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Beyond Graphic Novels: Illustrated scholarly discourse and the history of educational comics

By Aaron Humphrey

Abstract

Comics are increasingly being used in higher education for teaching and research, as demonstrated by the recent publication of comics in *The Annals of Internal Medicine* and other academic journals. This paper will examine how the ascendance of graphic novels to the realm of 'proper' literature has simultaneously paved the way for this acceptance of comics as scholarly discourse while obscuring the much longer tradition of pedagogical comics dating to before World War II. In the process, it will highlight some of the ways comics can be used in education, and suggest the benefits of using comics as multimodal scholarship.

Introduction

A peculiar journal article appeared in *The Annals of Internal Medicine* in March, 2013. Written by Michael J. Green and illustrated by Ray Rieck, the article, titled 'Missed It', was the first comic to be published by this 'heavyweight' of the

field ('The BMJ' 2012) but the word 'comic' did not appear in the journal. Instead, an editors' note described 'Missed It' alternately as a 'graphic novel', '"graphic" article', and, 'article in "graphic novel" format' ('Editor's Note' 2013).

However, 'Missed It,' at two pages long, hardly seems like any sort of novel. The editors' choice of language is symptomatic of a wider use of the 'graphic novel' terminology to imply elevated cultural status despite a longstanding academic ambivalence toward the popular realm of 'comics'. Elsewhere, comics that re-imagine works of classic literature are published in 'The Graphic Canon' (Weatherwax 2012), an anthology of educational comics for primary students is called 'The Graphic Textbook' (Canfield 2013), and a long-running series of 'documentary comic books' (the 'Introducing' series) that have been rebranded as 'Graphic Guides'.

This suggests that the growing presence of comics in school and university libraries, and their acceptance in places like high-ranked medical journals, are at least partially results of the increased literary legitimization of graphic novels. However, educational comics (by which we mean comics designed primarily to inform, educate and/or provoke further study) have been published since before World War II, long before graphic novels were established. Accordingly, this paper will examine how the ascendance of graphic novels to the realm of 'proper' literature has simultaneously paved the way for the acceptance of comics as scholarly discourse (as seen in 'Missed It'), while obscuring the much longer tradition of educational comics. In the process, it will suggest some benefits of using comics as multimodal scholarship.

Neither comic nor novels

Despite longstanding debates about whether the labels 'comics' and 'graphic novels' are suitable for their subjects, it is useful to look at not how these labels describe their subjects, but rather how well they position their subjects within the

public sphere. While 'graphic novel' may be a misnomer for articles like 'Missed It',

it can be seen as a response to the failure of 'comics' (a term used in this essay as a

'generic appellation' much the same as 'painting' or 'sculpture' (Herdeg and Pascal

1972), which includes comic strips, comic books, graphic novels, webcomics, and

other permutations) to convey adequate cultural authority. However, this very lack of

cultural authority has allowed comic books to develop under the radar for several

decades.

By contrast, 'graphic novel' has become established solely as a way of

attributing cultural authority to comics. It has been successfully applied to many

books that are neither particularly graphic nor novelistic, leading some to argue the

term simply refers to 'comics with a square binding' (Yanes 2009), but comics like

'Missed It' do not even qualify for this broad definition.

The term was first popularized as a subtitle on the cover of Will Eisner's 1978

short story collection *A Contract With God*. This was not the first book-length comic

(notable predecessors include *It Rhymes with Lust* in 1950 and *Kurtzman's Jungle

Book* in 1959), nor the first appearance of the phrase "graphic novel," which had been

used in various ways by publishers and fans since at least the mid-'60s (Gravett

2008). However, Eisner had an established reputation as a master cartoonist, and *A

Contract With God* marked his return to commercial comics after two decades, which

gave the book a unique legitimacy. Perhaps more importantly, its publication

coincided with changes in the comic book market in the late 1970s which saw the

establishment of specialty comic book shops and advances in printing technologies

that transformed the way cartoonists worked and the kind of material that could be

published (Sabin 1996). As a result, around the time of *A Contract With God*'s

publication, other cartoonists were working on more literary works that would

eventually be published in book-length collections, like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (originally serialized in *Raw* starting in 1980), The Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets* series starting in 1981, and Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* (originally serialized in *Warrior* starting in 1982).

