



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS



ART HISTORY FOR COMICS

Past, Present and Potential Futures

Ian Horton · Maggie Gray

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Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels

Series Editor

Roger Sabin

University of the Arts London

London, UK

This series concerns Comics Studies—with a capital “c” and a capital “s.” It feels good to write it that way. From emerging as a fringe interest within Literature and Media/Cultural Studies departments, to becoming a minor field, to maturing into the fastest growing field in the Humanities, to becoming a nascent *discipline*, the journey has been a hard but spectacular one. Those capital letters have been earned.

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Series Editor Roger Sabin is Professor of Popular Culture at the University of the Arts London, UK. His books include *Adult Comics: An Introduction* and *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, and he is part of the team that put together the Marie Duval Archive. He serves on the boards of key academic journals in the field, reviews graphic novels for international media, and consults on comics-related projects for the BBC, Channel 4, Tate Gallery, The British Museum and The British Library. The ‘Sabin Award’ is given annually at the International Graphic Novels and Comics Conference.

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Why Does Comics Studies Need Art History (and Vice Versa)?

Abstract This introductory chapter examines the current state of Comics Studies and discusses how reintegrating art-historical methods would bring different perspectives to bear on the study of comics, allowing for greater attention to be paid to the visual and material aspects of the medium, in contrast to dominant literary approaches. It presents the overall argument of this book—that by using methodological and theoretical approaches drawn from Art History, such as stylistic analysis, iconography, Cultural History and the social history of art which informed some of the earliest comics scholarship, as well as engaging with the ideological self-criticism Art History has subjected its categories and methods to since, new forms of interpretation are made possible.

Keywords Art History • Comics Studies • Historiography • Methodologies

DISCIPLINARY AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Comics Studies is at once starting to establish itself as an independent discipline and witnessing an intensifying questioning of its methodological and theoretical bases and the dominance of models drawn from literature, narratology, semiotics and Cultural Studies. This makes it a crucial moment at which to evaluate what different disciplinary perspectives offer the study of comics. Some of the foundational texts of Comics Studies of the 1960s and 1970s emerged from Art History, registering the dramatic shifts that discipline itself underwent in this period, as traditional approaches were challenged. Although subsequently the study of comics remained marginal, over the last decade there has been renewed interest in comics among art historians, and art-historical methodologies can more broadly be seen to have informed some recent comics scholarship (whether implicitly or explicitly), particularly that placing greater emphasis on the form's graphic, material and aesthetic dimensions.

In *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time* Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo examine how canons have been, and potentially could be, formed in Comics Studies and stress that such canon formation results from the individual disciplinary concerns of comics scholars. They emphasise the dominance of literary approaches and note the ways in which this replicates the biases of the literary field, stating “we contend that looking at comics through the lens of literature will inevitably produce a distorted picture” (Beaty and Woo 2016, p. 15). It is this distorted perspective this book seeks to challenge (without merely replacing one set of distortions with another).

Over the last decade the re-evaluation of Comics Studies has involved questioning both its disciplinary status and what kind of methods it might employ. In his introduction to Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith’s *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, Henry Jenkins poses the question “Is Comics Studies to be modelled on Art History or Literature, which have tended to embrace exemplar works, often masterpieces, whilst excluding much of what is produced?” (Jenkins 2011, p. 5). Jenkins then argues that comics scholarship would be better placed if it embraced multidisciplinary concerns rather than coalescing into a single discipline. However, this might still involve omissions. Taking Duncan and Smith’s book as an example—of the 21 chapters, each detailing a different research method or theoretical perspective applied to a case study, only 5 directly focus on the visual aspects of comics and only 2 of these draw on sources taken from Art History. In contrast, the majority of these chapters draw on concepts taken from Cultural Studies, Film Studies and Literary Theory, again confirming an absence of art-historical methods and theories within comics scholarship. The follow-up publication *More Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (2019) although embracing a wider range of approaches and taking account of key areas such as Critical Race and Queer Theory has no chapters explicitly devoted to the visual and no mention at all of art-historical approaches. It is such oversights this book seeks to address.

This does not mean these existing approaches are not valuable but rather that this omission means certain ways of reading comics are currently privileged and could fruitfully be brought into play with other ways of seeing that have their roots in Art History. In “Comics Studies, the Anti-Discipline”, Charles Hatfield’s foreword to *The Secret Origins of Comics Studies* he acknowledges the different starting points for the emergence of the “anti-discipline” as he puts it, from fandom to Popular Culture Studies, stressing that it has many potential, and yet no particular, home/s in academia (2017). Hatfield then speculates on the future of Comics Studies noting that:

it cannot have a disciplinary identity that serves to isolate it and shore up its borders, for two reasons: one, because the heterogeneous nature of comics itself means that, in practice, comics study has to be at the intersection of various disciplines (art history, communication, literature, design, and so forth); and, two, because this multidisciplinary nature of comics represents, in principle, a

challenge to the very idea of disciplinarity as the academy is used to practicing it... Inevitably, Comics Studies will bring together various disciplines and methodologies in a workplace that is at least multidisciplinary, and, we hope, truly and deliberately *interdisciplinary*. (2017, pp. xvii–xix)

By bringing Art History back into Hatfield's anti-disciplinary nexus this book also seeks to promote interdisciplinary perspectives but is not shy of highlighting the shortcomings of the existing methodological approaches prevalent in Comics Studies that do not pay enough attention to the visual and material aspects of the object of study. As Hannah Miodrag notes:

The methodologies of art history and fine art criticism, though they can only offer a partial account of the mixed medium, prove to be highly applicable to comics. These disciplines have not, however, had much significant input into what is otherwise a highly variegated multi-disciplinary field... The application of formalist art criticism to comics, however, does have implications for comics theory: namely demonstrating that the practices and methodologies of art criticism are as valuable to the study of comics as the "literary" readings of theme and narrative that have to some extent dominated critical approaches to the form. (2013, p. 198)

This demonstrates the scale as well as the significance of the task. The practices and methodologies of Art History and criticism, while grounded in visual and material analysis of images, objects and spaces, have been and remain heterogeneous, often inconsonant (if not adversarial), and not uniformly formalist. Indeed, formalist approaches and their ideological underpinnings have been sharply contested in Art History, particularly from the 1970s onwards when many of the discipline's fundamental categories, concepts and frameworks, and its wider cultural and ideological role, came under scrutiny. In many ways, the segregation of Art History and Comics Studies has led to neither benefiting from the developing approaches, insights and critical debates of the other, and foreclosed the way their "metadiscursive reflections" (Steirer 2011) might inform one another.

Although the methodological approaches of art historians such as Pierre Couperie, Gérard Blanchard, Ernst Gombrich and David Kunzle formed a significant strand in the origins of Comics Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, this was a short-lived phenomenon. Gombrich and Kunzle continued to publish books and articles about caricature, cartoons and comics into the 1990s and beyond, but on the whole art historians and critics avoided the subject of comics or approached the work of cartoonists under different categorical frameworks (printmaking, drawing, illustration).

There have been exceptions. David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) certainly built on Gombrich's ideas and explored the relationship between comics and Art History in some depth from a philosophy of art perspective. Adam Gopnik, then art critic at *The New Yorker*, provided extensive chapters on caricature and comics for the catalogue accompanying the (widely panned)

1990–1991 Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*. These directly examined the stylistic devices used in comics in comparison with avant-garde fine art practices, and considered issues of appropriation and citation, while admitting only George Herriman and Robert Crumb as canonical modernist artists (Varnedoe and Gopnik 1990, pp. 101–229).

Yet Carrier and Gopnik were outliers in bringing art-historical approaches to bear on the study of comics. As Miodrag has also observed, remaining largely focused on high art has been to the detriment of Art History as a discipline, as Cultural Theory, Film Studies and Visual Studies have taken more of a lead in developing theories that can account for the visual and material aspects of comics and popular culture more generally (2013, p. 206).¹

A prominent exception to this lacuna is work by art historians from the 1960s onwards that considers Pop Art, and in particular Roy Lichtenstein's, appropriation of comic book imagery. Although not an art historian himself, Bart Beaty's *Comics versus Art* provides a detailed account of the tensions between the position of many comics fans and scholars who see Lichtenstein's work as uncredited appropriation and art-historical accounts that focus more positively on the transformative aspects of the work (2012, pp. 51–69). Beaty contests Gopnik's assertion that Lichtenstein's heightening of certain effects results in painting that "looks more like a comic than the comics" (1990, p. 203) and critiques the work of other art historians Albert Boime (1968) and Michael Lobel (2002) for similarly "marginalising the cultural value of comics producers such as Jack Kirby and Irv Novick" (2012, p. 62).

More recently, the comics scholars Hugo Frey and Jan Baetens (2019) published "Comics Culture and Roy Lichtenstein Revisited: Analysing a Forgotten 'Feedback Loop'" in *Art History*, the journal of the UK-based Association for Art History. This article develops a more balanced account noting the reciprocal feedback loop between comics and Pop Art and back again, and it is significant that we now find comics scholars publishing in Art History journals. Interestingly, the reverse is also the case, with Frey and Baetens supporting their analysis of Lichtenstein by drawing on art historian Gavin Parkinson's article "Pogo, Pop and Politics: Robert Benayoun on Comics and Roy Lichtenstein", published in the Comics Studies journal *European Comic Art* in 2016. Parkinson has in recent years written extensively on the relationship between comics and Surrealist art practices but remains an isolated voice within Art History for this kind of sustained engagement with comics (2015; 2018).

One of the most significant publications for the genesis of this book was "Writing Comics into Art History and Art History into Comics Research", a special issue of the Swedish journal *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* (*Journal of Art History*) edited by Ylva Sommerland and Margareta Wallin Wictorin and published in 2017. The editorial boldly states that:

more tools are needed to describe and analyse the images, what is shown inside the panels. Aspects such as material, technique, colour, form, line/perspective,

degree of abstraction, balance, order, movement, proportions, patterns, rhythm, that is, the basic elements of art-historical formal analyses, are needed, as well as knowledge about how images have been constructed and read in different historical and contemporary contexts. (2017, p. 2)

This statement encapsulates several of the aims of this book and it was reassuring to know that others shared the view that Comics Studies can make productive use of the interpretive methods and methodologies of Art History. The four individual articles in this special issue used a wide range of examples from painting to artists' books, and from manga to the work of Chris Ware, to show the relationships between the world of comics and the art world. These articles employ methods drawn directly from Art History and Comics Studies but also touch on other disciplines, such as the history of design and print, to consider the material aspects of comics production (Berndt 2017; Pinto dos Santos 2017; Sundberg 2017; Von Rosen 2017).

This special issue was important in other ways—it was soon realised in the gestation of this project that one book alone, reliant as it would be on our own backgrounds, perspectives and predilections, would not do the subject justice, so a companion volume, the edited collection *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* has also been developed. This brings together comics scholars from art-historical backgrounds, art historians and Visual Studies scholars, comics scholars trained in other disciplines, librarians, curators and practice-based researchers, to explore what Art History offers the study of comics. Contributions examine a variety of art-historical methodologies, from some of the discipline's earliest approaches (such as Artist's Biography and Connoisseurship), to modern preoccupations with perception, memory and meaning, through strands that have radicalised the field since the 1970s (such as Feminist and Queer approaches) to more contemporary developments (like Visual Culture Studies and forms of Practice as Research). Drawing from an array of recent and ongoing research projects, each contributor applies one or more of these art-historical approaches to specific examples of comics across diverse formats, genres, historical periods and cultural traditions, which then serve as case studies for how Art History can inform the critical analysis of comics. The edited collection then shares the same aims and objectives as this volume in considering alternative modes of analysis for comics scholarship (as well as conversely what comics theory offers Art History) but is less concerned with the origins of art-historical approaches within Comics Studies which are explored in the first part of this book.

PART I: THE HISTORY OF ART HISTORY AND COMICS STUDIES

This part contains four chapters which re-examine the 'hidden' history of comics scholarship from the 1960s onwards by art historians such as Blanchard and Couperie in France and Gombrich and Kunzle in Britain and America. Their

scholarship was informed both by traditions of stylistic analysis and iconography, and emerging fields of Cultural History and the social history of art.

The global development of Comics Studies from the 1960s onwards took divergent paths in different regions many of which did not reference art-historical models. For example, in Germany Wolfgang Fuchs and Reinhold Reitberger barely acknowledged the antecedents of comics before the twentieth century and analysed the field using ideas drawn from Media and Communication Studies. The Brazilian Alvaro de Moya and the Swede Sture Hegerfors were both cartoonists who approached the subject from a practitioner rather than an art historian perspective (Lent 2010). Accounts of the emergence of Comics Studies as a serious academic discipline in France tend to stress the importance of structuralist semiotic methodologies as exemplified by the work of scholars such as Francis Lacassin, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle and Thierry Groensteen (Miller and Beaty 2014, pp. 10–12). By contrast in Britain an approach emerging out of, and drawing on, Cultural Studies, as exemplified by the work of Martin Barker, is often cited as the most significant during this period (Hague 2016; Gibson 2012). By mapping the historical significance of Art History to the development of Comics Studies, with a focus on influential art-historical approaches to the form developed by French and English-language scholars from the 1960s to the 1990s, an alternative account of the origins of the discipline emerges.

The first of these chapters “[Establishing Canons, Styles and Schools at the Dawn of Comics Studies](#)” examines how Couperie, Maurice Horn and Claude Moliterni, as members of 1960s’ French comics fan organisations, drew on art-historical categories and concepts—particularly of historical styles and schools—to establish a comics canon. The next chapter “[Iconography and Cultural History in Comics Studies](#)” identifies the role of iconographic analysis within the early comics scholarship of Couperie, and particularly Blanchard, while also examining its importance in Gombrich’s studies of comics, cartoons and caricature which underpinned his development of a critical approach to Cultural History. The following chapter “[Art History Turned Upside Down: David Kunzle and the Social History of Art](#)” attends to Kunzle’s methodology, which diverged from that of Gombrich, his PhD supervisor, turning to focus increasingly on social relations of production and reception and questions of ideology and class, as part of the emergence of a New Left social history of art in the 1970s. Concluding this part, the chapter “[Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction](#)” considers various amalgams of formalism, modernism and abstraction within Comics Studies, from Moliterni’s early formalist approach, through connections made between comics and avant-garde modern art by Scott McCloud and David Beronä in the 1990s and 2000s, to more recent work on abstract comics drawing on modernist formalist criticism.

Collectively the chapters in this part reference enduring themes and debates, notably over the origins and definition of comics, their relation to conditions and technologies of production, and the medium’s relationship to fine art, highlighting the work of key figures and identifying the distinctive art-historical

frameworks they applied. As such they trace the historical development of comics scholarship and Art History's impact upon it in line with wider shifts within Art History as a discipline, as traditional approaches became increasingly contested.

PART II: POSSIBILITIES FOR COMICS ART HISTORY NOW

After outlining the specifically art-historical roots of Comics Studies, our second part examines how Art History has itself reflected on these methodological approaches in the intervening 30–50 years of quite intense disciplinary self-scrutiny, and considers how these art-historical methodologies, categories and schools of thought might be productively deployed in the present. In doing so, it not only asks what Art History can provide for today's comics scholars, but also what the study of comics might offer Art History, particularly in considering sequence and serialisation, mass cultural production, and the intersections of the histories of comics and art beyond Pop.

This part proposes the benefits of engaging art-historical approaches, both traditional and more contemporary, in Comics Studies, via a series of provocative case studies. Different methods are applied to examples of British and North American comics in a range of formats, such as newspaper strips, comic books, comics magazines and one-shot paperbacks, and across diverse genres, including science-fiction, superhero, adventure, non-fiction and slice-of-life narratives, as well as those that splice and hybridise genres. The first of these chapters “[Challenging Canons and the Challenge of Style: Visualising the Baroque Storyworld of Judge Dredd's ‘The Cursed Earth’](#)” further interrogates how notions of style and schools have underpinned efforts to establish a comics canon, and turns to the art-historical categorisations of Heinrich Wölfflin to better account for stylistic similarities and differences in an analysis of the Judge Dredd storyline ‘The Cursed Earth’ from British weekly anthology comic book *2000AD*. The chapter “[Iconography for Comics Studies Reconsidered: Interpreting Visual Transformations in Jack Kirby's *The Mighty Thor*](#)” returns to iconography, and the related but distinct method of iconology, developed in particular by Erwin Panofsky, examining how they might offer an alternative way to approach symbolism in comics than more widespread semiotic analyses—as demonstrated by an investigation of transformations from Thor to his alter ego Don Blake (and vice versa) in Jack Kirby's work. In the chapter “[Cultural History for Comics Studies: Reinterpreting the *Eagle* and Dan Dare Pilot of the Future](#)” Gombrich's approach to Cultural History is reconsidered paying attention to critiques of his perspective and the views of other cultural historians before examining Cultural Studies as a significant strand of comics scholarship. A Cultural History approach is then used to examine the British comic book the *Eagle* and its lead character Dan Dare placing it within the wider visual culture of the period. The chapter “[A Social History of Comics Art: Looking at Writers and Readers' *Capitalism for Beginners*](#)” looks to the work of Marxist art historians beyond Kunzle to sketch what form a social history of comics might take, analysing the “documentary

comic books” produced by the Writers and Readers cooperative, specifically *Capitalism for Beginners*. Determinations of the ‘avant-garde’ in Comics Studies are nuanced in the chapter “[Re-framing the Avant-Garde: Different Ways of Seeing Escape](#)” by exploring contrasting art-historical definitions of the term—applying different ways of framing the avant-garde to the example of 1980s’ British publisher Escape. Finally, the chapter “[Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore’s I Can Hear the Grass Grow](#)” returns to the relationship between comics and modern art and the use in Comics Studies of formalist methods derived from modernist criticism, highlighting the limitations of formalism and arguing for a broader understanding of modernism via a reading of a strip by Alan Moore for music-themed UK comics magazine *Heartbreak Hotel*.

These chapters can be considered incitements to action, aiming to provide models for the further application of art-historical frameworks to the study of comics, and to that end follow a similar template. Each starts by introducing and contextualising the specific art-historical methodology concerned and providing key references charting how these approaches have been re-evaluated by art historians. The chosen methodology is then applied to the specific case study, and chapters conclude by proposing the benefits and challenges of each approach for Comics Studies.

Both the specific corpora we have used and the art-historical frameworks we have applied reflect our areas of specialism and the positions we take as both art historians and comics scholars. These overlap strongly but also diverge—Ian’s research interests lie mainly in British and American mainstream comics in the second half of the twentieth century, whereas Maggie is more interested in British underground, alternative, local and small-press publishing from the 1960s to the present. Ian looks to various formalist traditions of Art History, whereas Maggie positions herself in the tradition of Marxist Art History. This has shaped our approach to writing—Ian was responsible for chapters “[Establishing Canons, Styles and Schools at the Dawn of Comics Studies](#)”, “[Iconography and Cultural History in Comics Studies](#)”, “[Challenging Canons and the Challenge of Style: Visualising the Baroque Storyworld of Judge Dredd’s ‘The Cursed Earth’](#)”, “[Iconography for Comics Studies Reconsidered: Interpreting Visual Transformations in Jack Kirby’s *The Mighty Thor*](#)” and “[Cultural History for Comics Studies: Reinterpreting the *Eagle* and Dan Dare Pilot of the Future](#)”, and Maggie was responsible for chapters “[Art History Turned Upside Down: David Kunzle and the Social History of Art](#)”, “[Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction](#)”, “[A Social History of Comics Art: Looking at Writers and Readers’ *Capitalism for Beginners*](#)”, “[Re-framing the Avant-Garde: Different Ways of Seeing Escape](#)” and “[Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore’s I Can Hear the Grass Grow](#)”. Thus the reader will find many commonalities but also differences in perspective, approach and voice across and between chapters—we do not see this as a weakness but a strength, making apparent the heterogeneity and *intra-disciplinary* differences of both Comics Studies and Art History.

Many of our case studies (particularly British) are not well covered in existing scholarship, and even the examples included that have received greater critical attention are usually looked at more from fan studies and media history perspectives than for their visual and material dimensions. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that they represent a historically and culturally narrow range of comics, and our art-historical reference points are similarly Eurocentric. There is clear scope to apply a wider range of art-historical approaches to a far wider range of comics, as demonstrated in the companion volume *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*—with potential for much further development.

It is hoped that both volumes stimulate debate within Comics Studies about the future of the discipline and the value of art-historical methodologies for developing new kinds of interpretations. What happens when we take these approaches from the past and adapt them for use in the present—what do they offer that other methodologies do not? How might they make us see comics differently and contribute to the rigorous questioning of the frameworks, categories and assumptions underlying Comics Studies going forward?

NOTE

1. For more detail on Visual Studies see Roan (2022) in the companion volume to this book *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*.

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PART I

The History of Art History and Comics
Studies



Establishing Canons, Styles and Schools at the Dawn of Comics Studies

Abstract This chapter addresses the work of Pierre Couperie, Maurice Horn and Claude Moliterni who, as members of the Club des Bandes Dessinées (CBD) and then the Société civile d'études et de recherches des littératures dessinées (SOCERLID) in the 1960s, advocated the academic study of comics as an artistic medium that could be directly linked to both historical art traditions and contemporary art practices. In the exhibition catalogue published in 1967 to accompany the now legendary exhibition of comic art at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, Couperie, Horn and Moliterni applied traditional art-historical methods to comics, assembling a litany of significant artists and schools, identifying key formal features of canonical works, and applying established categories of historical stylistic cycles.

Keywords Canons • Newspaper strip • Styles • Schools

CREATING CLASSICAL CANONS

If a body of work is considered canonical it is generally agreed to represent the outstanding examples of a genre or medium, most notably in art and literature, against which existing and new works can be judged (Ferne 1995, p. 329). The canon in any field is contentious and continually contested; comic fans have been central to the debates surrounding the canon since the 1950s when in America the first fanzines dedicated to EC comics appeared, before a shift in the 1960s saw an explosion of fanzines primarily concerned with the superhero genre emerge out of science fiction fandom (Schelly 2010, pp. 3–13). The canon, or at least what was considered canonical by American comic fans during this period, was clearly unstable and shifted over time, what fans considered to be canonical in other comic cultures during this period was very different

but equally contested and subject to change. This chapter examines the ways in which the canon was contested in organised comics fandom in France during the 1960s and how art-historical concepts of style, and consequently schools, were used to determine the canonical status of certain comics and promote comics as cultural objects worth of study.

In France in 1962 a group of nearly 300 fans formed the Club des Bandes Dessinées (CBD). Somewhat surprisingly the club mainly focused on what they considered to be the canonical “Golden Age” of American newspaper strips of the early twentieth century rather than French and Belgian bandes dessinées (Miller 2007, p. 23). The journalist, publisher and scriptwriter Francis Lacassin, who went on to deliver a course on bandes dessinées at the Sorbonne in 1971 and is credited with coining and popularising the term the Ninth Art for bandes dessinées, was a driving force behind the CBD becoming President on its formation (Miller 2008, pp. 201–2). Lacassin also wrote the majority of the editorials for *Giff-Wiff*, which began life as the CBD newsletter but soon became a more substantial publication that shared many of the features of the fanzines emerging in America, with articles on significant American newspaper strips and lists of back issues of comics for exchange with other collectors.¹ Other significant founder members of the CBD were the New Wave film director Alain Resnais who became Vice-President, Jean-Claude Forest the creator of *Barbarella* who was designated as the Artistic Director of *Giff-Wiff*, and Pierre Couperie who was listed as the club’s Archivist, an activity which included conducting research into the sociological background of bandes dessinées.²

The CBD was formed with an emphasis on the study of American newspaper strips from the “Golden Age” of the 1930s, a concept redolent of canonisation and classical if not art-historical references. Initial discussions surrounding the formation of the CBD took place in the science fiction magazine *Fiction*; one suggested aim for any future club was the reprinting of favourite strips from this “Golden Age”, and to this end the magazine included a questionnaire for recommendations (Grove 2010, pp. 234–5). The results of the questionnaire were compiled by Couperie and the list published in *Giff-Wiff* in December 1962. Although the plan of reprinting these strips was not realised by the CBD, the list highlights the interests of its members and the article concluded by promising that *Giff-Wiff* would give attention to these strips in future issues.³

This list was dominated by American newspaper strips reprinted in French magazines such as *Hop-Là*, *Le Journal de Micky* and *Robinson* in the 1930s and 1940s. In first place was *Guy l’Éclair* [*Flash Gordon*] by Alex Raymond, followed by *Luc Bradefer* [*Brick Bradford*] by Clarence Gray and William Ritt, and in third place *Mandrake* [*Mandrake the Magician*] by Phil Davis and Lee Falk, all American reprints. In fourth place was the homegrown strip *Futuropolis* published in the magazine *Junior* and created by Pellos (René Pellarin) in the late 1930s. Coming fifth was *Diane Detective* a reprint of the American Frank Godwin’s strip *Connie* which also went by the title of *Cora* depending on which French magazine was reprinting it. Sixth was *Tarzan* which was

specifically designated as Burne Hogarth's version rather than the Hal Foster original, with Hogarth's strip *Drago* also appearing lower in the list. In seventh place was *Korgan le Magicien de la Vallée Morte* [*Virus, il mago della Foresta Morta*] originally published in the Italian children's magazine *L'Audace* and created by Walter Molino and Federico Pedrocchi in 1939. The next four were all humour strips by E. C. Segar starring his character Popeye but these were anomalous with the rest of the list which was dominated by adventure strips such as Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* and Alex Raymond's *Jungle Jim* and *Secret Agent X-9*. Overall, this list, consisting mainly of realistic adventure strips with the occasional humorous cartoon strip, would form the core corpus of canonical texts celebrated in *Giff-Wiff* during the 1960s.

