



BRECCIA, A.; BUSCAGLIA, N. *The Nameless City*. *Il Mago*, sep. 1974.

REINSTATING THE LAWS OF CHANCE

BRECCIA'S THROW OF THE DICE WITH ERNESTO SABATO'S *INFORME SOBRE CIEGOS*

Aarnoud Rommens

BEIPD-COFUND Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Liege (ULg), ACME Comics Research Group.

Pablo Turnes

History Professor (Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata); Master in Art History (Instituto de Altos Estudios Sociales/Universidad Nacional de San Martín); PhD Candidate in Social Sciences (Universidad de Buenos Aires/CONICET).

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

Recebido em 30/07/2014 e aprovado em 13/11/2014.

Abstract

In 1993, the year of his death, Alberto Breccia's retelling of Ernesto Sabato's *Report on the Blind* was finally published (first in Spain by Ediciones B and for the first time in Argentina by Editorial Colihue in 2007). Indeed, *finally* is the most fitting word to invoke its convoluted publication history: after an agonizing wait lasting over fifteen years – turning out to be a productive incubation period – Sabato eventually granted Breccia permission to re-create and publish the comic version of his literary work. One could say that Breccia's *Report on the Blind* is not a single work but is embedded within the dense accumulation of his other visual-verbal experimentations with literary texts, those by H. P. Lovecraft in particular. This article explores the always-controversial relationship between comics and literature and the various aspects of cultural exchange that defy the language of both comics and literary texts. We argue that this exchange turns creates borderline zones that provide new ways to see, read and understand the literary text and its comics adaptation, revealing both their limits and possibilities.

Keywords: Breccia. Comics. Abstraction.

Resumo

Em 1993, ano de sua morte, a recontagem de Alberto Breccia da obra de Ernesto Sabato *Relatório sobre os Cegos* foi finalmente publicada (primeiramente em espanhol pela Ediciones B e pela primeira vez na Argentina pela Editorial Colihue em 2007). De fato, *finalmente* é a palavra mais adequada para invocar sua controversa história de publicação: após uma agonizante espera que durou cerca de quinze anos – tornando-se um período de incubação criativa – Sabato eventualmente garantiu a permissão de Breccia para recriar e publicar a versão em quadrinhos de seu trabalho literário. Seria possível dizer que *Relato sobre os Cegos* de Breccia não é somente um simples trabalho, estando perpassado de um denso acúmulo de suas outras experimentações visuais-verbais com textos literários, em particular aqueles de H. P. Lovecraft. Este artigo explora a sempre controversa relação entre quadrinhos e literatura e os vários aspectos de troca cultural que desafiam a linguagem dos quadrinhos e dos textos literários. Nós argumentamos que essas trocas criam zonas limítrofes que provêm novas formas para ver, ler e compreender o texto literário e suas adaptações quadrinísticas, revelando tanto seus limites como possibilidades.

Palavras-chave: Breccia. Quadrinhos. Abstração.

Introduction

The idea to adapt Ernesto Sabato's story emerged around the same time – the early seventies – Alberto Breccia set out to translate Lovecraft's tales of terror into comics. Breccia discovered Lovecraft's work during the early sixties, at the time when Sabato's novel, *On Heroes and Tombs* – of which the "Report on the Blind" constitutes the pivotal third chapter – was first published (1961). Breccia's lifelong experimentation with the comics format – starting in 1958 with *Sherlock Time*, scripted by Héctor Oesterheld – had come to a halt in 1964 when *Mort Cinder*, also scripted by Oesterheld, had ended its run in *Misterix* magazine. *The Life of Che Guevara* (1968), made in collaboration with Oesterheld and Breccia's son Enrique, and especially his new version of *El Eternauta* (again written by Oesterheld) published between May and September of 1969 for *Gente* magazine – signaled his comeback onto the Argentine comics scene. Unfortunately, these met with editorial limitations and an uncomprehending readership not used to such experimentation in comics. Ironically, it would be precisely these works and the re-discovery of *Mort Cinder* in Europe that would turn Breccia into a recognized master of comics. During the seventies Breccia produced comics for a predominantly European readership through the Italian publishing house Mondadori which at that time issued magazines like *Il Mago* and *Alter Linus* and its spin-off *Alter Alter*, the latter home to more experimental work.

