

Pulp, Punctum and Pictures

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The texts of pulp paperbacks have long offered fertile territory for academic exploration, from linguistic examination to feminist studies. And the fantastic art works produced for their covers have been widely exhibited virtually and, increasingly, physically in museum spaces. Right now, in fact, the Robert Lehman Art Center in Massachusetts is holding an exhibition of some of collector Robert Lesser's substantial holdings of pulp paintings. And, similar to the way the authors of these pulp texts have been studied, art historians have joined American studies and pop culture scholars in evaluating the creators of cover art for these publications. They are, indeed, judging book covers.

But, what's been absent here is some sort of critical response from contemporary visual artists. Some have mimicked a signature illustrative style of the pulp artists, or appropriated images wholesale. But these efforts have largely been arch, ironic send ups. Most notably, American pop artist Roy Lichtenstein emulated the production method of comic book printing. Other artists have offered straightforward homages; after all, the great American realist painters NC Wyeth and Edward Hopper contributed to the pulp cover art canon. They were joined by scores of other, lesser known but considerably talented artists whose work adorned thousands of mass market, pulp paperbacks.

There are meanings to be mined in this repository by active visual artists who engage in postmodern dialogues, but not much digging has occurred.

However, the artist Thomas Allen has turned theory into practice and asks viewers to re-imagine the visual culture of pulp images. In fact, through his process Allen embodies theory and I'd like to set out to show this through an examination of some examples of Allen's work and specifically that of his image, "Thirst."

The noted polymath scholar Clive Bloom, in his seminal book "Cult Fiction," has offered: "Pulp does not want to be respectable. It wants to pretend to be respectable. ... Then pulp is not to be defended, nor is it to be made more available for serious study at the academy - pulp never went to school and hates the academy. Academic respect kills pulp with kindness."

Bearing this in mind, I would like to put forth my efforts to "kill" pulp with "respect" and "kindness" by linking the pulp images from Allen's photographs with the words of feminist visual art theory and semiotics.

There is a certain visual pleasure in looking. This is well-worn theoretical territory pioneered by the feminist and film scholar Laura Mulvey and her investigation of the male gaze; the ideas that women are represented to provide visual pleasure to men, viewers are treated as though they are male, and that such viewing is voyeuristic and fetishistic were presented in her touchstone essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In many ways,

pulp embodies this notion. As Bloom writes, "Pulp pleasure is illicit pleasure. Such pleasure comes from reading for the wrong reasons and knowing it."

For the French theorist, Roland Barthes, the photographic image can act as a signifier capable of operating on two levels. The first is the studium. Barthes explains the studium as a sort of rational response to a photograph. It's not that the photograph isn't accomplished or doesn't effectively communicate, it's just that the image works at an almost perfunctory level; it defines what it sets out to, whether that be the definition of an object or idea. It is a publicly available meaning that is coded and can be decoded by semiotic analysis.

The other way a photograph can communicate is deeper and highly personal. Barthes calls this the punctum. In his words, the punctum is "the sting, speck, cut, little hole. A photograph's punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)." The punctum, he notes, shows no preference for morality or good taste. And, just as one person's good taste is another's bad, the punctum - this cutting - is personal. Very often, Barthes notes, the punctum is activated as a result of a small detail in a photograph; a woman's belt, a young man with decaying teeth or an old shoe can elicit punctum.

In short, the punctum activates looking into active seeing and feeling something that resonates and it's also the territory where the worlds of pulp paperbacks and the pictures of Thomas Allen elide. His photographs are guilty pleasures, which hold the ability to pierce the memory.

Allen's work with images is deliberate and thoughtful and holds true to a famous Ansel Adams quote, "A photograph is not an accident - it is a concept." And, just as Barthes' punctum begins with a piercing cut, so too does the work of Allen. He does not take photographs, he makes them.

From the beginning of his process, there is tension; he destroys something we are generally taught to revere, wrap in plastic and store on shelves for posterity and protection. This is the position we accord most books. Most books, but not pulps, which are referred to as trashy fiction and considered disposable reading by many. Those readers complain of characters that are flat and story lines that are stereotypical. That's the knock on pulp fictions. Allen sets out to silence those critics by giving those characters literal depth and dimension.

