CHAPTER 5

BORING, UNCOMFORTABLE AND MUTATED: CHILI COM CARNE AT THE NEXUS OF THE CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE INDEPENDENT COMICS SCENE

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Abstract

Canonized histories of comics as both medium and text rarely look beyond the major trinity of the U.S., France-Belgium and Japan production centers. There are exceptions, "great international masters," and mentions in passing, but more often than not to prove a point or category founded and sustained by authors and titles from the centers. This chapter wishes to focus on one particular Portuguese publisher, called Chili Com Carne (CCC), which can be described through the broad categorization "independent." However, that very notion is wobbly, as it only makes sense within a specific "scene" and its settings (market, social structure, textual landscape), as well as its relationship with other contexts. By historicizing and contextualizing the output of a number of Portugal-based comics artists in articulation with CCC's structure and editorial practices, we will be able also to understand some aspects of its aesthetic, subjective, ethical, and political importance and the role it may play in a broader frame of reference.

Keywords: Portuguese comics, Chili Com Carne, independent, alternative publications.

5.1. Introduction

When thinking or writing about Portuguese comics, it is very difficult not to play it against a wider context of production, given the fact that outside their borders they are rarely acknowledged. Despite some efforts, such as Bart Beaty's inclusion of a few names in Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s (2007), with the lack of translations, Portuguese titles remain largely inaccessible and therefore insufficiently known[49].

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg and Benoît Denis' sociology-leaning "gravitational theory" of literature can prove itself useful in thinking about the placement of Portuguese comics within the global scene of comics culture. As, of course, I cannot go into much detail in this chapter on how Klinkenberg's and Denis' theory has to be adapted in order to address both the comics and the specificities of the Portuguese context, but suffice it to say, for now, that the gravitational character of the system refers to the centrifugal and centripetal dynamics that are established in literature (and beyond) between the centre and the peripheries.

These last two words are laden with problematic assumptions, but I will stick to some basic assessments. Where comics are concerned, the most important centres – that is to say, where we will find more titles, more authors working and being better paid, places from where work is more usually translated into other languages, more studied academically, more quoted in global evaluations, adapted to cinema, and so on – are the United States, France and Japan. There are a few other centres depending on genres, particular interests or geographical proximity: in Europe

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[49] A few global assessments will include one or two references, but that's about it.

for instance, Italy, Spain and Britain are important exporters of artists and oeuvres; and South Korea has gained traction in the last decade for its own production, known as manhwa, within an area previously opened up by manga enthusiasts.
According to Klinkenberg and Denis, centripetal forces attract peripheral literature towards the centre, entailing their assimilation whereas centrifugal forces can lead those same groupings towards differentiation and independence, usually creating that which may be called "emergent literature". It is surely more complicated than this, of course, but one could generalize by saying that in the first case we would have comics that aim to be as close as possible to established, dominant genres, models and styles from central poles of production. Indeed, there are such examples in Portugal, from comedic or light dramatic albums following the French-Belgian model, Portuguese-made manga stories and crime or high fantasy stories that would not be displaced in North American pull-lists[50]. However, my attention will lean towards the latter type of literature. Its main trait within that system would be its degree of autonomy, which "manifests itself through its capacity to self-organize independently of other social powers" (Klinkenberg and Denis 2005: 27). In other words, it follows its own concerns and founds its own styles and approaches. Comics production in Portugal, especially in independent labels and artists' collectives, shows precisely this independence, both where its editorial, political and financial dimensions are concerned. I will use the example of publisher Chili Com Carne, a purveyor of auteur comics, both Portuguese and international, as the model for such an emerging literature, coincidentally the very expression comics scholar Charles Hatfield used in his ground-breaking Alternative Comics.

5.2. CCC

Chili Com Carne (henceforth CCC) is a youth association founded in 1997 by budding comics artists Marcos Farrajota, Pedro Brito and João Fazenda, among others. This stemmed from previous experiences in putting up and publishing a fanzine entitled Mesinha de Cabeceira (literally, "bedstand"), started in 1992 with an issue 0 by Farrajota and Brito (Fig. 5.1). Both the publisher and the fanzine – meanwhile materially transformed - continue to this day, with Farrajota as its editor-in-chief. CCC publishes both Portuguese and international artists, monographs and anthologies, original book-length works and recuperated fanzine work (a specific series, Mercantologia, publishes in book form work that had been published in small run zines), as well as novels, short stories, music-related essay books, a DVD on a metal festival, split-tapes, a magazine on alternative/occult music and culture, graphzines, calendars, silkscreened posters and other graphic material.

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[50] For the sake of clarity, we will not be addressing issues of "outsourcing", i.e., when Portuguese artists work for international market, which is clearly an increasing outlet today. For instance, Jorge Coelho, Filipe Andrade, André Lima Araújo and Miguel Mendonça are recurrent names in the U.S. comic book market, including Marvel and DC.

Figure 6.1 Mesinha de Cabeceira # 0 (1992).

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As in a few other countries, the Portuguese comics scene finds within self-publishing fanzines the very first "school" for budding authors. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, many of the aspiring artists found in the "DIY mode" of fanzines the first platform for self-expression, formal experimentation, circulation and also for commercialization of their work, more often than not in the habitual format of A5 magazines comprised of black-and-white xeroxed, stapled and folded A4 sheets. Stephen Duncombe calls fanzines "…a novel form of communication and creation that burst with an angry idealism and a fierce devotion to democratic expression" (Duncombe, 2003: 228). If most of these projects only lasted for a couple of issues (such as Hips!, Joe Índio, Carneiro Mal Morto, Bactéria), if not just a single one, regardless of the importance of their work or the future career of their authors, there are indeed a few cases of both resilience and deep transformation. Azul BD Três was another title (which lasted 5 issues in the early 1990s, with the last two changed into a comic-booky format), from a different association, which would lead to a contemporary important publisher called Polvo. But Mesinha de Cabeceira (MdC) would have a longer and more diverse life. After its debut in 1992, it would reach its 28th issue on 2016 (with an adaptation by Nunsky of a Philip K. Dick short story, "I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon", Fig. 5.2), despite the fact that some issues came out of order, some of them were double, not to mention significant changes in content, format and materials.

Figure 5.2 Mesinha de Cabeceira # 28 (2016)
Source: Cover by Nunsky.

