STUDYING

COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

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Introduction: How to Use This Book

This book is a basic introduction to the study of COMICS and GRAPHIC NOVELS. It is designed to provide you with all the knowledge you need for studying and analyzing comics on a university course. It explores key issues in comics studies: how the MEDIUM tells its stories, how authors express their experience through them, what novels and graphic novels have in common and where they differ, as well as the history of comics as POPULAR CULTURE. The book outlines different critical approaches to comics, and gives you reading suggestions and exercises to practice comics analysis at the end of each chapter.

This book is for you, the reader of comics. It suggests an explanation for how we read comics and their NARRATIVES, how we relate to authors and NARRATORS and, perhaps, gives you a sense of how comics engage your mind. You might read this book in a class on comics and be interested in the reading suggestions and the exercises, or the instructions on how to write an essay on comics analysis; or you might be simply curious about what other people have to say and write about comics and graphic novels. Welcome. This section gives an overview of what you might expect in *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* and sets out some basic definitions, but please feel free to skip ahead to any other chapter.

This book approaches comics through the ways in which they engage their readers' minds and bodies, and the processes through which readers make sense of the squiggles and lines on the page. These basic processes are the key this book offers for analyzing comics and for connecting close readings to larger issues, such as authenticity in autobiographic comics, media differences in comics ADAPTATIONS, or cultural evaluations of comics. *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels* is therefore based on a cognitive approach to comics, one

that draws on insights from the cognitive sciences and the neurosciences into how our minds and bodies work together. It uses the cognitive approach as a point of departure for considering different aspects of comics, their connection to other media, and their place in culture, but it will also introduce other approaches, from narratology to media studies and cultural studies on its journey. Concepts and terminology from these approaches will be introduced where needed.

What This Book Holds

Studying Comics and Graphic Novels has six chapters which address different thematic issues. The chapters are designed to build onto each other and to be read in sequence, leading from simple PANEL-by-panel analysis to a consideration of larger narrative strategies, and from the role of such formal and narrative strategies in autobiographic comics and comics adaptations to the place of comics in our cultural landscape. The chapters cross-reference each other, and if you prefer to read up on, say, Jane Austen adaptations before *Maus*, you will find pointers in each chapter that lead you back to previous discussions of particular terms and issues. The glossary similarly provides a ready set of definitions and explanations that will help you map your own path through this volume. Glossary entries are highlighted when they first appear in the text.

Chapter 1 What's In A Page outlines the basic elements of the comics page and the ways in which we read them. It introduces a set of critical terms for the basic elements of the comics page (like panel, GUTTER, MISE EN PAGE, etc.) and explains how they work together as CLUES from which readers draw INFER-ENCES as they make sense of what they see on a page. This chapter is designed to help you develop your skills for close readings of individual comics pages. It uses COMIC STRIPS and pages from a variety of WEB COMICS and printed comics.

Chapter 2 The Way Comics Tell It introduces you to storytelling in comics. It looks at the distinction between the text as it presents itself (in image, word, and sequence), the STORY we read from it, and the dynamics between story and DISCOURSE. In storytelling, there is always a teller, someone who relates the story, and this chapter outlines the different ways in which comics render narrators, perspective, and point of view in their narratives. It teaches you to identify and analyze the dynamics of storytelling and the strategies of storytellers in comics. It uses *The Sandman* as its core text.

Chapter 3 Narrating Minds and Bodies takes a closer look at the GENRE of autobiographical comics. It introduces the ways in which comics authors mark narratives as "theirs," as expressing their personal experience, and the narra-

tive strategies which emerge from this, in terms of perspectives and EMBODI-
MENT. Autobiographical comics aim for authenticity, and in this endeavor they
often problematize the act of storytelling itself and the situation from which
they tell their tale. This chapter specifies the narrative strategies of autobio-
graphical comics, their self-reflexivity, and their relation to history. It also
gives a brief overview of how the genre developed. Alison Bechdel's *Fun
Home*, Craig Thompson's *Blankets*, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* will serve as
the basic texts.

