

# Defining Comic Art: An Onerous Task

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If it were so simple—to take liberty with an old saying with a rose as its referent—that comic art by any other name is still comic art. But that is not the case; the term is slippery – difficult to define and delimit – as scholars worldwide have discovered.

For each definition given, an exception to the rule comes to mind, and the term itself might not be most appropriate. Comic art implies humor, which is not always the case, especially with narrative strips. To call the medium narrative art, as comics artist Will Eisner (1985) does, is equally perplexing as the conceptual limits of that term are still undefined, and of course, not all comic art is narrative. Another artist, Jerry Robinson (2000), one of the first three artists of *Batman* comics, prefers to say it is cartoon art.

The confusion deepens when attempting to discuss types of comic art. First of all, distinctions often are not made: comic books and comic strips are used interchangeably, as are comic strip and cartoon, and cartoon and caricature. Throughout Europe, *karikatur* is the common word for cartoon. Second, the problem is compounded when trying to describe comic art and its offspring in other cultures and languages. To the French, they are *bande dessinée* (drawn strip); the Germans use *Bilderstreifen* or *Bildergeschichte* (picture strip, picture story), and the Italians have the word *fumetto* (puff of smoke, referring to speech balloons). The Hungarian word for comics is *képregény* (picture-novel), further defined by Hungarian comics scholar Kálman Rubovszky (2000: 121) as, “A description with the help of pictures of a sometimes emotional story which is full of changes.” The Chinese applied the word *lianhuanhua* to such picture books. David Kunzle, who wrote the definitive two-volume history of comics (1973, 1990), points out that only in English do artists and scholars insist that drawn strips are comic (1973: 1).

The terms for what we are talking about here proliferate across spatial and temporal dimensions: in Japan, this art is called *manga*; in China, *manhua*; Korea, *manhwa*; Philippines, *komiks*; Sri Lanka, *comics papers*; and so on. To describe what existed in Europe pre-1780, Kunzle (1973: 1) coined the term pre-caricatural strip, a caricatural strip being one that linked with the stylistic revolution in popular graphic art known as caricature. Kunzle also uses narrative strip, or narrative sequence, picture story, and pictorial sequence to stress the narrative role of the medium, which he considers primary.

Third, with centuries of cross-fertilization, and the more recent conglomeratization of the medium, the contours of comic art have been changed significantly. The impact of Disney, Warner Brothers, of Hanna-Barbera upon animation worldwide has been enormous, redefining the medium in the process. Along the same lines, humor magazines worldwide have been designed after, and named for, the British *Punch* or American *Puck* and *Mad*. American comic books certainly are different because of invasions of Filipino, British, Spanish, and Canadian artists, and in turn, they have left their imprints on narrative storytelling elsewhere. Over the years, at least the French, Australians, Canadians, and Brazilians have levied legislation to subdue the influences of American comics on their own artists and their products. Equally, Taiwanese and Korean authorities for decades tried to regulate impacts of Japanese *manga*.

In their attempts to establish the parameters and characteristics of comic art, scholars have looked for help in the lexicons of literature, graphics, and cinema. Although each has an impact on and connection with comic art, one cannot find the answer strictly in one of these disciplines. Take film, for example. Comics and film share much in common, especially similar language (camera angle, timing, distance, frame), but as comics historian R. C. Harvey (1994: 8) states, they are different in their essentials: one is a static art form; the other moves. He also contends that comics requires a larger vocabulary than found in literature, graphics, and cinema.

Perhaps one way to get out of this definition dilemma is to look at how types of comic art have been defined. First, comic strips. Kunzle (1973: 2) thinks a comic strip must fulfill conditions of, 1. Be a sequence of separate images, 2. Contain a preponderance of images over text, 3. Appear in a medium which is reproductive (a mass medium in other words), and 4. Have a sequence telling a story which is both moral and topical. He subdivides strips into humorous-caricatural and straight (sentimental fiction and adventure) but is clear in his belief that strips are not the same as cartoons (a graphic joke or humorous illustration printed in a magazine or newspaper).

