

Adverse Strategies for Graphic Narrative

Dear Fernando Pessoa¹,

The reason why I am writing to you, a dead man since 1935, is because among all the 7 billion alive, I cannot conceive a single soul except you who could possibly comprehend this particular matter I simply cannot dispel: *Adverse Strategies*.

Taking advantage of your position, which is confined to listening, I will proceed without providing further reasons why I pinpointed you as the 'forced interlocutor'. However, I do believe you will eventually understand why once you finish reading this.

Recently, I read a book labeling your writings as '*adverse genres*'. The author argues that you *founded your heteronym project based on adverse genres, part of a paradoxical juxtaposition whereby poetic genres selected from different historical periods in the Western tradition are filled with an incongruent and inauthentic content, subverting the familiarity of generic expression*². Do you agree? Or, before that, do you agree with the word "*heteronym project*"? If yes, assuming that an intelligent project may involve tactics or strategies³, do you think writers, in general, possess strategies at all?

We, from the 21st Century, still cling to the lingering image of 19th century romantic artists – if you permit me to include writers like you – which makes us hesitate when attempting to impose the term 'strategy' on an artist. But 80 years after your death, everything has changed dramatically. We are in an era that makes us reconsider the obsolescence of that hesitation. It seems almost impossible for a modern art critic to explain the likes of almost every modern artist without analyzing their strategy. (Please let me know your e-mail address, so that I can send you information about artists as examples; Marcel Duchamp, Jeff Koons and Richard Prince.) A 21st century artist does not only adopt strategies, but also actively propagates them. At this point, I anticipate your reaction. Yes, it's precisely what your heteronym Antonio Mora had foreseen in *Return of the Gods*.⁴

On the other hand, even if we assume that describing an artist as a strategic being is legitimate, a serious attempt at finding a logical or coherent strategy of an artist could easily fail. If you intend to extract it out of a collection of an artist's work – which is usually fragmentary and scattered all over – you will only be able to connect them by carefully examining his history backwards.

What, then, dear friend, would an *adverse* or a *disadvantageous* strategy mean? Aren't strategies supposed to be advantageous? Doesn't this word literally mean, "enhancing the capacity to attain and maintain a position of advantage over adversaries"? This unconventional trait – often unintentionally adopted in the beginning – is employed even when its result does not contribute to the fitness and survival of the individual. In fact, it could even result in undesirable effects such as irreversible mental

¹ A Portuguese poet and writer, most of whose work was published posthumously. He wrote frequently under heteronyms, alter egos with developed personalities, biographies, jobs, habits, attitudes, address, etc.

² K. David Jackson, *Adverse Genres in Fernando Pessoa*, Oxford Press, New York, 2010, p.17

³ Some authors prefer to use the word 'strategy' to give a complete specification of what an animal will do when competing for a scarce resource, and the word 'tactic' for the behavioral components of a strategy (Krebs JR, Davies NB, *Behavioral Ecology*, Blackwell Scientific Publications, 1987).

⁴ Fernando Pessoa, *O Regresso dos Deuses e outros escritos de António Mora*, Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa, 2013.

and physical damage (!), especially when it is allowed to be constantly operational. However, for some reason or other, the individual may enigmatically keep on being loyal to that detrimental 'strategy', despite its harms.

Let me confess one thing. I am neither a poet nor a novelist. I do something that I call *graphic narrative*. (Some call it "graphic novels", but let's avoid losing time discussing lexicons. Let's use it in the loosest terms.) What do I do? I write and draw, deal with image and text and produce it in printed matters. That's why I can't decide if I should say I *write* books or *draw* books. (Even this is a bit adverse.)