Chapter 4 Novels and Graphic Novels addresses the adaptation of novels in
comics. It outlines the basic media differences between novels and comics, and
their respective capabilities in representing particular elements of a narrative.
The questions of what it means to be "true" to the original text, and whether
this is a goal to strive for, are discussed as well. This chapter compares the
narrative strategies of the novel and comics and explains how comics adapta-
tions can translate one medium into the other. It is designed to help you see the
similarities in a comics and a novel version of the same text, and to discuss the
relevant differences. Comics adaptations of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*,
Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, and Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* will
be used as example cases.

Chapter 5 Comics and Their History presents an overview of the history of
comics in English-speaking countries, in particular the United States. This
overview outlines the times and contexts in which comics have been produced,
and the hierarchy of high culture and popular culture they are a part of. It
regards comics as an instance of popular culture which has undergone a con-
siderable reevaluation toward the end of the twentieth century. This chapter
helps you gain a broader perspective on comics, and directs you to appreciate
cultural and historical connections beyond the individual text. *Watchmen* is the
suggested text for this chapter.

Chapter 6 The Study and Criticism of Comics introduces you to the research
resources available on comics and to critical work on comics in different
academic disciplines. An outline of how to get access both to comics texts, con-
temporary and historical, and to critical writing, is followed by a guided tour of
six approaches to comics: semiotics, narratology, cognitive approaches, history,
cultural studies and gender studies, and psychoanalysis. Each of the sections
outlines the basic tenets of these approaches and explains which questions
about comics they raise and help you answer. This chapter is designed to
prepare you for writing your own research essay on comics. Installments from
Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* serve as examples through which
the different approaches are put to work.

Each of the chapters features a number of text boxes which introduce a particular topic in more depth. In the chapter on comics adaptations, for example, the text boxes look at the *Classics Illustrated* series (which pioneered comics adaptations of "classic" novels), the graphic novel (and what meanings the term has in the context of publishing formats as opposed to the larger cultural debate), and the notion of convergence culture (according to which much of popular storytelling today emerges from an intermedial web). The text boxes are designed to give you more information on a particular issue raised in the main text, to connect this issue with more general questions, and to develop your critical vocabulary.

Apart from the text boxes, each chapter has recommended reading (with brief explanations of what the books suggested are about). The recommended reading lets you go on from the rather brief outlines this book provides to explore the issues yourself in greater depth. Each of the chapters also features a class activity, a writing exercise to practice comics analysis, and an essay topic connected to the topic of the chapter and the example texts discussed. At the end of the book, you will find a glossary explaining the critical terms introduced in the book and a list of more comics you might want to read.

Working Definitions

Before we get started, however, I should lay out the basic assumptions on which this book is built.

What are comics to begin with? Any number of scholars working on comics will give you any number of answers to this question. The basic definition of comics I work with here is that comics are a medium that communicates through images, words, and sequence. A medium is constituted in three ways: (i) it is a MODE of communication, (ii) it relies on a particular set of technologies, and (iii) it is anchored in society through a number of institutions (Jensen 2008). Comics work as a mode of communication in that they tell stories or present jokes in a particular manner using images, words, and sequence. Comics also rely on the technology of print and the format of the book. With the increasing digitalization of comics and the rise of web comics, a new set of technologies might be introduced for comics, but as of now, most comics are printed and bound in various formats. Comics are institutionalized; in the United States for example through the MAINSTREAM COMICS publishing houses, such as DC and Marvel. Independent and ALTERNATIVE COMICS, when they are self-published or (re)published and distributed through smaller publishers of

comics, are tied to institutional infrastructures particular to comics as well. In this book, we will mostly focus on comics as a mode of communication, but the other two dimensions (technology and institutions) will come to the fore every now and then, particularly in the chapter on comics history.

