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ReDrawing of Narrative Boundaries: An Introduction

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Abstract

ReDrawing of Narrative Boundaries: An Introduction provides an overview of the comics studies field as it relates to discussions and debates regarding its relationship to the study of literature and the arts. It provides a snapshot of today's comics studies field, including how the scholarly essays collected for this special issue, "A Planetary Republic of Comic Book Letters: Drawing Expansive Narrative Boundaries," work to deepen and widen our understanding of comics, and comics from all over the planet. Individually and collectively they eschew the lean toward the fill-in-the-blank (lit, film, etc.) comparisons, and instead excavate and theorize comics on their own terms.

Keywords

comics studies, global comics, cultural studies

ReDrawing of Narrative Boundaries: An Introduction

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Given that this is a special issue on comics for *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* I thought it fitting to rehearse some of the discussion and debate around appraisal and valuation of comics up against literature. I will then leave this behind and simply talk about comics in the way we should—simply and wondrously as comics.

While less so today than yesterday or a decade ago or two decades ago, comics are still considered a lesser narrative art than, say, a novel or short story or poem. It is why some have rechristened some “worthy” comics as graphic novels, implying that the latter is more mature, adult—novel-like. Indeed, while attached to literature, these are dominated by alphabetic or verbal narratives that subordinate the drawings to an illustrative function. There are, however, a series of visual-verbal texts inspired by novels that stand on their own as comic book (or graphic novel) recreations. I think readily of Posy Simmonds’s *Tamara Drewe* (inspired by *Far From the Madding Crowd*) and her *Gemma Bovary* (a reworking of *Madame Bovary*), as well as Paul Karasik’s and David Mazzucchelli’s more titularly identifiable recreation of Paul Auster with their *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* and Peter Kuper’s adaptation of Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. The topic of literary recreation, distilling verbal narrative prime matter and reconstructing it with both verbal and visual shaping devices that characterize the comic book arts is fascinating and an area that still needs more study.

That said, what I would like to rehearse here is less those comics or graphic fictions that we might link to literature and more the comics field itself that one way or another has been shaped by the comic as it exists in relation to literature; it has also had its fair share of comparisons to other aesthetic categories such as film, art, and photography. What tends to happen is the assimilation of the unique ways that comics can shape narrative into the contrastive aesthetic category. Put simply, there has been a strong history of identifying the comic book aesthetic in a way that compares it to literature, and in so doing neglects to identify it on its own terms. Theorist such as Annessa Ann Babic (*Comics as History, Comics as Literature*), Rocco Versaci (*This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature*), and Aaron Meskin (“Comics as Literature?”) variously position comics studies within the larger literary studies field. For instance, Versaci goes to lengths to identify how visual-verbal narratives can do things that verbal-only narratives cannot, but in the end he assimilates comics to literature. Aaron Meskin more self-reflexively uses the comparison to literature to explore how we might use the category to legitimate its study. He reminds us that the category “literature” doesn’t guarantee, say, high-

brow aesthetic quality: “we may establish the status of comics (and the value of teaching and studying them) by straightforwardly showing that works of great art can be produced in the medium” (239). However, in the end Meskin leaves a conceptual framework of comics vs. literature or comics as literature intact, declaring that comics are a hybrid narrative “descended from the art form of literature” and that is all “we need to know” (239). Perhaps the practitioner-theorist Will Eisner exemplifies this impulse best. In *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* he made the case that images are a form of language, and therefore comics are a form of literature.

There are comic book scholars who step decisively away from this type of lit-to-comic comparative impulse. I think of Bart Beaty’s significant turning of sights toward the visual arts with his 2012 publication, *Comics Versus Art*. With this important and admirable corrective, we focus less on the words and more on the visual shaping devices; we see just how comics bring a long history of visual arts usually confined to museum walls into the hands of everyday readers. Others like Hilary Chute and Marianne DeKoven (see their 2006 special issue on graphic narrative for *Modern Fiction Studies*), Erin La Cour (“Comics as a Minor Literature”), and Paul Gravett (*Comics Art*) illuminate the many different visual shaping devices that make this a hybrid narrative form.

Along with Beaty, there are those like Charles Hatfield (*Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*) and Christopher Pizzino (*Arresting Development*). While Hatfield includes mention of “literature” in his subtitle, in the end he along with Pizzino call attention to the way that any comparison to another narrative form—especially literature—ends up assimilating comics to literature. Pizzino calls for the making of a “powerful and durable theory devoted to comics” (15) that stands its ground to scholarship that tends to analyze comics as literature. Pizzino identifies how comic book creators like Gilbert Hernandez, Alison Bechdel, and others build into their comics self-reflexive critiques of this scholarly (and mainstream) move that assimilates comics to the alphabetic-only narrative arts.

What the essays herein decisively demonstrate and that others such as my OSU colleague, Jared Gardner, and I have declared over and over again: we need to take our pleasure in the study of comics on their own terms. For instance, in *Projections* Gardner resists any and all attempts to “take the gutter out of comics and make it a respectable form for respective audiences” (x). That is, he emphatically stands his ground on defending the *sine qua non* shaping device of comics: the gutter as the space for us to imagine movement, thought, and feeling. And, in *Latinx Superheroes in Mainstream Comics* I attend to the ways in which the creative teams of mainstream comic books infuse complexity and energy in the way they *geometrize* Latinx characters and their stories. I write, “It is the skillful and willful visualizing—*geometrizing*—of character, theme, and plot that guides our gap-filling processes and shapes our experience of a given comic book. It’s the

visuals that primarily drive our co-creative insertion into a storyworld” (96). Put simply, we should make room on literature department syllabi for more than just the trifecta of *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home* that seem to attract a very alphabetic, literary analysis. I’m not saying we should discard these extraordinary comic book achievements. Rather, when we do teach and analyze these, we should attend to more than their alphabetic shaping devices. We should put the focus on the color schemes, perspectives, postures, shapes, font type, and other visual shaping devices that *geometrize* the story.

