

Le Petit Journal des Refusées: a graphical reading

Gelett Burgess's witty 1896 San Francisco publication, *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, provokes two important questions that make us think about how we understand the cultural role and aesthetic identity of certain modern works of innovative art. First, can we do a critical reading of a literary work through attention to its graphic properties? Second, can we talk about an aesthetic work as modern without either straining to align it with the utopian vision and politics of the 19th-century avant-garde or reading it only as a product of mass culture?¹ In the case of *Le Petit Journal*, a study of its graphic characteristics leads us into analysis of a work whose innovative expression is situated within a middle-brow world, far from radical ideals except those of playful humor, but wonderfully self-conscious about the scene on which it depends.²

My first encounter with this publication came long before I would have been able to frame the critical issues I address here. I spotted it on the desk of the then curator of the History Department at the Oakland Museum when I was an assistant to the Registrar. I had been hired for my typing skills, and such an encounter was as unlikely as it was life changing. Already actively immersed in a world of small press printers and experimental writers, I could recognize how unique a graphic work it was at a glance. The wallpaper cover, the trapezoidal shape, the strangely weird and wonderfully intriguing image on the front were so intriguing I could not keep myself from transgressing decorum and seizing the thing for examination. Questions immediately arose to drive my research. I wanted to know how this publication compared to its contemporary context and whether its graphic form was as uniquely unusual as it looked, or whether it borrowed and recycled graphic

elements already in use. Returning to this after three decades, I can frame that original response in terms of critical considerations about experimental work and modern publications.

Studies of modernism have suffered from two binarisms. The first critical formulation divided works of art from those of mass production.³ The various proponents of Frankfurt school and critical theory argued that the rarified aesthetics of esoteric fine art was a political tool to counter the mind-numbing, formulaic products of the culture industries.⁴ Since so many modern artists, especially in the 20th century, are fascinated with mass culture, practitioners of critical theory had to justify these acts of appropriation and media transformation. Theoretical language assigned a redemptive uplift, specifically, a quality of *critique*, to the act of bringing the dross of mass production across the line and into the realm of fine art, but never allowed for the flow of ideas and values to praise mass cultural works.⁵ In the second binarism, cultural studies theorists condemned esoteric art as elitist and argued for the empowering effects of subculture audiences created through mass-culture artifacts.⁶

In these dreary struggles, the supporters of Brecht or Beckett do mortal combat with the fans of Stephen King and *Star Wars* (usually in academic realms far removed from any but the most symbolic political acts). But critical theorists and cultural studies proponents are united by their adherence to a larger principle: the myth of a utopian role for art or aesthetic experience as a politicizing force in culture. To argue otherwise, they suggest, is to fall into the camp of the neo-conservatives, and align one's aspirations for fine art to either an Arnoldian notion of moral improvement, or abandon all moral responsibility and give over to mere hedonistic pleasure or rampant consumerist tactics.⁷

But between the pole of art as politics (whether through esoteric resistance, activist didacticism, interventionist strategies, or organizing principles) and that of art as product, lies an enormous terrain filled with works of fine art that were not and never could be considered utopian—but which are indisputably modern.

This outline of critical positions is over-simplified, but is meant to point to the problem that arises immediately in trying to read a work like *Le Petit Journal*, which remains absolutely, squarely, in the middle-brow cultural realm. Conceived as a parody of the ways literary elitism is produced and received in print culture, it is also a highly consumable piece, meant to be enjoyed by the very scene and circles whose activities and attitudes it exposes. Its audience is the same as the of *The Wave* and *The Wasp*, San Francisco journals detailing the current theater and social scene, for which Burgess also wrote and did interviews. We have few critical models for addressing such a playful work, at least in the modern era, though if we survey the field of modern art and literature, we see example after example of work that is part of the cultural milieu it parodies. (I'm thinking of the creations of John Singer Sargeant, Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase, Edith Wharton, and others in the American scene that were quite consumable to their bourgeois audiences, even popular, and rarely challenged formal conventions even when they cast their tales and themes in an critical light). Not by accident has so much of this work fallen out of the lineage of “modernism” defined as a critical study based on the two innovative engines of formal experimentation or the radical avant-garde. Work suited to parlor or sitting room may be deemed worthy of sociological or cultural historical attention, but art, in the modern era. is supposed to live up to the avant-garde agenda. What makes *Le Petit Journal* useful is that it can't be put

into those critically acceptable traditions. Instead it points us towards that substantive body of acceptable and consumable works that were enjoyed with afternoon tea or in the family sitting room. Clues to this are everywhere in the *Journal* itself, particularly in the many journals from which its authors purport to have been rejected (e.g. the Salvation Army's *War Cry*, *The Chap Book*, *The Journal of Insanity* (a real publication, later *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, and so on). *Le Petit Journal* eschews the social climbing impulse of radical work. It remains happily situated in that bourgeois milieu, branded with being insufficiently critical, complacently consumable, happily aiming for a broad audience. It has not a single impulse to "subvert," "resist," "overturn," or "intervene" in the culture of which it is a part.

