

# PROFESSORIAL PLATFORM

COMICS  
IN THE  
ACADEMY

PROFESSOR  
ROGER  
SABIN

Go enjoy this talk. lick here  
(Impregnated with Esn)



# University of the Arts London Professorial Platform 2019

Disclaimer: All “errors” are intentional and represent an artistic choice.

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Designed and drawn by John Miers

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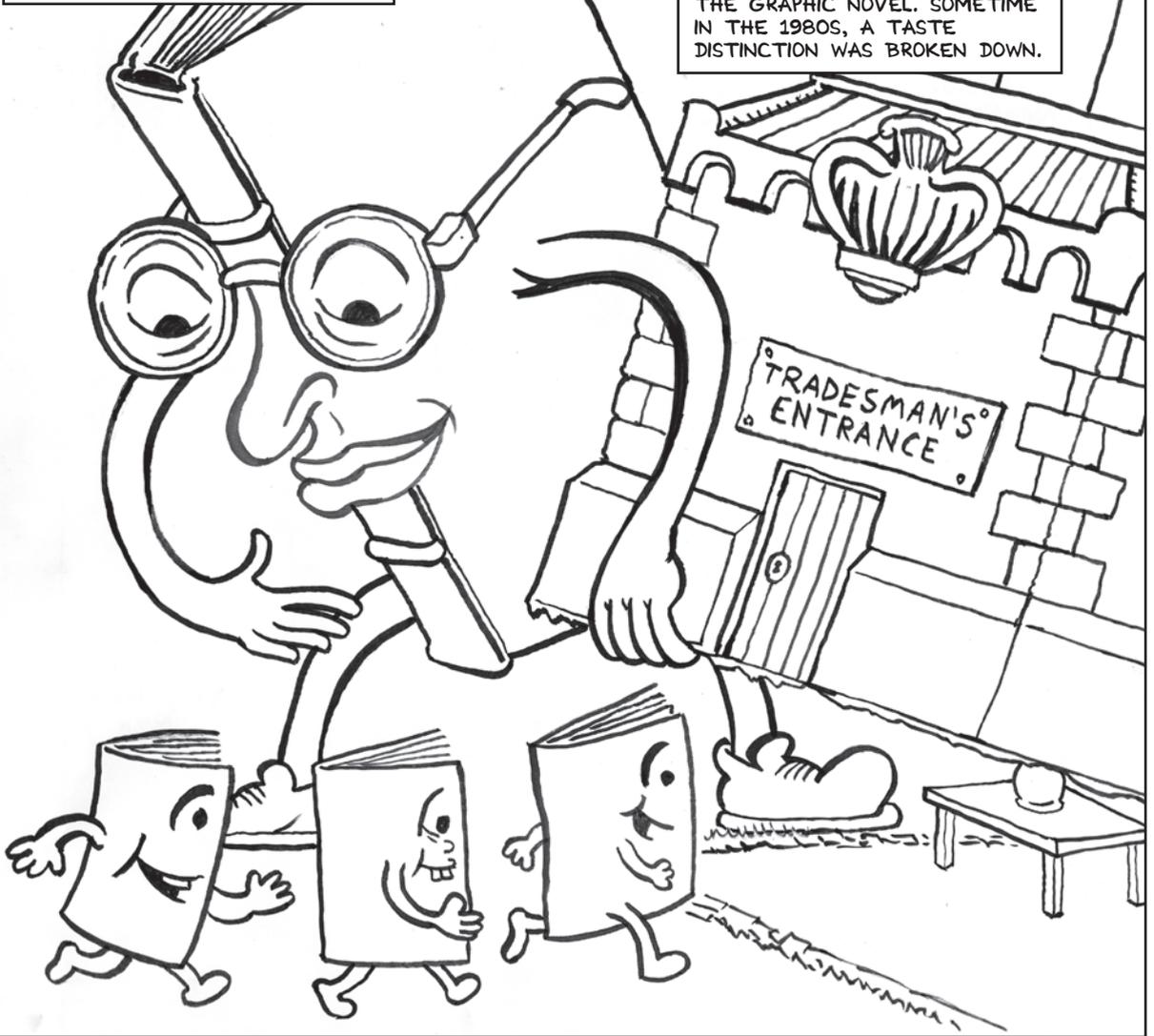
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COMICS IN THE ACADEMY: THREE QUESTIONS

FIRST QUESTION: IS THE 'GRAPHIC NOVEL' A CURSE?

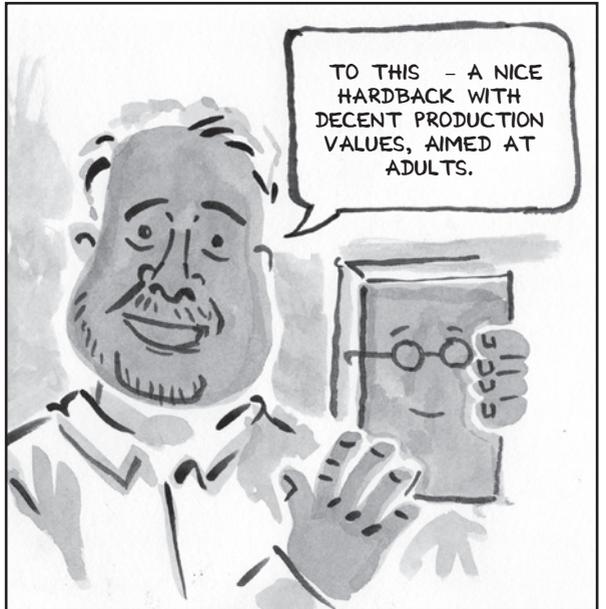
PARTLY WE'VE WON OUR PLACE IN THE ACADEMY BECAUSE OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL. SOMETIME IN THE 1980S, A TASTE DISTINCTION WAS BROKEN DOWN.



