

**Noir justice: Law, crime and morality
in Díaz Canales and Guarnido's
*Blacksad: Somewhere within the
shadows and Arctic-nation***

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**Introduction:
Justice in Comics and Popular Culture**

Comics have a long history of engagement with concepts of justice. Mainstream comics in English have commonly focused on crime, crime prevention, and punishment as part of their broader preoccupation with themes of power, abuse of power, and responsibility. This engagement is perhaps most obvious in the traditional superhero genre, in which ostensibly 'good' heroes are charged to protect the innocent and right wrongs perpetrated by 'bad' villains. Analysing the stories of the two iconic heroes Superman and Batman, Reynolds and Henson identify a 'crime control' model of justice focused on preventing and repressing crime (2010). In this model, the formal legal system is inadequate and due process is failing, thus indicating the need for vigilantism. Yet despite the failures of the legal system, the overall social order and obedience to the law is nevertheless the accepted morality. Phillips and Strobl similarly conclude that the underlying message in mainstream comics is a conservative one: the goal is always to reinforce or restore an

ideal of social order (2006). Thus, the concept of justice can be utilised as a broad model for understanding inequality, abuse and recompense in human relations. As such it should be brought into the discussion of many other forms of comics – in English and other languages. Sacco's comics journalism or testimonial and memoir comics like Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000) and Néaud's *Journal* series commencing with *Février 1992 – septembre 1993* (1996) portray structural injustice and its ramifications in individual lives. A critical engagement with real issues of justice and power is also demonstrably present in unambiguously fictional works. *From Hell* (Moore and Campbell 1999) and *The Homeland Directive* (Venditti and Huddleston 2011) both feature a central conspiracy that addresses the problem of power in a particular era and setting, yet their examination of power is quite different: the former employs metatextual subtlety and expansive plotting, and the latter utilises a high impact visual style.

The diversity of treatments of social order, disorder, justice and abuse of justice in different genres and individual works speaks not only to the versatility of the medium but also to the complexity of justice as a principle in contemporary culture. It is not only the moral universe of traditional superhero comics (disrupted by reinterpretations like Moore's and Gibbon's *Watchmen*, which make transparent the fascist undertones of the genre), but all genres of comics that have the potential to engage with the injustices that result when abstract notions of right and wrong are enacted both through systems of government and through human agents. Crime in the comics can usefully be examined therefore within a wider narrative of abuse of power and the relationship between social inequality and injustice. In this article, I will analyse the direct engagement with justice in a comic that explicitly represents crime, the adequacy or otherwise of official instruments of the law within an unequal social structure, and the contrast between different philosophies of individual morality. I will do so through an examination of Juan Díaz Canales and Juanjo Guarnido's series about the detective Blacksad. This series created by Spanish authors was originally published in French and commenced in 2000.

The centrality of justice and crime in the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* mainstream is quite different from the Anglophone tradition, with the superheroes of the Anglophone tradition replaced by Tintin and Astérix as the public icons of the medium. Discussion of *bande dessinée* does not fall into the divisions of superheroes and everything else, as is sometimes the case in analysis of comics in English. This is not to say there is not still a mainstream, both in terms of the publishing industry and popular content; Dargaud, publisher of *Blacksad*, is part of Média Participations, the comics publisher with the largest market share since the 1990s (Miller 2007: 50). Despite alternative imprints put forward by Dargaud, such as *Poisson Pilote*, much of the *bande dessinée* product is still catering to what Grove describes as a market dominated by violent and erotic content (2010: 199). Although the history and iconic works of the medium are different, crime has been very much a feature in many *bandes dessinées*, from the fantastic sex and violence of the American-influenced anthology series *Métal Hurlant* to more nuanced titles with a critical approach to crime and social order such as those cited by Miller: Tardi's *Brouillard au pont de Tolbiac* and Montellier's *Odile et les Crocodiles* (2007: 39). While *Blacksad* follows the European tradition for its format and some of its content, thematically it is embedded in transnational tropes of *noir* story and setting.

Looking at justice and crime through culture requires interdisciplinary tools from a variety of aesthetic, narrative and media theories as well as principles of criminology. A cultural approach to the study of crime is:

a journey into the spectacle and carnival of crime, a walk down an infinite hall of mirrors where images created and consumed by criminals, criminal subcultures, control agents, media institutions, and audiences bounce endlessly one off the other. (Ferrell 1999: 397)

While Ferrell is most concerned with criminal subcultures, the central insight about the cultural inflection of popular *ideas* of crime is also fruitful for looking at media representation of fictional criminal activity. Reichman characterises one relationship between law and culture via the concept of the 'paradigmatic narrative' (2007: 3). This

suggests that we have internal scripts for activities and experiences that influence how we behave and interpret them. The broader culture's instruments and products, including law and Reichman's example of cinema, shape those scripts. Reichman argues that law in particular is not sustained by active enforcement but by acquiescence to a behavioural norm (2007: 19). Popular culture interpretations of concepts of justice and fairness are important sources of context for understanding and legitimising the law. Among the predominant messages promulgated by the media regarding crime and justice are the prevalence of corruption and red tape in law enforcement, the justification of any means necessary in catching criminals, and the elision of structural causes for crime, focusing instead on the individual characteristics of criminals (Surette 2011: 201). These frequent tropes of *noir* fiction and film are common in the treatment of crime in comics as well. However, as evident in the example of *Blacksad*, these concepts are not merely reproduced without nuance or revision; the traditional dependence on an individual villain can be superseded by a critique of the social and economic forces which influence crime.

