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Words + Pictures: A Manifesto

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Words + Pictures: A Manifesto

Abstract

In the second decade of the 21st century, academic comics studies is well established as a serious intellectual subject, but for many non-specialists, including university administrators, a sense of frivolity still attaches to comics. This brief essay braids together personal history and intellectual analysis: 1) it compares the cultural position of comics today to the position of novels in the 19th century; 2) it analyzes the complementary nature of the verbal and visual channels; 3) it argues that neither words nor pictures should be considered *primary* in a narratology of comics; and 4) that comics are eminently well suited to be studied as a branch of literature (though fine arts departments can also stake a claim).

Keywords

comics studies, transmedial narratology, personal essay

Words + Pictures: A Manifesto

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“Jean wants to teach comic books!”

I was just preparing to start class one day when I heard my name being pronounced with contempt out in the hallway, so I popped out and discovered one of my colleagues badmouthing me to another. I’ll call the opiner Professor T.¹

Consider for a moment the history of the novel. There’s not a perfect scholarly consensus about how long novels have been around as a distinct art form: a few hundred years, or else a millennium or two, depending on whose argument you listen to. Ian Watt dates the rise of the novel to the eighteenth century. More recently, it’s become common to criticize Watt’s timeline as Eurocentric; there are texts we could call novels from Japan a thousand years ago, or from classical antiquity. Some might argue, though, that in the absence of clear pre-existing genre conventions these earlier texts should be regarded as precursors to the novel, not novels proper. Now set this controversy aside just for a moment.

Consider the graphic novel, also known as sequential art, also known as comics. Some say comics proper originated at the tail end of the nineteenth century in the US, in tandem with the “yellow journalism” whose epithet in fact derives from a popular cartoon character.² Others, including most notably Scott McCloud, say comics go back much further (9), even that they pre-date the invention of writing: certain prehistoric cave paintings can be interpreted as deliberately juxtaposed images read in a definite sequence. I don’t care whether we start the comics timeline in the 1830s with Rodolphe Töpffer, later with *The Yellow Kid*, or earlier with the cave paintings of Lascaux, any more than I care how long we draw that left-hand tapering-on tail of the rise of the novel. What’s clear is that as of now there exist venerable sequential-art traditions in a wide variety of cultures, including but not limited to Japanese manga, European *bande dessinée*, and American comics.

Nobody disagrees that following some initial period of catching on, there was a sudden creative explosion of literary novels in the nineteenth century, with the number of authors and readers increasing exponentially. Literary critics, historians, and narratologists regard the nineteenth century as the great age of realistic novels.

A few hundred years from now, I aver, scholars and critics of the future are going to identify our time as the great age of the graphic novel. The turning point is already behind us and the creative explosion well underway: Art Spiegelman received a Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for *Maus* (originally published as a serial in *Raw* magazine and collected into a volume by Pantheon in 1986). Two decades into the

twenty-first century, it's actually already a bit late to position oneself on the cutting edge of serious academic study of graphic literature. Yet I'm still cautious about saying "comics" in front of a university administrator. And a local newspaper write-up of the academic Words + Pictures conference sessions I organized this spring, though it was generally positive, spent a long time dwelling on the value of comics as an entrée into literacy. It didn't exactly say comics weren't a sophisticated art form suitable for pursuing the most complex artistic goals, but it didn't say they were, either. The presentation by my former student who teaches high school English and uses Marvel superheroes as bait to attract his students to Hemingway was the only one that got a specific mention in the paper.

In the nineteenth century itself—the great golden age of the novel, mind you—the reading of novels was widely condemned as frivolous and even intellectually harmful, especially for inexperienced young people.

My mother wasn't allowed to read any comics in her youth, except for *Classics Illustrated*.³ I was an early and avid reader of all sorts of books. Comics were no gateway drug for me, but an entirely different form of reading that massaged different places in my mind. I would and still do eagerly read almost anything in comics form. In the trailer in my grandmother's backyard, I even became absorbed in the stack of old *Classics Illustrated*, a series which most comics artists and critics speak of slightly.

Professor T tried to make up with me later, explaining himself. There was just one graphic work, he said, that deserved to be elevated into the literary canon, "the one by that Jewish guy," but no others. Lo! A man who knows of only one cartoonist, and can't even come up with Spiegelman's name, is nevertheless confident that there can't be anything else out there worthy of intellectual attention. Here is what I know: a few centuries from now, journals called something like *Chris Ware Studies* and the *Bechdel Review* will be as well subscribed as *Faulkner Studies* and the *Henry James Review* are now.⁴ I am willing to wager a considerable sum on this, if we can agree on a method of verification and execution.