SUDDENLY COMICS WERE NOT JUST CHILDISH, FANNISH, OR LOW-CLASS TRASH. WE WENT FROM THIS - A PAMPHLET ON CRAPPY NEWSPRINT;



TO THIS - A NICE HARDBACK WITH DECENT PRODUCTION VALUES, AIMED AT ADULTS.



YOU SOON HAD  
NON-FICTION,



POLITICS,



MEMOIR AND  
ALL MANNER  
OF OTHER  
'RESPECTABLE'  
SUBJECT  
MATTER.



Suddenly,  
graphic novels  
were being  
reviewed in the  
quality  
newspapers,



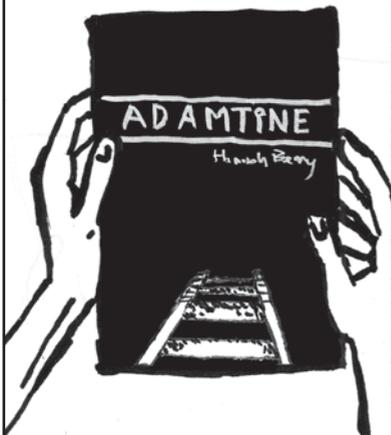
AND ON RADIO  
4 AND ON TV,



AND WERE IN  
BOOKSHOPS,  
AS OPPOSED  
TO THE  
NEWSAGENTS  
OR THE  
SPECIALIST  
COMICS SHOPS.



THIS MAGICAL TRANSITION HAS  
BEEN SEEN TO BE  
RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RISE OF  
NEW READERSHIPS,  
PARTICULARLY WOMEN.



IF YOU LOOK AT THE MOST  
SUCCESSFUL GRAPHIC NOVELS  
TODAY, MANY OF THEM ARE  
BY WOMEN.



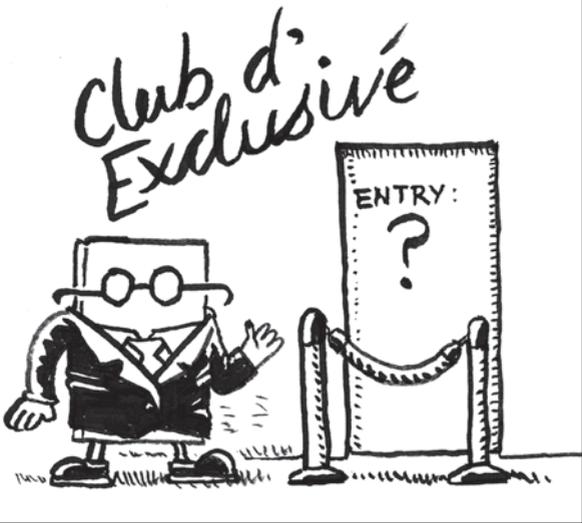
THIS SHIFT MAY ALSO HAVE  
HELPED INSPIRE OTHER KINDS  
OF DIVERSITY.



IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE THE  
ACADEMY CAUGHT ON, USING THE  
GRAPHIC NOVEL AS AN ACCESS POINT. BY  
THE 2000S WE HAD UNIVERSITY COURSES,  
AND ACADEMIC BOOKLISTS AND JOURNALS  
- TODAY THERE ARE 10 PEER-REVIEWED  
JOURNALS, WHICH IS PRETTY STAGGERING.



SO, THE GRAPHIC NOVEL HELPED US COME A  
LONG WAY. BUT AT WHAT PRICE?

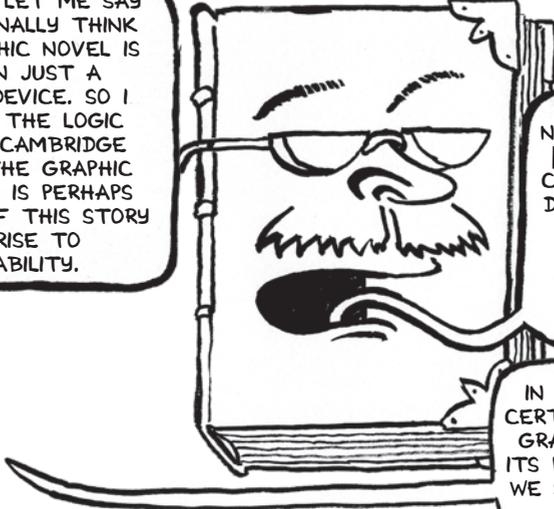


FIRST OF ALL, LET ME SAY THAT I PERSONALLY THINK THAT A GRAPHIC NOVEL IS MORE THAN JUST A MARKETING DEVICE. SO I AGREE WITH THE LOGIC BEHIND THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL, WHICH IS PERHAPS THE APOGEE OF THIS STORY OF THE RISE TO RESPECTABILITY.



'THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IS A SPECIFIC [VARIETY] OF THE COMIC FORM, WHICH DISPLAYS A NUMBER OF PROTOTYPICAL FEATURES THAT CAN BE READ, COMPARED AND ANALYSED'

IN OTHER WORDS, I CERTAINLY THINK THE GRAPHIC NOVEL HAS ITS PLACE, AND THAT WE SHOULD CONTINUE STUDYING IT.



BUT TOO MUCH OF AN EMPHASIS IS A PROBLEM.

WHAT ABOUT STRIPS, WEB COMICS, THE SMALL PRESS, AND ALL THE OTHER TYPES OF COMIC?

