

The Mock Down: Comics and a History of Trust

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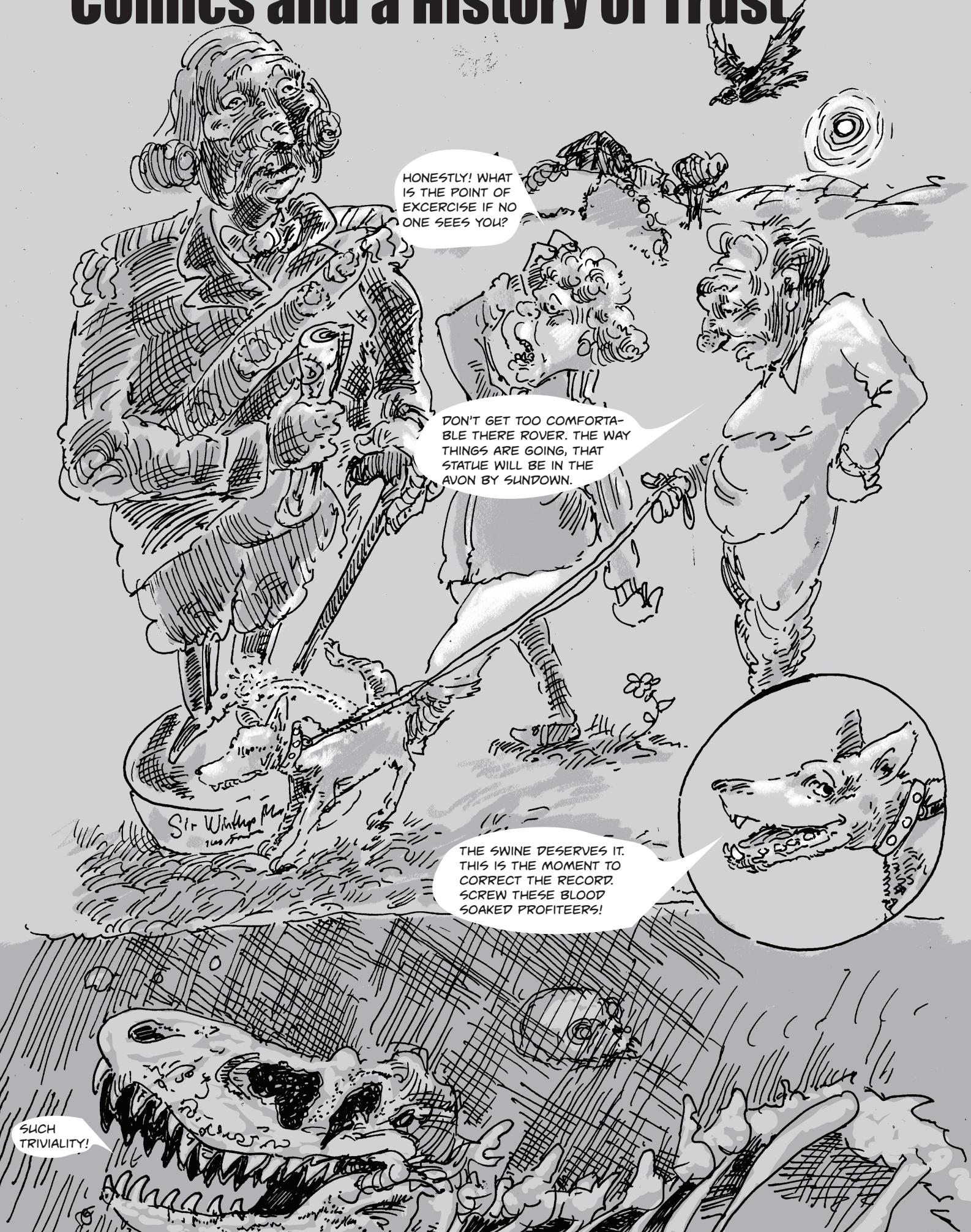
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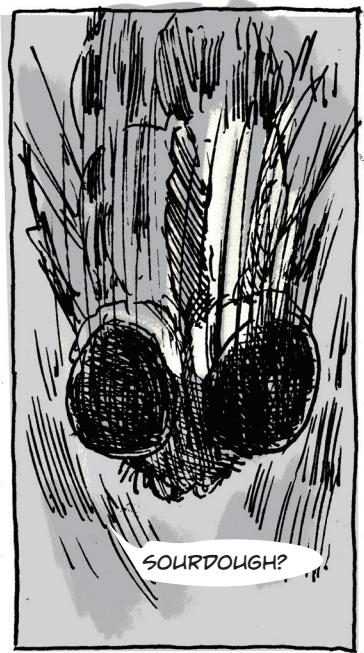
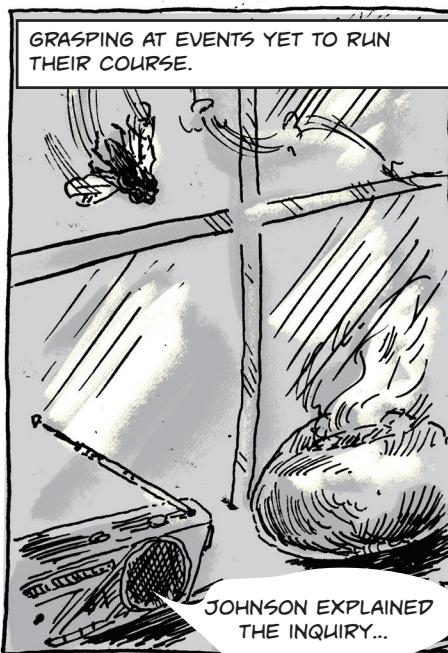
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Abstract

