Posthumanism and the Graphic Novel in Latin America

King, Edward, Page, Joanna

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Latin American graphic novels abound in sacred, mythical and occult ontologies, combining futuristic visions of high-tech cyborgs with ancient tales of human-animal metamorphs drawn from both Classical and Amerindian traditions. These hybrid figures – automata, cyborgs, golems and mutants of all kinds – dissolve the boundaries of the human, crossing the ‘Great Divide’ between nature and culture that, for Bruno Latour, results from modernity’s attempt to purge itself of such admixtures. By such strategies of ‘purification’, a rational, scientific modernity sought to sever itself definitively from the pre-modern condition of tradition and superstition.¹ The story of modernity’s ‘disenchantment of the world’, in Max Weber’s famous phrase from his 1917 lecture, follows a similar plot, in which ‘rationalization and intellectualization’ do away with the mysteries and magical powers of an earlier age. Weber’s term Entzauberung literally means ‘the elimination of magic’; this does not mean for him that the world is now entirely known and explained, but that we are on a path of continued progress towards greater understanding, and that ‘we can in principle control everything by means of calculation’.² It is this rationalism that has underpinned the humanist project since the Enlightenment, as well as its arguments for the exceptionality of the human species.

The tale of modernity’s disenchantment of the world is one that is being increasingly contested on many fronts. Joshua Landy and Michael T. Saler find Weber’s account to be incomplete, arguing that each time religion has withdrawn from spheres of experience, secular forms of re-enchantment – from political myths to spectator sports – have simply stepped in to fill the void that is left.³ Other scholars have deconstructed the apparent divide between magic and science. Morris Berman traces
the close relationship between the two in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and exposes the extent to which the work of Newton – the inventor of the mechanistic universe and the lynchpin of the scientific revolution – was heavily influenced by the occult sciences, notably alchemy and the hermetic tradition. Ioan P. Couliano similarly affirms that magic did not disappear with the advent of quantitative science, but that science has merely taken the place of magic, ‘extending its dreams and its goals by means of technology’. As he suggests:

Electricity, rapid transport, radio and television, the airplane, and the computer have merely carried into effect the promises first formulated by magic, resulting from the supernatural process of the magician: to produce light, to move instantaneously from one point in space to another, to communicate with faraway regions of space, to fly through the air, and to have an infallible memory.

This close relationship between technology and the supernatural is not confined to the esoteric, but is also a hallmark of institutional religion. Contesting the classifications of the modern imagination, in which – as Latour claims – ‘technology is nothing but pure instrumental mastery’, scholars are increasingly finding that technology is shot through with spiritual and religious meaning. David F. Noble demonstrates the co-evolution of modern technology and Christianity, in particular, to the extent to which ‘the technological enterprise has been and remains suffused with religious belief’ and remains ‘an essentially religious endeavor’. In the context of Christian millenarianism, hugely influential on the founders of modern science, the advance of technology was taken to contribute to the work of the redemption of man and his recovery of prelapsarian perfection. It is this ‘ideological wedding of technology and transcendence’ that infused technology with eschatology: through technology man was to regain his divine likeness and recover the dominion over nature that, since Eden, he was always destined to have.

Laying to one side the question of whether modernity really does usher in a disenchantment of the world, there is certainly growing evidence of the revival in recent decades of what James William Gibson calls ‘a culture of enchantment’. He refers here to a wide range of political movements (such as environmentalism), fields of scholarship (such as animal cognition and culture) and even mass cultural products (more than one Disney film) that reject modernity’s reduction of nature to inert matter or mere resource for human enterprise, and reinvest nature
instead with spirit, mystery and meaning. Many historians have noted that both magic and the science that arises from it shared a desire to transform and dominate nature,\textsuperscript{11} and that both flourished under the mercantilism of the Age of Discovery. As Berman points out, as capitalism gathered force in the second half of the seventeenth century, the idea of ‘living matter’ became ‘economically inconvenient […] if nature is dead, there are no restraints on exploiting it for profit’.\textsuperscript{12} The new ‘culture of enchantment’ emerges in societies searching for models to challenge the modern, capitalist relationship with nature that is effectively one of domination, characterized – in Marx’s words – by the ‘subjection of Nature’s forces to man’\textsuperscript{13}. Many of the graphic novels explored in this book belong to this ‘culture of enchantment’, seeking to restore to nature some of the mystery and autonomy it has lost and to imagine, as Gibson phrases it, ‘a new covenant between people, land, and creatures’\textsuperscript{14}.

The question of the relationships between technology, science and magic acquires a particular resonance in the Latin American context. In many parts of the region, science and spiritualism advanced their causes in an unusually intense symbiosis during the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth. Auguste Comte’s positivism provided the basis for a secular ‘Religion of Humanity’ with a strong following in Brazil, with Rio de Janeiro becoming the site of the first ‘Temple of Humanity’, founded in 1881. The teachings of the French spiritist Allan Kardec were enthusiastically taken up in Brazil and the Caribbean, among other parts of the region, resonating as they did with traditional indigenous and African beliefs. Positivist science in Argentina gained influence in the popular imagination alongside the spread of occult sciences, both circulating new discoveries and methods in the same media. The fantastical fictions of Leopoldo Lugones and Eduardo Ladislao Holmberg (the nation’s chief proponent of Darwinism) bear witness to the syncretism that united science and spiritism in the feverish \textit{fin de siècle} pursuit of knowledge.

Erik Davis, whose book \textit{Techgnosis} sets out to study ‘the mystical impulses that continue to spark and sustain the Western world’s obsession with technology’,\textsuperscript{15} suggests that ‘We have some important stories to tell about the way that modern technologies have become mixed up with other times, other places, other paradigms’.\textsuperscript{16} These stories form the basis of a critique of modernity’s exclusions of the irrational and the occult and therefore a contestation of the humanist narrative according to which scientific rationalism overcame superstition and magic to confirm itself as the proper path to knowledge of the universe. Science
fiction's non-linear temporalities become an important tool in challenging modernity's invention of time ‘as an irreversible arrow, as capitalization, as progress’ (Latour) and its determination to abolish the past behind it as archaic.

_E-Dem: La conspiración de la vida eterna_ (Chile, 2012), written and illustrated by Cristián Montes Lynch, deconstructs the rationalist premise of Western technological modernity. The narrative insists that science and technology have always been, and remain, closely imbricated with religion and mythology. It explores how sinister collaborations between religion, technology, rationalism, phallocentrism and state violence have arisen from Platonism and Christianity in Western thought, which have posited an estrangement between the imprisonment of our embodied existence in the natural world and our spiritual escape towards the divine. This critique of modernity’s exclusions and its narratives of disenchantment is extended in another two graphic novels, _Las playas del otro mundo_ (Cristián Barros and Demetrio Babul, Chile, 2009) and _Los perros salvajes_ (Edgar Clement, Mexico, 2011–), to focus specifically on modernity’s construction of the indigenous other as primitive and pre-modern. Simultaneously, these texts flaunt the particular capacity of graphic fiction to forge connections between apparently divergent temporalities, ontologies and epistemologies, drawing on techniques of visual analogy and remediation to deconstruct, recombine and refunction ancient myths for a cybernetic age.