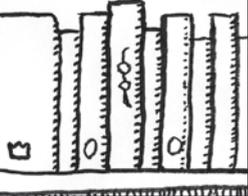
IN PARTICULAR, IF WE CONCENTRATE ON THE GRAPHIC NOVEL,



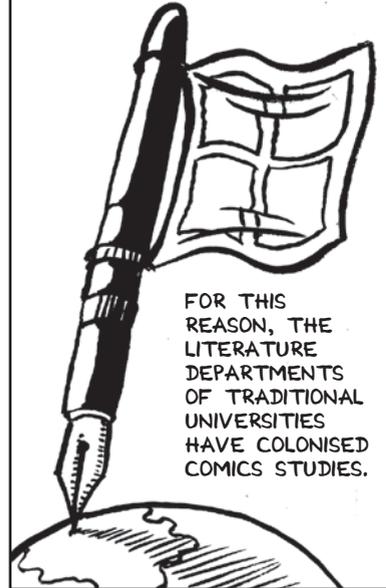
IT MEANS THAT COMICS GET LOOKED AT AS NOVELS.

IN OTHER WORDS, TEXT NARRATIVES WITH ADDED PICTURES.

THEIR LITERARINESS COMES TO DEFINE THEM.

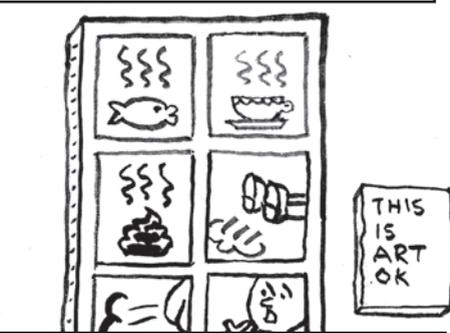


Ut enim con-  
strud exer-  
ris nisi ut aliq-  
onsequat. Duis a-  
rehenderit in volt-  
dolore eu fugiat n-  
cepteur sint occac-  
roident, sunt  
erunt mollit  
ut perspiciat  
ste natus error sit volupt-



FOR THIS REASON, THE LITERATURE DEPARTMENTS OF TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITIES HAVE COLONISED COMICS STUDIES.

THE VAST MAJORITY OF ESSAYS IN THE JOURNALS ARE CLOSE READINGS IN A LIT. CRIT. TRADITION.



THE VAST MAJORITY OF ANALYTICAL BOOKS ARE BY LITERATURE SCHOLARS. THE FIRST MASTERS COURSE WAS AT DUNDEE UNIVERSITY, AND CAME OUT OF A LITERATURE COURSE. AND SO ON.



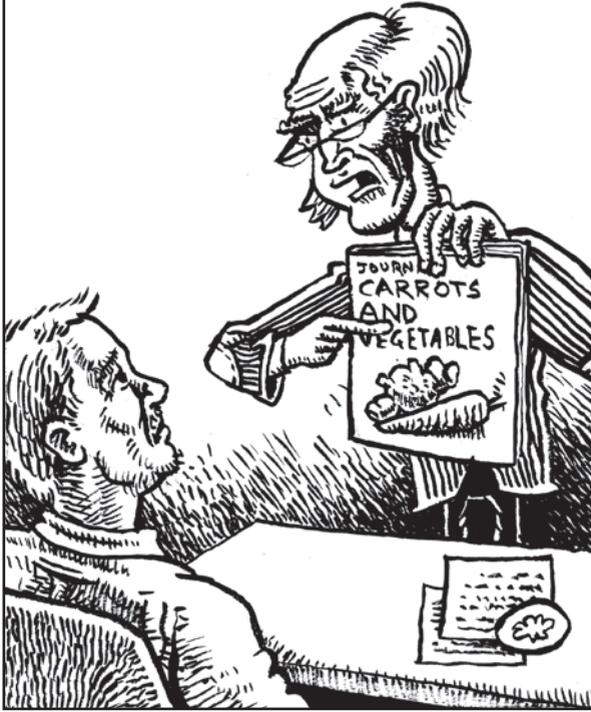
BY CONTRAST, THE ART SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN FRUSTRATINGLY SLOW TO CATCH ON.

IS THAT BECAUSE THERE IS MORE PREJUDICE HERE? I DON'T KNOW. ANYWAY, IT'S WHY SOME OF US HERE AT UAL FOUNDED THE COMICS RESEARCH HUB LAST YEAR - PARTLY TO PUSH BACK.



SO, ONCE THIS PROCESS OF THE 'GRAPHIC NOVELISATION' OF THE FORM STARTS, IT'S VERY HARD TO STOP. I'LL GIVE A FEW EXAMPLES.

WHEN I FOUNDED THE JOURNAL OF GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS, I HAD BIG FIGHTS WITH ROUTLEDGE ABOUT THE NEED TO INCLUDE THE TERM 'GRAPHIC NOVELS' IN THE TITLE. IN THE END THEY INSISTED ON IT. BUT THIS IS LIKE SAYING 'THE JOURNAL OF CARROTS AND VEGETABLES'.



ANOTHER EXAMPLE. THE MEDIA WILL NOT REVIEW COMICS UNLESS THEY ARE GRAPHIC NOVELS. THAT'S A GENERALISATION, BUT I WAS THE OBSERVER'S REVIEWER FOR TEN YEARS, AND THAT WAS DEFINITELY THE ATTITUDE. THERE WERE REASONS FOR IT - THE PUBLIC HAD TO BE ABLE TO BUY THE COMIC IN THEIR LOCAL BOOKSHOP. BUT NEVERTHELESS, I WAS WARNED OFF FROM REVIEWING THINGS THAT WERE 'TOO COMICY'. AND I BELIEVE THAT ATTITUDE IS STILL THERE.



THIRD EXAMPLE,



LAST YEAR, THIS GRAPHIC NOVEL WAS NOMINATED FOR A MAN BOOKER PRIZE.



CUE BIG CELEBRATIONS -



THE MEDIA HAILED THIS AS ANOTHER STEP FORWARD.



BUT THE MAN BOOKER IS A LITERARY PRIZE -



IT'S LIKE ENTERING AN APPLE IN AN ORANGES CONTEST.



