon:

> Video games are real in that they are made of real rules that players actually interact with and winning or losing a game is a *real* event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is, therefore, to interact with real rules *while* imagining a fictional world, and a video game *is* a set of rules as well as a fictional world (Note 11).

Video games and comics are, of course, different kinds of media, and comic book readers do not play anything. However, in *lucha libre* itself, the showdown schema between the face or heroic character (*técnico*) and the heel (*rudo*), along with the masks of the *luchadores,* present a fabrication that interweaves fiction and reality in a similar “half-real” entertainment form. Based on this form, readers of the comic *El Enmascarado de Plata*, which was produced with photomontage, may experience a further fictionality that is akin to that of the aforementioned video games.

The rules of *El Enmascarado de Plata* are as follows: “El Santo’s physicality is nearly identical to that of a living human being, and he exists in the same world as the reader.” Photomontage is the technique that makes these rules even more applicable; photographs that connect the real Santo to the comic book Santo reinforce the rules that constitute the foundation of the comic book’s world. However, this version of El Santo fights with unreal adversaries, such as vampires, which characterizes the comic book’s world as fictional. In other words, the (real) *luchador* El Santo, the (half-real) comic book El Santo, and the (unreal) opponents that

serve as fictional symbols are all established in the integrated “half-real” world of the comic book.

The photomontage technique that Cruz introduced prompted the rewriting of the “half-reality” of *lucha libre* to the “half-reality” of a comic book. Regardless of how many vampires, witches, or other unreal beings appear to attack people, suck their blood, or fly around, the comic book El Santo remains firmly human to the point that his “half-real” flight is created through photomontage. The hero depicted in *El Enmascarado de Plata* is not immortal (and cannot fly), while the *lucha libre luchador* unleashes superhuman moves that do not seem human: paradoxically, these two characters share the same physicality. This kind of “half-real” physicality is renewed by means of photomontage and shows readers a world that is considerably more fictional.

The appearance of unreal villains is also related to the films in which El Santo starred. El Santo’s film debut occurred in two 1958 collaborative works with Cuba: *Santo contra el Cerebro del Mal (Cerebro del Mal)* and *Santo contra los Hombres Infernales (Cargamento Blanco)*. El Santo films were made and released nearly every year, following the success of *Santo contra los Zombies* in 1961, until approximately 1973. As the titles suggest, these works express a marked tendency toward mass-market entertainment that centered on showdowns with unreal villains. There may have been some influence from B movies imported from the United States; however, there are numerous interesting aspects that also show common ground with local Mexican culture, such as the appearance of vampires (Note 12).

In this manner, comic books and photographs/films have a mediatic cross-referential relationship. The magazine versions of films were created in comic books using photographs from existing films, but Cruz, still unsatisfied, created photomontage by combining photographs and drawings, spurring innovation in comics. Although the comic-book Santo retains his “half-real” *lucha libre* physicality, as his mass popularity grew, he gradually began fighting highly fictional, unreal opponents. The films starring him that were made around this time of popularity primarily feature the motif of showdowns with these unreal opponents.

In summary, the format of taking photographs from films was used to create a mediatic relationship in comic books, with the photographs subsequently coded in accordance with the style of comics (with the introduction of photomontage). Specifically, while maintaining the rules of El Santo’s “half-real” physicality, which was associated with reality through the use of photographs, new value was also created through certain means, such as confrontations with unreal opponents, which would not have been a part of reality. Subsequently, films proactively adopted the aforementioned new value and depicted El Santo confronting various unreal opponents; in this manner, each media type was transformed in a cross-referential relationship.

In the next section, we will examine the question of Cruz, the man who was unsatisfied with the magazine versions of films and whose dissatisfaction led to the introduction of photomontage.

**Constructed Movement**

For Cruz, the *fotonovela* magazine versions of films, in which individual panels from a film reel were used

for the same individual comic panels, were “cold and static.” The reverse of this descriptor would be “hot and dynamic.” In other words, Cruz seemingly sought movement that could not be expressed in the magazine versions of films. One might say that he invented photomontage based on a strategy of realism to create this dynamic movement.

In what manner did the magazine versions of films lack the movement of comics? This “movement” concerns two aspects: a “spatial kinesis on the page through the layout of panels that have different angles and sizes” and a “temporal kinesis that represents physical movement of the characters from one panel to the next or within a single panel.” These two types of kinesis cannot be isolated in production or reception; both are required to express “movement” on the page for both Mexican comic books and Japanese manga (Note 13).

It would be possible to show the movement of characters by positioning successive frames from a film reel on the page, like a series of photographs, but this would have been impractical in terms of cost; therefore, arbitrary photographs were selected and positioned. It might also have been possible to indicate character movement with a series of arbitrary photograph panels. However, because the camera position does not change as drastically in films as the perspective changes in comics, only certain photographs could be selected in some scenes, such as conversations (Fig. 5). Once this was done, the comic book page would end up repeating similar layouts and character size images, thereby losing kinesis on the page. By refusing to rely on photographs from films and instead taking new ones, it became possible to use multiple angles to fit the comic book page (Fig. 6).

Although not from the same scene of the same story, Figures 5 and 6 are examples of two different numbers of panels on a single page. The narrative progression is aided by the text in comic books; this progression and its reception occur in a shorter period of time in comics than in films to help the reader continue to read actively (that is, if a 90-minute film were remade into a manga, reading the manga would take less time). Because this feature inevitably allows a substantial portion of the narrative to progress in a few panels, it is possible to leave out similar panels within the same scene.

For composition within a panel, screen images and still images must use different methods to show movement. To indicate that a character is “moving” in a still image, the artist uses the “cross-time projection method” and indicates time by drawing the same character multiple times within the same panel or by providing additional depictions via photography or drawing, such as how El Santo’s “flight” was enabled through the positioning of the character and effect lines. Furthermore, because the composition within an individual panel is also related to kinesis on the page, the difference from the adjacent panels must be shown. In comic books, as layouts can be created by making montages of photographs during production without necessarily taking photographs in actuality, the artist can easily create kinesis on the page by changing the angle or size of an image on the same page (Note 14).

The movement Cruz sought for *El Enmascarado de Plata* was characterized by the need for a mixture of photography and illustration. Photomontage makes it possible to retain the realism of film by using photographs while escaping a uniform composition through the addition of new photography, photo recomposition, and drawing. Thus, it allows the representation in comics of temporal and spatial “kinesis”, as well as physical movement.

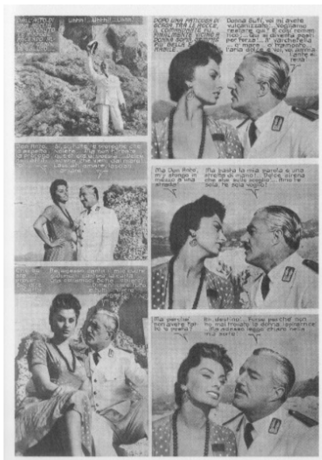

Figure 5. Examples of page layouts in film and photonovels

Dino Risi, *Pane, Amore e …,* (*Scandal in Sorrento*) (1955) film photonovel

Baetens, Jan. *The Film Photonovel: A Cultural History of Forgotten Adaptations*. University of Texas Press, 2019, p.91.

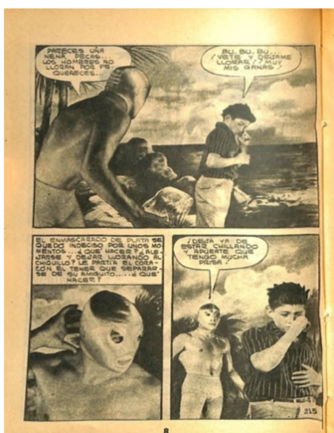


Figure 6. Kinesis on the page created by different angles

José G. Cruz, *El Enmascarado de Plata* (Ediciones José G. Cruz, October 1952, Volume 8, p.8)

Photomontage allows for a composition of movements and character positioning that would be impossible in images created through the lens of reality. In *El Enmascarado de Plata*, this technique is used flexibly. Not all the panels involve the use of photomontage; rather, the technique is partially used, and some panels are completely hand drawn.

Prior to employing photomontage, Cruz had streamlined his production process and used a stock of various head illustrations that he prepared ahead of time. The same method is also used in the photomontage of *El Enmascarado de Plata*. The characters’ heads from the neck up are photographs, and the rest of the body, from the chest to the limbs, is drawn. Instead of making subtle adjustments to hand and foot positions and then photographing them, it was more efficient to decide the size of the head to fit the panel, resize the photograph, and then draw in the remainder of the body. In panel images blended with hand-drawn backgrounds, clothing details (for example, textile patterns) did not have to be drawn at high resolutions.

Situations that would have been difficult to

photograph or were not suited to photography, such as the presence of blood, water, or other liquids, were depicted with drawings instead of photographs, likely because drawing was more efficient and better suited for the depiction of the movement of flowing liquids than photography, in terms of the costs of photography and the costs on the page (Note 15).

However, in the sole case of the protagonist El Santo, his body was generally depicted with cutouts of photographs rather than with a combination of head and body sections. It may have been difficult to draw the skin texture of his nude upper body. Although photographs of his body were used, his body was outlined in white to differentiate it from the hand-drawn background, and drawn highlights were occasionally added. If there was a loss in consistency in El Santo's physique when his torso was drawn, including in terms of the musculature, the connection with the real Santo would have been lost. Thus, more so than the other characters, the protagonist alone was given a powerful overlap with reality. Avoiding combination with illustration when depicting his body and instead maintaining a photograph-based "index" with the real Santo might have constituted an essential rule for the readers of this work.

In the final section, we will examine the indexed nature of photo media as it relates to Cruz's use of photomontage.

**Sameness and Resemblance, Character Identity**

In relation to the Mexican *fotoesculturas* or photo sculptures, also known as photo portraits, which decorate the homes of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (see, for instance, Fig. 7), the photo historian Geoffrey Batchen stated the following about "the collapse of the distinction between absence and presence" in the indexing of photographs:

> Where the photograph normally speaks to us of the past, the past in which the photograph was taken, a *fotoescultura* occupies the eternal horizon of the present. The photograph may speak of the catastrophe of time's passing, but the *fotoescultura* speaks as well of eternal life; it posits the possibility of a perpetual stasis, the literal, fully dimensioned presence of the present (Note 16).

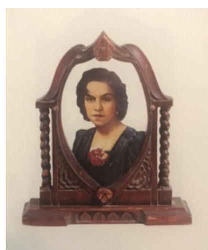

Figure 7. *Fotoescultura* (photo sculpture). Combination of a photographed head and a sculpted body.
Batchen, Geoffrey, Kai Yoshiaki, and Kohara Masashi. *Toki no chūzuri: Sei, shashin, shi* [*Suspending Time: Life, Photography, Death*]. Izu Photomuseum, 2010, p.69.

According to Batchen, *fotoesculturas* were made by "Mexican artisans from the late 1920s through to the

early 1980s" to "memorialize the dead, to honor individuals, and even to promote the images of certain celebrities." The head section was a hand-colored photograph, which was combined with a carved chest section and frame and then placed between sheets of glass. These sculptures were particularly popular during and right after the Second World War as families mourned the loss of their sons (Note 17).

To situate the concept of "absence, presence, and the collapse of both" in the structure of photomontage, the correct analogy might be that while El Santo could only be seen at the Arena Mexico (absence), readers could encounter him at any time in the comic book stories (presence).

The combination of a photographed head and sculpted chest in a photo sculpture—the mixture of multiple formats—aligns with the combination of photographs and illustrations in photomontage. As a "tangible metaphor" (Note 18), a photo sculpture ensures more presence than looking at a photograph of someone who is absent because the viewer can touch the photo sculpture. This kind of tactile perception might have also entered readers' lives, as a more familiar kind of presence, through the creation of a "touchable El Santo", that could be owned and carried around, flipped through and read, and displayed in one's room.

By means of indexing, the real Santo and the photo Santo are powerfully connected. However, naturally, the *lucha libre* idol and the comic book hero created by Cruz are two different characters. Because these different characters were linked together through the index of photographs, paradoxically, the comic book hero overlapped with the real Santo. El Santo standing in the ring at Arena Mexico was not merely a professional wrestler fighting with another *luchador*: he was a hero who would rescue the impoverished public if they were in trouble.

This duality of the character of El Santo, with its return current, is related to the "blending" of photomontage. The indexing of the photograph, which is its connection to the real Santo through sameness, is blended with his resemblance to the illustrated comic book hero.

