Salvador Dalí and Pop Culture

By Anthony Viera

Salvador Dalí 's influence on pop culture is clear and at times even obvious. Many of Dalí's contributions to pop art and modern culture have been well documented. However, his direct and indirect connections to comic books and their subsequent influence on modern subculture are less documented and sometimes outright overlooked. I would like to elaborate and highlight the impact Dalí 's artwork and artistic philosophies have made on comic book art and storytelling. Comic books and graphic novels arguably have a larger impact on modern day pop culture than any other medium. Observing the rising popularity of mega events such as Comic-con, or the massively successful adaptations of comic book and Japanese manga stories on media giant streaming services, such as Netflix and Disney, will tell you all you need to know about the influence comic books have on modern society. It would be irresponsible of us as proponents of Salvador Dalí's work and lasting influence not to make efforts to correlate the impact Salvador Dalí has had on comic books, manga, graphic novels, and sequential artwork at large.

Dalí's connection to comics begins with his own interest in the format. While Dalí is by no means considered a comic artist and illustrator in the same way that he is spoken of as an art pioneer and master of Surrealism, he did dabble in comics and created sequential artwork on many occasions. He enjoyed telling stories with pictures and seeing his own artwork in motion. Even if it was a fleeting experiment for the master artist, Dalí contributed to the sequential art form more than once throughout his illustrious career. At the age of 12, he was already developing sequential art in the form of comic strips that he created to entertain his little sister (which resurfaced and garnered more attention in 1994 during the London exhibition "Salvador Dalí: The Early Years"). These comics were slapstick in nature, and presumably were influenced by similar gags he would have seen in newspapers or magazines of that time.

Once Dalí had established himself with the surrealists and started to branch out into something uniquely his own, he revisited the comic book format. In 1935, Dalí produced what

may have been his first sequential art piece as a professional, which was in fact a storyboard playing off a silent era episodic film called *The Perils of Pauline* (1914-1915), particularly a specific episode of the film that translated from French to *Les Mystères de New York*. Dalí's adaptation was going to be titled *Les Mystères Surrealistes de New York*, but the film never went further than the initial concept. In 1940, Dalí pursued another film dream project to collaborate and work with Walt Disney on an animated feature. While the film which was titled *Destino* never reached completion in the 40s (it was finally completed in 2003), there are personal works of his that survived both of these projects in which we are able to see Dalí producing and visualizing sequential art in the form of storyboards. This type of work was very much akin to the type of panel art used in making comics, and aside from pacing there is little that distinguishes Dalí 's storyboard work from comic art. Dalí's interest in comics and sequential art, fleeting as it may have been, shows that he respected the format and wanted to understand it the same way he understood film (writing a movie script with Harpo Marx) and fashion (collaborating on surreal fashion designs with Elsa Schiaparelli). Even so, it's safe to say that his surrealistic imaginings had a much larger impact on the generations of comic artists to come than his brief stints with the format had on him. [1]

