
FORM AND FUNCTION – A REVIEW OF
FROM COMIC STRIPS TO GRAPHIC NOVELS

by Eric L. Berlatsky





Stein, Daniel and Jan-Noël Thon. *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2013. ISBN 978-3110281811. 416 pages.

Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon's new collection of essays, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels*, is part of a recent trend that brings together comics studies and narrative theory. This trend is best represented by Jared Gardner and David Herman's recent special issue of *SubStance* (2011), a volume cited frequently in this collection. Indeed, perhaps the greatest strength of *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* is its copious bibliography, Works Cited pages, and thorough referencing of sources. Twenty years ago, finding a rigorous academic collection on comics was almost as difficult as uncovering a living dodo bird, but, as *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* clearly indicates, a new collection in 2013 is hardly a cause for shock. Rather, it enters a robust conversation that changes rapidly, with new publications and new approaches dividing and subdividing like single-celled organisms in a petri dish. That *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* makes a brave effort to be an expansive overview of the field is to its credit, though its length and breadth are also indicative of the typical weaknesses of books that try to do too much.

Certainly, at least for me, the pursuit of the intersection of comics and narrative theory is a welcome one, as these fields have much to say to one another and several strong essays in the collection hew fairly close to that intersection. For example, there is much to be appreciated in Silke Horskotte's opening essay, which challenges some conventional wisdom on the linear progression of panels and the ways in which readers make meaning by "closing" the gaps between contiguous panels. At the same time, Horskotte's ultimate conclusion that, in comics, meaning is not made through linear progression, but through a "simultaneous reading that takes into account the size and positioning of the separate elements within the page layout" (p. 38), seems a bit hasty and overdetermined. Her claims that "linear reading [...] has to be discarded as a myth" and that comics have "infinite possibilities" (p. 38) in arranging panels, frames, and scenes, seem both too bold and not sufficiently excavated. As several theorists have previously insisted, it seems possible that comics typically *both* require a linear reading (to make sense of a progressing plot) and a "simultaneous" one (or, in the words of Gerard Genette, a "tabular" one), and to simply eliminate one of these from possible readerly or critical approaches seems hasty. Likewise, although the idea of "infinite" combinations may have some literal truthfulness, the actual practices of comics artists are typically more circumscribed (perhaps because of the necessity of attention to linear reading options). Finally, though Horskotte does an excellent job of pointing to several comics pages that exploit "simultaneous" reading practices, she rarely does so in the



service of an argument that reveals something new and interesting about the texts she is examining (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, Neil Gaiman, et. al's *Sandman*, and Charles Burns' *Black Hole*). When she does briefly discuss the ways in which the positioning and coloring of repeated panels reveal characters' personalities and motivations, and how these in turn contribute to the overall meaning of the texts, the essay reaches its high point. I simply wish such moments had been more frequent.

Horstkotte's essay thus exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the collection as a whole. While there are many essays that explore and expose comics' unique formal properties (and their relationship to narrative), or open up new possibilities for doing so, they often stop short of applying this formal insight to the realm of meaning and interpretation. While it is not perhaps necessary in all cases to do so, ultimately the naming and delineation of formal properties has little utility unless it helps us to understand both comics as a whole, and the specific ones under investigation.

Karin Kukkonen's essay on an "embodied" approach to comics' interpretation (through an examination of Winsor McCay's "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend") has similar strengths and flaws. By tracing the disposition of lines and depicted bodies in McCay and other comics, and highlighting recent research in cognitive psychology, Kukkonen argues that readers typically connect their own bodies to those depicted in comics, becoming physically engaged through identification with characters and, particularly, their movements. Again, the engagement with cognitive research is a popular recent avenue for narratological research (and comics studies) and here it yields some interesting possibilities. Again, however, the question of why such knowledge (of the physical engagement of readers' bodies) is important is left open.

Particularly interesting, though plagued by some of the same difficulties, is Jan-Noël Thon's classically narratological essay on narrators in comics. As he accurately notes, the typical notion of narrators as dictated by prose fiction is complicated by the disjunction between "pictorial" elements, "verbal-pictorial" depiction, and traditional narration in comics (and, to some degree, film). While the relationship of implied authors, narrators, and actual authors is a notoriously thorny one in prose (not to mention the idea of heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, intradiegetic, and extradiegetic narrators), the introduction in comics of pictorial representations and even accompanying captions that may not fall comfortably into any of these categories makes things only that much more complicated. Thon's discussion of these issues is thorough and compelling, although again there is little direct engagement with how these additional complications concretely impact a specific text or group of texts. While Thon convincingly demonstrates how all of the above elements contribute to the construction of an "implied author," or even "hypothetical



author collectives,” there is little suggestion of how that authorial construction has a significant impact on the meaning of the text itself and how the reader is encouraged to read a text based on his or her view of the hypothetical author.