Breccia's politics of adaptation

Originally published between 1973 and 1979, the *Myths of Cthulhu* started what would remain a constant in Breccia's oeuvre: the re-interpretation of those macabre gothic and mystery tales he loved so much, giving form to works that mimicked a dark socio-political context. More

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

generally speaking, it also inaugurated a practice revealing a specific interpretation of adaptation, an uncompromising stance testing the limits of the medium of comics through the appropriation of literature¹.

We believe that *Report on the Blind* is emblematic in this regard: it is the condensation of an immense network of experimentations, confrontations and radical narrative hypotheses that not only led Breccia to master the language of comics but also to re-invent it. As Philippe Marcelé (2007, p. 173) observes:

Adapting texts and authors he admired, Breccia paid 'homage' to them. This at least is how he put it himself. However, by no means is this homage an erasure: comics, which he said he did not like but which he practiced rigorously, are never the humble servant of that great and noble sister²

This leads us to our central claim, a paradox: by ostensibly "relinquishing" authorship through the *discourse* of literary homage – maintaining a poetics of *kenosis*, so to speak – Breccia assumed visual-verbal mastery by reinventing the medium of comics itself. Moreover, the works he presented as *tributes* – thereby rendering comics harmless, merely secondary elaborations of the "true" original – was actually a subversive act. The signifier "homage" is sleight of hand: it plays up the *status quo* and feigns respect for the cultural hierarchy between Literature and a marginal medium in the eyes of publishers, literary authors and readers alike. However, as we will argue in this essay, the notion of adaptation and all of its cultural connotations provided a paradoxical space of freedom, a space Breccia littered with unexpected visual detours and clues enabling endless counter-readings.

Keeping in mind that the idea of translating the *Report* coincided with Breccia's work on the *Myths of Cthulhu*, a brief consideration of the latter may

¹ Breccia adapted tales by Edgar Allan Poe (produced and published between 1975 and 1985), as well as authors as diverse as Horacio Quiroga, William W. Jacobs, Lord Dunsany, Robert L. Stevenson, Juan Rulfo, and the brothers Grimm, amongst many others.

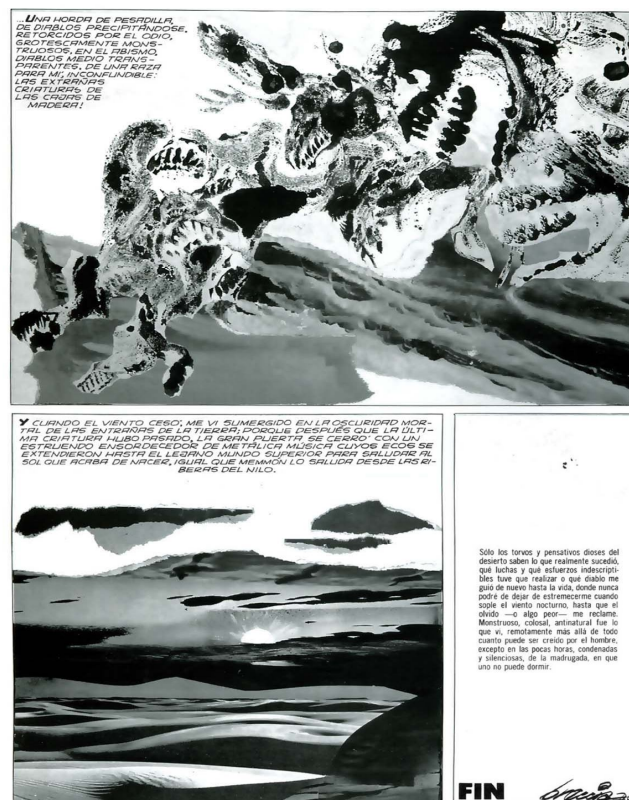
² All translations of quotations from the French and Spanish are ours, unless otherwise noted.