Graeme Newman has identified comics as a major contributor to the perceptions of criminal justice in popular culture. Newman's article makes an early argument for more research into the impact that cultural products have on community opinion about criminality, suggesting a likely two-way relationship rather than wholesale adoption of comics morality (1990: 261-2). Even when applied to the youngest readers of comics, a passive audience theory is excessively simplistic, harking back to the 1950s scaremongering of Fredric Wertham which pointed to the supposedly pernicious effects of comics on the behaviour and values of youth.¹ What comics do provide are narratives of justice and injustice, whether within formal systems of legal enforcement or via extra-legal processes such as vigilantism, which may serve as critiques of the failings of real-world justice systems or support abstract ideals of justice and punishment.

David Carrier argues that comics mirror popular culture, and depend on a shared frame of reference for understanding (2000: 85).

Comics narratives are predicated upon certain cultural assumptions which the audience brings to their reading in order to approximate the intended meanings of the text – though cross-cultural mis-readings can offer their own interesting insights. Many successful alternative (i.e. non-superhero) comics of recent decades – notably non-fiction works like the abovementioned *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2003) and *Palestine* (Sacco 2007) – have focused on a particular and very real time and place, and the reading of these texts must be enriched by some basic understanding of the structural inequalities of the sociohistorical context in which the comic transpires. In the vernacular of traditional fictional comics, however, timelessness usually prevails (Groensteen 2007: 139). Mainstream comics have promoted humanism, but in the trappings of genre rather than through specific details of real-world events.

The *Blacksad* series is arguably of this traditional variety; though set in the recognisable milieu of 1940s and 1950s USA (referencing aspects of the era such as the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism), it is actually in dialogue with the global imaginary around these things rather than their reality. *Blacksad* lacks the specific sociohistorical context of the testimonial, non-fiction and novelistic comics that have redrawn the boundaries of the genre. Functioning in the popular culture metaspace, it relies on intertextual rather than real-world referents to explore its themes, operating in large part in what Groensteen terms the *citationnel* register (2007: 139). With its Spanish authors, French publisher, and rapid export, *Blacksad* is also a good example of transnationalism in contemporary comics. These factors are important because unlike non-fiction comics, or even fiction strips like *Mafalda* (Groensteen's example of a politically engaged comic), when the *Blacksad* series addresses power and justice, it is *not* in the context of the oppressiveness or violence of a particular regime. By evoking an imaginary place inspired by popular representations of the mid-twentieth century United States, *Blacksad* makes little reference to the agency of the enforcers of a particular stifling government power; instead, it focuses on capitalism and the injustices that arise through its structural inequalities. Power in *Blacksad* is concentrated in the hands of individuals who benefit from

the free market's failings and a system twisted by avarice rather than ideological excess.

The intertextuality of *Blacksad* continues the ongoing dialogue between crime films, crime fiction, and crime comics. These include direct adaptations, such as the above mentioned *Brouillard au pont de Tolbiac*, a comic based on the novel by Léo Malet, to the numerous film adaptations of crime comics ranging from the pure style of *Dick Tracy* (1990) to the stylised violence of *Sin City* (2005). (Novelisations of comics remain virtually unheard of, however, probably reflecting the high culture value still attributed to novels.) Broe identifies in the early evolution of *noir* filmmaking 'a moment of resistance to an increasingly centralized and anti-labor state and, later, a critique of a rapacious economic system' (2003: 22). Similarly, according to Martín-Andino Mendieta, the key to hardboiled detective genre fiction is that it transpires at the margins of society, making the focus the socioeconomic context of crime. The implied social critique is more important than plot; as she puts it, the genre 'crea atmósferas asfixiantes donde el miedo, la falta de justicia, la corrupción del poder y la inseguridad predominan sobre el crimen' (Martín-Andino Mendieta 2010).² Unlike earlier locked room mysteries and whodunits, in this genre resolution supposes the restoration of some form of social order or equilibrium rather than solving a mystery. The parallel with the moral logic of superhero comics is clear. The restored balance, however, is not that of a just system where each achieves the end she or he merits. Vengeance for the sufferings of the weak is sometimes possible, but its impact is limited, doing nothing to reform a greater systemic rottenness.

1 *Blacksad* as *Noir* Comic

Trabado Cabado characterises the relationship between the detective tradition in other media and in comics as one in which the highly codified genre, originally displaying limited narrative possibilities, was transformed in its adaptation to the graphic medium. This adaptation:

ha actuado como un acicate para ir siempre un poco más allá en un

afán perpetuo de renovación que le permite, aun bajo la alargada sombra de los maestros, empezar siempre desde cero. (Trabado Cabado 2011: 268)³

The innovation is not pure invention, but the expression of debts to works in other media while simultaneously exploiting the possibilities of the graphic narrative to engage differently with the representation of crime. The *Blacksad* series features a private detective named John Blacksad. Blacksad fulfills every stereotype of a private detective, right down to the trench coat, dangling cigarette, and world-weariness, except that he is embodied in the form of a large black cat. The first album, *Somewhere within the Shadows* establishes the main character in relation to the glitter and the grime of urban crime as well as the police and the instruments – and limitations – of state power. In a typical *noir* plot, Blacksad is drawn into the case of the murder of an ex-lover Natalia, a glamorous party girl with a heart of gold. While investigating, he comes up against the richest, most powerful figure in the city, Ivo Statoc. Statoc's involvement prevents justice for Natalia's death through normal legal channels and inspires Blacksad to pursue personal vengeance instead. The second album, *Arctic-Nation*, removes the protagonist from the alleys and bars of his usual milieu to an area called The Line, the product of a failed urban development project. Female characters again drive the mystery: in the case of a missing small girl, her mother Dinah seemingly plays the part of the damsel in distress and the glamorous wife of the police chief, Jezabel, is a possible *femme fatale*. Dinah and Jezabel are established in contrast to school teacher Miss Gray who, anxious over the girl's fate (more so than Dinah who inexplicably seems not to be), summoned Blacksad on to the case. Blacksad gradually discovers the racial tensions of the town and the sad history that they engendered: the social ambition of the white police chief Karup led him to abandon his pregnant first wife because she was black. Her decline inspired one of her twin daughters – her flintier *white* daughter – to concoct an elaborate revenge scheme. This scheme depended on the prevailing atmosphere of suspicion and prejudice in the town in order to succeed. As we shall see, *Shadows* establishes the aesthetic language of the series, introduces the central