The question of sameness and resemblance is one that simultaneously carries the meaning of "being" the character and the meaning of "being like" the character. This question is one that was taken up as of the mid-19th-century by the "father of early modern comics" Rodolphe Töpffer and the portrait photographer Gaspard-Félix Tournachon (known by the pseudonym Nadar). Benoît Peeters, a researcher as well as an author of *Bandes dessinées* or Franco-Belgian comics, describes the two aforementioned individuals confronting the same questions as follows:

> Like the other comic book artists who followed him, Töpffer faced the following problem: namely, the problem of how much faces could be changed without becoming unrecognizable (Note 19).
>
> How does one discover the impact of caricature within the technique of photographs, which run counter thereto? How does one achieve the power of icons (showing resemblance to the object, as in a portrait or metaphor) within the index system (in Peirce's semiotic, a symbol that has a physical and direct connection with the referent, as smoke indicates fire)? (Note 20)

In Töpffer's case, while creating sequential narrative works, unlike paintings, he was confronted with the need to draw multiple depictions of the same character in panels that were positioned on a single page. For example, when a character's face becomes "impermanent," as when the character shows emotion

with a facial expression, there is the risk that “it might no longer be clear who they are, and the story will fail.” However, if the expression is too exaggerated in an effort to show the features of the character, “that unique drawing style” will “harden into something permanent,” thereby causing “excess typifying” (Note 21). In his drawing, Töpffer had the foresight to grasp the question of the contradiction between sameness and resemblance in sequential art.

For his part, Nadar approached the same question in the space between photography and the method of caricature. Because he started out as a caricaturist and later transitioned into photography, he also sought resemblance in his photography, with its strong sense of index. Through “frank communication with the model” in his photography sessions, Nadar achieved “the most familiar, most desirable resemblance, a resemblance that lets one feel the expression of the interior” rather than “a dull reproduction.” Furthermore, without “caricaturizing the photo” by using distortion lenses or processing, he grappled with this question purely through photography (Note 22).

The question facing both these artists was that of proving who the character was and their essence; in other words, it was a question of identity. The photographs that were cut out for photomontage created an index between the real Santo and the comic book Santo. Cruz bestowed a hero-like image that was typical of comic books on El Santo by mixing and processing his photographs with drawings and having the character seemingly fly, hand down his title, and confront unreal opponents.

Although Töpffer and Nadar sought the object of identity in the molding or expressions of the face, the object of Cruz’s art, El Santo, wore a mask; consequently, he was unable to show the character’s facial expressions in his work. However, this mask, along with the photographs, further reinforced the index with the real Santo. Figure 8 shows a page with a mask gift campaign run in *El Enmascarado de Plata*. The lower part of the page has a row of three panels in a quiz format, saying, “Tell us how you think today’s episode will be resolved,” and the prize for the first eight readers to guess the ending correctly was an El Santo mask. In short, the mask is a device: anyone with the mask on can be like El Santo (Note 23). Foreshadowing the depiction of the masked man’s succession at the beginning of the story, the comic book creates a situation in which the mask can become an index between El Santo and the readers themselves.

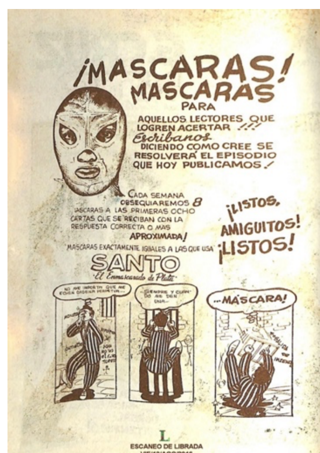


Figure 8. Mask gift advertisement

José G. Cruz, *El Enmascarado de Plata* (Ediciones José G. Cruz, September 1952, Volume 4)

This El Santo, a mixture of reality and fiction as linked by photomontage and masks, was “split” by an incident in the mid-1970s. Cruz and the “man behind the mask” of El Santo, Guzmán, began a legal dispute over the copyright and rights to the usage of the image of El Santo. Guzmán argued that Cruz had attempted to create new comic books of El Santo without permission, whereas Cruz claimed that he held the copyright to the character. As a result of the dispute, the originality of the comic book Santo was recognized, and Cruz won the copyright to the character; instead of Guzmán, the series continued with a new “man behind the mask”: the bodybuilder Héctor Pliego.

The issue concerning the ownership of this character evinces a split in the duality of reality and fiction in the character of El Santo that we have examined thus far. Instead of the reality, the fiction, conversely, was indexed. Guzmán entered the ring as the real Santo with the mask and appeared in the pages of the comic books through his photographs; however, both the mask and the photographs were unable to become indicators of Guzmán himself.

Subsequently, the comic book Santo’s appearance changed with the introduction of the replacement Pliego. The forehead section of the mask was engraved with the letter “S,” a belt was placed around his waist, and he wore simple wrestling shorts instead of tights, thereby creating an update of the index. It was said that Guzmán never removed the El Santo mask in public—even when he was in transit during tours for wrestling matches. However, as perhaps fated for a masked man, Guzmán’s true face was eventually exposed, in the newspapers when he lost the lawsuit (Note 25).

**Conclusion**

José G. Cruz was a self-aware media artist. Involved in the creation of novels, films, and comic books, he developed his own works by mixing different forms of media. Upon traversing media forms, he invented methods that best suited the media in question and made further innovations with respect to said methods. Photomontage, as a technique, symbolizes his creative work; in addition, the technique can be said to be relevant to the issues of the modern media landscape. In an era wherein computer graphics and motion capture are incorporated into filmmaking as a matter of course, the issues related to photographs and drawings in photomontage are also directly relevant to contemporary issues. Furthermore, even in manga, there are numerous artists who use backgrounds that are made from processed photographs or draw characters themselves using photographs. This kind of “photo media and photo processing” has stories and characters that cross over multiple forms of media, and goes so far as to function as an infrastructure supporting “trans-media storytelling” in which readers and fans can actively participate (Note 26).

Therefore, the photomontage technique as invented by José G. Cruz can be considered a trailblazing approach in terms of media theory.

Notes

1 For example, in the photo novel "*Isamashiki shussei* [Courageous Departure for War]" (*Nihon shōnen*, Jitsugyo no Nihonsha, October 1914), the characters are drawn on photograph backgrounds.
2 A detailed analysis of "ambiguous" and "layered" experiences of film media and written media, focusing on viewing films in theaters and cinema programs. Kondō, Kazuto. *Eigakan to kankyaku no mediaron: Senzenki Nihon no "eiga o yomu/kaku" to iu keiken* [*Cinema and Spectator Media Theory: Pre-War Japan's Experience of "Reading/Writing Films"*]. Seikyūsha, 2020.
3 Hidaka, Ryōsuke. "*Fōmatto riron—Chakumelo to chakuuta no sai ni miru MIDI kikaku no sayō*" [Format Theory—The Effects of MIDI Standards as Seen in the Differences Between Ringtone Chimes and Songs]". *Posuto media seoriizu: Media kenkyū no shintenkai* [*Post Media Theories: New Insights in Media Studies*], edited by Itō Mamoru, Minerva Shobō, 2021, p.121.
4 Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *José G. Cruz's Autobiography Notes—Supplement by Eduardo Soto*. Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum, 2018.
5 Aurrecoechea, Juan Manuel, and Armando Bartra. *Puros Cuentos II: Historia de la Historieta en México 1934–1950*. Editorial Grijalbo, 1993, pp.179–182. This book mentions that Mexican readers received fictional characters as if the characters were real. It notes that in particular, due to the continuity of serial films and comic books and the cyclic nature of comic strips that were published daily, these characters became "a part of the readers' lives, of their everyday worlds."
6 Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *José G. Cruz's Autobiography Notes—Supplement by Eduardo Soto*. Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum, 2018.
7 Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *José G. Cruz's Autobiography Notes—Supplement by Eduardo Soto*. Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum, 2018.
8 Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *José G. Cruz's Autobiography Notes—Supplement by Eduardo Soto*. Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum, 2018.
9 Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *José G. Cruz's Autobiography Notes—Supplement by Eduardo Soto*. Mexico Caricature and Comics Museum, 2018.
10 Cruz, José G. *El Enmascarado de Plata*. Ediciones José G. Cruz, September 1952, p.4.
11 Juul, Jesper. *Hāfu riaru – Kyojitsu no aida no bideo gēmu* [*Half-real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*]. Translated by Matsunaga Shinji, New Games Order, 2016, p.9.
12 Ishii, Noboru, "*Mekishiko no Dorakyura hakushaku—Karurosu Fuentesu no 'Vurado'*" [Mexico's Count Dracula: Carlos Fuentes' "Vlad"]." *Renikusa: Gendai bungeiron kenkyūshitsu ronshū 2 gō* [*Renyxa: Modern Literary Theory Department Journal*], Volume 2, 2010.
13 Itō, Go. *Tezuka izu deddo—Hirakareta manga hyōgenron e* [*Tezuka is Dead: Toward an Open Theory of Expression in Manga*]. NTT Shuppan, 2005, pp.199–207. These two types of kinesis are premised on "frame indeterminacy" in the two frame types of the panel and the page. Both must be kept in mind not only in terms of the reception of the comic book but also during the production of the comic book pages.
14 Aurrecoechea, Juan Manuel, and Armando Bartra. *Puros Cuentos III: Historia de la Historieta en México 1934–1950*. Editorial Grijalbo, 1994, pp.451–471. Bartra refers to John Heartfield and others, observing similarities with photomontage in Dada. To a certain extent, there may be some congruence in terms of the creation of new meaning through cutting, pasting, and reconstructing photographs that are meaningless on their own. Alternatively, as a means of communicating left-wing messages, there is a shared resemblance in terms of the situation during the Mexican revolution. However, photomontage in comic books is a technique for narrative exposition that is shown throughout multiple panels and multiple pages, which, as Bartra points out, differs from literal photomontage.
15 For example, as with the "tears" clip in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and the erasure of speech bubbles in Ōshima Nagisa's *Ninja bugeichō* [*Ninja Martial Arts*] (1967) (made by photographing Shirato Sanpei's original manga to turn it into a film), aspects that are difficult to express in the installed format are expressed in the format or code of the original media.
16 Batchen, Geoffrey, Kai Yoshiaki, and Kohara Masashi. *Toki no chūzuri: Sei, shashin, shi* [*Suspending Time: Life, Photography, Death*]. Izu Photomuseum, 2010, p.69.
17 Batchen, Geoffrey, Kai Yoshiaki, and Kohara Masashi. *Toki no chūzuri: Sei, shashin, shi* [*Suspending Time: Life, Photography, Death*]. Izu Photomuseum, 2010, pp.67–68. This kind of photography, which is linked to a particular local culture, is defined as "vernacular photography."
18 Batchen, Geoffrey, Kai Yoshiaki, and Kohara Masashi. *Toki no chūzuri: Sei, shashin, shi* [*Suspending Time: Life,*

*Photography, Death*]. Izu Photomuseum, 2010, p.68.
19 Groensteen, Thierry, and Benoît Peeters. *Tepfēru: Manga no hatsumei* [*L'invention de la Bande dessinée*]. Translated by Furunaga Shinichi, Hara Masato, and Morita Naoko, Hōsei University Press, 2014, p.26.
20 Groensteen, Thierry, and Benoît Peeters. *Tepfēru: Manga no hatsumei* [*L'invention de la Bande dessinée*]. Translated by Furunaga Shinichi, Hara Masato, and Morita Naoko, Hōsei University Press, 2014, p.63.
21 Groensteen, Thierry, and Benoît Peeters. *Tepfēru: Manga no hatsumei* [*L'invention de la Bande dessinée*]. Translated by Furunaga Shinichi, Hara Masato, and Morita Naoko, Hōsei University Press, 2014, p.63.
22 Groensteen, Thierry, and Benoît Peeters. *Tepfēru: Manga no hatsumei* [*L'invention de la Bande dessinée*]. Translated by Furunaga Shinichi, Hara Masato, and Morita Naoko, Hōsei University Press, 2014, p.63.
23 Ōtsuka, Eiji. *Mikkii no shoshiki [Mickey's Writing Style]*. Kadokawa Gakugei Publishing, 2013, p.88–95. As shown in references in letters to the editor to "Shō-chan's hat", which is worn by the protagonist of *Shō-chan no bōken* [*Shō-chan's Adventures*], the hat serves as an index or an indicator of the protagonist for the readers, linking reality and fiction.
25 The following websites have information on this topic that has been collected by fans. "José G. Cruz y Santo El Enmascarado de Plata." *Elazotevenezolanoelblog*, http://elazotevenezolanoelblog.blogspot.com/2015/05/jose-g-cruz-y-santo-el-enmascarado-de.html; "Hector Pilego y El Santo De La 'S'." *Remembersanto* http://remembersanto.blogspot.com/2016/03/hector-pilego-y-el-santo-de-la-s.html; "José G. Cruz: El hombre que desenmascaró al Santo." *Codigoespagueti.com* https://codigoespagueti.com/noticias/cultura/jose-g-cruz-desenmascaro-santo/. All accessed 20 September 2021.
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# Rhetorics of the Mask and Interconnected Realities in *El Santo, el enmascarado de plata* *[El Santo, The Silver-Masked Man]*: Commentary on "The 'Half-Real' as Created by Photomontage" by Yamamoto Tadahiro

Laura Ivonne Quiroz Castillo

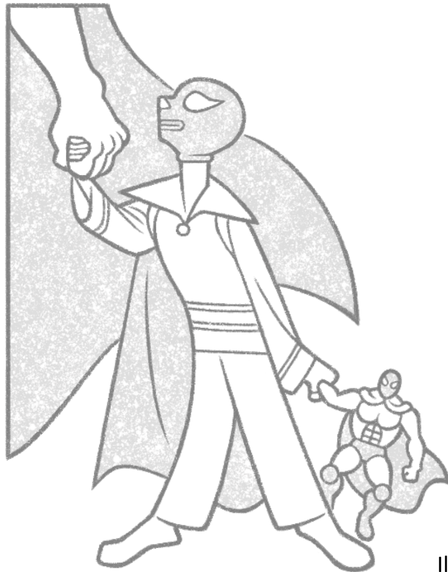

Illustration: Pablo Rincon Santana

*The inheritance he was left*
*was a very big dilemma*
*His father was a legend*
*and it couldn't be over*
*I had to grow*
*because he wouldn't crack*

-Ballad of *The Son of Santo*
Baby Richard (2012)

## Introduction

Wrestling is among the most prominent symbols of Mexican popular culture around the world, and its most emblematic figure is that of El Santo, also known as "the silver-masked man." According to Paola Aguilar and Andrés Giraldo (2018), the comic *El Santo, The Silver-Masked Man* by José G. Cruz is the core work on which the fictional universes of both this character and wrestling have been built (1). However, *transmedia* fiction is usually approached through films about wrestlers, of which El Santo was also a pioneer. For this reason, it is significant that Yamamoto Tadahiro chose *El Santo* as an object of analysis, to explore the function of the hybrid technique of photomontage and halftone illustration used by José G. Cruz to produce this comic and to build a universe that is both parallel to, but also in constant dialogue with, the universe manifested in the ring and its surroundings.