Taking as a starting point recent political and cultural debates surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-), this graphic research paper explores questions of “trust” as they have appeared in a variety of historical contexts. The concept of trust is a familiar one to psychologists, behavioural economists and political scientists, who have considered its implications within a variety of individual, group and national settings, including in relation to the pandemic. However, as the historian Geoffrey Hosking (2014) has observed (and his points seem to us to remain valid today), there are fewer explicit *histories of trust*, or efforts to explore the ways in which configurations of trust ebb, flow and/or break across specific historical periods. Rather than attempt any singular expansive history, we are concerned, here, with making a case for the value of practice research and, especially, comics-based research, as a useful method through which to interrogate trust and the various ideas and conflicts that it potentially evokes. As a medium that many scholars argue is especially given to metacommentary – on its own status as a constructed/invented representation, on its “factual” limitations, on the omissions lurking beyond its panels – the comic offers an array of formal and stylistic devices pertinent to those seeking to analyse trust and attendant issues of truth, fabrication, conspiracy and lies. Our article experiments with such devices, suggesting ways in which they allow for the development of visual symmetries, politically charged metaphors and historical connections that offer fresh perspective on, or “a different way of looking” at, this timely phenomenon. Engaging with philosophical writings on the nature of history, our article also contributes to wider debates on the value of creative practice as a form of historical and historiographical research. We provide at the end of the comic extensive explanatory notes and an introduction to our approach, but invite readers to engage with the images and text in ways that allows them to uncover their own interpretations, connections and meanings.

The Mock Down: Comics and a History of Trust





A USABLE PAST. HISTORY DRAGGED FROM THE ABSTRACT REALM; EMBEDDED WITHIN THE EVERYDAY VALUES, IDEOLOGIES, ACTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETIES.

BRAVO!

MAXIMISE THAT
LOCKDOWN
TIME! FEEL THE
BURN! WITNESS
THE FITNESS!

LOOK AT ME,
MARGE. I'M
SIDE-HUSTLING!

THAT'S NICE,
DEAR.

WILL YOU
SHUT UP!

THE PRACTICAL PAST IS ALSO A SELF-CONSCIOUS FORM OF HISTORY-TELLING, ONE WHICH EXPLICITLY ALLUDES TO ITS STATUS AS AN IMAGINATIVE RECONSTRUCTION.

TUT TUT...

I'M JUST BEING
PRACTICAL

AS MANY COMICS SCHOLARS HAVE ARGUED, THE
MEDIUM IS UNIQUELY SUITED TO SUCH HISTORIES.

DON'T PANIC.

CLOSED

LIE
VIRUS

MORE SPECIFICALLY, THIS COMIC IS ABOUT TRUST

TRUST! NOW THERE'S
AN OLD-FASHIONED
WORD

PATIENT ZERO.

WHEN ALL THIS STARTED,
WE TRUSTED IN HISTORY
FOR ANSWERS

FLU
SARS
TUB

WAYS OF SITUATING,
OF UNDERSTANDING,
THIS CATASTROPHE.
WE INSPECTED BODIES
LIKE THEY WERE CRIME
SCENES.

THE HISTORIAN GEOFFREY HOSKING ARGUES THAT
MOST STUDIES OF "TRUST" LACK A HISTORICAL
DIMENSION.