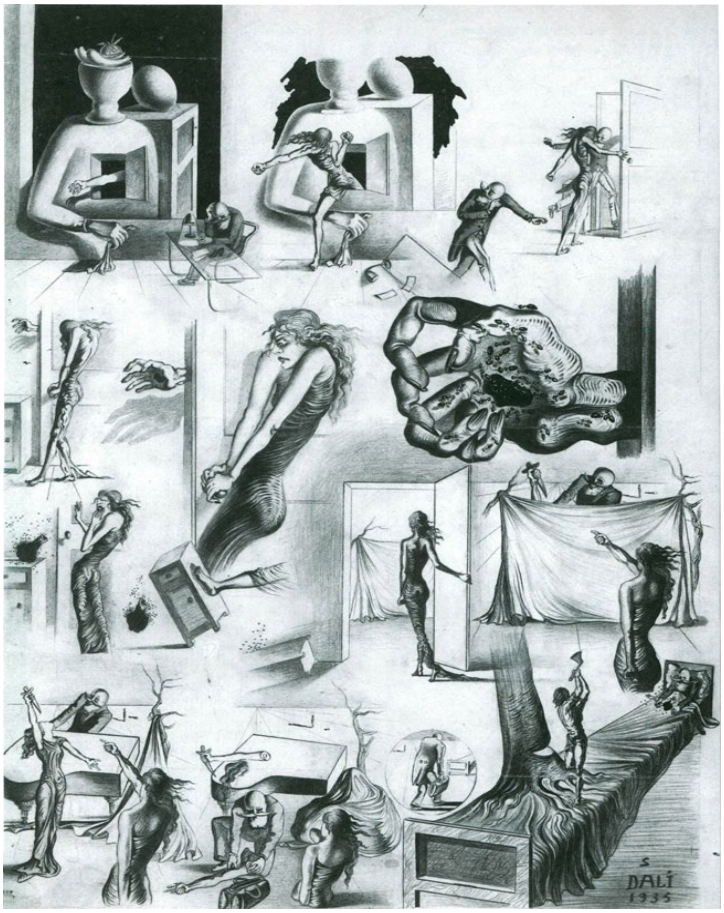

Figure 1. Salvador Dalí, *Les Mystères de New York'* storyboards,1935 [2]

To begin elaborating on Dalí's footprint and influence on pop comic subculture as well as on comic books and graphic novels in general, an obvious starting point is to underscore his influence on the creators of the most highly regarded works in the genre throughout its relatively short history. I can think of no better place to start than the founders and creators of Marvel Comics, a brand that has become a household name worldwide and is nearly synonymous with the genre. Marvel was initially founded as Timely Comics by Martin Goodman in 1939 and had somewhat fluid branding until a book titled *The Fantastic Four* was launched in 1961 by writer/creator Stan Lee and co/creator and artist Jack Kirby under the brand Marvel. This period was the beginning of comic books being targeted to a wider audience than children. The brand of Marvel became their primary publishing name and eventually evolved into the media juggernaut we know today. Jack Kirby was responsible for

many timeless stories and installments under the publishing house's multiple names and was nicknamed Jack "The King " Kirby for being the driving creative force behind many of the stories that would eventually become Marvel staples. Even in the early period of American comic books, comics were not predominantly "super-hero" tales, but covered a wide spectrum of stories, mostly taking after the storytelling trends of early 20th century pulp novels. Kirby was the main creative force behind many of these. Here, at the start of popular American comic book writing, we can observe the influence of Dalí and the surrealists.[3]

Kirby had created many books outside of the stereotypical "superhero" genre, and one such series of books was a collection of surrealist tales titled *The Strange World of Your Dreams* in 1953. This is one of the earliest clear lines that can be drawn between the founders of the Marvel publishing house and Salvador Dalí. With no hint of subtlety (standard practice for comics of that era) the sub-title for the book read "Comics meets Dalí & Freud!" These books were partly a marketing tactic to reach a broader audience, as many of the early pre-Marvel titles were attempts at generating sales to audiences other than children in order to grow the company's readership. These books contained stories by artists and writers who would later become known as industry giants, such as Joe Simon, Mort Meskin and more, and who were all influenced by Dalí and the surrealists. Their passion, understanding and appreciation of surrealist art are quite apparent throughout the interior pages of the books. The interior and cover art by Kirby himself was considered outstanding for comics of that era (and still revered even by modern comic standards), and the Dalínian influence was obvious—barren dreamscapes with odd symbolic imagery and grotesque transfigured characters. There is something to be said for seeing Dalínian art in the sequential form of comic art. There are scenes with jeering crowds slowly transforming into grotesque monsters, lions with horns attacking women as eyeball plants watch from the background, and dream detectives going mad and contorting into disfigured beasts. All these were transposed over tales influenced by dreamscapes and Freudian interpretation, an ode to Dalí and the surrealists in the plainest fashion.[4]

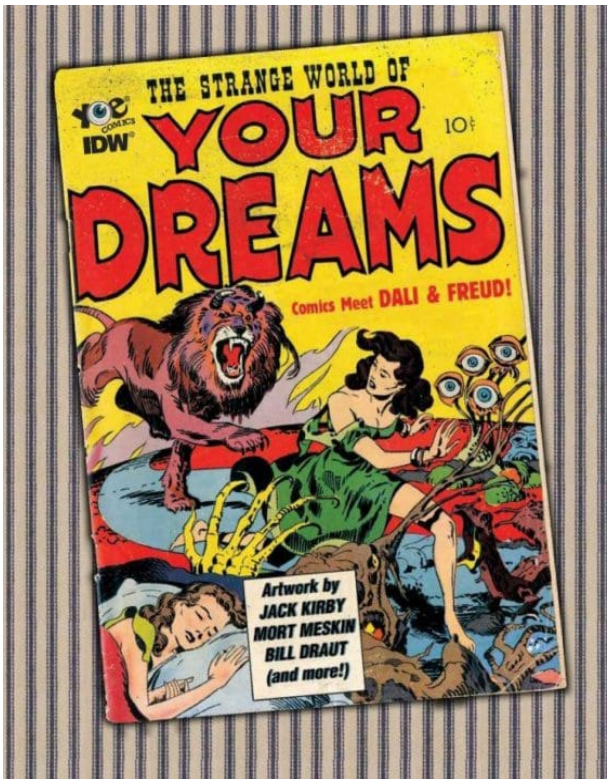

Figure 2. *The Strange World of Your Dreams,* 1953[5]