Although for Yamamoto, the photomontage-illustration technique is the vessel for communicating between realities, I would like to delve into the rhetorical constitution of El Santo's body image within the comic strip. My aim is to broaden the sociocultural panorama in which this graphic narrative became the core work of the worlds of meaning generated around this character and around wrestling, both of which are settled within Mexican *glocal* cultural baggage.

## Comics, wrestling, and peripheral modern narratives

El Santo is a character in Mexican popular culture that originated in post-revolutionary Mexico alongside various processes of modernization, such as the phenomena of migration, urbanization, cultural industrialization, and particular conditions of the nation's reformulation of identity narratives. According to Illescas (2012), these processes required the implementation of cultural and educational policies that united a population that was culturally diverse (2) and still divided by the Revolution (approximately 1910-1920), within the same identity crossed by discourses of tradition and modernity. For this purpose, in addition to generating an ideology of the New Mexican, which was being constructed through the film industry (3), it was necessary to ensure the formation of a literate and trained citizenship to build a modern state. Due to the low cost, comics served as the main means of building literacy. They also became the main diffuser of popular culture, since these publications portrayed both daily life and the most valued recreational activities in

underprivileged neighborhoods, such as boxing and wrestling.

For its part, wrestling also arises in the urban periphery as a spectator sport, in which the arena functions, more than as an allegorical scene of struggle between forces of good (*técnicos*; faces) and evil (*rudos*; heels), as a liminal space in which situations of conflict between rules and anomie, between the proper and the strange, are re-experienced. A space of possibility where the rival, rather than the contending fighter, represents the daily vicissitudes to be overcome either with ingenuity or brutality, by adhering to the norm (faces) or violating it (heels). It is the staging of a state of exception and catharsis in which authority, embodied in the referee, returns to present itself as a rival or ally, depending on who is favored; and whose transgression by the fighters is valid and even necessary (Lieberman, 2009). In this way, the wrestlers, as characters that are delineated in the ring, become vigilantes acting in response to the social and cultural problems of the poor, the anonymous, and the marginal, as well as popular heroes faced with the challenges of the transformations of modernity (Illescas, 2012; Aguilar and Giraldo, 2018).

In this sense, the comics, rather than presenting their target readers with narratives and identities alien to convention, presented narratives based on readers' life experiences, such as cultural shocks derived from migration, and situations of marginality, poverty, and vulnerability. But also, through the main character, they presented possible resolutions traversed by a kind of re-adaptation of value systems and ways of making the challenges and changes experienced both traditional and modern.

These situations were expressed and represented in comics and movies by means of the narrative tropes and visual vocabularies available at the time, many of them from North American film. Hence, El Santo's fiction and wrestling go from the realistic, such as fights against gangsters and the mafia in local neighborhoods, to the most fanciful, such as battles against both domestic supernatural beings like "La Llorona" (4), and the foreign imaginary like vampires, werewolves, zombies, and aliens. Thus, according to Illescas (2012) and Aguilar and Giraldo (2018), in wrestling fiction, new concerns were represented that emerged from the everyday life of the neighborhood to become possible domestic and international dangers that gave the wrestling heroes a more cosmopolitan dimension, and also linked the Mexican audience with the international socio-political and cultural scene.

**The mask, handling of symbols, and narratives**

*El Santo, The Silver-Masked Man* was the spearhead for the construction of a universe of meaning around wrestling, which integrates and re-articulates as a metalanguage (5), the symbolism of the ring – masks, corporealities, and movements – with other symbolisms and moral, identity, and thematic references shared by the readers.

In wrestling, although daily conflicts and tensions are usually staged and re-experienced in a cathartic and outrageous way, it is a non-narrative representation. The metalanguage that emerges and is used in the arena scenario mainly fulfills a descriptive function for the wrestlers in their double role as athletes and characters. That is to say, in the name and in the body image (masks, wardrobe, and appearance as a character) of the wrestler there are metonymically established traits that refer to his corporality, strength, dexterity, personality, attitudes, and ways of causing or facing trouble (6). It can be argued that the descriptive and narrative functions of a representation are closely linked, since the construction of the fighter as a character is related to his stories of civil and sports life. However, these tend to be known to a greater or lesser extent in situations and settings where people talk about the ring, such as in the press and popular speech, but also in fiction, such as comics and wrestling films.

In this sense, the comic *El Santo, The Silver-Masked Man* is interesting, since it is the cornerstone of a universe of meaning that gives life, strength, and structure to the character dimension of this wrestler. First, his argument is not about what happens in the arena, but about the situations that are dealt with in it. For this reason, as Yamamoto points out, El Santo is inserted into a daily life that is oblique to that of his fans, giving the impression that it takes place in real time, but in a parallel way to what happens in the tangible reality of the ring. Second, from the first pages of the first issue, El Santo is presented as a character making use of religious, moral, and identity symbols that challenge readers.

In the first issue of *El Santo, The Silver-Masked Man,* the hero and his story are introduced. This story would unfold not only throughout the comic, but would continue in parallel in later years in film. In the first two pages (Fig. 1), both the protagonist and the target audience are outlined and linked by making use of symbols and narratives that have been present in the construction of national identity, as well as in the founding myths of Mexico; a fact that accounts for the pedagogical dimension of this comic. The first page features an image of El Santo kneeling in front of the Virgin of Guadalupe, to whom he is presented as a

devotee and protegé. This symbol, besides being the most important within local Catholic religious beliefs (7), is strongly linked to the *mestizaje* as a Mexican identity (8), and to the War of Independence, in the beginning of which it was used as a political flag of the insurgency (9). For its part, the almost sacrificial giving of self to others, by which El Santo gets his name, is present in the Catholic, gender, and state moralities that configure this character as a religious devotee, an ideal of protective masculinity and civil authority, who hopes to serve as an example to children, who are presented on the second page as objective readers and “future citizens.”

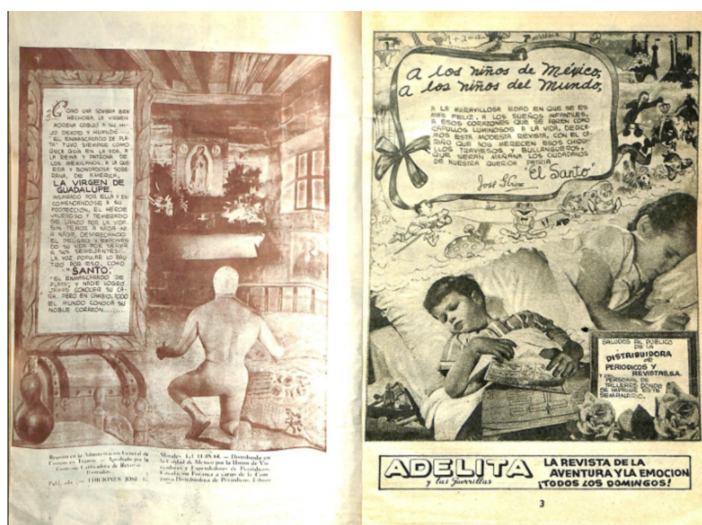


Fig. 1. Character presentation pages and dedication to “the children of Mexico and the world” in *El Santo, The Silver-Masked Man* (José G. Cruz Publishing, September 3, 1952, Vol. 1, pp. 1-2)

Next, the story of El Santo begins, placing him as an inhabitant of a neighborhood called De la Santa Cruz. His identity is unknown, although he is recognized as an anonymous hero. As Yamamoto mentions, the story begins with the death and resurrection of the character, which forms the basis of both a notion of heroic legacy and a mandate of justice transmitted from father to son, as well as a notion of mysticism that surrounds El Santo and establishes him as an authority. In this sense, rather than being part of a state police force, this hero embodies a popular authority emerging from and legitimized by the neighborhood, which together with family and school are the main social institutions that shape subjects (Aguilar and Giraldo, 2018).

The above premise, in addition to being the foundation of the adventures that take place throughout the four decades that the comic was published, also functions to duplicate and form a semantic juxtaposition of the athletic and artistic career of Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta as El Santo. In biographies of this wrestler (Fernández, 2004; Jiménez, 2010), it is said that Rodolfo Guzmán began his wrestling career in the early 1930s. However, it was not until 1942 that he made his debut as El Santo, an identity that he would expand upon until his death. This name came as a proposal from his coach, Jesús Lomelí, who had the intention of forming a team of wrestlers with silver masks. Lomelí offered the name options of “the angel,” “the demon,” and “the saint” [*el santo*], and Guzmán adopted the third name in irony, since he fought as a *rudo* (“bad guy”). However, his change to *técnico* (“good guy”) was related to an increase in popularity, either because at that time the public favored this side, or because he sought to present a good image to a growing fanbase that already considered him an idol. In this sense, the life story of many Catholic saints who left a disordered life for the path of redemption is also shared by El Santo in his journey as a fighter.

## The legacy of the mask

We find in the wrestler’s mask an object of great symbolic power to be protected, honored, and later transferred through a diegetic and extradiegetic legacy. The first transfer, as mentioned, was shown in the comic book with the death and reincarnation of the avenging hero through the inheritance of the mask. This transfer also then actually occurred in 1982 with the retirement of Rodolfo Guzmán and the passing of the mask to his son, who became “The Son of El Santo”; the tradition continued with the transfer to the third generation wrestler “El Santo Jr.” in 2016 (“Debutó El Santo Jr”, 2016), and through other legendary fighters such as

Blue Demon, El Rayo de Jalisco, and Dos Caras, to mention a few (10).

The extradiegetic legacy involved fans, particularly young fans, in appropriation of the character, with the possibility of incarnating El Santo, by granting masks to readers who guessed how the episodes end. Although commercial use rights to the character are not explicitly provided, there is the possibility that the character may be replicated and settle in the popular imaginary in its double meaning as reservoir and semantic process (Machado da Silva, 2007). In this way, we find several references to this character in derivative products, be they franchise licenses, such as the Cartoon Network cartoon *El Santo vs. The Clones,* comic strips, films, and the print album of "The Son of El Santo" (Aguilar and Giraldo, 2018: 157); or professional output produced by fans, such as the comics *El Santos* (11) by Trino, the satirical novel *Xanth: Novelucha libre* by José Luis Zárate (1994), the songs *Los luchadores* by Pedro Ocadiz and *El Guacarock del Santo* by the band Botellita de Jerez, and the comics (12) *El Santo y El Hijo del Santo* from former wrestler and referee Baby Richard. We must also note the official and unofficial merchandise, art and popular culture that make reference to El Santo, for example through dress.

**In conclusion**

El Santo is a hero and protagonist of the different processes of modernity that reconfigured the social and cultural life of Mexico. He was a pioneer in building a *transmedia* universe, using a network of representations in modern mass media such as comics, film, and television. It was comics that offered the possibility of being present for an almost indefinite period of time, positioned as an epic hero in Mexican popular culture, uniting time and space in a mask. In this sense, we find that the wrestler's mask is the vessel for communicating the multiple realities in which he presents himself, reactivating, re-semanticizing and putting into dialogue different experiences, values, and meanings that provide feedback into the *transmedia* universe built around El Santo and wrestling, which are also then integrated into the contemporary cultural baggage of what is Mexican.

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Notes

1 Like El Santo, other renowned fighters such as his rival and ally Blue Demon were the protagonists of comics and later of film and television productions, as is the case of Tinieblas. Comics were also predecessors of so-called wrestling films, from which characters exclusively created for this cinematographic universe emerged (Hipsters Posmos).