Comics can be thought of as a "visual language" rather than as a medium, as for example Neil Cohn (2007) proposes. Their image sequences link instances of the visual into meaningful utterances, just like sentences arrange words into meaningful statements. Seeing comics as a visual language would imply that they are not tied to a particular technology or a particular set of institutions. Web comics, for example, feature a different set of technologies, because they are distributed digitally, other than COMIC BOOKS and graphic novels. Still, of course, they are perceived in the cultural framework of the comics medium, and the web comic I discuss in the first chapter of this book, *Sinfest*, is published in black-and-white strips on weekdays and colored pages on Sundays, just like the traditional newspaper comics. The technology and institution of the newspaper comics have shaped the way in which this web comic works. I have refrained from presenting comics as a "visual language" as opposed to a medium here, because the contexts within which comics are produced and read are highly important for the ways in which we understand them and make sense of them.

Images, words, and sequence are the three constituents of comics as a mode of communication. A panel usually holds an image as well as written words in CAPTIONS, SPEECH BUBBLES, or as sound effects (onomatopoeia), and several panels are arranged in sequence on a page. We will discuss these three constituents and the way they work in more detail in the next chapter. Here, I want to discuss briefly whether each of the constituents is necessary, a debate which scholars of comics have had for several decades now. Do we need images? After all, the speech bubble is perhaps the most iconic element of the comics form, and comics which use just speech bubbles are possible. Do we need words? Silent panels are not uncommon, even in mainstream comics, and there is an entire genre, called "SANS PAROLES," which can be described as comics without words. Do we need sequence? Or does an individual panel already constitute a comic? Perhaps we do not need each constituent in each instance of a comic, but all three serve as the basic elements through which what we call "comics" unfolds.

Involving the different constituents of images, words, and sequence, comics are often created by more than one person. *Watchmen*, for example, was written by Alan Moore, penciled and inked by Dave Gibbons and colored by Alan Higgins. When we therefore talk of "Alan Moore's *Watchmen*," we ignore the

(significant) contributions of the two other creators of the comics. Of course, there are also many examples of comics in which one author writes, illustrates, colors and letters the entire narrative, such as Winsor McCay or Will Eisner, and most importantly, the autobiographical comics. In this book, I will therefore talk of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, because McCay is the single author, but will simply talk of *The Sandman*, because besides Neil Gaiman, who is the writer of the series, there are about forty other creators involved. In the list of comics and graphic novels at the end of this book, you will find the fuller (if not always complete) credits for each of the comics discussed here.

By now, you should have an idea of what this book is about, the issues it raises in the individual chapters, and what the working definitions are. It has probably also become clear what this book does not do. Even though the basic accounts of close reading comics and comics storytelling in Chapters 1 and 2 are partly built on research in French-language comics and should be useful for reading BANDE DESSINÉE and MANGA as well, *Studying Comics* focuses on English-language comics and leaves aside other great comics traditions, such as France and Belgium as well as Japan. Even though I discuss some web comics, my history of comics ends at the turn of the twenty-first century. These limitations are partially due to the ignorance of the author (particularly in the case of manga), and partially due to the endeavor to keep this volume as coherent and concise as possible. After all, it is an introduction.

Recommended Reading

Hatfield, Charles. 2005. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press. Chapter 2: The Otherness of Comics Reading.

References

Cohn, Neil. 2007. "The Visual Language Manifesto: Restructuring the 'Comics' Industry and Its Ideology." Accessed October 15, 2012. Emaki.net/manifesto.html

Jensen, Klaus Bruhn. 2008. "Media." *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

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What's in a Page: Close-Reading Comics

Comics seem more straightforward than written texts. Because they have images, it appears that everyone understands immediately what is going on their pages. However, as you begin to seriously consider comics and the way they tell their story, you will realize that also analyzing comics is a skill that has to be practiced. Close-reading comics is the first stepping stone toward understanding how they unfold their meaning. This chapter will explain how reading comics works by relating the elements of the comics page to what is going on in your mind as you make sense of them. It also introduces the basic terms you will need for your own comics' analysis.