The other challenge posed by *Le Petit Journal* is that it has to be appreciated by reading its graphic properties, as well as its visual and literary characteristics. Our training provides ways to read words among words, and images among images, but few aesthetic artifacts are examined through their graphical language. Even illustrated works are usually read for their texts, with the images treated as accessory information.⁸ Works that challenge disciplinary boundaries, most notably, the complex editions issued by William Blake, pose stiff challenges for many readers, but even these are not read for their *graphical* features. Why? Because we hardly have any critical vocabulary for talking about the organization and composition of pages, the way these create development over a sequence of openings, the use of patterns, decoration, typographic formats and styles, and the specific ways the methods of print production are thought about in the conception of a work. Bindings, typographic treatment and other matters are

usually left for bibliophiles to ponder in their own peculiar backwater of a terrain once known as bibliographical studies.

With these many preliminary considerations in mind, we can approach this striking and unusual 1896 publication, *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*, the brainchild and largely direct production of Gelett Burgess, and elaborate its aesthetic and cultural specificity through attention to its graphical qualities and its modernity. Burgess (1866-1951) had become famous for his ditty, “A Purple Cow,” published in *The Lark*, another San Francisco journal he had helped edit during its two year existence from 1895-97. Similar in format to other publications of its day aimed at a broad audience (*Harper’s* or *Sunset*), *The Lark* was a monthly journal consisting of poems, short themes, and stories that were amusing in tone and conventional in character. As the first step in what was a long career as a humorist and novelist, *The Lark* provided Burgess with a platform from which to launch his aspirations as a writer of talent and wit.

The outstanding graphic features of *Le Petit Journal* make it a unique work of art that presents itself as a periodical publication: it is an unusual shape, printed on wallpaper, it is hand-drawn throughout, it has striking graphic borders, and typesetting that would not be found in a conventional journal. The playful graphic spirit of invention, within a consistent border-and-text block format, introduces variations at every page turning. [Figure 1]

Le Petit Journal announces that it is an ephemeral (date stamped and time sensitive) periodical (serial) publication through its pamphlet format. The numbering on the cover masthead shows that it purports to be the first in a sequence of other numbers and thus part of that world of publications in which, to paraphrase Robert Scholes’ many

highly persuasive comments, modernism was made.⁹ But it is actually a unique publishing event filled with verbal and graphic jests. This is only one of the many fictions that pervade a work that pretends to be a collection of pieces written by women authors that have each been refused by at least three other publications (hence its title). It was produced in San Francisco, by a group of young artists in Burgess's circle with exposure to an international range of magazines, but within the realm of a bustling but still provincial city.¹⁰ *Le Petit Journal* combines the graphical sophomoric tastes of a youthful team working furiously on a whim and an obvious knowledge of a world of contemporary magazines across the spectrum of cutting edge British and American experiments and popular press productions. Among the most famous of the former would have been *The Yellow Book* (1894-97), and closer to home, the productions of the highly popular and influential American graphic designer, Will Bradley (who was also cited in *Le Petit Journal's* pages).¹¹ But seeking graphical sources among these and their ilk serves only part of the cause. We can't explain Burgess entirely by drawing on Bradley any more than by pointing to Beardsley (whose style is imitated throughout) or Burne-Jones, whose equally elaborate decorative sensibility looks staged and staid by contrast (and who is clearly not a direct source of inspiration). Many popular and vernacular sources for Burgess's work can be found quite close at hand – in the same Bay Area environment in which the *Journal* would have been received.