Many years ago, I enrolled in an undergraduate drawing class. In the back of my mind was the idea that maybe I could learn to make comics. On the first day the instructor warned us of the dangers of conceptual thinking: our process of apprehending the world directly ("seeing") must not be polluted by our process of describing the world with words ("naming"). We were not even supposed to hold the charcoal stick in the same way we held a pencil, because that configuration of our hand would supposedly trigger deeply embedded mental reflexes connected with writing.

For many people, the prohibition on combining seeing with naming, showing with telling, has the force of a scriptural injunction: of course, there is nothing shameful about the visual fine arts and, of course, there is nothing shameful

about writing, but a medium/genre/artwork that conjoins words and pictures is somehow suspect, inferior, if not outright sinful.

In a preliterate age, it made sense that art for the masses was restricted entirely to pictures. In the age of the printing press, the difficulty and expense of interleaving typography and images made illustrations a relative rarity within text. But under current technological conditions, there is no reason other than convention (or an individually chosen artistic challenge) for any artist or writer to be forbidden half of their potential communicative tools.

The words/pictures exchange rate.

The Anglophone adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” is well known and often repeated. And it's clearly true in many circumstances that a diagram or image carries far more explanatory power than lengthy verbal description, especially where what needs to be conveyed is a complex spatial relationship, or instructions for manipulating objects. But for the converse relationship—the supporting of visual images with words—we have no adage. There should be one. When we are groping for the meaning of what we see, there is nothing like the conceptual precision of words. The title of a painting, or a good verbal analysis of it, can completely transform a viewer's experience.

When I was in graduate school, once upon a time, I was whiling away a few hours at the Baltimore Museum of Art. I was waiting, after a mostly sleepless night, for some academic obligation to begin at Johns Hopkins—I think it was a presentation I had to make in a linguistics seminar—some task, anyway, for which I felt inadequately prepared. In one gallery, I caught a sidelong glimpse of a surrealist painting that repelled me with its nightmarish biomorphic forms, distortions of the human body. I decided not to look at the painting closely. I told myself that right before my presentation was no time to be assaulted with mentally disturbing imagery, just because it happened to be hanging in the museum. But there was still a very long time to wait, and eventually I found myself returning to the same surrealist gallery, sidling up to the same psychologically dangerous painting. My plan was simply to memorize the artist's name, so that I could cite him in future conversation as an example of the type of surrealist work I found off-putting, even threatening. I leaned in sideways to the identification card and learned that the painter was André Masson, and the title of the painting was *There Is No Finished World*.

There is no finished world! The sentence swept through my mind in one beautifully clarifying gust. It was a one-line poem that encapsulated my own current suffering and also suggested a kind of escape from it, or at least mitigation, the possibility of understanding and of being understood. What exactly was I so afraid of? A class presentation, a painting, falling short of my potential, the reactions of my own mind. But if there is no finished world, then perfect academic mastery,

perfect security, perfection of any kind, is always only sheer fantasy. What had I expected? André Masson, I thought, knew all about my squeamishness and insecurity, and his goal wasn't to assault me with ugliness, but to reach out the hand of fellow-feeling, asking and offering sympathy for our mutual predicament as unfinished creatures muddling along through a world where neither our circumstances nor our biological nature is ever quite under our control. I looked at the painting closely and now found in it touches of color, gentleness, and solace alongside the misshapen body parts.

My reading of Masson's painting may not be quite what he intended or what art historians think of it; that doesn't matter. My point is that the deftness of his title opened up his work to me in a way that could not have been achieved by the picture alone, wordless.

Words versus pictures?

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, I began to be a regular customer at Fantasy Comics in Tucson, where the intensely knowledgeable Charlie guided my budding connoisseurship. Charlie was the skinny dude with the long hair and the prison tattoos (he had declined to serve in Vietnam). Charlie loaned me his own copies of *Love and Rockets*, which I adored, and *Cerebus*, which I never fully warmed to. After reading *Ed the Happy Clown* I started buying *Yummy Fur* on a regular basis and trying to fill in the missing back issues also. I bought *The Doll's House* because it looked appealing on a quick leaf-through, and after that I bought each new *Sandman* comic as it came out. I got a longbox and the bags and boards to keep them safe and started filling those back issues in as well. And *Sandman* led me to *Hellblazer*.

John Constantine appears as a character in the first *Sandman* story arc, of course, but I don't think that was the precise trail I followed to *Hellblazer*. If I remember right, it was Dave McKean's art that was the proximal link. I had developed an appetite for his strange combination of polish and suggestion, his symbolically dense but underexplained paintings and collages. In other words, for me, *Sandman* begat *Hellblazer*, though I am aware that the latter title appeared first in the real world.