**Spirituality, technology and transcendence in _E-Dem_**

_E-Dem_ is one of Chile’s most spectacular contributions to the contemporary graphic novel. With a palette of warm ochre and soft blues, the book’s lavish world-design, its preference for full-page panels and the eroticism of its images produce an immersive experience of great visual pleasure. _E-Dem_’s complex and richly allusive narrative may be read as a reflection on the human desire for transcendence and the sinister collaborations it has engendered between religion, technology, rationalism and state violence. While adopting a critical perspective on the continued role of pre-modern mysticism in promoting technologies of control, _E-Dem_ subscribes to an alternative, more contemporary form of gnosis. This is very similar to that outlined by Davis, in which enlightenment comes with the embrace of annihilation and a oneness with the universe, rather than any form of transcendence or individual perfection.
E-Dem intertwines three narratives harnessed to different ontologies, encouraging the reader to wonder whether the one we take to be ‘real’ may be simply an illusion and to suspect that the connections between the three may point to a malevolent conspiracy of planetary proportions. Like The Matrix (The Wachowskis, 1999) and its sequels, E-Dem may easily be read as a contemporary adaptation of Plato’s Theory of Forms, according to which abstract ideas constitute a higher reality than the material world accessible to the senses. Montes Lynch’s use of biblical language neatly divides body from soul and charts the destiny of man to ascend from earth to the heavenly realms, shaking loose the shackles of material form and becoming perfected in spirit. The text quickly begins to destabilize this discourse, however, and to question its co-option by powers of an all-too-worldly nature.

The narrative initially relates the awakening to consciousness of a half-human, half-tree form whose torso/trunk remains embedded in the earth. The narrator explains that humanity’s destiny is to be born of the earth but to reach up to the sun and the universe beyond, making a journey from instinct to reason, and from reason to the spirit. The human chosen by the Fertilized Angel is wrenched with great pain from the earth so that the first stage of his germination can take place. He becomes the Angel’s partner in a passionate choreography that conditions him for spiritual transformation and the growth of his wings. The separation of text and image in this sequence (see Fig. 2.1) lends greater poetic force to both. The text attains the gravity of myth, presented in sober capitals and located in a timeless, boundless space beyond the panels. The image sequences – often unencumbered by the incursion of text bubbles or captions – immerse us in the pure sensuality of graceful movement, as the Angel and her new apprentice soar and whirl through the air, enfolding each other in exquisite embraces.

This first narrative invokes Plato’s Chariot Allegory, bearing witness to the soul’s yearning to (re)gain wings and soar to divine heights, where there is beauty and wisdom. In Plato’s myth, it is Reason that directs the soul’s ascent while lustful appetite knocks it off course. The chosen man in E-Dem certainly has to learn to control his desire to consummate his celestial courtship with the Fertilized Angel, but in a crucial twist to Plato’s original, it is not base appetite but Reason that nourishes fantasies of sexual possession and domination. When we return to this narrative, we are told that ‘Surge la razón y con ella, la necesidad de explorar, conocer, entender, dominar la tierra y poseer la carne’ (Reason springs forth, and with it the need to explore, know,
understand, dominate the earth and possess other flesh). The other two narratives that comprise *E-Dem* develop these relationships between rational knowledge, sexual domination and a politics of exclusion and explore how technology advances their common aims.
The overtly gendered bodies of E-Dem clearly reference the historical intersection of political and sexual violence under Pinochet’s dictatorship. The regime’s victims were often subjected to methods of torture that involved rape or the application of an electrical charge to the genitals, as shown in another of E-Dem’s narratives. By contrast, these graceful scenes of choreography, in which the male human and female angel spin euphorically through the air, announce a more egalitarian form of union that is not based on a quest for knowledge or power. Significantly, this union is not mediated by technology, which is inextricably bound up with the exercise of domination in E-Dem. While sexual difference is strongly marked in earlier sequences – the muscled torso of the male contrasting with the softer contours of the female – in the later sequence the bodies become almost indistinguishable at points, with the man’s facial features noticeably feminized.

We leave the chosen man gyrating in the air with the Fertilized Angel to pick up the second story, in which a university professor, José Luis Ortega, is arrested and tortured under Pinochet’s regime. Our sudden insertion within a specific time and place is reinforced by the introduction of photographs within some of the panels – La Moneda under fire, for example, in the 1973 coup – and the use of a more conventional speech-bubble and caption format (see Fig. 2.2). These first two narratives are explicitly brought together in a symmetrical four-panel square, visually equating the pain of an electric cattle-prod being applied to Ortega’s genitals with the uprooting of the chosen man we witnessed earlier (see Fig. 2.3). This visual match emphasizes the extent to which the Christian discourse of debt and redemption governing the first narrative seeps, in a most sinister way, into the torture chamber. Ortega accepts his pain as a punishment for the forbidden relationship he has been pursuing with his niece. Instead of a torturer inflicting pain on his victim, therefore, he casts his persecutor as a priest purifying the transgressor. He welcomes his suffering as a necessary expiation for the sin of incest. Ortega therefore submits to torture as a form of moral correction instead of an act of political violence and a criminal abuse of power.

This pernicious collusion between religion, technology and political repression extends into the third, futuristic, narrative of E-Dem. Ortega is transformed into an Inquisitor Angel in a future world in which a secret police force is battling against the resistance of Vamps. Again, the narrative of purification and salvation underpins a regime of exclusion and violence. Held high by golden antennae in the Temple of the
Order of the Knights of Redemption, as if suspended on a cross, Ortega meditates on the destiny of humankind:

El hombre está llamado a convertirse en ángel.
En su evolución hacia la luz,
This ‘freedom from the prison of flesh’, this desire for transcendence, is no innocent exercise of personal devotion. ‘¡Fuego a los impuros!!!’ (Open fire on the impure!!!) resounds the battle cry as the winged Angels swoop down from the Temple on their mission, assuming their self-appointed role as moral guardians and exterminators of reprobates.
Ortega’s task is to rescue another Angel, Cénichil, who has been captured, drugged and sucked dry by a voluptuous Vamp. This futuristic narrative also finally folds back into the torture scene as another set of matched panels, adopting the same perspective and layout, draw a visual parallel between Ortega, held down and subjected to the cattle-prod, and Cénichil, lying on an operating table as he is reprogrammed. The figure of Ortega is replaced with Cénichil in a way that suggests the merging of their destinies and the circularity of the dynamics of domination, in which one tortured man becomes the pursuer of another. The identity-switch also draws attention to the continued operation of the rhetoric of redemption to justify the repression of political dissidence.

In E-Dem’s saturation in Christian binarisms of spirit and flesh, purity and impurity, sin and redemption lies a clear allusion to the Pinochet regime’s claim to defend Christian values against the threat of Marxist socialism. The Declaración de Principios del Gobierno de Chile, for example, published a few months after the coup (in March 1974), denounced Marxism as a subversion of the morals and values of Chile’s Christian heritage. The relationship between Catholicism and totalitarian conspiracy is further suggested in E-Dem by the omnipresence of arcane symbols, pointing to a vast and secret order at work. Many of these combine visual echoes of the crucifix, the cattle-prod, the phallus and the swastika, revealing the disturbing imbrication of forces of domination of a religious, sexual and political nature. However, E-Dem moves beyond a political critique of Chile’s dictatorship to present a philosophical argument concerning the relationship between rationalism and tyranny, and to exhort its readers to discover a new way of engaging with the world that is not based on ideas of transcendence and domination.