character and addresses themes of power and its abuse; *Arctic-Nation*, with its remixed *noir* ingredients, significantly furthers the morally complex conflicts between enacted law and natural justice established in the first album. Since the central conflict in *Arctic-Nation* is not only of class and power, but also of race and power, it also extends the series' fundamental visual metaphor of anthropomorphised animals to explore racial inequality, its resulting injustices, and the failure of the legal system to address these issues.

The following analysis examines three elements of the first two albums of the *Blacksad* series in terms of how they contribute to the depiction of power, morality and justice. First, the selection and depiction of different animals for each of the characters is discussed as a device which both contributes to and unsettles the readers' recognition of good and evil. Characters' choices become more complex and morally ambiguous. Simultaneously, their graphical depiction is altered such that different aspects of their animal characteristics come to the fore. This aspect of the series speaks to the unevenness of justice as applied within the law, in comparison to the moral ideal of equality that the central character, were he not so jaded and disillusioned, would aspire to. Second, the use of different backgrounds, including interiors and urban space in *Shadows* and the run down, abortive subdivision development in *Arctic-Nation* contributes both to the development of readers' understanding of the characters' social position, and to the legibility of social context of scenes that advance the plot. Characters' differences in social consequence and the economic backdrop of the society present a critique of capitalist amorality and its concentration of power and wealth. Third, the texts' explicit references to different concepts of law, justice and morality are compared to the moral judgments about characters and their choices which are rendered implicitly through visual narrative and plot.

2 Animal Anthropomorphism, Social Hierarchy and Social Order

Grove argues that the *bande dessinée* has had a very different cultural trajectory within the respected French visual culture tradition (2010: 298). However, the influence of Anglophone comics on *bande dessinée* production has also been significant. One important influence Grove identifies was the importation of translated strips of Mickey Mouse and other Disney characters in the early twentieth century (2010: 127). This influence is especially evident in the evolution of the use of funny animals in Francophone production. For *Blacksad*, Guarnido's detail-oriented style and touch with animal characters in motion certainly owes something to his own experience as a Disney animator. The animal anthropomorphism in *Blacksad* also draws comparisons to Spiegelman's genre redefining *Maus*, if only because *Maus* is so much at the centre of contemporary conversation about comics and visual metaphor. Some Francophone comics, such as Trondheim's *Lapinot* series (starting with 1993's *Slaloms*), also employ funny animals to good effect – and Trondheim has even used his animal protagonists for a detective story. Sokal's Inspecteur Canardo, like *Blacksad*, is an anthropomorphised animal detective in the noir tradition, however his animals are drawn in a more humorous style, and the stories rest on amorality rather than exploring morality and power. Despite the difference in theme, the comparison between *Blacksad* and *Maus* remains more fruitful, since in *Blacksad* the choice of animals is fundamental to understanding the internal hierarchy and qualities of the characters. The animal drawings in *Maus* are far from literal depictions of the various species; Spiegelman rejected a more direct representational style in favour of a neutral, human quality (Orvell 1992: 121).

In *Blacksad*, animality is deployed in the construction of characters and to add emotional complexity to the interpretation of the narrative, but the art nevertheless ultimately suggests human rather than animal movement and physicality. This is particularly marked in sex scenes and the drawing of women, for example, where a more bestial visual could have been quite disruptive to the reader's gaze. The ultimate

predominance of human characteristics aligns with Chaney's analysis of the function of funny animals: 'The animal in such comics always functions as mask or costume, beneath which lies the human, whose universality is reaffirmed and reified in the process' (2011: 135). As Witek describes, the difference between the function of animals in comics as opposed to the original allegorical use in fables is that the animal's essential qualities are not uniformly present. In the example of *Krazy Kat*, the 'conventional meanings' of the animals establish their relationship, but subsequently 'the "animalness" of the characters becomes vestigial or drops away entirely' (1989: 110). Any hybridity is partial: unlike in fables, the animals do not stay true to their nature.

Animal anthropomorphism in comics can therefore have a range of possible effects in the construction of character and the establishment of hierarchies and relationships within the story. Ibáñez criticises Spiegelman's use of particular animals to represent ethnic and religious groups because it naturalises the predatory relationships between the different species (2007: 42). The artifice of the metaphor is made transparent within *Maus* itself, however, as characters do not conform to the animal behaviours or are difficult to place within one of the animal groups. Furthermore, as Gordon argues, *Maus*'s animals are not a straightforward metaphor applied to the Nazis and Jews in the Holocaust: the animality of the groups of belonging speaks also to the enduring aftereffects of the Holocaust (1991: 345). In *Blacksad*, the initial assumptions readers make about different characters' natures and relationships based on their animal depiction often prove similarly illusory. Guarnido takes advantage of the effect of association with the nature of different species; our understanding of his characters – and the animal aspect associated with them – shifts dramatically as the stories unfold.

