**Seeing ~~Comics~~/Illustration through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form**

Ian Horton and Maggie Gray

During the 1960s and 1970s foundational texts for what would become Comics Studies emerged from within the discipline of Art History as traditional approaches in this well-established field were challenged. Although subsequently the study of comics remained marginal to Art History, more recently there has been renewed interest in comics among art historians, while concurrently art-historical methodologies have informed comics scholarship (whether implicitly or explicitly), particularly those placing greater emphasis on the form’s graphic, material and aesthetic dimensions. It is here argued that Illustration Studies (as a nascent discipline) could also profit by being informed by these methodologies and concerns by acknowledging the, often marginal but still significant, inclusion of examples drawn from illustration within art-historical discourse/s in the past, so bringing such approaches into the present and potentially impacting on the future of the discipline as it emerges.

Our recent research examining the relationship between Comics Studies and Art History resulted in two publications, a monograph *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures* and an edited collection *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* (a necessary addition as we could not do all the work ourselves and our voices are clearly partial in examining such debates). The monograph was structured around two main sections, the first section titled The History of Art History and Comics Studies, addressed the work of art historians, such as Gerard Blanchard, Pierre Couperie, Ernst Gombrich and David Kunzle, produced between the 1950s and 1990s, that used methodologies drawn from Art History to examine comics, cartooning and caricature. Following an introduction that asked, ‘Why does Comics Studies need Art History (and vice versa)?’ (We might here ask the question ‘Why does Illustration need Art History (and vice versa)?’) this section contained four chapters that examined this ‘hidden’ history of comics scholarship by considering methodological issues such as canons, styles and schools; iconography and cultural history; and the social history of art.

In their books and essays Blanchard (1969), Couperie (1968, 1972) and Gombrich (1940, 1950, 1960, 1963), in addition to referencing canons, styles and schools, employed iconography and cultural history as methodological approaches to examine early comics strips (or proto-comics) and contextualised them using examples taken from the discipline of illustration. For example, when Gombrich analysed the iconography of female personifications in ‘The Cartoonists Armoury’ in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (1963) he considered the ways in which such images travelled across media and time analysing an 18th century cartoon depicting Britannia and an illustration from the cover of *Life* magazine from 1900 representing the Suffragette movement, then contrasted both with representations taken from the classical tradition. Kunzle similarly used iconography and cultural history as methodological approaches in his two volume *History of the Comic Strip* (1973, 1990), but here these approaches were inflected to focus on the social circumstances of production and consumption, thereby demonstrating the struggle within Art History to develop new approaches, in this case what came to be termed the social history of art. Although still focused on the emergence of the comic strip Kunzle’s more recent books use these methodologies to analyse the work of figures such as Doré and Cham who are usually considered as illustrators, focusing on the graphic narratives they produced (2015, 2019).

The methodologies noted above have been contested and transformed over last thirty to forty years so the second section of *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures*, titled Future Directions in Comics Art History, addressed these shifts. These updated methodologies were then applied to examples mainly drawn from British comics while including examples of illustration such as collages, cutaways and magazine covers. The edited collection *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* sought to provoke further exploration of comics from diverse art-historical and methodological perspectives. Although again the focus was on comics, in this case particularly addressing the relationship to fine art practices and histories, many of the contributors also included examples drawn from the field of illustration such as the well-known perceptual trickery of the duck-rabbit image, medieval illustrated manuscripts and 19th century newspaper illustration.

Clearly both books include many examples of works which might easily be included under the umbrella of illustration, but equally importantly for this argument is what happens if we insert Illustration for Comics Studies in this kind of formulation, or rather Illustration Studies. If we currently have any umbrella term for this field’s current interests and concerns it seems to be Illustration Research but perhaps Illustration Studies has a better ring to it and maybe illustration could follow Comics Studies in becoming a fully-fledged academic discipline. Much work has been done to legitimise the field with recent publications such as Susan Doyle, Jaleen Grove, and Whitney Sherman’s monumental *History of Illustration* (2019) and Rachel Gannon and Mireille Fauchon’s practice focused *Illustration Research Methods*, but although histories and methods are acknowledged in their titles there is little reference made to the methodological concerns of Art History. The same is true of the *Journal of Illustration* founded in 2014, which is perhaps understandable given that it wishes to encompass a very broad range of concerns in legitimising the discipline, and although the Aims and Scope of the journal note that it wishes to ‘To investigate the potential for metaphor, iconology and poetics in illustration’ (2023) contributions to the journal are yet to fulfil this particular ambition. Interestingly the keywords associated with the journal, presumably created by the publisher (or perhaps an algorithm!), are ‘Art Practice, Comics, Fine Art, Visual Arts’ (2023) with no mention of illustration or indeed Art History.

From this project we learnt that as part of an interdisciplinary Comics Studies, Art History can also demonstrate the possibilities opened up by a move away from a concern with rigidly defining and policing the borders of the form. Bringing Art History and ~~Comics Studies~~ Illustration Studies back into closer dialogue could similarly generate avenues for further research at the edges and intersections of illustration and other forms of visual art such as postcards, picture stories, stamps, comics, zines, book arts, muralism, tapestry, stained glass, tattoos and body art, toys and video games, all fields that intersect with illustration as a discipline. We would be excited to see what might emerge from future forays down these, and many other, potential avenues.

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Maggie Gray is a Senior Lecturer in Critical & Historical Studies at Kingston University with a specialism in comics, cartooning, and visual narrative. She is author of Alan Moore, Out from the Underground : Cartooning, Performance and Dissent (2017) and sits on the organising committee of the Comics Forum conference and the editorial board of the journal *Studies in Comics*, and is a member of the Comics & Performance Network and an associate member of the UAL Comics Research Hub (CorH).

**Ian Horton Biography**

Ian Horton is Reader in Graphic Communication at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. In 2014, along with Lydia Wysocki (Applied Comics Etc) and John Swogger (archaeological illustrator and comic book artist), he founded the Applied Comics Network. He is a founder member of the Comics Research Hub (CoRH!!) at the University of the Arts London, co-editor of *Contexts of Violence in Comics* (Routledge 2019) and *Representing Acts of Violence in Comics* (Routledge 2019) and is associate editor of the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*.