The Angel warns the chosen man that ‘Deberás renunciar a tu necesidad de poder y control sobre lo que conoces para aprender a amar y respetar lo que conoces. No intentes poseerme ni satisfacerte en mí’ (You must renounce your need for power and control over what you know in order to learn to love and respect what you know. Do not try to possess me or satisfy yourself in me). It is Reason that has robbed him of his profound integration with the rest of the universe, and only love, we are told, may help him recuperate it. As he first becomes conscious of the possibility of his own death, the chosen man learns the word ‘I’. The revelation he receives at the end, however, is that it is his fear of death, of human finitude, that gives power to kings and bishops to save him or condemn him. Instead, taken to the edge of annihilation, he discovers that ‘soy parte de un todo infinito en el que la muerte ya no existe y dejo de temer’ (I am part of an infinite whole in which death no longer
exists and I stop being afraid). He understands that his salvation is to be found in the acceptance of change, and that liberty means to be free of ideologies, leaders and religions. Montes Lynch articulates a powerful post-Romantic vision in which human individualism and a knowledge of finitude are replaced with a more affective engagement with the world, which does not seek to know it in a rational sense, or to subjugate it.

The crucial role of technology in forms of political control and domination is announced in many ways in *E-Dem*. In particular it is established via visual matches between the cattle-prod of the torture chamber and the high-tech harpoons, stun-guns and reprogramming devices of the futuristic narrative. It is also suggested by Montes Lynch’s use of a videogame aesthetic in the first and third narratives. The architecture of the third in particular recalls the complex, synthetic worlds created in role-playing games such as *Myst* or *Riven*, and the use of perspective often mimics the typical combination of elevated establishing shots, extreme close-ups and hypermobile perspectives to be found in role-playing games (see Fig. 2.4). A powerful and immersive 3D effect is created by employing the rich colour and detail of computer-generated imagery, as well as a cinematic use of deep focus, very rare in graphic fiction (also evident in Fig. 2.4). *E-Dem*’s recourse to sexualized and pornographic images is also a common feature of videogames, of course, and the busty, semi-clad Vamp brings to mind *Tomb Raider*’s controversially proportioned Lara Croft. In some panels, Montes Lynch even imitates the videogame’s frequent overlaying of dials and gauges to measure fuel usage or time remaining or menus from which alternative weapons or transportation may be chosen (see Fig. 2.5).

What distinguishes the videogame narrative from more traditional narratives, as Michael Jindra reminds us, is the extent to which power and control become defining features, facilitated by advanced technology.\(^{20}\) Paradoxically, as Jindra observes, it is also this technology that allows gamers to enter pre-modern worlds of magic and myth, in which control was sought, not by means of technology, but through ritual and witchcraft. *E-Dem* gestures towards exactly these continuities in its use of contemporary game styles to narrate a story of angels, inquisitors and mystical orders. Like many other recent science fiction or fantasy graphic novels, it uncovers the origins of technology in magic and esoteric beliefs and practices, and of all of these in human dreams of mastery and self-perfection. Technology in *E-Dem* is bound up with human dreams of transcendence and salvation, much in the way that it has been, for Noble, in Christian philosophy and theology since the Middle Ages.\(^{21}\) In the context of the intensely millenarian spirit of the
Reformation, technological advance appeared to reinstall Man to his prelapsarian dominion over Nature and thus to his lost state of perfection and God-likeness.  

_E-Dem_ thus deconstructs the relationships that bind spirituality, technology and dreams of human transcendence and dominion, as
Fig. 2.5 The use of videogame-style overlays in *E-Dem: La conspiración de la vida eterna* (Cristián Montes Lynch)
well as delivering a critique of rationalism and exclusionary politics. However, the spiritual remains central to its alternative vision of the universe. If, as Davis argues, for the ancient gnostics ‘the cosmic prison was the material world, the world of flesh and fate’, in today’s ‘Matrix model’ of gnosticism,

the false world has become the world of mediation, its rulers or archons are not carnal demons but captains of propaganda and brainwashing. In this new vision, spiritual awakening does not catapult you into an incorporeal heaven but plugs you back into the actual, physical world [. . .]. The core of our new gnosis, I believe, is the earth, in all its limitations and extraordinary fecund power.23

E-Dem ascribes to this new ‘gnosis’, calling humans to a full and affective reintegration with the world from which rationalism and dreams of transcendence had separated them. It outlines a new ethical imperative for humans to relate differently to the natural and technological world of which they are part, laying aside a desire for transcendence and domination and embracing instead a vision of immanence and integration. The attention to embodied experience that is evident in Montes Lynch’s exquisitely drawn figures – infused with light and movement – also announces this new gnosis as one that is rooted in the material, and in fusion with other bodies and the surrounding world, rather than in any kind of virtual abstraction. However, this fusion is imagined only in the mythical sequences of the text, removed from a specific location in time and space. E-Dem thus implicitly acknowledges the extent to which we remain trapped in systems of domination that are perpetuated by technologies of military violence, such as the surveillance aircraft and the laser guns of the futuristic narrative or the bombs that ushered in Pinochet’s regime and the cattle-prods used against its opponents.

Las playas del otro mundo: Aztec divination and Renaissance magic in imperialist modernity

This longing to return to the earth, and to heal a rift opened up by civilization, is articulated with even more clarity in Las playas del otro mundo (Cristián Barros and Demetrio Babul, Chile, 2009). The polytemporal narrative traces relationships between indigenous animism, Renaissance hermeticism and a cybernetic future, and in doing so
invents an alternative vision of Western technological modernity that does not radically exclude indigenous thought and practice.

In recent years anthropologists and post-colonial theorists have vigorously challenged an understanding of modernity as superseding the past, together with a corresponding relegation of non-modern beliefs to a previous historical era. Latour observes that ‘The moderns have a peculiar propensity for understanding time that passes as if it were really abolishing the past behind it’, which constructs a linear temporality in which time is ‘an irreversible arrow’. This historicist approach is clear in Weber’s account of the overthrow of superstition by reason: ‘Unlike the savage for whom such forces existed, we need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control the spirits or pray to them. Instead, technology and calculation achieve our ends.’ The modern understanding of time renders animism an anachronism, a mere vestige of a pre-modern world that will eventually disappear as society continues inexorably along the path of progress. Drawing on Latour’s deconstruction of the modern nature-culture divide – and extending Johannes Fabian’s famous critique of anthropology’s ‘denial of coevalness’ (the act of situating the Other in a ‘primitive’ era, prior to our own) – the recent work of anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philippe Descola has laid the foundation for a new appreciation of indigenous animism and its potential to contribute to the decolonization of thought. This approach does not cast the indigenous in the role of romanticized ‘non-modern Other’ or the object rather than the subject of theory in the manner censured by Juanita Sundberg. Instead, it uses indigenous thought to challenge the hegemonic discourses of modernity that Europe has constructed and to uncover new ways of understanding its relationship with temporality and spirituality.

*Las playas del otro mundo* contributes to this endeavour by uncovering unexpected or disavowed proximities between Western modernity and indigenous animism in Latin America. The narrative shuttles deliriously between three main loci, separated in time and space. The first is the moment at which Hernán Cortés’s men assault the Great Temple at Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, in 1520, murdering the crowds gathered there to celebrate a feast-day. The second takes us to England during Elizabeth I’s reign later that same century, and assembles the cast of mathematicians and magicians who held Renaissance Europe in thrall. The third narrative rockets forward to a future, post-apocalyptic Antarctica that becomes the scene for a new conquest, of the Hollow Earth. All three stories are knit together with myth, magic and ruthless imperial ambition and by the circulation of an Aztec black stone
mirror. This is a real historical artefact, one of many Mexica treasures plundered by Hernán Cortés’s men and brought to Europe, a highly polished obsidian disc used in temple worship that is now preserved in the British Museum. *Las playas del otro mundo* invents a past for the disc as the divination stone of Xaxán, a priestess and Montezuma’s sister, who commits suicide when the temple is overthrown. Her spirit then enters the stone and shapes the destinies of those into whose hands it falls, in a manner consonant with an animist understanding of the transmigratory potential of souls and the animation of inanimate objects. The presence of the disc in the futuristic Antarctic expedition is a product of fiction. However, its travels across Europe in the possession of John Dee, the imperialist visionary of the Elizabethan court, have a clear historical basis, and this strand of the narrative cleaves firmly to what is known about Dee and his occult research.