A typical early Mesinha de Cabeceira would be comprised of collages of short news, images or comic strips from other sources (which may have or may not have a common theme), short comics by the collaborators, music and comics reviews, interviews, opinions about current affairs (also related to music or comics), and of course, the combative editorial. Its materiality comes to the fore, it is not hidden. A conventional, professionally-looking publication aims to provide the reader with a material surface that is transparent enough to give unreined access to its storyworlds or content. More often than not, fanzines or zine-informed work makes its very constructedness visible. Images do not follow any kind of regular, orthogonal grid, but are scattered all over the place, collaged materials show their pasted borders, and there are many scribbled notes on top of printed material (whether original or collaged). According to Anna Poletti, "[t]his concept of constructedness refers to the presentation of text and images, layout, and the photocopying quality, and how they effect, interact with, contradict, or interrupt the narrative" (2008: 88).

The material changes that would be operative throughout the years were deeply associated with the changes not only in contents and authors, but also due to the national context and financial opportunities. Farrajota confesses that after that initial "bedroom punk" phase (in English in the original; Farrajota, 2012), the production of the zine became, between 1996 and 2002, a little subdued thanks to the intensity of work at the Bedeteca de Lisboa, a city-owned institution specifically dedicated to comics, founded in 1996. Under the guidance of

journalist, writer and researcher João Paulo Cotrim, the Bedeteca organised a comics and illustration exhibition (in the beginning, yearly), put out a comics-related publication, Quadrado ("inherited" from a previous life in Porto, by yet another organization), with reviews, interviews and short comic stories, both Portuguese and translated, as well as smaller exhibitions, meetings and talks, and a 16-page booklet collection of original material by Portuguese artists, the Lx Comics series (re-using a title from a 1999-2000 short-lived, high-end, and extremely influential and praised magazine). As Farrajota began to work in this institution as a library technician and producer he would have less time to dedicate to MdC and CCC, not only because much of his personal efforts were channelled to the work in Bedeteca, but also because that institution shared some of the same concerns about bringing to the fore auteur and creative comics, instead of more commercially inclined work. Therefore, MdC's "mission" as it were was somewhat diluted by that institutional presence. How institutions "recuperate" the alternative would warrant further, and quite engrossing, discussion but it is outside the scope of this chapter.

After the decline of the Bedeteca (suffice it to say that while the book collection did not disappear physically, the institution itself was dissolved, becoming part of a smaller-scale, locally administrated municipal library), CCC returned to full force.

The very first issue of MdC, # 0 (published in October 1992) states as its editors the following: "We cannot identify ourselves because we're afraid our families find out that we're their black sheep." The rest of the information sheet keeps up with this sort of humour. Slowly but surely, the punkish attitudes of the first years went under some change, turning CCC into a medium-sized and well-respected publisher of quality-produced books and publications.

MdC was important in terms of authorship, undoubtedly. Its participants were many of the major names of today, taking here their first steps: we will find in its pages José Carlos Fernandes, Rui Lacas, André Lemos, the brothers João and Ricardo Tércio, Miguel Falcato, Nunsky, but also the participations of other people that would become known, or were already known, in other fields, such as Pedro Proença (painting) and Adolfo Luxúria Canibal (music). We will also find early on the participation of international artists such as Mike Diana, Roberta Gregory, Peter Kuper, Adrien Tomine and Julie Doucet (who drew Farrajota for the cover of issue 11, in 1997), most of which contributed while they were visiting Portugal during an international comics festival, and were contacted by Farrajota directly. The maudit Mike Diana, surprisingly, had his actual first book, Sourball Prodigy, published in 2002 by Mmmnnnrrrg, a sort of subsidiary or sister-publisher of CCC. After the 2000s, the number of artists starts to expand exponentially, and thanks to the broadening of European (and beyond) contacts, CCC starts to put out material, sometimes unpublished, by artists such as Slovene Jacob Klemencic, Finnish Tommi Musturi, German diceindustries, Canadian Eric Braun. More recently, through Mmmnnnrrrg, which was founded in 2000, with Farrajota also as editor-in-chief, books have been published with work by Belgian Olivier Schrauwen or the Serbian Aleksandar Zograf.

MdC was not only, in the long run, a comics anthology for short stories. Issue no. 9 (1996), for instance, was the first with a solo participation. In this case, it was Farrajota himself, with an autobiographical piece, a genre that was becoming influential a little throughout the world, but that in Portugal would not have that many followers. Farrajota was actually a precursor of the genre within contemporary comics in Portugal (Fig. 5.3)[51]. Issue 16 (2002) was a collection of interventions by André Lemos made on top of George Grosz's drawings (Super Fight II). Issue 21 (2009), was an oversized book with loose, stark black-and-white illustrations by João Maio Pinto (The Gleaming Armament of Marching Genitalia). Its 23rd issue, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the title, put out a 350-plus page book, with up to twenty authors (both veteran and new at MdC).

Figure 5.3 Mesinha de Cabeceira # 12 (1997).
Source: Cover by Marcos Farrajota. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Materialistically speaking, there were also radical changes. There was at least one early experience where silk-screen was used for a cover, but xeroxed pages were the staple of its production. But after issue 14 (2000), Allen, also a monograph by artist Isabel Carvalho, all of their production would be printed professionally in offset. However, as it was happening elsewhere in the European independent comics scene, singular format solutions were chosen according to the particular project (see Baetens, 1998 and Beaty, 2007). Lemos-Grosz' issues was entirely silkscreened. A three-issue project, which gained a special, shifting title (CanibalCriCa Ilustrada 1/3, CriCa Clássica Ilustrada 2/3, and finally CapitãoCriCa Ilustrada 3/3), had a continuous cover, drawn by grafitti artist Nuno Valério, a.k.a. UiU. MdC 23 reached almost 80 pages, and had a "naked" book spine.

Although CCC has published other things rather than comics, as mentioned above, we will stick to comics for the present chapter. Moreover, the most important point I want to argue is how, to a certain extent, CCC is still today a chief agent within Portugal for testing ground for new authors whose purview remains mainly in experimental, more personal and independent work within the realm of comics. Whether formally or economically, its present functioning may put it at some distance from classical post-punk DIY ethics (xeroxed-zines and the like), but its uncompromising editorial position and the ways which it opens up to new artists with frankly innovative work prevents it to be seen as an accommodated force. In fact, CCC has been a driving force within the Portuguese comics scene in several aspects. Whether opening up new forms of distribution and publicity, creating new audiences, negotiating issues of relationships with the media and gatekeeping, not to mention heralding new ways of thinking about formats, book materiality and heterogeneous styles of both art and narrative, CCC has been at the forefront of those jobs.