Scholars from Europe and the United States, recently assembled to define the comic strip, came to an impasse. Belgian scholar Pascal Lefèvre concluded that the prototype definition of a comic might simply be: "The juxtaposition of fixed (mostly drawn) pictures on a support as a communicative act." (Dierick and Lefèvre, 1998: 12). Of course, that could include many other artistic forms as well. Others at the forum gave their interpretations. Dutch comic strip archivist Hans Matla said a comic strip is a "series of graphic images which are so organized that they convey a continuing action, with, possibly, the support of a text" (12). Antonio Martín characterized Spanish strips (called *historieta* and *comic*) as "stories told by means of interrelated drawings and texts, which present a progressive series of significant moments, chosen and arranged in sequences by a narrator" (12). Thierry Groensteen, who has toiled over defining and theorizing comics, called a comic strip "a visual narrative, a story conveyed by sequences of graphic, fixed images, together on a single support. The concept of sequence in praesentia (in what Henri Van Lier named a multiframe) constitutes the principal basis of the language of the comic strip. No other criterion appears absolutely essential to me" (12; see also Groensteen, 1999). R. C. Harvey (1994: 3-20) seems to avoid specifically defining the comic strip. Instead, he provides ingredients necessary: strips depend on a gag, suspense ending, the story itself, characterization, artwork, and dialogue; they need a visual-verbal blend (but many strips cannot meet this requirement, he qualifies, but are still excellent strips), and they require a narrative breakdown (of successive panels) and speech balloons.

How do comic strips differ from comic books? Kunzle does not expend much energy on this question, stating categorically a comic book is a book of strips. Comics theoretician Joseph Witek grants that both strips and books require a visual/verbal blend and integrate words and pictures into a flexible powerful literary form capable of a wide range of narrative effects, but argues they are very different. Witek (1989: 6) states:

Indeed, comic books began life in the 1930s as anthologies of reprinted newspaper comic strips. But comic books have evolved their own generic, narrative, and formal conventions; they are not simply bloated comic strips. While comic strips and comic books are both manifestations of the sequential art medium and both share a common narrative vocabulary and grammar, they diverge so fundamentally as to constitute different literary forms. They differ in their situations in the marketplace, in their cultural status, in their physical mode of presentation, and in the reading conventions they evoke.

Judith O'Sullivan uses the broader term comics in this definition, which introduces her book, *The Great American Comic Strip, One Hundred Years of Cartoon Art* (1990: 9):

Richly various, comics have communicated over the years through different devices, including continuous narration, whereby a single set of characters appears repeatedly from frame to frame and the action progresses from left to right; calligraphic caricature, which renders the protagonists and their adversaries immediately recognizable; facial and gestural schemata, which express the character's actions and reactions; action abstraction, a pictorial shorthand, universally understood, in which exploding lines indicate sudden impacts, stars unconsciousness, light bulbs ideas, and balloon puffs thoughts; literary legend, conveyed in the balloon, which clarifies the comic's visual message; and specialized vocabularies, such as 'Banana Oil!' 'Zap!' and 'Pow!' which heighten the extreme emotion or action manifested by the characters.

Finally, comics artist Scott McCloud, in his *Understanding Comics* (1993: 9), provides a definition that could equally refer to comic strips and comic books: Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer. Some aspects of McCloud's definition, particularly with regard to his treating comics as "both a partnership of separate elements and as a unique language," generated much debate among scholars contributing to the anthology, *The Language of Comics* (Varnum and Gibbons, 2001). Probably the most important difference between comic books and comic strips is length. The larger sizes of books allow for detailed stories, complex visual/verbal effects, and pacing in time and space. Although comic books began in the 1930s as collections of strips, as Witek said above, they have evolved their own characteristics: strips are in newspapers for all to read, while comic books have more purposeful audiences (people voluntarily purchase them); strips have waned in quality and size, but comic books have become ever more technically sophisticated.

Comic books defy easy description for they vary in format, size, frequency, and genre from country to country. In France, they are hard covered, oversized books; in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, they take on the size of metropolitan city phone books (500+ pages); in Sri Lanka, they are limited to 16 tabloid-size pages, each page of a different, continuing story by a different creator; in Myanmar, they are 10 to 80 pages, either 5x7 or 7.5x9 inch in format. Some Hong Kong comic books printed two versions—one with visuals, one without; Bangladeshi ones also had two styles, those on cheap newsprint, those on higher quality paper, and Thai comics printed in both a traditional magazine and a pocket-size format (see Lent, 1995). Frequency

of publication also cannot be a defining mark: Japanese *manga* appear weekly; US books monthly, and in Mexico in the 1940s, some comic books were daily (one even eight times weekly).

Usual genres of comic books have been gag, superhero, romance, gangster/crime, horror, war, etc. But in Japan, comic books are very different; there are *sariri-man* (salaryman or workers), *unka* (shit), *rorikon* (Lolita-complex), *redikomi* (ladies, with sex fantasies), *pachinko* and *mahjong* (games), and *june* (for young women but featuring male-to male sex) (see Schodt, 1983; Lent, 1989). Hong Kong has added the genres of gambling and kung fu, and the Philippines, *nobela* (serialized) and *wakasan* (non-serialized) (see Lent, 1998).