The production values say a great deal about this publication. With the exception of the sections of text set and printed letterpress, the *Journal* is entirely hand-drawn. The drawings were in turn engraved as metal plates so the highly graphic black-and-white borders, images, and hand-lettered titling type, could be printed in relief. The work is a

do-it-yourself independent publication that is entirely the work of Burgess and his buddies. The name of “editor” James Marrion II is one of Burgess’s many pseudonymous identities. Deliberately not professional, slick, or commercial, the Journal is a parodic imitation of high art literary magazines and their more popular forms and the hand-drawn quality registers the parodic touch.¹² Drawn illustrations still dominated journalistic reporting in this period, and were the almost exclusive way of rendering images in book production. Photographic reproduction was still technically crude and mainly used for documentation rather than illustration.¹³ Only in the realm of children’s literature (the work of Kate Greenaway or Beatrix Potter) are books or pamphlets entirely hand-drawn. Illustrated works for adults featured tipped-in etchings, wood engravings, in-line etched plates printed with type and text. Almost without exception, the two registers of image and language are markedly distinct, even when, as in the case of William Morris and his many imitators, every attempt is made at an aesthetic harmony among them. But in this instance, drawing is a crucial part of the conceptual work. Burgess draws borders, titling type, and images. He arranges movable type in peculiar ways. And he creates a graphically active environment that is, paradoxically, at once completely consistent while filled with variation. *Le Petit Journal* is a hand-drawn graphic pastiche that imitates a range of styles, a true oddity.

The unusual shape of the book recalls Peter Newell’s *Slant Book*, though that was first issued in 1912.¹⁴ The trapezoid cutting had to have been done after the printing and binding were completed, as a final trim to the finished work. Pop-up and cut-out works of paper engineering had been perfected in the 19th century, the labor then (as now) was always done by hand, often as piece-work in a cottage industry that allowed women to

work at home. But this artifact masquerades as a mass-produced object, while its shape and the use of wallpaper makes each copy unique.¹⁵ The pamphlet is comprised of 16 pages (4 sheets), on which five have letterpress type blocks, five exhibit decorative or special typesetting qualities (mixed fonts and initial letters), and two have shaped typographical layouts. One of these follows a musical score, the other is a crude poem (presumably by Burgess) about Spring that is almost sprinkled onto the page, its letters set in a wild ride of hills and valleys of crudely rhyming lines.¹⁶ [Figure 2] The titling type is all hand lettered, and the cover type is a peculiar invention of pseudo-medievalism, part uncial, part Byzantine, but that resembles many contemporary display fonts. As for the borders – they comprise a marvelous inventory of designs, each of which is elaborate and remarkable for its humor. In its overall style and attitude, this is a nonsense work, but one that in its way comments upon the social and print contexts of literary production.

When Burgess looked around for sources for his imagery and designs, his obvious idols were clear, as noted above. Beardsley and Bradley are both named in the piece in the *Journal* titled, “Our Clubbing List,” an alphabetic inventory of admired and disdained contemporaries. Though we see direct quotes from Beardsley in the style of sinewy, suggestive linework and use of pattern in the graphic approach to black and white drawings of figures and decorative elements on the cover of the *Journal*, Bradley’s direct influence is more in the concept than in the visual features of design. Bradley’s elegantly refined art has little relation to the juvenile antics of the young Burgess, whose playful scratchings are comic, even vulgar. But the idea of self-publishing as an artistic expression in graphic arts gets legitimacy by association with the work of the acclaimed

designer. Burgess has an exciting sense of graphic design and pattern. But he does not make use of a finely tuned approach to page design in this work. It is anti-elegant, especially by contrast to the work of private press designs. For instance, think of the sophistication that Charles Ricketts demonstrated in his approach to book spaces and their balance. *The Sphinx*, printed in 1894, is a dramatic example of daring use of white space and typographic placement.¹⁷ But Burgess's graphic sensibility was formed in a more vernacular scene, including his two-year stint as editor of *The Lark*, the regular periodical that served as a spring-board for *Le Petit Journal*.¹⁸ A selection from Bay Area publications at the time that includes college year books, popular lifestyle magazines, business and commercial catalogues, news journals, and of course literary art publications gives a view of the graphic languages in Burgess's ken.