SABRINA IS A GOOD COMIC IN MANY WAYS,



BUT IT IS A DEEPLY LITERARY COMIC -



IT'S VERY LONG, AND IT'S LOTS OF PANELS WITH TALKING HEADS.



I THINK YOU CAN SEE WHAT I MEAN...



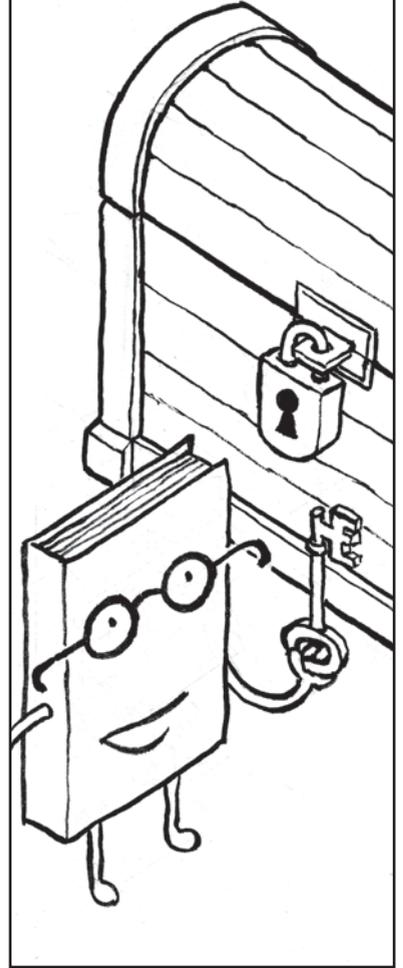
SO WHAT TO MAKE OF ALL THIS? IN THE ACADEMY, WE ARE RELIANT ON THE CANON - WHETHER YOU LIKE THAT IDEA OR NOT, IT'S WHAT WE BASE TEACHING AROUND. WITH GRAPHIC NOVELS DOMINATING THE CANON, IT SETS UP ALL SORTS OF DYNAMICS.



IT'S EASIER FOR A STUDENT TO GET A PROPOSAL FOR A DISSERTATION ACCEPTED IF IT'S ABOUT A GRAPHIC NOVEL - ESPECIALLY IF IT'S ONE THAT HAPPENS TO HAVE BEEN REVIEWED IN THE MEDIA - THAN IT IS ABOUT ANYTHING ON THIS TABLE.



OR TO GET FUNDING FOR CONFERENCES IF THE PROPOSAL HAS 'GRAPHIC NOVEL' IN THE TITLE. FOR RESEARCHERS, FUNDING BIDS ARE MORE APPEALING IF THEY HAVE THE TERM 'GRAPHIC NOVEL' IN THEM. AND SO ON.



WHAT SHOULD WE DO? THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IS AT THE NEXUS POINT OF WHAT MAKES COMICS IN THE ACADEMY BOTH EXCITING AND PROBLEMATIC. IT'S GOT US THIS FAR, BUT MAYBE NOW IS THE TIME TO SAY GOODBYE TO IT?



PERHAPS WE NEED TO MOVE INTO A POST-GRAPHIC NOVEL WAY OF THINKING. BUT WHAT WOULD THAT MEAN? WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE? WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THINKING ABOUT A COMICS STUDIES FUTURE BEYOND TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF LITERARY PRESTIGE? I'M NOT SURE. I'D LIKE TO KNOW WHAT YOU THINK.

**SECOND QUESTION:  
IS COMICS STUDIES  
BECOMING  
INSTRUMENTALISED?**

SOME OF US IN THIS ROOM WORK IN UNIVERSITIES, AND SO WE ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE WAY IN WHICH AN IMPACT AGENDA HAS TAKEN THEM OVER.



IT BASICALLY FOLLOWED THE 2008 FINANCIAL CRASH. THUS, THE ARTS HAVE TO BE 'USEFUL' - THEY HAVE TO MAKE MONEY, OR PUT STUDENTS IN JOBS, OR CONTRIBUTE TO SOCIETY IN SOME WAY.



SO, IT'S INEVITABLE THAT WE'RE SEEING MORE RESEARCH INTO HOW COMICS CAN BE USEFUL IN SCHOOLS, IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION, IN MEDICINE, AND SO ON. IN OTHER WORDS, HOW THEY CAN BE INSTRUMENTALISED. AND THAT'S FINE. THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT KIND OF RESEARCH.



SO, THE SCIENCES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES LOVE COMICS BECAUSE THEY CAN MAKE THEIR WORK MORE IMPACTFUL.



MY COLLEAGUE DR IAN HORTON HAS CALLED THIS KIND OF APPROACH 'APPLIED COMICS'. AND ONCE YOU APPLY THIS REMARKABLE ARTFORM TO DIFFERENT AREAS OF LIFE, REMARKABLE THINGS HAPPEN. HERE, I JUST WANT TO POINT TO THREE EXAMPLES OF WORK BY MY FORMER PHD STUDENTS:



THIS IS JOHN MIERS - WHO IS LOOKING AT VISUAL METAPHORS FOR CHRONIC ILLNESS,



THIS IS SIMON GRENNAN, WHO CO-PRODUCED A COMIC ABOUT DEMENTIA USING FEEDBACK FROM CARE WORKERS,

**Parables of  
Care**

CREATIVE RESPONSES TO DEMENTIA CARE, AS TOLD BY CARERS



DRAWN BY DR SIMON GRENNAN WITH CHRISTOPHER SPERANDIO. EDITED AND ADAPTED BY DR EUGENIA GRENNAN, DR ERNESTO PREGIO AND DR PETER WILKINS.

AND THIS IS PEN MENDONCA WHO HAS DEVELOPED A NEW SYSTEM OF ETHICAL CARTOONING, AS APPLIED TO THE WELLBEING OF DIFFERENT MARGINALISED GROUPS OF PEOPLE.



