

Grennan, S. (2015) *Misrecognising misrecognition: the capacity to influence in the milieux of comics and fine art*, Amsterdam Comics Conference

SLIDE 1: Title

Misrecognising misrecognition: the capacity to influence in the milieux of comics and fine art.

Crossing boundaries of language and culture, the international contemporary fine art market is a largely monolithic, cohesive social environment built upon the post-War, four-way participation of commercial fine art dealers, private collectors, trade journals and publicly maintained cultural institutions. It is into this environment that contemporary fine artists both inveigle themselves and deliver new works of art as raw material, if they are interested in acquiring status and making money in this particular marketplace. The practices that constitute this market transform these works, and to some extent an image of the artist, into branded status commodities that can be traded or laid up, in a continual process of validation and disavowal amongst the market's four types of participants, that ultimately produces both historically inviolable commodities (or masterpieces) and the putative narrative of their creation (or contemporary art history). Social histories of this market have been written by Arthur Danto, Vera Zolberg and George Dickie.

Alternatively, the markets for comic strips are historically differentiated along language lines, into a handful of distinct production and consumption cultures that are still only peripherally integrated, with a couple of anomalous exceptions. A major absence of a history of translation of francophone works into the languages of other markets demarcates the existence of francophone brands (– that is reader expectations), overriding potential market synergies between European cultures, for example. Alternatively, and quite distinctly, the consumption of translated manga in America in the last 10 years is a case study in the rapid creation of a market for more than a brand, rather an entire genre, as Casey Brienza points out. Although the practices of this new market have had an impact on the practices of older, as it were, 'home' markets, they have as yet not consolidated them. In English, Bart Beaty provides a masterful analysis of the history and mechanisms of the anglophone American market, again utterly distinct, in his 2012 *Comics Versus Art*.

These differences, very lightly touched upon here, constitute definitions of each market according to differences in practices between them – that is, differences in the ways in which the contemporary fine art market and comics markets are imagined, historicised, produced, distributed, promoted and consumed; and differences in their formal trends relative to the histories and expectations of their readers and consumers.

As Dickie and subsequently Beaty discuss, it is the differences and similarities in practices of these social environments – the contemporary fine art market and the markets for comics, that are significant, rather than any formal differences between art objects and comics. Formal definitions of both comics and art are aspects of profound, systemic sets of conventions encompassing attitudes, histories and practices, beyond which they are flotsam – not meaningless, of course, but set adrift.

I want to consider some of the relationships between subjects, social institutions, media and ideas that characterise differences between the social environments in which both comics as fine art are produced, used and made comprehensible.

A specific theoretical framework can encompass these differences, describing the discursive co-dependency between forms of media, the uses to which they are put and the habits of thought and expectation engendered by these uses.

This theoretical frame describes these relationships as ideology, deriving in general from Karl Mannheim's and from Marx and Engels' critiques of ideocracy, the promotion of or resistance to ideas on the grounds of the degree to which they reproduce or contradict a dominant social structure.

Theorised this way, ideology is not a set of ideas, but rather the consolidatory or antagonistic relationship between sets of ideas and people's different experiences of the world, which these ideas might or might not contradict.

Central to this conception of the role of ideas, relative to the material production of society, is a well-known theorisation of the acceptance by one social group of the practices and ideas of another social group, contrary to either their knowledge or their benefit in the continual struggle to influence others that constitutes discourse, termed cultural hegemony.

Hence, the relationships between the dominant ideas of one group of people and the world experiences of other groups include misrecognition as a systemic function. Those ideas that dominate social discourse in any particular circumstance are not actively misrepresented by the dominant order, according to this model, but rather misrecognised by others for whom their functions are invisible and for whom they are socially and materially disadvantageous.

Here, a process of misrecognition is important because it adds complexity to the foundational idea in this model: that embodied social discourse in the form of practices and institutions generates systems of ideas rather than the reverse. In cultural hegemonic relationships, however, imagined relationships motivate practices, apparently counter-intuitively.

One of the functions of this misrecognition is an imaginative projection of timelessness upon hegemonic ideas. As a result, the function of cultural hegemony is to inculcate a cognitive consensus identifying particular ideas not with the interests or behaviour of one social group or other, but with a pan-historic, a-temporal and pan-social concept such as 'nature', 'human' or 'quality' for example

Building on this, we can argue that the promotion or resistance to ideas occurs alongside an hegemonic inculcation of material practices through habituation, not only through cognition or acts of imagination, but through the perpetuation and reproduction of types of actions and responses, even at the most micro level, such as gestures.

Different groups of people utilise different types of expression from each other and

utilise their bodies differently. As a result, these practices literally embody comprehensions of social differences and take a part, alongside the imaginative projection of ideas, in hegemonic relationships, the reproduction of social structures and the broader struggles to influence.

In these terms, ideology is dynamic. As philosopher Anthony Giddens identifies: "... logonomic systems are by no means irresistible: on the contrary, the extent to which they hold sway or break down... is itself (a) symptom of the state of society" so that levels of equilibrium between the capacity to influence, on one hand, and the effect of dominant convention on the other hand, articulate mutually antithetical affects and sustain dynamic contradictions, producing both social structures and individual agency.

Given this theoretical lens, in which practices and ideas are both codependent and systemically obscured, consider the productions of a number of artists whose status within the marketplaces of comics and fine art is either:

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a) transitional from comics markets to the fine art market (such as Gary Panter), or
b) instrumentally utilises generic ideas of one set of market practices in, say Anglophone comics, held by the participants in another market, such as the contemporary fine art market (such as Janette Parris and Raymond Pettibon) or c) applies established methods from one market to encompass and objectify the practices of another (such as Lichtenstein, following, say Manet).