Dalí's impact on modern comics did not end with Jack Kirby and the early Marvel founders, however. Many of the most prolific artists since Kirby and his colleagues founded the most popular comic book company on Earth have also drawn influence from the surrealist mastermind. Jim Steranko, one of Marvel's long standing artists from the 1960's and 1970's was largely influenced by Salvador Dalí. Many of his interior artworks had surreal, psychedelic overtones and he gained fame among comic readers and eventually comic enthusiasts for his early out-of-the-box approach to comic design and innovative approach to storytelling. He paid even more direct homage to Dalí on his 1968 cover art for *Nick Fury, Agents of Shield #7* where he depicts super-agent Nick Fury running through a Dalínian landscape riddled with iconic Dalí symbolism like clocks and melting landscapes. [6]

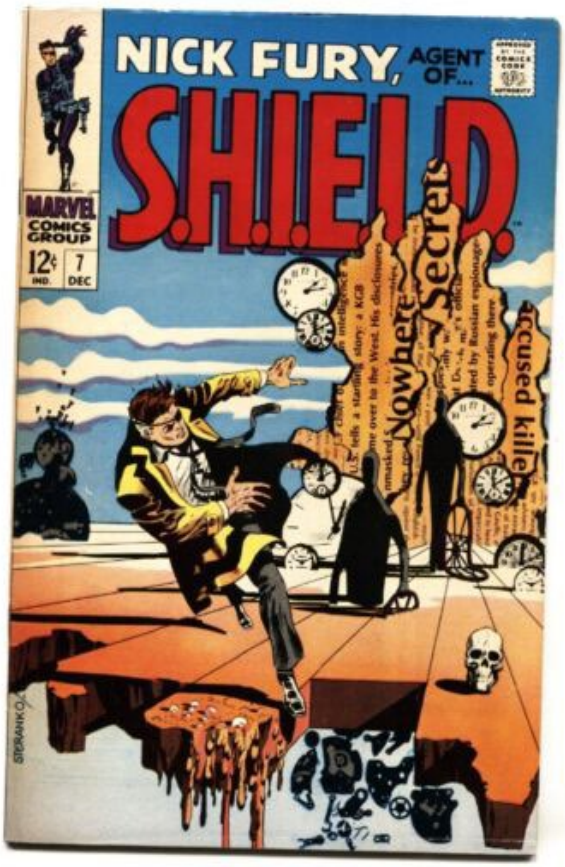

Figure 3. Jim Steranko, *Nick Fury, Agent of Shield #7*, 1968[7]

It wasn't just visual artists who took cues from Dalí and the surrealists to elevate storytelling in comics either. Writer Alan Moore, one of comics most recognizable names, and mastermind behind stories such as *V for Vendetta*, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *The Watchmen* drew from Dalí 's work as well. There is a sequence in *The Watchmen* (one of the greatest selling graphic novels of all time, and the only comic book to appear on *Time*'s "All-Time 100 Greatest Novels" list) where an integral character who has a fluid understanding of time is deeply studying Dalí 's *The Persistence of Memory*.[8] When asked about appreciating artists, Moore was quoted as saying, "I can look at Salvador Dalí's work and marvel at it, despite the fact that I believe that Dalí was probably a completely disgusting human being [laughter] and borderline fascist, but that doesn't detract from the genius of his artwork."[9]

Figure 4. *The Watchmen* by writer Alan Moore and artist Dave Gibbons, 1986[10]