From the late 1990s up to the present day, and despite the emergence of the internet and the number of possible platforms to upload one's work (from blogs to tumblr, etc.), many artists still find in print publications the most privileged and complete stage to present their work. Today there are a number of smaller publishers and self-publishing platforms that explore the many possibilities in reproducing and selling their work. The Clube do Inferno, for instance, a collective of four young comics artists, put out cheaply-produced xeroxed or risographed zines, but they take very seriously each and every phase of their titles' production, whether in the choice of paper, the final format or the colours used for printing. The same can be said of (then) Caldas da Rainha-based Lucas Almeida zine series, O Hábito Faz o Monstro, or Porto-based artist and 8-bit punk musician Rudolfo's output, namely his current series Molly.

If I am mentioning these artists in particular, it is due to yet another dimension of CCC, that will further complicate the notion of independence. No matter how CCC "grows", it maintains strong relationships with other small presses. Some of the artists mentioned above had their publications reprinted by CCC in a particular series (Mercantologia, see below), and others were invited to participate in a new collection dedicated to contemporary artists who create ground-breaking work that clashes highly formalist comics with profound political thought (QCDA). In fact, it is because CCC has grown but still maintains these relationships with

grassroots movements (not only of comics, but music, literature, etc.), zinesters (both individuals, as David Campos, Lucas Almeida and Rudolfo, and collectives, such as Hülülülü or Clube do Inferno), musicians, smaller festivals and meetings, that it becomes a sort of beacon for a very diverse community yet committed to solidarity. This is quite diverse from other publishers, who establish relationships with more institutionalised, commercial-prone events.

5.3. Independent comics

A typical problem in comics studies is its nomenclature, which is not at all consolidated or undiscussed. Terms are always polysemic, subject to turns and ever-increasing specificity. Looking at these objects and applying terms such as auteur, "independent" or "alternative comics" warrants inevitably further questions: if something is alternative, then to what does it constitute an alternative? Are commercial, popular comics completely devoid of auteur politics? If we use the term independent from a specific socio-economic perspective, couldn't we just use "small"?

At a time when the publishing industry is globally constituted by "vertically integrated media conglomerates" (Murphet, 2016: 57), where literature becomes an immediate commodity, whatever experience escapes such logic may be seen as marginal. There are differences between the comics publishing worlds in centres such as the United States and France or peripheries such as Portugal, both in degree and in kind, evidently. In terms of financial scale, for instance, Portuguese comics means lower, if any, wages, less royalties, less publicity and circulation, etc., than even some small press in the U.S. But in kind these are also worlds apart: it would be very difficult to imagine cinematic or televisual adaptations of Portuguese comics on a regular basis; such a possibility simply does not exist. And to be truthful, there are no significant awards where critical diffusion "outside" of the comics realm is concerned, or with a meaningful financial compensation. Nonetheless, the logic in the centres and the peripheries is still the same. This is what allows us to consider at this point Jacques Dubois'. Dubois considers, above all, the most usual networks of production and diffusion of publishing, which comprises printing houses, book stores, newspaper's review sections of literature, academic reception and literary (or others) awards.

It would be quite correct to consider the zine MdC, the seed that would lead to CCC, as a form of "wild publishing". There was not much control from the literary/comics establishment, most of its contents was dedicated to "spontaneous and personal expression", and had "little effect at the social plane" (Dubois, 2005: 215 and ff.). After all, up until its 12th issue, in 1997, MdC would overall maintain its nature as a xeroxed object, with a print run of not much more than 100 copies[52]. After the foundation of CCC, production values improved. Books had better paper stock, better printing techniques, used different colours for printing, sometimes two-colour and even four-colour printing. Occasional books have little high-end quality details, whether hardbacks or special signatures. Distribution would attain a professional level through national-wide companies. Some attention from the press would be conquered even if mostly in specialised channels, or in short texts. Recently, one of its titles, Zona de Desconforto (2014), was awarded with the "Best Portuguese Album of the Year" prize from the International Comics Festival of Amadora. Moreover, as a non-profit youth association,[53] Chili Com Carne has had some access to institutional support, whether from government funds (e.g., from the City Council and Parish Council of Cascais or the Council for Youth) or, at least on one occasion, a commercial company sponsorship. There are also experiences of co-editions. But all in all, print runs in average never surpass between 500 and 700 copies (one very rare occasion, CCC has issued titles with a 1000 and 1500 print run), and over the years some of the titles have indeed sold out.

Even if briefly, Dubois mentions comics and even fanzines, but he opens up the notion that comics create their own parallel institution in relationship to literature proper. And since 1978, many things have changed globally for comics, its academic reception not a small change. So, despite these changes, however, one cannot say that CCC has swung towards the other end of Dubois' spectrum, becoming an established publisher. The reason for that is that CCC maintained its ethic of production, not in a logic of acting against a mainstream culture, but addressing it critically, entering in a dialectic with it. Using Tanguy Habrand's words, about Belgian avant-garde publisher La 5ème Couche, but which can be applied effortlessly to CCC's production, "It's not a question of performing counter-culture, but rather of expressing its own culture with the means that bypass clichés, of expressing within culture itself, not at its margins" (2014: 54)[54].

There are other publishers in Portugal of similar size, such as the already mentioned Polvo or the more recent Kingpin Books, whose books' material traits and communication and circulation plans of action are somewhat comparable. However, whereas these other publishers pursue, each in their own manner, generic and stylistic characteristics closer to dominant global trends (Klinkenberg's and Denis' centripetal movement), CCC stays the course in its own (centrifugal) independent path. Habrand (2014: 55) sees this integration less as the professionalization of its agents than an "adhesion to an institution" in the sense studied by Dubois.

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[52] Allen, in offset, would reach a1000 print run.
[53] Maintained by sales and members' annual dues.
[54] My translation of the original French: "Il ne s'agit pas de faire de contre-culture, mais d'exprimer sa culture avec des moyens qui échappent aux clichés, de l'exprimer au sein même de la culture, pas en marge."