2 The population came from different parts of the country with different regional and ethnic origins. Also, there were foreign minorities such as Spaniards, Lebanese, and Chinese, who for various reasons congregated in Mexico City and other urban centers.

3 Particularly during the so-called Golden Age (approx. 1936-1960), when there was a *boom* in film production, reaching a film a week. This ideology was built not without certain tensions and conflicts, particularly during the

Cardenismo (1934-1940), between different power groups that defended traditional values or that appealed to a nostalgia for the Porfiriato, for the revolutionary ideals of freedom and social justice with a modern and cosmopolitan approach that sought to replicate a North American way of life (Illescas, 2012; De la Vega and Vidal, 2017-2018).

4 A supernatural entity from Mexican folklore that emerged in colonial times. The story is about the soul of an indigenous woman who is saddened by the death of her children who she murdered as a result of deceit and abandonment by her Spanish lover. It is said that this woman appears at night near water sources such as rivers and lakes, seducing and drowning her victims.

5 In anthropology and studies of performance (Turner, 1987; Schechner, 2003), all representation fulfills a dual function: on the one hand, it is referential when presenting an idea, situation, or object; and on the other, it communicates and reactivates one’s own experience or that of third parties, from which emerges a metalanguage expressed in different sensory codes to talk about what was done or what is being done.

6 The name and configuration of the mask usually associate wrestlers with supernatural beings, which may be divine, dark, or animals or natural phenomena, from whom their strength and physical abilities could be derived (Crespo).

7 According to the national population census carried out in 2020 by the National Institute of Geography, Statistics, and Information (INEGI is the Spanish acronym), 77% of the Mexican population subscribes to this religious belief. See https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/religion/#Informacion_general

8 The Virgin of Guadalupe is the local manifestation of the Virgin Mary. It is said that she appeared in the Cerro del Tepeyac, north of Mexico City, in the early years of the Colony. It was one of the evangelization devices used in New Spain, since it integrates the symbolism around the maternal deity of Catholicism (Virgin Mary) with that of Mesoamerica (the goddess Tonantzin).

9 To learn more about the relationship between Latin American baroque religious beliefs and identity processes and political subjectivation, see the following essay by Narváez Lora, Adriana. “Guadalupe, cultura barroca e identidad criolla”. *Historia y grafía*, vol. 35, pp. 121-149, 2010. Retrieved on December 19, 2021, from http://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1405-09272010000200005&lng=es&tlng=es.

10 All of them add “Son” or “Jr.” to the fighter’s family name.

11 *El Santos* is a character by José Ignacio Solórzano and José Trinidad Camacho (Trino) who parodies El Santo. While this character has an outfit similar to El Santo, the content is intended for an adult audience.

12 From a musical genre that emerged from Mexican oral history, in which the adventures and exploits of commanders and popular heroes are related; songs feature historical and important figures, and in recent decades, also drug traffickers.

# The Development of Horror *Historietas* and Rental Horror Manga: Local Acclimation of Genre-based Imaginative Capacity

Saika Tadahiro

## Introduction

The exhibition titled *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta' – Expression as Folk Culture* (*Historieta Exhibition* hereafter), held at the Kyoto International Manga Museum between December 7, 2019, and February 25, 2020, introduced the history of *historietas* (Mexican comics), valuable original drawings, and the modern-day trends of *historieta* authors. Meanwhile, the focus was also on the following seven major themes developed within *historieta* culture: humor, romance, heroines, child protagonists, heroes, *charros* (Mexican cowboys), and educational works.

These themes provided visitors to the exhibition with a viewpoint on the path taken by *historietas* in connection to the characteristic national frameworks of "Mexico." For example, "heroes" are linked to the historical figures who led the Mexican Revolution, such as Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, which suggests something very different from the "superheroes" of American comics. Meanwhile, *charros* are emblematic icons that evoke Mexican identity (*1).

Fundamentally common to the expository texts by *historieta* researchers Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea and Armando Bartra is the perspective that *historietas* are "an important introduction to an awareness of Mexican imagination in the 20th century," (*2) and the positioning of *historietas* as part of Mexico's popular and national culture (*3).

In this chapter, within the framework of "*historietas* as part of Mexico's popular and national culture," I will reconsider these works, albeit in a scope limited to those positioned within the horror genre, which, despite being one of the major themes of global comic culture, was mostly omitted from the *Historieta Exhibition*.

## Section 1 A terrifying tale that nobody knows or has ever known…

The primary development of the horror genre in Mexican *historietas* occurred in the 1940s at the peak of popularity of the daily *historieta* magazines, which, while labeled "adult" entertainment, were actually read by children and adults (*4).

Above all, one of the foremost early horror *historietas* was the *El Monje Loco* (*The Crazy Monk*) series by Juan Reyes Beiker et al. Launched in 1942 in the daily *historieta* magazine *Chamaco,* this series was based on a radio drama that had been broadcast on Radio XEW from 1937 (*5). This *historieta* takes the form of a series of short episodes featuring a crazy monk as the storyteller, imprisoned in the ruins of a monastery after once having committed a crime.

Let's consider the 34-page episode (*6) "Sepulcro Blanco" from the December 5th, 1952, issue as an example (Figure 1). This story, which starts with the monk saying, "Yes, the strange incident of the Sepulcro Blanco is a truly terrifying tale… you are sure to enjoy it… Hahaha," revolves around the talented young wax figure maker Andrés and his lover Lucia (Figure 2). Andrés, who has left his lover behind to refine his skills in Paris, is also loved by Sonia, the assistant to Andrés' teacher Sergei, but Andrés is unmoved and sets out to return to Mexico. Sonia, full of jealousy of Lucia, learns a black magic ceremony from Sergei and puts a deadly curse on Lucia.

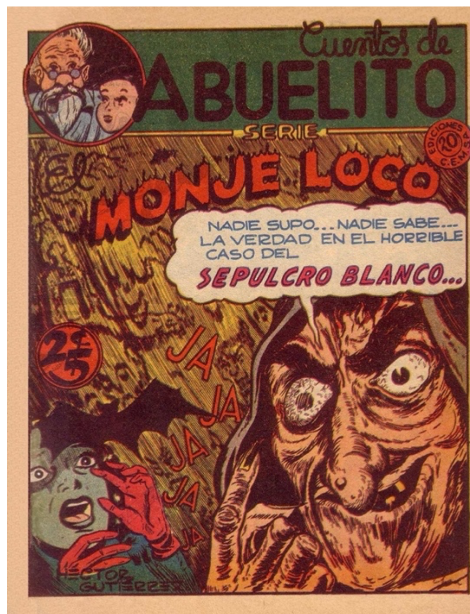



Figure 1 Cover page, Carlos Del Prado & Héctor Gutierrez, "Sepulcro Blanco," in *El Monje Loco* no.5, Corporación Editorial Mexicana, December 5, 1952.

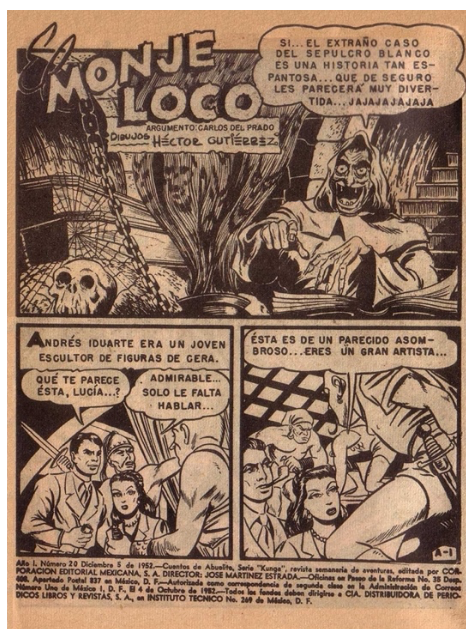



Figure 2 Page 1, Carlos Del Prado & Héctor Gutierrez, "Sepulcro Blanco," in *El Monje Loco* no.5, Corporación Editorial Mexicana, December 5, 1952.

However, Andrés is unable to accept the death of his lover. He digs up Lucia's grave and, with the help of a friend, seemingly brings her back to life by making a wax model of the decomposed corpse, to whom he promises everlasting love with a kiss. With a look back at his astonished friend, he seals himself in a boiling wax container. Guessing his intentions, the friend places the wax model of Andrés next to that of Lucia. Meanwhile, Sonia, who has learned what has happened to Andrés and

Lucia, becomes furious, kills Sergei, and throws herself into the Seine River.

While there are no monsters as such, this episode is full of a wide range of elements suited to the horror genre across its few pages, such as melodramatic plot developments about the love and death of men and women; the grotesque imaginative capacity to produce ailments caused by a magic spell, and the making and kissing of a wax model of a dead lover; and the final shocking scene of Lucia’s decomposed corpse and Andrés’ wax model, which André turned himself into by sealing himself in a boiling wax container while still alive (Figure 3).

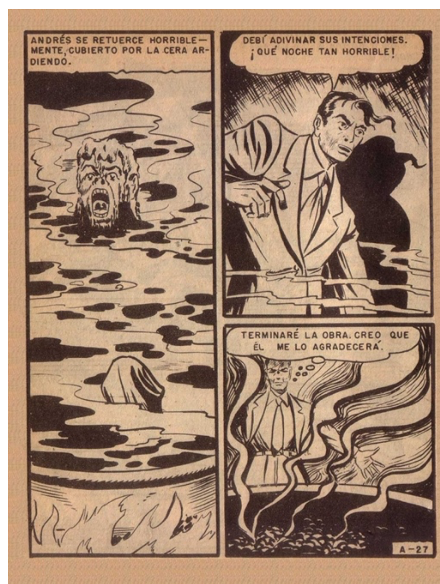



Figure 3 Andrés’ last moment, p. 27, Carlos Del Prado & Héctor Gutierrez, “Sepulcro Blanco,” in *El Monje Loco* no.5, Corporación Editorial Mexicana, December 5, 1952.

In this way, from his location in the “black church” that crosses space and time, the monk tells the reader various tales. Often employing a format that concluded with a moral lesson about the wages of sin, this series, which continued intermittently until the 1970s with various publishers and illustrators, used far-reaching horror genre motifs, such as the revenge of the dead, magic ceremonies, terrible spells and ailments, murders and cruel deaths, and grotesque monsters (*7).

Through the long history of the *El Monje Loco* series, which adopted and appropriated a wide range of horror story patterns, the narrator, “the crazy monk” who has appeared in various media, has been passed down as an icon of Mexican pop culture, much like the characters of *Memín Pinguín* and *La Familia Burron*. Bartra described the presence of the “crazy monk” across media in Mexican popular culture of the 1950s as follows:

> In the 1950s, as we shared in the immediate sensations provided by the culture industry, we Mexicans truly became Mexican. At school, the teachers told us of the “founding fathers,” but on the street, people spoke of “the crazy monk.” This *historieta* that had made its way into society from the hands of Carlos Liberol del Prado and Juan Reyes Beiker featured a man who wore gloomy black headgear. Before long, a radio program was produced featuring Salvatore Carrasco as this character, and it was Carrasco who played this part in the film and stage production directed by Alejandro Galindo. Furthermore, the famous phrase “A terrifying tale unknown, never known by anyone” became something that people hummed to a swing

song by Ernesto Riestra (*8).

In addition, Cecilio Jacobo González, in his Mexican comics critique blog, *Comikaze* (*9), said that, as an archetypal work, this series can be seen to have produced derivative variations in succeeding *historietas*, such as EDAR's *El Abate Negro* published in the 1950s, Editorial Ortega Flores' *El Monje Místico* in the 1960s, and Editorial Tanya's *La Llorona y El Monje Infernal* in the 1990s. González also mentions the comedian Eugenio Derbez, who became well known on late 1990s television for his parody character El Lonje Moco (Figure 4), and the musical group Míster Chivo, who wrote a song based on the motif of this series.

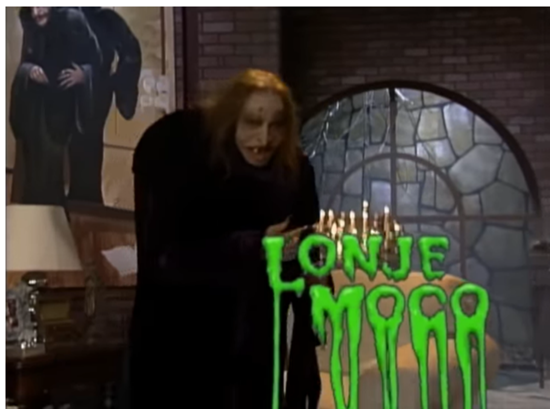



Figure 4 Antonio Derbez playing the parody character El Lonje Moco on a comedy TV program
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaQR82pt_rI

This way, *El Monje Loco* and the iconic character "the crazy monk" have become a focal point in the network of the Mexican popular culture industry in connection with horror *historietas* through reference, transformation, quotation, and imitation. González concluded his critique blog posts about *El Monje Loco* thus:

In some way, even as a parody in the rebroadcasting of Derbez's TV program on platforms such as TV and Blim (Mexican subscription services), the crazy monk (El Monje Loco) has lived on (*10).