Allen cuts the richly-illustrated covers of pulp paperbacks to free the material for use in his pictures. Using scissors, or more often X-acto blades, the artist deftly slices femme fatales and cussin' cowboys from the constraints of the two-dimensional page. Then, folding them or anchoring them with miniature armatures, he reassembles these cutouts in tableaux vivant to photograph. In this sense, his is not just creator, but reanimator.

He's also part movie director.

A voracious collector and consumer of pulp paperback art, Allen "casts" his photos from his collection of dime novels after a concept has been determined. The pool of candidates

from his collection while deep, does not vary widely - there are hallmarks of the pulp paperback cover, illustrational tropes if you will. Women, regardless of hair color almost always have long tresses. Their skin color, however, rarely varies - it is toothsome white. Gals are buxom. Guys are brawny. Women are vixens or victims. Guys are brash and, sometimes, brainy - for the male, both of these characteristics can be compromised by broads or booze.

Allen then is able to select a location for his project using the locales from book covers. These, too, are freighted with stereotypes either geographical - the lure and romance of the West, the adventures at sea - or offer location biases - the seedy, inner city motel room, for instance. He occasionally uses the books themselves as props, their color-edged pages or spines serving as scenery for his actors.

Finally, as director, Allen ensures the lighting on his set is evocative enough to carry the emotion of the scene. He excels in particular at isolating his characters, giving them the contradictory qualities of being at once powerful and lonely or isolated. It is a careful calibration, part noir, part technicolor.

Allen poses the actors within these carefully lit set pieces and the silent action unfolds as he photographs them using a shallow focus. Here, is dystopia and dislocation - characters are, quite literally, separated from their background, cut away from their frame of reference. And, to add to this visual dissonance, Allen may mix and match actors and sets to hybridize the tableaux vivant. He is reconstructing meanings.

For instance, in his 2006 photograph, "Knockout," Allen joins his actors - a prize fighter sprawled on the floor and a race car flag girl - across two genres, "the fighter" and "the race car driver." The fighter falls from the cover of the book "The Last Round" (cover copy: "Hungry, tough with a knockout punch in each fist .."); the candy-striped flag girl springs forth from an unknown tome.

The gaze, as Mulvey would say, takes in the action, observing the richly colored and contrasted manly activity that unfolds typically, with the man/active role and the woman/passive role. And in "Knockout," though the male is in a compromised position flat on his back, the female form is highly fetishized. The composition, the color, the content give pleasure just as pulp paperback cover art does. The punctum, Barthes asserts, is individualized and may not result from every photo; far more images rely on studium to narrate what they contain. But, this photo, which began with a cutting, does for me have the ability to pierce my memory. It's in Allen's actors' arms.

The boxer lies flattened by an unseen opponent in the photograph's foreground. Anguish and submission mark his face in sharp relief. His right arm extends skyward, a gloved hand held aloft at roughly the position of the 1 o'clock hour. The posture, the depiction, is the visual corollary to the words "I surrender." He is a fallen man.

In the image's background looming from and above the fighter is the soft-focus figure of the race car flag girl. She is curvy, elegant and very upright. Her left arm precisely mirrors

the position of that of the boxer - their limbs' positions seemingly parallel each others. But, hers is lifted in celebration, triumph. Is she the boxer's unseen opponent? Is she cheering at the fallen man? Why? This is poignant to me. This I remember and for me, this is the image's sharp upper cut to my head. It rings my bell, and punctures my heart. This is the punctum.

In "Cult Fiction" Bloom describes something similar to Barthes' punctum. The consumers of pulp are engaged by its "secret language of desires unfulfilled. ... Commercial entertainment ends as personal destiny," he writes.

Allen taps into these desires using pulp paperback imagery as a vehicle but re-contextualizing it, giving the language a fresh spin. These are characters or actors freed from their narrative. They are burst from the confines of the printed word or illustrated book cover. It is the viewer who can prescribe a fresh tale for the actors given the clues and cues provided by Allen.

The notions of viewer complicity, self reflexivity, multiple meanings and appropriation of images place his work squarely in the post-modern vein. But, interestingly, a surface reading of his images often evoke nostalgia to great effect. They hold initial appeal because they remind us directly or indirectly of View-Masters and popup books; a couple of optical teasers that once entertained us. And, there's not a small amount of "magic" or illusion we sense in looking at Allen's photographs. They are, to use a pulpish word, wonderments. At the same time, they hearken to an era we like to believe - whether it's true or not - in which the stories were easier to follow and meanings were fixed. An era

where we believed we could judge a book by its cover or at least we knew, clearly, what the book was to contain.