Cognitive Processes and Critical Terms

The comic strip from the web comics series *Sinfest* you will find on the next page seems immediately accessible: it presents a short dialogue between a boy and a girl. The girl seems to be in control of the situation, dispensing advice to the boy, until he turns the situation around in the final panel as he challenges her moral superiority. Yet this account short-circuits your encounter with this comic: when you read a panel like the first one, your mind begins taking in all kinds of information from the images and the written text – the facial expressions, gestures, and postures of the CHARACTERS, their speech, the layout of the image and many other features. These are clues for you to make sense of the panel and the event it represents. You identify clues, you draw inferences from them, and you integrate these inferences into the basic pattern of the story. These processes are not conscious proceedings, but something which you do (almost automatically).
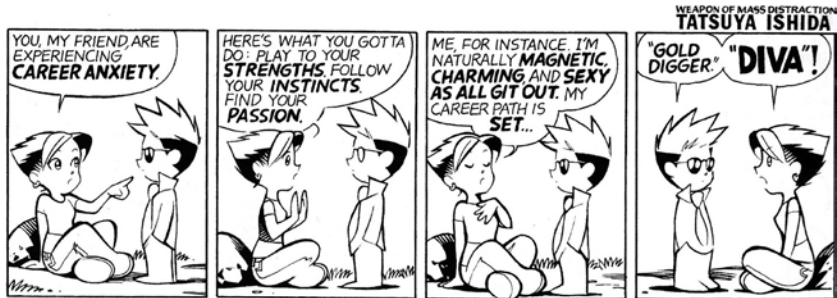
Figure 1.1   *Sinfest* (I). Source: Sinfest: Viva La Resistance™© 2012 Tatsuya Ishida.

If you want to analyze comics critically, it makes sense to consider how the clues on the page and the inferences they suggest tie in with how you make sense of the comic. The cognitive processes involved in reading comics are usually pre-conscious, that is, you would not be aware of them when you are actually reading a comic, but they contribute fundamentally to your meaning-making.

First, however, in order to make the analysis as specific as possible, I will briefly introduce some basic terminology for the comic and its elements. The *Sinfest* comic is structured into four panels which are the boxes within which you see the characters. Each panel presents something like a snapshot of the action, relating to what has happened before and suggesting how the event might continue. Within the panels, you see the characters and you can read their communication in the SPEECH BUBBLES. Speech bubbles are spaces within which the characters' words are rendered in written text. The tail of the speech bubble is connected to the mouth of the speaker, allowing you to relate the written text to its speaker. When the speech is not located with a speaker in the image, it is rendered in a caption, a box usually at the top left-hand corner of the panel.

As you make your way through a panel, your might first get a (very rough) impression of the entire panel. This is an impression of the number of characters and their general spatial relation to each other, as well as the number of speech bubbles and their connection to the characters. This is the snapshot aspect of the panels. In the first panel, for example, you can see at first glance that the girl is in control. She is the only one speaking, privileged by her position in the left-to-right reading direction of the panel, and she points at the boy, defining him. The boy, on the other hand, stands, with his hands in his pockets, which signals being relaxed. Without even reading the speech bubbles, we can tell that this power relationship will change in the final panel, because here the image shows us the

protagonists from the other side of the encounter (which looks like the image has been flipped around), and the girl's body suddenly tenses up. This information on basic power relationships and attitudes is something you can take in at a single glance, because they relate to your own bodily experience of the world. Try sitting up in your chair, and you will feel more alert; put your hands in your pockets and slump back, and you will be more relaxed.