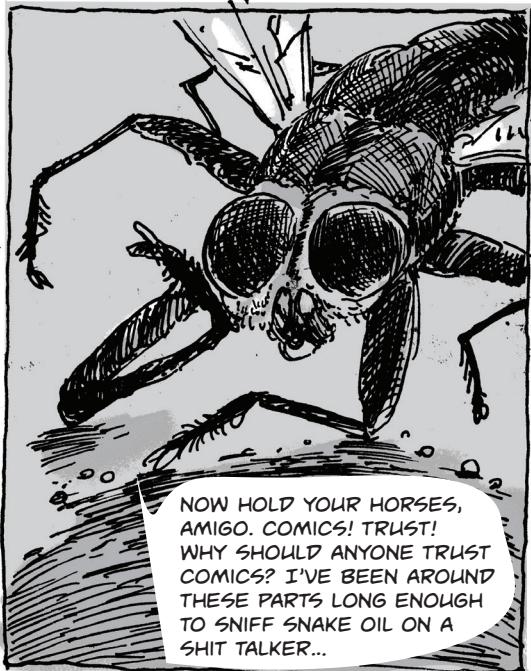
WE CARRIED THE WEIGHT OF
HISTORY -- TOO HEAVY WITH
EXPECTATION, TOO LIGHT WITH
RESULTS.

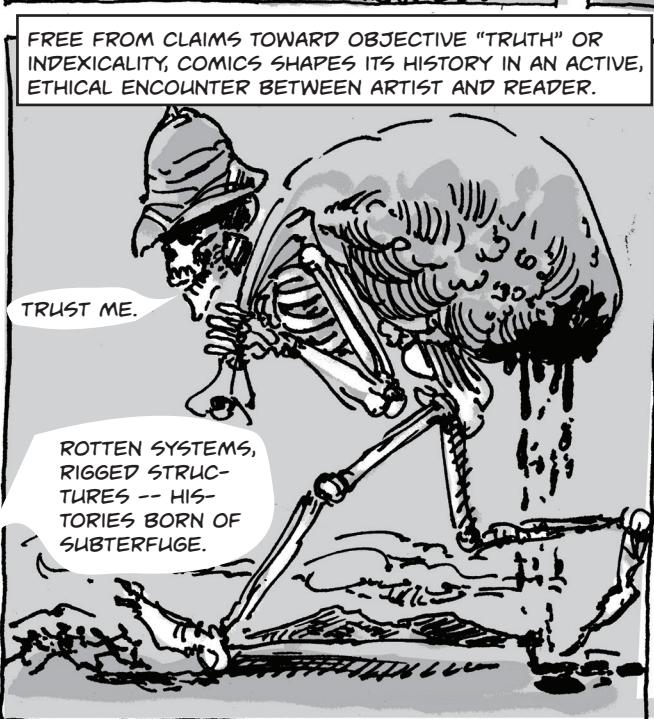
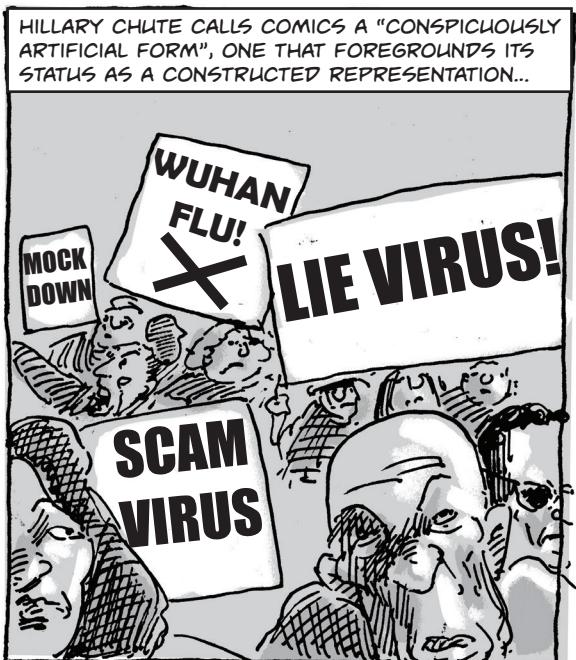
COMICS, WE ARGUE, IS AN EFFECTIVE MEDIUM
FOR EXPLORING QUESTIONS OF TRUST (AND DIS-
TRUST) -- THEIR HISTORICAL IMPACT AND ENDUR-
ING LEGACY.