It's when you get beyond the surface that the telling of Allen's stories develop more layers and become more complicated. His process of creation is dependent, in fact, on layering. Allen's work begins in two dimensions, then using cutting tools, he liberates his subjects and provides them three dimensionality, the ability to "move" in space where they are photographed using a 4 x 5 film camera format. Yet, his finished product is a photograph, reducing the paper cutouts once again to a flat surface. They are confined by the borders of the photo paper they are printed upon.

This manipulation is apparent - and enjoyable - to viewers. Unlike Mulvey's depiction of the male gaze, which is insidious and patriarchal, in this instance viewers are cognizant visual pleasure is being constructed. There is something fun about the way Allen toys with images to make meanings. (Side note, Allen worked at Toys R Us for 18 years as he pursued a Masters degree.) At the same time, this sort of re-presentation allows viewers to reconsider the object in a new way and in this way it transcends the source material from which it emerged. Bloom neatly sums this up in "Cult Fiction" when he writes, "Pulp is the first to give content to new media: film, radio, television. These then give back to pulp its vibrancy and life. Pulp is not one medium, but a transferable condition of the medium's content and structure."

These external machinations perhaps best meet the internal melodramas in Allen's inspired photograph, "Thirst," created in 2004.

In this image, a man is viewed from the back, but only the right third of his body is visible. His athletic frame is suggested beneath rumpled clothing. His arm, shirtsleeve rolled to just beneath the elbow, dangles at his side holding a bottle of liquor. His limb and the bottle cast a shadow on the ground beneath him. He is emerging from the spine of a book which faces the viewer. "The Nymph and the Lamp" is the title on the book's spine. The writers of copy for pulp paperbacks never met an exclamation point or adjective they didn't embrace. The book's teaser line, beneath its title reads: Only One Of Her Lovers Was Her Husband.

To the man's right, an arm languorously reaches toward him from the cover of another paperback. The arm projects from a sultry-looking red head, exposing ample décolletage and a come-hither expression. She seems to be offering the man a cigarette or beckoning for a pour from his bottle. The rest of her, however, remains adhered to the page of the book she inhabits; only her arm operates with dimension. Its title, only partially visible, reads "Lust For ..." the concluding word or words are not made apparent.

In "Thirst," time is frozen. This is what the master photographer Henri Cartier Bresson called the decisive moment. Lust hangs heavy in the air and we soon expect that same atmosphere to be filled with the smell of cigarettes and the sound of lips meeting. The action of the scene is paired and pared to its most raw distillation. Though told in an

unfamiliar way through Allen's lens, we think we know how this story turns out. It's all very straightforward, we think.

We think.

But this text will never progress; its narrative is frozen on a piece of photo paper. The space between the two will forever remain. This depiction is the decisive moment and we can not advance or retreat from this fictive space.

But, there's something unsettling, some small detail in "Thirst" that punctures and reveals itself - the punctum. As with "Knockout" the locus is again the limbs. What is that thing the ginger-haired dame is offering the man with the bottle? Or, is she pulling her arm away? Is he, in fact, pulling the bottle away from her? Is he denying her or is it the other way around? Is there an undercurrent of violence rather than sex that is about to explode? Maybe this seeming stereotype of a story has other meanings and its socially pre-determined meaning can give way to an individualistic one.

That man may not be thirsting for that woman, or vice versa. Maybe they're a couple of daytime drunks, reeling in an argument. Or, making plans for dinner. What's the exchange between the outreached arms? The man's bottle appears drained of fluid; is he, similarly, an empty vessel being excoriated by the woman? Is she a wife, a lover, a sister? And what is this "Thirst" Allen refer to in the title?

Meanings are subverted and open ended in this cross-pollinated photograph. Assumptions are ruptured and the tiniest detail - is it a lighter in her hand? an envelope? - is burdened with significant weight.

In defining punctum, Barthes calls this is “a kind of subtle beyond - as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see ... toward the absolute excellence of a being, body and soul together.” This then is Allen’s artistry; he constructs the photo in such a way as to allow us to read the text through to our own conclusions. The presentation of the image may still be framed by the male gaze, Mulvey could contend, but the punctum allows for a reconsideration of that perspective. Allen, by creating questions, allows viewers to fill in their own blanks and with a knowing nod, join the couple in the throes of passion or, perhaps, something sinister. Every Thomas Allen picture can tell a **multitude** of stories.