SLIDE 3 PANTER

The vocal and perspicacious Gary Panter is both familiar with and inured to the social mechanics of the fine art market, which he patently understands as a result of status- and finance-driven, often frustrated, attempts to transform his material and himself, by changing his market. Panter sees no reason for his comics to be less valuable than fine artwork, apart from his relative lack of success in the fine art market or, rather, his inability to participate fully in the core practices that make the market. He is right. There is no reason for the disparity in value, apart from the performance of the work in two different markets.

SLIDE 4 PARRIS

Janette Parris, on the other hand, is a historic participant in the fine art market, self-positioning through the Goldsmith's College Masters Programme in London in 1994, an established market gateway at the time. Parris made aspects of the fine art market's generic, that is, generalised, notion of comics part of her promotional USP. Joining a contemporaneous market fashion for public participation, and coinciding with the early anglophone rise of autobiographical and confessional comics, comics offered one formal response to the opportunity for presenting People's History as a fine art commodity.

SLIDE 5 PETTIBON

Similarly, although with quite different raw materials, Raymond Pettibon also commodifies aspects of perceived comics culture for the fine art market. Pettibon's work both matches and objectifies the list of characteristics of practice of Anglophone American comics discussed by Beaty: appeals to folk nationalism; the appearance of a dynamic of exclusion and inclusion which turns on an axis of arcane knowledge or expertise, coupled with the projection of marginalisation; 'outsiderness' or a sense of social disenfranchisement; a lack of academic training in culture; visionary psychology and a sense of exclusive belonging, in opposition to a cultural mainstream. Of course, Pettibon's artworks are not authorless in the sense that Beaty describes American comics as historically seeming authorless. Rather, aided by his high profile as a punk scenester, Pettibon transforms these characteristics into the unique attributes of a single author – himself – one of the prerequisite of art market practices.

SLIDE 6 LICHTENSTEIN

Lichtenstein, on the other hand, although still often discussed as an 'appropriator' of comics' forms, was, perhaps paradoxically, a conservative painter repeating the historically tested social formulae of other successful contemporary painters. According to him, he did not employ the formal devices of comics.

SLIDE 7 FANTAIN LATOUR

Rather, he made paintings that depicted comics, in the way that Henri Fantin-Latour had made paintings that depicted vases of flowers or Millais had made a painting that depicted Ophelia.

SLIDE 8 MANET

In this, he follows Manet, whose depictions of depictions form a minor but important part of a project to enumerate the experiences of the contemporary life of the 1870s. For Lichtenstein, comics imagery provided a painting challenge. For the fine art market in the mid 1960s, paintings depicting comics provided essential new news.

Considering these examples in ideological terms, the social antagonism between different propositions about the world requires that competing propositions insist on the truth of their particular vision, in opposition to others, as a foundation of struggle itself, rather than producing any understanding that contingency is the single condition by which hegemony is undermined.

By insisting on this truth, both comics and works of art become objects without a subject, which are theoretically disembodied, in which specific tropes are identified with hierarchically arranged meanings, emerging with pan-subjective, pan-cultural consistency across all human times and places. They become fixed tools used in social struggles between different types of misrecognition.

It is not surprising, then, that here is still contemporary currency in both misrecognition and the perpetuation of objectification, in some traditions within the academic discipline of art history, for example, particularly if we recall that art

history is always a putative origin story. Art historian Claire Bishop exemplifies misrecognition when she writes in her 2012 *Artificial Hells: participatory art and the politics of spectatorship* "...art is given to be seen by others." This description demarcates the way in which the experience of a work of art is placed theoretically beyond the discourse of the work (including the practices that constitute a market) in any way other than as a distinct situation in which, alone, a scopophilic view can be taken. In effect, this theoretical delimitation of the experience of an audience is an art-historical definition of the work of art itself, or an approach to cultural experience that misrecognises and effaces social relationships by objectifying and instrumentalising them.

But, of course, as Hodge and Kress remind us, the social equilibrium achieved through this type of objectification constitutes exactly a misrecognition of those social praxes that produce the situation itself, because "[...]'truth' and 'reality' [...] mark agreement over or challenges to the temporary state of the semiotic system", so that "'Truth' is therefore a description of the state when social participants [...] accept the system of classification [...]"

SLIDE 9 GRENNAN DETAILS

From a fine art market point of view, there are no reasons why the use of the forms of comics should be a special case: this market is interested only in renewing, maintaining and historically validating the partnerships and practices that constitute it as 'true'. Any type of object is plausible on the occasion of its recognition, or should I say confirmation by market practice, as fine art. This solipsism is itself a function of the market that neither object qualities nor, as in the case of Panter, awareness of its mechanisms can override.

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Danto *What art is* (2013) *After the end of art* (1997)

Dickie *The art circle* (1987) *Art and value* (2001)

Althusser *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971)

Bourdieu *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991)

Hodge and Kress *Social Semiotics* (1988)

Brienza *Global Manga: "Japanese" Comics without Japan?* (2015)

Beaty *Comics versus Art* (2012)

Giddens *New Rules of Sociological Method: a Positive Critique of interpretative Sociologies* (1993)

Mannheim *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (1985)

Zolberg *The Sociology of Art* (2007)