ALL THESE PROJECTS ARE MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. THIS KIND OF WORK FITS THE IMPACT AGENDA PERFECTLY. AND INDEED THIS UNIVERSITY'S STRATEGY REMIT, VERY WELL.



SO, HERE'S THE 'BUT' - AND YOU PROBABLY KNOW WHAT I'M GOING TO SAY... WHAT ABOUT OTHER KINDS OF RESEARCH? WHAT ABOUT MY OTHER PHDS, WHO ARE DOING EQUALLY BRILLIANT, GROUNDBREAKING WORK, BUT WHO DON'T FIT THE IMPACT AGENDA QUITE SO SNUGLY? WHO MAY BE DOING MORE EXPERIMENTAL WORK, OR MORE HISTORICAL WORK?

SO, AMONGST MY CURRENT AND ABOUT-TO-START PHDS, I HAVE A STUDENT LOOKING AT BIOGRAPHIES OF ARTISTS AND THE NEW GALLERY BOOKSHOP ECONOMY,

ONE DOING PHILOSOPHIES OF COLLABORATION,

ONE DOING AFROFUTURISM,

ONE DOING EARLY PRINT TECHNIQUES,

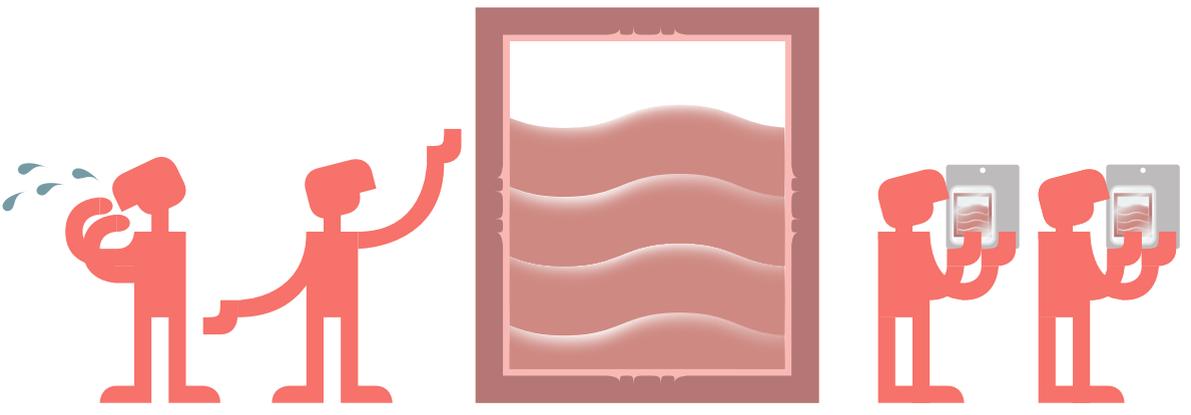
AND ANOTHER ONE DOING DIGITAL COMICS.

ONE DOING A TRANSMEDIA STUDY OF A WELL-KNOWN CHARACTER.

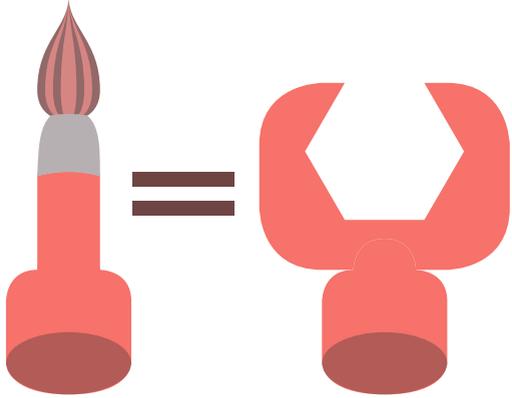
WHAT IS THEIR PLACE IN THE FUTURE? ARE THEY AT THE WRONG END OF THIS HIERARCHY? I HOPE NOT...



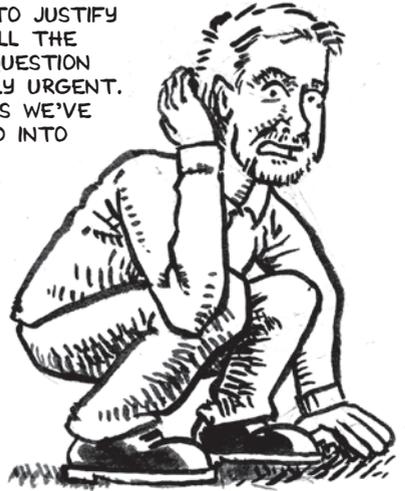
SO, HOW DO WE THINK IMAGINATIVELY ABOUT RESEARCH THAT FALLS OUTSIDE AN INSTRUMENTALIST AGENDA? IS IT 'A NICE HOBBY', AS THE DAILY MAIL AND SOME MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT WOULD LIKE US TO THINK, OR DOES IT ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THOUGHT, PROBLEM SOLVING, AND LATERAL THINKING? IS IT AT THE CORE OF WHAT MAKES THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES WORTHWHILE, AND IF SO DO WE NEED TO SHOUT LOUDER ABOUT THIS?



I REALISE, OF COURSE, THIS IS PART OF A BIGGER QUESTION ABOUT THE POINT OF THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES - WHICH TAKES IN THE POINT OF ART SCHOOL, WHICH HAS BEEN ONE OF JEREMY'S BIG QUESTIONS FOR US. AND I DO UNDERSTAND THE PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS.



BUT BECAUSE OF COMICS' LACK OF CULTURAL STATUS, AND THE FACT THAT WE STILL HAVE TO JUSTIFY OURSELVES ALL THE TIME, THIS QUESTION SEEMS DOUBLY URGENT. IN SOME WAYS WE'VE BEEN FORCED INTO A DEFENSIVE CROUCH, AND I'D BE INTERESTED TO HEAR HOW YOU THINK WE CAN GET UP FROM IT.