Neil Gaiman, another renowned novelist and author of a multitude of bestselling graphic novels also drew influence from Dalí. Gaiman, known for such stories as *Sandman*, *American Gods*, and *Good Omens*, had a long-standing run on a surreal superhero story titled *Miracleman*. *Miracleman* was originally created and published in 1954 as a standard superhero acting as a counter to heroes such as Superman and Captain Marvel (to of course

try and capitalize on the popularity of such heroes at the time). However, a new iteration of the hero came about in 1984, revised by Alan Moore, who retold the hero's story in a surreal and mind-bending way that had rarely been seen in comics before. Afterwards Neil Gaiman was handed the series, and in Gaiman's iteration, things became even more weird, and even more surreal.[11] In issue #3 of Gaiman's run, a cadre of Andy Warhol ghosts welcome a character into the afterlife, and there is a page where Dalí shows up riding a giant flaming giraffe. *Miracleman* wasn't the only instance of referencing Dalí for Gaiman. In his acclaimed series *Sandman*, the home of the major character (capital of the world of dreams) has a melting clock as its central decoration (one of Dalí 's most iconic symbols). [12]

Figure 5. Neil Gaiman, *Miracleman #3,* 2015 [13]

If Dalí's influence on comic giants like Jack Kirby, Jim Steranko and Alan Moore shows the artist's impact on the more popular side of comic subculture, his influence on the underground and rebellious founders of comic culture can be found just as easily. R. Crumb, who is perhaps the father of indie comics, has become a counterculture icon for leading the movement of underground comics. Crumb's underground, comic-illustrating career began after his counterculture contributions to San Francisco newspapers garnered national attention. He was offered work by independent publisher Don Donahue creating a comic book titled Zap Comix, and his comic work continued to rise in popularity (especially among the underground readerships throughout the United States). Crumb produced a high volume of comic work throughout the 1960's and 1970's until he created the infamous *Weirdo* magazine in 1980.[14] Crumb often includes hyper sexualism, extreme commentary on societal behavior, and satire in his storytelling and artwork, blended with a surreal and psychedelic visual style. Many of the same ideologies and commentaries on human society that drove the surrealists and Dalí during the advent of surreal artwork can be found in Crumb's comics. Crumb claims to have developed his surrealistic style after a two-month period following an LSD drug trip and has on many occasions cited Dalí as an influence.

> I came from popular culture. I didn't go to art school. And there was no place to learn cartooning. You looked at others' work and you copied it, that's how you learned in the old days. All fine art produced since the Second World War is not of interest to me. I'm a little interested in the pop surrealism of LA—Todd Schorr, Robert Williams. I like Dalí. I like Otto Dix, George Grosz, Christian Schad.[15]

Figure 6. R. Crumb, *Illustration* [16]

Although the modern concept of the comic book originated in the United States, sequential art has existed in the world for much longer than that. The format of the comic book has developed, grown and proliferated throughout the world, as has Salvador Dalí's influence on those works. One of the more prolific illustrators to influence and contribute to the genre of comic art is French comic artist Paul Giraud, also known as Moebius. The name Moebius is synonymous with highly detailed illustration work that pushes the boundaries of what an artist can accomplish with pen and ink. Moebius's illustrations visualized fantasy worlds that were unprecedented in their creativity and freedom, and influences a great many comic artists and illustrators to this day. Much of Moebius's work carries a surreal, Dalínian aesthetic. Artists such as Jack Kirby and Robert Crumb were an influence on Giraud's early artistic development as he would read and mimic western comic books at a young age, providing an indirect path of influence to Dalí.[17] Many of Moebius's artworks contain surreal landscapes that when compared to Dalí's works bear a striking resemblance. One cannot help but notice Dalí's influence on the artist. Many iconic pop culture works were influenced by Moebius designs and aesthetic (either as a direct result of Moebius providing concept work, or indirectly with directors and designers borrowing from the artist). Film projects

such as *Star Wars*, *Mad Max*, *Alien*, *Blade Runner* and even animation projects like Hayaou Miyazaki's *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* all have Moebius's aesthetic touch.[18] Dalí and Moebius were even slated to work on the same project together, when in 1974 Moebius began producing concept art for Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Dune* film adaptation. Dalí was also slated to act in the film as the Padishah Emperor. The film never made it to production, but there are concept arts that were conceived in the early stages of the film's design where Moebius imagined what Dalí would have looked like as the character.[19]

Figure 7. Moebius, *Jimi Hendrix* [20]

Figure 8. Moebius, *Dalí as the Emperor in Jodorowsky's "Dune"* [21]