Graphic novels in the limelight

Maus in particular helped to establish graphic novels as a form of serious literature, especially after it received the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, and has appeared on countless best-of lists and course syllabi (Thompson 2008; Yang 2003). Spiegelman has been a tireless crusader for the legitimization of comics, but is not overly fond of the term 'graphic novel', calling it a marketing tool for conveying respectability that 'leads to books that are made to be studied in academia and that's no less of a marketplace than making comics to appeal to 12-year-old boys' (Gross 2013). However, 12-year-old boys do not bestow prestigious literary awards, write reviews for the *New York Times* or make purchasing decisions for school and university libraries. In all these domains, graphic novels have flourished.

When two graphic novels were nominated for the Costa Book Awards in 2012 (Joff Winterhart's *Days of the Bagnold Summer* in the novel category, and Mary Talbot and Bryan Talbot's *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*, which won in the memoir category), the proclamation in British newspaper *The Independent* that 'Graphic novels finally win the literary limelight' (Sherwin 2012) would have seemed a foregone conclusion to many in the publishing world.

Many in the North American book trade saw the acceptance of graphic novels reach critical mass in the middle of the 2000s. Booklist proclaimed in 2007 that graphic novels had 'taken both the library and the literary worlds by storm!' (Cart

2007), and they became known as 'one of the rare publishing categories that's actually *expanding*' (Thompson 2008).

This rise in popularity can also be observed in cultural and academic spheres. The Sydney Opera House's Graphic Festival, inaugurated in 2010, is a yearly celebration of comics, and graphic novelists presented at nearly all of Australia's major writers' festivals in 2013. That same year, more than twenty academic conferences were held around the globe, and the University of Adelaide will host a comics symposium in April 2014.

As the name of the Graphic Festival and the presence of cartoonists at events usually reserved for novelists suggests, much of this academic and cultural interest in comics is related specifically to graphic novels, rather than other forms of comics. Columbia University's library's most requested items through the Ivy League interlibrary loan system are all graphic novels (MacDonald 2013), and many doctoral theses published in the last several years examine graphic novels from literary and cultural studies perspectives (Clayton 2009; Daly 2011; Edwards 2007; Green, CC 2011; Lucchine 2009; Mayeux 2011; Pletsch 2006; Rizzuto 2008; Smida 2010; Vincent 2011).

Early comics research

However, comics were receiving academic interest long before they had square binding or graced Ivy League bookshelves. Goethe championed the narrative caricature strips of Rodolphe Töpffer, the Swiss schoolteacher who is often called the forefather of modern comics (Kunzle 1985), and in 1924, Gilbert Seldes celebrated American newspaper comics among his *Seven Lively Arts*, showing special appreciation for George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, which was famously beloved of

intellectuals (McDonnell 1986). However, for much of their history, serious writing and research about comics was the domain of a passionate few (including Eco, McLuhan and Ong among others).

The most influential writer about comics in the middle of the 20th Century was Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist who believed that comics were poisoning the minds of children. In a series of popular magazine articles and his 400-page book *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham railed against violence and sexual themes in comic books, and called for the whole industry to be dismantled (Hajdu 2009). Though his work has remained controversial, and recent research suggests he fabricated data (Tilley 2012), his influence was undeniable and long-lasting.

Wertham claimed that children do not 'read' comics, but become desensitized 'picture gazers,' disinclined toward the more subtle pleasures and 'wholesome influence that comes from reading good literature' (Wertham 1955). This fear that pictures could undermine 'proper' literacy demonstrates what Harvey J. Graff termed 'the literacy myth', a logocentric belief in the written word as a symbol of education, morality and citizenship (Graff 2010). However, literacy is itself a historical artifact, and just as comics predate graphic novels, combinations of words and pictures existed long before the book's ascendance as a symbol of knowledge and culture.