Focusing on details of the design, we can begin with the figures on the cover of Burgess's *Journal*. The all-important audience and mainstay of financial and social support for literary publications were fine bourgeois matrons happy to be slightly titillated by mildly naughty and distinctly witty works. That quintessential lady is featured on the right of the lineup of figures that grace the cover of the *Journal*. [Figure 1 again] Her still corseted figure, her long hair bound into a modest but still elaborate chignon, her bust exposed, neck graceful, she is the very image of the fur-draped, hatted lady seen at exhibition openings, theatrical performances, social events, and running her own salon teas or evenings. A demographic group brought into being by industrialism, the affluent and even sometimes extravagantly wealthy, women who kept the social life of culture going, they had means, position, and a sense of the role they were to play. This is the world of Henry James and Edith Wharton, or, in San Francisco, of the Spreckels

and de Brettvilles, the Gumps and other influential families of high society. Managers of large households and mistresses of social life, they had power within their spheres and in accord with a hierarchy well articulated and understood. A similar figure appears in one of Edward Penfield's beautiful advertisements for *Harper's Magazine*, a respected periodical. [Figure 3] Posed and poised, the lovely woman is the apparently ideal reader—not to mention audience for advertisements—of the *Journal*.

The 1896 edition of *Social Etiquette*, published in Oakland, California, shows the hatted, coiffed, gloved, draped in fur-tipped cape lady in a hand-tinted photographic frontispiece captioned, "Good Morning." [Figure 4] The title page provides a lengthy list of activities forming a "Complete Guide to Self-Culture." "The art of dressing well; conversation; courtship; etiquette for children; letter-writing; artistic home and interior decorations, etc." within its "Rules of etiquette for all occasions [...]." Though not in evening dress, the fashionable figure is cast in the same mold as the figure on the *Journal's* cover. Burgess' world and her world are the same, and conform equally to "The Manners and Customs of Polite Society."

Burgess has rendered his lady in flamboyant stylistic imitation of Aubrey Beardsley's infamous drawings for *The Yellow Book*¹⁹, almost a cross between the "Fat Lady" rejected for Volume I and the woman in Volume II's "comedy ballet of marionettes. The figure next to her, of the Japanese actor, is straight out of the prints so popular in the second half of the 19th century. The visage, though perhaps not a direct copy, has a strong resemblance to that of Sawamura Sojuro in a print by Utagawa Kunisada from about 1860, but numerous other examples could be cited.²⁰ The exotic figure in profile, with a plume in his headband, is the type of iconic Native American

made popular in the prints of Karl Bodmer (as well as in the Buffalo Bill Wild West advertisements, the works of Edward Curtis, Catlin and even Currier and Ives). The skeleton, an ever popular figure in the nonsense and sophomoric humor world, is dressed in a fine female outfit on the cover and shows up again on the back page careening along on a bicycle at top speed. [Figure 5] In that context, it is an ad for the shop that produced the metal plates from which *Le Petit Journal* was printed. Though we can only speculate, quite possibly the proprietor agreed to offset Burgess's production costs in exchange for this advertisement. What is funny about the cycling skeleton is that it sets up association with the very much in-vogue and highly gendered bicycle advertisements of the day. Posters by Bradley, Georges Massias, and others showed female figures abandoning themselves (and their clothes) to their new freedom of movement, floating off their seats and handlebars in attitudes of semi-nude *jouissance*. The macabre skeleton is a witty comment on these, as is the treatment of each of the figures in the cover composition, including the corpse of classical tradition laid out on the floor in a toga edged with a meander pattern. All of these images are popular, consumable references to types, recycled images that depend on their association with already familiar motifs from print culture.

One of the skilful aspects of Burgess's graphic art is his ability to take full advantage of the specific features of relief printing. For instance, the exaggerated perspective of the floor tiles, created in part by the striking contrast of black and white shapes, reproduces beautifully in one single print run. Burgess makes good use of positive and negative spaces in his designs. He does not work them into the detailed tapestries that characterize Burne-Jones's elaborate designs, nor into the organic

intertwined fields of Morris's borders or wall-papers, with their wonderfully balanced tones built of black and white frequencies. Burgess exhibits the cartoonist-illustrator's confident fluency with the graphic language of print. His drawing technique is as far from fine art subtleties of chiaroscuro tonal values as it is from the well-disciplined designs of Morris and Burne-Jones. His iconography (the figures, their costumes, their postures) and his graphic method are grounded in popular print culture, not high art or the fine press designs he mocks.