Animal-to-character matches through the first two albums of the *Blacksad* series are not excessively schematic, though certain patterns do emerge. There is a relatively clear division between the species of apparently weak characters, who exercise little power and are subject to other characters' will, and those who are stronger, whether in terms of

pure physical threat or the more dangerous and comprehensive forms of power. In general, lowlifes and members of the criminal underclass might be vermin, reptiles or the like, while relatively powerless and less morally grey background characters might be pigs, birds, primates or small mammals. More imposing but not necessarily evil background characters appear in the shape of gorillas, walruses, stallions, and bulls, for example. These background characters serve to establish the animal metaphor.

At the centre of the narrative are animal characters whose strengths are implied in various, atypical ways. Some are strong like the villainous toad Ivo Statoc in *Shadows*, whose animal nature suggests a poisonous and sickening power. Others are like the wealthy and manipulative white tiger Oldsmill in *Arctic-Nation* who evokes a restrained, graceful might. Strength also features in the depiction of some sympathetic characters. Blacksad's consistency of purpose is echoed by his erect and fearless posture in situations of conflict. In *Arctic-Nation*, the character of the black sister, Dinah, is fleshed out via her furious and impassioned facial expressions. These are particularly evident during distressing encounters. Dinah also shows a directness of emotion that makes her more sympathetic than the opaque and 'cooler' white twin, Jezabel. In comparison to her sister, Dinah seems incapable of the sustained deception that Jezabel carries out by living a constant lie as the wife of their own father, Chief Karup.

Since, true to the *noir* genre, *Blacksad* tends to explore ambiguous moral choices and human weakness, there are few outright villains in the series. Instead, many less than admirable actions are prompted by desperation rather than natural malice. Their animal representations and the style in which they are drawn reflects this moral ambiguity. One exception is the previously mentioned Ivo Statoc, the arch-villain in *Shadows*. Statoc, a large toad, is confident of his particular protective venom, namely, the power of money and influence to control the world. This confidence leads to his downfall when he discovers that Blacksad cannot be bought. These conflicts of ethical worldviews which drive the series will be explored in more detail in the final section

of this article. What is interesting about Statoc, however, given the unambiguously repulsive choice of a toad for his character, is that he is hidden from readers: his head remains shadowed (like much else in this first album) until the climactic scene. Thus, the artist seems to refuse readers the simplicity of using characters' species to make reliable moral evaluations.

This assessment is borne out by other aesthetic and narrative choices of the artist and writer which disrupt initial assumptions that readers might have made about certain characters when they were first introduced. While the police in the series are usually canines, *Arctic-Nation's* Chief Karup is the more ambivalent polar bear. The polar bear suggests imposing physicality and potential ferocity, but also a certain ursine somnolence and unconcern. All these traits collapse into the pathos of such a grand creature suffering betrayal and pain when Karup is ultimately brought low by the associates into whose company his ambition and weakness lured him. A sinister reptilian antagonist appears out of the mist and trails Blacksad throughout *Shadows*. At first, with his bright blade, bright eyes and forked tongue, he seems to be a strong figure following the comic's pattern of graphical depiction of animals. However, he becomes pathetic when his ultimate insignificance is revealed. Bested by a petty henchman, he is transformed into merely another victim of true power. His eyes dull, his tongue lolls, bloody, down to his collar, and the coiled muscular menace of his shadowy figure when it first appeared is all undone in limp, impotent death (see figure 1).

Significant supporting characters also change in aspect as different elements of their animal selves are emphasised according to the situation. The weasel journalist Weekly in *Arctic-Nation* is initially repugnant to Blacksad, who finds him to be beneath him. Weekly, however, becomes an ally and even friend by the end of the story (and into subsequent volumes). His over-inquisitive smarm when first introduced shifts to a natural warm smile, slapstick comic relief, and self-effacing charm in the final panels of the album. Also unprepossessing on first appearance is the abject figure of the bedraggled, gambling-addicted magpie Cotten.

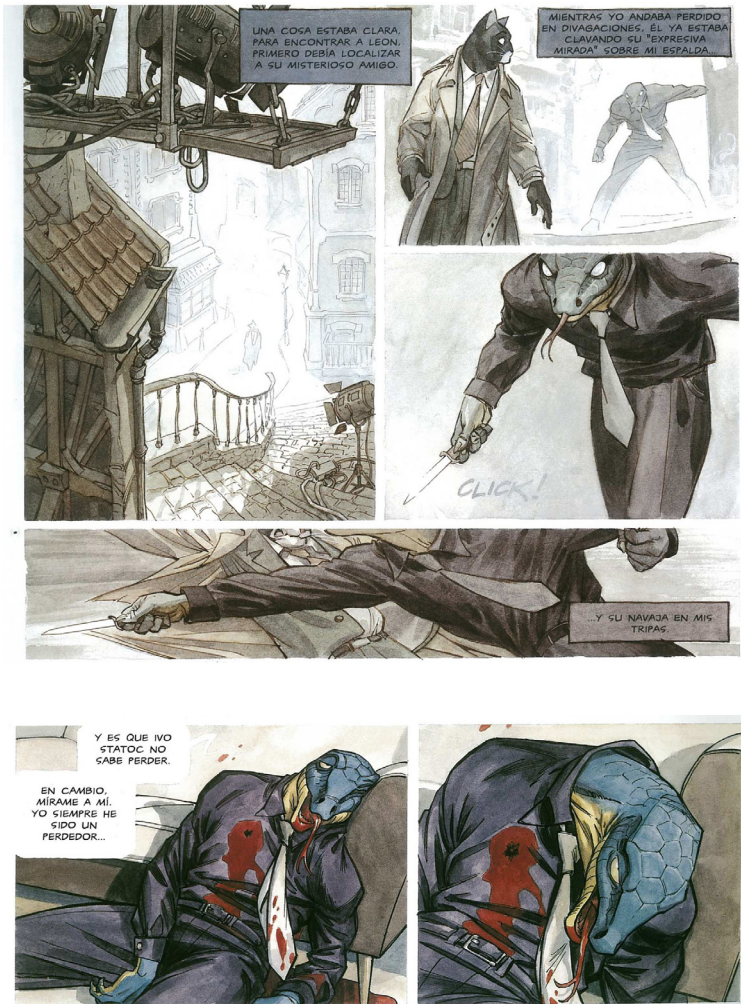


Figure 1. Transformation from threat into victim. *Un lugar entre las sombras* (2000:16, 37). © Spanish Edition published by Norma Editorial