I flunked my first drawing class, the one in which we were supposed to eschew "naming," because I neglected to officially drop the class after ceasing to attend it a few weeks into the semester. That's all right. I flunked freshman English the first several times I attempted it as well, and some twenty-five years later I nevertheless found that I had turned into a professor of English with a specialty in creative writing. Late bloomer. In the last two years, I've taken two undergraduate drawing courses. Unsurprisingly, over the past couple of decades my ability to apply myself to a challenge and stick with an intention has improved somewhat. My attendance in both classes was perfect, I did all the readings and turned in every

assignment, and I would have passed with flying colors, I'm sure, if I had been officially enrolled instead of just hitchhiking, relying on the professional courtesy of my colleagues in the Art Department, Paul Valadez and Jerry Lyles. This is a roundabout way of explaining that Lyles is my academic peer but at the same time also my figure-drawing teacher. Also, I'm pretty sure it was because of my influence that Lyles started offering his studio course in comics, under the ARTS prefix.

At the Words + Pictures sessions (UTRGV FESTIBA 2017), somebody gave Lyles a bit of a hard time about his Jack Kirby presentation, suggesting that it was simply naïve to take an *auteur* approach to comic books. I say that depends on the comic book. It would be plain crazy (I say) to take anything other than an *auteur* approach to a work like *Yummy Fur*, where one individual does all the writing and all the drawing, owns his own characters and maybe even self-publishes. In a garden-variety twentieth-century superhero comic from a mainstream publisher, in which a separate writer, penciler, inker, colorist, letterer, etc. assemble the components on a work-for-hire basis and can be swapped out from month to month like any factory laborers, then, yes, we have no *auteur* at all. But there are cases that fall between these clear-cut extremes. In the early part of his career, Kirby may often have been a cog in the machine, with relatively little creative control, and it may be impossible to disentangle his exact contribution to the creation of certain characters. Looking at the artwork, though, there are still recognizably Kirbyesque innovations, like the “Kirby dots” that crackle pseudo-fractally along the flow lines of vast unspecified natural and supernatural energies. They aren't Stan Lee dots, you know?

Sandman and *Hellblazer* are not clear-cut cases, either. To me it seems entirely uncontroversial to say that both are further toward the *auteur* end of the spectrum than where *Fantastic Four* sits but not as far as *Yummy Fur*. And I consider it still fairly uncontroversial to claim that $Yummy\ Fur \geq Sandman > Hellblazer \geq Fantastic\ Four$ is the correct semi-ordering, because Neil Gaiman was the sole writer of *Sandman* for its entire run, whereas *Hellblazer* had not just multiple artists but also multiple writers. And now finally I am ready to get controversial: a vast gulf separates *Sandman* and *Hellblazer* on the spectrum. *Sandman* ultimately coheres as Gaiman's unified creative work, despite the visual variety contributed by his different collaborators, while *Hellblazer* has no such coherence. There were some great early story arcs under Jamie Delano's authorship, and for all I know there may have been equally great ones later too, but I had to stop buying it when Delano rotated out. The dialogue was all wrong, and I just couldn't stand it. The real John Constantine wouldn't talk like that. This new bozo calling himself Constantine was an imposter.

So when Lyles casually said to me in class one day, that class in which he was teacher and I was pupil, “Comics are ultimately a visual form, wouldn't you

agree?” my immediate (but unexpressed) mental reaction was, No. Absolutely not. The writing—that is, the narrative elements—is more crucial than the drawing. *Sandman* vs. *Hellblazer* proves that.

The classes in which I’m the teacher bear the ENGL label. I teach comics as literary appreciation, and, in the creative-writing program, I also teach workshop classes where the students make comics. I tell my students: “You don’t have to be able to draw to do well in this class. There are great comics made all the time by people who can’t draw. Or you can be like Neil Gaiman and recruit a collaborator.”

Just to mention a few noteworthy comics or artists whose **draftsmanship is minimal**, irrelevant, or otherwise idiosyncratic and/or secondary: *The Amazing Cynicalman*, by Matt Feazell, is just stick figures, and Ivan Brunetti’s little people are just circles with vestigial bodies and flagellar limbs attached. Similarly, the towering mental achievement that is *xkcd* is not founded on visual elaboration, though Munroe’s precision with ink makes me guess that he could do more detailed drawings if he wanted to (but why would you want him to?). Ryan North’s *Dinosaur Comics* has been running continuously since 2003, three times a week, with the exact same artwork in all six panels; only the dialogue changes, and (less obviously) the temporal element. And then my hero Lynda Barry—well, this is the idiosyncratic category. I refuse to say that Barry can’t draw, or that there is anything inferior about her drawing style. But it’s certainly strange: wobbly, flat, often teeming with psychologically significant but spatially nonsensical doodles and childlike decoration. Nothing actual is rendered . . . except the full truth of what it is to have a mind and feelings.