In the center of the cover composition of the *Journal* naked bodies form a wreath. The naked forms serve the same purpose as floating banners bearing text. Their labels are written in the same careful handwriting as that which adorns the strips of ribbon on the front cover of *The Wave*, dated December 27th, 1896, and published in San Francisco "For those in the Swim." [Figure 6] "Poetry," "Music," "Sport," "Books," "Pictures," and "The Merrie Life," read the rippling surfaces surrounding shoes and a lute on that actual periodical publication. The banners continue their aerial dance, weaving around a set of books and an artist's palette on *The Wave*'s cover. But on Burgess's naked figures, the inscriptions say, "Art," "Literature," "Counterpoint," and "Yachting," among other phrases that situate this irreverent exercise in its society context. These floating devices, graphic artifices and decorative excesses are all part of the stock-in-trade of titling and advertising art of the end of the century. They are a frequently used motif in frontispieces, borders, chapter headings, and illustrated title pages. Within a decade a new modern look would streamline forms and disdain the frivolous frippery of such devices.

The cover of *The Wave* used for contrast here has another graphic element on it, a portrait bust of Albert E. Castle. That image, and personage, show we are squarely in the

idiom of the San Francisco bourgeois world. Listed as a member of the Union League Club, Castle was an exemplary representative of the demographic group that Burgess mimics and courts. The well-appointed businessman, carefully but rather generically drawn, exemplifies the identity of audience at which *The Wave* aimed. This bust portraiture is in turn caricatured by Burgess on the verso of the *Journal*'s cover. [Figure 7] Divided into four quadrants, the "Portrait de Nos Contemporains" is treated with just the same dignity as the portrait of the civic leader Castle. The conventions are used and cited, called to attention as conventions, in Burgess's treatment, which features a peek-a-boo design of skeletons in the border around the faces. Empty sockets peer through the clavicle and ulna, and the curling tailbones of the spine on the left suggest a source that is, ahem, not quite human. The games of visual pun and play demand attention from the reader, even if they lack the innuendo of, for instance, Beardsley's suggestive eroticism.

The first interior page of the supposed journal describes its editorial policy inside a border of crazed diagonal interlacing. One thinks of Owen Jones's incredible collection of patterns and borders in *The Grammar of Ornament* as the ne plus ultra of design sources, but of course, nothing of this mad variety would have shown in its well-researched and carefully drawn plates. We are thrown back into the nonsense world of Burgess and his "goops" – those rubber-limbed figures he invented as a way to instruct children into the ways of good (and incidentally, bad) behavior. [Figure Goop 8] Though he introduced them in *The Lark*, Burgess featured the goops in many books that ran into many editions and were successful bits of amusing and diverting nursery-school didacticism. But the *Journal* is not a children's book. Late 19th century print culture was very carefully divided to appeal to different segments of the population according to

assumptions about reading habits mapped onto gender, age, class, and religious and political orientation.

The cover of another contemporary Bay area journal, *The Argonaut*, offers a distinctly sober contrast to the diversions of *The Wave* or its rival San Francisco journal, *The Wasp*. [Figure 9 Argonaut and Figure 10 Wasp] In *The Argonaut*, narrow columns of type report events on the political stage. The type signals that the journal is meant to communicate important matters to serious readers. The interior pages of *The Wave* and *The Wasp* are aimed at women readers. They have small chunks of text for those with a short attention span and an interest in knowing what to wear and see, where to stay and be seen, and who is doing what in stylishly fashionable society. Literary journals like *Cosmopolitan* (the London-based publication that was the first venue for publication of Stéphane Mallarmé's typographically adventurous and conceptually radical *Un Coup de Dés*), or *Harper's*, *The American Chap-Book*, or, to take a Bay area example, *The Satyr* (a late-comer that almost seemed anachronistic at the time its naked faun cover appeared in the early 20th century) were omnibus publications. [Figure 11 Satyr] They featured short essays, fiction, poetry, commentary, and drawings in a miscellany of curious and amusing pieces. Though not quite as time sensitive as *The Wave*, with its interviews and reviews of current theatrical and social events, these were largely ephemeral publications. But these assortments of varia are the model for *Le Petit Journal*—as well as being the field of journals by which the pieces in Burgess's publication were supposedly rejected.

The letterpress type in the text blocks in the *Journal* is a form of Clarendon. First introduced in 1845 by the Fan Type Foundry, Clarendon is a refinement of the display faces known as Egyptians because of their slab serifs, which gained currency through the

wide variety of castings and designs.²¹ [Figure 12– detail of Clarendon and/or font sample] A highly popular 19th century font, it is very dark and legible in the small point sizes used for the text blocks. But though the mixed-font used in the setting of the piece titled “Our Clubbing List,” and the two more elaborately shaped texts in *Le Petit Journal*, are unusual, the fonts would have been easily supplied by any job shop in the 1890s. Though monotype and linotype had become viable means of automating the setting of long texts, the average printer’s supply of display faces had been substantially augmented by the demand for decorative designs. An almost infinite variety of wood and metal fonts brought elements of every flavor of ethnically inspired and historically inflected form into public view.