He is feeble and pathetic, physically submissive to white supremacists who bully him in a diner. After he turns on them and assists Blacksad, Cotten appears in his final wordless panel having achieved grace and peace in death; he is shown sitting in the pilot's seat of a jet – just as he had dreamed. Such alterations in the depictions of the various animals contribute significantly to the reader's understanding of the problematic nature of initial assumptions made about characters based on the animal selected and the location and context of their initial appearance. Blacksad himself, while mentioned above as an example of a 'strong' character and whose expressions are indomitable – fierce, or cheekily challenging – has moments of weariness, tenderness, and even joyful rather than ironic humour. It is worth noting, as Adler points out, that Blacksad is in fact a domestic cat, not a large, wild feline (Adler 2011: 2279). This ties in to the function of the hero of the comic being a figure representing justice and, often, the restoration of social order. Alongside the previously described general conservatism of this tendency, the competing ideals of social order presented suggest different ideological underpinnings.

Mooney and Fewell describe this phenomenon in a sample of *Dick Tracy*, concluding in that case that the order represented by the hero is pro-capitalist, as he combats crime that threatens economic divisions (1989: 97). In contrast, Wright finds that the early superheroes of the 1930s were often found 'targeting the forces of corporate greed' in implicit support of the government regulation of the New Deal (2001: 22). Unlike the superhero stories analysed by Wright, however, the answer to corruption and social problems is not necessarily increased oversight from higher government powers. Lovell finds that vigilantism in more recent comics suggests nostalgia for an illusory ideal of justice: a time when the system, if not its local instruments, was for the benefit of all (2002: 348). In this nostalgic vigilantism, justice devolves to the individual since the instruments of the state have failed to protect or avenge the less powerful. Blacksad transgresses the literal law when it is proven to be inadequate and fails the oppressed – such as is the case with the untouchable Ivo Statoc who cannot be subjected to due process for his crimes – although this transgression is not ultimately presented

as uniformly heroic. Despite his appearance as a cat, Blacksad does not represent predatory savagery or restrained danger, but a humane moral code. The *Blacksad* series does not display the hallmarks of a conservative economic message – high respect for private property, for example – but harks back to a nostalgic ideal of protection for the weak.

Apart from suggesting individual character, the animal drawings in *Arctic-Nation* also advance the primary theme of the second album in a way that bears further comparison to *Maus*. As already established, in the *Blacksad* series the selection of animals does not correspond to ethnic or religious belonging but rather expresses personality and suggests, though rarely unambiguously, the characters' morality; race in *Arctic-Nation* is translated directly via colour. Race, therefore, unlike in *Maus*, is a transparently external phenomenon. *Arctic-Nation*'s revelation that the two differently-hued and very differently-circumstanced young women are twin sisters shows colour to be a social illusion, something that people act out on each other rather than something they are by nature. As Orvell describes, in *Maus* Spiegelman explicitly questions the effect and significance of his animal metaphor through the framing narrative about Spiegelman himself drawing the comic and the question of which animal to assign to his French Jewish wife (1992: 124). *Blacksad* does not engage deeply with the metaphor on such a metatextual level. The use of animals for people is not discussed explicitly by the characters, although it is sometimes alluded to in the dialogue for comic or other effect. An example of this minor engagement with the metaphor is the scene shown in figure 2 in which Blacksad remarks that his repulsion towards the rat assisting him is 'instinct', paired with an image of Blacksad-the-cat following the rat down street. Though the animal metaphor is not dissected within the text, characters' readings of each other's visual characteristics (race, social consequence) are nevertheless extremely important to the internal narrative progression of the stories. In *Arctic-Nation*, for example, the different social positions – and ultimately different fates – of the differently-coloured twin sisters makes extremely explicit the injustice of the racial divisions imposed. Power is shown through its human wielders, with equally human and flawed criteria for evaluating and responding to their fellows.

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It is important to point out that the complexity of representation of animality is not nearly as sustained for the relatively few female characters. As mentioned above, almost all adult women are drawn in such a way that their human sexuality and carnality is more prominent than their animal traits, which serves to make the explicit sex scenes in which they figure erotic rather than bestial. This is not surprising, perhaps, given the work's dual roots in pop culture *noir* and mainstream comics, genres both known for their stylised hypermasculinities and femininities. The one important exception is the schoolmistress Miss Gray in *Arctic-Nation*, whose depiction as an angular doe represents a wintry hope of goodness in the otherwise bleak world of racism and injustice. Likewise, little children, female or not, are depicted as exceedingly cute; Guarnido takes full advantage of the big-eyed softness of baby animals, whether he is drawing the missing bear cub girl or the baby seal that Chief Karup interacts with in his role as choirmaster (an interaction which heightens the other characters' – and the reader's – suspicions of paedophilia).

Adler mentions the frequent occurrence in comics of visual stereotypes as an economical method of communicating information to the reader (Adler 2011). Guarnido certainly employs this language of stereotype to efficiently build the *Blacksad* universe – examples include the *femme fatale*, the conservative xenophobe, and the innocent child – however as demonstrated above the traits associated with particular animals and their initial representation in the comics often contributes to unsettling the reader's expectations of the 'natural' order and the relative strength and moral value of individuals in an unjust and unequal world.

