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JIMBO IN PURGATORY by Gary Panter
Study Guide by Joel Priddy

Introduction

Gary Panter grew up in Brownsville, Texas in the 1950s. He had an early opportunity to familiarize himself with the cartoon characters, packaging designs, and general pop culture ephemera that has formed so much of his artistic vision when, as a child, he was encouraged to doodle with his father in the family's five-and-dime store. The psychedelic sixties added fuel to fire, and by the seventies, Panter was a full-blown Outsider, an artist working on the fringes, observing the world from a unique perspective, and commenting on it through imagery that made no attempt to please conventional tastes and drew no distinction between "trash" and "art" (Edwin Pouncy, panter.com).

Panter's cartoons emerged as a formative voice in the Los Angeles Punk scene. This is when he created his most enduring character, Jimbo. Jimbo is a modern primitive, making his way through an apocalyptic world of robots, monsters, water parks, shopping malls, and junk iconography. A restless experimenter, Panter has found many outlets for his art: as well as cartooning, he has produced work as an illustrator, animator, painter, printmaker, and interior decorator – all with his trademark "ratty line" and highly personalized skew on the world in which we live. In the Eighties, he won three Emmys for designing props and scenery for the successful and innovative kids' show *Pee Wee's Playhouse.* In 2000 he received the Chrylser Design in acknowledgement of his influence on our visual culture. He has also received what may be the highest honor accorded to any American cartoonist: a café in Japan named after him.

Every night for three years, starting in 1997, Panter drew a single panel of *Jimbo in Purgatory* after putting his daughter to bed (Steven Heller, "Gary Panter: Formal Shock*"*). It is part of what is generally considered his most ambitious work to date: a rigorous exploration of Dante's epic poem, *the Divine Comedy* through the lens of the centuries of literature that have followed it, as well as Panter's own kitsch-derived comics vocabulary.

In Jimbo's previous exploits, he had been arrested and released in the company of a parole robot named Valise. Valise led Jimbo through an immense shopping mall called Focky-Bocky. Each page of their journey was based on a canto from Dante's *Inferno.* Now, Jimbo and Valise have emerged from Focky-Bocky, and entered an infotainment complex in the shape of Dante's Mount Purgatory.

Discussion Questions

1. Gary Panter's Jimbo first appeared in the punk rock magazine, *Slash,* in the Seventies. Just as punk music sounded like angry noise to many, Panter's drawings might appear to be crude doodles upon first viewing them. Instead of machine gun power chords and screamed lyrics, Panter uses sketchy compositions, changes in style, and what one admiring critic referred to as drawings that looked like they were "rendered with a fork" (Steven Heller, "Gary Panter: Formal Shock"). Panter is a talented artist, capable of drawing in more conventionally representational

styles. Why would he choose to create images that don't show off an ability to draw realistically? How does this style of drawing affect your reading of *Jimbo in Purgatory*? Does the art seem intimidating, or like something anyone might produce? Does this make the comic easier to approach, or easier to dismiss? Would a cleaner, more conventional style change your reading of this story?

2. How does Panter's style of art relate to the style of language? Do the pictures "look" the way the words "sound"?

3. Observe the marginalia (the images in the borders of each page). Snakes are entwined under images of egg-filled bird's nests on page 4. Angry eyes shoot out interlacing lightening bolts from the top of page 5. How do these relate to the main narrative? How do they change over the course of the story?

4. Each page of *Jimbo in Purgatory* is organized on two different levels: as a page, and as a series of twelve panels. The twelve panels are read one at a time, beginning at the upper left-hand corner, and reading to the right and down, one row at a time. The page, however, is designed as a single unit. Background images often flow together to create a unified image that may not always make sense with the panel progression. Often Mount Purgatory fills the background. Jimbo starts at the bottom of the mountain, and climbs up. How does Panter maintain a sense of Jimbo climbing upwards when each page shows Jimbo descending? Find a page in *Jimbo in Purgatory* where the page and the panels contradict one another. Find a page where they reinforce one another. Compare the differences in the way we read a single image versus a sequence of images. Does the sequence-reading dominate our experience of the strip? What is the effect of the page-reading on your experience of the strip?