In their adaptation of Antonio Gil’s 2004 novel of the same title, Barros and Babul exploit the powerful resources of graphic fiction in *Las playas del otro mundo* to convey a convergence of different times and spaces, including graphic matching and other forms of visual analogy. Many of these techniques trace continuities between past and future acts of conquest and colonization. When we first see the Spanish invaders disembarking from their galleons, in the vision of Xaxán, a matched cut takes us from left to right page, in which the radiation-suited men of the future search for the entrance to the Hollow Earth (see Fig. 2.6). The central advancing figure lies divided across the book’s inner hinge, such that the sixteenth-century conquistador is rendered one and the same with the leader of the Antarctic expedition. The decoration on the doublet sported by the first is playfully updated to form the bolts of the protective metal casing worn by the second. The use of anachronistic terms in the narrative voice also draws attention to the convergence of past and future. As Xaxán continues to narrate her vision, she describes how ‘Los extranjeros aprestan sus monturas’ (the foreigners prepare their horses); however, these words appear in caption boxes in panels that show us, instead, the explorers of the future riding their snowmobiles.

Other matches also emphasize the persistence of conflict and conquest through the ages, as well as the shared origin of humanity, created by a superior intelligence that emanates from within the planet. As this myth is expounded in boxed captions – eventually leading the humans of the future to search for the Hollow Earth – the posture of an Antarctic explorer whose helmet is connected to his futuristic snow-pod by multiple cables becomes a visual match for the Aztec figure from a temple relief depicted in the previous frame, with his headdress flying out
Fig. 2.6 Visual matching traces continuities between past and future acts of colonization in *Las playas del otro mundo* (Cristián Barros and Demetrio Babul)
above him (Fig. 2.7). The stylized outlines and bold colours of painted Aztec reliefs bear a marked similarity, in formal terms, to the two-dimensional, comic-style aesthetic adopted by the graphic novel itself. With its boundless capacity for remediation, graphic fiction possesses an unusual flair to bring into a close relationship two apparently contradictory worlds and systems of representation, establishing a series of convergences that overcome differences in time, space and medium. As we have argued elsewhere, the graphic novel in Latin America has become a space for aesthetic strategies of temporal multiplicity. In his analysis of what he calls ‘palimpsestic aesthetics’, Robert Stam argues that, because of its capacity for ‘weaving together sounds and images’ in ways that resist linear narrative, cinema is the ideal medium of ‘temporal hybridity’ of Brazilian culture. The strategies used in Las playas del otro mundo demonstrate a similar potential in the graphic novel form for exploring, not only the echoes of the past in the present, but also the coexistence of conflicting temporalities in contemporary culture.

Fig. 2.7 The formal similarities between ancient Aztec reliefs and graphic fiction established in Las playas del otro mundo (Cristián Barros and Demetrio Babul)
Las playas del otro mundo underscores in this way the endurance of certain mythemes across time and space. The Hollow Earth theory, central to the imaginary of science fiction novels such as Jules Verne’s Journey to the Centre of the Earth (1864) and Edgar Rice Burroughs’s At the Earth’s Core (1914), has its roots in ancient myths from many different regions of the world. The Antarctic sequence in Las playas del otro mundo is actually a retelling of an Aztec myth that recounts the journey of Quetzalcóatl to Mictlán, the underworld, to restore the human race using the bones of those who had previously died. Further visual analogies also point to the power of Aztec prophecy to read the ages to come. At the beginning of Las playas del otro mundo, the indigenous priestess prophesies the death of the universe and the destruction of the Fifth Sun – the current age in Aztec mythology – which will be accompanied by earthquakes and the coming of the ‘Tzitzimim’ from the west, whose outward appearance is like that of stone or bone. For the Aztec inhabitants of Central Mexico, the ‘Tzitzimim’ or ‘Tzitzimime’ were terrifying creatures poised to descend to earth and eat humans, depicted as skeletons. Georges Baudot describes them as ‘monstruos del crepúsculo, mujeres nocturnas parecidas a esqueletos humanos’ (monsters of the twilight, nocturnal women resembling human skeletons) who would sweep down to devour humanity at the moment at which colossal earthquakes bring the Fifth Sun to destruction. The myth is refashioned in Las playas and incorporated into a more contemporary science-fiction imaginary. The skirted female skeletons depicted in early colonial codices become the smooth, white, bone-like casings that permit the surviving members of the human race to withstand freezing temperatures and radiation in a future, post-catastrophe world.

Rewriting science fiction according to the codes of Aztec mythology becomes part of a broader rhetorical operation at the heart of Las playas del otro mundo. The aim is to write a history of modern technology as one that emerges from practices of divination and magic, rather than replacing superstition with scientific objectivity. Again, this relationship is forged by means of visual analogy, such as the one established between the fortified shelters of the Antarctic base camp and the form of the flying mechanical scarab John Dee acquires from an antiquities shop in London. Such visual echoes emphasize the origin of futuristic technologies in the feverish pursuit of occult knowledge that propelled the advance of modern science in its quest to know and conquer nature. Couliano reminds us in Eros and Magic in the Renaissance that, despite their differing methods, both magic and modern technology claim to arrive ‘at the same ends’, which include ‘long-distance communication,
rapid transport, interplanetary trips’. Perhaps even their methods are not so different: Latour affirms, for example, that both magic and science deal in ‘the transformations of agencies’. The temporal superimpositions of Las playas del otro mundo allow us to glimpse the extent to which the myths of our cybernetic age resonate in many ways with those of non-modern societies. The mystical operation by means of which Xaxán’s consciousness transfers to the black disc at the point of her death is clearly analogous to the cloning techniques used in the Antarctic sequence, which imagines a postbiological future in which the personality and memory of an individual may be extracted in the form of a liquid and transferred to another body.

Las playas del otro mundo insists in this way on a continuity between animism and cybernetics and more generally between magic and modern science. Renaissance theories of erotic desire – expounded in some detail in the text – unite both magic and scientific knowledge in a search for power, as erotic desire was considered to be a vital tool for the manipulation of individuals and groups in the hands of those who understood its workings. When Dee tells Emperor Rudolf II of Austria that ‘la fuente de toda magia se halla en el amor sensual, en las voluptuosidades de la carne’ (the source of all magic is to be found in sensual love, in the voluptuousness of the flesh) and that ‘Quien gobierne a Eros, gobernará el universo’ (whoever governs Eros will govern the universe), he echoes the influential views of the astrologer and philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548–1600), whose theories of Eros and manipulation through magic – as Couliano argues – were ‘the direct forerunner of a modern discipline, applied psychosociology’. In Las playas del otro mundo, these techniques are perfected by Elizabeth I, whose control of Eros by means of her famed virginity lends her the power to rule the world.

The attraction between individuals was often described in these times with recourse to the metaphor of the magnet. Dee affirms that ‘Una gran fuerza atrae y separa las cosas. Los hombres solo pueden llamar a esa fuerza amor o deseo’ (a powerful force attracts and separates things. The only name men know for that force is love or desire), speculating that the Earth is a giant magnet, ‘un enorme sexo que atrae hacia sí los cuerpos que la rodean’ (an enormous sexual organ that attracts towards it the bodies that surround it), and that all creation revolves around that movement of attraction and repulsion. A heliocentric theory of the earth as a giant magnet would be proposed by the English doctor William Gilbert in his work De Magnete (1600) and go on to influence Galileo’s revolutionary model of the universe, one of the keystones of modern physics that paved the way for Enlightenment science. Such
examples reveal the traffic between what we would now divide into the scientific, the speculative and the superstitious. They challenge modernity’s vaunted self-portrayal as a rupture with the past and a rejection of non-modern irrationalism in favour of scientific objectivity. They give the lie to modernity’s own construction of time as irreversible progress by looping backwards to find the future of humanity clearly rooted in supposedly superseded notions from the past.

If, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously argue in their characterization of Enlightenment thought, ‘the disenchantment of the world is the extirpation of animism’, Las playas del otro mundo insists on the enduring presence and influence of animistic ideas and ancient myths in our visions of the technological future. It does so in a way that belies the European attempt to contain animism by representing it as a relic of the past. When the nineteenth-century anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor used the term ‘animism’ he described a kind of confusion suffered by ‘primitive’ peoples who were unable to distinguish between subject and object or myth and reality. Tylor’s Primitive Culture (1871) found that the tendency to ascribe human-like qualities to non-humans, and a belief in the transference of the soul to other beings or objects, divided the ‘lower races’ from the ‘higher nations’; Tylor also found in European folklore ‘instructive legends which preserve for us, as in a museum, relics of an early intellectual condition of our Aryan race, in thoughts which to our modern minds have fallen to the level of quaint fancy, but which still remain sound and reasonable philosophy to the savage’. As Anselm Franke points out, Tylor was echoing views of the ‘backwardness’ of non-modern cultures that date back at least as far as the rise of mercantilism and imperial modernity in the sixteenth century, the setting for the key narrative events of Las playas del otro mundo.

As conceptualized by Tylor and others, animism – Franke proposes – does not provide an accurate description of other cultures so much as reflect back to Europe the distinctions that uphold modernity. For the moderns, animism threatens ‘the modern divide between subjective culture and objective nature’, becoming ‘a focal point where all differences are conflated’. For this reason, ‘animism and the primitive were much sought for mirrors, by means of which modernity could affirm itself in the image of alterity’. In Las playas del otro mundo, however, the mirror of animism – literally, at points, Xaxán’s divination mirror – does not reassuringly reflect back the rational, scientific pretensions of European modernity but its past and present fascination with esoteric learning and occult practices, and most of all the imperial fantasies that propel its modernizing endeavours.
Harry Garuba fears that a renewed interest in animism in recent years has not led to the creation of a credible alternative discursive space. Indeed, one could certainly argue that it still figures here as a mirror to Western modernity, albeit a more critical and deconstructive version of that modernity. *Las playas del otro mundo* does take a further step, however, towards deauthorizing the humanist discourses that underpin the hubris of modernity. Its narrative is ultimately directed not by the desires or deeds of its human actors but by the power of the disc, described as part of the non-human intelligence of the Earth. In comparison, as the narrator recognizes, ‘Nosotros poco importamos’ (we are of little importance), and the role played by the characters is essentially to fulfil the destiny of the disc. The disc eventually takes over as narrator, explaining ‘Soy Xaxán pero también soy todas las memorias del espejo’ (I am Xaxán but I am also all the mirror’s memories), and it turns out that the mission of the Antarctic conquistadors is really to restore the disc to its origins beneath the ground ‘para así integrarnos físicamente al metabolismo del planeta’ (to integrate ourselves physically in this way with the planet’s metabolism). This decentring of the human becomes the only means by which the human race may potentially save itself. Yet the final scenes show the last remaining human on earth destroying both himself and the disc in a nuclear explosion that impels us backwards to the attack on Tenochtitlan, that act of violent colonization that condemns the disc and its memories to a nomadic obscurity, and humanity to a bitter self-destruction. The recognition of hubris comes too late to save the planet or the human race.

**From animism to avatars: Cybershamanism in *Los perros salvajes***

Edgar Clement’s *Los perros salvajes* (Mexico, 2011–) also explores the relationship between the human and the non-human forged in traditional myths, cybernetics and modern media technologies. It does so in a way that challenges representations of indigenous culture as pre-modern or irrelevant to the scientific age, sketching out new ways of imagining the shifting ontologies that characterize the cyborg era. Clement’s serialized graphic novel mounts a searing attack on the Drug War launched by Felipe Calderón’s government (2006–12), which only compounded the violent conflict between warring factions of drug cartels, paramilitaries, government forces and paid hitmen. As Héctor Fernández L’Hoeste points out, the daring, caustic nature of Clement’s critique contrasts
sharply with the national media’s tendency towards self-censorship and makes full use of the webcomic’s potential for the broad dissemination of dissenting views (parts of Los perros salvajes are available online, with one volume also in print and another incomplete at the time of writing). Los perros salvajes melds science-fiction and posthuman imaginaries with Mesoamerican myths of human-animal transactions. The text’s infusion of recent political events with mythological resonances throws into cosmic relief the epochal scale of violence in contemporary Mexico. It also suggests an alternative way of conceptualizing continuities with Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past that effectively contests the state’s appropriation of indigenous heritage for nationalist purposes.

Mystics and mythological creatures proliferate in science fiction produced across the world. As Dani Cavallaro observes, ‘Cyberspace seethes with vampires, mambos, shamans, mermaids, Faustian and Mephistophelean characters, ghosts, visionaries and soothsayers’. However, if – as he and others have speculated – ‘cyberpunk supplies legion alternative religions as a means of forging some sense of cohesion in an otherwise alienating environment’, indigenous mythology and folklore play no such unifying role in Clement’s work. They are not developed as a credible system to which we could adhere, as an alternative to the Western technoscientific worldview. Instead, their imagined assimilation into that worldview points, by way of contrast, to the past and present exclusion of indigenous communities and beliefs from national culture, despite the supposed centrality of the nation’s indigenous heritage to official discourses on nationhood as mestizaje in Mexico since the Revolution.

State-sanctioned images of indigeneity have abounded in visions of the noble Indian whose admirable artistic traditions and productive labour might enrich the lives of modern Mexicans. The idealized portrayals of Indians in the work of nineteenth-century painters such as Félix Parra Hernández (1845–1919) and José María Obregón (1832–1902) became an important influence in the post-revolutionary muralist movement. As Fernández L’Hoeste argues, Clement’s parodic allusions to murals by Diego Rivera and others point to the way in which the state has produced and co-opted certain images of the Indian for nationalist motives. In Clement’s work, however, Amerindian heritage is put to the service of ‘debunking the myths and fallacies of the political establishment’. Many of the large, composite images in Los perros salvajes evoke the murals’ characteristic use of iconography, the different temporalities swept up together into a single vision of the nation’s past, present and future, their flattened, simplified figures and their
excoriating denunciation of injustice. If, as Dawn Ades argues with respect to Rivera’s work, this related more in the murals to past violence against Indians than present forms of repression, Clement draws repeated attention to continued forms of exclusion and oppression. In a large panel composition in the first volume of *Los perros salvajes* (Fig. 2.8), Indians drawn in sepia pencil – complete with headdresses and loincloths – bow down and offer up the produce of the land, the fruits of their labour. Above them looms a triumphant Felipe Calderón, surrounded by a coterie of politicians, oblivious to the trail of mutilated human parts and spent bullets, which snakes away beyond the podium.