IS IT SIMPLY A CASE OF 'NEVER APOLOGISE, NEVER DEFEND', AS THE GREAT AMERICAN SCHOLAR RUSTY WITEK PUTS IT? OR DO WE HAVE TO BE MORE PROACTIVE? AND HOW DO WE DO THAT?



(I'VE GOT THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD, HAVEN'T I - SUPERVISING THIS LOT...)



THIRD AND FINAL QUESTION:  
SHOULD COMICS STUDIES  
BE A DISCIPLINE?



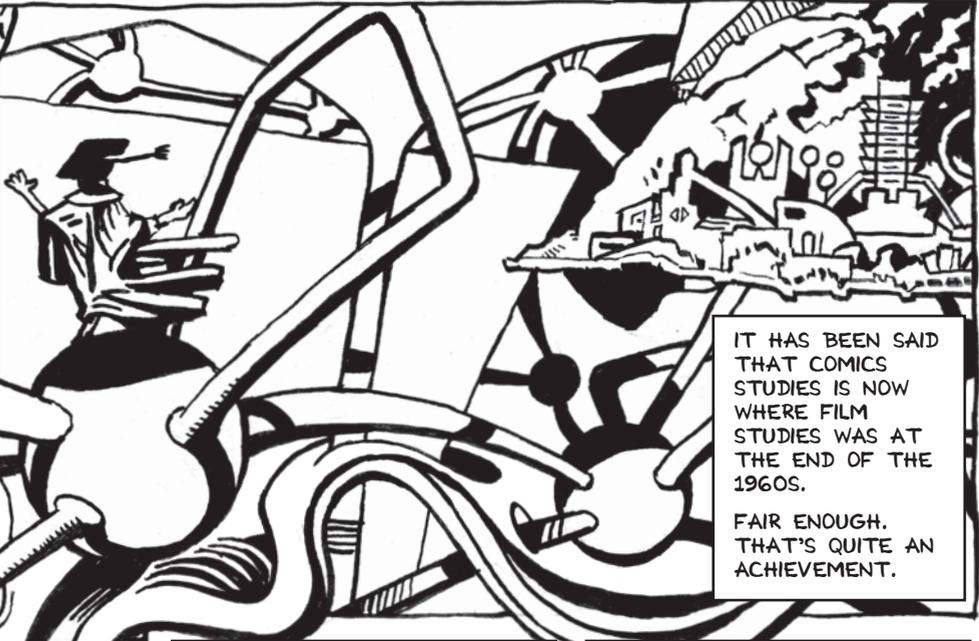
I WON'T SPEND MUCH TIME ON THIS ONE, BECAUSE IT BRINGS TOGETHER EVERYTHING I'VE SAID SO FAR. AT THE MOMENT COMICS STUDIES IS A FIELD.



WE WENT FROM BEING A FRINGE INTEREST AT FAN CONVENTIONS WHEN MARTIN AND I STARTED, TO BEING A 'FIELD', TO BEING A NASCENT 'DISCIPLINE'.



THIS HAS BEEN DUE TO THE REASONS I MENTIONED ABOVE - THE GROWTH OF THE JOURNALS, THE CONFERENCES, THE COURSES, ETC. - AND ALSO, INEVITABLY, THE GROWTH OF THE IDEA OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL.



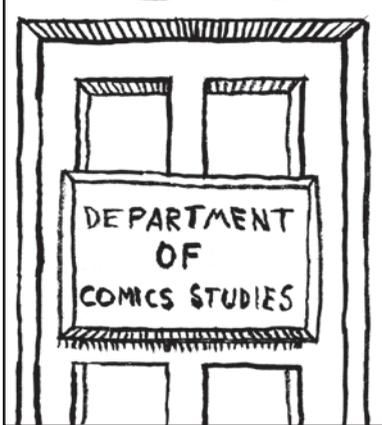
IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT COMICS STUDIES IS NOW WHERE FILM STUDIES WAS AT THE END OF THE 1960S.

FAIR ENOUGH. THAT'S QUITE AN ACHIEVEMENT.

AND IT'S BEEN QUITE A TRIP...



BUT DO WE WANT TO BE CONSECRATED BY THE ACADEMY, TO USE PIERRE BOURDIEU'S TERM?



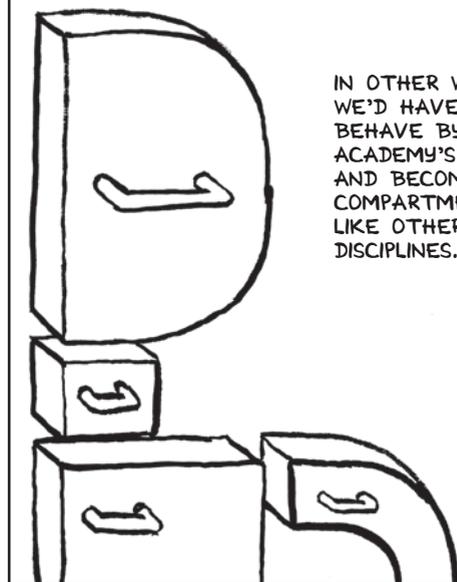
ANOTHER GREAT AMERICAN SCHOLAR, CHARLES HATFIELD, SAYS NO - WE WORK BEST USING GUERRILLA TACTICS IN DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES.



HE SAYS THAT COMICS STUDIES IS ALREADY INTERDISCIPLINARY - BY ITS VERY NATURE - AND THAT WE DON'T GAIN ANYTHING BY BECOMING MORE EMBEDDED. THERE ARE OTHER REASONS, TOO, FOR THINKING IT'S A BAD IDEA. FOR EXAMPLE, IF WE GIVE IN TO BECOMING A DISCIPLINE, THEN WE BECOME 'DISCIPLINED', IN A WAY THAT MICHEL FOUCAULT HAS DESCRIBED, AND HEMMED-IN BY A LIMITING DISCOURSE.