Of course, I do not want to create the idea that there is a neat division or absolute opposition between, on the one hand, that which one could call the industrial edition of paraliterature- or press-related massified comics, with its traits of serialization, genre segmentation and narrative and visual stereotypification, and, on the other hand, absolutely autonomous (self- or independently-) published comics (see Lesage, 2014). We should always bear in mind that paying attention to special forms of comics ("graphic novels") should not make us forget about comics' own historical, social and material diversity. We should bear in mind how "…the nature of our aesthetic categories, as well as how material forces – economics, print culture, circulation – both limit and produce possibilities for the medium" (Worden, 2015: 62; Hatfield, 2005). Even though there is no need to fall into a dangerous essentialist attitude, we must not lose sight of the particular possibilities of analysis of comics' specificities. For instance, by creating an aprioristic judgement value based upon genre or style, say, judging autobiography necessarily above super-hero comics or an expressionistic approach above streamlined a ligne claire style.

We should, on the contrary, be sensitive not only to each case's particular characteristics as also to the many degrees of continuity and contamination[55]. Especially taking in account the post-1990s scene in France and the US after the emergence of the so-called "literary turn", with graphic novels being published for diverse audiences, gaining space in bookstores shelves and review sections, being granted literary awards and academic scrutiny, not to mention influencing other areas of comics production. Nevertheless, one can still argue for the existence of that which Hatfield describes as "genuinely alternative comics", that is to say, those who "seek to offer alternatives to the unthinking consensus that mass culture is supposed to encourage." (2014: 73). I have italicized consensus for reasons that will become apparent in the last section.

Independence, however, and to start with, does not mean isolation. Quite the opposite. It is true that these agents, within the country, are less articulated with mainstream media outlets or with bigger comics-related institutions and companies (whether publishers or festivals, etc.), but these small presses (which would be comparable to small music publishers, poets' circles, travelling theatre companies, non-institutionalized academic circles of exchange and discussion, and the like) do relate to other congeneric bodies across Europe, in networks of cooperation that come up with counter-hegemonic forms of globalization. In fact, this last word cannot be seen as neutral, value-free, matter-of-fact notion[56] that could fill the space left by the evacuated master narratives, and it is not followed by everyone according to the same principles and venues. In Sianne Ngai's words, whose work will become central in the last part of this chapter, they explore "specific material conditions and relations of production" made possible within but at the margin of late industrial capitalism, making up what she calls "prismatic" networks (2005: 303).

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[55] For instance, some authors, such as André Pereira, André Coelho or Francisco Sousa Lobo will have work published in all those publishers, even if the nature of each title is quite different, adapted to the given publisher's usual catalogue or particular circumstance of the project.

One such prism, as it were, is the language nexus. Publishers such as the Portuguese Chili Com Carne, as well as the Finnish Kuti Kuti, the Italian Canicola, and the Slovenian Stripburger, among a few others often provide English translations or "sub-titles" along the original texts, more often than not in the shape of a footnote track.[57] That is one way of providing a solution for the language hurdles between countries, and along with the festivals and meetings themselves, those strategies seem to create that which Gustavo Lins Ribeiro calls "social transfrontiers" which contribute to "translocal systems and translocal cultures" ("Economic Globalization from Below", 2006: 247). Ribeiro is referring to actual places (specifically border cases like Ciudad Juárez and Foz do Iguaçu), so my usage of the term is somewhat metaphorical, in the sense that this transit of authors and publications creates an alternative venue to the more conventional globalization of comics[58]. Ribeiro explains that these locales "are often seen as spaces out of state control and, as a result, are negatively valued by authorities and the media as zones prone to illegal activities. Such spaces, thus, can easily be manipulated by different political and economic interests since they are liminal zones, hybrids that mix people, things and information from many different national origins, and reveal nation-States' fragilities" (240)[59]. Granted, we are referring to a small number of Western European countries but in a way the sort of collaborations and exchanges that emerge from this is less merely translational than transnational, considering how these editorial processes and decisions seem to be, up to a certain point, co-coordinated or at least mutually informed.

A number of smaller or mid-size international publishers coordinate their edition across countries with one another, in order to have access to better printing prices. Here's an abstract example: given the fact that printing up to 1000 copies of a book in Portuguese is usually pricey, it's a good policy to coordinate its printing with the Polish and Italian editions, so that overall 5000 copies are printed and bound at the same time, with the sole difference that when printing the black inks, which includes the different languages, is printed separately, in stages, putting out then each language's edition (even with shipment it seems to be worthy). This happens with both publishers that are working on multiple countries (say, G. Floy in Portugal and Poland), or Portuguese publishers that set up these relationships for certain titles (as was the case with VitaminaBd, and now with Kingpin Books). And this includes editorial houses that deal either with North-American superhero comics and light fantasy graphic novels or independent comics.

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[56] Rajagopal, Arvind "Imperceptible Perceptions in our Technological Modernity". CHUN, Wendy Hui Kyong, and KEENAN, Thomas, eds. New Media/Old Media. A History and Theory Reader. New York/London: Routledge 2006: 279.

[57] At the online shop of CCC, there is one particular section that crosses all categories and collections highlighting "Books that are written in English or with English subtitles or no words", inviting international audiences to interact with their book production beyond habitual language barrier. Of course, I am aware of the problems inherent in using English as a lingua franca, even between Romance languages speakers, but this is not the place to engage in such a discussion. See: http://www.chilicomcarne.com/, SHOP section, IN ENGLISH sub-section.

[58] Usually, through the outsourcing publishing contracts between well-established publishers of several countries, as mentioned in a previous footnote.

[59] Ribeiro is drawing from Victor Turner's concept of liminality, that points towards an unstable state.