The exclusiveness of this canon was the prime cause of a schism in the CBD in 1964 with some members leaving to form the rival group La Société Civile d'Études et de Recherches des Littératures Dessinées (SOCERLID) as they wanted to also include the study of contemporary bandes dessinées. The CBD itself had recently been renamed the Centre d'études des littératures d'expression graphique (CELEG) with a view to conferring more legitimacy on the study of comics and SOCERLID must have had the same intention, with both names emphasising the drawn and graphic nature of comics as a distinct form of literature (Grove 2010, p. 236; Miller 2007, p. 23).⁴

Key members of this splinter group were Couperie, Proto Destefanis, Édouard François, Maurice Horn and Claude Moliterni who founded SOCERLID in a café on the Left Bank in Paris in November 1964 (Horn 1972, p. 10). As with the CBD, the members of SOCERLID came from diverse backgrounds, François was a French teacher and Destefanis worked in the construction industry, Horn and Moliterni had collaborated on writing detective novels and a successful radio play in the 1950s before Horn relocated to America and Moliterni joined the publisher Hachette as a reference librarian (Sausverd 2020, p. 104). Couperie was head of historical research at the prestigious l'Ecole des Hautes Études Historiques in Paris and had studied Art History at the Sorbonne and the Institut d'Art, Paris where he wrote his dissertation on iconography and the representation of landscape in pre-Hellenic and Greek art (Herdig and Pascal 1972, p. 120; Sausverd 2020, p. 108). Couperie was the only member of this group who trained as an art historian but his influence on Horn and Moliterni can be seen in their collaborations and subsequent writing.

In 1966 SOCERLID began publishing its own magazine *Phénix* with Moliterni as Editor-in-Chief, and Couperie, Destefanis, and François on the Editorial Board with, Horn as the USA Correspondent. All five were regular contributors to *Phénix* and an overview of the early issues shows that they were realising their aim to be more inclusive and address both European and contemporary comics as well as those from the American "Golden Age". The first issue did have an extensive overview of Milton Caniff's newspaper strips and an article promoting an exhibition of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland*,

but Horn's lead article "70 années de bandes dessinées" extended the previous canon into the 1960s by including strips such as Stan Drake and Elliot Caplin's *The Heart of Juliet Jones*, the British strip *Modesty Blaise* by Jim Holdaway and Peter O'Donnell, as well as Forest's French strip *Barbarella*. The work of French creators was particularly foregrounded, with an article on Alain Saint-Ogan creator of *Zig et Puce* in the 1920s and an article focused on *Scarlett Dream* by Robert Gigi and Moliterni which first appeared in *V Magazine* in 1965.

This expansion of the canon continued and by its eighth issue, *Phénix* had only one article focused on an American strip, the contemporaneous *Wizard of ID* by Brant Parker and Johnny Hart. The rest of the articles focused on work by French artists such as Jacques Martin, whose Roman adventure story *Alix* first appeared in *Tintin* magazine in the late 1940s, and Gotlib (Marcel Gottlieb) a contemporary cartoonist producing humour strips for magazines such as *Pilote* who went on to create the first adult comics in France. This issue also featured the work of Pellos whose *Futuropolis* had been the highest placing French strip in the list of works CBD members had wanted to see republished. Interestingly this issue of *Phénix* additionally made good on the promise of reprinting important strips from the past by including Molino and Pedrocchi's *Korgan*, *Le mystère du Yacht Noir* [*Virus*, *Il Mistero dello Yacht Nero*] in its entirety.

Through the articles in *Giff-Wiff* and *Phénix* the CBD and SOCERLID canonised certain works, with the aim of increasing the status of comics and providing a critical evaluation of their worth. This canonisation initially focused on a nostalgic appreciation of American strips from the 1930s but increasingly they embraced the study of more contemporary comics.

DEFINING STYLES AND SCHOOLS

To understand the criteria behind this process of canonisation it is necessary to consider the ways in which Couperie, Horn and Moliterni used the art-historical concepts of style and schools in their analysis of comics. In this respect they follow the art-historical traditions developed by figures like Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that had roots in the earlier Art History of Giorgio Vasari and Johann Joachim Winckelmann.⁵ The two concepts are closely linked as national or regional schools, such as Italian and British or Florentine or Sieneese, are often determined by noting nothing more than the visual style of the work if no documentary evidence is available. More straightforwardly work produced in an artist's studio by assistants might be described as belonging to the school of that artist rather than by their own hand (Murray and Murray 1989, p. 383).

Moliterni's foreword to issue 8 of *Phénix*, published at the end of 1968, summarises the activities of SOCERLID over the previous four years, stressing the success of the magazine itself and the various exhibitions they had curated. For Moliterni the most significant of these was the 1967 exhibition *Bande*

Dessinée et Figuration Narrative, held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, a wing of the Palais du Louvre, and the accompanying catalogue of the same name.⁶ The catalogue did not describe the exhibition itself but was a more ambitious book attempting to set out the different ways in which comics could be studied, and it has subsequently been described by Thierry Groensteen as a foundational text for Comics Studies (2007, p. 23).

The catalogue was a collaborative affair that demonstrates the ideas of the members of SOCERLID and the art-historical models they applied to the analysis of comics. The first six chapters provided a chronological history of comics, starting with proto-comics and associated printing technologies then concluding with a chapter on what is described as the Renaissance of the American comic strip in the 1950s and international developments during the 1960s. The final six chapters examined thematic issues such as production, distribution, audiences, world building, narrative technique and aesthetics. The authorship of the catalogue is a complex issue, with Couperie the driving force behind the conception and organisation of the whole, writing four of the thematic and the first of the historical chapters. Couperie provided the plan for all of the historical chapters with Horn, Destefanis and François brought in to respectively contribute material on American, Italian and French comics and Couperie covering the British and German examples (Sausverd 2020, pp. 109–12).

Couperie's art-historical approach is evident throughout the catalogue with the work of comic artists being directly compared with historical and contemporary art styles and movements. The comics of Lyonel Feininger, who went on to become a painter and join the Bauhaus, are described as demonstrating elements of the Cubist and Expressionist movements, and Alain Saint-Ogan's early strips are noted as being directly influenced by Cubism (Couperie 1968, pp. 27, 55). Winsor McCay's strips are stylistically linked to Art Nouveau as well as "belonging within the great intellectual and esthetic current leading from Brueghel to the Surrealists" (p. 29). Similarly, George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* is seen as borrowing from the methods of Surrealism and linked to the absurdist and experimental work of Milt Gross and Rube Goldberg, thereby forming a distinct school within humour-based American cartooning during the early twentieth century (pp. 35–9).

Humour comics receive some attention in the history section of the catalogue but the development of adventure strips and the schools that emerged within this genre are examined in more detail, clearly highlighting the preference for more realistic comic art. The American cartoonist Charles Kahles is credited with creating the first adventure strips in the first decade of the twentieth century, with his *Sandy Highflyer* and *Hairbreadth Harry* being remarkable for "moving toward greater realism in the suggestion of movement" and "being the first to introduce suspense into the comic strip" (Couperie 1968, p. 23). The fourth chapter of the catalogue focused on the "definitive establishment of the adventure strips" starting with Hal Foster's *Tarzan* in 1929 which "ultimately achieved a graphic classicism that combined elegance with grandeur" (p. 57). In contrast, when Burne Hogarth took over *Tarzan* in

1936 he imbued it with “his entire artistic culture, his admiration of Michelangelo and the great baroque artists, his affinities for German expressionism, his knowledge of Far Eastern art” (p. 57).

Such connections are analysed in more depth in Couperie’s chapter “Esthetics and Signification” in the thematic section of the catalogue. Although the title would suggest the use of semiotic approaches in fact this employs a more traditional art-historical form of analysis where early comics are linked to contemporaneous illustration and poster arts, with McCay again credited with developing a style linked to Art Nouveau in terms of line and use of colour but being atypical and not founding any related “school”. For Couperie the main stylistic force of the 1930s had been the “appearance of classical realism - or idealism - in the comic strip” (1968, p. 205), initiated by Foster, Hogarth and Raymond, and having a significant impact on the adventure genre in subsequent years. Couperie additionally highlights the fine line work and classical compositional devices such as spirals, pyramids and crosses they applied to give the strips balance, as well as Raymond’s use of live models and photographic sources. Couperie then considered the emergence of a new school in the late 1930s, led by Milton Caniff, Alfred Andriola and Frank Robbins, who, using the brush rather than the pen, created work with extreme contrasts of black and white emulating the chiaroscuro of Baroque painters such as Caravaggio. Significantly, Alex Raymond abandoned his earlier classical realism and adopted this new style himself in the strip *Rip Kirby* in the 1940s, with John Prentice continuing this style upon Raymond’s death in 1956, and this became an important aspect of the American comic strip in this period in the hands of artists such as Fred Harman and Leonard Starr (pp. 213–24).

In an earlier chapter titled “Production and Distribution” Couperie examined the conditions under which the schools noted above emerged. Firstly, he suggests that syndicates would respond to successful strips by rival syndicates by commissioning imitations, *Flash Gordon* as a copy of *Buck Rogers* being a prime example; this resulted in the styles of the most popular strips being widely emulated. Secondly, it is noted that artists were unable to meet the demanding schedule of producing six daily strips and a full colour Sunday page every week on their own so they would have at least one assistant, and sometimes a workshop of artists, to support them. Sometimes assistants would take over the strip once the original creator died, retired or moved to another syndicate, and assistants might leave to create their own strips working in imitation of their former employers (Couperie 1968, pp. 129, 133).

In concluding the chapter on aesthetics Couperie suggests that:

We may present the comic strip as a traditional (because a popular) art, the equivalent of Quattrocento Florentine workshops that turned out works in accordance with Trecento rules for an intellectually retarded clientele. Or we may entertain the opposite hypothesis: the comic strip has hundreds of millions of readers, is gaining in importance, and has created its own style, based on those styles that have influenced it. (Couperie 1968, p. 227)

Clearly supporting the second of these options, he goes on to stress the centrality of classical figuration to the stylistic development of comics, whether through the artists of the Italian Renaissance themselves or the intercessors of illustration and caricature, before emphasising the importance of the narrative arts of the Medieval period as being closer to the form of sequential narrative art of the comic strip. Couperie developed this argument further in two articles in a special issue of the design magazine *Graphis* to which Moliterni also contributed. In these articles Couperie looked at the problematic issue of finding antecedents of the comic strip in earlier narrative art forms and the difficulties in defining what constitutes a comic. In addition, he extended his previous arguments about the relationship between comics and artistic styles by acknowledging the importance of Renaissance sources, then focused on links to Art Nouveau and Art Deco which he felt lasted much longer in the comics than other fields, before considering the relationship of comics to Expressionism, Pop Art, Op Art and Psychedelia (Couperie 1972a; 1972b).

Of course, there are issues with the canon developed by Couperie and the other members of SOCERLID, with newspaper comic strips seen as the apogee. Although they expanded their canon to include contemporary comics there were still notable exclusions with American superhero comic books, for example, barely mentioned. Art-historical models and methods were used to both establish a canon and to determine stylistic trends and schools. Although Couperie started to expand these methods to account for other stylistic modes besides classical figuration this was underdeveloped and only hints at the potential of adopting such art-historical approaches in Comics Studies.

NOTES

1. For information on *Giff-Wiff* and other French fanzines/comics magazines of the period such as *Phénix* we have relied on the full scans available at Jean-Paul Gabilliet's MEDIABD project <http://mediabd.citebd.org/>
2. See list of the Committee of the CBD in *Giff-Wiff* 1 July 1962, p. 3. In his role as Archivist Couperie wrote an article examining the social composition of the CBD demonstrating the diversity of its membership in *Giff Wiff* 3/4 December 1962, pp. 9–13.
3. *Giff-Wiff* 3/4 December 1962, pp. 7–8.
4. Miller (2007, p. 23) states that the schism occurred in 1966 but this is incorrect as a notice published in *Giff-Wiff* 11 stated that an extraordinary meeting of the CBD was to take place on 5th November 1964 to address an attempt to seize control of the society by some members of the committee, presumably those who went on to form SOCERLID.
5. See the chapter “Challenging Canons and the Challenge of Style: Visualising the Baroque Storyworld of Judge Dredd’s “The Cursed Earth”” for more details on notions of style and schools in Art History particularly in relation to Heinrich Wölfflin’s work.
6. The most detailed and incisive accounts of this exhibition are provided by Sausverd (2020) and Munson (2016).

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Iconography and Cultural History in Comics Studies

Abstract This chapter examines the use of iconography as a mode of analysis, as developed and refined by art historians such as Erwin Panofsky, by early Comics Studies scholars in the mid-twentieth century. Iconography can be defined as the identification and classification of subjects, motifs and symbols, and interpretation of their meaning through location within wider historical contexts. In France this approach was employed by Pierre Couperie in his analysis of the pre-history of comics and by Gérard Blanchard in *La Bande Dessinée: Histoire des Histoires en images de la préhistoire à nos jours* [*La Bande Dessinée: The Story of Stories in Pictures from Prehistory to Today*] from 1969, which makes comparisons between early developments in the comic book and medieval antecedents.

Iconography was a crucial component of the art-historical methods employed by Ernst Gombrich in his studies of caricature, cartoons and most notably the comic books of Rodolphe Töpffer. The series of books and articles he produced from the 1950s to the 1990s followed on from his 1938 collaboration with Ernst Kris examining the principles of caricature from a psychological perspective. Gombrich also developed a critical approach to the notion of Cultural History that suggested all visual materials from low to high contributed to the visual culture of a period. This elevation of caricature, cartoons and comic books by such a renowned art historian can be seen as the beginnings of taking the medium seriously within academic discourse.

Keywords Caricature • Cartoons • Cultural History • Iconography

ICONOGRAPHY AS METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

Iconography is an art-historical methodology that seeks to determine the meaning of images—from the specific, such as the symbols or attributes that represent a particular saint or mythological figure, to the more general, such as the meaning of a whole compositional scheme. For the nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl iconography was an important methodological tool but not a central construct in the edifice of Art History; in contrast the twentieth-century art historian Erwin Panofsky saw it as both a key instrument and fundamental theoretical concern for the discipline. The central feature of an iconographic approach is to compare the image with other texts to establish the potential meaning of its content; the text could be a passage from a sacred text like the bible if examining a religious work, a document outlining the requirements for a commission or even another contemporaneous artwork (Ferne 1995, pp. 116–26, 181–95, 345). As Paul Wood has noted in his discussion of iconographic interpretations of Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melencolia* this kind of approach “can open out the investigation to social, political and intellectual factors on which the artist draws, allowing its significance at the time to be revealed” (1999, p. 151).

By the 1960s iconography was deeply imbedded within Art History as a discipline so it is not surprising to find it being applied when it came to the study of comics at this time. It was an important component of the methodologies employed by Pierre Couperie, Gérard Blanchard and Ernst Gombrich, informing many of the arguments they developed regarding the emergence of comics as a medium. As noted in the [previous chapter](#), Couperie had an interest in the pre-history of comics and had turned his attention to the academic study of the medium because it “constituted the most prodigious iconographical field ever created by any civilization” (Sausverd 2020, p. 107). In a discussion of the antecedents of the comic strip and the problem of defining the medium, which includes examples such as a Phoenician silver plate, illustrated Medieval manuscripts and the obligatory Bayeux Tapestry, Couperie notes that for most examples of figurative narrative art the images illustrate a text that the spectator already knows thereby discounting them as precursors of the comic strip. This observation highlights a key feature of iconographical methodologies by considering the relationship between the image and some pre-existing textual source to be a key aspect of interpretation (1972).

Blanchard's book *La Bande Dessinée: Histoire des Histoires en images de la préhistoire à nos jours* [*La Bande Dessinée: The Story of Stories in Pictures from Prehistory to Today*], first published in 1969, is also clearly informed by iconography.¹ The book has been described by Thierry Groensteen as both a pioneering French language study of the history of comics and remarkable given that Blanchard only published this book and three related articles on comics, with his main academic interest being graphic design and typography (Blanchard 1969b; 1973; 1985; Groensteen 2017, pp. 11–16).

Blanchard's book has a rather unusual structure not being divided into chapters but instead into five rather uneven sub-sections, most pages additionally having individual descriptive headers which act to further sub-divide the topics explored. The final four sections of the book reveal the technological focus of Blanchard's overall thesis emphasising the impact that printing, cinema and television had on the images circulating in society and therefore on the kinds of comics work being produced. The book is extensively referenced with the sections on twentieth-century comics using the latest research including many articles published in *Giff-Wiff* and *Phénix* (Blanchard 1969a, pp. 180–3, 196, 218–26, 241, 274–6) and Couperie's catalogue for the 1967 exhibition *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative* (pp. 170, 178, 194).

The two short opening sections of his book reveal Blanchard's interest in tracing the antecedents of modern comics and the use of iconography in studying such works. The first section reveals the importance Blanchard places on the development of symbolic motifs and signs across a range of cultures including Palaeolithic paintings, Egyptian hieroglyphs and Classical Greek vases, additionally revealing his interests in typography, the origins of written language and text and image relationships.² The second section focuses on a period when

Christianity begins to assert its faith through words and a great number of images. Medieval iconography endures well beyond the invention of printing by Gutenberg which at first allows manuscripts to be preserved. (1969a, p. 6)³

Blanchard examines examples of Medieval sculpture and illuminated manuscripts before tracing the ways in which the symbols and devices used in these works survived in popular print in subsequent centuries, highlighting his iconographical approach to the subject. These sections are quite short with Blanchard commenting that "Concerning iconography, we have only kept a few essential and representative documents from Greece, Byzantium and the Middle Ages" (1969a, p. 7). In analysing these works Blanchard used extensive art-historical sources employing iconographic methods to support his analysis including Panofsky's studies of Gothic architecture and Scholasticism (1969a, p. 26).

Gombrich was regarded as the leading art historian of his generation; he was seen in English-speaking circles as traditionalist and conservative but in Europe as innovative in the breadth of material examined and the methods employed (Ferne 1995, pp. 223–4). Gombrich consistently employed iconography across his extensive fields of research; he published substantial monographs in Renaissance studies as well as collected volumes of essays, often based on lectures given in his role as director of the Warburg Institute, many of which reference caricature, cartoons and occasionally comics.⁴ His longstanding interest in caricature, cartoons and comics started with the 1938 article "The Principles of Caricature" written with Austrian art historian Ernst Kris and these ideas informed much of his subsequent work particularly in terms of the relationship between art and psychology. An interest in the formal and functional properties

of comics was evident throughout his career as exemplified by his essay "Pictorial Instructions" from 1990 which examined the ways in which sequential images can be used to convey instructional information as well as entertain. The elevation of caricature, cartoons and comic books by such a renowned art historian can be seen as the beginnings of the medium being given serious critical attention within academic discourse.

Outside of academia Gombrich is most well-known for *The Story of Art* (1950), which provided an introductory chronological survey of the subject for a general audience. This evidences his interest in popular visual media with references to Disney's Mickey Mouse when discussing the cartoon-like aspects of Picasso's work and the use of an eighteenth-century caricature, an illustration by Daumier and a cartoon from *The New Yorker* as supporting images to conclude chapters (p. 9, 334, 404, 469).

Gombrich's main direct contribution to Comics Studies was his ongoing discussion of the comic strips produced by Rodolphe Töpffer in Switzerland in the early nineteenth century. Gombrich first mentioned Töpffer in the short book *Caricature* (1940) co-authored with Ernst Kris and the essay "The Experiment of Caricature" (1960, pp. 265–88) contained a detailed analysis of his work.⁵ In this essay a discussion of the cartoon-like aspects of Rembrandt's paintings was followed by a nuanced exploration of Rodolphe Töpffer's work which hailed him as the progenitor of animation, illustrated children's books and the modern comic strip:

It is no accident that we should be led back from Disney, Al Capp, and Brunhoff to that half-forgotten artist and thinker, for to Töpffer belongs the credit, if we want to call it so, of having invented and propagated the picture story, the comic strip... Töpffer's humorous picture novels, the first of which Goethe admired and encouraged him to publish, are the innocent ancestors of today's manufactured dreams. We find everything in them, albeit still in genuinely comic garb. (pp. 269–70)

Gombrich then went on to use the concepts outlined in Töpffer's *Essai de physiognomonie* as a starting point to examine how caricature operates, drawing on examples and theories from Leonardo Da Vinci, Agostino Carracci, Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Charles Le Brun in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through to William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier, before concluding with James Thurber and Paul Klee in the twentieth century. Some 30 years later Gombrich referenced Töpffer again in his essay "The Pleasure of Boredom: Four centuries of Doodles" reprinted in *The Uses of Images* and originally published as the introduction to a book on caricatures found in Italian bank ledgers from the Renaissance (1999, pp. 226–39).

These works all rely on Gombrich's use of iconography, a methodology which he saw as a crucial tool in the development of Art History as a discipline. The introductory chapter to Gombrich's book *Symbolic Images: Studies in the*

Art of the Renaissance was titled “Aims and Limits of Iconology” and provides a clear definition of his understanding of both this term and iconography:

The identification of texts illustrated in a given religious or secular picture is usually considered part of iconography. Like all kinds of historical detective work the solution of iconographic puzzles needs luck as well as a certain amount of background knowledge. But given this luck the results of iconography can sometimes meet exacting standards of proof. If a complex illustration can be matched by a text that accounts for all its principle features the iconographer can be said to have made his case. If there is a whole sequence of such illustrations which fits a similar sequence in a text the possibility of the fit being due to accident is very remote indeed. (1972, p. 6)

Gombrich’s application of this methodology is evident throughout the essay “Magic, Myth and Metaphor: Reflections on Pictorial Satire”, which further developed the research on caricature and cartooning started with Kris many decades earlier. The essay began by considering the ways in which images of the devil changed from the beginning of the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth centuries, shifting in meaning from a direct relationship with religious texts to its use for political aims during the French Revolution. A second example traced the ways in which the image of an aristocratic man falling from a horse could retain its metaphorical power, starting with a twelfth-century illustrated manuscript showing Tancred, a challenger to the throne of Henry VI the Holy Roman Emperor, and ending with an eighteenth-century political print of George III being thrown from a horse labelled “America”, all referenced to key textual sources (1999, pp. 184–211).

CULTURAL HISTORY AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

In addition to showing the application of iconography to the study of caricature, cartooning and comics, Gombrich’s sources demonstrate his commitment to Cultural History as a methodological concern as well as a potential tool of analysis. Cultural History is a much contested field which can be considered as the study of culture in its broadest sense but is also understood to be “accepted shorthand for what is strictly speaking the cultural history of art” (Ferne 1995, p. 331). In terms of Cultural History Gombrich saw himself as part of a tradition that included the art historians Jacob Burckhardt and Aby Warburg in the nineteenth century and Johann Winckelmann in the eighteenth century. Although Gombrich also acknowledged the theoretical foundations of Cultural History developed by the German philosopher Hegel, he was critical of Hegel’s model most notably in the essays “Art and Scholarship” (1963, pp. 106–19) and “In Search of Cultural History” (1979, pp. 24–59). Gombrich sought to liberate Cultural History from what he saw as the restrictive concepts of *zeitgeist*, spirit of the age, and *volksgeist*, national spirit or national character, which had been used by Hegel and subsequent art historians to suggest that

each period of human history had a central defining force that manifested itself in all cultural outputs. For Gombrich the result of this kind of Cultural History was art historians

speaking of “Gothic man” or “Baroque psychology”, assuming a radical change in the mental make-up to have happened when building firms discarded one pattern book in favour of another. (1979, p. 50)

In contrast to this broad periodisation Gombrich felt that the art historian needed to focus on the work of individual artists and how specific artistic movements come into being by considering the social context in which images, from both low and high culture, were produced and circulated. In explaining this concept Gombrich employed the metaphor of an ecology of art and emphasised the role of feedback loops in the creative artistic process (Fernie 1995, p. 227; Gombrich 1999, p. 10). In line with his use of iconography, this approach to Cultural History allowed him to consider how genres and types of images transformed over time as well as within specific time periods.

A prime example of Gombrich’s approach to Cultural History is the essay “The Cartoonist’s Armoury” (1963) which focused on the critical devices used in caricature and cartoons from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. One section addressed the ways in which female personifications have been used, starting with an eighteenth-century cartoon *The Reconciliation of Britannia and Her Daughter America* contrasted with a cover illustration supporting women’s right to vote for *Life* magazine from 1920. The essay then examined the shifting meaning of female personifications from Greek stone reliefs and Roman coins in relation to cartoons by Honoré Daumier and twentieth-century newspaper cartoonists before exploring the role of exaggeration in portrait caricature over the same period and the importance of visual metaphor in all these practices.