Moving even further East, comic books from Japan (widely known as manga), were developed in near-isolation from the rest of the world and have their own unique cartooning styles, storytelling mechanics and printing techniques, as well as their own flavor of Surrealism. Despite that difference, it is just as easy to find manga influenced by Dalí in the East as it is in the West. Many of the mangas in Japan push the boundaries of Surrealism, and it could be argued that some of the most surreal storytelling in the world originates there. Stories ranging from Super Drugs that turn the world power struggle into literal wrestling championships to sentient cats that adopt humans, nothing is too "out there" for the medium. The more terrifying aspects of Surrealism have an especially strong footing in horror there. Horror is a very popular genre in Japan and grasp on reality is a concept that is often used to unnerve readers and keep them on the edge of their seats.[22]

One such master of this type of storytelling is an artist and creator by the name of Junji Ito. World renowned for his books *Uzumaki* (a reality bending horror story about a small Japanese town) and *Cat Diary* (the true life perspective of Ito's surreal experience becoming a cat owner), Ito has carved out his own path using surreal imagery and reality bending narrative to hook audiences worldwide. Ito's visual work, especially in Uzumaki, will often rely on a Dalínian abandonment of structural anatomy and perspective to accompany the truly terrifying stories he is telling. Ito has cited Dalí as an influence, along with H.R. Giger and H.P. Lovecraft.[23] With the sheer volume of surrealist storytelling that comes out of Japan, it is of little surprise that Dalí would be attributed as an influence by some of their most celebrated surreal storytellers.

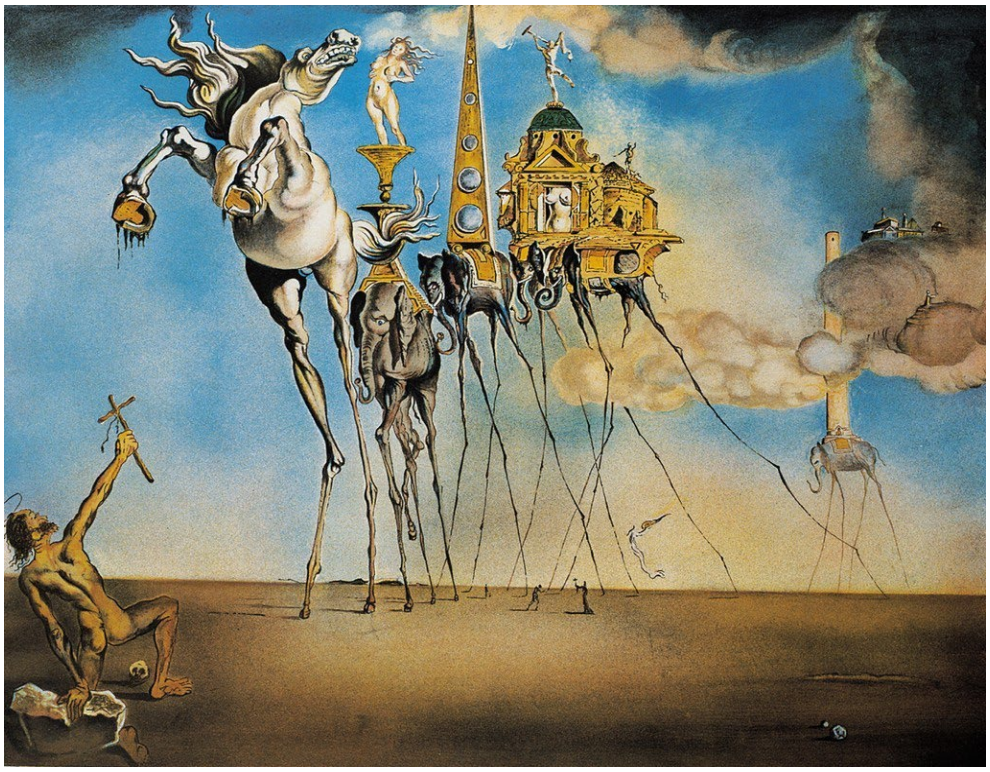

Figure 9. Salvador Dalí, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, 1946, Collection of the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

