
Evie Kendal

Originally written in 1975 by Argentine novelist and essayist Julio Cortázar, the half-novella, half-graphic novel *Fantomas versus the multinational vampires* has now been translated into English for the first time. The text is accompanied by an afterword by translator David Kurnick and includes an appendix containing excerpts from the Second Russell Tribunal, a.k.a. the International War Crimes Tribunal (1973-1975), of which Cortázar was a member. The tribunal was tasked with investigating human rights violations in Latin America, particularly against the people of Brazil, Chile and Argentina. It is following his experiences on this tribunal that Cortázar begins his narration in *Fantomas*.

The narrator—proclaiming to be the author himself, although rarely referred to as such—opens the story by recounting the difficult work of listening to the testimonies of persecuted exiles at the tribunal. Not wishing to return home yet, he lingers in the streets of Brussels observing the Latin American influences in the city and appreciating the beauty of the Belgian women. Eventually approaching the train station and seeking something to read for the journey back to Paris, the narrator is exasperated when all the kiosk has in stock are “Mexican publications” (10). Resigning himself to the embarrassment of reading a “little garishly colored magazine” while other
travellers are perusing local newspapers, the narrator nevertheless soon becomes enthralled in the comic strip about FANTOMAS, *the Elegant Menace* (13-4). Kur nick notes in his afterword that at the time Cortázar was writing, the real Fantomas comic series had just released issue 201, which featured a secret society of bibliophobic book-burners, and served as inspiration for Cortázar’s decision to publicise the verdict of the tribunal through the medium of a graphic novel.

Soon the parallels between the fantasy world of the comic and the grim reality of the tribunal start to become clear: while the hero Fantomas is given the awesome responsibility of saving “the world’s culture” by preventing works of great literature from continuing to disappear inexplicably from library archives, so the members of the tribunal were given the similarly impossible task of retrospectively protecting citizens from despots and multinational companies intent on “economic plunder and political domination” (19) through passing down a judgment “no existing body would ever enforce” (21). When describing the experience of reading, the narrator relates a craving for the escapism of the comic, while simultaneously accepting the impossibility of ever escaping the horrors of the tortures he heard described over the eight days of the tribunal. As he reflects on this, the violence against cultural artefacts in the comic escalates with libraries now burning down rather than simply being plundered. Soon the distinction between the “real” world and that of the comic starts to break down entirely, with the narrator and his literary associates becoming characters in the story. The comic panels in Cortázar’s story are reproductions of the original comic strip by Gonzalo Martré and Víctor Cruz Mota, whose trademark use of real-life characters led to their inclusion of Cortázar: art imitating art imitating life.

The meta-fictional elements of Fantomas begin with the aforementioned crossing over of characters from the framing narrative to the comic narrative, but soon progress to include self-reflexive commentary on the “book-ness” of the text itself. Real-life characters direct their fictional counterparts to refer to the appendix provided in the book, while the narrator breaks the fourth wall to address the reader. After Gabriel García Márquez is introduced as one of Fantomas’ sources on page 50, the text begins to acquire a magic realism reminiscent of Márquez’s literary style. Together the language and artwork of Fantomas create a surreal reading experience, that while often confusing in terms of narrative plot, contains a clear indictment against the greed and corruption of Western consumerist culture that led to so much suffering during the repression of 1970s Latin America.