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Rarefied Heights, Restoration, and the Rhythm Method

*Some Analyses on the Mastery of Form in
Francisco V. Coching's *El Indio**



I always find it strange to be constantly continuously reminding people that *komix*¹ is art, that komix is lit, as being from a generation and lineage that grew up around komix, it being art and lit was already a done deal—moot and academic—even before I was born,

¹ I've been putting off talking about this as I feel it needs its own essay, but for the sake of clarity and just to show that I'm not (just) being *cool* about stuff: I use the term *komix* to describe the contemporary manifestations of the form, i.e., more *art* art than pop art, thoroughly distant if not wholly disconnected from the traditions of the original *komiks*, as elaborated on in a certain book that I'll be mentioning in the next footnote. One can make a decent case that I am merely splitting hairs with this proposal, but for me it makes perfect sense: the urge to trace a straight line from Tony Velasquez's *Kenkoy* to Macoy's *Ang Maskot* is obstructed by other factors that come into play when considering texts—mainly production, mainly audience—that a straight line between the two just isn't possible. The disparity is big enough—besides production and audience, there's also intent and stylistics—that I feel the new stuff needs a new term, even if the new stuff is actually repackaged old stuff, i.e., *El Indio* (the repackaging has already reframed it in a more contemporary context), even if only just for the sake of pseudo-academic clarity. This footnote is completely unsatisfactory, I know. Like I said: it needs its own essay.

but perhaps people always need reminding lest we forget, and so we get books like Francisco V. Coching's *El Indio* (Vibal Publishing, 2009), quite possibly the one book of this millennium's first decade that will be universally loved and praised by *komikers* and critics alike, although for what reasons, exactly? Is it one of those books that we automatically love and praise because it's a classic, an artifact from what is generally considered by most fans and practitioners as the Golden Age of Pinoy Komix, drawn in that distinctly classic/al "Pinoy" style? Do we love it and praise it because it's komix that is quite obviously unabashedly art and lit? Do we love it and praise it because of its inherent historical value? And it definitely has historical value, as most *komikers* will see this book once again as impetus for a sermon on how much contemporary komix are without a relevant sense of artistic history, and unfortunately for most contemporary komix, the sermons will be right, and right on the money.

Most contemporary komix are being produced with a mindset teetering between historical vacuum and polybagged nostalgia: some will champion Tony De Zuñiga for cocreating *Black Orchid* and *Jonah Hex*, but will not have read or cared for any of those titles prior to the assertion of said trivia, or will at least maybe know of *Orchid* and *Hex* for their revisionist GenX/Y periods, i.e., not the De Zuñiga era, which ought to be the relevant area of discussion; most will readily say their opinion of Alex Niño and Nestor Redondo—that eternal push-me-pull-you struggle between fantastic/impressionist and realist/representational—but none will have seen or read any relevant Niño or Redondo piece, will in fact be actually more informed with the long-running Jack Kirby–Steve Ditko comparative analysis between bombastic and paranoiac art.

How many people today have actually read a Mars Ravelo–Nestor Redondo *Darna* komiks? Much acclaim has been given to the fact that

it was in komiks first before everything else, and yet most of what we know of *Darna* today is based on the various and sundry movies and TV shows and not on the actual komiks themselves, a fact that continues to be downplayed by what passes for komix criticism here. How different would our opinions be of Carlo Caparas if what we know of his art is based on his komiks work—the true area of contention—and not on his movies? How much of the actual Caparas Hate was actually informed researched opinion of his art and wasn't just arguably well-deserved ad hominem bandwagoning?

And the situation is thus as the relevant texts have never been made accessible, either for entertainment or scholarly perusal. Our opinions and knowledge of these texts are actually founded on prefab hand-me-downs from self-appointed vanguards of the industry—"industry" = "not the art form"—than actual informed and considered ideas based off of actual art appreciation, their fuel being our faith in the self-appointed vanguards being more intellectually and morally considerate about art than we are, but once we actually read them talk about art, we are crestfallen to find that the self-appointed vanguards are far more clueless about it than we are, their various rationales more self-aggrandisement than art analyses.²

One of the more resounding names suggested as far more deserving of a National Artist Award during the Caparas Fiasco was Coching's,