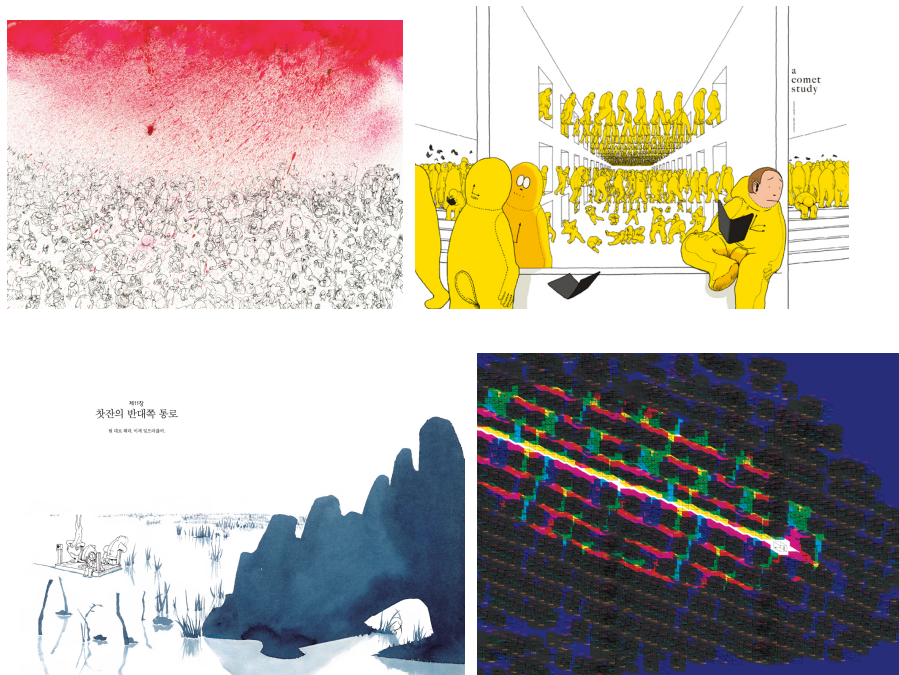
Knowing your fidelity to literature and your apparent indifference to visual culture, I was reluctant to reveal my identity. I even considered writing your friend Almada Negreiros⁵, but I feared a negative response, which can easily hurt my fragile soul, and I'm sure you're the last one to hurt souls.

The first time I coined the word *adverse strategy* during a conversation, a friend of mine immediately reminded me Robert Frost's famous poem *The Road Not Taken*, which I didn't find entirely pleasant, because this poem was so often quoted by people who do everything to take the *road already taken*, simply romanticizing the untaken. No, adverse strategies aren't romantic. For your understanding, I will offer examples from my own graphic narrative works whose characteristics pertain to the adverseness of my strategy. I have narrowed them down to five, for your convenience.

1. Hetero-style

People say you created more than 70 Heteronyms (even 136, according to some scholars) with different styles. In my case, I am doomed to draw every book I create in different styles. I even adopted 10 different styles in a single book^[1]. I use the term 'doomed' in order to highlight how disadvantageous it can be to keep on with this strange 'tactic', especially in a capitalist society where every artist is consumed by a certain style approved by the market. When the demand is there, the artist must grab his or her momentum, and reproduce feverishly; otherwise you're simply a fool, because *to survive is to reproduce*. But all I know is how to produce; to reproduce, I'm at a loss. The reason I gave up drawing 'true' cartoons was because I was never able to maintain the shape of a character constantly. Well, a keen observer may notice the similarities between my different styles, but such a case is very rare. Some may interpret it merely as my incompetence to create a powerful style, but well, I don't feel like defending my own incompetence. It is what it is. I repeat: this isn't an intentional strategy. The graphic artist David Shrigley says, *I am not very good drawing women, so I end up drawing a lot of deformed men*; me, I'm not good at reproducing, so I ended up with various styles.

⁵ Portuguese visual artist. Besides painting and literature, he developed ballet choreographies, and worked on tapestry, engraving, murals, caricature, mosaic and stained glass.



[1 1] Different styles in one book. (Comet Study, Volume #3, 2008)

2. Non-story, Adverse Genres or White Tragedy

If your “static drama” *The Mariner* is a drama in which action is absent from the plot, (...) a drama in which the characters don’t act and don’t even have feelings capable of producing an action, in your own words, my things are also not led by action. Neither are they led by words. Like yours, there is no conflict or true plot in it. They don’t even have themes.

***Things I don’t deal with:** Super-heros, sex, sports, love, crime, psychopaths, killers, action, violence, war, history, religion, famous figures, celebrities, cancer, music, sub-culture, the occult, politics, business, ordinary life, historical or social issues, SF, disasters, Auschwitz, 9/11, North Korea, exotic spaces, parodies of literary greats, happy endings, myths, bands, current issues, foreign affairs, vampires, zombies, teens, wizards, trolls, monsters, LGBT, Zen, massacres, revolutions, rich or poor, kings, aristocrats, millionaires, success stories, human dramas, gastronomy, death etc.

I simply discovered that even without all that, there were still so many interesting things. I am extremely careful not to represent anything. When I was 19, after reading Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, I decided my first creed should be not to write an autobiographical story. Maybe that was the beginning of this weird quest. My only graphic novel about a specific figure was the tragicomedy *Dear Euripides*, which wasn’t about the Greek playwright himself, but about an unknown, non-existent craftsman who makes masks, and how his letters of complaint couldn’t change anything of Euripides. Recently, I ventured further in *Kafe Limbo*^[1 2], trying to create a plot and protagonist, both belonging to nowhere.