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Fig. 2.8 Page spreads depict panoramas of violence and exclusion in Mexico, past and present, in *Los perros salvajes* (Edgar Clement, vol. 1)
Yet the indigenous past Clement represents is often not passive or submissive but bloodthirsty and bellicose, locked into cycles of destruction and revenge. Its violence is clearly shown to prefigure that of modern-day Mexico in the grip of the Drug War. Sculptures of Aztec deities incorporated into the frames of *Los perros salvajes* provide an appropriately murderous backdrop to the events of the narrative. The second volume opens with a detailed tracing of the Coyolxauhqui Stone (see Fig. 2.9), an important relic of Aztec art now lodged in the Museo del Templo Mayor in Mexico City. In it, the Aztec moon goddess Coyolxauhqui is shown after her decapitation and dismemberment at the hand of her brother, the sun god Huitzilopochtli. The image of Coyolxauhqui haunts the comic’s depiction of the savage, internecine conflict that has devastated Mexico in recent years. The cycles of violence that mark national history suggested here are strongly reminiscent of those described by Octavio Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950), which holds such continual conflicts in social life responsible for Mexico’s marginalization and lack of development.49

The depiction of another stone sculpture later in the narrative provides an even more powerful and poignant example of a pre-Hispanic visual analogy placed at the service of contemporary social critique.

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*Fig. 2.9* Images such as the Coyolxauhqui Stone in *Los perros salvajes* anchor present-day Mexican violence to the nation’s mythical and historical past (Edgar Clement, vol. 2)
The giant monolith of the earth goddess Tlaltecuhtli, also now exhibited in the Museo del Templo Mayor, lies in the foreground of the frame, with the city’s slums rising steeply on the hills beyond (Fig. 2.10). The unusually lengthened panel arranges Mexico’s ancient myths at the base, with the contemporary world confined to a smaller half above. Tlaltecuhtli, ‘the one who gives and devours life’, and out of whose dismembered body the earth was formed, brings together the dual forces of creation and destruction so commonly articulated together in Mesoamerican mythology. Her open, teeth-studded jaw is ready to receive the human sacrifices necessary to appease her for the violence of her own destruction in bringing forth the earth. Here, the monolith lies covered with slumped, decapitated bodies – the latest victims of the battle between federal forces and drug gangs – as a shantytown climbs vertiginously up behind and a helicopter circles overhead.

The representation of the Coyolxauhqui Stone that opens the second volume (Fig. 2.9 above) also announces Clement’s intention to intervene in past myths and renew them for present uses. Drawn as if viewed from an oblique angle, a gap opens up between the body fragments of the carved relief, providing an entrance to a labyrinth that winds its way through the dismembered stone limbs. The labyrinth is peopled with male and female human figures, uniformly naked and staring downcast at the ground. The ancient relief becomes in this way a space that may be inhabited by new actors and a scene for new stories; it invites navigation and exploration. The image signals the cybernetic refashioning of pre-Hispanic myths in *Los perros salvajes*, and its exploitation of the comic’s potential for remediation.

One of the key myths employed by Clement is that of the *nahual* (or *nagual*) in Mesoamerican popular religion, a human who is able to take on animal form. The term also applies to an animal whose destiny is linked with that of a human, usually in a guardian role. As James Dow explains, the concepts of the *nahual* and the related *tonal* ‘link man to nature and recognize that his fate is like that of other animals. They also proclaim that his fate depends on conflicts waged in a special mythic world, the world of the *tonales* and *naguales*. This ‘special mythic world’ is the one in which the battles of the Drug War – too hellish to be imagined as part of everyday reality – are played out, but also one that rehearses cybernetic fantasies of power and domination.

The protagonists of *Los perros salvajes* are guerrillas who end up becoming hitmen for the Zetas, the nation’s most powerful criminal syndicate, but their interventions in the Drug War are carried out as *nahuales* (in this case, in the guise of dogs). In the best superhero tradition, Clement
Fig. 2.10  The monolith of the dismembered Aztec goddess Tlaltecuhtli is draped with the decapitated bodies of Mexico’s Drug War in *Los perros salvajes* (Edgar Clement, vol. 2)
has his characters adopt animal form at moments of extreme danger or during battles, in order to save the humans they are bound to in a relationship of protection and guidance. The *nahuales* in *Los perros salvajes* become figures both of resistance and – when linked to cybernetic motifs – regeneration. They are able to take on the government’s formidable elite forces, the *kaibiles*, who hail from the special operations branch of the Guatemalan army. Having had their hands amputated by the federal police, the guerrillas/nahuales are offered cybernetic prostheses sourced from Somali pirates in return for working as hitmen for the drug lords. The prostheses give them special powers, but under the influence of Yoon, a *nahual* they believe to be a deity, their human flesh starts to assimilate those prostheses, regenerating itself and reconverting the artificial back to the human (Fig. 2.11). Both their *nahual* attributes and their

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Fig. 2.11  The guerrillas/nahuales of *Los perros salvajes* begin to reassimilate their cybernetic prostheses (Edgar Clement, vol. 2; panel detail)
prosthetic arms enhance the guerrillas’ natural human powers. In their
dual role as trans-species mythical beings and mechanical cyborgs, the
guerrillas/nahuales simultaneously contest the different boundaries –
between human/animal, human/machine and human/supernatural –
that conventionally separate the human from the non-human.

The mythical framing of contemporary conflict might, in another
context, have a dehistoricizing and depoliticizing effect. This is thor-
oughly dispelled, however, by Clement’s precise references to specific
political scandals of his own day. The nahuales – alongside the other
Amerindian figures presented here – do not exist in the narrative as a
relic of the past, but are fully integrated into recent Mexican political
history. Clement rewrites the plots of some of the most notorious sus-
ppected assassinations and conspiracies of the last decade, giving the lie
to official cover-ups and creating a protagonist role for the nahuales, act-
ing on behalf of politicians or narcos. One such event is the 2008 plane
crash over Mexico City that killed the Minister of the Interior as well
as a former prosecutor who had led a campaign against the country’s
most powerful cartels. In Clement’s version, the plane is the target of
a successful attack by Yoon, one of the nahuales. At this and other sim-
ilar moments, photographic material is incorporated into the panels,
clearly signalling the intrusion of real-world events into the webcomic’s
developing plot. Infographics and reproductions of newspaper pages
establish the graphic fiction’s close relationship with print journalism.
In the second volume, the nahuales often become outraged witnesses
to a string of cases of corruption, impunity and negligence. These cases
include the fraud committed by Elba Esther Gordillo Morales, the union
leader and politician arrested in 2013, and the death of 49 children in
a nursery school fire in 2009 that may have been started deliberately in
a government archive next door.

The figure of the nahual is thoroughly assimilated within modern
media technologies in Los perros salvajes: the guerrillas are given orders
via mobile phones and consider selling their captive on eBay. Clement
also integrates Mesoamerican folk beliefs into contemporary media
technologies through his use of avatars. As the nahuales engage in battle
with the kaibiles, Clement adopts a visual style that evokes a videogame
aesthetic. An aerial view shows the location of skirmishes with bright
red concentric circles, as if viewed through a gunsight. The next pages
show a series of clashes between opponents, labelled ‘Clash 1’ and so
on, with the characters involved presented in the first frame as avatars,
labelled with their names (see Fig. 2.12). The avatar, as a temporary rep-
resentation of the self within a virtual world that can be exchanged at
Fig. 2.12 The use of avatars contributes to the videogame aesthetic created in *Los perros salvajes* (Edgar Clement, vol. 1)
will, becomes a cybernetic equivalent of the *nahual*, drawing on its ability to adopt other forms and identities.

