



Comics Bulletin Contraband has an innovative and forward-thinking premise that would be a work of pure science fiction in the hands of a more capable writer: What if camera phone technology, online video sharing, and sadism became a linked social phenomenon where people catch themselves on digital video doing illicit and awful things via mobile phone and then post the illegal video content for consumption by other voyeuristic sadists. This premise isn't far from our own reality where Youtube and Myspace are breeding grounds for empty, sub-cultural drivel and the small-minded cruelty of puerile popularity. Thus, one would expect this graphic novel to readily make use of this abundant source material with ease and finesse—even being poignant by providing clarification on the phenomenon itself. No. Thomas Behr's writing is cumbersome, indefensibly tangential, and without focus. The story follows Toby, an internet café waiter and mobile movie voyeur, who falls for an attractive girl named Charlotte. This loathsome caricature of damsel-in-distress is involved with Tucker, a mobile movie maker whose lambaste of every single convention of society seems both ridiculous and needlessly circuitous. When Charlotte's kidnapping is caught on digital camera and posted on Contraband, a vile video-sharing site, Toby sets off to find her by following the kidnapper's taunting videos on his mobile phone. Behr's background is primarily in technology, not fiction writing. Without holding that against him, it does explain his lack of narrative structure. Nonetheless, his writing is unforgivably overbearing. For example, there is no "dialogue." There are plenty of words and plenty of people talking—but either not to each other or, when they do talk to each other, not about a single topic that doesn't wind into a maze of personal beliefs, pseudo-philosophy, and half-baked observations. Every panel is filled with dialogue that runs out of control from the author. These are monologues that are nothing more than specially packaged idiosyncratic thoughts of the author—none of which engage the story or characters directly for more than a single balloon. And let's not forget the cumbersome structure of the discourse! Behr attempts to capture real speech patterns like bypassing formality or reducing a question to the object, like in the above excerpt, "This whole celebrity spotting thing?" That bit of dialogue isn't cumbersome—neither is, "Both fake and real famous folks want you grovelling at that their feet!" However, when you link these bits of coherent yet informal dialogue together in an incoherent pattern, you get a shattered thought process that reads like Tourettes: "They have no clue!—Both fake and real famous folks want you grovelling around their feet! Hey, bill boy. This whole celebrity-spotting thing? Never happens in my town." As I mentioned earlier, Behr's novel lacks narrative structure. His winding statements on celebrity spotting, the British health service, smoking, or whatever, are held together only by the talent of Phil Elliot. Comic artist since 1981, Elliot has incredible skill at capturing placid humanity—the vulnerable, common person—which works very well given the subject matter of Contraband. Elliot's previous works are similarly humanistic, such as *Illegal Alien* for Dark Horse Comics. He has clean line work that is defined by thick inking—giving the page a sketchy look. It's his storytelling, the intricate detail of a scene and fluidity of the panels that hold this book together. As Tucker, Pluggler, and Toby drive across a London intersection, Elliot captures the readers' interest with elaborate rows of homes that line the thoroughfare—showcasing ordinary life juxtaposed to the three turgid characters whose lives are consumed by mobile video sharing. I really looked forward to enjoying this book. I love relevant science fiction, how it focuses on a specific timely topic and watches it run amok across society. Contraband has a poignant statement to make. Western culture is consumed by a sick infatuation with fame and vicious vindication over the general populace, which is being exacerbated by faster communication via multimedia technology. However, the book suffers from extremely poor writing, and even the humanism of Phil Elliot could not save it.