3 *Blacksad's* Aesthetics of Public and Private Morality

In addition to animal characterisations, the moral conflicts of each album are suggested via aesthetic choices and the composition and background detail of key scenes. Colours in comics can 'express a

dominant mood' (McCloud 1994: 190). In *Blacksad* colour operates both on the micro level, within each panel and each scene, and on the macro level to create a coherent tone through a whole album. One major device is the use of colours that resonate with the titles and central themes of each album in the series. The predominance of black and grey in *Somewhere within the Shadows* reflects the thematic focus on human weakness, moral compromise, and the urban underworld. *Arctic-Nation*, with its cover portraying snow falling over the skeletons of defunct aircraft and a title which refers to the white supremacist group at the story's centre, uses white (contrasted with black) to enrich the comic's portrayal of race and racism. Rejecting its traditional metaphorical reading, whiteness – of snow or of the skin or fur – does not stand for purity but acts as a temporary concealment of the decay, failure or deceit beneath the surface. In the third and fourth albums of the series, *Red Soul* and *A Silent Hell*, the use of colours continues with the colour red representing communism and the colour blue evoking jazz and the blues.

In addition to the symbolic use of colour, the composition of interactive scenes between characters as well as the background detail are both important to understanding the story and the ways in which we are intended to judge characters' actions. It has become something of a cliché in comics scholarship to compare comics to cinema, and the comparison of the forms has limitations. As both Versaci and Wolk have pointed out, the visual in comics is illustrative not representational, making the process of story construction more transparent to readers (Versaci 2007: 14, Wolk 2007: 118). McCloud notes that the way individual frames come together in cinema is 'involuntary and virtually imperceptible', whereas comics require the engagement of the reader in establishing the pacing and interaction between frames (1994: 68). Visual representation and framing are as necessary for the communication of meaning in comics as in film. In the *noir* tradition, in which mood is so important, comics and film both employ similar tactics.

The interrelationship between setting and narrative in the *Blacksad*

series would be substantially weaker were the former described rather than drawn; Guarnido's exteriors suggest the atmosphere of scenes, the socioeconomic context of the action, and even subtle transformations of mood with an economy language cannot achieve. In *Arctic-Nation* for example it is overcast, snowing or dark night until the bright blue skies of the closing panels when the kidnapped girl is finally happy and free. These panels include virtually the only true colour blue in the entire album. Fried outlines the notable aesthetic influence of Eisner on the representation of the city in contemporary comics (2010). *Shadows*, with its gloom and shade and ordinary citizens peopling the city streets, certainly owes a debt to past iconic cities like Eisner's. By illustrating such a cityscape, Guarnido uses established visual shortcuts to suggest the socioeconomic margins in which the action takes place (see figure 2). The Line in *Arctic-Nation* is not the classic urban noir of *Shadows*, but rather a run-down suburban development originally intended to be the site of new, better lives. In the absence of prosperity, however, The Line has degenerated into a highly stratified and dysfunctional district under plutocratic control. Visually, Guarnido contrasts traces of idyllic nature and the clean order of the wealthy, white neighbourhoods with the ruins of industry and the dilapidated poor, black neighbourhoods (figure 2).

A major *noir* convention upon which *Blacksad* draws is that figures of authority are not to be trusted – the rotten environment in the halls of power corrupts those who wield it, with only outsiders retaining the potential to disrupt the status quo. Background details in interiors suggest much about the values of those who inhabit them to the attentive reader, slowly establishing the competing moral worldviews held by different characters. Blacksad's office in *Shadows* contains traces of the detective's history, the debris of past cases, as well as a general disorder suggesting a certain lack of care arising from solitude (figure 3). He explicitly identifies this material clutter as 'los vestigios de aquel ser civilizado que fui' (2000: 5).⁴ Although his place may feel more a prison than a refuge, it is an indication of his ongoing connection to his past, the investment of his energies in his work, and manifestations of his human empathy.



Figure 2. The noir city. *Un lugar entre las sombras* (2000:24). / Snow over the ruins of industry. *Arctic-Nation* (2003:32). © Spanish Edition published by Norma Editorial



The desk of *Arctic-Nation's* Chief Karup, on the other hand, supports the public image of his role in law enforcement with symbols associated with his office: a U.S. flag, antique pistols mounted on the wall, orderly and clean cabinets and shelves (figure 3). A confederacy sabre is the only background item mentioned explicitly in the text, reinforcing his connection to the white supremacy movement and evoking the history of ideological and racial conflict in the United States and its associated abuses of power. On his extremely neat desk, the inclusion of photos of Karup as scout leader and choirmaster echo his professional position of authority while also foreshadowing a rumour that he is a paedophile. Despite this seeming 'clue', it is *Weekly's* assumption that Karup's much younger wife (who appears in the nearby family photos) is actually the Chief's daughter which is a more instructive hint about the story's central mystery.



Figure 3. Blacksad's office *Un lugar entre las sombras* (2000:5) Chief Karup's office *Arctic-Nation* (2003:11). © Spanish Edition published by Norma Editorial

While his affection for children (with the exception of his own unborn offspring) ultimately seems to be genuine rather than perverse, the details of Karup's office suggest a man for whom the symbols of his position and his associated public profile are more important than the social good to which it should be attached. Personal empathy has been subsumed by ambition, and in a context in which public instruments like law enforcement are associated with corruption, no viable system of public order adequately replaces private morality. Thus, Karup is an empty symbol within a dysfunctional system. In comparison, Smirnov, the police detective in *Shadows*, interacts with Blacksad not at a sterile police desk but in the places he actually carries out his work – crime scenes and lock-up cells. Smirnov acts as an ambiguously moral agent within an immoral and corrupt system.