When we see characters do something in a panel, the processes in our brains unfold something like an imitation of these postures in motorsensory systems which prepare the action (but do not lead us to actually perform it), and we feel an echo of the character's experience. This has been discussed in terms of "embodied simulation" in the neurosciences. When an image relates characters to each other in its COMPOSITION, our BODY SCHEMA (that is, our motorsensory capacities, see Gallagher 2005) give us a sense of whether there is a balance or an imbalance between the characters, and how the dynamics of the relationship is going to unfold. In his discussion of the dynamics of composition in art, Rudolf Arnheim (2008) has noted how perception and our bodily experience of balance, gravity and other forces shape each other. What the cognitive sciences have found about the relation of body and mind suggests that a good part of our meaning-making is indeed grounded in our bodily experience of the world. A lot of information can be taken in at a single glance.

As you investigate the details of the panel then, your attention focuses and you read the speech bubbles. When you pay attention to the details of the panel, it begins to unfold through time, and a story emerges as you relate the first-glance information to the details you pick up now. The controlling attitude of the girl is confirmed, when we read that she indeed tells the boy "what you gotta do." His smart tie and carefully groomed hair suggest that he thinks highly enough of himself to take care of his appearance. The sunglasses also contribute to this attitude of studied coolness. The clothes and the looks of characters give you a lot of information, based on social conventions and expectations, about the way they want to be perceived and about what is important to them.

The girl's speech is modulated by her gestures (pointing at the boy, calling him to attention, and referring to herself) and her facial expressions of emotional states. It is also shaped by the emphasis of the letters in bold, which indicate stress in her voice. In her final word, "diva," she seems to be positively yelling. Unlike the printed letters on a book page, the letters in speech bubbles have onomatopoetic qualities, which means that their size and boldness correspond to the volume at which they are spoken and the emphasis which is laid onto them. The bigger and bolder the letters, the louder the speech; the smaller and thinner the letters, the more quiet and subdued.

Paying attention to the details on the page fleshes out the basic impression that you get from the first glance. Your inferences get more precise and you get a clearer sense of what the story is about, of the interests and investments of the characters involved, and also of the likely course the action is going to take. The scene between the girl and the boy is set up as an encounter between two different attitudes: know-it-all versus studied cool. This is information which you can take from their body language, but also from the social knowledge you have about clothing style for example. In the beginning it looks like the girl has all the trumps in her hand: she is the only one speaking and shaping the space of interaction between them with her gestures (thereby assigning him a particular role in the encounter). Readers not only infer the meaning of the situation as it stands, but also project how the story will continue on the basis of their inferences: Will the boy accept the girl's assessment of his tuition? Will he try to turn the situation around? Will he lose his cool? These are all questions raised by the first panel. As the following panels give answers to these questions and raise new ones, your inferences about the situation, the relations of the characters and the potential outcome will change constantly, and a narrative emerges as you establish connections between the events.

In this particular comic, the panel images represent a single situation, set in a single space, and the dialogue unfolds continuously. Other comics, however, might feature long temporal gaps between panels or they might change scenes completely between panels. The space between the panels is called the "gutter", and just as you step across a gutter, your mind creates connections between the individual panels, by drawing inferences about how the action in the one can relate to the other, and thereby trying to integrate them into a single, meaningful narrative.

Scott McCloud calls the phenomenon of making sense between panels "closure" (1994, 67). To McCloud, who has a very broad-ranging understanding of closure, it is a process that turns readers into participants of the comics' narrative as they supply the missing information between panels. Closure goes back to the so-called "principle of closure" in GESTALT psychology. We perceive the Figure 1.2 as a
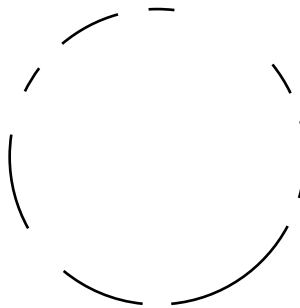

Figure 1.2   Closure.