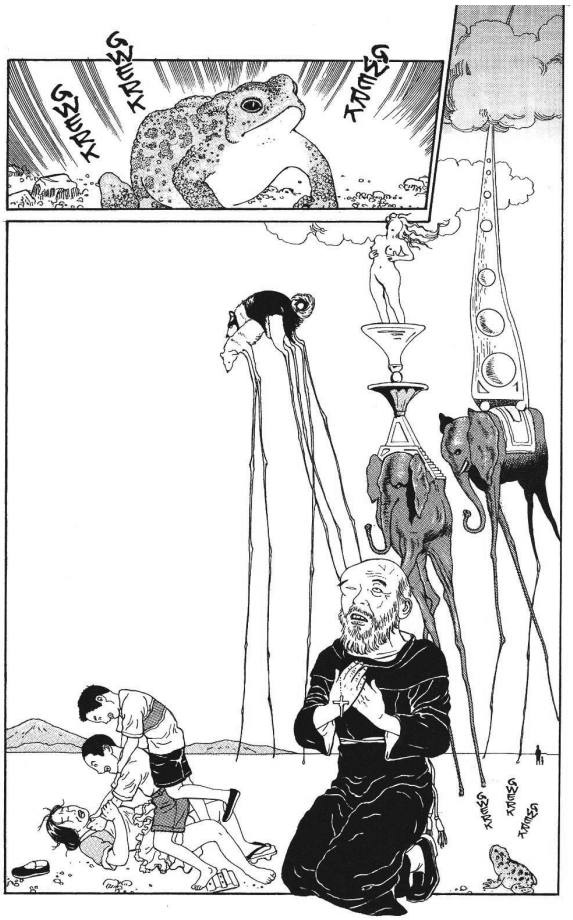

Figure 10. Suehiro Maruo, *"Binzume no Jigoku"*[24]

Not only can we trace Dalí's influence on comics' most influential and celebrated creators worldwide, but we can also find comics that were made specifically about Dalí or inspired by his works. There are a handful of graphic novels that tell the story of Dalí. The 2016 Art Masters Series: *Dalí* graphic novel is a modern in-depth look at the life of Dalí. Artist Edmond Baudoin gives us a fantastic view of what Dalí's work would have looked like in comic form. Baudoin uses all of Dalí 's surreal iconography such as the great masturbator, the iconic forked crutch, men being born from eggs and more, to elucidate the important moments in Dalí 's career while giving the story an overall feel of a Dalí painting.[25] While this is a great example of comics being used to biograph the life of Dalí, it is certainly not the only graphic novel to cover Dalí's life and career. German artist Willi Bloess made *Milestones of Art: Salvador Dalí : The Paranoia-Method: A Graphic Novel* in 2013, Paco Roca drew a fictional

biopic of Dalí's career in 2001 titled *El Juego Lúgubre*, and French artist Jean-Michel Renault with writer Robert Descharnes wrote a comic about Dalí in 1986 titled *La Vie de Salvador Dalí*.[26] These are just a few examples of comic works covering the wild and surreal career of Salvador Dalí. They show us that Dalí's influence on art was powerful enough to inspire many comic artists from different parts of the world to use their medium to celebrate him.

Art

Figure 11. Edmond Baudoin, *Masters Series: Dalí* [27]

Another graphic novel born of Dalí's influence is the book *Giraffes on Horseback Salad*. This graphic novel adapts the screenplay that Dalí created with Harpo Marx in 1937 that was too surreal and indigestible for producers to take a chance on at the time. While the film was never produced, the screenplay survived (a common outcome in Dalí's work with film). The book was a collaborative effort between writer Josh Frank, Spanish illustrator Manuela Pertega and comedian Tim Heidecker. The artwork by Pertega is incredibly thoughtful and psychedelic, using clever panel structure to sequence the artwork for such a sporadic and surreal story line. And Heidecker was employed to provide 1930s style gag

humor, as the script simply said “insert Marx Brothers routine here” in place of all the jokes. [28]

Figure 12. Josh Frank, Tim Heidecker and Manuela Pertega, *Giraffes on Horseback Salad*, 2019 [29]

Overall, it is clear that Salvador Dalí had an impact on the generations of comic artists that have followed since he began to revolutionize the art world with his surrealist works and mind-bending sense of visual interpretation. Whether it be popular American comics from publishing houses like Marvel Comics, world renowned Japanese Manga publications, or accomplished literary works in the form of graphic novels studied in schools and universities alike, there is not a corner of the industry that has not been influenced or added to by the master of Surrealism. And with the ever-rising popularity of comic books and the subsequent comic culture, to fail to draw this connection is to fail to recognize Dalí’s impact on the world. Both Dalí’s work and the work of comic culture can be used to educate future generations about how much of what we see in modern day art is influenced by his work.

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