The hand-drawn cover type on the *Journal* has literally dozens of cognate fonts to which it can be compared, with its stylized geometric serifs and slightly exotic cast. [Figure display fonts 13] Hand-drawn mastheads and journal titles were common –the German aesthetic publication, *Jugend*, for instance, engaged a different artist for each cover, including a redesign of the name in a hand-rendered font. By contrast, mainstream newspapers had had standard typographic mastheads for centuries, and book publication used metal type almost exclusively for titling purposes, even when the text was surrounded by decorative motifs and borders. This conventional approach to the design allowed all elements on the pages to be printed using letterpress technology. Burgess’s pages would either have to have been printed in two runs, one for the letterpress text blocks and one for the borders, or the border plates would have had to have been mounted on type-high blocks with a space that accommodated the locked up form of the metal type. The mixed-font typography on Burgess’s pages was widespread in

advertising, as pages from a contemporary business directory make as clear at the back pages of *The Wasp*. [Figure 14 Business Directory and Figure 15 interior pages of *Wasp*]

The hand-drawn approach to lettering had received enormous momentum from lithographic poster designs whose free-form renderings were not limited by the constraints of metal. When drawn letters were integrated with visual images, they could be printed from a lithographic surface or, as in the case of the *Journal*, in relief engravings that had been made from hand-drawn originals. The technology of lithography was reserved almost entirely for commercial publications, posters, advertisements, and these mainstream publications. Neither lithography nor silkscreen were considered fine art methods of production until well into the twentieth century.²² Metal relief plates were part of a longer technical and artistic print tradition, but Burgess's use of them comes from the commercial application to mass print production, not fine art atelier traditions. Burgess had formal training in technical drawing from MIT, the institution from which he received his degree before coming to teach at the University of California at Berkeley (the post he lost by defacing one of the many statues erected by prominent civic leader and dentist, Henry Cogswell, of himself, in his own honor). Burgess clearly had professional skills as well as creative talent, and he drew on both.

Following along in the sequence of *Le Petit Journal*, on the spread following the introduction, the "Portrait du rédacteur-en-chef" is presented in silhouette. [Figure 16] Here the juvenile reference is obvious in the shape of the head, the curling hair. But the joke is that the frontal silhouette gives us no clue about the figure's identity. The surrounding border is filled with rejection letters and bitter tears as one female author after another receives those oh so dismaying notes from editors refusing their work. No

doubt the gender play was meant to enthrall those women readers who were crucial to the subscription base of *The Lark*, *The Wave*, and other stylish publications. Facing this, the “Ghost of a Flea,” with its obvious Blake reference, is surrounded by a border of sketched and scraggly black cats. [Figure 17] The number of 19th century references – literary and graphic – to black cats is too numerous to detail (with Edgar Allen Poe and Charles Baudelaire being the most obvious). The popularity of Théophile Steinlen’s iconic poster for the Parisian café of the same name reified the enthusiasm for this motif. But the goofy cartoon on the verso, as a tail piece for the “Ghost” text, is right out of popular nonsense and humor illustrations. [Figure 18] It recalls the sophomoric cartoons that featured in yearbooks for colleges and high schools. *The Blue and Gold*, University of California’s yearbook, and illustrations in *Sunset* magazine from the late 1890s and first years of the 1900s, match the crude style and boyish humor of these cavorting figures. [Figures 19 and 20] But the border on this final page of “The Ghost of the Flea” consists of balding, buzz-cut heads with interlocking tongues surrounded by vibrating psychedelic auras. This border is of another order entirely. Reminiscent of the 1960s underground “comix” of Robert Crumb, it seems amazingly daring and wildly innovative for the 1890s.