² This is a stone directly slung towards Randy Valiente's and Fermin Salvador's compilation of komiks pseudo-scholarly work *Komiks sa Paningin ng mga Tagakomiks* (self-published, 2007). What the editors did was scour the Internet for essays and articles on komiks written by the people they deem to be komiks professionals and merely copy-pasted more or less everything they found from the blogs and forums, typos and unsubstantiated claims and all, on to the book's pages. Among the claims made (by Valiente himself) is that all comic books that aren't drawn realistically anatomy-wise are books done by lesser artists and thus are lesser books, regardless of their topics and narrative integrity and artistic intents, and our komiks, being drawn realistically anatomy-wise, are done by better artists, and thus are better books than most in the world, if not the very best in the world. This sort of logical analysis is basically run-of-the-mill in non-academic (read: non-critical) essays on komiks, and it basically fed my decision to use *komix* instead of *komiks*. And for clarity's sake: I wasn't looking for *academic* rigor in their essays; what I was looking for was *intellectual* rigor, *moral* rigor; words and paragraphs employed to promote *actual thinking*, thinking not burdened by the self-assigned task of self-legitimacy.

and with the release of the *El Indio* album and the P2,000 hardcover retrospective of his artworks both sequential and “fine,” we now get to see, firsthand, exactly why Coching deserves such a place in the history of art.

Komix as art and lit is always a slippery discussion for most people invested in the definitions, to say the least: it is a medium that embraces the Benjaminian notion of mechanical reproduction’s negation of art’s aura of value — it is not art because it is mass-produced and ephemeral — but at the same time it increases in value as an artifact as the years go by, a value brought on by its ephemeral nature — it’s an artifact as not a lot of it exists precisely because of its ephemeral origin — and so it goes. My definition of art leans more towards an artisan’s understanding of it, or a journeyman’s: it is something you work on — a job — its only real concrete value dictated by its effectivity as a piece of communiqué, and by the highly subjective yet paradoxically universal notion of “beauty.” In my book, John Porcellino’s almost-abstractly minimalist zen poem aspirations are to be regarded with the same awe and respect as Philippe Druillet’s oppressively maximalist monstrosities as well as Eddie Campbell’s realist humanist ink scrawls. In short, it’s a case-by-case basis, the standards dictated by how effective it is in telling you something.

Analyses of komix as art and lit are further compounded by the latter-day occasion that komix, by and large, is a populist medium, much more affected by audience appeal than critical assessment, by market forces than artistic movements, and yet the artist demands a price and respect worthy of his perceived artistic excellence — yet another slippery notion — yet oftentimes refuses to let his art mean more than market and authorial intent — yet another slippery notion.

And *El Indio* is a curious example of komix as art and lit. It is a thirty-five-part serial of five-page bits from 1952, of a quasi-revenge-revolution

drama of the European bend, much like Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or like the legend of the Man in the Iron Mask (which was the influence of yet another Dumas work, *The Three Musketeers*), and thus, much like Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*; considered a mongrel in Imperial Spain, Fernando exiles himself to the Philippines where he finds the colonial situation to be so unbearable he dons a vigilante persona he dubs "El Indio," with matching pistols and scarf and a legendary *salakot* he cribbed from an earlier vigilante called "Sabas, the Barbarian," who also happens to be <SPOILER> his long-lost father.

The story is pure romantic adventure, chockful of swordfights and gunfights and bullfights. Early in the book, Fernando as a boy breaks a wild horse he captured himself in the countryside; midway into the book, a more adult Fernando charts a ship to the Philippines steered by a gruff-looking yet subservient captain with an eye patch; towards the ending, yet another male masked vigilante is revealed to be none other than <SPOILER> Fernando's female romantic interest. Somewhere in between, young sidekicks for the revolution are earned, one of whom slaps a wild bull on the ass, while another is chased out of a coop by a domesticated hen.

And I am glib about the plot in the light of the new millennium's day, as it is rather silly and old, "old" being "nothing new," "nothing new" being "by the numbers," and that, ultimately, is just *really okay*. The writing of the story itself is nothing special, nothing ahead of its time, nothing particularly mind-blowing happens in the captions—even while it was written rather obviously with a bookish bend in mind, it is not quality lit: it is a generic adventure told in imitation "classical" tone, ultimately as vapid and as compelling as *Pirates of the Caribbean*. What is of interest to me here is how it seems that this story, from all komix historian's accounts, had actual mass appeal—even as far as having a

movie based off of it a year after it originally concluded, starring no less than Cesar Ramirez, Tita Muñoz, Nena Cardenas, and Eddie Garcia, directed by National Artist Eddie Romero – and that fact is of interest as it illustrates just how flimsy public opinion really is (local productions of period pieces in mass media have proven to be generally problematic nowadays, as not even Richard Gutierrez could keep people’s interest on a recent *Zorro* TV serial), how komix writing almost always loses out to komix art when it comes to standards of quality (only now do we have actual komix that have more-than-decently talented writers, i.e., Budjette Tan, Andrew Drilon, as opposed to our range and history of high quality komix artists, i.e., Leinil Yu, Carlo Pagulayan, Philip Tan, Roy Allan Martinez, Andrew Drilon (again), all the etc. etc. of the past ten years or so, and its corollary thought how komix is truly a collaborative medium of words and pictures working together, one’s strengths supporting the other’s weaknesses, all in aid of telling a story, and as such, *El Indio* pulls this stunt off quite admirably.