Kai Mikkonen’s examination of varying approaches to ocular and cognitive perspective in comics works similarly. It details a number of practices and possibilities in the depiction of character subjectivity in a variety of comics, but it does so without burrowing deeply into the motivation behind some specific choices, or how they generate meaning. Mikkonen offers that merely delineating the formal options and choices of comics artists in depicting subjectivity will help us “better understand how minds and worlds are created in comics” and “allow[] us to recognize some of the formal options and narrative devices that are available to graphic narratives” (p. 107). There is little to argue with here, but, again, I find myself wanting a more full investigation and interpretation not only of what formal options are available or how minds are created, but why they are created in this fashion, and to what meaningful end.

The second section of the book departs somewhat from typical narratological concerns and several of the essays in the section are among the book’s most compelling, though their connections to each other seem tenuous. Nancy Pedri’s look at graphic memoir, and particularly at Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, and Lynda Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* does an excellent job of looking at the ways in which the formal properties of these particular comics contribute both to the establishment of veracity in the particular “true” stories they are telling and to the self-reflexive disavowal of said truthfulness. Daniel Stein’s overview and analysis of the construction of authorship in early *Batman* comics (initially Bob Kane’s and eventually that of fan communities) is also fascinating and is a significant contribution to the study of the ways in which superhero comics companies, in particular, have long blurred the lines between the author’s role and the reader’s.

Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter’s account of the various “intermedial” relationships comics have to other media is one of the longest and most comprehensive essays in the book. Its attempt to define and delineate similar terms like intermedial, transmedial, and hybrid media is somewhat trying at first, but it yields some fascinating fruit, particularly in the authors’ discussion of specific examples of the intersections between seemingly separate media. The brief discussion (and images from) Jason Lutes’ *Berlin: City of Smoke* is a particularly compelling example of the ways in which one medium (comics) can highlight and emphasize what is unique and peculiar to another (music), both capturing its distinctive elements and spectacularly failing to do so. While Lutes’ work highlights the “rhythm and musicality” (p. 199) of a jazz clarinetist, his comic is, of course, literally silent, and thus the opposite of music in fundamental ways. Rippl and Etter’s



depiction and discussion of computer games' depiction in comics is similarly enlightening and fascinating.

Building on the strength of the Rippl and Etter essay, Greg Smith's account of the historical distinctions between frames, windows, and panels is perhaps the strongest piece included in the book. In particular, his insight that film, for instance, has historically taken the screen to be a window whose size and shape cannot be manipulated is an important reparative to the many critical parallels drawn between film and comics. While the "placement of the camera" is (at least metaphorically) important to both media, the "size and shape of the camera" appears, at least to the viewer, to be static in film, while in comics, of course, "that frame changes size and shape as the expressive/narrative needs of the comic varies" (p. 231). While Smith does not make the comparison between the screen and the page (since, historically, the page has been more rigid in size and shape and therefore more similar to the cinema's screen in some ways), his probing of notions of "window" versus "panel" is an important reminder of the differences between the media. Likewise, his claim that comics serve as predecessors to the "Windows" of the computer revolution is helpful, given the tendency for one computer screen to contain multiple "open" windows, whose juxtaposition can contribute to the creation of new meanings. In this, computer usage is more similar to that of comics than to the static single "screen" of film.

This second section of the book is its strongest, as it combines formal analysis with historical context and interpretation. The last two sections, on the other hand, drift even further from the book's narratological *précis*, and provide less frequently compelling interpretation. The third section leads off with brief histories of different comics traditions. While these are educational for those uninitiated in those histories, they are necessarily brief and therefore serve as only the tip of the iceberg of what would constitute a proper history. Jared Gardner's history of the American "narrative comic strip" is a familiar one for American comics fans, but it reorients typical histories into a narratological perspective, pointing to the ways in which newspaper strips eventually oriented themselves toward lengthy sustained narratives in adventure strips, and how and why that vogue inevitably subsided. Gardner's concentration on the reasons for these shifts is compelling and might even provide a useful reading for undergraduates being introduced to the history of American comics.

Pascal Lefèvre's account of the "dual system of publication" of Flemish comics is, by contrast, almost completely unfamiliar to me, and, for others like me, it has the value of providing new knowledge. His account of the conversion of two tier daily newspaper installments into lengthier albums (always of a length that was a multiple of 8 pages) is fascinating, and his claim that the rigid codification of certain formats could not help but influence, if not determine, the kinds of



stories that could be told, seems incontrovertible. At the same time, his application of this thesis to his example of choice, *Suske en Wiske*, is not always convincing. He describes *Suske en Wiske* in great detail and provides some canny reading of its form and meaning, but rarely is it clear why and how the “dual publication system” actually determines (or influences) these meanings. Instead, we seem to get two interesting accounts, one of the dual publication system, and one of *Suske en Wiske*, while their intersection is less sufficiently explored.