**Section 2 The "crazy monk" as a form of acclimating genre-based imagination to the locality**

As a work of horror in which a wide range of motifs are presented as short stories with an element of "anything goes", it is difficult to explain *El Monje Loco* solely from the "why it is scary" perspective of genre-based text entertainment. Research and criticism on movies and the rest of the horror genre, particularly critiques adopting a post-structuralist, psychoanalytical approach, tend to explain horror entertainment from a thematic or author-centric understanding of the universal cultural codes often incorporated into specific texts (*11). In contrast, rather than taking a textualist approach, Andrew Tudor argues for the idea that the question "Why is this scary?" must be asked from the perspective of the ways in which works of horror are given meaning and utilized by consumers within specific temporal, regional, and social contexts (*12).

From the latter perspective, when looking at *El Monje Loco,* attention is drawn, more even than to the content of the stories, to the processes of cross-media reference, imitation, quotation, and mimicry of this work and the iconic character of the crazy monk in Mexican society. In

this regard, it should be noted that Bartra followed the quote given above with the following:

> We must not forget that what we are talking about is not a *historieta* by a single author but a *historieta* industry where the rules have penetrated deeply through the repetition of the same descriptive formats and models. This repeatability is not limited to a single medium, but rather formed of a complex network of mass media, a kind of conduit system mutually interconnected to form a composite structure (*13).

Rather than ascribing *El Monje Loco* to a specific origin in terms of a "single author," here, a standardized cultural product repeated throughout a cross-media network collectively, as an industry, is perceived to be merging into a mass received experience. Thus, we can see the establishment of a popular, or national, "Mexican" identity with the same shared imagination. While traversing Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" (14), Bartra's perspective is connected to the viewpoint wherein attention is drawn to the involvement of "imagined communities" in the landscape of the collective imagination cultivated in mass media offerings, as described by the cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, where "sensitive communities" are formed through an understanding of, criticism, and sensitivity to such landscapes and the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of "race, that is, nationhood" (15).

When seen from this "imaginative media-cultural anthropological" perspective, with regard to the forms of *historietas* in the popular/national Mexican imaginative landscape formed through mass media offerings, the following passage from *Puros Cuentos* (*Weird Tales*), a three-volume tome by Aurrecoechea and Bartra that traces the history of *historietas* from 1874 to 1950, is noteworthy:

> There are no alien others in Mexico's *historietas*, where the flow of realism intermingles with traditions, fashions and national aspirations; where gigantic public obsessions and dreams integrate in a melting pot. *Monitos* [a term for Mexican comics] revive tales of chivalry, draw on folklore, and reconstruct modern popular myths.
>
> Our realism is a product of reading *Tarzan*, *Flash Gordon*, *Terry and the Pirates*, and *The Phantom*. It results from the effort made to replace imports, driven by the brazen desire to imitate models from the north. This approach is baroque, irreverent and self-centered, but it is unique to us… Our *monitos* are something more than an imported cultural fashion; they have formed one of the major factories of the dreams of contemporary Mexico, as Mexican as those who read them, and as culturally syncretic as we Mexicans are (*16).

Here, *historietas* are not only said to be a melting pot of the popular/national Mexican imagination, but are also positioned as incorporating an imagination external to Mexican nation–state frameworks to enable acclimation as a property of internal popular/national communities. The presence of "the crazy monk" in Mexico's mass media is easily understood as part of this acclimation process. The use of the classical format in which the crazy monk appears on the opening page to recount to the reader the "tale" of a horror story is a device that allows for inclusivity in overdrive. From monsters from Hollywood's horror movies to adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe, from the disturbing deaths of gothic horror to the criminal suspense of film noir, everything is fair game as part of the repeated "descriptive format" of horror *historietas*, enabling "scary" genre entertainment in all its diverse forms to be appropriated as "*historieta Mexicana*."

On the other hand, the crazy monk is different from the symbols of *historietas* read as manifestations of Mexican identity, history, or nationality, such as the "*charros*" or the "heroes" resembling the leaders of the Revolution, or even Memín or Familia Burrón. Whereas these symbols represent an indigenous Mexicanism in the "content" interwoven into the text (work), on the contrary the crazy monk moves between—and is accepted in—short stories, movies, comics and other cultural products

crossing national borders. This character functions in an unfettered form that has gained local acceptance by conferring a framework of "popular/national Mexican imagination" on the transnational "horror" genre imagination (*17).

The power of the crazy monk as a form of this acclimation and proximization has been further enhanced through his becoming the property of the Mexican popular/national imagination as a cross-media character. As such, the opportunity for the crazy monk to shift from the impression widely formed by the voice in the narration of the radio drama to a visual focus and characterization through the *historieta* will likely be positioned as important.

**Chapter 3 "Where do historical facts end and legends begin?"**

In the 1950s, the Mexican horror *historieta* industry was greatly influenced by American horror comics. In terms of the development of the *El Monje Loco* series from the 1940s to the 1970s, the series published under the 1967 Editorial Temporae label, often praised by *historieta* enthusiasts, was a notable success. In the *historieta* archives of the National Newspaper Library of Mexico (*18), the series is introduced as a work influenced by 1950s American horror comics with an even more grotesque and terrifying pictorial style, as seen in Figure 5 (*19).

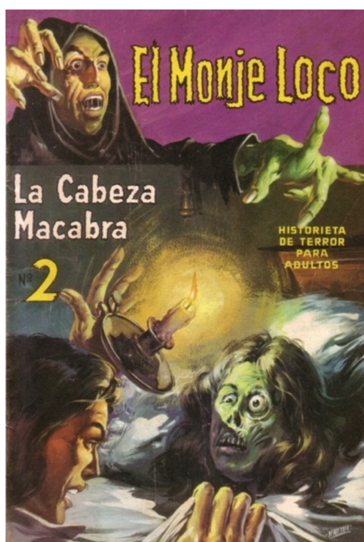



Figure 5 Editorial Temporae *El Monje Loco* cover page. The cover image also highlights grotesque drawing in the style of 1950s American horror comics. Author unknown, "La Cabeza Macabra Blanco," in *El Monje Loco* no.2, Editorial Temporae, 1967.

While *El Monje Loco* took on the pictorial aesthetic style of American horror comics using distinct line drawings in its own way, in the same 1960s another representative horror *historieta* series that produced many of its own successors was born: *Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia* (*Traditions and Legends of the Colony*; *Legends* hereafter), published by Editorial Gutenberg (later Ediciones Latinoamericanas). This series was exhibited at the *Historieta Exhibition* as "Mexico's most-loved gothic *historieta*" (*20).

While *El Monje Loco* incorporated wide-ranging horror genre-based motifs, in the *Legends* series, which logged 1500 issues between 1963 and 1983, the primary motifs are (as the title suggests) dramatizations of many of the

traditional tales about Mexico City during the Spanish colonial period, as described in Luis González Obregón's 1922 *Las Calles de México: Leyendas y Sucedidos*. For example, the first issue engages readers with the famous traditional tale "La Llorona," about a female ghost (once featured in a movie) who grieves after killing her own child in anger over her husband's adultery (Figure 6) .

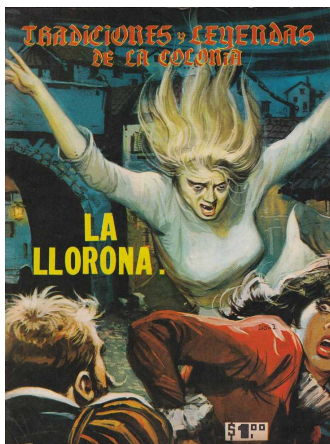



Figure 6　Cover page, "La Llorona," in *Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia* no.1, Editorial Gutenberg, 1963.

The content of the third issue, "La Leyenda de la Calle de Olmedo" ("The Legend of Olmedo Street"), presents the typical narrative flow of the series that would later be featured repeatedly. The narrator, a middle-aged gentleman (modeled on Boris Karloff, an actor known for American gothic horror movies) in his study, who appears in every issue, says the following as he lures the reader in with a terrifying traditional tale from the colonial period.

Legends are formed of interweaving narratives, which is probably how the most terrifying legends of colonial-era Mexico came about… Maybe you have heard of "La Leyenda de la Calle de Olmedo"? You've probably walked through this area countless times, but did you know that this cobblestoned street was once so terrifying as to make one's hair stand on end? … Where do historical facts end and legends begin? (Figure 7)

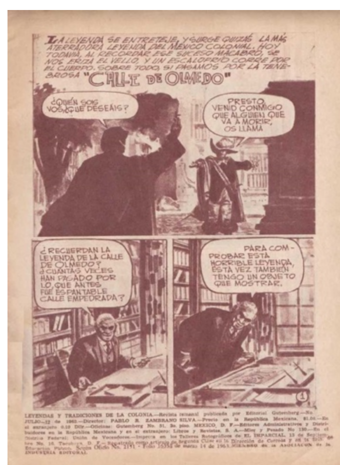



Figure 7　First page, "La Leyenda de la Calle de Olmedo," in *Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia* no.3, Editorial Gutenberg, 1963.

Then the readers are lured into the Mexico of 1731 in the era of the Viceroyalty of Nueva España, where they are sucked into the mysterious reimagining of a murder that once took place on Olmedo Street as they listen in on a confession from a dead person, heard by a Catholic priest.

This way, *Legends* tells various traditional tales about the fate of the dead and spirits through horror stories in an "anecdotal" format using the classic device of a narrator, which is superficially the same as what *El Monje Loco* does. However, the differences between the two works are notable with respect to the framework of "*historietas* as Mexican popular/national culture."

As touched upon earlier, the stamp of Mexican locality in *El Monje Loco* is not found in the "content" but in the "format" where the "crazy monk" tells tales as a template to produce "*historieta Mexicana*". Entertainment from various horror genre-based texts became part of Mexico's popular/national property through the tales of "that" monk, who himself became the property of Mexico's popular/national imagination by means of cross-media use and repeated reference.

In contrast, *Legends* recalls for the reader a specific time and place within the anecdote. Therefore, what incites the awareness of the reader is the past and present of Mexican localities, connected in imaginative landscapes where familiar locations provide the settings for traditional tales and fateful stories of spirits and the dead (*21). The use of the locality of the traditional tale as a device of proximization creates the pleasure of imagined horror. At the same time, the "horror" genre format, through the visual recreation of tales of the dead and spirits, operates as a means of proximization of the past around local places, firing the imagination of the modern reader. As such, the transnational imagination of the horror genre forms a more integrated and complex relationship with the locality of Mexico.

However, in contrast to *El Monje Loco*, it is likely ill-judged to see the connection and proximization of the past and present of Mexico through the "horror" genre format in *Legends* as an evocation of a "true" past that forms the Mexican popular/national identity. Experiences through mass media assume the "texture of everyday experience" (*22), and as noted by Appadurai with reference to Frederick Jameson's theory that the element of nostalgia is an important focal point in modern cultural products (*23), the nostalgia and familiarity evoked by mass media cultural products need not be connected to actual lived experiences of the chronological past. Rather, the origin of their authenticity is the retrospective recreation of media experiences.

The Mexico of the past depicted in *Legends* is not an authentic recreation of a lived past but a recreation within the imagination formed through mass media. Just as the storyteller who lures you into the traditions of the past is modeled on an actor from Hollywood horror movies, the past shown in *Legends* is partly constructed from local folk culture traditions. Yet it is also greatly dependent on the cross-media imagination of the transnational horror genre (including horror movies) that is part of Mexican popular/national experience and that has undoubtedly been appropriated in forms such as *El Monje Loco*. Here it is difficult to distinguish the gaze on the past as a historical source shared by a national collective from the nostalgia and intimacy felt with regard to reimagined shared media experiences.

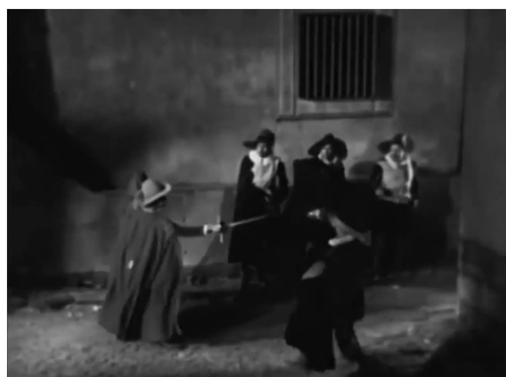
The technique of *medio tono* used in *Legends* enables an overlap in the imagination of this gaze on the historical past and the nostalgia for media experiences. According to Aurrecoechea and Bartra, this characteristically expressive technique depicts halftone gradations using a special combination of ink and pencil that can be compared to *café con leche*. It was created on the basis of a desire to make the visual expression of *historietas* more naturalistic and full of ambience. In the *historietas* of the 1940s, readers in Mexico appreciated black and sepia monochrome pictures rather than color, especially *historieta* drawings depicted in *medio tono*, as such depictions were seen as reimagining a realistic ambience reminiscent of black and white movies and photographs (*24).