5. In his introduction, Panter talks about a chain of influence and inspiration in literature. Dante includes a poet who inspired him, Virgil, as a character in the *Purgatorio.* Dante's work, in turn, influenced Boccaccio, Boccaccio influenced Chaucer, and so on. How does *Jimbo in Purgatory* extend this chain of influence?

6. The people Jimbo and Valise meet on their journey are all students trying to earn literature degrees by quoting appropriate passages from various texts. Take a single page from *Jimbo in Purgatory* and find the relevant passages listed at the bottom of the page. Can you identify the constituent parts Panter used to create his text? Does a familiarity with these source-passages deepen your understanding of that page? Does Panter's synthesis deepen your understanding of the original texts?

7. Along with cross-references to the literary descendants of Dante, Panter fills his Purgatory with images from recent and contemporary popular culture. Dante and Virgil met the ghost of a Roman named Cato; Jimbo and Valise meet Bruce Lee, who played a character named Kato on the American TV series *The Green Hornet.* The original Cato, in Dante's time as well as in Roman Antiquity, represented the "natural moral virtues" of Justice, Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude (Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Purgatory*). How, other than a naming pun, is Bruce Lee an appropriate stand-in? What does Bruce Lee represent to the contemporary reader?

8. How do other pop references change or illuminate Dante's verse? How do the following pop references relate to their *Purgatorio* originals: Boy George on page 4? Yule Brenner's Android from the movie *Westworld* on page 6? The robot Maria from the movie *Metropolis* on page 12?

9. How do the albums listed on the final page relate to the story that preceded it?

10. Dante understood Purgatory to be a place where the soul stayed until it had burnt off its sins. In this way the soul could be perfected and enter Heaven. Why is Panter's Purgatory reinterpreted as an "infotainment-testing center?" How does this relate to modern attempts to improve the self?

10. In Dante's *Purgatorio*, Dante himself is the protagonist. In Panter's version, Dante has been replaced by Jimbo. Jimbo is a muscular Caucasian man with a crew-cut and a tartan loincloth. What sort of associations do you have with a person with these visual characteristics? Do you identify with him? Is he an "everyman?" Or is he more specific than that? Why would Panter find Jimbo to be an effective protagonist?

11. Why does Panter make so many changes to Dante's story? What is the purpose of creating an adaptation of a story that is not completely faithful to the original?

Studio Exercises

Project One: Music and Marks
Music does not necessarily have any visual component. Comics do not have actual sound. And yet both media can draw inspiration from the other. Collect three very different pieces of music, such a Classical, up-tempo Jazz, and Punk Rock. While listening to each piece of music, fill a sketchbook page with abstract visual representations of the music: not imagery of lifestyles associated with the music, but of the sounds themselves. What sorts of lines and shapes seem appropriate while listening to each piece of music? Is one type of music full of curving, loopy lines? Is another more angular and jagged?

When you have all three pages, use them as a visual lexicon of marks from which you'll create three characters. Again, a character need not represent our social associations with the music that inspired it, but rather should be a visual embodiment of your experience of that music. Listening to the appropriate music, create a three-panel strip for each character, still referring to your sketchbook pages for types of mark-making.

Then create a ten-panel strip in which your three characters meet.

Project Two: Other People's Words
Randomly select a page from one of the three following books: *The Bible, The Bagahavad-Gita,* or Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Using what you find on that page as your text for all narration and dialogue, create a twelve-panel strip about your day-to-day life. You may omit or rearrange sentences, and you may replace words with synonyms. All imagery should illustrate your life, not the source text.

Can you find anything in the source text that relates to any aspect of your life? How does the high prose of the source text sound when used as dialogue by contemporary characters?