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

shed some further light on Breccia's politics of adaptation. Lovecraft's heirs stipulated that Breccia could alter no word of the original narratives. He could cut nothing: he had to retain every single letter. This created a formal problem haunting the adaptation: the irreconcilable distance between the original text and Breccia's images. Long captions clash with the expressionist, almost abstract panels that give visual form to the unspeakable world Lovecraft had imagined (Figure 1).

Figure 1



BRECCIA, A.; BUSCAGLIA, N. *The Nameless City*. *Il Mago*, sep. 1974.

As Breccia confided in Juan Sasturain (2013, p. 258):

[The *Myths of Cthulhu*] is more of an illustrated text than a comic. It does not have the agility of a comic. Except for one of the adaptations where there is a sequence, "The Festival" [...] Maybe

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

because I made the adaptation, and I'm more of a comic artist than a writer. So I took the adaptation to the terms of narrative proper to comics [...] It's not a finished thing. Therein lies the difference with an illustration properly speaking.

Dissatisfied with the redundancy between word and image of "illustrated literature", Breccia insisted on modifying Sabato's text so as to fit the narrative demands of the comics format. After what must have seemed an eternity, Sabato gave his blessing.

Breccia's Report on the Blind: Textual austerity

Report on the Blind is the personal diary of Fernando Vidal Olmos, a tortured soul meticulously detailing his paranoid worldview. Similar to the narrative setup of some of E. A. Poe's stories, the "report" is framed as the faithful transcription by a dubious narrator obsessed with establishing the "facts of the case" once and for all. Starting his inner monologue after having consummated – in the literal, carnal sense – the heart of the unspeakable secret he unknowingly created for himself, he stoically awaits his death, once again transcribing his descent into hell. The novel runs in a loop, and Vidal is caught in the infinite regress of his own report: "Enter now, this is your beginning and your end" (SABATO, 1981, p. 367), the voice at the heart of the enigma tells him before the tale reaches its climax. The end of the mystery marks the end of his life, as well as the end of writing. Yet, at the same time it refers back to the beginning as his narrative opens with the inevitability of his death: "When was the beginning of all this that is about to end in my murder?" (SABATO, 1981, p. 237).

Vidal Olmos lives an eternally recurrent living death in and through writing, suspended as he is within the labyrinth of his hyper-logical reasoning that gradually unfolds into grotesque absurdity. The writing he performs at infinitum tells of his conviction that he has uncovered the ultimate truth of life:

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

the blind are an alien species literally ruling from the shadows. Their organizational web is planetary; everyone is a potential agent of the Sect of the Blind; he must leave this report to posterity as ultimate proof and denunciation. His nihilistic voyage into the depths of Buenos Aires in search of the key to the puzzle is equally a confrontation with his inner experience: he dissects his own hallucination using the blinding light of insomniac *logos* and the razor-sharp power of pure reason. The "report", with its pretense to scientific truth – Vidal Olmos is the self-described "investigator of Evil" (SABATO, 1981, p. 282) – eventually tips over into madness: he reinterprets his hallucinations into convoluted syllogisms and endows them with irrefutable truth-value. Fact and fabrication become indistinguishable in the same way that the beginning was always already the end. Since the entire conundrum of the *Report* is the rhetorical edifice itself, only the closing of the book will end its maddening circularity.

The main problem for Breccia's adaptation was quite clear: since Sabato's narrative revolves around the excess of logical discourse produced by Vidal Olmos, how to translate it in a way that leaves room for the fundamental plastic aspect of comics? Incorporating the protagonist's interior monologue word for word into a graphic report would be unworkable and merely end up in "illustrated literature", a lesson Breccia had learned from his Lovecraft adaptations. Sabato's initial refusal to have his text cut down met with a refusal on Breccia's part: he was intent on making a comic, and would not compromise on the economy of verbal means the comic form demands. Eventually, Sabato relented. As Breccia recalls:

If we did not intervene in the text, my drawing was only slavishly repeating his work. This didn't make any sense, so I put the project aside. Much later, Sabato called me telling me that he had changed his mind. I could modify the original text. (IMPARATO, 1992, p. 54-55)

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

Master, slave; word, image: Sabato's initial refusal asserts the secondary nature of the image, misrecognizing comics as a derivative literary genre with images tacked on. Indeed, "slavishly" indicates that Breccia made a strict distinction between illustration and comics as two idioms with their own logic and poetics, a distinction Sabato was blind to. Breccia's interest lay not in remaining 'faithful' to the source text, but in experimenting with the possibilities afforded by the *Report* as raw material to be worked up into a graphic retelling. It is a matter of allowing the demands of the medium speak through and attuning this raw material to new narrative constraints.

If there is any talk of fidelity, one must understand it through a nuanced dictum: appropriate a literary text into a material form faithful to the parameters of the language of comics, or – as is the case with Breccia – make these parameters an intrinsic part of the graphic narrative, thereby going beyond narration to create a space for thinking the notion of "medium-specificity" itself. Do so even when it comes at the price of "betraying" the original; or better still, *especially* when it comes at that price. All liberation implies sacrifice, and for comics that meant extrication from its "great and noble sister"; profiting from the momentum of literature while discarding its heavy burden in search of comics' distinctive "agility": "I left everything I could draw; everything that could not be graphically represented, I had to have it eliminated. I had no other choice" (IMPARATO, 1992, p. 56). It is the "fate" of comic adaptations – or comics at large, for that matter- that it can only attain its nimbleness by restraining the textual and discarding the aniconic discipline of literature.

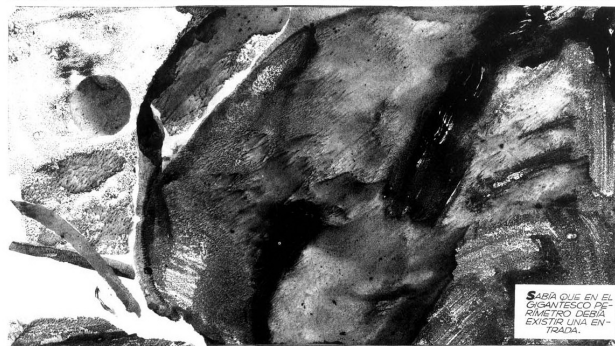
Indeed, this is the crux of Breccia's adaptation of *The Report*: how to visualize the iconoclastic? In Sabato's novel it is writing *an sich* that is the very performance of obsession: Vidal Olmos scribbles over the visible – the idiosyncratic, the accidental, the poetic – through a discourse that reads hidden symbolism in every detail, displaying an intolerable literalism. Against

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

the uncanniness of this reduction of the visual to the logic of writing with its laws of alphanumerical linearity, Breccia revels in the uncanny indetermination of the image. He subjects the literary work to extreme austerity, stripping it down to short bursts of texts, erasing Vidal's (and Sabato's) sophistry. His *Report* is an ironic retort: it is as if Breccia's adaptation is a *cut-up* where short scraps of text are pasted over the dominant image. Textual explication is kept at a minimum, while maximizing the "enigma effect": the images – many of them crossing into pure abstraction – refuse to help us decipher Vidal Olmos's fever dream (Figure 2).

Figure 2



BRECCIA, A. *Report on the Blind*, Ediciones B, 1993, p. 45.

Collage and the "Laws of Chance"

One particularly revealing episode concerns the protagonist's recurring childhood nightmare in which he fears that "if [the shadow] moves I don't know what may happen" (SABATO, 1981, p. 250). Eventually the shadow shifts and reality turns into utter chaos, losing all coherence. The character believes this to be an omen and obsesses about its possible meanings for years to come: "What did the dream mean? What sort of warning was it, what did it symbolize?" (SABATO, 1981). While preserving the text in the caption (Figure 3), Breccia craftily turns the shadow into a single figure compressing three

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

characters which, although they are difficult to disentangle, have monstrous faces that reappear as those of the blind later on in the comic.

Figure 3



BRECCIA, A. *Report on the Blind*, Ediciones B, 1993, p. 6.