Since every border is different, the openings within the pamphlet format of *Le Petit Journal* often create improbable juxtapositions of style and design. For instance, the page facing these literally tongue-tied heads features a border in cubist geometrical rendering. [Figure 21] In the pages ahead, swirling goops, grinning heads and masks, classical columns and masks, screaming devils, plaid and polka-dotted animals all parade in the remaining border frames. All have corollaries in the wider field of publication,

even in the Bay area, where the various motifs of *Le Petit Journal* rhyme with the classical arch of *Sunset* magazine, the leaves and vines of *Philopolis*, and so on. [Figure 20 *Sunset* again and Figure 22 *Philopolis*] In type and general function, these graphic motifs are generic, part of an established approach to framing type and images on covers, title pages, and book or journal publications. Burgess's parodic imitations of existing forms comments on the styles of the day through their exaggeration and satiric rendering.

Reading *Le Petit Journal*'s visual elements in association with the cartoons of sophomoric humor or the playful entertainments diverting a conventional San Francisco bourgeois audience connects the work to its cultural milieu. Visually and graphically innovative and imaginative, *Le Petit Journal* is not utopian in the least. It does not have a whiff of social reform, or flirt with the radicalism of revolutionary sensibilities. And yet, Burgess's curious production is nonetheless absolutely, indisputably modern. It is modern because it is only conceivable within the conditions of a highly industrialized culture, one in which mass print culture was the common currency of exchange of ideas and forms. What is remarkable about *Le Petit Journal* is that it engages the complexity of late 19th century cultural production with self-reflection and wit – but without any of the posturing affectation of its fine art peers, or pretentious aspirations (filled with contradictions) of its sources of inspiration in the arts and crafts movement. Nor does it turn its back on all social or cultural insight, as it could be argued the fine press editions turned out by Daniel Berkeley Updike or Bruce Rogers attempt to do with their lofty aspirations to revive the humanist print traditions of the Italian Renaissance. The ideology of *Le Petit Journal* is utterly within its sphere of influences, and while it is a meta-work that archly exposes the very networks within which its conception and reception are inevitably linked, it

demonstrates its dependence on those bourgeois circumstances in its content and formal expression. In that regard, *Le Petit Journal* is an exemplary instance of modern aesthetic activity, but one that cannot be absorbed into the orthodoxy of avant-garde theory.

In conclusion, without dismissing the importance of the avant-garde, or of utopian impulses and attempts to engage radical aesthetics in a project of social reform, whether in the 19th century or today, it seems important to be able to look at works of the modern period without forcing them into the critical frames that have been its legacy. It seems equally important that we not dismiss the aesthetic properties of graphical works when we read them, either as fine art objects or as products of mass culture. The graphical features are an embodiment of, and an index to, the sensibility and ideas of these works.

Somehow, it became a requirement of modern studies that every and any artifact of aesthetic culture be read into these critical frameworks of resistance and intervention—or else be condemned to being sell-out work utterly aligned with the culture industries. We need to peel off the blinders that have made it impossible to conceive of modernism and artistic imagination outside of outmoded critical binaries. *Le Petit Journal* is not a utopian work. It offers no vision of alternative culture. It does not want to change the world. But it does offer a witty, and highly self-conscious insight into the workings of the world of which it is a part. And that world is absolutely modern—networked, with publicity machines and transatlantic culture industries of literary, lifestyle, and artistic publication working at full tilt and in active exchange with each other. *Le Petit Journal* is an exemplary instance of a non-utopian modern work whose sensibilities and arguments are exhibited through its graphical features.

¹ See the recent issue of *Modernism and Modernity*, for instance the essay by Elizabeth Miller, in which she goes to elaborate lengths to try to make an argument reconciling the contradictions in William Morris's work. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller "William Morris, Print Culture, and the Politics of Aestheticism," *Modernism/modernity*, Volume 15, Number 3, September 2008, pp. 477-50.

² I had been hired in a SETA training program, an opportunity for which I remain grateful to this day, since the experience at the Museum led me to pursue a PhD at the University of California, Berkeley, and I trace the initial impulse for scholarship to this initial encounter with the remarkable *Journal*.

³ Andreas Huyssen, *After The Great Divide* (NY: Macmillan Palgrave, 1986) and Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," written in 1981, reprinted in *Modern Art and the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) pp.3-37. Crow's article argues for the intellectual and political superiority of the avant-garde in a way that reifies a distinction that has come to be taken as historical fact, though it is much more evidently a creation of critical discourse.

⁴ This belief can even be considered the defining tenet of critical theory as it emerges from the Frankfurt school. See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (NY: Continuum, 1996); Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), Ernst Bloch et.al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, (NY: Verso, 1980).