Just a couple of decades before Wertham's crusade, novels of woodcut images by artists like Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward which contained no words at all were accepted by the literary establishment thus demonstrating that it was not images that kept comics from being authorized as proper literature but rather cultural status, Masareel's books 'received glowing forewords from Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse'(Lanier 2001), and Ward's editor wrote that the visual novel 'has narrative qualities of which words are incapable' (Herb 2010). Woodcut novels were serious,

literary-minded, and could be placed in libraries side-by-side other 'proper' books; in short, they were the 'graphic novels' of their day (Spiegelman 2010).

By contrast, early comics were rarely 'proper.' While woodcuts were made though a labour-intensive process that recalled early printing technology and created an impression of solemnity and cultural authority, cartoonists used newer technologies to directly reproduce pen-strokes that often seemed nimble and energetic.

Beginning in the 1890s, early newspaper comics featured this lively style printed across full pages, which proved wildly popular and bolstered circulation numbers. One of the earliest newspaper comics, R. F. Oucault's *Hogan's Alley* was deliberately vulgar, in the sense of being 'for and of the people.' The main character was an immigrant street urchin in a dirty nightshirt that displayed ever-changing slogans in slang. He was called The Yellow Kid; he was the namesake of 'yellow journalism,' a term coined for the use of sensationalism to reach the masses. It was in this context that the term 'comics' came to prominence, and it was well suited to describe the material (which today would be classified, faux-redundantly as 'humour comics'), for an audience that was looking for diversion and entertainment.

Comics remained with the domain of newspapers until the 1930s when 'two employees at the Eastern Color Printing Company inadvertently gave birth to the modern comic book' (Yang 2003), initially as a way of publishing a collection of newspaper comics. Comic books soon became a phenomenon for young people. 'By the 1940s, an estimated 95% of all 8-14 year olds, and 65% of 15-18 year olds, read comic books' (Sones, 1944).

The spirit of education

Although a good deal of the material in comic books was intended merely as entertainment, some cartoonists had higher aspirations for their work, including Will Eisner, whose early famous work, *The Spirit* was published weekly from 1940 as a comic book-style newspaper supplement, bridging the newspaper and comic book worlds. Eisner hoped his narratively inventive and visually daring strip could also bridge the gap between entertainment and art. However, when Eisner was drafted during World War II, he began to use comics in a different way: to educate soldiers about safety and preventative maintenance in the pages of periodicals like *Firepower* and *Army Motors*. After the war he returned to *The Spirit* for a few years, but in 1952 he quit commercial comics for two decades to work on instructional comics for private clients like the United States Army. (Harvey 1996)

In many accounts of Eisner's biography this is represented as a gap in his career, until the mid-1970s when he would return 'to his first love, storytelling with sequential art' (Eisner, Will 2008). However, Eisner's work during the war served as a warm-up for a much larger project that he would begin for the Army in 1951, *PS: The Preventative Maintenance Monthly* (Eisner, W. et al. 2012), a magazine in the spirit of *Army Motors* which featured a mix of cartoons, text, diagrams and comics. *PS* served both instructional and ideological purposes, and Eisner edited and contributed to it for two decades. In a 1968 interview he said using comics as a tool for education was 'really the thing I'm proud of. I'll teach anything with that tool" (Garrelts 2012).

The legacy of government-sponsored comics

Eisner was not the only one using comics this way. Ever since the 1950s, in spite of Wertham's crusade, United States government bodies have been

commissioning comic books to teach adults and children about topics including fire safety, civil defense, economics, 'mental hygiene', syphilis, naval history, and a variety of other topics (Graham 2011); like *PS Monthly*, these sorts of comics have been a persistent component of government educational and propaganda campaigns. The World Health Organization's 1999 publication *Malaria: An educational comic* (WHO 1999), can be seen as a continuation of the tradition that blossomed during World War II, when the U.S. War Department published a comic on the same topic by Theodor 'Dr. Seuss' Geisel and Murno Leaf. Meanwhile, the Army continues to publish new issues of *PS Monthly* (Vaughn 2011), one of the longest-running comics publications in the United States (for example, it pre-dates *The Amazing Spider-Man* by several years).