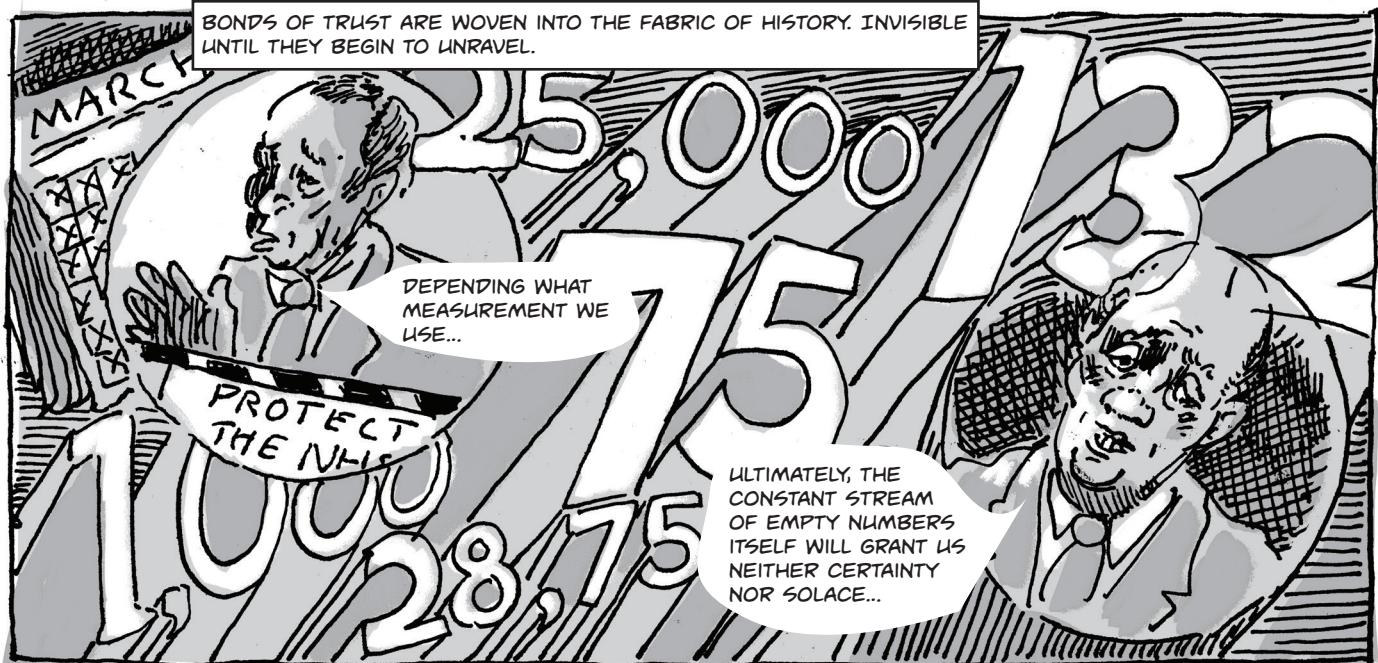
AND SUGGESTS THAT ANALYSING "CON-
FIGURATIONS OF TRUST" -- WHETH-
ER THAT BE TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS
OR INDIVIDUALS -- CAN ILLUMINATE
POLITICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND POWER
DYNAMICS WITHIN A SOCIETY.

I WAS TOO CLOSE.
UNAWARE THAT,
OUTSIDE, THE BONDS
HAD BROKEN.

IT WAS THE WELL
FROM WHICH ALL
ELSE BECAME CON-
TAMINATED. IT WAS
THE START.







MEANWHILE... BACK AT HISTORY-COMIC HQ

"WHAT LINGERS MOST IN MY MEMORY OF CHERNOBYL IS LIFE AFTERWARDS...THE LANDSCAPES WITHOUT PEOPLE. THE ROADS LEADING NOWHERE. THE CABLES LEADING NOWHERE. YOU FIND YOURSELF WONDERING JUST WHAT THIS IS. THE PAST OR THE FUTURE" (SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH).

A RECKONING, HUH?

THAT SOUNDS NICE,
BUT HOW DO WE
RECKON WITH
IMAGES?

CAN WE TRUST THEM?

DO THEY OPEN DOORS
OR CONSTRUCT
BARRIERS?

ARE THEY TOOLS OF
REVOLUTION, OR
SYMBOLS OF A VISUAL
CULTURE PRE-ORDAINED?

THEMES FOUND IN PHOTOGRAPHS DOCUMENTING SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME (SARS) AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC... THE ISOLATED, ANONYMOUS URBAN FIGURE IN A LANDSCAPE OF EPIDEMIOLOGICAL DANGERS; THE HAUNTED QUALITY OF EMPTY ZONES OF TRANSIT AND TOURISM" (DAVID SERLIN).

"IN RECENT YEARS THE BODY HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT SUBJECTS OF PARANOID FANTASIES"
(PETER KNIGHT).

