Arturo Herrera's Fabulous Monsters

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Every evening, Mrs. Darling of James Barrie's *Peter Pan* engages in the supremely maternal activity of tidying up her children's minds. An orthodox Freudian *avant la lettre*, she polices the consciousness of the children and engages the process of repression to banish naughty thoughts and evil passions.

> It is the nightly custom of every good mother after her children are asleep to rummage in their minds and put things straight for next morning, repacking into their proper places the many articles that have wandered during the day. If you could keep awake (but of course you can't) you would see your own mother doing this, and you would find it interesting to watch her. It is quite like tidying up drawers. You would see her on her knees, I expect, lingering humorously over some of your contents. . . When you wake in the morning, the naughtiness and evil passions with which you went to bed have been folded up small and placed at the bottom of your mind; and on the top, beautifully aired, are spread out your prettier thoughts, ready for you to put on.[1]

Adults are forever trying to tidy up after children, to secure order, beauty, and purity where there is anarchy, clutter, and dirt. But in our passionate desire to civilize the child and to tame its unruly urges, we seldom stop to consider the mind of the child as a source of undomesticated inventive energy. Entry into the world of law, order, sublimation, and subordination has always implied loss (a fall from grace, loss of innocence, expulsion from paradise), yet we rarely make the effort to scrutinize the disorderly space of the child's imagination without simultaneously undertaking the effort to clean it up.

Walter Benjamin, who loathed the tidy false consciousness of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and would have especially detested Mrs. Darling's efforts, made it a life project to reclaim the "messiness" of the child's imagination and to validate its creative energy, cognitive power, and revolutionary vector. By contrast to Barrie's Mrs. Darling, he believed that the child's bureau drawers (in this case the *real* bureau drawers rather than the metaphorical ones of the mind) must become "arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt." For Benjamin, "'to tidy up' would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tin foil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields."[2] The child invests the found objects of everyday life with a symbolic value that stands in no relation whatsoever to bourgeois use-value. More important, the treasures hoarded in drawers are randomly drawn together to constitute a unique collection that serves as the point of departure for engaging in play, in an associative game where the child brings the power of imagination to bear on the world of material and matter.

Cultural debris, without monetary worth and lacking use-value, fascinates children. Children take what has been discarded and, as Benjamin further observes, "bring together, in the artifacts produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new intuitive relationship."[3] In a creative act of mimesis, the child establishes startling new relationships and

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1. J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan* (New York: Signet, 1987), PP. 5–6.
2. "One Way Street," in Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), P. 74.
3. Ibid., P. 53.

fosters a cognitive mode that has not hardened into the predictable paths of adult thinking. Through the art of improvisation, the unforeseen materializes, and the child, rather than expressing itself through things, expresses things through itself.[4]

"Stay within the lines!" is one of the first imperatives issued to children testing their creative power with crayons and coloring books, those first artistic tools put into children's hands. After looking at Arturo Herrera's collages, it is with more than a touch of mortification that parents will recall the intense pride felt while observing the growing compliance of a child with that imperative. A glance at Herrera's collages reveals just why it is so difficult for parents to part with those early coloring books, the ones that once seemed to reflect lack of skill and coordination but now suddenly reveal creative impulses, unimpeded by the rule dictated by adults.

To look at Herrera's collages is to open a door into our childhood memories, to recall how the starkly outlined figures of coloring books invited us to engage with them by applying the crayon and trying to stay within the lines, connect the dots, or cut along the lines. But Herrera does not merely try to invoke nostalgia for the innocent pleasures of childhood. What we see in the collages is also the transgressive energy of the adult artist at work, engaged in an act of creative improvisation that releases new possibilities as it plays with cultural debris. There is Snow White, her signature coiffure superimposed on one of those mice (from Disney's *Cinderella*?), with Peter Rabbit superimposed, in turn, on her neck. Is she part of the bait or has she too been caught in the trap? Is that Thumper superimposed on a bird's nest resting on branches that look eerily like drumsticks? What is in that hollow log being inspected by a duck outfitted in a sailor suit and monitored by the ghostly presence of a colossal Beatrix Potter rabbit? Who can fail to be disturbed by the disorderly force of these scenes, by their resolute resistance to romanticizing the image repertoire of childhood memories and by their insistence on making a mess of even that tidiest of Disney's cinematic creations: Snow White?