Adler has also analysed the composition of key scenes in *Arctic-Nation*, noting the importance of the power dynamics suggested by the relative position of different characters within the frame (2011: 2280). Low or weak characters are physically subordinate to more powerful characters. Adler posits that this framing assists in conveying the social consensus of the *Blacksad* universe of a natural hierarchy of power which may be only temporarily upset, and that to be in a weak position is somehow to deserve that position. As I have already argued, however, the initial framing of characters is often something of a red herring. Groensteen, among many others, has theorised that the balance between text and image in comics is variable, and the possible effects of their interplay are many (2007: 71). The art can function as an ironic counterpoint to the written text, for example, rather than reinforcing information that has been given. Where the dialogue or narration demonstrate the point-of-view of a particular character, the art can suggest alternative or more nuanced interpretations of events. McCloud identifies seven types of word/picture combinations (2006: 130), three of which can function to substantially modify an independently meaningful written text: intersecting, in which words and images convey the same meaning, interdependent, in which words and images together convey a meaning beyond what either conveys alone and parallel, in which text and image each have independent,

separate messages.

The predominant rule of the *Blacksad* universe – the caprices of the powerful determine the fate of the weak – is countered by the reader's engagement with the visual representation of the characters and locations and the space opened up by the gutters. The unique interpretive leisure and narrative control that readers of comics have is described by McCloud as 'closure', in which readers are required to form the connections between different panels, between words and text – and between different narrative components – according to their own mode of reading (1994). In *Blacksad*, the interaction between imagery and text 'involves the reader/observer in the process of both solving the kidnapping case as well as revealing the author's silent plea for both tolerance and justice' (Adler 2011: 2280). Adler notes that the explicit theme of *Arctic-Nation* is injustice associated with racism (2011: 2278). I would add that this injustice is understood through the social relationship of race and *power* in the comic, thus extending *Shadows*' exploration of power, impotence, corruption and vengeance. The pictures frequently add complexity to the functioning of power put forward in the written text, be it economic clout, physical might, or the power of state-sanctioned law.

For example, in a scene in *Arctic-Nation*, Blacksad confronts the powerful white tiger mogul Oldsmill at his country club (2003: 20–21). On the first page, Oldsmill is a model of grace and power. In the final panel of that page and on the following page his power is gradually undermined as the visual focus shifts to his weak, inbred son. The focus remains partly on his son as Oldsmill is made to look more and more impotent, drawn from above and eventually at a distance until Blacksad ultimately leaves the scene – and Oldsmill – to their insignificance.

Later, another graphic inversion occurs when Karup is shown in the closing panel of one page, with no text, with the red robes of his race-hate group billowing around him in a classicly 'powerful' comic book stance. On the following page, these robes become the red robes of a victim as Chief Karup, the largest animal present, is

brought low and bloodied by the amassed forces of the lesser, white-clad members of the mob which suspects him as a paedophile (2003: 33-34). Later, the kidnapped girl wears a similar red robe as she plays in the schoolyard with a zebra child (who represents the ultimate animal fusion of black and white). In this last image, the symbolism of the robe is transformed to one of innocence and hope (2003: 54).

Visual iconography can occur more subtly: in *Shadows*, Smirnov the police detective is posed heroically between the noble pillars and lights of the police station entrance while having a crisis of conscience over the morality of concealing Blacksad's extra-legal retributive justice. This image suggests the ongoing impossibility of reconciling ideals of justice to corrupt reality (2000: 47). In as much as the *Blacksad* series is a meditation on injustice in the context of economically determined social power, the purely temporary destabilising capacity of personal vengeance suggested by the bare plot is not the only concept of justice which a reader can carry away. There is ample space – literally and figuratively – for the reader's deductions to inform their moral judgment about the events portrayed.

4 Explicit and Implicit Definitions of Justice in *Blacksad*

In the context of moral concepts of justice, *Blacksad's* debt to *noir* is once again important. As Todorov describes, in literature the core of this subgenre of crime fiction (what he calls 'thrillers') is the 'vulnerable detective', personally involved in the events of the story unlike whodunit detectives who were outside observers (2010: 29). Many comics focus on the external, via dialogue and exposition. Carried over from fiction and film, however, detective comics often have a first person narrator. Adler claims the *Blacksad* series as Holmesian (2011). Neither Blacksad's strong emotional motivation nor his sense of impotence align well with the intellectual curiosity that drives many of Holmes's investigations. Holmes rejects the law because it is neither as capable nor swift as himself; Blacksad's

cynicism suggests a fundamentally dysfunctional rather than simply an inept legal apparatus, but one which he cannot personally remedy. *Blacksad* exists as I have described in an imaginary cultural space – that created by pre-existing popular culture *noir* world-building – and does not reflect a particular national discourse around injustice despite its U.S. historical referents. Instead, the narratives respond to broader social changes in concepts of racial and class equality, employing the tropes of a mid-twentieth century genre but suggesting the moral judgments of the twenty-first. Gociol describes the traditional function of the detective narrative as exploring ‘the vices and ambitions of a capitalist society, where money and the hunger for power are the forces directing human relationships, as well as the crimes that spring from marginalization and injustice’ (2005: 8). *Blacksad* references a bygone era, but is published into a world where capitalist plutocracy is near-global. Readers might not be living with blatant racial segregation or such a visible alternative economy of organised crime, but examples of wealth bringing power and the resulting corruption are never far away.