WHY SHOULD ANYONE TRUST US?

WHO TO BELIEVE WHEN, ALL AROUND, RAGES A FEVERISH FIGHT FOR CONTROL OF THE RECENT PAST.



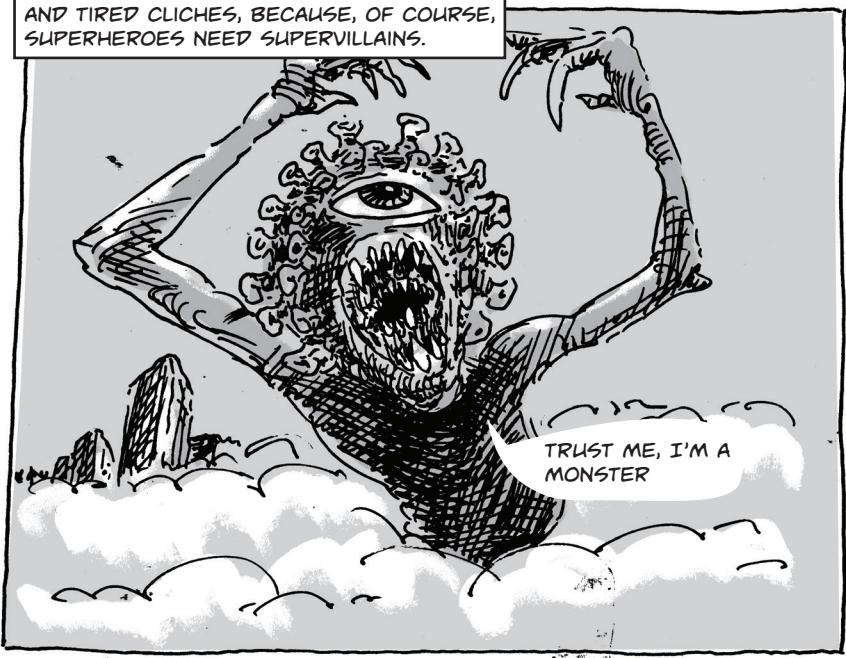
A COOKING OF THE HISTORY BOOKS



A FRANTIC GRABBING AT AGE OLD FEARS, DIVISIONS



AND TIRED CLICHES, BECAUSE, OF COURSE, SUPERHEROES NEED SUPERVILLAINS.



DUNKIRK SPIRIT

SEE HOW THIS BEAST QUIVERS AT MY CHURCHILLIAN MAGNIFOLENCE.

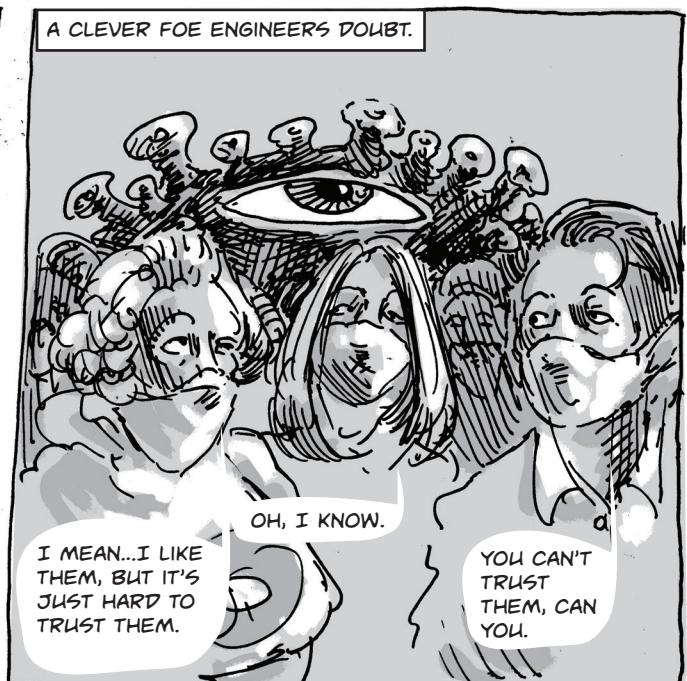


A CLEVER FOE ENGINEERS DOUBT.

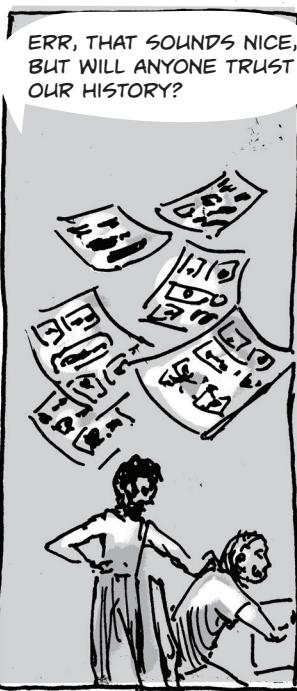
I MEAN...I LIKE THEM, BUT IT'S JUST HARD TO TRUST THEM.