While the transgressive energy of Herrera's collages is of a different order from that of the child, it uncannily captures both the disruptive and creative forces that we have all witnessed in children at play. "If they are fit and well," the poet Paul Valéry observed, "children are absolute *monsters* of activity. . . tearing up, breaking up, building, they're always at it."[5] Rather than accepting the given meaning of things and embracing the directives issued by adults for constructive behavior, the "fit and well" child will lay hold of objects, tear them apart, dismantle them, and put them in new, unexpected relationships and contexts. For that child, the logic of an axe as an extension of Snow White's arm is self-evident, the smile of Goofy that constitutes a boy's torso remains splendidly unproblematic, and the airplane propeller emerging from Geppetto's neck is quite anatomically correct.

Nothing is what it seems to be in Herrera's collages. The constituent elements of each collage may be embedded in our childhood memories, but they are de-familiarized in a manner that renders them disturbingly uncanny. Unlike Holbein's *Ambassadors*, a painting that undermines what it displays (the notion of wordly wealth as plenitude) by "staining" the canvas with a skull, Herrera's work subverts as it displays, scattering stains in every corner of each work. Nothing fits and virtually everything "sticks out" from the surface to create what Slavoj Zizek has called phallic details, arresting visual elements that unsettle the entire composition.[6] These suspicious details challenge our interpretive faculties, turning us into detectives confronted with one sinister scene

4. On this point, see Hans-Thies Lehmann, "An Interrupted Performance: On Walter Benjamin's Idea of Children's Theatre," in *"With the Sharpened Axe of Reason": Approaches to Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gerhard Fischer (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p. 189.

5. Paul Valéry, *Idee Fixe*, trans. David Paul (New York: Pantheon, 1965), p. 36.

6. Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991), p. 91.

after another. We are compelled to study traces, to decipher codes, to unravel mysteries, to discover and uncover meaning at the site of each collage's anarchic violence.

In Herrera's collages, phallic details not only run riot, they are also literalized in a startling way. The collages may represent the work of a bricoleur with the inventive genius of the child's mind, but they are, as even a cursory look reveals, emphatically adult in their representational matter. A lackluster coloring book Santa Claus faces a pert housewife, apron tied with a perfect bow, shapely legs shod in spikey high heels. Superimposed on the two, connecting them in a weirdly eroticized way, appears the proboscis of Dumbo, topped by a two-tone phallic shape pointed toward a doughnut-shaped blue streak. A coloring book picture with the caption "This Sly Goat Finds a Yo-Yo Chewy" positions a monumental blue phallic shape on the goat's buttocks, superimposes Dumbo's trunk on the phallus, and balances a headless cartoon boy between the elephant's trunks and Huey's webbed feet. We are clearly no longer in the realm of child's play.

And yet everywhere we see an uncanny juxtaposition of innocence and experience, a conjunction of naive wonder with cynical wisdom that disables our interpretive confidence even as its redoubles our visual efforts. Who can forget the chipper goodwill of Snow White's woodland friends, who wash the dishes, fold the linen, and sweep the floor of that messiest of cinematic households known as the cottage of the seven dwarfs? Herrera reproduces their wide-eyed innocence, but this time not in the presence of Snow White but in the face of a red screen, pulsing with sexual energy and vitality. Confronted with one of those visual enigmas in which we see either figure or ground (rabbit or duck) but never both at the same time, we move back and forth with unnerving facility between those unaffected woodland creatures—suddenly invested with sly sexual precocity—and that throbbing red screen—suddenly endowed with the purity of an artless abstraction. The same effect can be found in a collage displaying the tip of Goofy's nose, sailing through the waters. At once innocent and obscene, it pulsates with erotic energy yet also seems quietly surreal.