Of, course, it **helps to be able to draw**. Who wouldn’t want to have that skill? If a cartoonist can’t even make a given character recognizable as the same individual from one panel to the next, this is a problem for most narrative genres. If you’ve never tried it, it’s harder than you think to achieve even that minimal consistency. And being able to draw faces well enough to convey mood through facial expression alone is a powerful tool that’s yet more difficult to achieve, by a couple orders of magnitude. I point my students to that moment in David Small’s *Stitches* where the psychotic punishing grandmother hesitates just a moment before dragging the boy upstairs by his wrists (90). In the last panel on the page we (and David) get the rare opportunity to gaze into her eyes as an oblique ray of light penetrates behind her usually reflecting glasses. For a long moment she is at rest and human, somewhat abashed, considering her options. Then she resumes the manic vindictiveness of the preceding panels, along with her flat-eyed, Joker-esque evil grimace (91). We should delight in the rare drawing skill that enables this psychological depth and moral complexity.

Well, I'm of two minds, as you can see. Here's what I maintain, though: being unable to draw doesn't disqualify you from creating great comics. Being unable to manipulate your compositional elements effectively—including characterization, setting, plot points, cause-and-effect logic, narration, dialogue, pacing, focus, tone, theme, etc. (tick however many boxes are relevant to your chosen genre) does.

But look, people are always thinking that their own specialty, whatever it is, is the central one and that disciplines in which other people have made themselves expert are less significant. Could that be the main operating principle behind my philosophical differences with Lyles and others who consider the aesthetic impact of comics to reside purely or primarily in their visual aspects? Lyles can draw, has spent many years studying other artists' drawings to improve his drawing skills, so he naturally looks at comics as pictures expanded to include words, and multiplied to encompass plot, character, and all the rest of whatever. I on the other hand have spent a lifetime reading and building up my linguistic confidence, and so my personal manifesto is Words + Pictures, in that order. Is that all this boils down to?

Nah, I don't think that's it. Because narrative craftsmanship isn't just about diction, choosing your words well. Comics can also succeed without any dialogue or word-based narration at all. As an example I offer Erik Nebel's "Behold the Sexy Man," which wordlessly deploys an unearthly setting, fabulistic characters, and fabulous plot twists. In a well-made comic, both words and pictures are symbolic pointers to other things, either actual objects and persons from the past or present of the real world, or imaginary ones in fictional worlds. That is to say, they have meaning. The importance of the meaning that a comics text aims at outweighs the importance of either the words or the pictures taken in isolation, and meaning may be supported by any combination of words and pictures. (So play to your strengths, writer/artists!)

In published interviews, my hero Chris Ware argues that the perusal of comics, even wordless ones, should be regarded as a form of reading rather than the sort of looking-at we engage in with most of the art objects collected in museums and galleries. It drove him kind of crazy that his art teachers would sometimes spend lengthy critique periods examining and discussing his compositions without ever once reading them.

Like Ware, I claim that reading is the main thing comics are for and that therefore the most profound obligation laid on the makers of comics is to create a compelling reading experience. If they can also provide eye candy, or, like Kirby, profound innovations in the 2D visual plane, well, that's gravy. And if an art student wants to reverse engineer the 2D visual techniques of comics art for the purpose of creating objects to be looked at rather than objects to be read, I'm not telling them they shouldn't. I'm not saying there is no value in fitting (at least some) comics into

the taxonomies and traditions of the visual arts; I'm just saying that comics (at least the ones worth reading) are a branch of literature.

Thus, literature teachers should teach comics and students of literature should read them. And a teacher of creative writing may humbly aspire to teach comics-making alongside and in collaboration with 2D artists and designers.

Notes

1. In my mind, it stands for “troglodyte.”
2. Richard F. Outcault's comic strip *Hogan's Alley*, featuring a character who became known as The Yellow Kid, first appeared in 1895 in Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. The following year, Outcault was hired away by William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*, but because Outcault had not copyrighted the character, Pulitzer was able to continue publishing a version of the strip as well. The Yellow Kid thus came to epitomize the Pulitzer/Hearst competition in particular (New York had two “yellow kid papers”), and subsequently a lurid journalistic style more generally.
3. *Classic Comics/Classics Illustrated* was a comic book series consisting entirely of adaptations of classic literature. It began in 1941, was renamed in 1947, and ceased in 1971 after publishing 169 issues in total.
4. I mean, assuming the academic lit-crit peer review system continues to exist at all. Perhaps we shouldn't completely rule out the possibility of a cataclysm that ends the world as we know it.

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