OH, I KNOW.

YOU CAN'T TRUST THEM, CAN YOU.



BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD.





Introductory Notes

These introductory notes discuss the approaches and concepts with which we worked while developing this comic. Influenced by recent scholarship on “comics-based research” our aim was to utilise the formal and stylistic “affordances” (Kuttner *et al.*, 2021) of comics to explore and interrogate historical narratives that gained prominence in and around the Covid-19 pandemic. In line with this special issue’s focus on fake news and disinformation, we pay particular attention to the idea of “trust” – its importance to a variety of discourses pertaining to public health, politics, history and collective memory. Our practice is informed by philosophical writing on historiography and comics-as-history and the notes below provide an explanation of our creative decisions, an argument for our original contribution and a roadmap of the methods adopted.

Page 2. “History dragged from the abstract realm...” White (2014, pp. 9-10). Philosophical debates about the nature of history have raged for many years and the likes of Hayden White (1973, 1988), Linda Hutcheon (1986), Robert A. Rosenstone (1988, 2016), Keith Jenkins (1991) and Alun Munslow (2010) have been at the forefront of postmodernist efforts to critique traditional claims to “objectivity” and explore history as a construction, forged out of techniques – narrative, character, symbolism, metaphor – that one associates with the creative arts. While such works are oft cited in academic analyses of visual histories, we suggest they are particularly useful for practice researchers for the very fact that arts practice enables one to reclaim, rethink, iterate and invert the various formal and stylistic devices identified by these scholars. Given White *et al.*’s demand for a broader range of histories – which diverge from traditional text-based linear narratives – the comic-as-journal-article would seem to us an ideal channel through which to put these ideas into practice. Of course, as the growing body of scholarship concerned with comics-based research attests (see for example, Kuttner *et al.*, 2018, 2021; McNichol and Wysocki (2019), Ford (2022), Moretti (2023)), comics enjoy increased legitimacy as a research method and tool. Journals such as *The Comics Grid* and *Rethinking History* have provided a forum for publishing such work. But academic research articles and/or books that take the form of comics remain reasonably rare. See, for examples: Walker (2003), Sousanis (2015), Wysocki (2018), Netter and Gruner (2017); Gruner, Netter and Pooley (2025). As a piece of creative history, our comic offers a new perspective on the entanglement of trust, politics and history during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a contribution to debates on arts-based research, its insistence on engaging simultaneously with historical narratives and *the process of constructing these historical narratives* highlights new potential avenues of enquiry for the academic comics maker.

Page 2. “As many comics scholars have argued...” There is a long-established and rich tradition of historical comics studies, stretching back to Joseph Witek’s pioneering *Comics and History* (1989). Recent years have seen a wealth of studies concerned with the comic (and “graphic novel”) as a

particularly fertile space for inventive histories, possessing within their form the potential to experiment with time and space, mix media, focus on lesser-known stories absent from archives, emotionalise history and self-consciously deconstruct stereotypes. See, for example, Witek (1989), Buhle (2007), Chute (2010, 2016), Baetens and Frey (2015, pp. 217-245), Frey (2017, pp. 80-96), Cutter and Schlund Vials (2018), Santos (2019). Our aim with this work is to build upon the above scholars, and to make a case for how comics could serve as useful, flexible vehicles through which to explore more abstract historical concepts, feelings and attitudes. As discussed further below, we exemplify how such an approach can work through a multimodal analysis of “trust”.

Page 3. “The historian Geoffrey Hosking argues...” Hosking (2014, pp. 4-5). See also Hosking (2006, pp. 95-115). There is a vast literature within the fields of political science, psychology and behavioural economics on public trust of individuals and institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. See, for example, Davies *et al* (2021, pp. 1-9); Boehm *et al* (2023, pp. 1155-1162); Devine *et al* (2024, pp. 657-679). Such works provide detailed analysis of shifting trends in terms of trust (in governments and other official institutions) within various national contexts as well as examining the extent to which trust impacted the status of public figures, health authorities and the efficacy of governmental policies. Our article draws on insights in this work, while situating debates on trust within wider historical narratives and visual discourses. In doing so, it explores the potential of comics to explore a culture where questions of trust and distrust have loomed (and continue to loom) large. Comics’ oft-noted capacity for visual juxtapositions, complex (or fragmented) sequential narratives, “multimodal” perspectives and self-conscious deconstruction offer, we argue, rich potential to interrogate the ambiguous and invisible concept of trust – its historical and contemporary implications. On the complex formal and stylistic devices available to comics’ makers, see, for example, McCloud (1993), Groensteen (2007), Smolderen (2014).