Nonetheless, the preference for the realist ambience of *medio tono* would be unintentionally derailed by naturalist realism through collage techniques using monochrome photographs, that is, photomontage. As Aurrecoechea and Bartra wrote:

> The desire for realism ended up chasing its own tail. The technique intended to make *historietas* more truthful enabled the fragments of ‘reality’ that are photographs to create a doubly destructive illusory world in accordance with the demands of wild imagination. (*25)

The monochrome characters and backgrounds in the halftone gradations formed by *medio tono*, along with the photo collages, brought about a distinctive sensation on the *historieta* page, imploding with naturalist realism.

In this way, expressive endeavors in *Legends* to depict “truthful” horror settings in a horror *historieta* paradoxically brought in a transversal capacity for imagination, which allowed *historietas* to cross the boundaries between existing specific locations and the past settings of traditional tales about the dead via a realism rooted in monochrome media experiences. This can be seen, for example, in the specific depiction of the “places” used as settings in *Legends*. As for the cobbled streets of Mexico City endlessly depicted in *medio tono*, including Calle de Olmedo, their visual authenticity is not supported by historical investigations about the accuracy of the depictions. Rather, the imaginations of the readers of Mexican popular/national *historietas* who enjoy making connections between the supernatural traditional tales of spirits and the dead and actual place names/memories of urban spaces are given form. This is done through continuity with other re-imaginings in past media experiences, including movies, such as the screen projection of the sets of past city streets and houses from the 1933 Mexican horror film of *La Llorona* (Figure 8) (*26).



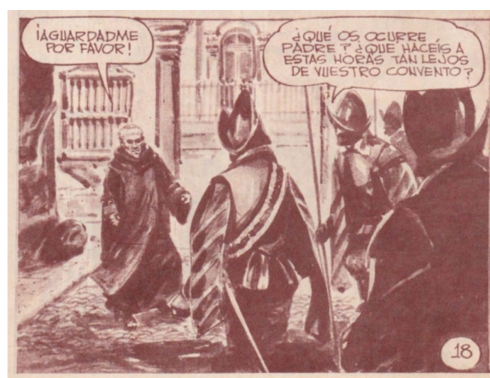



Figure 8 The streets of Mexico in *La Llorona* (1933), one of Mexico’s first horror movies, and the setting for “The Legend of Olmedo Street.”

*Legends* acclimates post-*El Monje Loco* transnational, genre-based imagination within a national framework. While building on the lineage of “*historietas Mexicanas*” as a means of seizing the pleasure thereof, *Legends* can now be positioned as presenting the new directionality of reimagining/rediscovering national motifs within a format that localizes the imagination of genre for the “*historieta*” as a “work of horror.” Thus, just as with *El Monje Loco*, as a point of transition in the history of horror *historietas*, *Legends* gave rise to spin-offs and follow-up *historieta* series (*27). There, in contrast to *El Monje Loco*, local motifs were reimagined in “horror *historietas*” as a genre-based form of transnational imagination.

**Section 4 The use of genre-based capacity for imagination in rental gothic manga and horror *historietas***

One topic that invites a comparison with these horror *historietas* from the perspective of the form of the “acclimation to popular/national culture of a transnational genre-based capacity for imagination” is the heyday of Japanese rental gothic manga.

In Japan, one of the epochal moments in the development of gothic manga was the evolution of rental manga between 1955 and 1965. For example, in the lineup from Taiheiyō Bunko, one of the foremost publishers of rental manga in terms of the number of publications, about a sixth were gothic publications (*28). In addition, the publications of *Kaidan* and *All Kaidan*, rental short story magazines from Tsubame Shuppan (1958) and Hibari Shobō (1959), respectively, were highly significant in terms of the emergence of specialist publications in the horror genre (Figure 8). Following these, rental short story magazines focusing on gothic themes were successively issued until about the mid-1960s, leading to a craze for rental gothic manga (*29).

Incidentally, on the shelves of rental bookstores, there were also novels meant for entertainment, such as historical novels and detective stories by domestic and foreign authors, whose elements were introduced into rental manga in response to reader demand (*30). In this context, as noted by Yonezawa Yoshihiro, from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, as rental gothic manga proliferated, overseas gothic/fantasy novels poured into Japan, including Tokyo Sōgensha’s *The Complete Collected World Horror Short Stories,* edited by Hirai Teiichi (1958), and Hayakawa Shuppan’s anthologies *Great Tales of the Supernatural and Uncanny* (1956) and *Outlandish Short Stories* (1960) (*31). Also, during the same period, on the one hand, foreign horror movies, including Hammer Films’ *Dracula* (1958), Roger Corman’s *House of Usher* (1960), and Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), as well as Tōhō *tokusatsu* (special effects) horror movies, such as *The H-Man* (1958), were released one after the other. On the other hand, there was a revival in ghost story movies, originating from the popularity of monster cat movies, such as Daiei’s *Ghost of Saga Mansion* (1953).

Born in 1949, writer Kikuchi Hideyuki, in his postscript to the anthology he compiled of rental ghost story manga, wrote the following about his childhood memories of frequenting rental bookstores:

> The turning point came when a certain book arrived. Even now, I can clearly remember the title, *Ma no Hyakumonsen*, a period gothic manga. It was an adaptation of the famous *Dracula* movie, with which I was obsessed at that point… It worked in part because Dracula was a black-caped Westerner, not awkwardly Japanized (*32).

While Kikuchi’s experience was derived from the appropriation of monster representations in Hollywood horror movies, the success of ghost stories in view of the craze for ghost movies cannot be described here in full. For example, Kojima Gōseki, the vanguard author of *Kaidan* and *All Kaidan*, created fantastical short manga that combined classical ghost stories, such as “Dōjō-ji” and “Yotsuya Kaidan,” or “The Reed-Choked House” and “The Peony Lantern” from *Ugetsu Monogatari*, with romantic melodramas. In the late 1950s, Tokunami Seiichirō, who now has an almost cult-like following, published seven books with Akebono Shobō under the title *Tokunami Seiichiro Ghost Cat Series*, seemingly against the background of the popularity of ghost cat movies.

In addition, while it is well known that the rental gothic manga *The Underground Footsteps* (Akebono Shobō, 1962) is an early adaptation by Mizuki Shigeru of H. P. Lovecraft’s *The Dunwich Horror* set in Japan, in the early 1960s, in the period gothic manga series *Mizuki Shigeru’s Fantasy Roman* there were many additional adaptations of foreign horror and SF novels, such as those of Poe, Jack Finney’s *The Body Snatchers*, and Guillaume Apollinaire’s “The Disappearance of Honoré Subrac” (Figure 9) (*33).

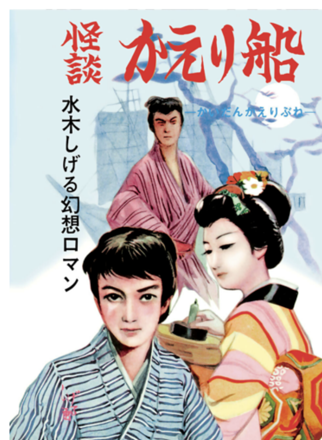



Figure 9 "*Kaidan kaeribune*," from the series *Mizuki Shigeru's Fantasy Roman*. This episode was inspired by W.W. Jacobs' classic horror story, "The Monkey's Paw."
Mizuki, Shigeru. "*Kaidan kaeribune*." *Mizuki Shigeru Complete Manga Works, Rental Manga Compilation 10, Kaidan kaeribune and others*. Kodansha, 2020.

Just as horror *historietas* took on a wide range of horror genre-based motifs, including through adaptation and appropriation, in the realm of rental gothic manga, the transnational and transmedia capacity for genre-based imagination was frequently borrowed such that it was linked to the contemporaneous development of movies and novels. This process can largely be divided into three modes, namely, (1) the appropriation of representations of monsters from horror movies (this can be seen in both magazines and rental books), (2) the recreation of stories of fate based on the format of ghost stories, and (3) borrowing and adapting the plots of foreign gothic and SF novels. Regarding this directionality, Yonezawa views (2) and (3) in particular as contrastive. While (2) aimed for iconographic and pragmatic horror that conformed to the model of revenge stories, (3) placed greater emphasis on a story with a shock punchline or ending. Yonezawa states that, in its late period, rental gothic manga became more aware of sophisticated "urban horror" in the style of mode (3) (*34).

When viewing these works as "forms of acclimating genre-based imagination," an additional line of reasoning can be employed with reference to Kang Jun's theory about the rental gothic manga *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (*35). Kang compares the rental gothic manga writers Mizuki Shigeru and Takeuchi Kankō, who worked on *GeGeGe no Kitarō* and had both started out working on *kamishibai* picture card storytelling. While Takeuchi's *Kitarō* does not pictorially harmonize the manga-like Kitarō with the other, more realistically drawn, characters in the same frame, Mizuki's *Kitarō* was able to have both the manga-like Kitarō and Nezumi Otoko together with depictions of more realistic human characters without any sense of discomfort, using frame composition and connection methods.

According to Kang, this disparity can be referred to as a "conflict between the orality and textuality of the image" (*36). Essentially, Takeuchi's work was affected by his history with *kamishibai* ghost stories and horror stories, where the jumble of different coexisting standards of images (content) could be integrated or canceled out by the "narration" of the *kamishibai* narrator, who was intrinsically "external" thereto. On the other hand, Mizuki, while similarly having started out in *kamishibai*, aimed to achieve integration by enhancing consistency in the autonomous text of the "work" of manga as an independent book through awareness of the method of uniting connected frames and refinement of the plot and

setting. Thus, while Mizuki’s Kitarō later developed as a unique “work” connected to a specific “author,” Takeuchi’s Kitarō failed to become a manga “work” and petered out with the decline of rental manga.

To expand on the differences between Mizuki and Takeuchi with relation to the modes of borrowing genre-based imagination in rental manga cited in the foregoing text, it can be said that mode (2), which places emphasis on appropriated and borrowed individual elements of shock while attempting virtual unification by the use of an existing shared ghost story or stories of fate as the narrative format, conflicts with mode (3). This is because mode (3) assimilates and conceals the appropriated and borrowed sources and tries to move towards an integrated autonomous text. This is a conflict also because actual rental gothic manga frequently collided and disintegrated between the two modes, leading to overly abrupt punchlines and the introduction of illogical shocking scenes (these would later be rediscovered and appraised as “cult literature” and “B-grade horror”).

This way, manga was similar to *historieta* in terms of the transnational relocation of horror genre representations and the cross-media appropriation of plots and motifs for transformation into local cultural products. However, manga made the shift from rentals toward magazine media issued by major publishers and finally became individual, autonomous “works,” bound up with the authors’ names and giving rise to author-centric standards of appraisal, including in terms of the originality of ideas and skillful adaptations. On the other hand, the narrative devices/formats of *historietas*, such as “stories from the crazy monk” and “Mexican traditions,” simply served as external bounds for the internal logic and pleasure of individual short texts in the horror genre, consistently broadminded enough to permit divergence from organized consistency where “works” could be ascribed to a specific author. In addition, as highlighted by Bartra, the formation of a collective readership with a shared, specific, genre-based imaginative capacity through horror *historietas* was connected to the national framework of “the Mexican masses” founded on cross-sectional mass media experiences. However, manga, through the change to youth culture, is instead heading toward forming a subculture collective founded on specific media, that is, “manga readership,” articulated and separated inside the national framework.

In his essay in the illustrated text for the *Historieta Exhibition*, Ōtsuka Eiji connected the Bartra and Aurrecoechea view of *historietas* to the context in which manga forms a “folklore” as an expression of a “commons” originating in a “group of authors” who can no longer be seen as the modern concept of individual “authors” (*37). It is significant that, as an example of the “folklore” approach, Ōtsuka cites *Hakaba Kitarō*, which existed in various versions before being attached to the author Mizuki Shigeru. The role of horror *historietas* in the landscape of Mexican popular/national imagination originating in “the crazy monk” can perhaps be likened to the existence of *Kitarō* and its non-convergence with *GeGeGe no Kitarō*.

**Conclusion**

“*Tradiciones y Leyendas de la Colonia*: A brutal, sepia-colored comic that was widely available when I was a kid. Brutal.” (*38) In 2015, Guillermo Del Toro, the Mexican movie director known for *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and other grotesque and fantastical works, posted this tweet on his Twitter feed alongside a grotesque cover image from *Legends*.

This post, which shows that *Legends* is one of the roots of the imagination of this globally active director known to be a fan of Japanese manga, anime, and *tokusatsu* movies, nicely demonstrates the interaction between the movement of imagination across national borders and experiences of its reception in local media as argued by Appadurai. As a melting pot of Mexico’s

popular/national imagination, and as an appropriation of a transnational imaginative capacity, the world of *historietas* may be an important point of comparison when reassessing the development of the realm of imagination in manga, which tends to be positioned solely within the framework of “Japan.”