It was Freud who reminded us that a disposition to "perversions of every kind" is a "general and fundamental human characteristic." Because children have not yet cultivated a sense of shame, disgust, and morality, they are more inclined to indulge the polymorphous perversity that is "innately present" in all of us.[7] In this sense, then, Herrera's collages can be seen, despite their appeal to adult sensibilities, as resolutely rooted in the world of childhood experience, playfully representing the sensuality of the material world yet unencumbered by the sense of shame that infects visual pleasure with a feeling of disgust.

If Herrera harnesses both the messy subversive energy of the child and the shameless erotic élan of the child-like adult to unsettle the images in our collective cultural archive, he also self-consciously aligns himself with artistic practices that aim to deform and exaggerate the real rather than to reproduce it. Embracing the grotesque realism endorsed by the Russian critic Mikhal Bakhtin, Herrera de-centers bodies, representing them as inflated, distorted, collapsed, fragmented, bulging, swollen, and protruding. What is at stake in grotesque realism is not the classical image of the self-contained, impermeable, unblemished, and perfected human body, but an image of the "impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit,' reason)."[8] One look at Herrera's purple hippopotamus, missing its hind legs but with a second, white cartoon mask on its snout, and we know that we are in the realm of the carnivalesque, a world turned not only upside down but also inside out and backwards.

7. Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1962), PP. 87–88.

8. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), P. 9.

Among the most arresting of all the collages is the one displaying a knee encased in the waist of a boy's half-torso, with legs marching across the composition. That conflation of body parts is superimposed on an elongated phallic shape, a reminder that that knee may indeed be what we thought it was in the first place. In another collage, a baker is engulfed by a hybrid, indeterminate body mass of gray, blue, pink, and white, criss-crossed by brown rope. Is this Dumbo or his mother, trussed by the cords of captors? The captive may not be able to topple the baker, but engulfs him nonetheless. As we move from the orderly regularity of the checkerboard linoleum floor and from the loaves of bread neatly lining the baker's shelves to the messy scandal of the gargantuan figures in embrace and to the discolored pieces of scotch tape masking the tears on the page, it becomes impossible to find a point of orientation. The compositional field is completely decentered, creating in the viewer a perpetual hermeneutic crisis.

Who can look at Grumpy, ensconced in the fragment of an armchair, without feeling similarly unsettled, this time by the conflation of the simulated and the real? The defiant gaze on the dwarf's face is splendidly overdetermined: he is at once uncomfortable, irritated, and ill at ease, anxiously trapped in the real comforts of a false home. A fragment torn from the cultural imaginary, Grumpy has become more material and authentic than the armchair displaying him. Like Disneyland, which, to cite Jean Baudrillard, is presented as imaginary, "in order to make us believe that the rest is real," Grumpy, a figure torn out of the image repertoire of contemporary culture, represents an imaginary that has become our reality.[9] "Consider the United States," Roland Barthes entreats us, "where everything is transformed into images: only images exist and are produced and consumed."[10] Grumpy, endowed with an astonishing degree of affective energy, has become a part of our reality, endowing us with all the discomfort written across his face.

Like the cartoon characters that invade reality in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* Herrera's collages use the cultural imaginary to make their way into our consciousness, turning the surreal into the real. In one of the collages, a figure in a white coat appears stunned by the sight of something that is missing from the unframed page on which he appears. Only a shadow cast on the white coat gives body to that terrifying presence outside the collage. We experience the same kind of shock when the surreal imprints its shadow on our bodies. Perhaps the threat of the real is as terrifying for this surreal figure as the terror of the surreal is for us, the real witnesses to his anguish.

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, the now mythical Alice is presented to the unicorn as an exotic creature:

> "What—is—this?" he said at last.
> "This is a child!" Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her. . . .
> "We only found it today. It's as large as life, and twice as natural!"
> "I always thought they were fabulous monsters!" said the Unicorn.[11]

Larger than life and twice as real, the brain children of Herrera's imagination introduce us to fabulous monsters that relentlessly inspire both wonder and dread. •

9. Jean Baudrillard, "From *Simulations*," in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), P. 205.

10. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), P. 118.

11. Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, ed. Donald J. Gray, 2ND ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), P. 175.