It is especially through Mmmnnnrrrg that we will find these sorts of business-editorial alliances. Farrajota has joined efforts with Huuda Huuda, La 5ème Couche, and Optimal Press in order to put out Tommi Musturi's Walking With Samuel (2010). Anton Kannemeyer's anthology Papa in Afrika/Papá em África or Olivier Schrauwen's Mowgli's Mirror (as O Espelho de Mogli) was also done like under these circumstances (Fig. 5.4). And in early 2016, a 500-plus page tome entitled Harvested, conducted by Ilan Manouach, collecting stills from pornographic films that show some sort of contemporary art was co-published by Mmmnnnrrrg, Forlaens, Bitterkomix, La 5ème Couche, Topovoros, Fortepressa, Ediciones Valientes, Hálice Hálas and Pachiclon. Moreover, Farrajota has helped other editors in certain projects, such as Quadradinhos (2014), a Portuguese authors anthology for the Treviso Comic Book Festival in Italy.
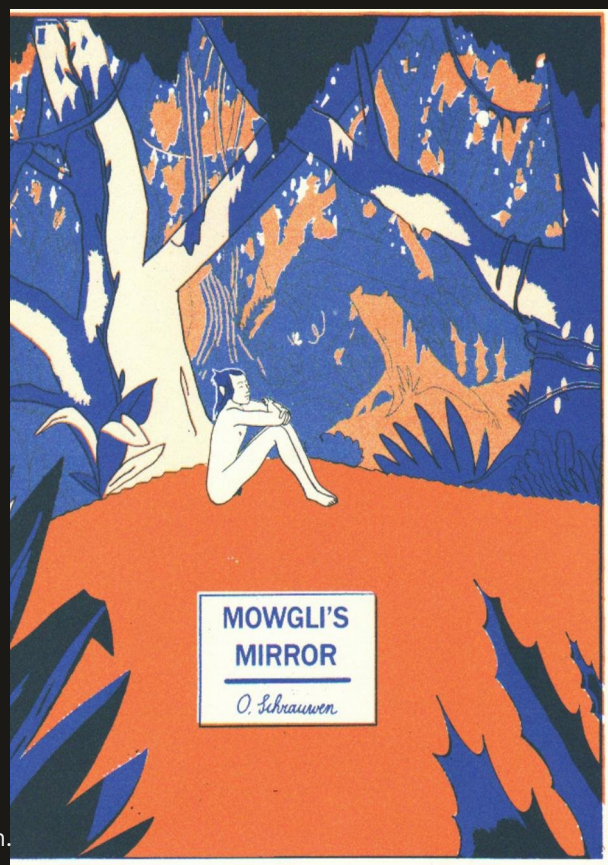

Figure 5.4 O Espelho de Mogli (2014).
Source: O. Schrauwen. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Actually, apart from participating in many of the smaller festival across the country, Chili Com Carne is also usually present in several international meetings such as the Luzern and Mälmo Festivals, or Crack! and Angoulême-Off, not to mention that, as a small publisher (although we can count a handful of people working for it, many of the tasks fall upon the editor, Marcos Farrajota), it shares many of the characteristics and affinities with some of the aforementioned publishers. So, one sees how these international relations work not only in building the immediate catalogue, but also as a sort of aesthetic community.

Moreover, almost all of these publishers also look for the public exposure of politically charged authors or artistic endeavours that are outside the norms of a more normalised perception of comics (Baetens, 1998). Kannemeyer, Schrauwen, Zograf, and the Portuguese David Campos, Francisco Sousa Lobo, Isabel Carvalho, Farrajota himself, the Clube do Inferno folks, and so on, are authors who deal with themes such as racism, colonialism, gender, collective memory, war, politics, cultural wars, capitalism, unemployment and precariousness which more often than not open up a dialog to international alliances. In this sense, they do contribute to that which Charles Hatfield deems as a "new movement", whose main traits are "the rejection of mainstream formulas; the exploration of (to comics) new genres, as well as the revival, at times ironic recasting, of genres long neglected; a diversification of graphic style; a budding internationalism, as cartoonists learned from other cultures and other traditions; and, especially, the exploration of searchingly personal and at times political themes." (2005: 10). This is very different from other publishers who, while following identical commercial strategies, are more concerned with tapping into generic trends than opening up comics to conceptual discussions and formal transformations.

5.4. Boring consensus

But if CCC follows this "independent" or "alternative" ethics of non-compliance with hegemonic politics of genres or commodification of comics, apart from rejection, what are its "positive" claims? Well, perhaps the feelings that are nurtured by this positioning are not overwhelmingly heroic, but rather "ugly", in Sianne Ngai's sense of the word. According to the cultural critic, "the separateness from 'empirical society' which art gains as a consequence of the bourgeois revolution ironically coincides with its growing awareness of its inability to significantly change that society" (2005: 2). But if art becomes aware that it cannot effectively or pragmatically change the world, it may nonetheless make an effort to change the way that same world is viewed, whether at the micro-level of daily life or at the macro-level of socio-economical systems. I believe that a substantial part of what makes CCC's output in such an important role is the (perhaps not programmed) capacity in providing texts that bring these two seemingly separated levels together and, with that, create a resonant force of political resistance towards commodification and normativization.

Ngai argues that within "the transnational stage of capitalism that defines our contemporary moment (...) the nature of the socio-political itself has changed in a manner that both calls forth and calls upon a new set of feelings", feelings she then proceeds to analyse in her book. Ngai plays these new, "ugly" feelings against the older, perhaps more powerful "classical political passions", but she finds that they are probably quite more adequate for "models of subjectivity, collectivity, and agency not entirely foreseen by past theorists of the commonwealth" (2005: 5). These feelings are characterized as, in a general sense, "ambient", "Bartlebyan", "minor and generally unprestigious", "explicitly amoral and noncathartic" (5-6).

At the same time that I introduce Ngai's affect mapping, I would like to engage with a specific understanding of "politics", namely Jacques Rancière's distinction of what he calls la politique politicienne, or police, that is to say politics in its most common sense, as a function of party members, government and State functionaries and so on, which is related to the conquest, exercise and maintenance of power, and la politique, or proper politics, which has to do with the conquest of the rights of expression by those who usually do not have access to it[60].

Rancière explains how politics proper only takes place when those who are usually unheard of or even unseen, or those whose voices are seen as "white noise" only by the police – the power structures who usually dismiss these voices as those of the "permanently discontented", the "resented ones", and so on -, are able to conquer a previously unreachable space or means of expression (La Mésentente, 1995). Politics is therefore the redistribution of the space of the sensible, describable as, according to Rancière, "in principle, an order of the bodies that defines the distribution of the modes of the doable, the visible, and the sayable, which attributes to those bodies an exclusive, specific place and role." That is the reason why the power of the police, by deciding what is sayable, doable and visible, is associated with the production and managing of consensus. Quite the contrary, the opening up, the foundation, the creation of a new political space is related to dissent.