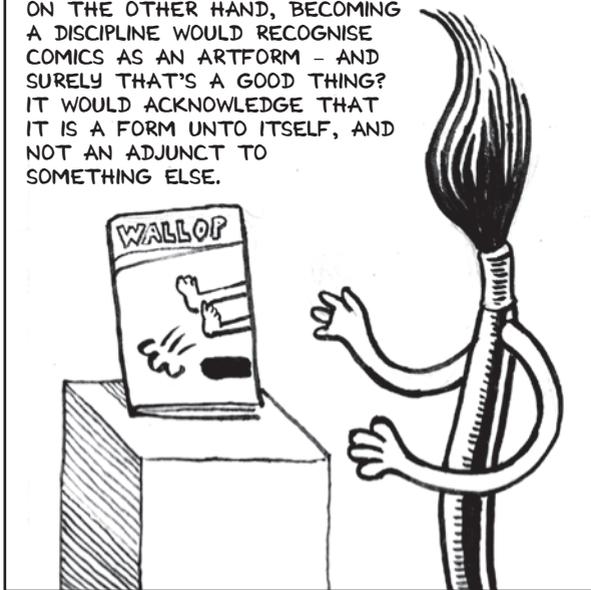
IN OTHER WORDS, WE'D HAVE TO BEHAVE BY THE ACADEMY'S RULES, AND BECOME COMPARTMENTALISED LIKE OTHER DISCIPLINES.



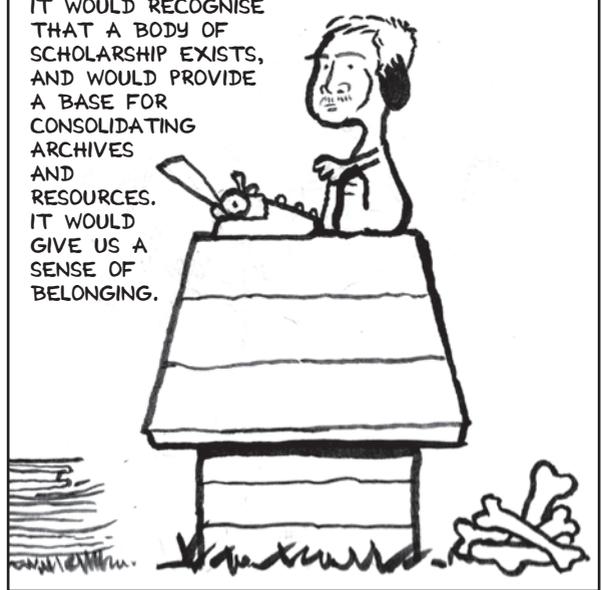
FINALLY, SHOULD WE BE TRYING TO BECOME A DISCIPLINE JUST AT A MOMENT WHEN SOME UNIVERSITIES ARE MOVING AWAY FROM DISCIPLINES ALTOGETHER AND OFFERING PICK-AND-MIX DEGREES? THERE ARE SOME POWERFUL PHILOSOPHICAL ARGUMENTS BEHIND THIS.



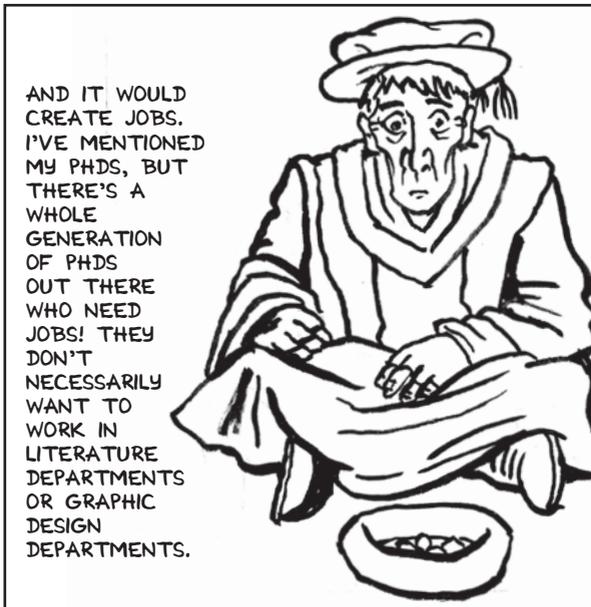
ON THE OTHER HAND, BECOMING A DISCIPLINE WOULD RECOGNISE COMICS AS AN ARTFORM - AND SURELY THAT'S A GOOD THING? IT WOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT IS A FORM UNTO ITSELF, AND NOT AN ADJUNCT TO SOMETHING ELSE.



IT WOULD RECOGNISE THAT A BODY OF SCHOLARSHIP EXISTS, AND WOULD PROVIDE A BASE FOR CONSOLIDATING ARCHIVES AND RESOURCES. IT WOULD GIVE US A SENSE OF BELONGING.



AND IT WOULD CREATE JOBS. I'VE MENTIONED MY PHDS, BUT THERE'S A WHOLE GENERATION OF PHDS OUT THERE WHO NEED JOBS! THEY DON'T NECESSARILY WANT TO WORK IN LITERATURE DEPARTMENTS OR GRAPHIC DESIGN DEPARTMENTS.



AND I DO MEAN ALL MY PHDS... NOT JUST THE SO-CALLED INSTRUMENTALIST ONES.