By treating these figures as contemporaneous, Clement directly contests the representation of indigenous culture in foundational texts of *indigenismo* such as Manuel Gamio’s *Forjando patria (pro nacionalismo)* (1916) as ‘trasasada con respecto a la civilización contemporánea’ (backward in comparison with contemporary civilization) and unable to play an efficient role in a modern, technological society. A comparison with the relationship established between the indigenous and the modern in Rivera’s murals is also revealing. Both Barbara Braun and Linda Bank Downs discover a likeness of Coatlicue in Rivera’s representation of a car factory stamping-press on the south wall of the *Detroit Industry Murals*, which associates the power of new technology with the terrifying might and greatness of the Aztec earth goddess, as well as with notions of both divine and human sacrifice. For the most part, however – for example, in the National Palace mural – indigenous groups are positioned in Rivera’s work as entirely lacking with respect to modernity, needing to be redeemed and ushered into it by *mestizo* intellectuals and socialist revolutionaries. Indigenous culture as such thus becomes dispensable and something to be superseded by modernity.

Clement’s use of the avatar also points to an essential interchangeability of roles and identities on the battlefield that acts as a sobering reminder of how little appears to distinguish the violence of one militarized group from any other caught up in the Drug War. Although these pages appear to offer a blow-by-blow account of each fight, the action is not easy to follow, as significant ellipses separate the frames. Our attention is drawn instead to the forms of the figures in flight, which sometimes lose human characteristics as they pick up speed, their arms and legs dissolving into more ephemeral forms; we observe too how the combatants, locked into deathly embraces, become virtually indistinguishable. The animal-like forms they have adopted are so similar that they can be recognized only briefly by the flash of a red beret (the *kaibiles*) or the head of a dog (the *nahuales/guerrillas*).

In videogame theory, the avatar exposes the instability of subjectivization and the complex distribution of agency between player and the game apparatus or programmer. Bob Rehak reads the avatar in the light of Lacan’s narrative of the ego’s search for the lost ‘other’, arguing that this opens up the contradictions inherent in gameplay, ‘which consists – at least in part – of a toying with unstable categories of identity, presence, and subjectivity’. He also suggests that adopting an avatar involves ‘willingly inverting self-other distinctions’ and that
‘players invest an acted-on object with the characteristics of an acting subject’. This shifting, or shared, distribution of agency can only be evoked rather than directly experienced in the pages of a comic. The pages of *Los perros salvajes* that feature avatars actually resemble the pre-rendered ‘cutscenes’ or ‘in-game movies’ that are embedded in some videogames, sometimes – as here – with the purpose of showing how a conflict between chosen combinations of combatants plays out. These are moments at which the gameplayer becomes a spectator, disrupting the interactive mode of the game, and scenes of this kind usually draw on cinematic techniques to mobilize a variety of perspectives, which are certainly present here. If games often make heavy use of a first-person perspective in order to enhance immersion and player agency, cutscenes remind us of the extent to which agency is, in reality, distributed between player and programmer, undercutting the illusion of unity between player and avatar.

In his study of videogames in Latin America, Phillip Penix-Tadsen describes the connection between the player and the game as a cyborg configuration: ‘By engaging in a pas de deux with the coded restrictions and affordances of the game software, the player merges with the technology of the video game in the act of meaning creation referred to as gameplay’. Gameplay is a ‘collaborative performance’ in which the configurations of the game’s software and hardware engage the player at the level of embodied cognition. The game conditions the player’s body as the player appropriates the game. In the words of Martti Lahti, videogames are ‘a paradigmatic site for producing, imagining, and testing different kinds of relations between the body and technology in contemporary culture’. Clement’s evocation of gameplay within *Los perros salvajes* similarly tests out forms of technological incorporation. It also highlights the instability of the relationship between the self and the alter-ego represented by the avatar, understood as a distinct self but paradoxically remaining dependent on the first self. Rehak proposes that gamers derive pleasure from such instability, which allows them to engage in ‘liminal play’ of a kind that speaks to our experience of subjectivity in the world as fragmented and multiple rather than unified and whole. That this notion of multiplicity is not unique to the cybernetic era is made clear by the parallels Clement draws with Mesoamerican ontologies. Indeed, the mythology surrounding the *nahual* and its representation in *Los perros salvajes* provides an interesting model of how we might understand the multiple, distributed nature of subjectivity and agency that is particularly evident in cyborg identities. The guerrillas sometimes seem to transform themselves fully into dogs, but at other
times they merely don a mask that represents the head of a dog, while clearly remaining human beneath it (*nahual* comes from ‘covering’ or ‘disguise’ in Nahuatl). Similarly, their *nahuales* are sometimes presented as separate from the guerrillas – they are taught how to ‘use’ them at the beginning of the first volume, and we see them sprucing up their *nahual* masks with a new coat of paint in the second (Fig. 2.13) – while, at other times, they are fully identified with their own selves as they metamorphose into them. This ambivalence may reflect the much-cited ethnographic confusion and inconsistency that has surrounded the terms *nahual* and *tonal*, and indeed the evidence that the word *nahual* is used by different communities (or even within the same community) to refer either to the animal double of a human soul, or the shaman’s transformation into an animal.\(^{59}\)

The analogy established by Clement between the animal mask and the cybernetic prosthesis gestures towards a common notion of multiplicity and difference. For Descola, *nahualismo* is typical of the ‘wandering among other bodies that is undertaken by the components of a person’ he observes in Mesoamerican beliefs.\(^{60}\) These are characterized, for Descola, by ‘analogism’ (as distinct from animism, naturalism and totemism in his scheme of ontologies), which posits a world that is ‘a multiplicity of reverberating differences’ in which only analogy may bring a semblance of order and intelligibility.\(^{61}\) A distinctive feature of analogic ontologies, Descola proposes, is ‘This multiplication of the elementary pieces of the world echoing within each of its parts – including humans, divided into numerous components partially located outside of their bodies’.\(^{62}\) This description of the human clearly embraces the cybernetic prosthesis and establishes a shared concept of selfhood that extends beyond the human body, dispersed across the human/non-human boundary. What is also clear is that Clement’s procedure in *Los perros salvajes* is precisely one of ordering and rendering intelligible through analogies, a point that will be taken up in the conclusion to this chapter.

Clement’s imagined, almost parodic, incorporation of aspects of indigenous culture into political life highlights the signal failure of earlier projects to construct and put into effect a fully integrated vision of the nation, as well as the current-day failure of the Mexican state qua state. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that *Los perros salvajes* constructs the possibility of a viable alternative worldview based on indigenous beliefs, or participates in any idealization of indigenous culture. The guerrillas, who draw on their *nahual* powers to transcend human and non-human realms in order to wreak their own form of
Fig. 2.13 Guerrillas painting their *nahual* masks in *Los perros salvajes* (Edgar Clement, vol. 2)
private justice, also symbolize the impoverishment of indigenous culture as it – like almost everything else in Mexico – has been swallowed up in the Drug War. This is made clear when the guerrillas adopt their *nahual* masks to hide their identity as they participate in acts of abuse themselves. Indeed, the guerrillas/*nahuales* are not really associated with indigenous groups as such, as their physiognomy does not mark them out as indigenous in racial terms, although they do often wear clothing typical of *campesinos*, or peasants. What is being reproduced here, perhaps, is not the process by which the Indians have been (culturally) ‘mesticized’ in line with post-revolutionary nationalism but an alternative process by which *mestizos* have become ‘indianized’, partially assimilating indigenous beliefs and practices. It could therefore be objected that Clement effectively repeats the state’s appropriation of certain elements of indigeneity for specific political aims.