Notes

*1 Hernández, Alvaro, editor. *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta': Expression as Folk Culture*. International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2019, pp. 52–81.
*2 Aurrecoechea, Juan Manuel. "Mexican Popular Comics in the Transition from *historieta salvaje* to Graphic Novels." *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta': Expression as Folk Culture*, edited by Alvaro Hernández, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2019, p.11.
*3 Bartra, Armando. "Crowd Reading: Birth, Splendor and the Agony of the Great Illustrated Whale. Historical Recounts of Mexican Comic Books, From Lithography to the Internet." *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta': Expression as Folk Culture*, edited by Alvaro Hernández, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2019, pp. 114-115.
*4 Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *Historietas de Horror en México*. Editorial Mucachi Metiche, 2019.
*5 For details of the *El Monje Loco* bibliography, see the website of the *historieta* archives of the National Newspaper Library of Mexico. https://pepines.iib.unam.mx/serie/1113
*6 Del Plado, Carlos and Héctor Gutierrez. *El Monje Loco*, vol.1, no.20, Corporación Editorial Mexicana, 1952. This episode has been published online by a collector. http://monjeloco6771.blogspot.com/search/label/1952
*7 *El Monje Loco*, after being published in the daily *historieta* magazine *Chamaco* in 1940, was issued as a book in 1952 by Corporación Editorial Mexicana. In the 1960s, a short series comprising only three volumes was issued by Editorial Continente (1967), with later developments including the publication of the successful Editorial Temporae label series (1967–1971), followed by the 6-volume, short-lived Grupo Editor de México series (1972).
*8 Bartra, Armando. "Crowd Reading: Birth, Splendor and the Agony of the Great Illustrated Whale. Historical Recounts of Mexican Comic Books, From Lithography to the Internet." *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta': Expression as Folk Culture*, edited by Alvaro Hernández, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2019, p.110. Here, the description gives the sense that the 1937 radio drama was produced after the *historieta*.
*9 González, Cecilio Jacobo. *El Monje Loco: una breve semblanza del abad maldito*, 2021. https://www.comikaze.net/el-monje-loco/
*10 González, Cecilio Jacobo. *El Monje Loco: una breve semblanza del abad maldito*, 2021. https://www.comikaze.net/el-monje-loco/
*11 Jancovich, Mark. *Horror*. Translated by Endō Tōru, Seikyūsha, 1997, pp. 15–16.
*12 Tudor, Andrew. "Why Horror?: The Peculiar Pleasure of a Popular Genre." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1997, pp. 443–463.
*13 Bartra, Armando. "Crowd Reading: Birth, Splendor and the Agony of the Great Illustrated Whale. Historical Recounts of Mexican Comic Books, From Lithography to the Internet." *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta': Expression as Folk Culture*, edited by Alvaro Hernández, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2019, p.110.
*14 Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Translated by Shiraishi Saya and Shiraishi Takashi, NTT, 2004.
*15 Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Translated by Kadota Kenichi, Heibonsha, 2004.
*16 Aurrecoechea, Juan Manuel and Armando Bartra. *Puros Cuentos III: Historia de la Historieta en México 1934-1950*. Editorial Grijalbo, 1994, pp.18–19.
*17 As with "the crazy monk," as a means of acclimating transnationally shared horror genre-based motifs as local products, battles with monsters from various horror movies appear in *historietas* featuring *luchador* heroes such as *Santo: El Enmascarado de Plata*.
*18 See the National Newspaper Library of Mexico website, https://pepines.iib.unam.mx/serie/1113
*19 Based on plots under the signature of Salvatore Carrasco, who played the crazy monk in the radio drama and movie, with the narrator of the tale thus evoking "that" cross-media monk for the reader, the series, drawn by artists such as Rubén Lara, José Pacindo, Carlos Moro, Juan Rangel, and José Barradas, was published weekly, reaching 169 volumes between 1967 and 1971. Refer to González, *El Monje Loco: una breve semblanza del abad maldito*, 2021. https://www.comikaze.net/el-monje-loco/
*20 See Soto Díaz, Rubén Eduardo. *Historietas de Horror en México*. Editorial Mucachi Metiche, 2019.

*21 Also, as an element that suggests the Mexican locality of *Legends*, Alvaro David Hernández Hernández points out the many Christian motifs in this work. See Hernández's presentation "Expressions of horror in Mexican *historieta*" (at the *Media, Media Expressions and Fan Culture* MANGAlabo 7 workshop, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Japanese Popular Culture Research Project, 2019). These Christian motifs are also an important shared device within the Mexican popular/national imagination for framing vice and devilishness by way of inciting horror. In contrast, Aztec/Mayan indigenous motifs tend to be more widely used in action and adventure *historietas* rather than horror works, a point to be studied in the future. Regarding the text in this section, Alvaro Hernández and Gen Leonardo Ota Otani provided important suggestions.
*22 Silverstone, Roger. *Why Study the Media?* Translated by Yoshimi Shunya et al., Serica Shobō, 2003.
*23 Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, translated by Muroi Hisashi and Yoshioka Hiroshi, Keisō Shobō, 1987.
*24 Aurrecoechea, Juan Manuel and Armando Bartra. *Puros Cuentos II: Historia de la Historieta en México 1934–1950*. Editorial Grijalbo, 1993, p.192.
*25 Aurrecoechea, Juan Manuel and Armando Bartra. *Puros Cuentos II: Historia de la Historieta en México 1934–1950*. Editorial Grijalbo, 1993, pp.197–198.
*26 The period from the 1950s to the 1960s was also when many horror movies were produced in Mexico. The connection between these movies and horror *historietas* is an important issue when considering this fictional universe, which requires further study in the future.
*27 Among the series of horror *historietas* which, following the success of *Legends*, used local motifs, the *historieta* website "tebeosfera" lists *El Caballo Del Diablo* by Ediciones Latinoamericana (1969) and *El Jinete De La Muerte* (1974) among others (https://www.tebeosfera.com/colecciones/tradiciones_y_leyendas_de_la_colonia_1963_latinoamericanas_gutenberg.html). The former presents crime and horror stories that intermingle legends and superstitions in the local setting of modernized Mexico, while the latter depicts the legendary adventures of a *charro* carrying the souls of the dead.
*28 Yonezawa, Yoshihiro. *A History of Postwar Gothic Manga.* Tetsujinsha, 2019, p. 25.
*29 Book Rental Manga History Study Group, *Rental Manga RETURNS*. Poplar, 2006, pp. 194–196.
*30 Nakano, Haruyuki. *Understanding the Manga Industry*. Chikuma Shobō, 2004.
*31 Yonezawa, Yoshihiro. *A History of Postwar Gothic Manga.* Tetsujinsha, 2019, pp. 73–75.
*32 Kikuchi, Hideyuki, editor. *Rental Ghost Story Manga Masterworks Compilation: Phantom Volume*. Rippū Shobō, 1991, p. 325.
*33 Yonezawa,Yoshihiro. *A History of Postwar Gothic Manga.* Tetsujinsha, 2019, p.61.
*34 Yonezawa, Yoshihiro. *A History of Postwar Gothic Manga.* Tetsujinsha, 2019, pp.73–81.
*35 Kang, Jun. *Kamishibai and "the Spooky" in Modern Times*. Seikyūsha, 2007, pp. 169–178.
*36 Kang, Jun. *Kamishibai and "the Spooky" in Modern Times*. Seikyūsha, 2007, p.178.
*37 Ōtsuka, Eiji. "Rediscovery of 'the People's Manga': *Historieta* as 'Folk Culture'.'" *Unknown Mexican Comics 'Historieta': Expression as Folk Culture*, edited by Alvaro Hernández, International Research Center for Japanese Studies, 2019, pp.156–59.
*38 @RealGDT. "TRADICIONES Y LEYENDAS DE LA COLONIA: A Brutal, Sepia-colored comic that was widely avail. when I was a kid. Brutal." *Twitter*, 29 Sep. 2015, 4:48p.m., https://twitter.com/RealGDT/status/648766182791753728

# *El Monje Loco* from the View of Saika Tadahiro

Olivia Domínguez Prieto[1]

In Mexico, there is a very old tradition of exploring themes from the horror genre, particularly in terms of what is referred to as literary creation, traced from colonial legends[2], that has since developed important roots in popular culture and been repeated and reinvented over the centuries. However, it is also possible to go back to the history of the pre-Hispanic peoples[3] to find elements in oral tradition and myths that, due to their function as social regulators, could be classified as belonging to the horror genre, and that even today can be found to play a role in determining cultural traits in many communities in this country.

However, the genre of horror began to be integrated into Mexican culture between the 1930s and 1960s[4], making itself present first in the restoration and publication of collections of chronicles and old legends, in parallel with radio programs, and later in film. Since the 1920s, the Coahuila writer Artemio del Valle Arizpe began to compile the tradition of New Spain in his work, and specifically in 1936, he published the book *Stories of the Living and the Dead: Legends, Traditions, and Events of Viceregal Mexico.* Just one year later, in 1937, radio broadcasts would begin where the character chosen by Saika Tadahiro, El Monje Loco [The Mad Monk],[5] would appear. El Monje Loco's stories were narrated by Salvador Carrasco, who would later become known as one of the first Mexican dubbing actors who had the opportunity to travel to the United States. After the voice of the presenter who announced, "From the gloom of his chapel, the terrifying narratives of El Monje Loco reach you," a macabre laugh could be heard, followed by the sound of a baroque organ and special effects that were interrupted with the phrase, "Nobody knows, nobody knew," followed by a gruesome narrative. It wouldn't take long for the character to be brought first to the big screen[6] and later to print, specifically in comic strip format, as Eduardo Soto notes:

> In *Chamaco*, starting in 1942, the "El Monje Loco" series was published by Juan Reyes Béiker and other prominent cartoonists from the same publication based on the radio series of the same name, written by Carlos Riveroll de Prado and starring Salvador Carrasco (Soto, 2010: 5)[7].

Possibly, one of the elements that has most drawn attention to the figure of El Monje Loco has been his positioning as a narrator-storyteller, a very common device in classic texts, but also in many famous horror and suspense series[8]. El Monje Loco would become a witness and at the same time a narrator, both in his radio

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1 Head of Research at the Postgraduate and Research Section of the School of Engineering and Architecture (ESIA Tecamachalco) at the National Polytechnic Institute (NPI), Mexico.

2 In the book *Leyendas y Sucedidos del México Colonial* [*Legends and Events of Colonial Mexico]* published by El Libro Español (1963), some of the best-known legends are compiled, although not all would be classified as belonging to the genre of horror. However, one of the best known, "La Llorona," occupies a key place in the framework of this genre.

3 In his book *Leyendas del Agua en México* [*Water Legends in Mexico]* (2006), Andrés González Pages compiles some of them, particularly those that refer to water, such as that of *Nahui Atl* (*The Fourth Sun* or *Sun of Water*), *Hapunda, Tajín and the Seven Thunders, The Weeping Trees,* and *The Tlalocan or Paraíso de Tláloc.*

4 Previously, at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, *Legends and Events* by Luis González Obregón, Guillermo Prieto, and Vicente Riva Palacio was published. The reprints of this work, according to an advertisement from the publishers in the *Traditions and Legends of the Colony* magazine recovered by Miguel Ángel Morales and Eduardo Soto in their book *Traditions and Legends of the Colony*: *Novohispanic Horror in Comics* (2020)*,* "were out of print or prohibitively expensive".

5 In the archives of the *W*, one of the oldest and most recognized radio stations in Mexico, there are some files from the aforementioned programs. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTYjO2JtbPU

6 The movie *El Monje Loco* was shown for the first time in 1940, directed by Alejandro Galindo.

7 Cecilio Jacobo González from *Comikaze* provides further information, stating that *El Monje Loco*: "(…) started weekly in 1940 as part of the famous publication *Kid*, from Publicaciones Herrerías. By the 1950s, the stories appeared on the pages of *Grandpa's Tales*, from Corporación Editorial Mexicana. Then, with its own title, it had a brief run of only three issues at Editorial Continente, published in 1967. At the end of that same year, Editorial Temporae, a sub-label of Editorial Novaro, took up the title. To do so, it used great talents of the time, such as Salvador Carrasco for the storylines and Rubén Lara (*Fantomas*), José Pacindo, Carlos Moro, Juan Rangel, and José Barradas for illustration. This was the longest and most famous stage of the character, since between 1967 and 1971, 169 weekly issues were published." Originally published in *Comikaze* no. 35, URL: https://www.comikaze.net/el-monje-loco/.

8 Among them, the Alfred Hitchcock series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1965) *and The New Alfred Hitchcock* (1985-1989) and the famous skeleton narrator of *Tales from the Crypt* (1989-1996).

form, as well as in his film and graphic versions in the comic:

> With *El Monje Loco,* the comic not only welcomes tasty tales of mystery and horror, it also receives from radio theater the dramatic structure of the short story… [contributing] the first narrator character of our comics: a hooded man who with his mysterious characterization defines the tone of the series (Aurrecoechea and Bartra, 1994: 265-267).