Blanchard and Couperie also employed approaches that accord with Gombrich’s notion of Cultural History. Blanchard considered comics to be directly influenced by the kinds of images circulating in other media suggesting in his introduction that

We propose to show that the variants we see, across the centuries, are conditioned by the dominant system of communication of the time, that is, by habits of listening (for the centuries in which oral communication is dominant), of reading (for the centuries of the book), or of synchronised perceptions (for our audio-visual-dominated age). (1969a, p. 5)

Couperie took a different, less technologically orientated, approach to employing Cultural History to develop his arguments. In “The World of the Comic Book”, one of his chapters in the catalogue accompanying the 1967 exhibition *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative*, he went beyond simply linking the creators of American adventure strips of the 1930s with historical

art styles and instead stressed the wider cultural forces in play. In a discussion of Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* he first considered the ways in which the strip used the same narrative devices and imagery as contemporaneous works of science fiction such as those by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Couperie went on to consider the ways in which *Flash Gordon* belongs to a lineage of heroic tales from the myths of ancient Greece to the epics of the Medieval period such as the Irish Immrama which told of sea journeys seeking the other world (1968, pp. 173–77). He then suggested that such epics were not confined to the past but were being created by contemporary science fiction writers such as E. R. Eddison and J. R. R. Tolkien and in contemporary media such as cinema and comic strips. Couperie then argued for a new kind of academic study of comics, closely aligned with the aims of Cultural History as outlined by Gombrich, and perhaps even prescient of the emergence of Popular Culture Studies in the 1970s:

We must realize that the comics strip is not an isolated phenomena completely divorced from all tradition – on the contrary. Insofar as it is a so called ‘popular’ art it is receptive to many more traditions and influences than the ‘official’ arts, which are more or less sclerosed or trapped within themselves ... There exists an entire trend that does not fall within the framework of traditional studies and that has not even been recognized, because it should belong to the domains of art history and the history of literature – both sluggish disciplines undeserving of the name ‘history’ and which have not yet realized that everything that exists merits study. (Couperie 1968, pp. 173–77)

Couperie, Blanchard and Gombrich all employed the art-historical methodologies of iconography to the study of comics, most particularly to examine those antecedents to the form that could be seen in both fine art practices and the images afforded by the emergence of new printing technologies. They were all also concerned to locate comics within a wider Cultural History that took account of the ways in which comics, and other images, were produced and circulated within and across cultures. Gombrich was more acutely aware of both the value and the potential pitfalls of Cultural History as a methodological approach and invested some energy in trying to break away from Hegel's influence to invest it with new critical potential.

NOTES

1. The title of Blanchard's book is a complex issue. The original publication from 1969 was titled *La Bande Dessinée: Histoire des Histoires en images de la préhistoire à nos jours* (*La Bande Dessinée: The Story of Stories in Pictures from Prehistory to Today*). However, it was then republished in 1974/75 with the title *Histoire de la Bande Dessinée* (*The History of Comics*) and Miller (2007), Miller and Beaty (2014) and Groensteen (2017) all use the title *Histoire de la Bande Dessinée* even when referring to the published edition of 1969. The original title is used here as we agree with Grove (2010, p. 237) that it seems to more clearly express

- Blanchard's overarching thesis to consecrate comics as an art form by tracing its origins back to cave paintings.
2. We are indebted to Dom Glennon for the translation of sections of Blanchard's book, most notably the introductory passages, used in the writing of this chapter. For a translation of some of the earlier sections of Blanchard's book see Miller and Beaty (2014).
 3. Of course Gutenberg didn't invent printing—woodblock printing on paper originated in China during the Tang dynasty. Nor for that matter did he invent moveable type which was invented by Bi Sheng in the eleventh century during the Song dynasty, but he did create the first screw-threaded printing press.
 4. For an exhaustive overview of his extensive research output see <https://gombrich.co.uk/bibliography/>.
 5. We are indebted to Guy Lawley for drawing our attention to the mention of Töpffer in the book on caricature Gombrich co-authored with Kris in 1940. Since Töpffer is not mentioned in their co-authored article "The Principles of Caricature" from 1938 presumably they became aware of his work in the intervening two years, or at least changed their view of his work thereby considering it to be an important stage in the development of caricature as well as the development of the comic strip.

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Art History Turned Upside Down: David Kunzle and the Social History of Art

Abstract This chapter examines the art-historical methods employed across David Kunzle's ambitious two-volume *History of the Comic Strip*. While the first volume was shaped by traditional empirical approaches grounded in substantive documentary research (inflected by Ernst Gombrich's emphasis on Cultural History), it marked an increasing focus on social contexts of production and reception, questions of ideology, class, and the relevance of art-historical research to contemporary political antagonisms. Radicalised by the social movements of the late 1960s, and particularly a trip to Chile before the overthrow of the Unidad Popular government in 1973, by the time Kunzle published the second volume he had, along with other art historians like T. J. Clark and O. K. Werckmeister, embraced a social history of art renewed by the New Left, and developed an approach grounded in Marxist theory that became the foundation of his future work in, and beyond, the field of comics scholarship.

Keywords David Kunzle • Social history of art • New Left Art History • Ideology • Class

David Kunzle is possibly the best-known art historian working in Comics Studies, his *History of the Comic Strip*, published in two volumes in 1973 (*History of the Comic Strip. Volume 1: The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*—hereafter Volume 1) and 1990 (*History of the Comic Strip. Volume 2: The Nineteenth Century*—hereafter Volume 2), recognised among its foundational texts. Yet few comics scholars have overtly taken up Ian Gordon's claim that Kunzle's work provides certain “methodological constructs” necessary for understanding comics' production and cultural operation (1991, p. 342).

This could be because, for all its richness, range and rigour, Kunzle's *History* may seem somewhat old-fashioned in its methodology. Accounts of his art-historical approach from a Comics Studies standpoint emphasise how it follows a tradition laid down by Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, and ensconced mid-twentieth century by Ernst Gombrich, with the addition of some less typical "sociological and political perspectives" (Sommerland and Wictorin 2017, p. 3). To Art History, by contrast, Kunzle's output—explicitly labelled Marxist—has appeared fundamentally disruptive of this tradition, particularly in the 1970s when it was branded "Art History Turned Upside Down" (Bruyn 1978, p. 742).

To grasp this disparity, it's worth considering how conservative post-war Art History was, and situating Kunzle within the currents that transformed it as university campuses were swept by the insurgent social movements of the late 1960s. While *History* Volume 1 bore traces of Gombrich, who was Kunzle's PhD supervisor, by the time it was published Kunzle had embraced the renewal of a Marxist "social history of art" to which Gombrich had been vociferously opposed. Kunzle's involvement in this New Left Art History has perhaps been clouded to comics scholarship because his studies of early comics have been dissociated from a wider art-historical project attending to the political valency of popular art (including posters, murals, fashion). For instance, his work on Latin American leftist graphics (including Chilean, Nicaraguan and Cuban comics), in adversarial relation with US neo-colonialism as endorsed by Disney, has been comparatively overlooked.

Revisiting Kunzle's work in the period of writing his *History* can help clarify the significance of its methodology and what it asks of comics scholarship.

VOLUME 1: EXERCISING GOMBRICH

In the Preface to Volume 1, written in 1968 four years after the PhD dissertation on which this first book was based had been completed (and five years before it would eventually be published), Kunzle acknowledged his debt to Gombrich's suggestion in "The Experiment of Caricature" of connections between Rodolphe Töpffer and the eighteenth-century picture stories of William Hogarth. He additionally recognised the work of Hilde Kurz—also connected with the Warburg Institute—which had in turn found antecedents of Hogarth's Progresses in seventeenth-century Italian broadsheets.

Kunzle was proficient in the fastidious empirical methods that characterised such scholarship. He built his corpus by sifting through the folios and rare editions of major print collections in several European cities, drawing on a wealth of documentary sources to establish dates, places, publishers and artists, identify iconography and its meaning, and connect works in their stylistic continuities and innovations.

Indeed, one of the most patent contributions Kunzle's *History* makes is to reproduce and catalogue exhaustively European antecedents of comics—after its "monumental" scope; what drew reviewers' attention most was its "lavish" illustration (accompanied by lengthy captions). The collation and presentation of works themselves—otherwise hidden from view, or even at risk of disposal—forms

a key aspect of his scholarship (also evident in regular involvement in exhibition curation). While not unusual in Art History, this stands out in Comics Studies where publications may only include few, often poor quality reproductions, or even no images at all.

Such an encyclopedic approach can be traced to the positivism of Gombrichian Art History that, seeking scientific objectivity, fetishised “facts” (Deinhard 1975, p. 29). Shrinking from theoretical generalisations and socio-logical explanations, as tainted with historicism and economism that threatened the singularity of the aesthetic, it left unquestioned what John Roberts has called its own “reactionary addiction to certain notions of ‘quality’ and ‘value’” (2013, p. 32).

However, in constructing this corpus Kunzle deviated from Gombrich. While Cultural History opened up the study of comics as part of the visual language and heterogeneous raw material available for artistic appropriation by “geniuses” like Goya (Gombrich 1963), Kunzle set out a popular tradition of comic strip creation *per se*, placing such “greats” within *it*. This riled at least one reviewer who argued that, despite “traces of popular schemata” in their work, artists like Hogarth, Romeyn de Hooghe and Jacques Callot transcended such sources, producing something “more than popular art” (Paulson 1975, pp. 484, 486).

Kunzle’s title proved contentious but significant. A *History of the comic strip* mandated moving beyond the “facts” of Art History—as a history of a print/journalistic/literary tradition demanding attention to workplace, market, technology, circulation, censorship and piracy, social attitudes and popular customs. This corpus could not be made sense of solely “by means of conventional art-historical and iconological techniques”, instead demanding “talents of the historian of politics, art, literature and social mores; ... folklorist and ... criminologist” (Kunzle 1973, p. 6).

Therefore, while Kunzle was critical of sociology of art that drew schematic, overdetermined correlations between content and class (of maker, patron and/or audience), in decentering the individual artist and artwork by charting a wider social totality, he was already flirting with the concerns of an earlier social history of art practised by Marxists like Arnold Hauser, whom Gombrich (1953) impugned.

This was evident in connections drawn between comics’ development and the trajectory of the early modern bourgeoisie, clearest in opening and concluding assessments of his survey’s broader implications. In Comics Studies, attention has often fixed on Kunzle’s introductory definition of comics, with each of its four parts deemed progressively more contentious: from a widely shared emphasis on sequence to a slightly more disputed assertion of “preponderance” of image over text, with more forceful objections raised to his insistence on comics as a mass print medium, and above all to claims they must tell topical moral stories.¹ Yet all four are fundamentally interconnected and entangled with Kunzle’s mapping of comics’ history onto the history of capitalism and class.

Comics are topical because they emerge as a means of mass communication in specific post-Reformation contexts of political, religious and social conflict

(thereby “preoccupied” with political violence). The form lent itself to polemic *because* it is sequential, rhetorically polarising events into a pictorial “before and after, then and now, cause and effect”, working as a call to “political and social action” (Kunzle 1973, p. 3). Comics therefore met the political demands of particular historical moments, emerging in European cities where the bourgeoisie was strongest, progressive political movements spawned, and class strife most acute—accounting for the structuring of the book by geographical region and political or religious events. On this basis, Kunzle claims “the political strip has by and large served the cause of social advance and revolutionary history” (1973, p. 427).

This was the kind of broad sociological conclusion, and alignment of shifting social relations of class with modulations of style and format, that were Gombrich’s kryptonite, but signalled the ambitions of a radicalised Art History. Kunzle’s affiliation with this tendency was also indicated by concluding links between the violence of seventeenth-century broadsheets and posters opposing the Vietnam War, asserting, like Hauser, the bearing of art-historical inquiry on the political present. While Volume 1 awaited publication, Kunzle was involved in exhibitions in Milan, Santa Barbara and New York featuring precisely such ‘posters of protest’ from American student and anti-war movements.

NEW LEFT ART HISTORY

It was these movements that galvanised New Left art historians, particularly in West Germany, America, Britain and France, and saw a social history of art move from the margins of the discipline into its mainstream. They set out to expose the ideological complicity of “objective” Art History with capitalism and nationalism—how judgements of quality and genius, methods of connoisseurship and iconographical analysis, and constructions of art as a “repository of transcendental humanist values” untouched by “social and material contingencies” (Duncan 1974, p. 338) served the interests of art market and state, and shored up bourgeois, capitalist and fascist ideologies (Werckmeister 1982, p. 285).

This move was led by the German Ulmer Verein für Kunst und Kulturwissenschaften, founded in 1968 in a context where former Nazis still held prominent positions in the field, and highly influenced by Frankfurt School critical theory. It gained an institutional foothold in America when O. K. Werckmeister was appointed chair of Art History at UCLA in 1971 and overhauled the department, bringing in Marxist-feminist Carol Duncan as visiting professor in 1973, followed by ex-Situationist T. J. Clark. Kunzle was hired in 1976, the same year they initiated a session on “Marxism and Art History” at the College Art Association (CAA), which became the Caucus for Marxism and Art.

Its best-known programmatic statements in English are probably Clark’s 1973 “On the Social History of Art” and 1974 “The Conditions of Artistic Production”. The latter argued that, in place of an Art History become

“manservant of the market”, the discipline needed to return to the kind of “important, unavoidable questions” about the circumstances of artistic production, the nature of representation and the conditions of consciousness that had been dropped in the anti-Hegelian turn which saw methods like iconology deployed for their own sake (Clark 1995, pp. 249–50).

But for Clark the framing of these questions, and concepts applied, must be radically different. Facts were crucial, but they should be facts about the conditions and relations of artistic production that illuminate the “complex relationship of the artist to the total historical situation”, requiring a guiding theory of the structure of capitalism (Clark 1973, p. 12). This political economy of cultural production and its location within a wider social totality should be used to examine the relationship between art and ideology—“the beliefs, images, values or techniques of representation by which social classes, in conflict with each other, attempt to ‘naturalize’ their particular histories” (Clark 1995, p. 251). Art History could thus help uncover how ideologies operate, how they produce meaning and legitimise social interests, and the role of artists, critics and art institutions in their formation, articulation and inflection.

The concept of ideology, informed by Marx’s early writings and the Frankfurt School, as opposed to the crude determinism of Soviet orthodoxy, thereby became central to New Left Art History and how it saw itself contributing to contemporary activism. For Werckmeister, analysing how values related to specific class interests are universalised, “is tantamount to their exposure... the critical thrust of any such study can itself contribute to the ongoing class struggle” (1982, p. 284). However, the term proved elusive, subject to a “formidable” degree of contestation (Hemingway 2017, pp. 6–8). Fault lines opened up, particularly in relation to categories of “art” and the “aesthetic”—whether art’s autonomy afforded it critical purchase, or if aesthetics itself was an ideological trap—with Clark more aligned to the former position, and Werckmeister the latter.

HOW KARL MARX PREVAILED OVER CARL BARKS

For both Clark and Werckmeister 1973 already marked a moment of defeat for the Western left (Carter 2013, p. 15), as the radical movements that had coalesced in 1968 were knocked back. For Kunzle it was a critical year due to an encounter with Marxist comics scholarship forged in a pivotal political struggle which provided his work with its own important, unavoidable questions. Sacked from his post at Santa Barbara for “some very minor anti-war behaviour” (Kunzle 2003, p. 5), he travelled to Cuba and Chile. En route he picked up *Para leer al Pato Donald* (1971) the strident critique of Disney comics as American cultural imperialism by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, working at the time with publisher Quimantú affiliated to the Chilean left-wing Unidad Popular government. Struck by its “rigorous, impassioned and imaginative” application of Marxist concepts to comics, Kunzle approached Dorfman at Santiago University offering to translate it (Kunzle 1976). That

September the Allende government was deposed in a CIA-backed coup that saw the book banned and burned. Back in LA, Kunzle joined a collective who clandestinely produced the film *Chile with Poems and Guns*, documenting Unidad Popular's achievements and the coup's brutality.

Kunzle's translation of *How to Read Donald Duck* was published in 1975, and in his CAA contribution the following year he affirmed how the book had signalled his chance "to become a true Marxist art historian, and throw in my lot with the Third World" (1976). He shared Werckmeister's conviction of Art History as an instrument of political struggle, positioning subsequent work documenting Cuban posters, Sandinista murals and Vietnamese lacquer paintings in opposition to scholarship and curation that provided "ideological justification ... for cultural and hence economic penetration into foreign markets", looting a country's archaeology and history alongside its economic resources, and imposing "capitalist cultural modes" as a way of opening it up to US interests (Kunzle 1982, p. 138).

Now peppered with references to class and class struggle, hegemony, historical and dialectical process and revolution, Kunzle's work brought core New Left art-historical questions about art and ideology, aesthetics and resistance, production and policy to bear on issues of culture and coloniality, including comics' relationships to imperialism.

Yet while Dorfman and Mattelart's work registered the impact of Althusser's structuralism and Barthes' semiotics on media and communications theory, Kunzle for the most part retained an empiricist bent. His own Disney research drew on archival inquiry and interviews with Carl Barks to examine working conditions and operational structures, uncovering "significant ambivalence towards the Disney-capitalist ideology of which [Barks] is both victim and critic" (1976).² He argued (contra Dorfman and Mattelart) that, as much as they naturalised US cultural and economic dispossession of the Global South, Barks' strips also contained elements of satire and social realism that worked to undermine and expose it (see Kunzle 1991, 1990b).

An empirical approach also characterised Kunzle's work on corsetry, which brought him into confrontation with feminism—both a key dimension of Marxist Art History (particularly in the USA) and a distinct movement that transformed the discipline even more radically (and was often highly critical of Marxist approaches).³ A 1972 survey of images of corset fetishism was described by Marxist-feminist Lise Vogel as "a provocative instance of misogyny" that, evading theory in favour of description, universalised a male perspective and failed to account for "corsetry as a vehicle of sexual oppression, dress as an emblem of class position" (1972, p. 380). In subsequent debates in feminist journal *Signs*, Kunzle argued that nineteenth-century dress reform movements were reactionary and anti-feminist, and tight-lacing was a non-mainstream, anti-authoritarian act of defiance practised largely by lower-middle-class women (and some men) almost as satire of gender and class repression through body-sculpting. Evidenced by letters from tight-lacing fans to publications like *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, this suggested an attention to audiences,

and quite complex unpicking of relationships between audience, class, ideology and visual form that, alongside questions of intersections of gender and class, also characterised much of his work on comics.

VOLUME 2: THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF COMICS

History Volume 2 wasn't published until 1990, although articles that appeared from 1973 onwards informed several sections. By that time, Kunzle's allegiance to a Marxist Art History that "tainted" the discipline with "questions of ideology and socio-political contexts of production and reception" was unequivocal (1990a, p. xix). Studying comics was explicitly positioned in opposition not only to a bourgeois Art History that disdained popular media, but equally (in a side-swipe at Clark) "those vanguard social art historians, for whom "art" is still painting and sculpture" (p. xix). This aligned him with figures like Adrian Rifkin (2018) who criticised a social history of art that merely asked new questions of the same material, rather than questioning the ascription of cultural value solely to a series of museum objects.

Covering the shorter, less remote historical period of the nineteenth century enabled Kunzle to delve further into the political economy of comics and its relationship to wider social relations. Any print imagery had to be understood in terms of broader conditions of production, particularly in a context of commodification and industrialisation. Against insipid biography, Kunzle demanded attention to "competition for circulation and artists... relationships with editors, divisions of labour, fluctuations in taste and format, pay rates" (1977, p. 649).

Comics artists are identified as just as socially buffeted as their protagonists—in a low-status profession with their work rationalised, intensified and mechanised. Both characters and creators are located within, or on the lower-class edges of, the nineteenth-century petty-bourgeoisie—a heterogeneous, mobile and interstitial class comprising tradesmen, shop keepers and lower-level professionals who shared bourgeois aspirations and values but lacked autonomous ownership of property. Insecure both economically and ideologically, they were host to fluctuating conservative, liberal and radical tendencies (1990a, p. 8).

This was a class position Kunzle claimed was shared by the majority of comics readers—attending to a "dimension which art historians all too often ignore: the consumer" (1979, p. 72). Volume 2 tracks how comics registered the changing social fortunes and outlooks, external hostilities and internal tensions of this group, masticated by the social and economic changes wrought by industrial capitalism. Approaching comics as a site of class antagonism and identity formation in this way was clearly informed by Marxist ideology critique, and more nuanced than the determinist, orthodox "reflection" model—attending to the protean character of ideology, the historical dynamics of class, and, like Clark, to the way artists "work" the structures of meaning they inhabit. For Kunzle, "art not only reflects but also produces ideology" (1985,

p. 40), with the development of Ally Sloper, Victorian comics star created by Marie Duval, for example, documenting and inflecting this restless sector's shifting attitudes towards, and experiences of, work and leisure.

Like his peers, Kunzle drew attention to how this played out not only in terms of changing narrative content but also stylistically—to an audience of “disordered and disoriented social classes” the comic strip resonated as “a disordering medium” (1990a, p. xix). Drawing on critical sociology and Film Studies, particularly in the concluding sections of Volume 2, he related the formal development of comics to their changing material formats, and, in turn, the changing visual experience of the modern city. As miscellany, the illustrated magazine was a microcosm of urban life and the comic strip adapted to its anatomy, “which it miniaturises and pictorializes” (p. 6). Comics sped up, stripped down and convulsed in acclimation to the hectic, irregular pace and fractured, erratic experience of “railway time”. This idea of the comic becoming a medium of “fragments” situated it within wider currents in modernist art, design and media (notably film, photography and painting) working the same material of “industrial perception” and the rationalisation of space, time and the body (p. 378).

This attention to form in relation to ideology and the sublimation of class experience had roots in Frankfurt School critical theory—consonant with Walter Benjamin's work on consumption and the city, technology and perception, but also directly referencing Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in relating the violent rubberisation of the body in comics—“flattened, stretched, twisted, kinked”—to the social ruptures and deformations of capitalism (1990a, pp. 361–2). For Adorno and Horkheimer this inculcated “resignation to the constant beating, both moral and physical, that capitalism inflicts on the worker” (p. 362), and Kunzle's work suggests an affinity with their critique of the Culture Industry, casting the 1880s and 1890s as marking the emergence of a sanitised, standardised and regimented mass culture that in the twentieth century “serves the cause of established capitalist authority” as a safety valve for emotions “which might otherwise threaten economic and social stability” (1973, p. 427).

Nonetheless, this was equally a period of significant formal invention by comics artists. The section “Movement Before Movies” examined how figures like Töpffer and Wilhelm Busch developed a new visual vocabulary of speed, noise, dynamism, distortion, ambiguity and fluidity. In his writing on Marie Duval, partly published in *Women's Art Journal* and aligned with feminist efforts to recover the work of women artists falsely attributed to men, Kunzle explicitly identified such graphic innovations—“vibrating contours ... multiplication of limbs ... effects of shriveling up, exploding, discombobulation, twisting, unraveling, melting of form”—as anticipating experimental abstractions associated with the artistic avant-garde (1986, p. 30). This asserted the significance of commercial popular art as a space of artistic innovation in its own right (rather than as source material for art proper), that destabilised the canon. And while Kunzle rejected insurrectionary claims made for an avant-garde detached

from political action as feeding bourgeois myth (1982), particularly with respect to Duval this marked comics as a space in which a critical, antagonistic aesthetic could be developed—where “disrespect for academic norms” could be used to affront “conventional (male) view[s]”, and a gender “proletarianised and primitivised” could articulate its antipathy (1986, p. 30).

Thus Kunzle’s work on comics was deeply informed by Marxist Art History, engaging its core questions and concepts, and navigating its debates and the emerging poles of ideology critique and aesthetic theory. It was driven, particularly in work on Latin American comics and Disney, by political conviction of the ideological role of Art History—that scholarship is never neutral but partisan, to ignore the relevance of capitalism and coloniality is to endorse them. Why then might it seem methodologically unremarkable (despite its extraordinary scope)?

One answer is that Marxist Art History failed in its success. A milder “social history of art”, materialist but remote from active struggle, became standard in much teaching and scholarship (Clunas 2003), institutionalised relatively quickly in the 1980s and 1990s within a rejuvenated “New Art History”, sitting among a “smorgasbord” of methodologies with limited scope to address their ideological antagonisms (Carter 2013). Internally, faced with this post-modern relativisation of values Werckmeister observed a split between “empirical explorations of large scope and minute precision... chary of categorical conclusions about the social significance of art” and “self-reflexive methodological criticism and introspective theoretical aesthetics” (1991, p. 84). Kunzle would seem to fall on the empirical side of this fracture, addressing fundamental questions of ideology, style and class, but for the most part disinclined to make definite, sustained theoretical contentions about popular culture, politics and society on the basis of his findings. While it troubled the traditional art-historical canon, in several ways Kunzle’s (Eurocentric) *History* never fully shook off the historical model of tradition and innovation that produced it—privileging, as Rebecca Zurier (1991) observed, ingenuity over iteration, instances of resistance over conservatism, and major over ordinary figures (also overwhelmingly men).

Nevertheless, the art-historical approach in Kunzle’s *History of Comic Strip* was distinctive, and distinctly Marxist—not alone in drawing sociology into the study of comics at this time (see, e.g. the work of Luc Boltanski⁴), but notable for connecting sociological explorations of comics’ production and consumption to how ideology is articulated and inflected by their graphic style, material format and visual form, and the political possibilities this implies.

NOTES

1. Ian Hague uses Kunzle’s four conditions as his opening example of “elemental” definitions of comics which “define comics based on the existence of a combination of a particular a set of empirically observable characteristics or elements” (2014, p. 75). He notes other elemental definitions such as Bill Blackbeard’s

arose in direct reaction to Kunzle, as well as alternative categories of definition—the “knowingly incomplete” and the “social”—which have emerged in Comics Studies to address the oversights of these more essentialist approaches. The most prominent knowingly incomplete definition Hague discusses is that of Thierry Groensteen, who criticised both Kunzle and Blackbeard’s attempts as “equally normative and self-interested” (2007, p. 13).