Despite its employment of words and pictures for narrative purposes, komix is a medium with mechanisms that are closer to music and poetry than painting and prose, the elements aware of each other in their placement on the page and working in synch to evoke a certain reaction, to tell a certain story, to make the characters move from one action to the other, one turn hinging on the one preceding it and at the same time anticipating the one next to it, all laid out as a linear track of images albeit also happening all at once (all the words and pictures are on the page, your eyes providing the machine to make them “move”), the reading of it a process that operates more on patterns and rhythms, movement and closure (panel one opens, panel two closes) than the more linear (prose) or static (painting) media.

It’s hard not to look at Margarita’s page-38-and-39 dance sequence without seeing her actually dancing her seduction dance with Fernando,

hard to read through it without hearing busy percussive beats of brass and strings with her arms' every snap and pose—and it's because every movement logically follows the one before it and anticipates the ones next to it, like a particularly skillful nylon string guitar solo, or a really smoothly executed enjambment—the smoothness brought about by how the artist laid it on the page, which dives towards the book's primary strength, which is page design.

From chapter to page to panel to figure to every unassuming line of ink, *El Indio* is executed with utterly baroque exuberance, with enthusiasm approaching nothing less than florid vibrance. The art style is, for the most part, realist and representational, having more in common with Juan Luna and Rembrandt, albeit infused with dynamism that approaches Kirby—again, these pictures aren't mere paintings but actual moving pictures in their own right, the movement not only merely suggested by the McCloudian komix "closure" in the gutters, but by the actual rendering of the drawings themselves, almost expressionistic.³ It holds a particular place in visual communication that is strictly in komix territory, communicating in ways only komix could, only rarely seen at this level of maturity and complexity and artistic humility, even (or maybe most especially) today.

When compared to contemporary komix's present greats—Arnold Arre, Gerry Alanguilan, and Carlo Vergara—Coching still comes out on top as a true master of the form: Arre, while the better storyteller of the

³ I expanded on this germ in my essay on Cartooning in context with Manix Abrera's *12* and Macoy's *Ang Maskot*, replacing "expressionistic" with "cartooning," going to great lengths in explaining just how cartooning works, how a single panel of komix can communicate a narrative independent of all the other panels on the page. It's not the most original piece of observation; as I later found out, Douglas Wolk talks at length about it in *Reading Comics* (Da Capo Press, 2007). My own bit on it obliquely turned into a rebuttal of Scott McCloud's proposal that comic book narrative depends on an arc of communication that happens between at least *two* panels of comics on page, thus discounting the possibility of the power of one, so to speak. He did some semantic hand-wringing about this particular point yet opted to still discard it in favor of the "McCloudian komix 'closure,'" and although the resultant proposal was/is still very debatable, in the end it proved to be a very very very wise and intelligent and lucid choice.

three, only really has one visual tone, i.e., cute; Alanguilan, the closest aesthetic kin to Coching today and whose style is given to a wider range, still tends towards a more static (versus Coching's more dynamic) figure drawing, i.e., they look more like pictures caught in time than action in sequence; and Vergara, the ideal compromise between Arre's storytelling and Alanguilan's range, is still too limited by the superhero idiom, i.e., his books still look like Western superhero comic books even when they're not about superheroes.⁴ Rarely do they approach the level of the emo-physio narratology of *El Indio's* page 28, panel 3 (the beginning of a bullfight, Fernando all dolled up as a matador posing with a sword, his back to us, the large bull glowering in front of him, horns perked to strike, over them a gathering storm, clouds like billows of smoke on fire), or the chiaroscuro atmospheric drama of page 122 (a clandestine meeting in the woods as a bonfire flickers and fades shifting shadows across leaves and bark and sombreros and folded fabric and smooth-skinned faces as the characters debate about love and the revolution), or the French garden styling of each chapter's splash page (by themselves ornate period illustrations, widescreen dioramic vignettes, the reader's point of entry into the story, the characters caught in freeze frame from the previous chapter's cliffhanger, the story now ready to continue).