As they say you do, maybe I also try to subvert genres, filling them with unconventional and incongruent contents, with philosophy, poetry, etc. Concerning this incongruity of content and format, I once described my works as *White tragedy*. If black

comedy is about humor that makes light of otherwise serious subject matters, a white tragedy makes weight of otherwise light subject matters. Caricature outside, serious & speculative inside.



[1 2] A handful of people collectively known as Limbo, barely cling on the brink of extinction in their habitat Country 82, a nation infested by the Roaches, blind worshippers of immediate homeostasis and rampant breeding. (Kafe Limbo, 2013)

3. Anti-symbolia⁶ and Inconsistent Coloring

For some reason, I prefer avoiding balloons and frames^[1 3]; the two pillar symbols of Comics' lexicon. Furthermore, I scarcely use other elements like grawlixes, plewds, lucafleets, squeans, etc. Regarding the countenance of characters, I try not to follow traditional facial expressions; eye or mouth expressions mean little to me.



[1 3] A character tries to sell a balloon to the protagonist, but he refuses to buy. (Comet Study, Volume #1, 2008)

⁶ In *The Lexicon of Comicana*, (iUniverse, 1980), the author Mort Walker invented an international set of symbols called "symbolia" after researching cartoons around the world.

In my recent work *Book Island*, of the two protagonists, one has his eyes covered with huge glasses, and the other is blind, so that their eyes can't express anything. One reader informed me that the characters open their mouth only once throughout the book.

Additionally, although I adore giving colors to my drawing, when I arrive at the point that coloring becomes repetitious mechanical labor, I immediately cease doing it.^[1]

⁴⁾ As there are stage directions to indicate appearances in theatrical plays, I presume the reader can fill in colors by him/herself afterwards, given the color concept in the beginning. But of course, no publisher was pleased about this idea, since they regarded it as a sloppy and lazy attitude.



[1 4] Colors appear and disappear rather arbitrarily. (Comet Study, Volume #1 & #2, 2008)

4. Self-marginalization in a Peripheral Country or Exiled in His Own Land

When Naipaul, from Trinidad, said *“From the beginning, there was a mismatch, (...) ambition, coming from outside, from another culture, and our community, which had no living literary tradition. (...) Great novelists wrote about highly organized societies. I had no such society: I couldn’t share the assumptions of the writers; I didn’t see my world reflected in theirs. (...) But no writer, however individual his vision, could be separated from this society”*⁷, he was conscious about the matter of cultural inheritance. I agree. Those who have that literary tradition may just start destroying it or creating something new. Those who don’t have it must first create their entire history, in order to create or destroy. At least, dear friend, you had Camões⁸. I have no one. [or “nothing”, or “no prior tradition”]

One more thing. Even Naipaul wrote in English. In my case, I write in an isolated language. Some would say, no, your language (Korean) is the 13th most spoken in the world. But it’s only spoken in the Korean peninsula, and you have to discount half of it (North Korea). So, why is this a problem? Let us remember the case of Emil Cioran, when he abandoned the Romanian language and opted for French, because if he were to keep writing in Romanian, nobody would read him, and when he said 'nobody', you

⁷ V. S. Naipaul, *Reading and Writing: A Personal Account*, New York Review Books, 2000.

⁸ Luís Vaz de Camões is considered Portugal's and the Portuguese language's greatest poet. His mastery of verse has been compared to that of Shakespeare, Homer, Virgil and Dante. He is best remembered for his epic work *Os Lusíadas*.

know very well that he didn't necessarily mean nobody in a numerical sense. It's rather an expression based on the same frustration, which urged you to write desperate letters to get your works translated and published in English or French, all in vain.

People say that we, writers from peripheral regions, can contribute best by dealing with local things, since it's what we know best. However, I object, first, because my goal isn't contribution (to exactly what?), and second, since many times people from peripheral regions know better about the center than their own locality.

Like your *Sebastianism*⁹, every nation has their own heroic myth, which encourages the natives to believe that one day *it will be their turn* to be the center of the world. But I don't believe in hegemonic shifts. A writer from a remote region, who may succeed personally, will never be able to avoid nationalistic stigmatization. You're always the 'best Portuguese poet' or the 'best poet among the unknown', but never *the* best.