As previously mentioned, in *Shadows* the policeman Smirnov responds to the corruption above by compromising his personal ethics in order to cover up *Blacksad*’s vigilante justice. Smirnov comments: ‘me gusta imaginar un mundo justo, en el que hasta los poderosos paguen sus culpas ... en el fondo, soy un ingenuo’ (2000: 31).⁵ Murder does not fit within Smirnov’s personal morality, but his disillusionment with the law is such that he chooses to compromise that morality to conceal a murder, even though the moral compromise itself also fails to satisfy his sense of justice. In *Arctic-Nation*, the white sister Jezabel marries her father in order to plot against him, engaging in an extreme personal quest and staging the kidnapping of her niece in order to enact a form of justice for her abandoned mother, a goal to which she effectively sacrifices her whole self – and involuntarily sacrifices the life of her sister. Alternative paths to justice are as fallible as the corrupt law, leading readers to believe that vigilantism and revenge plots are not the answer either. While *Blacksad* himself is portrayed as a consistently sympathetic hero, transgression of the

law for the sake of alternative ideals of justice is not an uncomplicated good within the moral universe of the comic. Bainbridge has identified this complexity in the contemporary superhero genre as well:

As the superhero genre develops the black and white distinction between heroes and villains is eroded, the genre throws into question ideas of law and justice, differences between morality and law and evil and illegality (where actions can be good but illegal and legal but evil). (Bainbridge 2007: 461)

The same message is echoed by Wolk, who believes the best comics 'address the question of means and ends and where they intersect with violence and history and the notion of what constitutes moral action' (2007: 100). The distinctions between right and wrong do not follow the strict rule of law, but individual moral judgment does not provide a sufficiently robust alternative barometer of justice.

The climactic confrontation between Blacksad and Statoc in *Shadows* also makes explicit two contrasting concepts of justice. Statoc simultaneously believes that everything is negotiable for the right price and that Blacksad's own illusions of morality will prevent him from carrying out a revenge murder. Blacksad states that Statoc's concept of justice is wrong and that money is not powerful enough to influence true justice (2000: 42-3). In *Arctic-Nation*, Karup explains his own concept of justice and the social order, which favours maintaining social hierarchy as a natural expression of the merits of each individual (2003: 11). Karup's worldview is a more socially acceptable costume for the more direct philosophy expressed by the outright villain, Ivo Statoc: the wealthy and powerful are protected and can bend the fates of others to their will. If the law responds to the personal interests of the powerful and is subverted in its application by its agents, then justice might similarly be taken into individual hands, but the moral qualms of Smirnov and the unhappy resolution for Jezebel (and even more so for her sister Dinah) erode the viability of vigilantism as an alternative.

Conclusion

Justice is a broad concept which can be useful for examining inequality and power in many different kinds of cultural products. Comics have consistently engaged with ideas of justice throughout their history, most explicitly in the representation of crime and crime fighting. Comics also contribute to the formation of discourses around the legitimacy and function of the law in relation to abstract ideals of equality, transgression and retribution.

The *Blacksad* series of comics functions in an intertextual popular culture metaspace dealing more with the existing narratives of justice in *noir* genres across different media rather than specific real-world instances of abuse of power. The fundamental metaphor of animal anthropomorphism is a tool the artist uses to establish hierarchies and power relationships. However, the evolving treatment of the different animal natures destabilises these hierarchies so it becomes evident that they are artificial constructs rather than a natural order.

The hierarchical inequalities so naturalised *within* the universe are rendered profoundly unnatural for readers interpreting it from outside that universe. Indeed, the third volume, *Red Soul*, rather than just exploring socioeconomic and racial divisions explicitly brings ideology – communism and the red panic – into the equation, offering fertile material for further analysis. The first volume in this engaging series, however, closes on a dark note from Blacksad regarding the nature of power: ‘Éste habría de ser mi mundo, una jungla donde el grande se come al chico, donde las personas se comportan como animales. Me había sumergido en el lado más sombrío de la vida...’ (2000: 46).⁶

Despite that, the laws of the jungle do not always apply. The weak find defenders or strategies of resistance to these pseudo-natural imbalances of power. However, there is no easy dichotomy between the rule of the strong and the resistance of the weak. The framing and details of key scenes in the series serve to suggest a variety of different versions of individual morality in relation to social order as held by the characters themselves. The conflict between these differing interpretations of justice, such as justice as vengeance, justice as legal

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instrument and justice as unattainable ideal, remains at least somewhat unresolved.

The comics trope of the failure of the law as a justification for vigilantism is undermined through the narratives, and while individuals are shown to have some capacity to undermine or unsettle social hierarchies, the means and consequences of such actions are not portrayed as an unalloyed good. *Blacksad*, whilst employing many of the most stereotypical elements of the *noir* detective story, offers an ambivalent reframing of the genre's classic narrative of the individual *versus* the corruption of wealth and power.

Notes

- 1 The papers collected in *Pulp demons* (Lent ed 1999) demonstrate how Wertham-esque thinking was not merely a function of a particular sociohistorical moment in North America, but a more generalised response to the popularity of comics in a number of countries.
- 2 ‘creates suffocating atmospheres in which fear, the lack of justice, the corruption of power and insecurity predominate over crime.’ (*All translations my own*).
- 3 ‘has acted as a spur to always go further in a perpetual thirst for renovation that allows it, even in the long shadow of the masters, to begin always from scratch’
- 4 ‘the vestiges of that civilised being I used to be.’
- 5 ‘I like to imagine a just world, in which even the powerful pay for their sins... I’m naive at heart.’
- 6 ‘This would be my world, a jungle where big eats small, where people behave like animals. I had sunk into the shadowy side of life...’

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