2. Martin Barker criticised what would eventually be published as Kunzle’s (1990c) “Dispossession by Ducks: The Imperialist Treasure Hunt in Southeast Asia” for partially upholding what he calls Dorfman and Mattelart’s “neo-Freudian” perspective—taking too rigid and oversimplified an approach in reading imperialist ideology off representations of the Global South in Disney comics, rather than working through his own observations of historical contradictions, complexities and shifts in Carl Barks’ work (Barker 1989, pp. 295–298).
3. For explorations of how feminist Art History and criticism can be related to the history and study of comics see the chapters “Feminist Art History as an Approach to Research on Comics. Meta Reflections on Studies of Swedish Feminist Comics” by Margareta Wallin Victorin and Anna Nordenstam (2022) and “Towards Feminist Comics Studies: Feminist Art History and the Study of Women’s Comix in the 1970s” by Małgorzata Olsza (2022) in the companion volume this book, *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*.
4. Boltanski was among the first to approach comics from a sociological perspective, for example, with the influential “La constitution du champ de la bande dessinée” in *Actes de la Recherche en sciences sociales* 1 (January 1975) edited by Pierre Bourdieu, which explored processes of canonisation and consecration in comics that came with the emergence of alternative institutions and publishing strategies, and demographic shifts in both creators and readers, that challenged the form’s low legitimacy as a mass cultural form. The key difference between a social history of art and the sociology of art is the greater attention paid in the former to the (historically contingent) politics of the aesthetic and the category art, and to questions of ideology and style, form and facture.

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Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction

Abstract The final chapter of this section explores various intersections of formalism, modernism and abstraction in comics scholarship. It begins by examining Claude Moliterni's contribution to the 1967 exhibition catalogue *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative* in which he deconstructed the medium by focusing on its formal features. In taking a formalist approach, Moliterni pre-dates the form-focused accounts of figures like Will Eisner and Scott McCloud. The contribution of the art critic Gérald Gassiot-Talabot to the 1967 catalogue also addressed form but focused on how contemporary modern art appropriated the visual vernacular of comics as found material. Subsequent comics scholarship has asserted the specificity of comics as a medium on the basis of formal features related to artistic modernism and identified Expressionist woodcut novelists Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward as avant-garde precursors of the graphic novel, notably in the writing of David Beronä. Studies of abstract comics, particularly by Andrei Molotiu, have drawn more explicitly on modernist art theory, and in turn been criticised for the limitations of a formalist approach, most recently in the two-volume edited collection *Abstraction and Comics* from 2019.

Keywords Formalism • Modernism • Abstract comics • Abstraction • Avant-garde • Narrative figuration

While comics scholarship developed as a field in the 1990s primarily in relation to Literary and Media Studies, many of its debates concerning comics' definition, origins and characteristics took place in dialogue with Art History, theory and criticism, often drawing on modernist formalist aesthetics and art-historical characterisations of the avant-garde. This came via the early work of practitioners, curators, critics and enthusiasts, and so this chapter begins by revisiting

the catalogue of the 1967 exhibition *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative* at the Musée des Art Décoratifs and its approaches to comics' form. In the twenty-first century, Art History has re-surfaced in Comics Studies, most notably in relation to questions of visual abstraction and the genre of abstract comics, with work that both takes and diverges from modernist formalism.

CLAUDE MOLITERNI: A FORMALISM OF NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative (translated as *A History of the Comic Strip*) included an early attempt to define comics by what are deemed their essential formal features, in the chapter entitled "Narrative Technique" written by Claude Moliterni. Following the organisation and main thrust of the show itself, Moliterni moved from discussion of speech balloons and panel frames, to layout and resulting "narrative technique", with concluding observations about colour and image-text relationships. He traced a historical development from earlier illustrated narratives in which text was primary, to comics where the picture "constitutes the basic element" (Moliterni 1968, p. 183). Overall design and composition were fundamental—Moliterni emphasised the aesthetic effects of linework, colour, tonal relationships and interplaying panel shapes, but, above all, how narrative action is driven forwards and continuity achieved through the dynamic rhythm created by juxtaposing panels (often called "cartoons"). This synthesis of elements produces narrative technique—the way a story is told via "successive leaps from one picture to the next" and the relations established "from cartoon to cartoon, from strip to strip, even from page to page, and...between each of these constituent elements" (ibid.).

Using a corpus drawn primarily from American adventure strips and classic Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, Moliterni identified three categories of comics narration: simple, parallel and accelerated. Simple narration relates a single plot in panels following a chronological order, while parallel narration involves two or more plots developed simultaneously by intercutting scenes. Accelerated narration decomposes action into panels "temporally very close to each other... that depict the situation from various angles" (Moliterni 1968, p. 187). This "most fertile" type enables "effects no text could ever express" (ibid.), revealing what makes comics a "total and authentic art form" (p. 199). The discovery of this definitive complex narration was the work of the few comics artists who had realised "the necessity of expressing themselves graphically by the creation of a dynamic movement in the composition of a page or strip" (p. 183). Moliterni thereby distinguishes a canon of ground-breaking creators including Winsor McCay, George Herriman, Pellos (René Pellarin), Burne Hogarth, Milton Caniff, Hergé (George Remi) and Robert Gigi, who stood apart from the "80 percent of European and American artists ... ignorant of these methods of expression" (p. 187), establishing a comics avant-garde without naming it as such.¹

The focus on comics' autonomous, medium-specific formal properties, and particularly the emphasis placed on succession, sequence and the articulation of visual narrative through linear and tabular relationships, places Moliterni as a predecessor of debates about specificity in French comics criticism of the 1980s, and the subsequent form-focused comics theory of figures like Will Eisner, Scott McCloud and Thierry Groensteen.² As well as structuralism and semiotics, such approaches also draw on literary and artistic formalism. The idea that what distinguishes art lies in its inherent formal properties, unique to a given medium, was key to certain modernist discourses of visual art: from Nabis painter Maurice Denis' famous statement "a picture... is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order" ([1890] quoted in Tate [n.d.](#)), through the work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell engaged with Post-Impressionism as signalling a "purely abstract language of form" (1912, p. 29), to the championing of high modernist medium-specificity and Abstract Expressionism by influential art critic Clement Greenberg.³ Such formalist theory had certain continuities with nineteenth-century aestheticism's romantic defence of "art for art's sake"—art as pleasurable in and of itself, addressing an aesthetic sensibility distinct from other modes of perception, rather than subject to a didactic purpose and instrumentalist means-ends rationality. Modernist formalism was also tied to the concept of the avant-garde and the value attributed to originality and breaking with convention (counterposed to ersatz, formulaic kitsch)—displacing prior Western art-historical models of sustained or cyclical stylistic development and the classical tradition as a benchmark of artistic quality. Storytelling stays central to Moliterni's discussion of comics' essential features, maintaining a focus on a core communicative function much modernist art criticism would eschew. Yet his canonisation of a group of innovators standing apart from a prosaic mainstream, and his zoning in on formal qualities not only of the panel but the page and its overall aesthetic effects, indicates a latent inflection of formalist approaches to comics by Art History that would subsequently become more pronounced.

Moliterni's writing on comics' narrative technique (alongside a chapter on McCay) was later published in 1972 in a special volume from Swiss design journal *GRAPHIS* dedicated to comics as an overlooked modern art form. This reproduced much of the content from the exhibition catalogue on comics' formal features and distinctive visual narration, with more said on the panel as "narrative picture" and the rhythm, movement and flow created by its juxtaposition. Moliterni extended his canon of vanguard cartoonists to include Japanese and Spanish artists, and work in the superhero genre by Gil Kane and Neal Adams. In reframing his material for this publication, Moliterni also doubled down on claims for comics' distinction as an autonomous art form on the basis of the "progressive discovery of new and more refined techniques" and "means of expression" unique to it (1972, p. 26).

GÉRALD GASSIOT-TALABOT: COMICS AGAINST FORMALISM AND ABSTRACTION?

Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative also included a chapter by art critic Gérald Gassiot-Talabot who worked on the exhibition with SOCERLID at the behest of the Louvre curator, having previously organised the 1965 show *Narrative Figuration in Contemporary Art* (Sausverd 2020). He coined the term “narrative figuration” to describe a movement in French art (predominantly painting) from 1960, which revived “the ‘narrative’ picture” in reaction to the dominance of abstraction (Gassiot-Talabot 1968, p. 231). Associated with American Pop Art, but more politicised (closer to West German Capitalist Realism), this movement included artists like Bernard Rancillac, Hervé Télémaque, Gérard Fromanger, Erró, Jan Voss, Valerio Adami and Öyvind Fahlström.

Like Moliterni, Gassiot-Talabot highlighted narrative, but drew distinctions between narration in comics and narrative figuration in art. Comics are subject to “the external reality of the story” which must be communicated as explicitly as possible, via “simple signs and universal layouts” that enable “rapid interpretation” (Gassiot-Talabot 1968, pp. 235–7). Narrative figuration, by contrast, didn’t entail relating a story, but loosely suggesting a “figurative representation in time” (p. 231). Such art, despite its implied temporality and pictorial content, is more ambiguous, subtle in its associations and plural in its meanings, decoding and filtering reality (p. 231). Its relationship to comics was not one of blank assimilation. Aspects of juxtaposition, segmentation, framing and sequence, elements like speech bubbles, cursive or schematic drawing and nostalgia-laden imagery were appropriated and reinterpreted in narrative pictures that operated differently by virtue of painting’s capacity to immobilise form in relations of simultaneity and superimposition.

Critical of what was seen as the aloof formalism of American Pop Art—Roy Lichtenstein deemed “the most antinarrative painter imaginable”⁴ (Gassiot-Talabot 1968, pp. 233–5)—narrative figuration sought to adapt everyday popular culture as a means to critically expose and subvert the power of images in Cold War consumer society. Yet while the visual language of comics offered a means to disclose latent meanings and produce new ones, comics remained the found object: “as in the case of Lichtenstein, the narrative artist considers the comic as sociological raw material” (p. 235). Thus, despite the antipathy of narrative figuration to abstract art and a residual modernist formalism read in Pop Art, it retained some of the operative distinctions between high and low that exercised high modernist art critics, including the specialised agency and sensibility that distinguished the creation and experience of avant-garde art from the production and reception of popular culture. In many ways this mobilised the same “sublimation model” for which the MoMA exhibition *High & Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* would be criticised 23 years later—whereby, deploying their “special genius”, fine artists “sublimate...

experience, raising it from ordinary to extraordinary, from commonplace to unique, from low to high”, transforming their sources “into the entirely separate set of concerns that structure the aesthetic domain” (Krauss 1990, pp. 3–4).

COMICS (AND THE) MODERNIST AVANT-GARDE

The contrasts between Moliterni and Gassiot-Talabot’s chapters expose the tensions within the 1967 exhibition between early comics scholars aiming to reveal their distinctive aesthetic value and irreducible formal components as an autonomous art form, and art critics examining fine art borrowings from comics as vernacular raw material alongside advertising, television and magazine illustration. Yet form-based approaches in comics scholarship continued to lay claim to the medium’s autonomy on the basis of interfaces with artistic modernism, in ways that increasingly asserted a relationship to visual abstraction. McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* includes numerous references to modern art, citing Post-Impressionist, Expressionist, Cubist and Surrealist paintings. McCloud maps comics onto the story of modernism as the progressive rejection of mimesis, from a fragmentation of perspectival naturalism (influenced by Japanese art) to pure “non-iconic” abstraction “where shapes, lines and colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise” (1993, p. 51). At the same time, he draws connections between comics and experiments in “iconic” abstraction (word-like pictures) in Futurist and Dadaist visual poetry and graphic design.

McCloud famously claimed an ancestry for comics stretching back to ancient Egyptian painting, but also identified a more precise pedigree in the modernist avant-garde—naming the Expressionist wordless woodcut novels of Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward as comics’ art-historical “missing link” (1993, p. 18). This was a move Eisner had made in his introduction to *A Contract with God*, and developed in *Graphic Storytelling* (1996), but more specifically in relation to the graphic novel as a category. This alternative genealogy for comics in general, and the graphic novel in particular, was most thoroughly constructed by curator, writer and editor David Beronä. In the mid-1990s Beronä published articles on Masereel, Ward and Milt Gross in both comics and book arts journals, identifying contemporary wordless comics creators like Eric Drooker and Peter Kuper as their successors. He emphasised a historical interweaving—comic strips being a contributing influence on Masereel’s origination of the woodcut novel form, and it, in turn, established the narrative principles “used today by artists of... graphic novels” (Beronä 2008, p. 82).

This established wordless picture book artists as the avant-garde comics hadn’t recognised it had, revealing in their self-conscious interrogation of the medium its distinction and unique affordances. Gross, for example, “created a gamut of page designs that reflected the wealth of possibilities in comics” (Beronä 2001, p. 22) and established, through playing with words as images, their key interdependence (p. 26).⁵ Such formal experimentations veered towards abstraction, in terms of both imagery in panels and transitions between

them—more distended transitions showcasing how readers use intuition and inference to resolve juxtaposed images into an understandable sequence, and “the power of ... the ‘hungry eye’ to make meaning” (p. 38).

For Beronă, wordless picture books are thus modernist comics in Greenberg’s sense, self-critically interrogating the medium as a means of ascertaining its “area of competence” (1992, p. 755)—stripping away devices like speech balloons and captions to direct attention to an inherent pictorial sequentiality. While modernism is among Art History’s most contested terms, it has often been defined in relation to a self-conscious orientation and critical mode of attention demanded of the viewer. The idea recurs in Beronă’s writing that, partly because meaning has to be inferred from larger (conceptual and material) leaps between images, these works demand a more sophisticated and active decoding, and therefore a more protracted and intense looking. Taking almost an opposite view to Moliterni, it is what we might term this “decelerated narration” in wordless books which for Beronă self-reflexively draws attention to the mechanisms by which all comics are read. At the same time, he ascribes to them the kind of ambiguity and openness to individual interpretation Gassiot-Talabot assigned to painting—an argument taken up by David Ball (2016) in discussing the fungible polysemy of Ward’s woodcut novels.

Jean-Mattieu Méon has demonstrated how this strategy of “patrimonialisation” and “reverse filiation”—symbolically annexing wordless picture books in a reimagined comics history—has been a means of asserting greater cultural prestige. In particular, this claim to the artistic autonomy embodied in woodcut novels has helped construct the graphic novel, inventing an alternative “forgotten” lineage that enabled theorists like Eisner “to redefine comics by shifting their referential framework” and allowed publishing houses to “distinguish themselves from more commercial and/or more traditional productions” (Méon 2021a). Crucially, this is a strategy of cultural legitimisation based on suturing comics to art rather than literature, “shifting definitional issues towards a form of graphic narration distinct from literary concerns” (Méon 2021b), but here taking place not in the gallery but in the book—specifically, in republished editions of Masereel and Ward’s works.

ANDREI MOLOTIU: ABSTRACT COMICS FORMALISM

It was similarly in a book (and a blog) that artist and art historian Andrei Molotiu defined the contemporary genre of abstract comics and invented a fine art lineage for them, this time drawing more explicitly on modernist art theory to redirect formalist approaches to comics by displacing “narrativity” and “representationality” (2012, p. 85).

For Molotiu, abstract comics include not just “sequential art consisting exclusively of abstract imagery” but also “comics that contain some representational elements, as long as those elements don’t cohere into a narrative or even a unified narrative space” (2009, n.p.⁶). In this sense abstraction in comics

differs from abstraction in painting—it is not just a matter of rejecting representation “in favour of an emphasis on form”, but disposing of any “narrative excuse to string the panels together” beyond the “stories... resulting from the transformation and interaction of shapes across a comic page” (Molotiu 2009, n.p.).

Introducing the anthology *Abstract Comics*, Molotiu sketched a brief pre-history of the genre, acknowledging he was establishing a tradition for it *post facto*. This mainly comprised the “abstract sequential art” of modernist artists—Constructivist El Lissitzky, Bauhaus student Kurt Krans (as well as teacher Wassily Kandinsky), Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Pop artist Jasper Johns and CoBrA’s Pierre Alechinsky—alongside a few comics artists who had carved out the freedom to sneak in abstraction under the radar of comics’ pop culture mandate (McCay and Steve Ditko).

In highly Greenbergian terms, for Molotiu abstract comics have a self-reflexive modernist preoccupation with medium itself. Freed from the distraction of representation or subjection to a “narrative excuse”, and stripping the medium back to its irreducible visual elements, they reveal the fundamental formal mechanisms underlying all comics: “the graphic dynamism that leads the eye ... the aesthetically rich interplay between sequentiality and page layout” (Molotiu 2009, n.p.). Molotiu notes being motivated by Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé to identify the “graphic music that underlies sequential art”, the formal structure “underneath the story” that constitutes a comic’s “true aesthetic value” (2009, n.p.). Recalling Beronă, for Molotiu abstract comics address a specific mode of perception that reveals the essential qualities of comics detached from any external reference, making the reader critically self-aware of a usually unconscious process: “many of the most aesthetically satisfying comics can also be seen as, deep down, abstract comics, if only one looks at them in the right way” (2009, n.p.).

Molotiu would go on to expand on the fundamental formal structures abstract comics disclose: “sequential dynamism” (the visual energy created by the internal composition and external arrangement of panels), and “iconostasis” (the countervailing perception of the comics page “as a unified composition” taken in at a glance, “the way we take in an abstract painting”—2012, p. 91). Despite the expurgation of narrative, this echoes some of the earliest formalist approaches to comics and explorations of their relationship to fine art, resonating with Moliterni’s ideas of “dynamic rhythm”, but also laying claim to the principle of simultaneity Gassiot-Talabot assigned to painting. Molotiu draws further on the Kantian aspects of formalist accounts of the autonomous, medium-specific distinction of aesthetic experience—comics, on the basis of their pure graphic form, divorced from any subject, share the aesthetic value of painting in the apprehension of visual unity, but at the same time have a unique aesthetic value grounded in sequence: “a specifically sequential pleasure, achieved by putting the eye in motion” (2012, p. 89).

ABSTRACTION BEYOND MODERNIST FORMALISM

Molotiu's work has reinvigorated analyses of comics' form, in ways that both elaborate on and contest his account of abstraction in comics, but has also faced criticism for the limitations of the modernist formalist theory it deploys.

Several comics theorists have taken a more context-based approach to abstraction. Jan Baetens, for example, has built on the idea that abstraction in comics is not just resistance to figuration at the level of the panel, but resistance to narrative at the level of sequence. He affirms the heuristic self-reflexivity of abstraction proposed by Molotiu and Beronä—abstraction draws attention to comics' overlooked material and plastic qualities and “promotes a critical thinking” (2011, p. 104). However, Baetens takes a functional rather than formalist angle, examining how *zones* and *degrees* of figuration and abstraction, narrativity and non-narrativity, dialectically interact, on the basis of a tendency to decipher sequences of panels “in story-like terms” even in apparently non-sequitur conjunctions (2011, p. 95)—recalling Beronä's “hungry eye”. Moreover, the kind of resistant form-directed reading invited by abstract comics is conditional on contextual factors both material (e.g. the formatting of panels on pages) and cognitive (the reader's prior familiarity with, and expectations of, comics).

Thierry Groensteen, who examined the possibilities of abstract comics in the 1980s by creating his own experimental “proto-page” collage (2014), similarly sees explorations of abstraction as having brought to light the different ways assembled images can be co-related without constituting a narrative, ultimately arriving at seven subcategories of “infra-narrative”: amalgam, inventory, variation, inflection, decomposition, seriation and fragmentation (2014, p. 171, 2013, p. 17). Like Baetens, however, he insists on the role of context in framing whether examples named abstract comics can be *read as comics*—as page rather than tableau, “contiguous images...perceived as consecutive” (2013, p. 13).

The most comprehensive work on *Abstraction and Comics*—the two volumes of comics and scholarly essays edited by Aarnoud Rommens, Benoît Crucifix, Björn-Olav Dozo, Erwin Dejasse and Pablo Turnes (2019) is positioned in a more firmly antagonistic relationship to Molotiu's formalist modernist approach. Rommens' introduction lambasts the alignment of abstract comics with institutionalised, enervated modernist art and Art History, and especially Greenbergian ideas of abstraction as a reduction to a pure essence and commitment to “an exclusively formal self-reflexivity” (2019, p. 27). Such attempts at legitimisation by annexing the “aura” of the modernist avant-garde entrench reactionary aspects of Comics Studies, requiring the development of prescriptive definitions, taxonomies and canons, and obscure the critical edge of contemporary abstract comics. By contrast, *Abstraction and Comics* approaches abstraction “as a way of affirming ‘the outside’”, rejecting discourses of medium-specificity and formalist aesthetics in favour of seeing comics as “a material poetic/technic that is instantiated in correlation with socio-political variables” (ibid). In line with art historian Ryan Holmberg's

criticism of Molotiu's anthology (2012), Rommens highlights abstract comics' "anarchic engagement with other media" and "with the political" (2019, p. 27), their enlisting of glitch, noise and critical network aesthetics to probe contemporary surveillance and cognitive capitalism, precarity and the Anthropocene (as Holmberg remarks, suggesting more productive alignments with the computer-age abstraction of Neo-Geo, net art and laptop music than mid-century abstract painting). Ilan Manouach, for example, whose work is included in *Abstraction and Comics*, is a key figure in deploying processes of appropriation, abstraction and displacement in speculative "post-digital conceptual comics" (2019) as a way to critically engage questions of globalisation, automation, and precarious, networked, immaterial labour, as related to the medium's "industrial affordances" (see also Crucifix 2020).

While diverse, the essays included in the volume generally adopt Baetens' more functional approach than Molotiu's acute formalism. Rather than a reduction to the purity of comics' form emancipated from narrative and/or signification, and binary oppositions of abstraction and narration/figuration, they explore spectra—degrees of narrativity (Postema 2019), clines of abstraction (Fisher Davies 2019), the ways they interweave in temporary and local zones (Lefèvre 2019), and the convergence of "abstract and narrative reading" (Crucifix and Meesters 2019). Simon Grennan's chapter most openly criticises Molotiu's framing of abstract comics as an ideological manoeuvre, demonstrating how nominally abstract and non-abstract comics share depictive affects and a "mandate to imagine" in Kendall Walton's terms, "despite the fact that each page mandates us to imagine ourselves seeing quite different things" (2019, p. 78)—emphasising how depiction prompts conventionalised, socially cued acts of imagining.

Further criticisms of Molotiu's formalism are levelled at the ahistorical way it papers over divergent tendencies within modernist art. Fred Andersson (2019) draws distinctions between geometric and non-geometric abstraction—what he terms the "aesthetic abstraction" of Kasimir Malevich and the "expressive abstraction" of Pollock. But furthermore, he asserts the importance of attending to ideological divisions within modernism: "it is virtually impossible to maintain clear and straightforward distinctions between in abstract, concrete and constructivist art because these terms were used by various artists in different contexts and with widely divergent aims" (p. 387). Bringing comics up against a broader range of fine art examples enables a more nuanced exploration of their interplay. Andersson relates abstract comics to the Lettriste *hypergraphies* of Roland Sabatier and Roberto Altmann in ways that develop McCloud's discussion of "iconic abstraction".⁷ Art historian Katherine Roeder challenges the sublimation model by exploring how Cliff Sterett's associations with modernist painters like Bernard Karfiol and Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and the shared influence of chronophotography, silent film and jazz, led to his use of "colourful, syncopated abstraction" in 1920s' and 1930s' strips (2019, p. 91).

In the collection's final chapter, Erin La Cour (2019) deploys Rosalind Krauss' rejection of Greenbergian medium-specificity in favour of post-medium

self-reflexivity to scope an alternative approach to exhibiting comics, one that withdraws from the blind alleys of both high modernist art discourse and restrictive formalist approaches to delimiting comics as a medium, to better explore their affective qualities. This aligns with a move she observes in contemporary work on comics abstraction away from the pitfalls of defining “what comics *are*, especially in relation to literature and art... towards a consideration of what comics *do*” (la Cour 2022). This suggests how, looking forward, Comics Studies and Art History might chart a route beyond the tensions of the 1967 Musée des Arts Décoratifs exhibition, seeing both comics and art as heterogeneous, contextually determined and dynamically interacting.

The following chapters in Part II of this book explore how the methods and concepts of Art History might further inform the contemporary study of comics, pursuing some of the pathways opened up by the early comics scholars discussed in this section.

NOTES

1. For more on comics as/and the avant-garde, see the chapter “[Re-framing the Avant-Garde: Different Ways of Seeing Escape](#)”.
2. These debates about specificity and development of formal theory were closely connected to competing definitions of comics, and approaches to definition, with both what Ian Hague (2014) calls “elemental” and “knowingly incomplete” types of definitions often centred on observable formal elements, with contextual, historical and social factors glossed to a greater or lesser extent.
3. For more on the modernist formalism of Fry, Bell and Greenberg and its legacies in Comics Studies, see the chapter “[Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore’s I Can Hear the Grass Grow](#)”.
4. This assessment of Lichtenstein as reworking comics solely in the interest of visual form aligns with early critics who defended his work on modernist formalist grounds as affiliated with post-painterly abstraction, despite the way Pop Art’s anonymity and denial of gesture troubled the (masculinist) authorial presence of the artist. See Whiting (1992).
5. Deemed a defining formal characteristic of comics, most notably by R. C. Harvey (1996), visual-verbal interdependence has been generally displaced by an essentialism of sequentiality in formalist approaches to comics.
6. This book uses an abstract page numbering system of geometric shapes rather than numerals, which we haven’t attempted to reproduce here.
7. Also developing McCloud’s connections of comics to Dadaist and Futurist concrete poetry, Ryan Holmberg has criticised the ocularcentric bias of Western formalist aesthetics and the theorisation of abstract comics, which ignores comics’ integrated audiovisual qualities and thus the audiovisual abstraction of wordless comics like those by Yokoyama Yūichi—reminding us that wordless comics aren’t silent (2017).