Other types of comic art are political cartoons, gag cartoons, caricature, and animation. Newspapers usually carry on the editorial or opposite editorial pages, a large, one panel cartoon that comments on newsworthy events. Usually, they are political in nature, except in countries where constraints are plentiful; then, they are either omitted or they discuss social issues, the foibles of society. Gag cartoons are visualized jokes, normally one panel; they appear in magazines and newspapers.

Of all comic art types, caricature is probably the oldest. Scholar E. H. Gombrich (1960: 343) credits the Caracci brothers of late 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy with inventing the joke of transforming victim's faces into animals, lifeless implements, etc. Gombrich refers to caricature in the works of many European master artists, including Leonardo, Bernini, Grose, Daumier, and others. An early definition of mock portraiture was given by 17<sup>th</sup> century critic Filippo Baldinucci:

Among painters and sculptors, the word signifies a method of making portraits, in which they aim at the greatest resemblance of the whole of the person portrayed, while yet, for the purpose of fun, and sometimes of mockery, they disproportionately increase and emphasize the defects of the features they copy, so that the portrait as a whole appears to be the sitter himself, while its components are changed (Baldinucci, 1681; quoted in Gombrich, 1960: 343).

Employing a Eurocentric perspective, Gombrich failed to show origins of caricature in Asia centuries before, in Japan 1,500 years ago and again more than a thousand years ago in Bishop Toba's satiric scrolls, in 1,500s' Mughal India, in Edo-period Japan, through *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, and so on.

Making distinctions between caricature and cartoons (which some people do not), Edward Lucie-Smith, in the *Art of Caricature* (1981: 13), said that caricature emphasizes the satiric, while the cartoon merely amuses. He called caricature popular, the most universal, and democratic form of visual art, and said it often breaks through the artistic conventions of the time. Perhaps as a way of defining caricatu-

re, he said it makes use of distortions, exaggerations, and incongruities of all kinds (14). Caricature figures in most other types of comic art, most definitely in political/editorial cartoons, but also in animation, comic strips, and comic books.

Concern has been expressed rather regularly on how to define the last type of comic art considered here—animation. Charles Solomon (1989: iv) claimed filmmaking had become so complicated, that defining any aspect of it, including animation, was difficult. He did attribute two factors as linking the diverse media of animation: 1. The imagery is recorded frame by frame, 2. The illusion of motion is created, rather than recorded (iv). Founder of the animation department of the National Film Board of Canada, Norman McLaren, gave a different twist to defining the medium:

Animation is not the art of drawings that move but the art of movements that are drawn. What happens between each frame is much more important than what exists on each frame; animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames (quoted in Furniss, 1998: 5).

But, as is commonly known, the technique does not have to be drawings; it can involve clay, computers, paper, puppets, sand, pinboard, paper cut, etc.

Animation incorporates, or is otherwise linked with, all forms of comic art. Caricature is certainly an ingredient of many filmic cartoons, and there is no shortage of examples of comic strips and comic books being the basis of, or spin-offs of, animation. Some early comic strip artists in the U.S. dabbled in animation, notably Winsor McCay and Bud Fisher. Thus, to try to define, or truly understand, animation requires a grasp of the evolution of these other comic art forms.

With all that said, what can we say definitively about defining comic art? Maybe not much, which is not so bad a conclusion. Definition and categorization have as their purpose, delimiting something so that we can talk about it in mutually understood terms. Given all that has been written and said about comic art, it seems we are succeeding in that regard. Also, definitions are bound to differ, for these phenomena are being defined after the fact—not usually by their creators, but by critics who follow long after.

I prefer to define the field loosely under the umbrella term comic art (or cartoon art), looking at types such as animation, caricature, comic book, comic strip, gag cartoon, humorous illustration, and political/editorial cartoon; genres and subgenres under these types, and useful characteristics such as caricature, humor, satire, narrative, and playfulness.

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### *Trudne zadanie definiowania komizmu*

Definiowanie komizmu jest z wielu powodów zadaniem trudnym. Po pierwsze, nie jest łatwo wyznaczyć granice zasięgu komizmu, jako że wykorzystuje on różnorakie środki, przybierając postać różnych form, gatunków i stylów. Po drugie, opisywaniu typów komizmu często towarzyszą powtórzenia, nieścisłości i nakładanie się definicji. Po trzecie, zadanie to jest utrudnione przez odwieczne przenikanie się różnych typów komizmu.

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie poglądów badaczy i komików od lat zastanawiających się nad różnicami między komiksem, kreskówką, karykaturą, rysunkiem satyrycznym i innymi postaciami komizmu.