Page 3. “And suggests that analysing ‘configurations of trust’...” Hosking (2014, pp. 22). We were particularly drawn to Hosking’s points regarding the three ways in which trust manifests itself: as a *feeling*, as an *attitude* and as a *relationship* (Ibid, 26-27). First of all, “trust” and its opposite “distrust” awaken, in individuals, feelings of safety, security, uncertainty, suspicion and fear. While such feelings are difficult to quantify, comics’ ability to visualise and emotionalise the past offers the opportunity to explore their presence within a variety of contexts. Our decision to inject this comic with personal backstories and emotive narration was an effort to probe the extent to which feelings of trust and distrust might emerge amongst individuals and impact their actions at various points in history. Second, trust and distrust give birth to attitudes – “a frame of mind, outlook or perspective” – which influence how people perceive a particular issue in society. Telling our story from multiple human (the doctor, the activist, the artist) and non-human (the

fly) perspectives, our aim was to explore the causes and formation of shared attitudes, especially the ways in which histories of violence, disinformation and inequality shaped present day feelings of distrust. Third, trust forms as a relationship between individuals and other individuals, or individuals and collectives/institutions. This relationship is influenced by, and changes depending on, the actions of both parties. Such actions “can modify the behaviour of that trust, even turn it into distrust” (Hosking 2014, p. 26). On this, we looked to comics’ ability to juxtapose seemingly disconnected images and ideas in order to suggest a variety of historical, political, social and visual relationships of relevance to our historical subject matter.

Page 5. “Hillary Chute calls comics...” See Chute (2016, p. 17). Chute compellingly argues for comics’ ability to confront the problematics of representation, to allude to what *cannot* be shown or symbolised and to imbue its narratives with absences, calling for the reader to fill in the gaps. Thus, in Chute’s terms, comics “literalizes on the page the work of framing and making, and also what framing excludes.” See Chute (2016, pp. 17-18). This self-consciousness about not only the *limits* of representation but also the *process* of representation offers, in our view, a tantalising opportunity to explore the ways in which conspiracy theories and misinformation is shaped and constructed and how trust and distrust emerge and unravel within historical contexts. A prominent theme throughout the comic is the extent to which we can “trust” images – as archival documents, as evidence, as authentic representations – and their truth status within historical discourses and political debates. The words “Lie Virus” conclude page two of this comic, a statement that, in many ways, anticipates our efforts on subsequent pages to reflect on how myths, misrepresentations and absences in collective memory helped forge the context in which such distrust, disinformation and conspiracy thinking emerged.

Page 5. “Free from claims toward objective ‘truth’ or indexicality...” See Chute (2016, pp. 20-21).

Page 5. “And ‘materializes’ the past...” See Chute (2016, pp.25-27). At the heart of our comic is an exploration of the “invisible” threats – disease, lies, radiation, conspiracies – that place the body in jeopardy. For this reason, we endeavoured to stress the embodied aspect of drawing and to make visible feelings – of confinement, confusion, anger, betrayal, trust and distrust – that pervade the historical landscape.

Page 6. “Ultimately, the constant stream of empty numbers...” Ville Aula, “The Public Debate Around Covid-19 Demonstrates Our Ongoing Misplaced Trust in Numbers”, *LSE Blogs*, May 15,

2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/05/15/the-public-debate-around-covid-19-demonstrates-our-ongoing-and-misplaced-trust-in-numbers/>