The word consensus is more often than not used by Ranciére's police as a constraint: these powers are the ones that decide who speaks, when, where and under what circumstances and conditions. Therefore, consensus is not a sign of open, active participation in the democratic equation, but rather a reductive control of its participants and a restriction of its potential action. Dissent is then the opening of "more room," "more agency," "more and better democracy." In a first phase, the opening up of that space may follow more or less expected clichés of adolescent fantasies but slowly it may evolve into a more sophisticated, implicated attitude. That is precisely what I consider to be CCC's development over the decades.

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[60] These thoughts are first presented in Rancière, 1995. A brilliant approach to the realm of comics has been made by Ann Miller, 2013, whom I am closely following here.

The first few years, marked especially by the publication of MdC and associated projects (namely, the complement[61] Mesinha de Cabecinha, a strip created by Farrajota and Joana Figueiredo, and Osso da pilinha, a Valentine's Day special edition by the same authors), were branded by a (bedroomy) punkish attitude, quoting music, depicting explicitly violent and sexual scenes, in perfect antagonism with bourgeois mores, and blatantly showing a taste for vernacular forms over artistic choices.

But the expansion of the dialogue with other artistic platforms and a wider circle of action and relationships would lead to ever more ambitious projects, both formally and in terms of content, if you will. Perhaps the first groundbreaking project for CCC has been Mutate & Survive, an impressive 200-page anthology with up to 77 alternative artists from 16 countries (from Argentina to Sweden), published in 2001[62]. Still, M&S was defined a free-flow "ratty line" extravaganza and for a long time it remained the backbone of the CCC Collection (in which we will find novels, graphzines, anthologies and, more recently, what could pass as a more or less conventional graphic novels, such as Francisco Sousa Lobo's and Nunsky's books). Ever since then CCC has put out a number of more or less thematically coordinated collective titles, such as Crack On, Destruição, Futuro Primitivo, MdC # 23/Inverno, Boring Europa (Fig. 5.5), Zona de Desconforto and Lisboa é very very typical. By "thematically coordinated" I mean that there is an attempt to provide a coherent theme or at least some concern that will bring the very different contributions together in one particular project around a subject. Destruição is "about how horrible it was to live between 2001 and 2010" and Futuro Primitivo an anthology in which 45 national and international authors submitted work "remixed" by the unDJ Mmmnnnrrrg, i.e., Farrajota himself.

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[61] A few issues of MdC were squared-shaped. The printed A3 sheets would be folded, stapled and trimmed. The remainder (the top) had the complementary strip. To a certain extent it reminds one of the historical "topper strips" (e.g. George Herriman's Krazy Kat for the The Dingbat Family).

[62] An interesting comparative study could be done with L'Association's 1999 anthology Comix 2000, but this is not the place to do so. However, the French-led project shows how the network of independent comics in Europe and elsewhere could bring about outstanding results. See also Baetens, 1998 on Autarcic Comix. Thanks to Benoît Crucifix for this point.

Figure 5.5 Boring Europa (AAVV, 2011).
Source: Cover by Joana Pires and lettering by Marcos Farrajota

An even more focused collection, and the only one, so far, in which most volumes share the same formal characteristics (size, format, one-color printing) but also topicality, is LowCCCost. To put it simply, these are volumes that deal with travelogues, personal impressions of the artists while traversing or living in another country, but which act, at the same time, as both a reflection on identity (personal and collective, whether in terms of nationality or artistic). David Campos' Kassumai is the artists' travel diary while he spent some time in Guinea-Bissau as a NGO volunteer, mixing his daily experiences with a reflection on Portuguese colonialism from the perspective of someone who was born after the dissolution of the Empire. Lisboa é very very typical is an anthology by 11 foreign authors (plus another for the cover) about their time living in Lisbon, creating an "exotic view" about the city at the margin of the current dominant "touristy" discourses[63] . But I want to focus on two particular titles for an attempt at "closer" reading.

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63 Especially taking in account that Lisbon has been one of the fastest-growing city destinations in Europe, with dramatic changes where traffic, accommodation and services are concerned.

One of their titles in particular, Boring Europa, depicts an European tour - Chili Sauce around Boring Europa - by van of a small group of Portuguese artists, stopping at a handful of European cities, from Valencia to Ljubljana, and putting up a small publication fair, presenting a DJ set and other actions, taking advantage precisely of the informal network that was mentioned in the previous section. To a certain extent, this confirms how "peripheral agents" sometimes "de-nationalize" themselves, and are attracted to the mainstream centre, albeit in an alternative network (Klinkenberg and Denis, 2005: 31-32). One could argue, however, that these are strategies that share, if in a smaller scale, the same goals as larger, more institutionalized bodies: "The contemporary comic book field, especially in its alternative wing, embodies a curious mix of values, a blend of countercultural iconoclasm, rapacious consumerism, and learned connoisseurship. It is a highly specialized if thinly populated consumer culture, one that holds tightly to a romanticized position of marginality and yet courts wider recognition." (Hatfield, 2005: 12).

Boring Europa is drawn by the touring artists (Farrajota, Ana Ribeiro, Joana Pires, Ricardo Martins and Sílvia Rodrigues) but there are also contributions by friends met along the way, such as world-class artists-publishers Aleksandar Zograf, Andrea Bruno, Martín López Lam and Igor Haufbauer, among many others. The book does not present separate "stories" or "sections", but a mishmash of drawings, texts, collages of xeroxed photographs, maps and documents, cadavre exquis comics, etc. underlining a certain collaborative, intimate but also "tight" (mimicking travelling in a van, staying in rooms or couch-surfing together) relationship. And more often than not there are considerations about movement, cultural migration, collaboration and economic disparities or social commonalities across different national settings.

At one point, one of the touring musicians, Ghuna X, says, "now there are no borders in Europe, and it's much easier to travel but most of the people don't move around much, they are bound by the borders which are just in their minds" (Aleksandar Zograf, Boring Europa, 2012: 65). One of the Serbian authors they meet, Dzaizku Volodya, is invited by Farrajota to travel with them to Berlin. Volodya thinks (in narrator's captions): "Now with new biometric Serbian passport and visas abolished, one is able to decide to travel or not within minutes..." But, oddly enough, he ultimately declines the invitation, because he is "kinda busy these days" (Volodya, Boring Europa: 73). To a certain extent, it's as if the authors are addressing Ugo Pagano's notion of "low horizontal cultural homogenization". Despite the often-repeated idea of the existence of such a thing as "Europe", the truth is that such a notion exists practically solely at a level of symbolic, political and economic institutions. In other words, well above the level of the daily life of common citizens. To all effects, there is no such thing as "low mobility costs", which has less to do with actual expenses of travelling, accommodation and food, but rather with cultural, linguistic and social mobility costs, quite often consubstantiated in an unsurmountable obstacle (Pagano, 2014).