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PART II

Possibilities for Comics Art History Now



Challenging Canons and the Challenge of Style: Visualising the Baroque Storyworld of Judge Dredd’s “The Cursed Earth”

Abstract This chapter revisits the notion of canons, schools and styles established by the members of SOCERLID in the 1960s to raise the status of comics. Drawing on Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo’s critical evaluation of canon formation in Comics Studies it explores how these art-historical concepts have subsequently been applied and revised over time. It considers how the concepts of style and schools have been used to define and evaluate the canonical status of certain genres of comics and the problematic use of stylistic terms such as Classical and Baroque, particularly in relation to newspaper strips. The chapter concludes by rigorously applying the comparative stylistic categories developed by art historian Heinrich Wölfflin to distinguish between Renaissance and Baroque art to analyse the visual styles employed in the Judge Dredd storyline “The Cursed Earth” published in the British comic *2000AD*.

Keywords Canons • Judge Dredd • Styles • Schools • Wölfflin • *2000AD*

CONTESTING CANONS IN COMICS STUDIES

Although notions of canonical status are contested, they remain central to Art History as a discipline and:

There are numerous reasons why some works from part of a canon and others do not, and why individuals’ reputations rise and fall over time. Some scholars argue that the bases for making such judgements are objective and others that canons are nothing more than constructions formed to support the interests of power elites... the important point is the need to be aware of the artificiality of the canon and the criteria used to construct it. (Fernie 1995, p. 329)

The artificiality of the canon has, lately, been examined in Comics Studies but the concept is still often applied in an uncritical manner. In “Long-Length Serials in the Golden Age of Comic Strips: Production and Reception” Daniel Stein and Lukas Etter follow the lead of SOCERLID from the 1960s in designating American newspaper strips as a “Golden Age” even if they focus more on humour strips rather than the adventure ones favoured by their French counterparts (2018, pp. 39–58). Peter Cullen Bryan’s recent study of Donald Duck (2021) examines the translation and adaptation of these comics and their reception by German fan cultures, by focusing firmly on canonical figures such as Carl Barks and Don Rosa rather than works by numerous, often anonymous, creators working for the German market.

In these examples the factors leading to canon formation, in both fandom and Comics Studies, are implicit rather than explicitly examined and discussed. However, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo in *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time* (2016) have taken Bourdieu’s notions of symbolic capital and the field of cultural production to critically deconstruct the ways in which certain works gain, and potentially lose, canonical status over time. Underpinning their argument is the notion that literary standards of canonicity dominate Comics Studies and that approaches taken from other disciplines should be employed for evaluating the canonical status of different kinds of comics. They focus on the greatest comic book so there is no space for an analysis of newspaper strips from the 1930s, that are still viewed by many as forming a key canonical body of work. There is also little analysis of British comics, examples of which form the focus of this present chapter, apart from the work of Alan Moore, and the “British Invasion” of the American comic book industry in the 1980s, which was “self-consciously literary” (2016, p. 53).

However, in three of their case studies Beaty and Woo do focus on the ways in which visual style is indicative of canonical status. The work of Robert Crumb is marked as being the most closely connected to the art world through the sale and exhibition of original art with the suggestion that if Comics Studies had been shaped by Art History then Crumb’s status would be higher than at present (2016, pp. 27–41). In individual chapters on the superhero comics of Jack Kirby and Rob Liefeld the visual style of the art itself is seen as the marker of their canonical status, certainly amongst fans if not comic scholars. Drawing heavily on Charles Hatfield’s *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (2012) Beaty and Woo evocatively pronounce Kirby’s work as featuring:

a collection of rough-hewn homunculi battering one another in landscapes alive with scintillating energies and full of baroque, mysterious technological devices. His figures were often remarkably ugly, and yet the whole—the kinetic, rampaging whole—somehow worked. (2016, p. 48)

This attempt to verbalise Kirby’s work is effective but lacks precision with terms such as Baroque and kinetic included without any clear sense of what this means stylistically beyond expressing the general dynamism of the work.¹

Similarly, the superhero body in Liefeld's work is described as drawing and building on Kirby's dynamism to become a sign of excess "a hyperreal caricature of a cartoon" (2016, p. 80) considered by many as unworthy of serious academic attention.² Although this analysis by Beaty and Woo is useful in determining the position of these artists within the canon it is necessary to look elsewhere for an in-depth consideration of style itself.

THE CHALLENGE OF STYLE FOR COMICS STUDIES

In Comics Studies the concept of style is seen as an issue fraught with difficulty with Hatfield stressing that:

In general, the problem of style has proven a hard nut for analysis; many comics scholars have despaired of getting a handle on it. For example, R. C. Harvey has said that style 'the mark of the maker' is too personal for analysis: too peculiar to the individual practitioner too subtle in its effects. (2012, p. 37)

Notwithstanding the challenge many have attempted to find ways of dealing with the issue both in general theoretical terms and in relation to the work of individuals or even schools of artists.

Some have employed both practice and theory to the problem of defining and determining style in general terms. For example, Matt Madden's *99 Ways to Tell a Story* (2006), inspired by Raymond Queneau's book *Exercises in Style* (1947), takes a basic comic strip narrative, and repeats this story using different approaches some of which reproduce the style of individual artists and with others taking genre tropes as a starting point. Simon Grennan is critical of Madden's approach arguing that these exercises do not accurately employ either the actual forms of representation used by individual artists or expected genre tropes, resulting in drawings that tell us more about Madden's ways of drawing in different styles rather than the styles themselves (2017, pp. 231–8). The comic strip "Demonstrations" that Grennan himself created to support his arguments in *A Theory of Narrative Drawing* are more productive in showing what happens when an artist submits themselves to the stylistic imperatives of another artist, thereby undercutting Phillippe Marion's notion of the *graphiateur* whereby individual style is considered a marker of unmediated expression in the production of comics (2017, pp. 162–7).³ This point is central to the argument presented in the rest of this chapter which is concerned with notions of collective rather than individual style and developing a methodology for identifying both stylistic similarities and differences.

Many other comics scholars taking an overarching theoretical approach to the issue of style follow the precedent of Scott McCloud's pyramid diagram from *Understanding Comics* by placing realistic and simplified cartoon images at opposite ends of a spectrum of the kinds of styles used in comics (1993, pp. 52–3). Joseph Witek follows this model in his study of Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Robert Crumb's *Dirty Laundry* comic series examining, what he

considers to be, the two dominant styles used in comics, naturalistic (which in this case means much the same as McCloud's use of realistic) and cartoon modes. The difficulties of applying such terminology are evident in the title of Witek's study which includes the terms illustration (presumably standing for naturalistic) and caricature (substituting for cartoon). However, his analysis does not go on to define the similarities and differences between all four terms, seeing the pairs of concepts as loosely interchangeable (2012, pp. 27–42). In contrast, John Holbo charts the relationship between caricature and comics with a detailed examination of the relationships between caricature, cartoons, and realism, tracing their development from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries, but he is still uneasy about determining any of these terms as having a stylistic core as such. Holbo draws heavily on Ernst Gombrich's art-historical theorising around this subject before concluding that his own study of comics and caricature "does not point us to any particular corner of comics, but it may open up all of art history" (2016, p. 78), suggesting there are untapped resources to bring to the evaluation of style in comics.

STYLES AND SCHOOLS AS CANONICAL MARKERS

The issue of realistic/naturalistic versus cartoon styles also underlies the work of comics scholars who take a historical rather than theoretical approach to the subject, grouping artists in schools by style and furthermore employing art-historical terminology. This approach, first developed by Couperie and the other members of SOCERLID in the 1960s, has now expanded to take account of other comics cultures, particularly Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, in addition to American newspaper strips from the 1930s.

Ligne Claire (Clear Line) was a style that emerged in Europe after the Second World War with Hergé as the main exponent and his creation Tintin as the most outstanding example. The name for this style was retrospectively coined by the Dutch comic artist, designer and illustrator Jooste Swarte in 1977, and primarily highlights the simplified mono-linear line work and minimal shading present in such works. Hergé and his contemporaries Paul Cuvelier, Edgar Pierre Jacobs, Jacques Martin and Willy Vandersteen, all of whom worked in variations of the *Ligne Claire* style for the magazine *Tintin*, collectively formed what came to be known as the *École de Bruxelles* and worked in a studio system to ensure consistency of the house style (Grove, 2010, pp. 122–3, 140–5; Lus Arana 2022a, pp. 52–3; Miller, 2007, pp. 17–21). In part because of the *Ligne Claire* style and the formation of a distinctive school both Hergé and Tintin are considered canonical in Franco-Belgian Comic Studies. In Miller and Beaty's *The French Comics Theory Reader* out of the 25 selected texts 3 focus exclusively on what they describe as Hergé's masterpiece *Les Bijoux de la Castafiore*, and in defending this selection, they note that "we might have opted for literally dozens of additional interpretations of this text" (2014, p. 12).

Ligne Claire has also endured beyond the *École de Bruxelles* with Jooste Swarte employing this style himself and Moebius (Jean Giraud) acknowledging

the influence on his science fiction work (Grove 2010, p. 46). Generally, these evaluations of the *Ligne Claire* style simply reference the supposedly self-evident qualities in works by Hergé and other members of the *École de Bruxelles* without subjecting them to scrutiny. A recent study by Hugo Frey examines the work of creators, both comic and fine artists, who have taken *Ligne Claire* shorn of its original function to provide narrative clarity and developed it into a new kind of neo-abstract language. Frey's evaluations are more helpful in determining the essential features of the style by developing an analysis more closely aligned with fine art aesthetics (Frey 2019, pp. 329–40).

Emerging alongside the *Ligne Claire* style was work produced for the contemporaneous magazine *Spirou* which has been variously described as the *École de Charleroi* and the *École de Marcinelle*, as in the 1940s the magazine's offices were in Marcinelle, near Charleroi in Belgium. The artists associated with this school were Morris (Maurice de Bevere), Peyo (Pierre Culliford), André Franquin, Jijé (Joseph Gillain) and Maurice Tillieux, who all had what has been described as a virtuoso and instinctive drawing style, displaying a stylistic lucidity. Swarte, again retrospectively, described this work as the *Style Atome*, for the inventive modernity that was demonstrated in many of the strips in the magazine, linking this to the Atomium one of the futuristic buildings at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair (Grove 2010, p. 140; Lus Arana 2022b, p. 186; Miller 2007, pp. 19–21) Again Swarte, but now alongside other artists such as Javier Mariscal and Daniel Torres, has been seen to have combined aspects of *Ligne Claire* with the *Style Atome* in his work during the 1970s and 1980s. However, as with *Ligne Claire* the precise visual features of *Style Atome* are loosely defined with only a lucid virtuosity, the depiction of a futuristic modernity and a canonical body of works by a school of artists as a guide.⁴ The issue of realistic/naturalistic versus cartoon styles also underlies the distinctions between these two schools with *Ligne Claire* tending towards realism with the *Style Atome* tending more towards the cartoon end of the spectrum.

Dave Sim's self-published comic book *Glamourpuss* (2008–12), although ostensibly a parody of contemporary fashion magazines, feeds into these debates by exploring the emergence of photorealism as a style, and distinct school, within American newspaper strips between the 1930s and the 1960s. In charting this development Sim references inter-related schools such as the Hal Foster School, which Sim calls non-stylised realism; the Alex Raymond Schools, of stylised realism and photorealism; and the Milton Caniff Schools, of cartoon realism and photorealism. A key aspect of Sim's analysis is using his own practice to recreate panels by these, and other artists, thereby exploring how photorealism emerged, developed, and continued as both a school and a style in the work of John Prentice, Stan Drake, Al Williamson and Neal Adams.⁵ Again realistic and cartoon-like aspects are central to the ways in which different styles, and in this case schools, are conceived.

These schools are certainly deemed as canonical because of the styles employed but they were not examined using art-historical terms. For this we must turn to the debates surrounding American newspaper strips which are

closely aligned to the approaches first instigated by SOCERLID back in the 1960s. Pascal Lefèvre's recent overview of the history of the newspaper strip focuses on "two dominant publication formats (dailies and Sundays) and their particular affordances, its basic use of text and images, its dominant graphic styles and genres, its typical production and distribution process, and finally its scholarship" (2016, p. 16). Although Lefèvre's overview is global in its coverage, his use of the term "classic" is reserved for reprints of American strips from the 1930s such as E. C. Segar's *Popeye* and Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*. When discussing style, Lefèvre references the naturalistic and cartoon modes discussed earlier, before going on to denote Foster's *Tarzan* as being "academic" while Burne Hogarth's version of the strip is considered as "baroque renderings" and Milton Caniff's work is described as employing "chiaroscuro effects", all art-historical terms we saw used by Couperie, and again rather loosely defined (2016, pp. 19–20).

As noted above, the work of Jack Kirby has likewise been described in art-historical terms with Witek suggesting that his page designs from the 1940s, often produced collaboratively with Joe Simon, are examples of high Baroque (2009, p. 154). In *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* Hatfield provides a lengthy and detailed analysis of the development of Kirby's style in relation to realism arguing that it is narrative as opposed to illustrative drawing and influenced by the newspaper strips of Foster, Raymond and particularly Caniff. Art-historical terms abound in this analysis with Caniff employing "rugged chiaroscuro", Foster's work perceived as "grand illustrative Romanticism... fresh out of the Golden Age of book illustration" and the suggestion that Raymond "trumped Foster's high Romanticism with a florid, baroque and languidly erotic manner" (2012, p. 60). In explaining Kirby's shift towards a more abstract visual style Hatfield stresses the importance of the loose brushwork in Caniff's work then concentrates on the impact Burne Hogarth's dynamic figures had on Kirby with their "highly exaggerated contrasts" (2012, p. 61). This expression explains one aspect of the Baroque tendencies in Kirby's work, but Hatfield generally references art-historical concepts such as Romanticism without unpacking them in any detail.

In contrast Thierry Smolderen's study of the nineteenth origins of comics is more precise in referencing Romanticism, acknowledging the primitivist tendencies within this art movement when examining the emergence of sequential narrative in the work of artists and illustrators such as Rodolphe Töpffer, Cham (Charles Amédée de Noé), Gustave Doré and George Cruikshank (2014, pp. 25–74).⁶ Smolderen is also accurate in his assessment of the use of Neo-Classical drawing styles influenced by the British sculptor John Flaxman by certain caricaturists such as Cruikshank but rather loose in the way he employs the term Baroque. He clearly outlines the aesthetic ideas of William Hogarth, in particular the concept of the "serpentine line" but considers this to be an example of the Baroque rather than belonging to the Rococo movement with which Hogarth is usually associated (2014, pp. 5, 12). A chapter evocatively titled "Winsor McCay: The Last Baroque" attempts to connect this style to this

cartoonist's work on *Little Nemo in Slumberland* but lacks art-historical precision. Smolderen correctly notes that "The portico of Slumberland Palace was inspired by the golden doors of the Modern Transportation Building at the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition" but then incorrectly states that "The baroque architecture of this memorable world's fair was a major source of McCay's architectural imagination" (2014, p. 148). This architecture clearly influenced McCay, but the style is usually associated with bringing "to the fore a more Classical and ordered sort of Neo-Academicism" (Hitchcock 1977, pp. 323–5) very different from a Baroque sensibility. Throughout the chapter Smolderen uses a commonplace interpretation of Baroque rather than considering it as a strict stylistic category. *Little Nemo in Slumberland* is described as "a truly baroque labyrinthine voyage, filled with serpentine lines, kaleidoscopic effects, perforated panels, and flamboyant architecture" (2014, p. 154) but the terms used in this description are redolent of the Rococo than the Baroque and possibly more Art Nouveau than any other style.⁷

In his essay "What is Baroque" the art historian Erwin Panofsky notes that the Baroque started life as a pejorative term of exclusion in contrast to the art of the Renaissance and that it has often been inaccurately co-opted by disciplines outside of the fine arts (1995, pp. 20–1). It is clear from the examples cited above that many comics scholars have used art-historical terminology inexactly, particularly the concept of the Baroque. This chapter now considers how such terms, drawing directly on art-historical theory, might be more profitably employed in the analysis of style in comics.

PICTURING A BAROQUE STORYWORLD: SEEING "THE CURSED EARTH" THROUGH WÖLFFLIN'S COMPARATIVE METHODOLOGY

In this section the comparative methodology concerning style developed by Henrich Wölfflin in *Principles of Art History* (1915) is used to explain how the artwork produced by Mike McMahon and Brian Bolland for the Judge Dredd storyline "The Cursed Earth", originally published in the British anthology comic *2000AD* in 1978, is complimentary when contrasted with artwork by earlier British comic artists. This analysis has its origins in a re-reading of the early issues of *2000AD* for another research project and the unbidden observation that although two artists with very different art styles worked on this storyline their work shared features that were difficult to explain given current thinking on the issue of style within Comics Studies.

"The Cursed Earth" appeared in Progs 61–85 of *2000AD* and was written by Pat Mills with support from John Wagner, the creator and regular writer of "Judge Dredd", and Jack Adrian.⁸ This extended narrative charted Judge Dredd's journey from Mega-City One across the Cursed Earth, a lawless radioactive wasteland resulting from nuclear war, to save Mega-City Two by delivering a vaccine to cure the deadly 2T(FRU)T virus. By the time of "The Cursed Earth" storyline "Judge Dredd" had become the most significant strip in

2000AD. It chronicled the twenty-first-century justice system in America where the Judges in Mega-City One were judge, jury and executioner all rolled into one with Judge Dredd being the most uncompromising of them all—as his tagline proclaimed “Judge Dredd is the Law!”

The pressures of weekly delivery of “The Cursed Earth” extended storyline meant two artists Mike McMahon, who had regularly drawn “Judge Dredd” from its first appearance in Prog 2 of *2000AD* in 1977, and Brian Bolland worked on different weekly episodes. McMahon and Bolland were relative newcomers to comics when they started working on *2000AD* in the late 1970s and as such were selected to provide a new more dynamic visual style with the support of art editors such as Doug Church, Jan Shepherd and Kevin O’Neill (McDonald 2012, pp. 26–32). When comparing *2000AD* covers by McMahon and Bolland featuring Twerk, an alien companion who Dredd rescued from mutant slave traders in the Cursed Earth, at first sight their artwork seems very different with McMahon employing an expressive, loose scratchy line and distortion in contrast to Bolland’s more precise graphic rendering (Figs. 1 and 2).

The change of artist from one weekly episode to another could have had a jarring effect but they worked effectively together to create a convincing story-world introducing the Cursed Earth as a new environment shaping Judge Dredd’s character. In terms of world building Mega-City One was already well-developed through the “Robot Wars” (Progs 9–17) storyline and Judge Dredd’s secondment to Luna One, a city on the moon where he met Judges from Texas City and the Sov Block (Progs 42–59) expanded his environment. However, “The Cursed Earth” was the first to develop a detailed backstory that would form the basis of future “Judge Dredd” narratives. “Judge Dredd” has not received much attention from comics scholars—both Rory Olcayto (2012) and Dan Smith (2013) have examined the role Mega-City One played in the strip and Brian Ireland (2009) has considered “The Cursed Earth” from the perspective of road movie tropes, but none of these authors have focused on the stylistic aspects of the artwork.

Pat Mills, as co-creator of *2000AD* and developer of the “Judge Dredd” strip, also notes the importance of Mega-City One as a setting and stressed that “The Cursed Earth” allowed him to create the fantastical inhabitants of this radioactive wasteland, reintroduce characters such as the punk biker Spikes Harvey Rotten and develop new characters related to the wider *2000AD* universe thereby expanding the overall storyworld (2017, pp. 48–110).

When describing the creation and development of Judge Dredd as a character Mills suggests that the artist Carlos Ezquerra’s original designs had a “flamboyant, heavily padded, “busy” look” that “were extremely “Baroque”” (2017, p. 50) a point that is central here to analysing the artwork of McMahon and Bolland on “The Cursed Earth”.

Judge Dredd quickly became the canonical character in *2000AD*, and the schedule of producing six pages a week meant that six different artists were used in the first 20 weekly episodes alone. The editorial team was clearly aware of the different styles used on the series acknowledging this in the *Judge Dredd*



Fig. 1 Cover Prog 69 2000AD 17 June 1978. Mike McMahon (Art)

Annual of 1981, where they showed examples of the 14 artists who had worked on Judge Dredd up to that point (Fig. 3). Artists such as Ezquerra, McMahon and Ian Gibson could be seen to fall more on the expressive side in terms of the mark-making with Bolland, Gary Leech and Brett Ewins all using a more precise graphic style.



Fig. 2 Cover Prog 82 2000AD 16 September 1978. Brian Bolland (Art)

Interestingly in Prog 58 of 2000AD, the final Luna City “Judge Dredd” story, McMahon and Bolland had already collaborated, with Bolland drawing the opening double-page spread and McMahon the following four pages. When discussing his work on “Judge Dredd” Bolland notes the influence of



Fig. 3 “The Changing Face of Dredd” *Judge Dredd Annual* 1981, pp. 38–9

McMahon, “I think all the idiosyncrasies of the character were really thanks to him ...Mick’s version was the one we all aimed for” (Khoury 2004, p. 52), which suggests the work of these artists might have more in common than first meets the eye, particularly when compared to the work of earlier generations of British comic book artists. This argument is developed by looking at how art historians have considered the problematic issue of style before focusing on the analysis of style developed by Wölfflin to explain differences between the “Classic Art” of the Renaissance and the Baroque style that followed. As Gombrich notes

It was Wölfflin who gave art history the fateful tool of systematic comparison: it was he who introduced into our lecture rooms a need for two lanterns and two screens for the purpose of sharpening the eye to the stylistic differences between two comparable works. (1966, p. 90)

Style is as much debated and contested in Art History as it is in Comics Studies. In his discussion of style in *Art History and its Methods*, Eric Fernie stresses the importance of Wölfflin, determining that “The analysis of style is one of the defining methods of the history of art” (1995, pp. 361), before directly addressing comics and style in popular culture, contrasting the traditional layout employed in a 1950s’ British adventure story from the *Eagle* with the dynamic style of a late 1960s’ *Captain America* comic book (p. 363).

Fernie additionally highlights the ways in which style was criticised within Art History from the 1970s onwards because it was bound up with connoisseurship and maintaining the canonical value systems but still maintains that it is a valuable tool for the discipline and in examining visual culture in general (1995, pp. 361–4). Todd Cronan’s review of the 100th Anniversary Edition of Wölfflin’s text similarly notes that style is still central to Art History and that Wölfflin’s comparative methodology has become embedded in the humanities as Visual Culture Studies has emerged as an independent discipline, where his concepts can, and have been, applied to any kind of visual material (2015).

For Wölfflin his principles:

arose from the need of establishing on a firmer basis the classifications of art history: not the judgment of value — there is no question of that here — but the classifications of style. It is greatly to the interest of the historian of style first and foremost to recognise what mode of imaginative process he has before him in each individual case. (1950, p. vii)

Wölfflin notes the difficulties of applying these principles across different national cultures and determines that when examining “period” style:

This idea is best to be obtained in Italy, because the development there fulfilled itself independently of outside influences and the general nature of the Italian character remains fully recognisable throughout. The transition from renaissance to baroque is a classic example of how a new *Zeitgeist* enforces a new form. (p. 9)

In his analysis of this transition Wölfflin employs five pairs of concepts where the first term is a formal feature of art in the Renaissance and the second term is a formal feature of art in the Baroque. These paired concepts are Linear and Painterly, Plane and Recession, Closed and Open Form, Multiplicity and Unity, and Absolute and Relative Clarity (pp. 14–16). Wölfflin argues that the development from one term to the other is visible in all artworks of any specific period and therefore uses examples taken from architecture, drawing, painting and sculpture to explain his thesis. Since the aim here is to apply this methodology to explain the shared formal features of McMahon and Bolland’s work we will confine ourselves to examples of drawings as they are closer to comic book pages in terms of the media used.

In his chapter on Multiplicity and Unity Wölfflin takes two drawings of interiors containing multiple figures, one attributed to Hieronymus Bosch⁹ and the other by Adriaen van Ostade, with the Bosch standing as an example of the “Classic Art” of the Renaissance and the Ostade as an example of the Baroque (Fig. 4). For simplicity’s sake these two drawings will be considered in relation to all five of Wölfflin’s paired concepts.

To first take Linear and Painterly in the Bosch all of the objects in the space are clearly delineated from each other, this most notable in the figures who are individually distinct even when grouped together. In contrast in the Ostade

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Hieronymus Bosch



Ostade

Fig. 4 Supporting illustrations by Hieronymus Bosch and Adriaen van Ostade from Henrich Wölfflin (1950), *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, p. 173

rather than individual objects we see masses of form where line is less important in defining objects, and the clustered figures suggest "the apprehension of the world as a shifting semblance" (p. 14).

In these drawings Plane and Recession is the most evident of Wölfflin's paired concepts. In the Bosch the elements of the picture recede as if presented on stage flats, the fallen stool, dishes and dog lie in the extreme foreground, to the right a couple come next and are followed by the grouped figures surrounding the mantelpiece before we reach the figure leaning through the window frame in the background. No such description is possible for the Ostade where we have the extreme perspective of the furniture, roof timbers and mantelpiece leading us directly through the space, with the groups of figures gradually moving the eye through and across the space with no sense that they exist on different layers as in the Bosch. As Wölfflin puts it, "Classic Art reduces the parts of a total form to a sequence of planes, the baroque emphasises depth" (p. 15).