Christina Meyer’s account of Michael Carey’s *The Unwritten* and Henry Jenkins’ treatment of Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* engage with “history” in a different way, as both articles excavate the ways in which the texts in question depict and recirculate comics history, *The Unwritten* in a wide-ranging way and *In the Shadow of No Towers* through engagement with early American newspaper strips. Meyer’s article focuses on exploring *The Unwritten*’s metafictional components, its self-reflexive interest in the ways in which stories work (drawing not negligibly from its Vertigo predecessor *Sandman*), and its intertextual games. Meyer never settles securely on the purposes of these “postmodern” games, but she does suggest the ways in which we all see our lives as a series of narratives, and the ways in which self-conscious narratives like the *Unwritten* can then lead to introspection about the narrativizing of our own lives. While she may give too much credit to the groundbreaking and innovative nature of *The Unwritten* itself, her conclusions go beyond a formal preoccupation with comics and towards an engagement with the world itself. Similarly, Jenkins’ treatment of *No Towers* is interesting in its willingness to note the ways in which Spiegelman’s redeployment of classic comics function both as politically antagonistic toward Bush II-era foreign and domestic policy, and the ways in which nostalgia for such strips can serve a conservative and escapist function. That is, while interested in the history of comics and their formal qualities, both Meyer and Jenkins are also usefully interested in the way comics speak to us in our daily lives.

The final section of the book is devoted to “graphic narratives across cultures,” though this heading is so broad as to be difficult to pinpoint. The first essay reads much like the histories of the previous section, with Julia Round’s account of the late 1980’s-early 1990’s “British Invasion” comics being familiar if only because of its relatively recent subject matter. While the history itself provides few revelations, Round’s claim that the explosion of productivity and talent from the likes of Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Garth Ennis, Neil Gaiman, et. al. arose in response to Thatcher-era politics is both compelling and convincing. Jan Baetens and Steven Surdiacourt’s history of European comics (from Töpffer, through Hergé and the ligne claire, and beyond) is, like some that precede it, a useful overview for the uninitiated, but it seems to offer little in the way of new insight.



Jacqueline Berndt's reading of ghost stories in Japanese manga seems out of place next to the overviews that precede it, not least because it is the only example of manga criticism in the book. Nevertheless, Berndt's examination of the intentionally inconclusive narrative of Mizuki Shigeru's *Nonnonba* and the ways in which it is typical of the manga ghost story does a convincing job of drawing connections between cultural traditions and aesthetic ones. In particular, Shigeru's engagement with Bart Beaty's 2007 excoriation of *Nonnonba* in *The ComicsReporter* provides an interesting clash of aesthetic sensibilities and reading practices.

The final essay in the collection is probably the least interesting, and it is unfortunate that the book ends on such an indifferent note. Monika Schmitz-Evans' discussion of whether or not comics can or should be considered "World Literature" is simply an exercise in nomenclature with a distant connection to Goethe's discussion of the same concept. Schmitz-Evans ranges from a listing of various graphic adaptations of classics of world literature to a discussion of the increasing popularity of comics in recent years (a questionable claim not substantiated by compelling evidence), to a look at the cross-pollination of various national comics' traditions. The most interesting assertion she makes is that images can be "globally" understood by people of different cultures in more or less the same ways (p. 386–87), giving comics an advantage over purely linguistic representations in their ability to cross cultural lines. While she acknowledges that different cultures have "highly different cultural codes and traditions", she argues that comics readers have a "strong inclination" to learn and "transgress cultural borders" (p. 386–87), and that learning those visual codes is somewhat easier than acquiring a new language in all of its intricacies. Whether this is true or not is an open question left largely unpursued and undocumented, but it is a provocative claim and an idea worth exploring further. Unfortunately, the essay largely goes in different directions.

Ultimately, then, the book engages with many interesting critical conversations central to comics studies. It begins with a series of essays on the formal intersections of comics and narrative more widely conceived before branching out into presentations of historical narratives both of national traditions and formal properties, examinations of genres and relationships to other media. The breadth of the book is a strength, as there is something in it for nearly any comics scholar, but it is also a weakness, as there are many essays whose connection to narrative theory is tenuous, and whose relationships to those surrounding it are not always immediately clear. This, of course, is a complaint common to almost any collection of essays, but the sheer length of this volume makes the problem a bit more pronounced. Likewise, as mentioned above, a little less in the way of definition and elucidation of terminology, and a little more in the way of interpretation of texts and their meaning would have strengthened the book. Nevertheless, it does provide many



avenues for additional conversation and discussion, taking steps in productive directions for comics studies and narrative theory alike.