Indeed, as the essays in this special issue attest, comics are a distinct kind of creative activity with particular kinds of aesthetic results and products. They simultaneously trigger specific kinds of reception among comic book creators as well as a series of aesthetic experiences in their ideal readers. That is to say, the creative process involved in the conception and materializing of a comic book is never discernible *a priori* because it is made of the innumerable heuristic twists, turns, and adjustments to the “original ideas” that are at the essence of all art. In other words, we need to be careful about slipping into a prescriptive approach to the study of comics. We need to be mindful that the creators of comics provide the “blueprints,” but they only come to life when readers receive them and fill in the blanks according to their own affectivity, cognitive abilities, knowledge, and general education of their senses. No aesthetics of comics reception can be stated *a priori* for the same reason that it cannot exist on the side of creation: one can never set limits to artistic reception, just as one can never set limits on artistic creation.

To study in a non-prescriptive way what is involved in the making and co-creating of comics, we would do well to study the mechanisms (the shaping devices) that characterize the comic: the specific ways it *geometrizes* storytelling. In this way, we would do well to understand and appreciate how they reconstruct the building blocks of reality, drawing from and innovating narrative shaping devices from the visual and verbal arts. In this sense, comics demand that we be thoroughly and carefully interdisciplinary in our various contributions to the building of comics studies: not interdisciplinary in the sense of overlaying, say, a literary-only or arts-only interpretive model over the comic, but rather, interdisciplinary in the way that the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Comics* see comics studies as the intersection of “a multitude of different disciplines, issues, and approaches” (4). It will be in this approach and spirit that comics studies will grow into a robust discipline.

This special issue on comics for *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* is a testament to the fact that comic book studies is coming into its own as a solid academic discipline. That is, while there is much discussion and debate going on as outlined briefly above, comics studies has been gaining much traction and moving forward with its theoretical and critical insights.

Today, we are seeing how comics studies is becoming increasingly

important at universities in the US and globally. Proof of this growth is the multiplying number of courses at the high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels, as well as the tremendous amount of PhD dissertations written (see comicsresearch.org). Perhaps the apotheosis of this is the publication of Nick Sousanis's comic book dissertation, *Unflattening*, with Harvard University Press in 2015; Sousanis is now a professor of comics studies at San Francisco State. With more and more students focused on the study of comics (from undergraduate theses to PhD dissertations), more and more faculty are being hired who can teach in this area. The six hundred faculty listed as founding members of [The Comics Society](#) all teach comics at the university level. Additionally, we are seeing an extraordinary number of monographs and edited volumes published every year on the subject. I currently co-edit the "World Comics and Graphic Nonfiction" series for the University of Texas Press, where we see a steady flow of extraordinary manuscripts crossing my desk every week. Additionally, there are the series "[Comics Culture](#)" (Rutgers), "[Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels](#)" (Palgrave), "Studies in Comics and Cartoons" (OSU Press), "[Comics and Graphic Novels](#)" (Bloomsbury), "Studies in European Comics and Graphic Novels" (University of Leuven Press), "[Comics and Popular Culture](#)" (University of Mississippi Press), and "[Graphic Medicine](#)" (Penn State). In addition to the many books published in these series and elsewhere, there have been a number of important academic journals dedicated to publishing scholarship on comic books, including [INKS](#), [ImageText](#), [International Journal of Comic Art](#), and dozens of others from around the world. And academic journals not focused on comics are dedicating increased space to their issues.

I should mention, too, that academic presses are now also publishing comic books. As already mentioned, Harvard University Press published its first comic book dissertation, *Unflattening*. Add to this Yale University Press's publication of Ivan Brunetti's autobiography, *Aesthetics: A Memoir HC* (2013); Princeton University Press's graphic narrative of seventeenth-century anti-status quo thinkers, *Heretics!* (2017); and my own Latinographix series with OSU Press. The Latinographix series publishes Latinx comics (fictional and nonfictional) and provides, as I write, "a place for exploration and boundary pushing, and will celebrate hybridity, experimentation, and creativity" ("Latinographix"). While I launched the series only a year ago, I already have the following books in the production pipeline: Alberto Ledesma's *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* (2017), Ilan Stavans's and Santiago Cohen's *Angelitos* (2018), Eric J. García's *El Machete Illustrated* (2018), Wilfred Santiago's *Thunderbolt* (2018), José Alaniz's *The Phantom Zone & Other Stories* (2019), and my own edited collection, *Tales from la Vida: The Latinographix Collection* (2018) that brings together the vignette comics of sixty-seven Latino/a creators.

The scholarly essays herein work to deepen and widen our understanding of

comics from all over the planet. Individually and collectively they eschew the propensity toward fill-in-the-blank (lit, film, etc.) comparisons and instead excavate and theorize comics on their own terms—and from here, they reach out to other ways that comics exist in the world, including in its myriad transmedial recreations. Indeed, I should mention that I recently decided to title my forthcoming edited collection the following: *Comics Studies: Here and Now!*—a volume that grew out of this special issue. I did so to mark the fact of our arrival, that is, to announce clearly that today we are creating comics scholarship and venues to disseminate this scholarship without the need to mention other disciplines like literary studies in the same breath. The essays herein are a testament to this. They are a celebration of how comic books have become a part of our global cultural landscape as never before.

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