In terms of Closed and Open Form for the Renaissance everything in the artwork focuses in on the image itself whereas for the Baroque the artwork expands beyond its confines. So, for the Bosch we can see that the figures either side focus inwards to the hearth at the centre of the drawing. In contrast with the Ostade there is no centre as such with as much attention given to the periphery, as in the figures around the hearth at the extreme right, as to any other part of the drawing, giving a sense that there is life beyond the edge of the frame.

For Multiplicity and Unity Wölfflin describes the two drawings in the following terms starting with Bosch where everything is "unified in feeling and effect as a whole, yet a series of motives each of which claims uniform interest for itself" (p. 172). By which he means each group of figures is self-contained, telling its own story and still contributing to the overall narrative. By comparison, in Ostade's drawing "From the tangle of the whole, the group of three standing figures emerges, the highest wave in the undulation of the picture. Not detached from the total movement, yet a major motive [sic] which immediately brings rhythm to the scene" (p. 172). Here this group of three figures is significant yet still mainly considered as a part of the whole.

Absolute and Relative Clarity is perhaps best considered as a summation of the previous paired concepts with a focus on the notion that "the explicitness of the subject is not [sic] longer the sole purpose of the presentment. Composition, light and colour no longer merely serve to define form but have their own life" (p. 16). So, with Bosch the subject is clearly the focus of the work and the narrative relies on the relative relation of all the individual figures but with Ostade it is not so much a narrative being conveyed as an impression of life being lived.

Having established the five paired concepts employed by Wölfflin it is time to employ them to examine the similarities between McMahon and Bolland, who in this instance are considered as standing in for the Baroque. The obvious differences between the work of these two artists have already been noted and

Wölfflin himself examined this issue of difference in relation to artists of the German Renaissance:

we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that within the same people —ethnographically united or not — different types of imagination constantly appear side by side. Even in Italy this disunion exists, but it comes most clearly to light in Germany. Grünewald is a different imaginative type from Dürer, although they are contemporaries. But we cannot say that that destroys the significance of the development in time: seen from a longer range, these two types re-unite in a common style, i.e. we at once recognise the elements which unite the two as representatives of their generation. (1950, pp. xiii–ix)

In the case of McMahon and Bolland we might similarly say that although they are of different imaginative types, they share common stylistic features that for this analysis make them the equivalent of Wölfflin's notion of the Baroque.

To apply Wölfflin's methodology effectively there needs to be a comparison that can stand in for the Classic or Renaissance. The story "One-Eyed Jack" that ran in the British anthology comic *Valiant* between 1975 and 1976 makes an ideal comparative example.¹⁰ Written by John Wagner and drawn by John Cooper it was according to Wagner the direct precursor of "Judge Dredd" and told the story of a similarly violent figure of authority, in this case a New York police officer, with both characters being heavily influenced by the Dirty Harry film series (McDonald 2012, pp. 9–25). The tone of "One-Eyed Jack" and the stark, high-contrast style of Cooper's artwork can be seen in the cover of *Valiant (and Vulcan)* from 15 May 1976, where One-Eyed Jack is depicted both in dramatic gun-toting pose and during a deadly gun battle on the streets of New York (Fig. 5).

Cooper was of a different generation from McMahon and Bolland being some ten years older. His comic book career started with humour strips in the early 1960s, then graduating to adventure stories such as "Secret Agent 21", "Captain Scarlet" and "Thunderbirds" for *TV Century 21* in the late 1960s before extensive work on "Johnny Red", drawing over 300 episodes, as well as "Action Force" and "Dredger" for *Battle Picture Weekly* in the 1970s (McDonald 2012, pp. 9–25).¹¹

In the following analysis the opening page from Cooper's 'One-Eyed Jack' in *Valiant (and Vulcan)* 15th May 1976 (Fig. 6) is contrasted with the opening double-page spread of Chapter 4 of the 'The Cursed Earth' (King Rat) by McMahon (Fig. 7) and the opening double-page spread of Chapter 10 of the 'The Cursed Earth' (Requiem for an Alien) by Bolland (Fig. 8). The artwork by McMahon and Bolland was originally printed in colour as centre-page spreads in *2000AD* but here black-and-white images from the reprint edition are used for the sake of clarity.



Fig. 5 Cover *Valiant (and Vulcan)* 15 May 1976. John Cooper (Art)

Before applying Wölfflin's methodology some general comparative points reveal clear differences in terms of layout and panel structure between Cooper's work on "One-Eye Jack" and the work of McMahon and Bolland on "Judge Dredd". Large splash panels are used in "Judge Dredd"—one large panel filling most of the opening double-page spreads with supporting panels either overlaid or placed either side. In contrast "One-Eyed Jack" has much smaller



Fig. 6 Opening page “One-Eyed Jack” *Valiant (and Vulcan)* 15 May 1976. John Cooper (Art)

splash panels with the largest panels occupying at most half a page. This impacts on the number of panels per page with “One-Eyed Jack” having on average almost twice as many panels per page. Given these differences Wölfflin’s methodology will be used, taking each of the paired concepts in turn, to examine the



Fig. 7 Opening double-page spread of Chapter 4 of the 'The Cursed Earth' (King Rat) Prog 64 *2000AD* 13th May 1978. Mike McMahon (Art)



Fig. 8 Opening double-page spread of Chapter 10 of the 'The Cursed Earth' (Requiem for an Alien) Prog 70 2000AD 24th June 1978. Brian Bolland (Art)

stylistic features in individual panels rather than the overall layout of pages or double-page spreads.

Firstly, taking Linear and Painterly if we look at the opening panel of Cooper's "One-Eyed Jack" then the figures in the window, policemen and suspect, motorbike and police car are all clearly defined with each element distinctly outlined from each other. In McMahon's splash panel the rats and figures in both the foreground and background are not very clearly distinct from each other or in themselves, with rat merging with rat and figure merging into figure, overall rats, figures and background are difficult to distinguish at points. In Bolland's splash panel, perhaps as a consequence of the unusual viewpoints employed, the Slay Riders and mounts at the top merge together into one indistinct grouping with Twerk and Judge Dredd on his Lawmaster motorbike at the bottom of the page being even more difficult to decipher.

In terms of Plane and Recession in the main panel of Cooper's page we see two silhouetted figures in the extreme foreground with a shotgun firing at the policemen and suspect on the stairs in the middle of the panel with the figures in the window in the background, each on a distinct plane within the image. In McMahon's splash panel the main feature in terms of recession is the stream of rats spiralling without break across and through the image forcing the eye into the infinitely receding distance. In Bolland's splash panel the extreme perspective of the worm's-eye view of the Slay Riders contrasts with the contradictory bird's-eye view of Twerk and Judge Dredd; there are no planes of recession, and the result is an uncertainty to the depth of the image with no clear horizon in sight.

The contrast between Closed and Open Form is also evident across all three examples. In Cooper's "One-Eyed Jack" the action is clearly contained within each panel, and the composition draws the eye into the image with the two policemen and the suspect being the focus in four of the six panels. Even though some figures are cut off by the edge of the panels the result is to frame the main action rather than suggest the world outside the panel. In McMahon's double-page spread there is no central focus to any of the panels, in the main splash panel the eye roams across and even beyond the image in all directions and the smaller insert panels similarly have no clear centre with some of the figures almost bursting outside of the confines of the frame. Likewise, the figures in the panels in Bolland's double-page spread are barely contained by their frames threatening to break outside of these confines and sometimes actually cutting through the frame, most noticeably with Judge Dredd's boot and the Slay Rider's fist in the final panel. As with McMahon there are no central focus points in Bolland's images with the eye roving around and outside of the panels.

Multiplicity and Unity is the most obvious of Wölfflin's paired concepts in these examples. Taking the main panel in Cooper's page the two silhouetted figures in the foreground individually frame the policemen and suspect on the stairs who form another distinct group whilst the figures in the window in the background form yet another separate group. Cooper's overall image is made

up of a multiplicity of distinct elements whilst in McMahon and Bolland's splash panels the individual elements are fused together to create a unified overall effect. In McMahon the rats and bodies form one seething cohesive volume while in Bolland the Slay Riders, Judge Dredd, Twerk and the surrounding rocks and flames create one singular mass.

As noted earlier when applying these ideas to Wölfflin's examples of drawings from the Renaissance and Baroque periods the notion of Absolute and Relative Clarity is best considered as a summation of the previous paired concepts. So, with Cooper the figures and objects are clearly the focus of the images and the narrative relies on the relation of all the individual elements in each panel to each other. In contrast, with McMahon and Bolland the images are not so concerned with the clarity of the individual figures and objects or the narrative being clearly conveyed but rather in creating an impression of the "lived" experience of the characters.

To return to the original question of accounting for the complimentary aspects of McMahon and Bolland's artwork, applying Wölfflin's paired concepts allows for the stylistic differences between McMahon and Bolland to be reconciled. Rather than focusing on the obvious surface aspects of individual style it is now possible to see more clearly what they share stylistically and to account for underlying features such as compositional structure and the formal devices, such as continual rather than planar recession, used by both artists. This in turn allows us to appreciate the ways in which they complement each other in building the storyworld of "The Cursed Earth". The analysis of more pages of their work, or even entire story arcs, could both confirm the thesis outlined in this chapter and would allow the impact these formal devices have on the resulting narratives to be considered in more depth.

THE LIMITS AND POTENTIAL OF WÖLFFLIN'S ANALYSIS OF STYLE FOR COMICS STUDIES

Of course, McMahon and Bolland's work is not Baroque in the true sense of belonging to that period nor is Cooper's work Renaissance and there could be objections to applying paired concepts originally developed for these stylistic periods to comics. Wölfflin himself addressed this type of argument acknowledging that

Our formulation of the concepts, however, only corresponds to the development in later times. For other periods, they must undergo continual modification. Yet the schema has proved applicable even as far as the domains of Japanese and old Nordic art. (1950, p. viii)

Indeed Gombrich, in his book *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, although highly critical of Wölfflin's methods, still considers these paired concepts to be useful in differentiating not only between art of the Renaissance and the Baroque but between the much broader categories of the

classical and the non-classical, including in his analysis of other negative stylistic terms of exclusion such as Gothic, Mannerism and Rococo. However, for Gombrich the main problem with Wölfflin's approach is his failure to acknowledge that the classical had emerged in Art History as a norm against which all artworks are judged (1966, pp. 81–98). Panofsky is also critical of Wölfflin noting the stark polarisation of the terms employed and the fact that this methodology cannot therefore adequately account for the intervening period of Mannerist art between the Renaissance and the Baroque (1995, pp. 17–90).

These critiques of Wölfflin suggest other potential avenues of inquiry for Comics Studies to pursue, such as the imponderably broad notion of establishing some kind of stylistic norm against which all comics can be measured, or modified versions of Wölfflin's model that can account for the subtle transitions from one style to another. These approaches might return us to the existing debates in Comics Studies grounded in concepts of realistic and cartoon modes of depiction or allow us to consider afresh the notion of schools. They would certainly require a much wider corpus of examples than examined in this present chapter and recourse to consider the wider art-historical discourse on issues of style.

NOTES

1. For detail on Kirby's work in relation to iconography, rather than canonical status or style, Cf. the following chapter "Iconography for Comics Studies Reconsidered: Interpreting Visual Transformations in Jack Kirby's *The Mighty Thor*".
2. Peppard (2019) addresses the work of Liefeld and other artists at Image by focusing on the visual as symbolic of excess but places this within the wider contexts of visual culture in the 1990s, such as bodybuilding and advertising imagery. It does not, however, unpack the drawing style itself.
3. For an enlightening review of Grennan's book see Paul Fisher Davies (2018).
4. For detail on Swarte and the naming of the *Style Atome* see http://www.paul-gravett.com/articles/article/in_search_of_the_atom_style1/ and http://www.paulgravett.com/articles/article/in_search_of_the_atom_style2
5. Sim has developed and refined this argument in the graphic novel *The Strange Death of Alex Raymond* (2021). Sim's methodology also explores the issue of swiping through his own practice.
6. In this context Smolderen, by evoking the notion of primitivism, is positioning such works within a folk or popular tradition rather than the dominant Classical forms of the period.
7. See Couperie (1972) for consideration of McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* as part of the extended influence of Art Nouveau on comics.
8. Rather than calling each weekly comic an issue *2000AD* still to the present-day calls them Progs with the wilful conceit that in the future such comics would in fact be programmes rather than printed material.
9. This is now believed to be a copy, from between 1567 and 1580 by an anonymous artist, of an original drawing by Pieter van der Heyden. See catalogue entry for this drawing at the Albertina Museum in Vienna <https://sammlungen-online.albertina.at/#/query/1c8b85b0-192f-42ed-a554-da74961cc384>

10. Following the usual practice in British comics of merging titles when sales dropped below a certain level *Vulcan* merged with *Valiant* in April 1976, *Valiant* was in turn merged with *Battle Picture Weekly* in October 1976. For the reprints of the original run of “One-Eyed Jack” see Wagner and Cooper (2017).
11. Cooper did a small number “Judge Dredd”, “Mach 1” and “Future Shock” stories in early issues of *2000AD*.

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Iconography for Comics Studies Reconsidered: Interpreting Visual Transformations in Jack Kirby's *The Mighty Thor*

Abstract This chapter returns to the art-historical methodology of iconography, and the related but distinct concept of iconology, to consider how the visual attributes of comic book characters, in terms of symbolic motifs and stylistic forms, can be identified, categorised and interpreted. Beginning with an overview of art historian Erwin Panofsky's theories from the first half of the twentieth century it then examines how iconography has been reconsidered as a methodological tool within Art History with the emergence of semiotics as a distinct but related approach to analysing visual signs. It examines the application of semiotics within Comics Studies from the 1970s onwards, highlighting the key theoretical strands used in the field before noting critiques of semiotics by Comics Studies scholars such as Hannah Miodrag and Charles Hatfield. The value of iconographic and iconological approaches is considered through an analysis of Jack Kirby's depictions of Thor during the 1960s, focusing on the character's origin story and the visual transformations he undergoes between his human alter ego Dr Don Blake and becoming the god of thunder.

Keywords Iconography • Iconology • Jack Kirby • Panofsky • Semiotics • Thor

FROM ICONOGRAPHY TO ICONOLOGY

In their pioneering works Gérard Blanchard, Pierre Couperie and Ernst Gombrich employed iconographic methods when analysing caricature, cartoons and comics. This is unsurprising given that iconography was a central methodological pillar for Art History but it is noteworthy that this aspect of their work has subsequently had little impact on Comics Studies and is only recently being recognised as a valuable form of interpretation (Crucifix 2022, pp. 153–4). Blanchard is remembered for the art-historical examples he draws

on and highlighting the impact that different technologies had on the kinds of images being produced in comics. Couperie is generally recalled as one of the driving forces behind the 1967 exhibition *Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative* and its accompanying catalogue rather than any specific methodological approach. In contrast to Blanchard and Couperie the methodologies employed by Gombrich have influenced Comics Studies, but mainly in terms of visual metaphor theory rather than the application of iconography which underpins his analysis of caricature, cartooning and comics (Holbo 2016).¹

Gombrich's use of iconography was indebted to the writings of Erwin Panofsky from the mid-twentieth century. In a review of a collection of Panofsky's essays Gombrich notes that:

In the public mind Panofsky's name became associated with the subject with which he had introduced himself to the United States, his *Studies in Iconology*. His ingenious interpretations of Renaissance masterpieces in the light of Neo-Platonic philosophy caught the imagination of a whole generation who tried to emulate him, not always to his pleasure. (1996, p. 29)

Kenneth Clark, in the introduction to Hall's *Dictionary of Signs and Symbols in Art*, suggested Aby Warburg was the originator of iconology as a methodology approach but that Panofsky's development of these ideas marked him as "unquestionably the greatest art historian of his time" (1979, p. vii). Panofsky evidently had a significant impact on Art History in terms of methodology, and it is important here to examine the three different stages of his model, the pre-iconographical, the iconographical and iconological, as first outlined in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (1939).²

Panofsky begins explaining his methodology outside of the realm of art by providing a pre-iconographical reading of the everyday act of a man raising his hat.³ Panofsky suggests we initially read this factually from our own practical experience, seeing the objects (a man and his hat) then the action (hat-lifting). Panofsky goes further by noting our empathic response to the hat-lifting man where one "may be able to sense whether he is in a good or bad humour, and whether his feelings towards me are indifferent, friendly or hostile" (1970, p. 51). Panofsky's second stage of interpretation is the iconographical, where the hat raising action is perceived as a greeting, an interpretation reliant on knowing this gesture is particular to Western culture with origins in medieval chivalry. For Panofsky this level of interpretation lies outside of everyday understanding and resides in the "world of customs and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilisation" (p. 52). The iconological stage is the most complex as Panofsky suggests we can consider the personality of the man with the hat which is conditioned by his belonging to a specific period as well as his "national, social and educational background" (p. 53). This interpretation cannot be made on a single observation, such as the man raising his hat, but must consider other actions by the man and the cultural forces that have shaped him and society.

Panofsky then explained this model in relation to Art History focusing on the second two stages as the pre-iconographical stage merely relies on the correct identification of the things depicted (people, objects and settings) in a work of art. In terms of iconography the key issue for Panofsky is the correct interpretation of subject matter and artistic motifs such as:

realizing that a male figure with a knife is St Bartholomew, that a figure with a peach in her hand is a personification of veracity, that a group of figures seated at a table in a certain arrangement and in certain poses represents the Last Supper... If the knife that enables us to identify a St Bartholomew is not a knife but a cork-screw, the figure is not a St Bartholomew. (pp. 54–5)

The interpretive aspect of iconography focuses on recognising key motifs, each of which carries a specific meaning, with combinations of motifs creating stories and allegories (pp. 54–5). For Panofsky an understanding of these stories and allegories relies on knowledge of literary sources, primarily biblical, mythological and historical, unsurprising given his focus on the interpretation of Medieval and Renaissance art (pp. 61–2).

The creation of stories, and perhaps even allegories, using specific motifs has a particular relevance when applying iconographic methods to the analysis of comics. A reliance on literary sources is less easy to accommodate as comics mainly tell new stories based on original scripts unless they are adaptations from other media, such as Kirby's *Marvel Treasury Special 2001: A Space Odyssey* (1976), or the retelling of existing comic book narratives, most commonly superhero origin stories such as Kirby's different versions of Captain America gaining his superpowers (Hatfield 2012, pp. 68–72). The narrative aspects of iconographic interpretations and issues surrounding textual or literary sources are examined throughout the rest of this chapter.

For Panofsky literary references could sometimes be misleading when used to identify combinations of motifs and narrative interpretations, in such cases he suggests we must employ an iconological approach which emphasises the visual evidence provided by other artworks. To demonstrate this point Panofsky uses a seventeenth-century painting by Francesco Maffi of a young woman, a sword in her left hand and in her right hand a large plate on which rests the head of a beheaded man. This had previously been identified as a painting of Salome with the head of St John the Baptist, in one aspect this does accord with the biblical story where the head was brought to Salome on a plate but she did not cut off the head herself, so the inclusion of a sword contradicts this identification. Panofsky instead suggests the painting represents the biblical story of Judith beheading Holofernes which accounts for the sword in the painting but not the plate as Judith places the head in a sack. Panofsky concludes that to correctly interpret Maffi's painting "We should be entirely at a loss were we to depend on literary sources alone" (1970, p. 62).

Panofsky's iconological solution considers other artworks of the period, finding that there were some paintings in Germany and Northern Italy that

unquestionably represented Judith holding a head on a plate but no paintings of Salome with a sword. This still does not account for why the sword motif was not attached to Salome but Panofsky argues that the motif of a sword, as well as being associated with Judith, was at the time an attribute of allegorical virtues such as Justice and Fortitude and it would have been culturally unacceptable to attach it to such a licentious character as Salome (pp. 63–4).

Gombrich similarly took issue with the primacy of textual sources in iconographical interpretations. When interpreting Botticelli's *Primavera* he suggested that by this time the function of paintings to merely represent classical or religious texts had started to wane (1972, pp. 62–4).

Visual symbols have a way of asserting their own presence. To the next generation, the dignity and emotional import of classical themes began to equal those of religious subjects. Their exegetic meaning, began to pale. The image gained ascendancy over the text, Venus conquered her commentators. (p. 64)

In the essay “Art and Scholarship” Gombrich had already examined the difficulties with proceeding from iconographic interpretations of individual artworks to iconological approaches that consider individual works in relation to wider artistic currents.⁴ Gombrich's critique stressed the importance of the visual aspects of images suggesting that “Unless iconology is to become barren it will have to find new contact with the ever present problem of style in art” (1963, p. 117).

Panofsky similarly argued that his overall methodological approach only succeeded if artworks are considered in relation to the style of the depiction and not just the meaning of the imagery. To exemplify this point he compares two artworks, the painting *Three Magi* (circa. 1450) by Roger van der Weyden and a miniature from the *Gospels of Otto III* (circa 1000). In the painting the representation of the infant Christ floats in the sky above a landscape containing the figures of the three wise men; similarly in the miniature the image of a city floats above the figure of Christ resurrecting the children of Nain (1970, pp. 59–61). The question for Panofsky is why we read the naturalistic floating Christ as an apparition and the stylised floating city as an image of a real city, concluding that:

We really are reading ‘what we see’ according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions. In doing this we subject our practical experience to a corrective principle which may be called the history of style. (p. 61)

Panofsky attached corrective principles to all three stages of his methodological model with each principle building successively upon the others. Style was the corrective principle for pre-iconographical interpretations; themes and typologies, or what we might call genres, were the corrective principle for iconographical interpretations; the values associated with cultural symbols in

general were the corrective principle for iconological interpretations. These corrective principles were central to Panofsky’s overall methodological approach and summarised in a table to explain the model (Fig. 1).

In evaluating this model Moxey noted that:

The system of checks and balances that characterizes Panofsky’s “iconological” method has proven to be the door through which it has become possible to essay an interpretation of works of art that does justice to their complex historical particularity. (1986, pp. 271–2)

As will be shown, when interpreting visual transformations in Kirby’s representations of Dr Don Blake and Thor using pre-iconographical, iconographical and iconological approaches, awareness of the corrective principles of style, typologies and cultural symbols will allow for the “complex historical particularity” of the work to be made evident.

THE SEMIOTIC TURN IN ART HISTORY (AND COMICS STUDIES)

In the 1970s the promoters of a New Art History led the shift away from an art-historical focus on canonical artists and traditional methods such as connoisseurship, the analysis of style and iconography. Although the New Art History was wide-ranging in promoting new methodological approaches one of the main challenges to iconography was mounted by structuralists and

OBJECT OF INTERPRETATION	ACT OF INTERPRETATION	EQUIPMENT FOR INTERPRETATION	CORRECTIVE PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETATION (History of Tradition)
I Primary or natural subject matter – (A) factual, (B) expressional – constituting the world of artistic motifs.	Pre-iconographical description (and pseudo-formal analysis).	Practical experience (familiarity with objects and events).	History of style (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms).
II Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories.	Iconographical analysis.	Knowledge of literary sources (familiarity with specific themes and concepts).	History of types (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific themes or concepts were expressed by objects and events).
III Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of ‘symbolical’ values.	Iconological interpretation.	Synthetic intuition (familiarity with the essential tendencies of the human mind), conditioned by personal psychology and ‘Weltanschauung’.	History of cultural symptoms or ‘symbols’ in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts).

Fig. 1 Synoptical Table from Panofsky’s Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art. *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1970), p. 66

post-structuralists employing semiotics (Ferne 1995, pp. 18–21, 345). Fernie has suggested that iconography and semiotics are not that dissimilar as both create systems for the analysis of signs, and notes that semiotics is “a label used to cover a wide variety of concepts” (p. 359). He then outlines some semiotic approaches such as Charles Sanders Peirce’s categorisation of signs as being iconic, symbolic and indexical, and a theoretical model mainly associated with the work of Roland Barthes focused on sign systems (pp. 359–60).⁵

The incorporation of semiotic theory into Art History from the 1970s onwards was a gradual process hindered by its emergence from linguistics and Literary Theory, fields which had given little attention to the visual arts (Carrier 1984, p. 290). Much of this semiotic theory had its origins in the work of the early twentieth-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and in this transitional period some art historians sought to reconcile these new theoretical directions with traditional art-historical approaches. For example, Hasenmueller examined the relationship between Panofsky’s ideas and semiotic theory in some detail noting that Panofsky had been labelled by the Italian art historian Giulio Carlo Argan as “the ‘Saussure’ of art history” (1978, p. 289). However, Hasenmueller considers such parallels to be rather simplistic, emphasising the limits of ideas developed in relation to structural linguistics when applied to the visual arts stressing that “It is inevitable that attempts to extend semiotics to non-linguistic phenomena shall present new problems and severe tests” (p. 298).

In Europe the period characterised by the calls for a New Art History also saw semiotics adopted by the emerging discipline of Comics Studies. This was particularly evident in the work of Umberto Eco and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle who took a formalist approach in their analysis of comics often referencing the similarities and differences with cinema using semiotic theories based on Saussure borrowed from the emerging discipline of Film Studies (Meesters 2017, pp. 100–1; Miller and Beaty 2014, p. 11; Miller 2017, pp. 150–4).⁶ This formalist strand of semiotic analysis has continued to inform the work of European and, more recently, anglophone, comics scholars as evident in the structuralist approach in Thierry Groensteen’s *Système de la bande dessinée* [The System of Comics] (1999) and the analytical frameworks adopted by Ann Miller in *Reading Bande Dessinée* (2007).