In contrast to the cultural discourses of *mestizaje* at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, this appropriation does not give rise to any kind of utopian vision, forging instead an increasingly apocalyptic one. As references to specific political scandals begin to dominate the pages of the second volume, images of demons and the infernal underworld prevail and the sober colour palette is increasingly daubed with sulphurous reds and oranges. As the violence intensifies, the *nahuales* appear more like devils than dogs, and one guerrilla opts to change instead into a *xolotl* (a god of the underworld). At one point we see a wolf-like *nahual* adopt a human mask, rather than the other way around, as if to register the fact that the guerrillas are now almost permanently required to activate their *nahuales* in the context of the escalating crisis. The *nahuales* take their place within a much broader series of images and incantations, drawn from literary texts and folkloric performances, which chart Mexico’s collapse into the obscene destruction of the end times. Many of the frames are imprinted with verses taken from José Emilio Pacheco’s *El reposo del fuego* (1966), which envisions the inflagration and dissolution of Mexico, or with lines from the incendiary *Chants de Maldoror* by Comte de Lautréamont (1869), whose delirious, sadistic prose also conjures up the reign of evil and savagery (Fig. 2.14). The infernal theme is also pursued via the inclusion of lyrics from the ‘Danza de los Diablos’ that dates back to colonial times and forms part of the Day of the Dead celebrations in the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca. The visual motif of a descent is also marked by Clement’s preference for elongated vertical frames that draw the eye down to the bottom of the page, an effect that is magnified as the action in such frames often spills out further downwards beyond the panel. It is compounded for the reader
of the web version, who must scroll down the page to see the lower part of the image.

The eschatological mode of *Los perros salvajes* might lead us to expect a conventional battle between good and evil. However, the putative superheroes – the *nahuales* – occupy an indeterminable space between resistance to repression and the pursuit of outright terrorism, and there are no actors in Clement’s drama who are not morally reprehensible. His monsters cannot perform their usual role of shoring up the ‘ontological hygiene of the humanist subject’, as Elaine Graham puts it.63

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63 Reference to Graham’s specific text is not provided in the image.
as they are already patently human. Their transformations cannot be mapped onto a Jekyll-and-Hyde scenario in which the ‘good’ self recoils from the depravity of the ‘evil’ one, as no distinction is drawn between the intentions of the guerrillas and their nahuales. Both human and non-human are equally inhuman; this immediately invalidates the inhuman as a moral category that – as Neal Curtis suggests – paradoxically ‘constitutes and saves the human [. . .], projecting all animality and barbarity outwards’. The continuities between the human and the non-human in Los perros salvajes allow Clement to construct a radically antihumanist critique, registering the destruction of every ideal of progress or evolution in the face of the all-encompassing corruption and stupefying brutality of Mexico’s Drug War.

The comic’s appropriation of traditional myths for use in the contemporary context also demonstrates the power of graphic fiction, with its potential for remediation, to challenge and reimagine mythologies peddled by the state. As Bruce D. Campbell observes, the drastic reduction in the post-NAFTA period of the government support that had previously sponsored the growth of a national comic book industry has increased the importance of online self-publication in the form of webcomics. If such restrictions on conventional forms of publication are to be regretted, they also enhance the freedom of the graphic artist to pursue highly critical work that is fully independent from both state control and commercial constraints. The increasing recourse to photojournalistic techniques and the proliferation of newspaper headline mock-ups in the second volume of Los perros salvajes – still a work in progress at the time of writing – reveals the extent to which graphic fiction may also step in, at times of national crisis, to take on the informative and critical perspective on unfolding news that is more often the preserve of print journalism. This function is particularly clear in the case of Los perros salvajes, which was developed first as a series of blog posts before being edited for publication in print as a graphic novel. This platform allowed Clement to release a page or even an individual panel very soon after its composition, creating a sense of immediacy in his response to political events of the time.

Conclusion

In E-Dem, Las playas del otro mundo and Los perros salvajes, spirituality, magic and animism are fully integrated into futuristic fantasies in ways that contest Western conceptions of modernity. In the case of the first two, it is modernity’s claim to be advancing towards a technological
future without encumbering myths and superstitions that is voided. Technology is shown to be saturated with mysticism and modern science fully rooted in the magic of erstwhile eras as well as the fantasies of our own. *Los perros salvajes*, on the other hand, draws on indigenous beliefs to challenge the specific exclusions of Mexican modernity and to highlight the crashing defeat of the national project in the inhuman violence of the Drug War. All three graphic novels seek to unseat the arrogance with which humans consider themselves the sole authors of their history and find a potential source of redemption and regeneration in an embrace of philosophies that do not distinguish between humans and non-humans in the way that Western modernity does.

This provides the impetus for the explorations of gnosis and esotericism in these texts. As Davis suggests, however, new forms of gnosis of this kind do not aspire to an escape from the material world or from embodiment but to a renewed integration with it:

> If the original gnostic moment reflected an emerging sense of the self as a free agent, the latest mutation also gropes toward an embodied awareness of the collective dimension of being. After all, the myth of the individual – with its desires, its rebellious spunk, and its hopeless immortality projects – is now the dominant fiction of the corporate consumer world. What we are moving toward, perhaps, is an awakened consciousness of our links in this place, and the corresponding need to sustain this place with these relations in mind.67

This ‘collective dimension of being’ also involves non-humans. Jane Bennett, who adds her voice to those who dispute modernity’s ‘disenchantment tale’, finds an array of ‘sites of enchantment’ in the contemporary world that range from interspecies crossings and the science of complexity to ecospirituality and even forms of commodity consumption.69 She contends, crucially, that ‘enchantment is a mood with ethical potential’, as it opens us to other selves and entities and makes us ‘more willing and able to enter into productive assemblages with them’.70 The graphic novels discussed in this chapter engage in strategies of enchantment with precisely this aim, to heighten ethical awareness of the exclusions and the atrocities of the past and present and to lay out a new, or renewed, ethical orientation that begins from an understanding of the place of the human in a world that is (still) full of mysticism.

If technology in these texts is often allied to the forces of repression and alienation in society, we may find in the appropriation by *E-Dem*
and Los perros salvajes of different media technologies – photography, television, videogames – an alternative, and decidedly more positive, understanding of the potential in technology for the staging of encounters, imagined or virtual but often embodied in some way, between humans and their others. If these encounters are almost entirely violent within the diegesis, the immersive capacity borrowed from the gaming aesthetic in particular may establish a different kind of relationship between the text and its reader. The reader is drawn in, by means of a collusion between technology and strategies of enchantment, to grasp hidden agencies that unite apparently disparate points in time and space, to adopt other viewing perspectives, to allow him or herself to be configured according to different ontologies, or even, momentarily, to take on other identities, human or non-human. Such strategies, if they do not always lead to an explicit ethical stance as they do in E-Dem, nevertheless provide the conditions for one.

In different ways, the three texts discussed in this chapter exploit the capacity of graphic fiction for remediation and visual analogy. They establish the medium as a powerful means to connect apparently divergent ontologies and systems of knowledge, such as science and magic, indigeneity and modernity, Renaissance Europe and pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, nahualismo and cybernetics. Just as significant are the reflexive relationships established in both Las playas del otro mundo and Los perros del paraíso between contemporary graphic fiction and ancient Mesoamerican writing systems, in which writing was thoroughly entwined with visual imagery. The use of glyphs within pictures in Mixtec, Maya and Aztec screenfolds (or codices) could very feasibly be seen as a precursor to graphic fiction. While they may root themselves in the pre-Hispanic past, however, these graphic novels also claim an uncompromising contemporaneity. They may do this by folding into their aesthetic the virtuosic imagery of videogames or the immediacy and ephemerality of newsprint and infographics. They may also create new audiences by circulating in digitized form on the internet and exploiting the potential of blogs as spaces that permit an immediate response to unfolding political events and create new forms of interaction with readers.