Olmos's greatest anxiety is the utter disintegration of reality into meaningless fragments, and he is prone to episodes of dissociation from reality. As he transcribes it in the original report:

I feared that the world round about me might begin at any moment to move, to become deformed ... to fall apart, to be transformed, to lose all meaning. ... I felt a sort of vertigo, lost consciousness, and sank down into chaos, but finally I was able... to tie down the fragments of reality. A sort of anchor... Unfortunately, the entire episode was repeated on several occasions. (SABATO, 1981, p. 251)

By interrupting the narrative flow through one single abstract panel Breccia conjures up the choreography between dissociation and coherence. The panel threatens the integrity of the panel itself (Figure 4), and, by extension, of the comic as a whole. Yet, the paper tears seem to converge in one point – the “origin” (0,0) in cartographic terms – suggesting that even though sense (“sentido”) might be irrevocably lost, it is also the point where new sense will take off – and so it does, as the sequence continues: it was but

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

a momentary "nonsensical" interval. In fact, we can re-read this abstract image – a collage – as a space where the medium reflects on its own (im)possibility to adequately relay Vidal's report.

Figure 4



BRECCIA, A. *Report on the Blind*, Ediciones B, 1993, p. 7.

It equally acts as the visual transformation of a line in Sabato's text: in Breccia's rendition it directly addresses the reader-viewer and discloses an allegory of reading, the secret – or Dantesque warning upon entering the story – holding together (and tearing apart) this adaptation: "Enter now, this is your beginning and your end" (SABATO, 1981, p. 367). The panel is the graphic narrative's big bang (origin) and its black hole (end) at the same time, referring to the material condition of its possibility (collage, page-layout, panel: the form of comic narration), which is at the same time the precondition for its eventual undoing on the level of the plot. This one image "centers" the tension between the centripetal, negentropic force of narration, logic and cohesion – the obsessive hyper-logical constructions of

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

Fernando Vidal Olmos and the story that unfolds – and the centrifugal, entropic force of dispersal, dissemination, and de-narrativization.

Collage is the technique *par excellence* to give plastic form to the pathos between randomness and systematic order – it is surely not by accident that Breccia was drawn to this technique with its art historical “aura”³. Breccia's collages foreground a similar dynamic as in Jean Arp's series with the title *Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* in which pieces of paper are torn and then dropped from a height onto a larger sheet, with each scrap glued wherever it happens to fall, leaving gravity the “author” of the artwork⁴. Yet, the relatively ordered appearance of Arp's collages suggests that the artist did not fully relinquish artistic control, which is indicated by the paradox “law of chance”. This makes the works still images of the antinomy between spontaneity and conscious intervention, between the *negentropic* as the tendency to re-impose order and meaning onto nonsense, as for instance in the compositional structure with grid in Arp (Figure 5), or, indeed, the grid-layout of comics⁵.

³ He uses these techniques in other works as well, notably his H. P. Lovecraft adaptations. Breccia not only appropriates freely from literature, but also from canonical art. In this case he adapts the technique of collage – pioneered during the early twentieth century in what now has been institutionalized as the “historical avant-garde” – and reformats it to suit the needs of the graphic narrative. Again, what now counts as canonical, “high art” is tactically “brought down” to the level of a “marginal medium”: Breccia employs comics as a tactic of the *bathetic*. For more on the historical significance of collage, see Peter Bürger's (2010 [1974]) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

⁴ Another possible visual association is with the work of Lee Krasner. For instance, the technique (brush and black paint, cut and torn painted paper collage with adhesive residue on cream laid paper) in Krasner's *Black and White* (1953), as well as the precarious zone between abstraction and figuration it engenders reverberates in Breccia's *Report* but perhaps even more so in the *Cthulhu* series.

⁵ Mike Johnson reads the Merz works of Kurt Schwitters in terms of the *negentropic* principle: using refuse – abject material left behind by modernity, thus embodying entropy – Schwitters creates new aesthetic *bricolage*-compositions, thereby endowing purposefulness onto discarded, “non-artistic” material: *negentropy*. One could analyze the oeuvre of artist Antonio Berni – an artist whose work Breccia knew well – along the same lines.