If I were at least a nationalist like you - forgive my simplification! - it would have been slightly advantageous. But I'm not. I ferociously criticize the sensibility of my own 'tribe', adding one more adversity to my collection.^[15] But the most curious thing of you is not your nationalist side, since it's just one of the million aspects you have. I want to know why you think language is irreplaceable. Why is it that *a thing that can just as well be said in one language as in another had better not be said at all*¹⁰? What are you supposed to do if the thing you want to say can't be said in any language at all?



[15] Criticizing the hype of PSY and the detrimental ubiquitous technology usage. (*Sensibility Wars*, 2011~2012)

5. Anti-empathy

If this letter weren't for you, Fernando Pessoa, the reaction of the reader at this point would be quite predictable. Certainly he/she would not be nodding with full empathy. But of course! Why bother to empathize with such a misfit? They might think, don't all writers consider themselves marginal? Why does this guy think he's so different? That's exactly what *I* would also like to know. Yet, my question isn't "Why am I so different". It's "Why am I so willing to lose common ground?" The clue may be found in *Dr. Faustus*¹¹, where the composer invites acquaintances to his last concert, only to smother the audience with extreme unease.

⁹ One aspect of the sleeping king folk-motif is part of the Portuguese mythology. It means waiting for a hero that will save Portugal and lead it to the Fifth Empire. Pessoa wrote about this hero-to-come in his epic *Mensagem*, supporting his ideas on predictions and myths.

¹⁰ Thomas Crosse, *Portuguese Sensationists* (Another Heteronym of Fernando Pessoa) (Assírio & Alvim, 2007)

¹¹ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn* (Vintage, 1999)

Instead of pursuing empathy, I hinder readers from identifying themselves with my characters. Rather than convincing readers that this story is theirs, I deny that this has much to do with them. And in a society like Korea, where there is no such thing as art but only products, and where every product has to meet the needs regulated by the *visible* hand of the market, the no. 1 marketing value is empathy. Thus, simply because you do not actively seek numerous hits of 'likes' in *Facebook* (sorry about the jargon, just imagine the stupidest book one could ever imagine), you end up isolated. And that is my core intention. Voluntary Isolation. I willingly accept not getting accepted. I even consider it as a task. When I created the main characters for my trilogy *Comet Study*, I chose a small potted plant called *microcosm* ^[I 6] because I thought it would be much more difficult for anyone to identify with a plant, than a person, or a kid, or a dog.

Permit me to go one step further. My own narrative hinders the narrative's development. I interrupt it with another episode before it develops enough. A figure appears and disappears without playing any role in the plot. Certain tendencies in me proactively look for discordance, like the task of Schönberg's atonal music. If it was fine art, these experiments might be something common or even outdated. But in a comic book? Even inside the market? Strategically, this is nothing but a suicide. Perhaps this is evidence that I am unable to obliterate the influence of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or estrangement effect). Yes, I am ending this very letter in an adverse fashion, exposing unmistakable adverse temperaments, equivalent to that of your other heteronym Baron of Teive, a man who was *unfit to live life*¹².



[I 6] A non-love story between a man and a... plant. (*Comet Study*, Volume #1, 2008)

The end, or the evolutionary dead end

Dear Fernando, my situation reminds me of the story of two Javan forest rhinoceroses who, although unwittingly facing extinction as a species, simply would not copulate with each other because they did not find their partner attractive enough. Now, *that's* truly disadvantageous. Maybe having an adverse strategy is a part of natural selection. You liked reading Darwin. Do you know what an *evolutionary dead end* means?

¹² Baron de Teive, *The Education of the Stoic* (Exact Change, 2005)

The classical view of **specialization** on a favorable, narrow niche is that it is **an evolutionary dead end** that ultimately increases the likelihood of extinction. (...) The arguments in this paper (...) strongly corroborate the view that **specializing on a narrow niche limits future evolution**.¹³ (bold added)

In other words, if you specialize excessively, surpassing a certain tipping point, you lose control of the inertia to keep specializing, so you specialize even though it's not beneficial for survival.

Is this what I am facing?

Maybe getting involved mainly in graphic narratives was itself an adverse strategy. While you write thirty-some poems in a row, just standing by your table¹⁴, I must draw, write, re-draw, re-write... countless times, until I figure out the exact composition of text and image. In short, I'm hardly allowed to be productive. Although graphic narrative as a field seems to be gaining some ground recently, everything positive is happening only in limited regions. Where I live, nobody knows you've released a new book. It's like releasing your goldfish into the Manhattan River.