Most of the stories contained and mixed in Boring Europa bring to the fore necessarily the autobiographical, travelling, diaristic episodes that took place during the tour. But at the same time they also draw up a number of alternative practices in organizing and performing culture (music, visual arts, comics, parties, fairs), going into details as practices of fundraising, volunteer coordination, urban and social network communication, how one creates alternatives to conventional culture good markets, how one hosts guests, how one manages accommodation and food, and so on. And surprisingly, touristic sight-seeing is not neglected, which can include the most expected monuments as well as alternative paths to curious anecdotes: a tunnel in Serbiathat leads to a Cernunnos statue, a number of coincidences in Ljubljana, the confirmation of the cliché that the Portuguese are bad customers and poor organizers wherever in the world, and so on... Whenever there's a meeting around a meal or beers and cigarettes, the brief discussions that emerge within such a "clash of nationalities" are set forth, which lead to highlight or criticize stereotypes, expectations and projections towards the other, furthering, deconstruction, dialog and understanding self- and other-identity. If there is a degree of cultural homogenization or standardization or stereotypification in Europe, more often than not through massified popular culture, the cartography created by Chili's tour, the alternative cultural network it shows and the dissent culture it promotes comes across as a differentiated, independent, democracy-expanding system. Of course, it is outside the purview of my expertise to go into sociological details about mobility in Europe or about Portuguese emigration, but

it is very telling that both Boring Europa and Zona de Desconforto, which I will address presently (if not the bulk of CCC's comics production), accentuate time and again identity politics.

Zona de Desconforto (translatable as "Discomfort Zone")[64] collected 10 first-person stories of artists that lived or are living abroad (that is, not in Portugal), whether pursuing studies or because they found a job somewhere, so that a contrasting portrait of "outside over there" is created in relation to the current, crisis-imbued situation in Portugal (Fig. 5.7). However, the very identity-creation process is not clear-cut at all. First of all, the anthology brings together work from Portuguese artists, but also one Portuguese born in France (David Campos), a Portuguese-Chilean (Amanda Baeza) and a North-American who has lived most of her teenage years and adulthood in Porto (Christine Casneille), complicating easy notions of belonging and nationality. Most of the experiences of these young artists are not the typical "emigrant experience," even within the Portuguese community. On the one hand, there is always a degree of cultured privilege, but on the other hand that does not prevent most of them, if not all, of being part of a generation whose precariousness is almost definitional. But it is precisely the dovetailing of these two traits that allows them to sift through late modernity global precariousness, and reach out towards or establish a dialogue with historical or social "others". The stories deal with snippets of daily life in those other places – visited for short or longer periods, and with varying degrees of interaction or integration in "local life" - but such quotidian grounding does not mean that they cannot link wider frames of reference, even if not in any pamphleteering way. In Ngai's parlance, these authors are forwarding "minor affects that are far less intentional or object-directed, and thus more likely to produce political and aesthetic ambiguities" (2005: 20).

Figure 5.7 Zona de Desconforto (AAVV, 2014).
Source: Cover by João Fazenda. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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[64] As far as I know, there is no relation whatsoever with Jonathan Frazen's novel The Comfort Zone.

Tiago Baptista, for example, creates a story in which he displays his fascination with the contemporary Berlin's cultural and artistic life he is discovering, but when at the same time he extends his inquisitiveness towards a Palestinian shish-kebab street vendor, the protagonist's self-centred, localized narrative gives way to an inquiry upon territory, borders, politics, and otherness. Daniel Seabra Lopes, on the other hand, an academically-trained anthropologist, performs a balancing act between a stronger comics-related visual-structural inventability (as noticeable, within the anthology, by the works of Amanda Baeza and Francisco Sousa Lobo) and the narrative force (the main goal of David Campos' and Christine Casneille's contributions) by creating a perspicuous portrait of the places he visits in Brazil and the people he meets with a reflection upon cultural and political implications.

In "La fonction critique," cinema critic Serge Daney produces an important caveat to two types of "denials:" "An excess of neutrality (no one is speaking but something precise is being said) or an excess of subjectivity (someone is speaking and saying nothing): these are two denials which we ought to be able to recognize for what they are. This said, they are not symmetrical and they have to be fought against with different weapons" (57). Daney is pointing out to those works which, on the one hand, pretend to be apolitical but are in fact supporting the dominant ideologies and the other that, on the other hand, supposedly speak in the name of the oppressed but end up only speaking their own voices, erasing that of the people. Despite the many different subject matters and comics specific visual and narrative strategies of the authors gathered in Zona de Desconforto, the mass of their co-joints works does not create a homogeneous voice but nonetheless create a communitarian attitude, one that opens up a space for others to speak for themselves. By addressing local problems, by being sensitive to peculiarities instead of delving in preconceived notions of otherness, by speaking to others, they allow for those same other or that otherness to express itself (Moura, 2012).

Daney also invites us to perform a "double reading", that is to say, consider the historical time that is represented in the (filmic, comics) text and the historical period of its very production. Even if all of the texts in CCC's production usually deal with contemporaneity, I do believe it is possible to implicate such reading, which is in itself an always already political interpretation. Daney writes: "What is problematical is the film-maker's relation to this double reading: this is what allow us, in specific situations, to distinguish between a reactionary, a progressive and a revolutionary film-maker depending on whether he denies it, whether he plays on it or whether he is truly responsible for it." (58). A reactionary would say something like, "there's nothing political about my text", denying the differentiation between the two time frames and the interpretation that would emerge from it. The progressive would only take advantage from it, forwarding a programmatic and instrumental view of the represented "events". But even if we would read these short autobiographical travelogues about "life abroad" or snippets of "the others", it is in their collective nature – in other words, in the editorial gesture that triggered them and brought them together – that we can read the clearly acknowledged responsibility of the explored many forms of discomfort.