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

Figure 5



ARP, Jean. *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1917. Collage of torn paper on paper.

This gives us a clue as to how the visual adaptation breaks with the literary source, endowing the former with a form-content dynamic all of its own as it is grounded in the constraints of the comics medium – or rather, as it pushes these constraints to (over?) the limit. Breccia counters the contrived, baroque syllogisms driving Vidal's story forward with the contingency of drawing and collage: the risk of the "plastic sign" is pitted against the laws of typography and discursive design⁶. Abstraction forces the reader to think "the

⁶ In "Abstraction in Comics," Jan Baetens invokes Groupe Mu's distinction between – and constitutive intertwining of – "iconic signs" and "plastic signs": "on the one hand the 'iconic' dimension, which is the part of the image that can be lexically identified and labelled (the representational side of the image) and on the other hand the 'plastic' dimension, which escapes lexical labelling (it is, the authors argue, the non-representational or abstract side of the image, and it has to do with colors, patterning, and form)" (BAETENS, 2011, p. 97). As

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

loss of all sense" ("perder todo sentido"). As such these cuts in the narrative produce "thinking images": if the reader allows these inchoate stills to slow down the pace, he or she will allow the affect of non-sense into the reading process. Granted, in the case of collage in comics plasticity is attenuated: through the mechanical process of reproduction, the tactility of collage is lost in the smoothness of the printed page. However, what matters is that it is there as memory trace, testifying to the irreducible materiality of its being. Throughout Breccia's *Report*, scraps of paper with their infinite tonalities of grey offset the unambiguous black and white of the countable set of words of the printed, alphanumerical moveable type of Sabato's text.

Overall, Breccia's *Report* figures the threat of entropy through collage: a precarious unity is recreated by reassembling the tatters of what once cohered. Collage coexists uneasily in the space of the hand-drawn, producing a fractured wholeness where the seams of the construct are still visible, like scars. Simultaneously, the reading eye – as it moves from left to right, up and down – assumes the force of negentropy, as the architecture of the page reinstates an overall equilibrium in the pulsating rhythm between the ruination of meaning and its reconstruction, i.e., its (re-)reading. If, as Thierry Groensteen⁷ maintains, page layout *is* the language of comics, then one can see Breccia as one of its most fluent native speakers. "Fated" to articulate itself through this idiom, the graphic experimentation within the individual frame is counterbalanced by a classical page layout with more or less stable paneling and distribution of panes.

It is interesting to note that throughout Breccia's oeuvre there is very little radical experimentation with layout and the architecture of the page:

Breccia's abstract panel blanks out iconicity it brings into relief its plasticity, its genesis *qua* material image.

⁷ "[...] the page layout, on the contrary, generally is invented at the same time that the drawings are realized on the paper, or even before the scenario is drawn [...] let us leave the editing to the cinema (and the photo-novel) and fasten ourselves to the study of the page layout - which the cinema cannot do" (GROENSTEEN, 2007 [1999], p. 101-102).

the organization of graphic space never tips over into the formless. Furthermore, at least in the case of the *Report*, there is a certain performative, theatrical quality to this productive tension: the illegibility of the frame (insofar as it contains those "nonsensical" expressionist strokes or collaged scraps) can only be made intelligible – in its unreadability, its resistance to discourse, its affectivity – by the discipline of layout. Page structure is the *sine qua non* for de-structuring: it is that "sort of anchor" (SABATO, 1981, p. 251) making experimentation visible as experimentation, thus "sort of" (but not fully) incorporating it within the semiosis of the adaptation. Consequently, chance (experiment) and "fate" (the language of the medium) enter in an interminable conversation, effecting a meta-narrative allegory that reflects back on the content of Sabato's source text. Breccia's *Report* is a drama unfolding the material conditions of the medium itself: to dissolve the panel – a possibility encapsulated within Figure 4 – and deform the simple rectangle, to abandon the simple geometry of the form of comics would be to take Vidal Olmos's madness too literal instead of seeing it for what it is: an allegory of reading/writing as the endless rerouting of beginnings and endings, of interpretation and what escapes it. Perhaps the relative strictness of the layout is a visual approximation of the protagonist's dogmatic faith in rational construction, which is doomed to collapse into its opposite.