⁵ Since 20th century modernism is populated by artists fascinated with mass culture and appropriating it into their works through various techniques (collage, assemblage, ready-mades, detournement, and appropriation) the rhetorical stance generally assigns a redemptive uplift to the fine art act. The list is long from Picasso, Stuart Davis, Marcel Duchamp, Georges Braque, Raoul Hausmann, John Heartfield, Max Ernst, Hannah Hoch, the Situationists, Lettrists, all of pop art from Warhol and Lichtenstein to Romare Bearden, much of photorealism, postmodernism in the work of Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo, Jenny Holzer, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, to the current work of Jane Hammond, Susan Bee.

⁶ Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (NY: Pantheon, 1965) and *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London and NY: Routledge, 1980) and Dick Hebdige, *Subcultures* (London and NY: Routledge, 2005) and *Hiding in the Light* (London and NY: Routledge, 1989).

Practitioners of cultural studies felt mass-culture artifacts provided a democratic field on which an alternative program of political agency could be conceived. Rather than resist the absorptive exploitations of the culture industries through esoterically difficult formal aesthetic strategies, they proposed that mass and popular culture could be used to create alternative networks of power. Subcultures, reading strategies, audience agency were all features of this power formation and its ability to use mass culture both to resist elite hegemony and to transform the supposedly exploitative mind-numbing effects of culture industries. From this perspective, fine art is hopelessly elitist, and only the products and

uses of mass culture artifacts are worthy of critical study, and not for their aesthetic properties, but for their supposedly political capacity.

⁷ Curious range here including conservative and neo-conservative positions, Hilton Kramer, Dave Hickey or pseudo-conservatives for whom the basic Arnoldian premise still holds, though they are not strident.

⁸ Stuart Sillars, *Visualization in English Popular Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁹ Robert Scholes, *Paradoxy of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) makes many of these points.

¹⁰ Ernst Peixotto and Bruce Porter had long careers in the San Francisco arts.

Interestingly, Peixotto's murals adorn the ballroom at the Filoli estate near Hillsborough, while Porter was responsible for the design of the gardens of this extravagant spot, created by Mr. and Mrs. William Bowers Bourn beginning in 1915. Porter Garnett, the fourth collaborator, was a member of the Bohemian club and writer of various Arts and Crafts influenced works.

¹¹ Will Bradley issued the first volume of *Will Bradley: His Book*, in May 1896 from his imprint, The Wayside Press, in Chicago. <http://www.willbradley.com/chron/index.htm> see also: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3459.html>

¹² The literary parodies in this publication deserve more attention than I am giving them, but that is a study for another article.

¹³ Photographs were often used for documentation within pages where illustrations and drawings are used as decorative elements or borders.

¹⁴ Peter Newell (1862-1924) was a children's book author and illustrator. Two of his more novel designs, *The Slant Book* and *The Hole Book* (the former trimmed to trapezoidal shape with strong italic type as its font, the latter with an aperture drilled through the entire text block and incorporated into every page's text or graphic design), have been reprinted from their early 20th century original editions.

http://lambiek.net/artists/n/newell_p.htm

¹⁵ I've seen several reproductions of different instances of the initial edition, and each is different because of the paper designs.

¹⁶ I say "presumably" because the individual pieces are not identified by author, but among the four participants, Burgess is the one with the track record as a writer of humorous poetry and prose. Porter Garnett's literary oeuvre was consistently more serious.

¹⁷ For an image of the cover, see

<http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/exhibits/wilde/images/sphinx.jpg>

¹⁸ Johanna Drucker, *Le Petit Journal* (Houston: Rice University Press, 2009); (digital edition, forthcoming Fall 2009).

¹⁹ I'm indebted to Lorraine Janzen for these identifications. She went on to add that in the second instance, the hat, dress, and pose are remarkably similar.

²⁰ See: <http://www.kunisada.de/Kunisada-1852/kabuki-1852/series293/series293-part1.htm> for the series of Kunisada prints of Japanese actors.

²¹ See [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarendon_\(typeface\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clarendon_(typeface)) and <http://www.itcfonts.com/fonts/detail.htm?pid=201488>

²² Acceptability for lithographic prints as fine art comes late, in spite of the groundbreaking work of late 19th century poster work by major figures, fine and commercial

artists alike. Thomas Hart Benton, Louis Corvinth, and other artists were doing lithographic prints in the 1930s, but the stigma of chromolithography attached to the popular artwork of Currier and Ives and others, kept the hierarchy intact. Silk screen does not achieve fine art status until Andy Warhol introduced its use.