The definition of semiotics in *Key Terms for Comics Studies* (2022) also sees Saussure’s structuralist ideas as central to linguistic, as well as formalist, approaches to the discipline whilst acknowledging that authors such as Hannah Miodrag have been critical of this position (Davies 2022, pp. 286–7). Although Miodrag also employs structuralist semiotic theory she argues that comics cannot be broken down into isolated individual signs in this manner. Her focus is not on applying semiotics as a way of unlocking the meaning within selected comics but instead testing its efficacy as a methodological tool (2013, pp. 7–14). Miodrag references W. T. J. Mitchell’s thinking around semiotics and the visual arts from his *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) highlighting the

shortcomings of semiotic approaches when confronted with the problematic issue of style in Comics Studies (pp. 197–220).⁷

Saussure's semiotic approach is important but others have also influenced comics scholars, most notably Peirce's categorisation of signs as being iconic, symbolic and indexical. Using these concepts Anne Magnusson concluded that they "could offer a more precise and full description of the comics signs than could the dichotomy of iconic and symbolic signs of European semiology. The use of the Peircean sign led to a focus on the interpretation process and the interaction between different sign types, and between the panels" (2000, p. 205). Although Magnusson acknowledges contextual factors such as genre tropes her analysis focuses on formalist issues such as panel sequences, additionally drawing on Groensteen's ideas and pragmatic linguistics as well as Peirce's semiotic triad (p. 195). Magnusson considered the indexical to be the most useful of the categories outlined by Peirce while acknowledging that there was more research to be done in this area.

Magnusson's challenge was picked up by Charles Hatfield in *Hand of Fire: The Comic Art of Jack Kirby* (2012) where he engaged extensively with Peirce thereby developing a sustained argument to evaluate the use of this semiotic model for the study of comics. Hatfield draws on Peirce's semiotic triad of the iconic, symbolic and indexical for interpreting signs, to underpin his central argument that Kirby's work is best considered as narrative as opposed to illustrative drawing. Hatfield does not merely apply semiotic theory to explain Kirby's work or attempt to "debunk semiotics" (2012, p. 38) but is interested in how this exercise might "reveal both the usefulness and limits of Peirce's semeiotic?" (p. 38) suggesting that Kirby's work in particular, and comics and cartooning in general, are best understood by collapsing or even reintegrating Peirce's categories (pp. 36–50).

Hatfield considers Peirce's notion of iconic to be the most problematic as it suggests a kind resemblance to reality, an issue he unpacks with reference to the triangle of style in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and the ideas of Gombrich and design theorist Clive Ashwin, noting that Kirby's work is difficult to reconcile with this idea as often it bears little relation to any straightforward mimetic function (pp. 38–41). For Hatfield the non-mimetic visual aspects of Kirby's work are best understood in relation to Peirce's concepts of the symbolic and indexical, where the indexical aspects such as the distinctive mark-making and stylistic devices become symbolic of Kirby's presence as an artist. This in turn is linked to the ways in which Kirby's presence is invoked by his many imitators in the comic book industry (pp. 44–9).

Hatfield argues that the iconic aspects of Kirby's work are overwhelmed by the tendency to read them in symbolic and indexical terms as "his dynamic and contorted figures, while recognisable as such to the initiated reader, may be less so to the uninitiated" and his "shorthand efforts to render motion in a static medium force his artwork toward a distinctive symbolism" (p. 45). In his analysis Hatfield does not really expand on this notion of symbolism so it remains somewhat generalised representing in all instances expressive movement in

static form and dynamic forces (p. 49). This may well be the case but it suggests that there is more to be done in terms of determining symbolism in Kirby's work, suggesting the benefits of using iconography as a methodological tool.

THUMP, KARRACK! THE ICONOLOGY OF TRANSFORMATION IN THOR

Kirby Krackle, a visual device of deep black fields and dynamic patterns of dots, is one of the most recognisable features of Jack Kirby's artwork which Hatfield describes as "his trademark method of portraying sizzling energy" (p. 69). This has received detailed critical attention in academia where it has been connected to abstraction in relation to Psychedelia and Op Art (Bartual 2019) or as a graphic language informing subsequent generations of comic artists (Gandolfo 2019). Comics fandom similarly focuses on the impact of Kirby Krackle on the industry and identifying the origins of this effect in his work (Appledorn 2003; Foley 2001). Comic scholars and fans agree that although Kirby Krackle is iconic, in the commonplace sense of the word, it has no specific meaning or symbolic function as it can represent many different things from deep space and water to energy bolts and lightning and is therefore resistant to both semi-otic and iconographic interpretations.

This suggests that examples from Kirby's oeuvre needs to be limited and specific in scope to be effectively analysed using Panofsky's pre-iconographical, iconographical and iconological interpretative methodology in parallel with his three corrective principles of style, typologies and cultural symbols. Kirby's depictions of the transformations Thor undergoes between his human alter ego Dr Don Blake and becoming the god of thunder are suitable as they show the specific action of one character becoming another.

The corpus examined here starts with, and focuses on, the transformations in Thor's origin story which first appeared in "Thor the Mighty and the Stone Men from Saturn" in *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962) and concludes with *The Mighty Thor* 159 (January 1966) where Odin reveals Don Blake never existed and was merely a human persona he created to teach Thor humility. This effectively marked the end of such transformations in the series except in flashback sequences.⁸ Thor's origin story from *Journey into Mystery* 83 was plotted by Stan Lee and scripted by his brother and comic book artist Larry Lieber, who continued with the scripting duties for the next eight issues. It was pencilled by Kirby and inked by Joe Sinnott who is recognised as a significant inker of Kirby's work particularly on the *Fantastic Four* (Lee and Mair 2002, p. 159). There are a total of five transformations from Blake to Thor or vice versa in the origin story and all are considered individually with a pre-iconographical description before developing an overall iconographical and iconological interpretation.⁹ Even though these three stages will initially be considered separately for Panofsky:

the neatly differentiated categories, ...refer in reality to aspects of one phenomenon, namely the work of art as a whole. So that in actual work, the methods of approach which here appear as three unrelated operations of research merge with each other into one organic and indivisible whole. (1970, p. 67)

Thor's origin story starts with Dr Don Blake on vacation in Norway. Forced to flee from invading aliens Blake, who has a severe limp, loses his cane and becomes trapped in a cave. Trying to escape he discovers a gnarled wooden stick which he uses as a lever to remove a boulder blocking his exit but it will not move. In frustration Blake strikes it with the stick at which point his transformation into Thor begins. This transformation, which takes place across four panels running over two pages, is described pre-iconographically noting the depicted objects and actions, at this stage ignoring textual elements and detailed interpretation which comes in the iconographical and iconological stages of analysis (Figs. 2 and 3).¹⁰

In the first panel of this sequence a man strikes a boulder with a gnarled stick causing lightning bolts to appear. Next the silhouette of a figure looks at the expanding end of the stick they are holding, the image is comprised of broken marks surrounded by radiating lines indicating a burst of light. The following panel shows the silhouette of a larger figure throwing back its head and the stick has broadened, all depicted using thick broken marks surrounded by thick and thin radiating lines indicating an explosion of light. Finally, a clearly delineated figure, seen in silhouette from behind, wears a cloak and winged helmet with arms raised one holding a hammer aloft, all surrounded by fine radiating lines overlaying a rocky interior.

The next two transformation sequences take place on one page (Fig. 4). In pre-iconographical terms the third panel on this page shows a cloaked figure with long hair, winged helmet, a jerkin decorated with six roundels, gladiator-style sandals and a belt with a buckle, the letter T at its centre, sat on the ground surrounded by rocks and trees resting a hammer on the grass. Next a figure wearing a cloak and winged helmet is depicted with very broken radiating marks suggesting a burst of light comes from within the figure. The fifth panel shows a clearly delineated suited man with a fedora hat kneeling on the grass a hammer lying beside him and surrounded by rocks and trees. The next transformation takes place across three panels at the bottom of the page. They show, a man with a fedora hat holding his chin thoughtfully, a kneeling silhouetted man with a fedora hat at the centre of an explosion of light comprised of thick broken lines, and a man with long hair wearing a winged helmet and thrusting a hammer towards the viewer.

The final two transformation sequences in Thor's origin story take place on consecutive pages the first running across three panels (Fig. 5) the second taking only two panels (Fig. 6). The initial panel of the first sequence shows a cloaked man with long hair, wearing a winged helmet, a jerkin decorated with six roundels, gladiator-style sandals and a belt with a buckle with the letter T at its centre and a pair of wings either side. Half-kneeling on the grass he grasps



Fig. 2 *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962), p. 4. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Joe Sinnott (Inks) Stan Lee (Plot) Larry Lieber (Script)



Fig. 3 *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962), p. 5. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Joe Sinnott (Inks) Stan Lee (Plot) Larry Lieber (Script)



Fig. 4 *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962), p. 7. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Joe Sinnott (Inks) Stan Lee (Plot) Larry Lieber (Script)



Fig. 5 *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962), p. 9. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Joe Sinnott (Inks) Stan Lee (Plot) Larry Lieber (Script)



Fig. 6 *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962), p. 10. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Joe Sinnott (Inks) Stan Lee (Plot) Larry Lieber (Script)

the shaft of a hammer below the head preparing to strike the butt on the ground. The second panel shows the same figure silhouetted at the centre of a burst of light composed of broken thick lines. The final panel shows a suited man wearing a fedora hat kneeling on the grass grasping a gnarled wooden stick with a hill and tree in the background. The final transformation sequence in the origin story runs across two panels, the first shows a suited man wearing a fedora hat kneeling on the grass hitting the ground with a gnarled wooden stick as indicated by the sound effect THUMP, a hill and tree in the background. Next a standing figure holds a stick in one hand, their silhouette is comprised of thick broken marks surrounded by thick radiating lines indicating an explosion of light. There is no final panel in the sequence showing the result of the transformation though the expected figure with winged helmet and hammer does appear two panels later.

This detailed pre-iconographic analysis reveals several significant factors. Firstly, transformations take place over different numbers of panels, but the majority occur over three panels with a before, during and after transformation pattern. Secondly, pre-iconographic interpretation relies on description but panels with no clear objects or actions are difficult to describe. This is most evident in the abstract transformation panels where visual evaluations focus on the manner of depiction rather than on what is depicted, thereby following Panofsky's corrective principle to take account of style. Thirdly, recurring objects can be grouped in pairs such as walking stick/hammer, fedora/winged helmet and suit/cloak, indicating before and after transformation. Fourthly, in terms of actions figures sit and kneel on the ground or stand with both arms raised aloft, the stick and hammer are both struck on the ground and transformations are accompanied by bursts or explosions of light.

Before turning to an iconographical interpretation, it should be noted that for Panofsky's this stage considered "Secondary or conventional subject matter, constituting the world of images, stories and allegories" alongside "Knowledge of literary sources" (1970, p. 66). Taking the "world of images, stories and allegories" first then the representation of the suited man with his slim tie and fedora hat would be a familiar everyday sight indicative of a certain class of individual for an American comic book reader in 1962. For a contemporary reader such details are not perhaps instantaneously recognisable but familiarity with representations of the period such as other comic books, films and television series would aid in interpretation. The representation of the man with long hair, winged helmet, cloak, gladiator sandals and hammer was clearly not an everyday sight but is recognisable as a historical or mythological figure belonging to the same adventure genre as Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, which directly referenced Viking mythology and culture, or films such as *The Vikings* (1958) from the sword-and-sandals genre popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Conventional or secondary subject matter can also be considered in symbolic terms. The suited man is mobility impaired as he needs the aid of a stick to walk, being lame is often associated with gods such as Thor who control fire.

It is also a sign “of the unfinished and of something out of balance. ... lame heroes evoke cycles which begin with the end of one as the prelude to a new one” (Chevalier and Geerbrandt 1996, pp. 586–7) an interpretation which aligns with the transformation process.¹¹ The stick the man finds in the cave could be a pilgrim’s staff suggesting a means of spiritual as well as physical support to the man, alternatively in the special form of the caduceus the stick is linked to medicine and finally it can be a weapon especially a magical one associated with fire, all attributes we could associate with either Dr Don Blake or Thor (pp. 142–3, 518–20). The stick transforms to become a hammer which can represent “brute force” and is identified “with celestial instrumentality and the manufacture of the thunderbolt” (p. 465). The hammer is readily associated with Thor, the Norse god of thunder, but also linked to thunderbolts and fire in the myths of many other cultures (pp. 465–6).

These conventional or secondary subject matters aid in the initial stages of an iconographical interpretation but textual sources are also important. Since Panofsky focused on interpreting Medieval and Renaissance art, his textual sources consisted of two different kinds. Firstly, documentary evidence from the period such as letters or a contract between patron and artist specifying the subject matter of the work of art. For our purposes such sources include interviews, either with Kirby or his collaborators on the origin story, many of which have been assiduously researched and published in the fan publication *The Jack Kirby Collector*. Secondly, Panofsky would also turn to literary texts that acted as the sources for the works of art, primarily biblical and mythological tales. In our case this includes texts that Kirby, Lee and Lieber may have drawn on such as the Norse myths themselves, and other comics they created which explored similar subject matter. Collectively these textual sources enable a more complete iconographical interpretation of these transformations to be constructed.

In addition to the kinds of textual sources noted above the origin story contains its own text, in the form of narrative captions, speech balloons and sound effects. For Thor’s origin story Lee created a plot synopsis with Lieber developing the script which was followed by Kirby when creating the artwork. According to Sinnott, who pencilled five of the early Thor stories scripted by Lee for *Journey into Mystery*, at this time the artists at Marvel Comics worked from a full script which included the text for narration and dialogue (Amash 2002, p. 15).¹² The text in Thor’s origin story tells us that Blake describes the radiating light of transformation as “like a fiery bolt of lightning”, that the hammer is inscribed with the legend “Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of... Thor” and that Thor self-identifies as being “Thor!! The legendary god of thunder!! The mightiest warrior of all mythology”. Thor also states that he is the strongest and noblest of all the Norse gods, that the hammer is enchanted, invincible and used to create a raging storm, can only be lifted by him and will return when thrown.

Collectively the texts in the comic suggest that the creators had some understanding of the original source material. The different ways myths from many

cultures informed Kirby's work was examined in detail in *The Jack Kirby Collector* 26 and it is generally acknowledged that Kirby was well-versed in mythology and specifically with Norse myths and Thor (Dorf and Rubinfeld 2002 69; Hatfield 2012, p. 161; Morrow 1997, p. 19). This still begs the question of where did the information about the Norse Myths come from when they were creating the origin story? The only clear reference to a source appears in an interview with Lieber conducted by Roy Thomas. Lieber remembers Thomas questioning him about the naming of Thor's hammer when both were working at Marvel Comics:

You'd been poring over *Bulfinch's Mythology* or something, and you said, "Larry, where did you find this 'uru hammer' in mythology?" And I said, "Roy, I didn't find it; I made it up." And you looked at me like, "Why the hell did you make it up?" You went and found the hammer's original name, Mjolnir. (Thomas 1999, p. 21)

Bulfinch's Mythology was a retelling of mythological tales from many cultures originally published in the mid-nineteenth century by Thomas Bulfinch in three volumes, then republished in a collected edition in 1881 which was widely read until the mid-twentieth century. In this work Bulfinch describes Thor as:

Thor, the thunderer, Odin's eldest son, is the strongest of gods and men, and possesses three very precious things. The first is a hammer, which both the Frost and the Mountain giants know to their cost, when they see it hurled against them in the air, for it has split many a skull of their fathers and kindred. When thrown, it returns to his hand of its own accord. The second rare thing he possesses is called the belt of strength. When he girds it about him his divine might is doubled. The third, also very precious, is his iron gloves, which he puts on whenever he would use his mallet efficiently. (1913, pp. 331–2)

Some of these features, such as his strength and the returning hammer, agree with the way Thor is represented in the comic but others such as the iron gloves are missing. Although he does have a belt in the comic, we are never told it gives him strength and key visual features such as the winged helmet and cloak do not appear in Bulfinch's description, although Thor does use a cloak as a disguise in one of Bulfinch's tales. The notion that Thor must be worthy to wield the hammer is a new concept introduced in the comics that has no basis in the Norse myths but seems closer to the sword in the stone of Arthurian legend (Hague 2022).

Although there are differences it is still likely that Bulfinch was the initial reference point for the creation of Thor's origin story for *Journey into Mystery*. The backup to the main Thor story "Tales of Asgard", also created by Lee and Kirby and first introduced in *Journey into Mystery* 97 (August 1963), initially closely followed the Norse myths outlined by Bulfinch although it soon freely adapted and diverged from this source material (Nolan-Weathington 2002,

pp. 64–5). For example, the fourth episode of “Tales of Asgard” focused on Thor’s childhood, a subject never tackled in Bulfinch, and created an alternative origin story for Thor’s hammer. In Bulfinch the hammer was created by the dwarfish black or night elves who directly gifted it to Thor, whilst in “Tales of Asgard” the hammer was originally Odin’s with Thor striving through acts of valour to become worthy of lifting then possessing it.

Other textual sources demonstrating the origins of Kirby’s representation of Thor are the comics he created while working for DC in the 1940s and 1950s. These include a criminal disguised as Thor in “Villain from Valhalla” *Adventure Comics* 75 (May 1942) and an appearance by Thor himself in “The Magic Hammer” *Tales of the Unexpected* 16 (August 1957) (Fig. 7). These both contain features that informed the representation of Thor in *Journey into Mystery* such as a belt, a horned, but not winged, helmet and hammer. There are differences as both earlier versions of Thor are bearded and carry a sword as well as a hammer, but the version from “The Magic Hammer” is closest to *Journey into Mystery* as he has a cloak, albeit made of fur, roundels on his jerkin and the hammer is identical to the one we are familiar with from the origin story (Kolkman 1997, pp. 10–11).

To summarise the iconographical stage of interpretation we can say that certain visual devices, particularly the hammer and some of the powers it confers, and the representation of Thor align to some extent with mythological source material. We have also identified that the stick that transforms into a hammer indicates both Blake’s impaired mobility and perhaps more importantly is a source of power itself. We can also see that the transformation process is a never ending cycle from weakness to brute force and strength and then back again. Before moving to an iconological interpretation, we should consider Panofsky’s corrective principle of themes or typologies at this iconographical stage. Gombrich used the concept of genre to describe the use of themes and typologies as a corrective principle in iconographical interpretation. In the “Aims and Limits of Iconology” Gombrich drew on the literary criticism of D. E. Hirsch to argue that:

Though traditions and functions of the visual arts differ considerably from those of literature the relevance of categories or genres for the business of interpretation is the same in both fields. [...] Without the existence of such genres in the traditions of Western art the task of the iconologist would indeed be desperate. (1972, p. 5)

We could conclude from the evidence so far that Thor’s origin story conforms to the mythologically informed adventure genre in the tradition of *Prince Valiant* but it is not that straightforward. The origin story is titled “Thor the Mighty and the Stone Men from Saturn” and contains elements of science fiction such as aliens and flying saucers, the cover of the comic reveals another genre by proclaiming Thor as “The most exciting superhero of all time!!” (Kolkman 1997, pp. 11–12).¹³ These make it an example of what Doug



Fig. 7 "The Magic Hammer" *Tales of the Unexpected* 16 (August 1957), p. 6. Jack Kirby (art). Writer unknown

Singsen has defined as genre-splicing as distinct from genre-blending, where the former juxtaposes distinct aspects of different genres and the latter attempts to create an integrated whole of disparate elements (2014, p. 174). Labarre in his study of genre in comics agrees with Singsen on the importance of such mutability as genres evolve and additionally emphasises the importance of visual style when accounting for the significant features of specific genres which exist alongside other markers such as storyworld and narrative structure (2020, pp. 29–41, 79–93).

Notions of genre are also useful when using Panofsky's iconological stage of interpretation to examine the abstract transformation panels which are only partially explained through a pre-iconographic and iconographic analysis. For Panofsky's the iconological stage of interpretation is marked by considering "Intrinsic meaning or content, constituting the world of symbolic values" through a process of "Synthetic intuition" aligned to the corrective principle of understanding a "History of cultural symbols in general" (1970, p. 66). Iconology therefore focuses on how individual examples fit within wider systems of meaning to develop overall interpretations, in this case we must look outside of the origin story and re-examine earlier sources informing representation in these transformation panels before considering which aspects survived this formative stage to become paradigmatic.

This analysis of the abstract panels addresses three elements, the radiating bursts or explosions of light, the broken marks used to represent figures in transformation and the use of kneeling figures striking either a stick or hammer on the ground. Tracing the origins of bursts or explosions of light in Kirby's work is difficult as they are seen even in his earliest professional work (Alexander 2003, pp. 70–1). However, looking again at "The Magic Hammer" the radiating marks used to describe the power of Thor's hammer are strikingly similar to those used for transformations in the origin story and very different from other burst effects created by Kirby while working at DC in the 1950s (Fig. 7). There are no precedents for the broken marks used to represent figures in transformation until *The Incredible Hulk* 1 (March 1962), created by Lee and Kirby some months before the Thor origin story. Three panels showing Bruce Banner bathed in gamma radiation utilise the same broken radiating marks which additionally describe the figure's silhouette, a visual device repeated when retelling this part of the story in future issues (Fig. 8). It seems Kirby reserved this effect for the representation of figures in transformation regardless of genre, applying it to the mythological Thor, the science fiction monster Hulk and later in various retellings of the Captain America's origin story (Hatfield 2012, pp. 68–73). Joe Sinnott made a similar point about transformations and comic book characters when interviewed about his work on Thor stating "I liked the idea of Don Blake stamping his cane on the floor and turning into Thor. It was like Shazam!, the original Captain Marvel" (Amash p. 15).

Immediately following the origin story Kirby experimented with depicting transformations by directly overlaying Blake and Thor in a single panel sometimes using dotted lines for one of the figures in a manner similar to



Fig. 8 *The Incredible Hulk* 1 (March 1962), p. 4. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Paul Reinman (Inks) Stan Lee (Writer)

representations of Sue Storm as the Invisible Girl. This experiment was quickly abandoned and variations on the origin story approach to representing transformations dominated for six issues but only using one or two panels from the sequence, not three, with only one abstract panel at all depicting the moment of transformation. Kirby then left, with Al Hartley, Joe Sinnott and Don Heck taking over the pencilling and copying Kirby's model of depicting transformations using either one or two panels sometimes with radiating lines surrounding the figures. Kirby returned for *Journey into Mystery* 101 (December 1963) and two issues later reintroduced the three panel version of transformations from the origin story with the figures kneeling on the ground. This sequence is notable for having the head of the hammer striking the ground rather than the butt, which becomes a dominant feature in representations of transformation. Iconographically this new representation is reminiscent of the way the hammer symbolises the breaking of the ice and snow of winter to release the fertility of spring and energy of the earth in some North European myths (Chevalier and Geerbrandt 1996, p. 466) (Fig. 9).

Over the next 24 issues Kirby used both three- and two-panel transformations; the kneeling figures became consistent in terms of the frontal poses adopted, and there was a return to using broad broken radiating marks and silhouetted figures for the moment of transformation. There were no transformations between *Journey into Mystery* 125 (December 1965) and *The Mighty Thor* 138 (January 1967) when Thor was in Asgard—on his return to Earth for the next six issues the transformation were all three panel versions with kneeling figures and broad broken radiating marks depicting silhouetted figures. The transformations then disappeared again for nine issues and only appeared twice in the following five issues before making their final appearance in *The Mighty Thor* 159 (October 1968) (Fig. 10). This final version has three panels with energetic bursts of radiating lines, Blake kneels striking his cane on the ground, Thor is partially silhouetted kneels and holds the hammer below the head again, and finally Thor is shown in close-up holding the hammer towards the viewer, an image reminiscent of a panel from the origin story. By this stage the use of three panel sequences was now the dominant form along with the kneeling poses of figures which could be interpreted as representing an act of worship or allegiance to a greater power (Chevalier and Geerbrandt 1996, p. 573).

This may have been the end of transformation panels in *The Mighty Thor* but they lived on in various reprints and retellings of Thor's origin story. The origin story was retold in *Marvel Saga* 4 (March 1986) one of a series of comic books published between 1985 and 1987 that outlined the overall continuity of all Marvel Comics from their inception, using panels from the original comics supported with new text captions to fill gaps in the narrative. The story "Prisoners of the Reds" originally published in *Journey into Mystery* 87 (October 1962) was remediated in *Marvel Saga* 7 (June 1986). As with most stories in *Marvel Saga* this retelling was heavily edited so most pages and panels from the original were omitted. Even though there was no need to include



Fig. 9 *Journey into Mystery* 103 (February 1964), p. 2. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Chic Stone (Inks) Stan Lee (Script)



Fig. 10 *The Mighty Thor* 159 (October 1968) p. 20. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Vince Colletta (Inks) Stan Lee (Script)

transformation panels, as they did not advance the plot, it used one such sequence including the kneeling figures of Blake and Thor. Clearly these had by this stage become paradigmatic images (Fig. 11).