Be that as it may, Breccia transforms Sabato's *Report* in a way that transcends the original: by affirming the aleatory essence of matter (cuts, collage, ink, scribbles, etc.), a meta-play – a shadow play, quite literally – between chance and determinism is staged. As such, Breccia's *Report* contradicts Sabato's *Report*: whereas the latter presents its narrative outcome as already determined from the start (with the main character demonstrating again and again that there is no such thing as chance and everything has a hidden symbolic meaning), Breccia restores the unpredictability of matter as the "ground" out of which the "figure" of the narrative emerges. While the

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

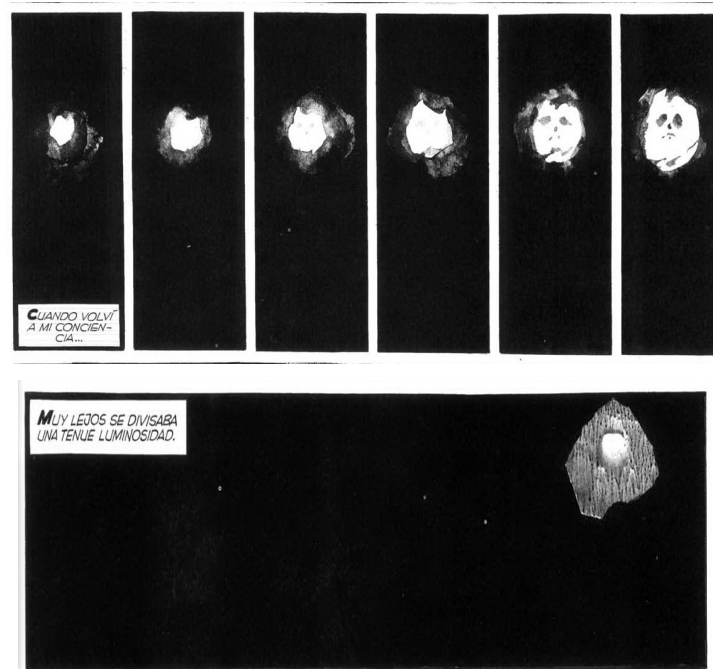
ISSN 2237-9126

source text is the exorcism of serendipity through Vidal's insufferably erudite writing, the images in Breccia's *Report* take on unimaginable (yet controlled) risks. Upon this reading, Breccia's version is a comical masterpiece, a parody of the original – it is an inversion of the *gravitas* of literature, allowing play back into structure.

NO EXIT

Breccia's *Report* contains a sequence that can be understood as part of the "maze game", showing how Breccia materially displays the literary paranoia constructed by Sabato (Figure 6). One way to describe it – violently proper – is as *exit wound/entry wound*: it is as if the page had been shot. The wound inflicted by Breccia only serves to show that we have always been in the same place, in the same world. But which hole is the exit and which one is the entry? No decision can be made: in fact, the figure of the *loop* is most apt as it echoes the never-ending dynamic driving Vidal Olmos insane.

Figure 6



BRECCIA, A. *Report on the Blind*, Ediciones B, 1993. p. 36 and 47.

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

The upper sequence shows Vidal Olmos regaining consciousness only to face the iconic visage of a blind woman, his guide into the depths. In the lower panel nine pages further, we see that light at the end of the tunnel that is about to take Vidal Olmos into a nightmarish world no man should ever lay eyes on. Breccia follows this maddening path to the point of interrogating, once again, the language of comics: although sequentiality is evident, what happens in each individual panel is ambiguous, rendering the reader's usual habits of deciphering useless. The reader must unlearn in order to gain access to that *antiworld* (LUKAVSKA, 1992, p. 50) where Vidal Olmos lives and which Breccia has rebuilt primarily for himself. This *antiworld* is given shape through an *anticomic*: this is precisely what Breccia has created out of Sabato's words.

