**Tangled in a Web of Ink**

When ‘Black Widow’ was first published in *Misty* in the late 1970s comics were considered ephemeral products of low cultural value and not worthy of serious critical attention compared to works of high culture such as paintings. However, the visual techniques used by Jaume Rumeu in ‘Black Widow’ to represent clothes, hair and spider’s webs are worth studying in some detail. Most writing about comics concentrates on the story and plot structure, but this essay will focus on visual elements such as brush marks, composition and drawing style. By using the formalist ideas of Modernist art critics to look at the *ways* in which these images were made, rather than what they *literally represent*, the visual is allowed to take centre stage.

There are precedents for drawing on Modernist theories to look at comics. Andrei Molotiu used the Modernist art critics Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg to analyse Steve Ditko’s artwork on *Amazing Spider-Man* from the 1960s.[[1]](#footnote-1) Clement Greenberg was the Craig Revel Horwood of contemporary art criticism in mid-twentieth century America, his provocative essays defended and promoted abstract art, particularly the Abstract Expressionist movement and artists like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko who emerged in America in the 1940s. In this essay Greenberg’s theories as outlined in *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939) and *Modernist Painting* (1960) will be used to examine the formalist aspects of Rumeu’s artwork for ‘Black Widow’.

In *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* Greenberg included comics in a list of works he considered to be examples of ‘…that thing that the Germans give the wonderful name of Kitsch; popular, commercial art and literature with their chromotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc, etc.’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Greenberg saw comics as examples of low culture created to distract and entertain the masses using tired formulaic clichés. This was in opposition to the avant-garde work of abstract artists which he believed was important in creating new and original forms of high culture. Although Greenberg was no fan of comics his ideas are invaluable in considering the ways in which all artworks, including comics, are made and communicate.

In the introduction to this book David Roach notes that when Rumeu started working for *Misty* in the late 1970s ‘…his artwork had become increasingly dark, textured and rough-edged, mixing humour with some startling imagery and a surprising gift for horror.’The dark, textured and rough-edged aspects of Rumeu’s artwork are evident in the title page for the second ‘Black Widow’ episode **(Figure 1)**. Although obviously an image of Mrs Webb in her guise as the Black Widow it is not a straightforward naturalistic representation, her jet-black hair takes the shape of a flattened abstract spider and her disembodied head is floating at the centre of a stylised spider’s web.

How does this image then compare with Greenberg’s Modernist theories? Greenberg’s basic premise was that each art form should focus on what is unique to it as a medium. In the case of painting that was mark-making, emphasising the painted surface and making evident the flatness and shape of the canvas itself, thereby rejecting the focus on representation and storytelling that had dominated the medium from the Renaissance onwards. Greenberg expressed these ideas most clearly in his polemical essay *Modernist Painting*

‘..., Manet’s became the first Modernist pictures by the virtue of the frankness with which they declared the flat surfaces on which they were painted. The Impressionists, in Manet’s wake, abjured underpainting and underglazes, they leave the eye under no doubt as to the fact that the colours they used were made of paint that came from tubes or pots.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

How can these ideas be applied to Rumeu’s drawing of the Black Widow? Of course we see a woman’s face and a spider’s web but we are also aware of the ways in which the image has been created. The edges of the drawing show the rough brush marks of the black ink used to create the background, white lines have been painted over or scratched into the ink with a razor blade to create the effect of the spider’s web. Finally the stylised hair was inked over the top of these layers to create the spider silhouette. It is the way that these elements are represented by textured marks made of ink that makes this such a startling image and allows it to convey the horror of the Black Widow to the reader.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The ‘Black Widow’ contains many examples of Rumeu’s expressive ink drawing style which is not simply naturalistic or representational but instead seems to delight in mark-making itself. Background textures and the patterns on clothing and curtains do not describe three-dimensional form but create purely decorative patterns **(Figure 2)**. In one panel Sadie, one of the main characters, is shown at home, the designs on the curtain and her mother’s dress are recognisably ‘1970s’ but they do little to represent the folds of the fabric and instead create patterns on the surface of the page. The marks used to describe the wallpaper behind Sadie in this panel are used very differently in the panels below where they represent the shadow Black Widow casts on the map of the British Isles in her lair, these marks were created for effect rather than to accurately represent specific surfaces or spaces. Similarly, the Black Widow’s lair contains different representations of spider’s webs some which are naturalistic and others that are decorative. On the right of the panel the marks used earlier to describe Sadie’s wallpaper appear again but now as web-like shadows, the central section uses the technique of scratching into the ink described above and on the left is a more realistically drawn web canopy over the Black Widow’s throne.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The next episode opened with Black Widow announcing her vengeful plan to take over the British Isles using spiders with the help of Sadie and her friend Freda **(Figure 3)**. Here the graphic mark-making used to represent the lair is even more textured than before, this is most evident in Black Widow’s shadow falling on the map and the web that frames it, creating a heightened emotional effect rather than an naturalistic representation of the space. The cast shadow of Black Widow’s hair again takes on an abstract spider-like form and by falling on the map adds visual emphasis to the threat of her words. However, in the panel below Black Widow’s hair is almost naturalistic which suggests that it can be used as a stylised motif that shifts from abstraction to realism depending on the needs of the story.

So far these ideas have been applied to ‘Black Widow’ as if it was a Modernist work of art but it is possible to take a different approach and consider comics on their own terms using Greenberg’s notion of self-criticality. Greenberg explained this as ‘… the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticise the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but to in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.’[[6]](#footnote-6) So what does this mean for comics? We have seen that comics share aspects of Modernist painting in terms of abstract mark-making but one characteristic unique to comics is the use of sequences of panels to tell stories. This makes both the representation of time and the form of the panels themselves key aspects of the medium of comics.

In the early 1970s most British Girls comics used regular grid-like layouts with clearly delineated rectangular panel borders but later in the decade artists working on *Misty*, including Rumeu, were more experimental in the ways they used panels. A page where the Black Widow hypnotises Sadie contains a great variety of panels with most having no borders at all, one panel has rounded corners while another is rectangular but has lines of varying widths as borders **(Figure 4)**. An irregular five-sided panel stands out and focuses the eye on the significant moment when the Black Widow actually hypnotises Sadie. In the middle of this page an abstract patterned rectangle, reminiscent of a Jackson Pollock drip painting and the earlier representations of spider webs, is placed behind Sadie, Freda and the Black Widow. This also acts as a panel border as the lower edge cuts off the legs of Freda and the Black Widow while Sadie’s legs continue below the rectangle and appear in the panel below where they are overlapped by the Black Widow’s arm later in the story. The form of the panels clearly impacts on the storytelling, and Rumeu’s experimentation with this unique aspect of the comics medium allows time to flow across the panels drawing the reader into the narrative.

Although Greenberg’s Modernist ideas were originally applied to the analysis and appreciation of avant-garde art they also allow us to untangle the different artistic and comic book techniques used by Rumeu and illuminate the Black Widow’s tangled web of ink.

Bibliography

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1. Andrei Molotiu. ‘Abstract Forms: Sequential Dynamism and Iconostasis in Abstract Comics and Steve Ditko’s Amazing Spiderman’. In Matthew Smith and Randy Duncan (Eds) *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Clement Greenberg ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ in Clement Greenberg *Art and Culture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 3-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’ in John O’Brian (Ed) *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 86-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See John Miers’ essay ‘Stylistic analysis, or “sweating the small stuff”’ for a different interpretation of the role of texture. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Geraint D’Arcy’s essay ‘Mise en Scène’ for more detail on the role of scenery and locations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Greenberg ‘Modernist Painting’ p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)