As we see, these anthologies bring to the fore Duncombe's main trait in his assessment of zine-culture: identity. The short pieces that make up these titles act less as a (supposedly) objective take on their subjects than a very personal take, implying and divulging the very presence of the one who speaks (and draws). It is less to tell things as they are (Lisbon, other countries and cultures, the comics scene, and so on), but rather, in discussing the subject – precariousness, gentrification, global tourism, massification of culture, and so on – revealing how "the teller is as important as what is being told" (Duncombe, 2003: 236). And as the authors tell their stories, they open up "some sort of personal connection" (Duncombe, 2003: 237) with the readers. This allows for two things. On the one hand, it puts a personal touch, a face if you will, to whatever subject is being addressed. On the other hand, but also consequently, that leads to a discussion of the subject that is not seen as pedagogical, institutionalized, or "preachy".

If one can, as a matter of fact, describe Boring Europa and some of the other LowCCCost titles as travelogues, all of them are less interested in the depiction of the travel itself, the supposedly exotic vistas, or heralding the so-called "cultural shocks", than actually engaging with understanding deeper personal experiences, quite often the relationships with other people, while there. It's life as it takes place, in its most common, glorious triviality. There are no archplots. No bombastic conclusions to the projects, whether collective or individual (Francisco Sousa Lobo, arguably the new CCC's comics superstar, produces book-length books that I have described elsewhere as "a tour de force between Dostoevskyan drama and Kafkesque inaction"; Fig. 5.8). The episodes are indeed underwhelming, devoid of sweeping statements of how the world should be changed or how (comics) art could act towards some idea of progress. However, such "drastic slowdown of language, a rhetorical enactment of its fatigue" (Ngai, 2005: 255) is quite telling in itself: "By pointing to what obstructs aesthetic or critical response, however, astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions" (Idem: 262). It's as if boring here is not related to "boredom" but to the act of the verb bore, "piercing" or "digging", in order to reveal the conditions of normative discourses and, consequently, yet quietly, produce alternatives.

5.5. Conclusion

An ahistorical, superficial outlook of Chili Com Carne's output could nowadays perhaps mistake it for a regular, established publishing house. Or, perhaps, it would regard it as a typical case of a small press that went through a significant scale and financial growth, making it depart from its freer editorial roots. Looking at volumes such as Zona de Desconforto and Boring Europa, we would be hard-pressed to call them fanzines, or even "fanzinesque". But its core experience is still there. "Zines offer a space for people to try out new personalities, ideas, and politics" (Duncombe, 2003: 247). CCC's later life cycle has revealed that its pathos and ethics remain the same.

I hope that this portrait of one of the most significant editorial projects in the contemporary Portuguese comics scenes has shown how, at the end of the day, preserving its very nature, while expanding its action within both a mainstream and alternative publishing environment, is the real stage of resistance.
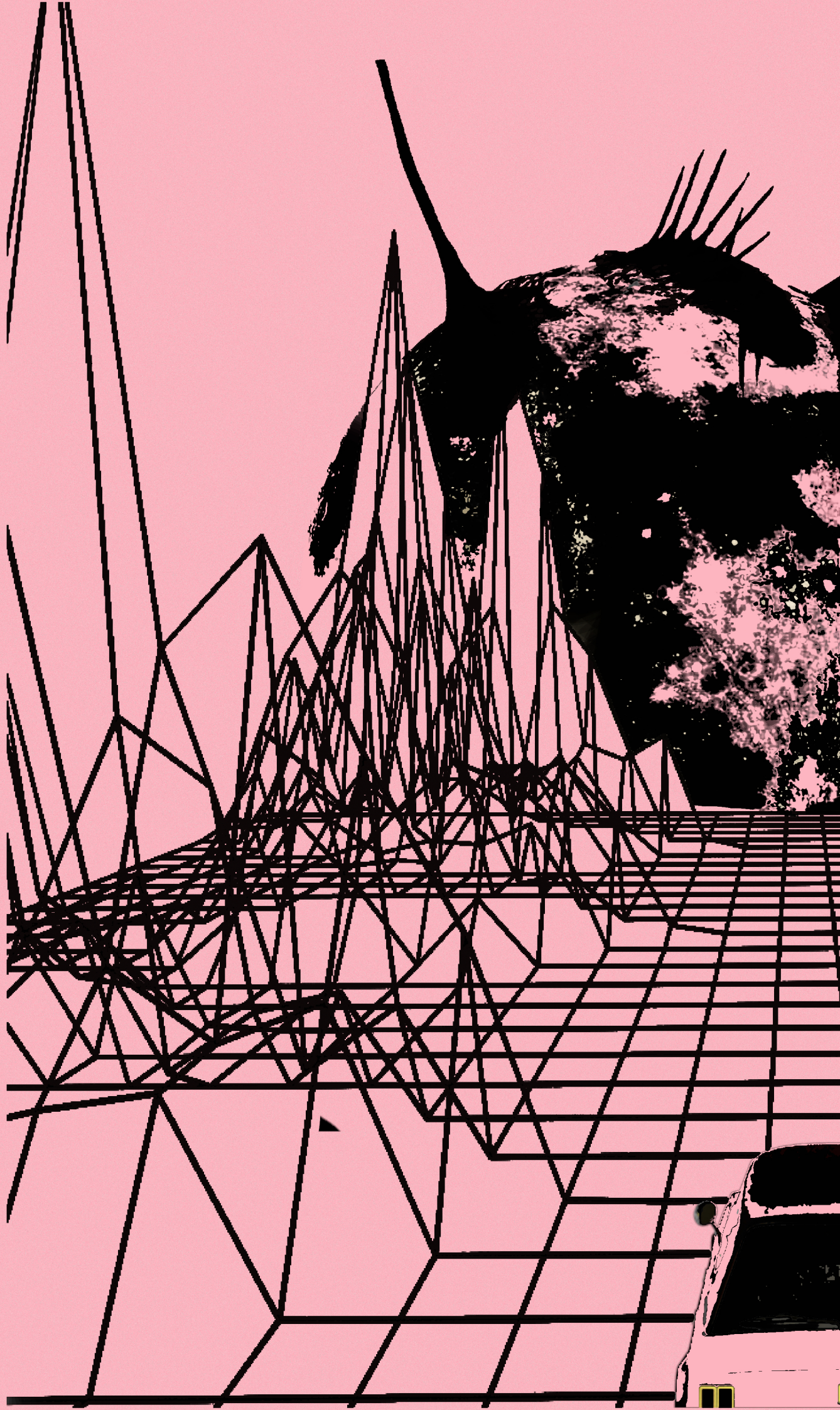
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