Page 7. “Meanwhile...Back at history-comic HQ...” This page is devoted to how visual culture of the past haunts the present, shaping contemporary representations. As we dug into the mass of photographs and other imagery associated with Covid-19, we were struck by the extent to which much of it seemed to recycle motifs we’d seen in representations of previous crises – lone figures bathed in the blur of disinfecting spray, empty urban landscapes, unoccupied chairs in schoolrooms, concert halls and other places where busyness usually reigns. Thus, images of Covid-19 evoke memories of the visual culture associated with the Chernobyl disaster of 1986 or the SARS outbreak of 2002-2004. While it is not our aim to question the veracity of individual photographs, we suggest that the very process of capturing such images (and then selecting them for dissemination via media channels) is informed by what has come before. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in another context, visual representations of the past (art, photography, film etc.) inform the optical structures within which we “see” the world today: “that which is visible is only ever that which is legible”. See Bourdieu (1990, p. 75). Similarly, theories of memory and perception influenced our rendering of this page as an allusion to Freud’s (1925) “Mystic Writing Pad.” A child’s toy where a transparent sheet sits atop a waxed board, the mystic writing pad could be written over again and again but always left traces of previous marks. Thus, faint impressions of the past remain embedded in our subconscious, influencing the ways in which we perceive the world. Jacques Derrida (1996, pp. 13-17) alludes, by way of Freud, to the same metaphor in his analysis of archives and memory. Derrida argues that the archive is not just a place where “the past” is conserved, catalogued and stocked. Rather, the process of archiving also “determines the structure” of future “archivable content.” Thus, past writing, printing, photography and other archivable traces not only shape our visions of the past, but inform and influence our capturing of the future: “the archivization produces as much as it informs the event” (Derrida 1996, p. 17). Predominant visual culture of the Covid-19 pandemic was a visual culture pre-ordained.

Page 7. “What lingers most in my memory of Chernobyl...” Alexievich (2016, p. 33).

Page 7. “themes found in photographs documenting Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome...” Serlin (2010, p. xvi).

Page 7. “In recent years the body...” Knight (2000, p. 204).

Page 8. "Who to believe when, all around, rages a feverish fight for control of the recent past." This page is informed by work on the politicisation of collective memory. In a recent study of commemorative discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic, Sydney Goggins (2023, p. 1247) argues that "social memories of Covid-19's unequal toll are being rendered invisible through a process of public forgetting." Goggins notes official narratives of the pandemic are driven by a desire for a "return to normalcy" which "forget" inconvenient truths in the drive to restore the economic and political status quo. The trivialising of the pandemic's continued threat to the immunocompromised, racist and xenophobic narratives laying its origins at the feet of "foreign" invaders and interlopers and the rehashing of tired jingoistic archetypes – all represented on this page – constitute a wider culture of disinformation, where health, racial and class inequalities are elided in favour of dangerous platitudes and simple solutions. In a more general sense, our aim with this page is to construct – through symbolic images and text – an argument for how official memory, during the pandemic and of the pandemic, appears as an amalgam of ideologically-charged tropes, myths and iconography intended to further the agenda of various powerful interests.

Page 9. "Hell, we can cite the comics-based research literature in our bibliography." The conversation on this page turns the critique inward. If some of these lines appear to undercut our previous arguments (or even faith in the project as a whole), we felt them necessary for a paper that throughout has sought to destabilise narratives, perspectives and arguments. Of course, we believe in our aims/objectives, but also realise the 10 pages here constitute only a tiny fragment of what could be said about Covid-19 and its historical resonances. This comic is a work in progress and always will be. It is a subjective rendition of events, told from the point-of-view of two "half-baked historians", or two white male UK-based academics bringing a particular set of ideas and values to the table. By inserting moments of indecision and flailing about for answers we wanted to recognise the imperfect processes of creation that went into our "history" (just as, perhaps, history itself is always an imperfect creation). We felt it less important that readers "trust us" than see in this comic an invitation to debate, challenge, reinterpret (on their own terms), reframe, interrogate and collaborate in the act of making meaning. We do, however, believe strongly in the value of comics-based research and the potentially significant contribution it can offer to academic discourse. See note 2 above, where we cite literature on the subject. Here, we were especially thinking about Kuttner et al's (2021, pp. 200-207) triumvirate of "affordances" available to the comics-based researcher: multimodality, sequence/simultaneity and style/voice.

Multimodality emerges through the extent to which comics' can represent and engage multiple forms of data – historical, temporal, spatial, numerical – within the arrangement of their visual and textual content, panel design and gutters. Sequence and simultaneity enable both narratives

and processes to be represented and self-consciously deconstructed through the processes of ordering and juxtaposition. Our comic jumps between historically informed vignettes and reflections on the very process of creating a historical comic. In terms of style and voice, Kuttner *et al.* describe comics as “unabashedly subjective” (p. 205) and that this blatant “authorial presence” enables an engagement with questions of “researcher subjectivity”, something central to this paper as it is to any discussion of trust, history, collective memory and politics.

Page 9. “I try to see what we’re doing as a ‘polygraphic’ endeavour...” See Smolderen (2014, p. 9) for a discussion of the “stylistic collisions, ironic contrasts, and hybridization” that defines comics’ “polygraphic approach” to its subject matter. In general, we are influenced by work that has discussed how comics encompass a complex semiotic system, whereby everything from panel size, drawing style (e.g. McCloud 1993).

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