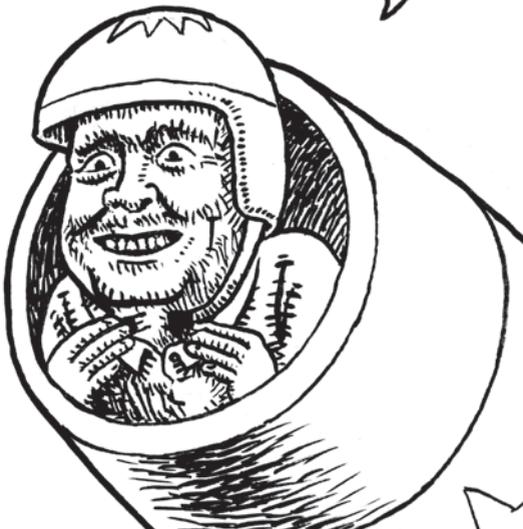
(OR IS ARGUING FOR JOBS BEING INSTRUMENTALIST IN ITSELF??)



SO, JUST TO CONCLUDE ON WHY WE SHOULD BE A DISCIPLINE - AND TO CONCLUDE MY TALK:



IN THIS AGE OF THE PRECARIAT, IT WOULD MAKE US LESS PRECARIOUS.



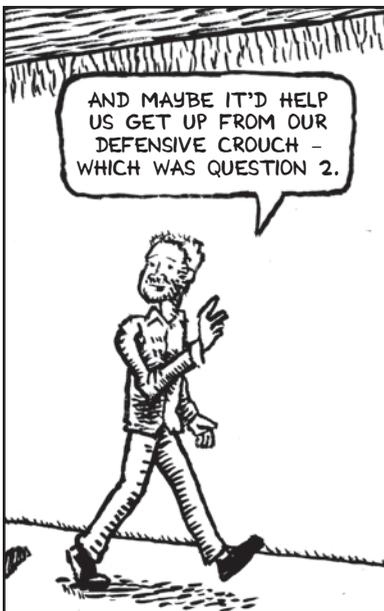
MAYBE, IT'D MAKE IT EASIER FOR A STUDENT TO PROPOSE A DISSERTATION THAT IS NOT CONSTRAINED BY THE CANON, AS DICTATED BY AN EMPHASIS ON THE GRAPHIC NOVEL.



WHICH BRINGS ME BACK TO QUESTION 1.



AND MAYBE IT'D HELP US GET UP FROM OUR DEFENSIVE CROUCH - WHICH WAS QUESTION 2.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

THANK YOU.



P.S. ...

WELL, KIDS, DIDJA ENJOY THAT?... THAT WAS JUST THE RED LEB VERSION - THE CLICKBAIT, CROWDPLEASIN' STUFF...

HEH...HEH...

IF YOU WANT THE HARD STUFF, MEET ME HERE: WWW.MARIEDUVAL.ORG, AND AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM LUNCHTIME TALK ABOUT MARIE DUVAL ON 13/06/2019.



For more on the state of comics studies, please see:

Beaty, B. (2011) "Introduction" to "In Focus: Comics Studies Fifty Years after Film Studies." *Cinema Journal* 50.3: 106 - 110.

Hatfield, Ch. (2010) "Indiscipline, or, The Condition of Comics Studies." *Transatlantica*: <<http://transatlantica.revues.org/4933>>.

Jenkins, H. (2011). "Whither Comic Studies?: A Conversation with the Editors and Contributors of *Critical Approaches to Comics* (Part One)". *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, 15 November. <[http://henryjenkins.org/2011/11/wither\\_comic\\_studies\\_a\\_convers.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2011/11/wither_comic_studies_a_convers.html)>.

Singer, M. (2019) *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press)

Smith, M. and Duncan, R. (eds.) (2011) *Critical Approaches to Comics. Theories and Methods* (New York and London: Routledge)

Roger Sabin is *Professor of Popular Culture* at UAL. His research has an emphasis on the history of comics and cartooning, but takes in film, TV, and other popular forms - including subcultural studies. He is the author, co-author or editor of eight books, including *Adult Comics* (Routledge 'Major Works'), *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (Phaidon), *The Lasting of the Mohicans* (University Press of Mississippi), *Punk Rock: So What?* (Routledge), and *Cop Shows: A Critical History of Police Drama on Television* (McFarland). He was part of the team that put together the 2016 Marie Duval Archive ([www.marieduval.org](http://www.marieduval.org)). He serves on the boards of eight research journals, and is Series Editor for the booklist *Palgrave Studies in Comics*, and Series Co-Editor for *Palgrave Studies in Comedy*. His journalism includes work for *The Guardian*, *BBC* and *Channel 4*, and he has been a curatorial consultant for The British Museum, British Library and Tate Gallery. The 'Sabin Award' is awarded annually at the International Graphic Novels and Comics Conference.

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Roger would like to thank Jeremy Till, Oriana Baddeley, Tom Corby, Martin Barker, and Lynne Finn, and John Miers for producing this comic.

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Inspired by *Raw Purple* (1977), *Army Man* (1989), and *Outernational Times* (2018)

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University of the Arts London is Europe's largest specialist art and design university and a vibrant world centre for innovation drawing together six distinctive and distinguished Colleges with international reputations in art, design, fashion, communications and performing arts: Camberwell College of Arts, Central Saint Martins, Chelsea College of Arts, London College of Communication, London College of Fashion, and Wimbledon College of Arts. Proudly associated with some of the most original thinkers and practitioners in the arts, the University continues to innovate, challenge convention, and nurture exceptional talents. One of our goals is to sustain and develop a world-class research culture that supports and informs the university's academic profile. As a leader in the arts and design sector, we aim to clearly articulate the practice-based nature of much of our research, and in doing so to demonstrate the importance of the creative arts to scholarly research. The Professorial Platforms series is an opportunity for University colleagues and associates, as well as invited members of the public to learn more about the research undertaken in the University. The Platforms enable Professors to highlight their field of interest and the University, in turn, to recognise and commemorate their successes to date.

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**YOUR TIME**