However, despite the peculiarity of the character El Monje Loco and his famous parodies, there are few texts that analyze this comic in depth. In the text "The Development of Horror *Historietas* and Rental Horror Manga: Local Acclimation of Genre-based Imaginative Capacity," Saika Tadahiro reflects with insight on Mexican comics and wonders why there are few references to the literary genre of horror, compared to the "seven predominant themes in that country, among which humor, romance, and heroes stand out, among others[9]."

For Saika, the narrative in *El Monje Loco* breaks with the frameworks and themes developed in other Mexican comics at the time, an observation that perfectly indicates the political project promoted by post-revolutionary governments in Mexico, which sought to build a national identity, based on the assimilation of certain shared cultural symbols. These symbols were presented through music, muralism, and different literary genres, including comics[10]. Saika writes

> On the other hand, El Monje Loco is different from the symbols of comics read as manifestations of Mexican identity, history, or nationality, such as the "charros" or the "heroes" resembling the leaders of the Revolution, or even Memín or Familia Burrón. They represent an indigenous Mexicanism in the "content" interwoven into the text (work), as the mad monk moves between—and is accepted in—short stories, movies, comics, and other cultural products crossing national borders (Saika).

*El Monje Loco,* based on *what is said* from its semantic explicitness, sticks to universal frameworks, connecting with the transnational node of the narrative and the aesthetics of horror with a particularly North American influence that Saika discovers not only in the storyline, but also in the plot.

The search for parallels and contrasts is key in Saika's text: in principle he compares *El Monje Loco* with the series *Traditions and Legends of the Colony* which, from the 1960s, led the horror comics market in Mexico, recovering locations and local imaginaries, unlike the stories of *El Monje Loco,* which could even be placed in other locations around the world.

However, the most interesting comparison that Saika makes is spatially located across the Pacific, in the rental comics that circulated between the 50s and 60s in Japan, where gothic themes would occupy an important position, along with in novels and later, imported films. Western influence, according to Saika, appeared at various times, through the adaptation of Bram Stoker's work *Dracula* as the manga *Ma no hyakumonsen*; in the ghosts of Kojima Gōseki's manga; in books by Tokunami Seiichirō; and even in the adaptation of English-language works by H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe by Shigeru Mizuki.

However, the reception of manga by readers in Japan would follow different paths than those of Mexican comics, as suggested by Saika following Bartra. While in Mexico, comics—with a few exceptions—became another instrument of the dominant national culture, in Japan, reading manga would lead to the formation of communities of meaning or to so-called youth cultures, which have transcended generations and have been transnationalized when crossing borders:

> In addition, as highlighted by Bartra, the formation of a collective readership with a shared, specific, genre-based imaginative capacity through horror historietas was connected to the national framework of "the Mexican masses" founded on cross-sectional mass media experiences. However, manga, through the change to youth culture, is instead heading toward forming a subculture collective founded on specific media, that is, "manga readership," articulated and separated inside the national framework (Saika).

Undoubtedly, themes that revolve around horror continue to have an important function in different cultural expressions in Mexico—despite not being the

[9] The episode he has chosen is number 34, titled "The White Sepulcher," in which a necrophilic theme is developed, where the protagonist unearths and coexists with the corpse of his beloved. This is a recurrent theme in Latin American narratives; it is also found in the lyrics of the song by Ecuadorian Julio Jaramillo called "Bodas Negras," as well as in the episode "Until death do us part" from a television horror series produced in Mexico that was titled *Hora Marcada* and broadcast in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

[10] Due to their low cost and wide dissemination among the reading audience, comics played a fundamental role in circulating social imaginaries about the construction of Mexican national identity.

most popular genre—both in literature and in film[11]. However, it is seldom chosen as a subject for critical analysis by academia, indicating the need to develop interpretations and observations such as those made by Saika, who has identified the contrasting perspectives within the historical understandings of horror comics in Mexico. In Mexico, there is no single image of horror, nor is there a "pure formula," since, for several decades, the symbolic elements of the narratives have been hybridized in their contact with the transnational imaginaries of this genre.

As Silvana Flores writes – with reference to film, but her comments can be applied to Mexican comics – understandings about horror abound:

> (…) when we talk about horror and fantasy films in Mexico, we cannot stick to a mere formula for preparation, but to a range of understandings that arise from the influx of creators (both domestic and foreign, who act as a reference) and from the target audience, which expects from the film a product aligned with that imaginary.

To conclude, it is important to emphasize the need to return to comics as materials for historical study, from the perspectives of the history of mentalities and from the semiotic analysis of culture, for a number of reasons: the ability of comics to condense images and discourses into the same object reproduced from reality or fantasy, and to pass through different aesthetics and integrate social imaginaries related to a certain time or understanding of the world; as well as their intertextuality. In this sense, Saika's reading provides important clues to unravel the narrative and configuration of *El Monje Loco,* as well as its intersections with other comics, from its creation to its final reception. As Saika suggests, *imagine the one who imagines*, years and miles away, while listening to a voiceover that vehemently assures them: "no one knows, no one knew."

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[11] There are many contemporary authors who have opted for this genre, choosing the story, as a narrative form: Cristhian Chavero, Óscar Álvarez Freeman, Vianka Mildred, Daniel Drack, and Itzel Santos, among others.

# Modernity and Innocence: Commentary on the Comparative Analysis by Ota Otani of the Mexican Comic "Almas de Niños" [Children's Souls] and the Japanese Manga "Batto-kun"

Fernando Ruiz Molina[12]

The analysis in Ota Otani's article is expertly enriched through the interpretation of the child's gaze as a coding/decoding device. Through the child's gaze affections, materialities, experiences, and precise conditions of existence are assembled, in the midst of industrialization and modernization in Mexico's case, and in the political readjustment that occurred after defeat in World War II in Japan's case.

Perhaps the closest theory for interpreting this gaze as assemblage is Benjamin's, which does not disregard the *shock* of modernity, and ruin, as an object of sociological or philosophical reflection. Along these lines, the child's gaze uses innocence to assimilate the symptoms – new emotions or those that did not yet have a name – of abrupt social, political, and economic changes. Ruin, human loss, and demolition, what the Japanese coined *kyodatsu*: a collective depressive feeling, which before celebrating the martial spirit of war and, the sometimes saturating and self-commendable Japanese spirit, enhanced the feeling of irreversibility, one of the qualities that Vladimir Jankelevitch associates with time, the feeling of *death* and *the Nothing*. Melancholy that moves, on the one hand, towards what has been lost and feeds on the dream of modifying the irreversibility of time (in Memín's case, which invites the general public to think and remember childhood as a "sacred treasure"), and, on the other hand, to the war experience of Japan, the shock, the sense of loss, to the expectant and careful life and the reconfiguration of everyday practices, in this new reality and logic of "Americanized" existence, in which Batto-kun tries to insert himself and adapt through his rise in baseball.

Through the *child's gaze,* Ota Otani reconstructs, in Mexico's case, the lives and experiences of the people of the urban peripheries, which he indicates are the product of a migratory phenomenon in Mexico that began to take shape during the transformations of the 1940s, with the reforms that made possible prosperity and balance between the countryside and the city, under the shelter of civil (not military) governments and the emergence of public education. In the case of Japan, the focus is on the reconstruction of the future for children through sports meritocracy, the aura of effort, and the constant overcoming of obstacles.

Through the visual experiences in "Alma de Niños" and "Batto-kun," both works reconstruct the concept of "childhood innocence" through a gaze that crudely reads life in the city, within a context of urban upheaval, and in the midst of constant transformation towards the modern industrial paradigm. The tension between ruin and reconstruction, after World War II, is perhaps one of the perspective lines within Ota Otani's comparative work. Ruin in this sense expresses the materiality of decay, disaster, a crisis in the notion of "purity" (whose expected antimony is "decomposition" and "corruption"), and destruction. However, reconstruction incorporates elements that allude to the operative processes of technical reproducibility, and changes concerning the experience of work under this new logic of material ordering, and the subjectivity that this implies (the reconfiguration of the worker, life itself in peripheral and underprivileged territories after the end of the War, the emergence of a culture of scarcity or savings—for example, the collective consumption of the same comic— and the appearance of the "new rich" and the "new poor"), as well as a geolocalized and global experience of ruin, which would transform the political space in all senses.

Ota Otani promptly points out the marks of the rise of a kind of military culture in both the Mexican and Japanese contexts, whether in the form of propaganda, or life within an occupied territory, censorship, or the corporeality of the protagonists (the fact that both Memín and Batto-kun are bald, which is due to specific postwar conditions). The Mexican text offers elements that refer to a call for collectivity, while the Japanese text presents a call to effort through sports meritocracy, which nevertheless eliminates structural elements from the panorama to focus only on individual development as a condition for problem solving.

John Seymour (2019) points out that baseball, "rather than connecting Japan with other countries, became another way to reinforce domestic control" (2019, 6); it provided a fast track to Americanization, with the military initially funding the Japanese league. As a technology of military subjectification, it accommodated the idea of individuality necessary for the establishment and transformation of militaristic imperial Japan into a Westernized "democratic" country, and at the same time, allowed the survival of the maxim of self-sacrifice in the name of a higher sense or precept

[12] National School of Anthropology and History (Mexico City) /Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México

such as a nation or group. Among other things, baseball allowed the continuity of a certain predisposition to the cult of martial discipline. In Batto-kun's manga, elements of the urban context, traces of war and baseball are problematized as means for the harmonious construction of everyday life, forming a field of possibility and advancement for the poor Japanese.

Ota Otani points out that while "Alma de niños" is intended for a wider and more general audience, Batto-kun is entirely aimed at children. While in the Mexican work the resource of "memory" operates, in the evocation of the past and of a "good childhood" as a sort of "affective escape" from an increasingly crude reality or present, it would be interesting to explore if in Batto-kun, as it is aimed at children, the idea of playful adaptation to the new order, with an eye towards the future, is presented. We see two similar realities after World War II, two representations of similar social classes, but different affective strategies to face the same reality.

Although in the Mexican text the idea is put forward that the characters, coming from different classes, coexist in the same spaces, such as the public school – a sort of commendable portrait of the new Mexican ascending order of social welfare – as Ota Otani rightly points out, it is of interest for the historiography of Mexican comics to note that the crudeness and realism represented in a comic that portrays the urban context differs strikingly from the comics that portray stories in rural contexts, where elements of the supernatural or fantastic are often used to solve conflicts, or to give an outlet to plots involving searches for treasure or villains.

This element is not superficial in terms of understanding the importance of representation of the Mexican urban context, and is in keeping with the nature of subjectification under colonial rule and the postcolonial Mexican condition, that is, centralism. From this point of view, nationalism and the interior and exterior of purported national hegemonic modernity, whose maximum expression is the pairing of rural and urban, emerge. Centralistic dreamlike aesthetics, representations, gazes, and daydreams are contained in the exoticized, eroticized, and supernaturalized centralist fantasy of *the provinces* (the rest of the country, the non-center, the non-capital), and there are particular ways of thinking about the modernity and temporality of the non-centric (or *the provincial*). The imagery of *the provinces* obeys a real order and purpose. In this case, for the state and cultural centralism, emanating from a specific distribution of institutions and work, based on the agreement of the dominant Mexican business and political elites, whose successes, technological and cultural advances, and so on, are distributed with extreme inequality between the central *commandment*, where most of the elites gather, and the other territories, which are subordinated to the center for regulation and whose residents are mostly confined to agrarian work and the processing of natural resources. Barbara Arneil (2017) calls this *domestic colonialism*.

The crude, ruinous, and problematic appearance of life in the cities is a kind of narrative that denounces the difficulties and vicissitudes of living or growing up in the city. Outside the city is seen as a paradise, without cars, massive congregations of people living their lives, public transportation, or broken sanitation services; where the supernatural, the magical and fantastic, even "purity," can survive or exist. In other words, these urban narratives provide clues to better understand the imageries presented within comics whose narratives mostly occur within rural contexts.

The imaginary of the child revived by Ota Otani, in turn, accounts for the diegetic position of Mexican comics: vulnerability, the permissibility to solve certain problems through "innocence," the permanence of "purity" in the world, or on the contrary, the ability to represent malice and mischief in a caricatured way through children. In Japanese manga, however, the possibility of weaving even stronger bonds of solidarity is established during childhood.

To conclude, and with the intention of contributing to the detailed analysis by Ota Otani, I would like to emphasize the importance of the anthropological mapping that the author revived in order to reuse and reconstruct the affective atmosphere after World War II. In this sense, the comparative analysis of two comics with similar plots, published in Mexico and Japan, is helpful for understanding the materiality of culture in a time of global rearrangement, and could be a thought-provoking model for understanding the ways in which the same set of crucial problems for humanity (from the implementation of neoliberal models to the post-pandemic economies created by COVID-19) are experienced through forms of communication such as comics, manga, or film.

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