You don't know Asia, but exercise some imagination as you did in *Crónicas Decorativas*¹⁵ and imagine for once that you are a far-east Asian graphic novelist. And you will be surprised how similar my situation is to yours, 80 years ago.¹⁶

Let me begin:

Your job isn't even considered an occupation, not only because you never earn a living no matter how productive you are, but more importantly because you don't sense any demand. No one asks you to produce what you produce. No magazine, no editor. The demand only exists in you.

To sustain yourself, since you do not have a true job, you have to draw illustrations for stupid advertisements or second-rate novelists, which makes you feel you're betraying yourself, or you must translate meaningless English texts, or repair cars, change engine oils, work in construction, give private lessons and soon get fired, and so on. When you receive a call from a publisher, it's always about making silly English textbooks for kids. Once, I was lucky to have an opportunity to publish a non-educational children's book, and it was a story about a *Malaysian Tapir*^[17] – also quite an adverse choice as compared to tigers or dogs – which was rejected by a Malaysian publisher because they thought my happy ending wasn't happy enough!



[17] A Tapir and her baby tip-toeing with their unlikely companion. (*Le Tapir aux pas de velours*, 2013)

¹³ Nancy A. Moran, *The Evolution of Host-plant alteration in Aphid: Evidence for specialization as a dead end*. (The American Naturalist, Vol. 132, No. 5, 1998)

¹⁴ In the letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro, dated 13th Jan. 1935, Pessoa describes how he wrote *The Keeper of the Sheep* and *Slanting Rain*, all in a row, standing up at a high chest of drawers.

¹⁵ In this short essay, Pessoa narrates his encounter with a Japanese professor, reflecting upon cultural & political issues.

¹⁶ Pessoa only published one book in his lifetime. He had to translate commercial letters and write sales advertisements to earn a living.

I'm not finished. I am testing your perseverance.

You don't receive scholarships because you're not an academic, there are no awards because you're not doing literature, there's not even a section in the bookshop... oh yes there is, a tiny shelf full of Web-cartoons in printed form.¹⁷

If you need a place to work, since in your room there's barely a space for you to lie and sleep, you don't meet any requirements for artist residency programs, because you are neither in painting (I can't afford canvases, I use A4 sheets), nor video (the only medium I can handle is analog), nor sculpture (again, can't afford materials), nor installation (the only thing I install is OS), nor conceptual art (nothing is considered less conceptual than a caricature).

In spite of such adversities, if you are still eager to pour everything you've got into this cause, then, who the hell do you think you are? A 19th century romantic artist? A Cesar Vallejo¹⁸, a Maurice Blanchot or a Henry Darger in a 21st century comic version? Please tell me all this isn't but pure nonsense! But also explain to me what makes me keep doing this. Yes, I *am* asking for psychoanalysis. What kind of pervert am I to keep hindering my own way?

Did you notice the tone of this letter is starting to resemble that of your hunchback girl¹⁹, because when you feel (or are) disabled by given obstacles, everything you honestly claim sounds like mere whining, and you know what, you must not be ashamed of whining, instead you should know how to whine, whine well! Labeling someone's claim as whining is becoming a trendy trap. Don't get caught!

Wait, let me clarify one thing; I am not a marginal person seeking to join the majority. I'm not another wounded soldier of the never-ending *struggle for recognition*. No, not that. There are people who strongly wish to exist as themselves but do not succeed in doing so under given conditions. The reason of your struggle also wasn't merely for recognition but to be yourself, or *yourselves*, wasn't it?

Maybe we are the kind, simply born as *flâneurs*, trying to find a nonexistent bench to hang around in our adversaries' park.

And here comes my last question, did you find an exit of that park which I haven't been able to find?

Long live the adverse genes!

Warm regards from your friend who greatly admires you,

Hanmin Kim
Porto, 2014

¹⁷ The huge majority of Korean cartoonists or any potential individual capable of producing graphic novels have moved into the Internet. The so-called '*Webtoons*' have increasingly become popular. Its productivity and readership in Korea would definitely belong to the world's top tier, in a quantitative sense, while comics or graphic novels published in print are scarcely produced, and the few available are swamped by imported American superhero comics or French *Bande-dessiné*.

¹⁸ Peruvian poet. Although he published little during his lifetime, he is considered one of the great poetic innovators of the 20th century. He was always a step ahead of literary currents, and each of his books was distinct from the others, and, in its own sense, revolutionary. He died on 1938, of an unknown illness in Paris.

¹⁹ *The letter from a hunchback girl to a metal worker*, by Maria José, Pessoa's only female heteronym, is a sad letter of a disabled young girl, confessing her hopeless love to a person who doesn't even seem to know she exists.