Once again it seems as if we are shown what it means to dwell in Vidal Olmos's *antiworld*, where, like in his nightmare, everything is about to collapse forever, where things exist in a feeble equilibrium. However, what it truly discloses is the extent to which we have been seduced by the work's supreme, blinding stratagem: the *Report* never really shows anything except the gradual path leading up to madness as we accompany a deranged "visionary" into the distorted labyrinth of psychosis. We journey within an unnamable world with its own inhuman logic. At the same time, this *antiworld* is the product of a craft: Breccia punctures the page and the hole it leaves is an invitation to plunge our fingers, eyes and self into the blackness. When we believe we have reached the terminus we have merely crossed into the other side of the looking glass. But the question remains: when and where did we enter? Was it at the beginning of the story, from the first page? But if this is a loop structure – a narrative *ouroboros* – then we cannot know "where" we are except always *in medias res*. Just like Vidal Olmo's nightmares, everything is just about to crumble to chaos: ultimately, the possibility of storytelling itself is questioned.

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

This brings us back to Breccia's politics of adaptation. The literary is the occasion to bend the limits of the medium of comics. Literature is but the means to interrogate the (anti-)narrative possibilities of comics, while simultaneously parodying the aniconic limitations of textuality. What Breccia says about style equally applies to the practice of adaptation:

Style does exist, but that it's not what matters, concept does [...] I repeat myself in the concept [...] But not in form. It's not that I purposely try not to resemble myself, I just can't do it [...] Concept is I am Breccia, I'm always present in the style or the treatment variations. (SASTURAIN, 2013, p. 242)

Breccia refuses to "resemble himself": that is to say, each work – especially adaptations – demands a *modus operandi* that is materially adequate to its telling. In fact, we could rephrase it more radically: Sabato's version of the *Report* does not "resemble" Breccia's version. If there is resemblance, it is not "intentional", but merely the effect of chance, of play. Immersed in the maze, we must play our role and follow the leads that add to the complexity of the riddle: are we reading Breccia's leads, or are they just our own, as if everything was still about to start or end?

References

BAETENS, Jan. Abstraction in Comics. *SubStance*, v. 40, n. 1, p. 94-113, 2011.

BARTHES, Roland. The Reality Effect. In: *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. p. 141-48.

BÜRGER, Peter. *Teoría de la vanguardia*. Trad. Tomás Bartoletti. Buenos Aires: Las Cuarenta, 2010 [1974].

GROENSTEEN, Thierry. *The system of comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty; Nick Nguyen. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007 [1999].

IMPARATO, Latino. *Ombres et lumières: Entretien avec Latino Imparato*. Paris: Vertige Graphic, 1992.

ROMMENS, Aarnoud; TURNES, Pablo. Reistating the *Laws of Chance*: Breccia's throw of the dice with Ernesto Sabato's *Informe sobre ciegos*. *Dominios da Imagem*, Londrina, v. 8, n. 16, p. 25-43, jun./dez. 2014.

ISSN 2237-9126

JOHNSON, Mike. Kurt Merz Schwitters: Aesthetics, Politics and the Negentropic Principle. In: GILES, Steve (ed.). *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory*. London: Routledge, 1993. p. 138-70.

LUKAVSKA, Eva. Esquemas, mitos y símbolos en el "Informe sobre ciegos" de Ernesto Sábato. *Études Romanes de Brno*, Brno, v. 22, p. 47-56, 1992.

MARCELÉ, Philippe. Alberto Breccia, <<l'humoriste sanglant>>. *MEI*, Paris, n. 26, p. 171-182, 2007.

SABATO, Ernesto R. *Sobre Héroes y Tumbas*. Buenos Aires: Compañía General Fabril Editora, 1961.

_____. *On Heroes and Tombs*. Trans. Helen R. Lane. Boston: David R. Godine, 1981.

SASTURAIN, Juan. *Breccia el Viejo: conversaciones con Juan Sasturain*. Buenos Aires: Colihue, 2013.