Rius and "graphic guides"

Educational comics that are widely available in bookstores and libraries are a newer phenomenon, and one that has recently expanded significantly. In 2012 alone, more than 30 book-length educational comics were published in the United States, on topics ranging from calculus and linear algebra to politics and environmentalism. This publishing boom has certainly been influenced by the literary legitimization of graphic novels, but this spike in activity in some ways obscures the much longer history of educational comics being sold in bookstores, especially alternative bookshops and on university campuses.

One route to trace this lineage is back to the work of Rius, the penname of Mexican cartoonist Eduardo del Rio, whose work is related to the '60s Latin American pedagogical tradition called concientizadora, or 'raising consciousness' (Priego 2002). Rius has written and drawn more than 100 books and is an acknowledged master of comics in Mexico, but best known in to Anglophone readers

for *Marx for Beginners* (translated from *Marx para principantes*), first published in 1976 in England by Writers and Readers, a small publishing cooperative. The book was an immediate success and more than 80 volumes of 'For Beginners' and 'Introducing' books have been published using Rius' format but employing other writers and illustrators (Appignanesi).

Rius was also a direct inspiration to cartoonist Larry Gonick, whose *Cartoon History of the Universe* books became best-selling educational comics in the late 1980s (Craggs 2003). Gonick's style in turn was a seminal influence on Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, a textbook about the history and form of comics which is one of the most frequently cited texts in Comics Studies. All three of these cartoonists had roots in underground or alternative comics and were publishing square-bound, book-length educational comics long before the graphic novel boom. Their work, especially the discursive, first-person style employed by McCloud and Rius, has been a clear influence on scholars like Al-Jawad and Soussanis who have turned to comics to compose essays and journal articles (Al-Jawad 2013; Imprint 2013).

Comics as academic discourse/journal articles

These sorts of academic journal articles in comics form have appeared in the *Journal of Medical Humanities* (Al-Jawad 2013) and *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* (Jones & Evans 2011), as well as *The Annals of Internal Medicine*, and will form the basis of an upcoming special issue of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* on 'Comics as Scholarship' (Whitson 2013). A number of scholars are currently composing doctoral dissertations as comics, including Nick Sousanis at Columbia University's Teachers College (DeSantis 2012) and Jarod (Roselló 2013) at Pennsylvania State University.

According to Sousanis, drawing comics can function as a kind of research: 'the very act of working spatially and visual-verbally facilitates creative discoveries otherwise obscured when limited to a sheet of lined paper or my keyboard' (Sousanis 2012). Rius similarly has claimed that composing and laying out comics by hand is a way of circumventing the globalizing and homogenizing effects of working with computers (Priego 2002). Al-Jawad, a clinical doctor who does practitioner research, argues that making comic links 'what happens on the ward – "practice" – with what happens in my head – "theory" – a similar process of analyzing qualitative data' (Al-Jawad 2013).

While these approaches do share a lineage with previous educational comics, their inward focus sets them apart as a kind of praxis or action research. This use of 'drawing as thinking' is also reflected in recently developed classes like Michael Green's class on 'graphic medicine' at Pennsylvania State, where medical students make comics about their experiences working in hospital (one former student reports, 'I truly believe using comics will make me a better doctor' (Hawkins 2013)), and cartoonist Lynda Barry's cross-listed art/science/English course 'The Unthinkable Mind' at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where the coursework involves extensive image-making (Halliday 2013).

Conclusion

These sorts of intersections between comics and academia are likely to continue. Following a positive reception of 'Missed It' (Green, M 2013), *The Annals of Internal Medicine* issued a call for more 'original graphic narratives' ('Call for work' 2013) and it seems likely that others may follow suit. This and other new applications of comics within academia might not have been possible without the

literary acclaim and subsequent cultural authority that has been granted to graphic novels. However, just as these new developments also point back to a long legacy of educational comics that has been demonstrating for decades the various ways comics can be used for education, teaching and research. This is not a new way to use words and pictures, although until recently it is one that lacked the cultural legitimacy needed to gain support of academic journals and university administrations. Examining early examples of educational comics from before the legitimization of graphic novels can help us better understand, and best utilize this phenomenon.

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