The development of such a mature idiom at such an early stage in the art's development is a curiosity: by 1952, we'd been doing komix for thirty years, interrupted for five by World War 2, but by then it already had various visual shorthands for pictographic storytelling, shorthands

⁴ When an earlier draft of this essay was published online, of all the conclusions and proposals I asserted, my comparison of Coching's mastery of the form to the three contemporary komikeros' earned the only comments to date, both of them—there were only two—berating me for even *imagining* that such a comparison can even be remotely accurate, even accusing me of being unfairly nostalgic for championing Coching over Arre, et al. I acknowledge that further elucidation on a few tangential points would have been extremely helpful for the entire thing, but these things had to be sacrificed due to the circumstances of production and the constraints of the form, and I acknowledge that this essay is a lesser thing because of these sacrifices. But that said, I still stand by these generalisations.

that wouldn't function in media other than komix. Among its subtler elements, *El Indio* features a very mature understanding of typography, apparently courtesy of Luming Coching, Francisco Coching's better half, the letterer of the book: aside from its title logo, the book employs nothing more than three variations of the same handwritten type, the three being Normal, Bold, and Hollow, all variously encased in emphatically hand-drawn Caption Boxes, Word and Shout Balloons, and each is used deliberately and with conscious reason, dictated not only by sound volume, i.e., faintest to loudest, but also by emotional intensity and by the more spatial formalist concern of broadcasting ambient noise in a medium that is basically mute.

The three variations of type exhibit quite the range. In pages 14 and 15 alone, half a dozen panels illustrate this flexibility: page 14, panel 1 has a ranch hand's emboldened exclamatory "FERNANDO!!" – a firm commanding shout tinged with some worry as Fernando, as a child, balances himself on a fence with a handstand; page 14, panel 2 has a hollowed disjointed exclamatory "YIYA!!" – a more carelessly playful shout than the previous panel's, as Fernando rides yet another ranch hand as a mock horse; page 14, panel 3's hollowed moderate "TSK .. TSK .. ARYAAA!!" is a rehearsed command evoked by Fernando the child pretending to be an adult, hoping to fool the (this time real and domesticated) horse he's riding. The Hollow Type Variation proves to be the most flexible of the three, exhibiting much character and voice, as in page 15, where it is used variably as a low ambient growl (an unballooned "GRRRRRRR!!" rolling around a character's head) and as typical cinematic foley (a crisp "PAK!" as Fernando punches a boy on the side of the head), and both work effectively in their differing purposes, despite being virtually the same type.

This attention to the power of words and how they are rendered is

seemingly a discipline that has lost its power at the advent of Adobe Illustrator and various other font-making programs, which is ultimately greatly sarcastic as these modern complex tools are all in aid of better and simpler manipulation of words as objects, and as it gives us a bountiful cornucopia of objectified type, it also increasingly separates us from type's ability to communicate clarity of thought.

The story of the publication of *El Indio* is also of interest: Coching's work was painstakingly digitally restored by Zara Macandili and Gerry Alanguilan for years, cleaning and restoring each and every page, down to each and every line of ink, scanned off of pages on loan from the Coching Estate—and only copies of the pages, not even the originals themselves, at that—all now collected and published for the first time ever as one glossy volume, the first time such pages have been printed since they first came out, pioneering in the Philippines the latest and maybe final stage of the paradox of komix as art and lit. After years of being a medium for the masses, and then becoming an elitist artifact with prices for individual pages selling for upwards thousands of pesos, now it returns to the realm of modern mechanical reproduction and to popular culture, only now more academically inclined, where it turns both into an elitist historical artifact and a populist commodity, or at least as populist as far as mass appeal and price admission will allow, which is not very far, which is still very elitist, as it ultimately betrays the text's origins and intent—popular entertainment—since it is elevated by its current circumstance—glossy artifact selectively reclaimed from the various lacunae of art history—and by our own contemporary dilemmas—championing an underdog art beset with historical denial and amnesia—as ultimately, *El Indio* will be read in the context of our current komix production, our contemporary situation and predicaments, and of course, comparisons will occur.

In its original incarnation, *El Indio* came out in five-page chunks every

two weeks, written and drawn and by one person, lettered by his wife, all in its dramatically elaborate baroque two-color glory, for a year and a half, with much grace and maturity and understanding of the form. The funny thing about this is, this circumstance is not solely *El Indio's*—this book is only really the veritable tip of the iceberg: Coching alone has a fifty-odd-strong bibliography; by 1952, the Philippines already had five major separate—and competing—komix publishers, all having at least four komix every week, each title having four or five serialized stories.⁵ Granted, not everything would have reached *El Indio's* formalist heights, but each of these things, if not a major chunk of them, will have made legit contributions to the form, each as valid as *El Indio's*, will have been of value for their comedic timing or aesthetic maturity or generic exploration, and for the most part, these things are already lost to us, either by calamity or neglect or ignorance, and ultimately, this is the value of Francisco V. Coching's newly albumized *El Indio*: it is not sentimentality, or nostalgia, or the championing of one art style over the other; it is about reclamation, restoration, and evolution. Ultimately, it is about education.

Thanks to Mr. Gerry Alanguilan for the additional information regarding actual production.

⁵ All this data I appropriated from the very same Valiente–Salvador book that I very much belligerently beleaguered a few footnotes ago. Of course, *now* the book's an authority! Funny how these things go.