These images have influenced future generations of comics book creators and in Jeff Lemire and Dean Ormston's *Black Hammer* 7 we can see a direct homage to Thor's transformations. In several panels where Black Hammer transforms back into his human form of Joseph Webber a social worker, we can see the same kind of mark-making as in Thor's origin story. Interestingly when Webber receives the hammer he is told that only the worthy and pure of heart may wield it, a clear reference back to Thor, and other characters in the series such as Starlok and Anti-God clearly draw on other characters created by Kirby such as Odin and Darkseid (Fig. 12).

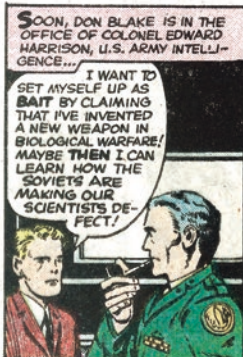
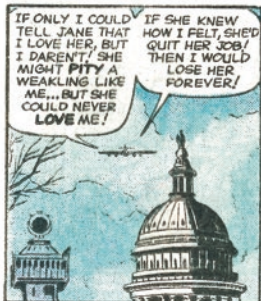
Although the themes running through Kirby's work, such as the relationship to politics or the technological sublime, have been given some attention these topics are perhaps too broad and all-encompassing to be tackled using iconographical and iconological methodologies (Hatfield pp. 144–71; Nama 2015, pp. 57–61). Using this approach to address a very limited set of actions and a tightly focused corpus allows for a precise interpretation of Thor's transformations in both sequences and individual panels. A semiotic analysis of these transformation panels might have accounted for some of the symbolic aspects of the work with reference to mythological source material but would have struggled to provide an interpretation for the manner of depiction and consequently the importance of three panel sequences. Of course, there could be objections to using Thor as the focus of an iconographical and iconological analysis as he is based on a mythological subject which might be easier to interpret than other comic book characters. However, this interpretation primarily relies on a detailed analysis of the images of transformation without recourse to the mythological source material. Even if these sources are important for some aspects of the appearance of the character, they have little relevance to the three-panel sequences, kneeling poses and abstract visual devices ultimately adopted by Kirby to represent transformation, many of which have subsequently been remediated and adopted by other writers and artists.

THE CHALLENGE OF ICONOGRAPHY AND ICONOLOGY FOR COMIC STUDIES (AND ART HISTORY)

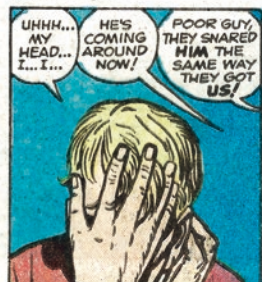
This chapter focused on the iconography of Thor's transformation sequences, but it could have equally examined him stamping his hammer to create a storm or whirling it above his head to fly or even travel through time and space. The overall iconological analysis could have been expanded to consider transformations in relation to other visual devices employed by Kirby in this period, or even across his entire career, potentially revealing how certain aspects of his iconography emerged to become the Marvel Comics house style. We might have examined how other artists took Kirby's iconography and transformed it

Thor is the son of **ODIN**, the ruler of the superhuman **ASGARDIANS** who were once worshiped as gods by the Norsemen. Odin gave Thor the human identity of Don Blake to teach him humility.

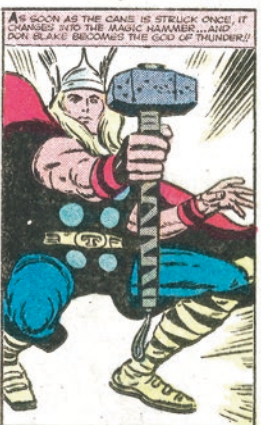
On the subject of Jane Foster, perhaps Thor has learned his lesson too well.



Blake's plan works. He is captured and rendered unconscious. He wakes up in a cell somewhere in the U.S.S.R.



Now that Blake has found the scientists, he intends to break them out of prison by changing himself into his true form. As soon as he is left in a cell by himself, he stamps his cane...



The Soviets are helpless to stop the mighty thunder god, until finally they play upon his concern for protecting innocent human beings.



Fig. 11 *Marvel Saga* 7 (June 1986) p. 19. Jack Kirby (Pencils) Dick Ayres (Inks) Stan Lee (Plot) Larry Lieber (Script)



Fig. 12 *Black Hammer* 7 (March 2017), p. 11. Dean Ormston (Art) Jeff Lemire (Script)

in their own work expanding the corpus to examine its impact on both his contemporaries and the superhero genre in general. Conversely, we could have expanded this analysis to consider what aspects of his iconography were informed by artists working on newspaper strips and comic books in the 1940s and 1950s. Alternatively an iconographical approach might not be confined to the study of Kirby or superhero comics but could be adopted and adapted for other genres. What if we brought this to bear on the transformations of Asterix the Gaul when he takes the magic potion or of Luffy from the manga series *One-Piece* when he swallows the devil fruit?

Comic Studies might also benefit in other ways from an iconographical approach. Panofsky's model uses what he calls themes and typologies at the iconographic stage to examine stories and allegories, exploring how this operates in more detail could contribute fruitfully to theorising of genre in comics scholarship. At the same time, there is potential for Art History to refine Panofsky's notion of themes and typologies which are predicated on rather fixed categories and could benefit by introducing concepts such as genre-blending or genre-splicing developed in Comics Studies. Iconographical methods might also need to be refined for the analysis of comics so they can account for, and be applied more effectively to, sequences of images as well as individual panels. More attention could also be given to the relationship to textual sources when applying iconographical methods to comics. The fact that comics have embedded textual material based on a specially created script is not easily accounted for in terms of Panofsky's model and needs further consideration.

This chapter started by bemoaning the fact that the use of iconography by Blanchard, Couperie and Gombrich had no legacy within Comics Studies. However, on reflection it seems that some aspects of this approach can be detected in the contribution made by fan communities. Panofsky's model uses documentary textual sources, such as contracts or letters between artist and patron, that tell us about the subject matter of artworks. Writing this chapter would not have been possible without consulting the work of fans published in *The Jack Kirby Collector*, which has two issues entirely devoted to Kirby's work on Thor and gathers important documentary sources, such as creator interviews and Kirby's artwork, with some contributors employing approaches very similar to iconography in analysing key features of his work such as Kirby Krackle and burst effects (Alexander 2003; Appeldorn 2003; Foley 2001). In a similar vein Kolkman's *The Jack Kirby Checklist* (2008) provides a comprehensive overview of Kirby's work, both published and unpublished, and the Kirby Museum has digitally preserved over 13,000 pieces of his original artwork. Any future examination of the iconography of Jack Kirby's work will undoubtedly be indebted to the dedicated research activities of this fan community.

NOTES

1. Gombrich developed his understanding of visual metaphor in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960), *Meditations on a Hobby Horse, and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (1963) and *The Use of Images: Studies in the Social Function of Art and Visual Communication* (1999). For the most recent application of Gombrich's ideas concerning visual metaphor in Comics Studies see John Miers chapter "Psychologies of Perception: Stories of Depiction" in the companion volume to this book, the edited collection *Seeing Comics Through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* (2022), which draws on Miers' PhD thesis *Visual Metaphor and Drawn Narratives* (2017). Other significant research referencing Gombrich's ideas of visual metaphor in caricature, cartooning and comics include: Bounegru and Forceville (2011), El Refaie (2003, 2009, 2012), Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009) Forker (2012), Domínguez et al. (2014).
2. "Iconography and Iconology" first appeared as the Introduction to Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York, 1939). In this present chapter we have used the slightly revised version "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art", which was reprinted in his *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1970).
3. In *Understanding Comics* (1993) Scott McCloud uses the example of a man raising a hat as a key motif throughout the book as it has a readily understandable meaning, in addition McCloud also uses it to signify the concept of sequence in comics.
4. For a detailed examination of the positive and negative consequences of applying Panofsky's iconological methodology see Moxey (1986) and Van Straten (1986).
5. This tripartite division of iconic, symbolic and indexical is drawn from the semi-otic model developed by Charles Sanders Pierce but Fernie does not note its origins in his work perhaps because by the 1990s these ideas had become so widespread within Art History.
6. For English translations of Fresnault-Deruelle see Miller and Beaty (2014).
7. Interestingly even though W. T. J. Mitchell includes one of Panofsky's key terms in the title of his *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (1986) there is virtually no engagement with Panofsky and he turns instead to the art-historical and philosophical ideas of Gombrich, Nelson Goodman and Gotthold Lessing.
8. The Mighty Thor started as one of the stories in *Journey into Mystery* 83 (June 1962) and this remained the case until 1966 when issue 126 was renamed *The Mighty Thor* (January 1966) continuing with the same numbering system. The fact that The Mighty Thor was the main story in the comic had been displayed prominently on the cover from *Journey into Mystery* 105 of (April 1964) onwards. Note for all issues of the American comic books cited in this chapter the actual release dates rather than the cover dates have been given.
9. Using this method to analyse comics is of necessity more complex than is normal in Art History since we are examining images in sequence rather than individual artworks, though of course this complexity does also exist when dealing with traditional subjects such as architectural sculptural schemes or stained-glass windows.

10. The artwork by Kirby was originally printed in colour, but in this chapter black-and-white images from the Marvel Essentials reprint editions are used for the sake of clarity.
11. The term lame is problematic because it has ableist uses and for some is ableist in any use. José Alaniz (2014) has addressed the ableist aspects of superhero narratives (and ways this was challenged within the genre) in great depth and touches on how this issue relates to Thor's transformations.
12. This clearly pre-dates the so-called Marvel Method of production where Lee would only provide a plot outline and much of the storytelling would be developed by artists such as Kirby, Steve Ditko and John Romita in creating the layout and pencilling of the comic (Dorf and Rubinfeld 2002, p. 68; Hadfield 2012, pp. 90–5). Interestingly as the Marvel Method of production took hold increasingly Kirby would add notes in the margins of the pencilled pages which would have informed Lee when developing the dialogue and narration captions. Many photostats of pencilled pages containing such marginalia have been published in *The Jack Kirby Collector* and are an invaluable research resource.
13. For a discussion of Thor in relation to wider debates on the fantasy, science fiction and superhero genres see Hague (2022).

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Cultural History for Comics Studies: Reinterpreting the *Eagle* and “Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future”

Abstract This chapter “[Iconography and Cultural History in Comics Studies](#)” returns to Ernst Gombrich’s conception of Cultural History which was indebted to Aby Warburg’s ideas concerning the scope of Art History as a discipline and some of its primary modes of operating, all issues closely related to the iconological methodology developed by Panofsky examined in previous chapters. Cultural History as a project has remained much contested and this chapter considers some of these debates in detail. Cultural History is then contrasted with the distinct but related field of Cultural Studies which emerged in the UK from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1960s and had a significant impact on Comics Studies and the work of Martin Barker, James Chapman, Mel Gibson and Roger Sabin. These competing approaches to contextualising comics will be considered by examining the emergence of the British comic the *Eagle* in the 1950s and the lead character Dan Dare who appeared on its cover pages for many years. It will situate the *Eagle* in relation to the broader field of British magazine culture from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Keywords Cultural History • Cultural Studies • Dan Dare • *Eagle* • Magazines

FROM ICONOLOGY TO CULTURAL HISTORY

An [earlier chapter](#) examined Ernst Gombrich’s concept of Cultural History and its relationship to Art History in some detail. Central to Gombrich’s approach was a rejection of the Hegelian model of Cultural History, in particular concepts of *zeitgeist*, spirit of the age, and *volksgeist*, national spirit or national character, and his conviction that all manners of artistic production should be considered as part of the ecology of art at any one time (Ferne 1995, p. 227;

Gombrich 1999, p. 10). This conviction was evident throughout his career as demonstrated by two of his essays examining the imagery of Romanticism in relation to the French Revolution, “Imagery and Art in the Romantic Period” published in 1947 and “The Dream of Reason: Symbols of the French Revolution” published some 30 years later in 1979 (Gombrich 1963, pp. 120–6, 1999, pp. 162–83). In both cases a main concern was to demonstrate how Romanticism reflected and drew on the different kinds of imagery circulating in society. In developing this argument, the examples Gombrich examined were wide-ranging and included works of fine art, such as paintings and etchings by Francisco Goya, popular prints by caricaturists such as James Gillray, propagandist pamphlets and the imagery of coins and medals. In these essays Gombrich was particularly interested in the ways in which these images cross-referenced and cross-pollinated each other while demonstrating how competing social and political forces contested their ideas and positions through such images in both low and high culture.

In 1970, Gombrich wrote an intellectual biography of the influential art historian Aby Warburg so it is unsurprising his approach has much in common with Warburg’s work and ideas. Warburg is seen as crucial in developing Cultural History as a central concern for Art History and the creation of a more flexible iconological and iconographical methodology in the early twentieth century before it later became systemised by Panofsky (Von Rosen 2017, pp. 6–30; Woodfield 2001, pp. 259–93).¹ For many commentators Cultural History is in fact closely aligned with these methodologies, so for Van Straten:

Iconology is that branch of the discipline of Cultural History that has as its task to discover the cultural, social, and historical background of subjects in art, and to explain from this background why a certain subject was chosen by a certain person (artist or patron) in a certain place and at a certain time (period), and why the subject is represented in a particular way. (1986, p. 170)

It could be said then that iconology looks at works of art through a focused lens identifying the choices and forces operating in relation to specific objects and motifs at a certain time, whereas Cultural History takes a slightly broader scope focusing less on the individual works of art but rather on placing them within wider trends and movements.

Although Gombrich, drawing on Warburg, significantly outlined the limits and potentials of Cultural History others have taken issue with his critique of Hegel’s holistic system and for seeing Cultural History as mainly an art-historical concern. Claude Paur challenged Gombrich’s arguments presented in the essay “In Search of Cultural History” (1979) by suggesting that the task of the historian is precisely to try and make sense of the fragments of the past through a holistic construct (1991, pp. 157–67). More recently Peter Burke sees Cultural History as having some of its roots in the traditions of Art History but considers it primarily as a sub-discipline of History, noting that:

Today, art history is increasingly viewed as cultural history. The tradition of Warburg [...] viewing ‘visual studies’ (Bildwissenschaft) as part of ‘cultural studies’ (Kulturwissenschaft) was neglected for a time, but is now enjoying a revival, thanks in particular to German ‘visual historians’, formerly art historians, such as Hans Belting and Horst Bredekamp. The trend is revealed by the increasingly frequent use of the phrase ‘visual culture’, as well as the reorganization of university departments under the headings of Visual Studies or Visual Culture Studies, following the model of Cultural Studies. Scholars working on visual culture, past and present, borrow both from anthropology (which is itself going through a ‘visual turn’) and from literary studies (producing hybrid concepts such as ‘visual text’, ‘visual literacy’, visual ‘quotation’ and so on). (2004, pp. 135–6)²

In aligning Cultural History with these other disciplines Burke notes the ways in which each brings its own methodological benefits stressing, again from a historian’s perspective, that “It has become difficult to imagine how historians ever managed without literary concepts such as ‘genre’, anthropological concepts such as ‘habitus’ or art-historical concepts such as ‘schema’” (p. 135). Gombrich made similar calls to interdisciplinarity throughout his career, noting in the preface to *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* that:

The Warburg Institute, with which I have been connected for most of my working life, has always been committed to the breaking down of conventional barriers between the so-called departments of study. (1963, p. xii)

Although Gombrich would be inclined to see Cultural History as closely aligned with Art History he was clearly aware that it needed to draw on approaches and methodologies from other disciplines to effectively examine ecologies of art.

THE DISCOURSE OF CULTURAL STUDIES WITHIN COMICS STUDIES

Apart from Gombrich’s work there has been no sustained application of the methodologies of Cultural History within Comics Studies. Cultural Theory has recently been considered by Freija Camps as a set of practices within comics scholarship that have emerged from Cultural Studies and focus on issues of representation and ideology.

This concern with cultural REPRESENTATION as “signifying practice” is central to analytical approaches that investigate how cultural texts relate to the DISCOURSES they emerge from and constitute. In so doing, cultural theory informs various (cross-) disciplinary approaches that seek to analyse the ideological function of cultural texts to affirm, resist, or subvert dominant ideologies, for example, hierarchies of GENDER, RACE, CLASS, ETHNICITY, and DIS(ABILITY). (2022, p. 79)³

As this definition shows, semiotics as a mode of analysis and ideology are some of the central concerns for Cultural Studies. The relationship between Cultural Studies and Comics Studies has been examined in some detail by several comics scholars and they all agree that semiotics and ideology are important and additionally stress a focus on readers and audiences. In the first of these Mark C. Rogers (2001) sees the use of Cultural Studies as critical approach as a specifically British phenomenon lasting from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. For Rogers the three main strands of this approach are: a focus on the media as a site of the production of ideology; recuperating comics as representing an important strand of culture that has significantly impacted on readers lives; and finally positioning comics as one strand within notions of popular culture.⁴ In covering this period Rogers highlights the work of Angela McRobbie (1978; 1990) and Martin Barker (1989), and in particular their studies of British comics of the 1970s and 1980s such as *Action*, *Jackie* and *Scream*. Rogers sees them as exemplifying a Cultural Studies position with their focus on reading ideology through a textual analysis of comics and, in an approach borrowed from sociology, inviting the responses of readers to affirm such interpretations (2001, pp. 93–9). Rogers examines some of the critiques of these approaches and the complex debates surrounding the ideological underpinnings of such interpretations, noting that Barker's *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (1989) itself examines such problems even if it remains subject to some of the same difficulties.

Mel Gibson has also contributed to this Cultural Studies strand of Comics Studies with articles such as “‘You Can’t Read Them, They’re For Boys!’ British Girls, American Superhero Comics and Identity” (2003) and ‘What You Read and Where You Read It, How You Get It, How You Keep It: Children, Comics and Historical Cultural Practice’ (2008) whose titles explicitly highlight a focus on audiences. Gibson’s overview of the relationship between Cultural Studies and comics scholarship first outlines her own formative experiences as a reader of comics and professional experience in developing collections of comics and graphic novels in British schools and libraries (2012, pp. 267–9). After considering the roots of Cultural Studies at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from the 1960s onwards Gibson follows Rogers in addressing the work of McRobbie and Barker, stressing that, although they have similar perspectives, Barker’s work is the more compelling as it engages with readers through interviews rather than theoretical speculation on the media-effects such works have on their lived experience (pp. 270–2). Gibson notes that central to Barker’s argument is the concept of a contract between the reader and the comic and his notion that these are rarely unified texts but that they shift over time and we must therefore take account of their production history (p. 271). This seems to indicate a shift towards a Cultural History approach but for Barker this is a quite focused notion of production history accounting only for the different relations between producers and readers rather than indicating an interest in the wider visual culture surrounding such comics.

In contrast to Rogers and Gibson the most recent evaluation of Cultural Studies' contribution to comics scholarship by Ian Hague starts from a much wider perspective suggesting that there are two ways to consider Cultural Studies where "The first is to understand cultural studies as those academic fields and disciplines that are involved with the study of cultural objects, such as literature, film, video games and so on" (2016, p. 424). From this perspective, Hague argues, we could use the methodologies of such disciplines as English Literature, Film Studies or Media Studies to interrogate comics, which seems similar to the calls for interdisciplinarity examined earlier in relation to Cultural History. However, for Hague:

In cultural studies, the focus of research is not cultural objects, but culture itself. Cultural objects such as comics may be of interest, but only in as far as they reflect or contribute to the formation of culture and the various individuals and groups involved in it.

He then goes on to review the earlier work by Rogers and Gibson above covering many of the same points in relation to McRobbie and Barker and broadly agreeing with their characterisation of the field. Interestingly, Hague disagrees with Rogers on the position of Roger Sabin's work in relation to Cultural Studies. For Rogers the work produced by Sabin, particularly his book *Adult Comics* (1993), is only loosely related to this field as it is not concerned with the role comics play in readers' lives, does not focus on the ideological dimensions of comics and most importantly does not use the methodological approaches of Cultural Studies (2001, p. 101). Hague, however, sees Sabin's work as sharing some of the same underlying assumptions particularly in wanting to see comics in relation to the lived experience of readers and in presenting marginalised perspectives that challenge pre-existing grand narratives (2016, p. 426). As we shall see some of the ideological underpinnings in Sabin's evaluations of the *Eagle* and Dan Dare might also reflect, if not wholeheartedly represent, several of the concerns of Cultural Studies.

Hague additionally argues that we might view the work of some other comics scholars as related to Cultural Studies even if they do not sit fully within this field. His examples include Bart Beaty, in particular his *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (2007) and *Comics versus Art* (2012), and Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (2005) which is in fact perhaps much closer to a Cultural History approach than Cultural Studies (2016, pp. 428–9). Gabilliet's overall argument situates the origins of the American comic book within the wider publishing industry, but his Cultural History perspective is most evident in the second part of the book which is divided into four sections titled, Production, The Business of Comic Books, The Creators and finally The Readers. Clearly readers have an important place in his account but are only one factor in the overall ecology in which comics are produced.

Hague also mentions the impact that Barker and Sabin have had on other scholars:

James Chapman's *British Comics: A Cultural History* (2011), for example, refers to both Martin Barker and Roger Sabin in delineating the history of comics in Britain, a necessity given that Chapman asserts that 'their work represents the only sustained academic engagement with comics in Britain.' (2016, p. 429)

In fact, Chapman is extensive in his praise for Barker and Sabin and certainly views himself as continuing their work and drawing on their methodological approaches. His own approach is outlined in some detail.

My reading of comics is very much from the perspective of a cultural historian. I have set out to chart trends and themes, to identify patterns and structures, ...In analysing the ideologies and social politics of comics – including their representations of nationhood, class, gender and ethnicity – I have sought to read them historically as products of their time. I have considered the institutional contexts in which comics were produced, examining structural and technological changes in comics publishing industry. And, where primary sources are available, I have looked at the popular reception of comics and the nature of their readership. (2011, pp. 14–5)

Even though he self-identifies as a cultural historian it seems that the priorities outlined above, and his indebtedness to Barker and to a lesser extent Sabin, clearly align Chapman with a Cultural Studies approach that focuses more on ideological and socio-political concerns. Even though he notes the importance of changing production and technological factors, these receive very little attention in the rest of his book, and he acknowledges "I am interested not so much in the evaluation of comics as an art form but rather to understand what comics can tell us about society" (p. 15), demonstrating that he is more interested in the wider context than the comics themselves. Chapman has written perhaps the most extensive analysis of the *Eagle* and Dan Dare to date, and as will be demonstrated in the analysis of these works below, his approach is directly informed by a Cultural Studies perspective which draws attention to certain aspects of the comic while leaving others barely explored.

Before turning to an analysis of the *Eagle* and "Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future" it is worth returning to Gombrich to emphasise the differences between applying methodologies drawn from Cultural Studies and Cultural History. In "In Search of Cultural History", originally published in 1968, he stated that:

It seems to me quite natural that the present generation of students is particularly interested in the social foundations of culture; ...The all-pervasive idea of rank and hierarchy that coloured man's reaction to art, religion and even to nature, has become perplexing to the young ...Perhaps this example also illustrates the difference between the social and the cultural historian. The first is interested in social

change as such. He will use the tools of demography and statistics to map out the transformations in society. The latter will be grateful for all the information he can glean from such research, but the direction of his interest will still be the way these changes interact with other aspects of culture. (1979, p. 53)

Clearly Cultural Studies has something to offer in the study of comics, but it only takes us so far with its ideological concerns and focus on the consumption of comics by individual readers and wider audiences. As Gombrich argues, and perhaps following Gabilliet's example, we need to consider how comics interact with other aspects of culture, considering the visual aspects of comics that preceded the *Eagle*, as well as other fields such as histories of publishing, the wider magazine culture of the period and the related elements of illustration, design and typography.

RECONTEXTUALISING THE *EAGLE* AND "DAN DARE - PILOT OF THE FUTURE"

The popularity of Frank Hampson's comic strip "Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future" during the 1950s can hardly be overstated. The strip told the adventures of Colonel Dan Dare chief pilot of the Interplanet Space Fleet along with his assistant Digby, Commander Sir Hubert Guest and scientist Jocelyn Peabody. It was the lead cover story for the market-leading British comic book the *Eagle*, initially published by Hulton Press, and Dan Dare even had a daily show on Radio Luxembourg (Hansen 2004, pp. 106–8). However, in the face of declining sales in 1969 the *Eagle* merged with *Lion*, another British anthology comic book, so marking the end of the original series of Dan Dare stories. There have been several subsequent revivals directly based on the character of Dan Dare, firstly in *2000AD* (1977–79) and then in the re-launched *Eagle* (1982–94). There were other short-lived revivals such as Grant Morrison and Rian Hughes' "Dare", published in *Revolver* (1990), and Garth Ennis and Gary Erskine's seven-part *Dan Dare* (2007–8) a mini-series published by Virgin Comics. Most recently the fan-produced *Spaceship Away* (2003–present) continues to publish new content that develops and extends the Dan Dare universe in a manner that clearly pays homage to the original stories.

Here we are concerned with applying a Cultural History approach to both Dan Dare as a character and the *Eagle* as a site of publication. Although some consideration will be given to the narrative and ideological aspects of the work more attention is given to the visual styles, print cultures and typography of the period in which the work was produced, following Gombrich's notion of an ecology of art.

The history of the *Eagle* has been examined by many comics scholars who have mainly focused on its development and launch, success during the 1950s and then gradual decline throughout the 1960s. These histories often concentrate on the Reverend Marcus Morris who was the driving force behind the publication, its first editor and went on subsequently to have a successful career

in magazine publishing once he left the *Eagle* (Morris 1977; Morris and Hallwood 1998) and the artwork of Frank Hampson on Dan Dare. The purpose here is not to repeat these histories but rather to question the positions taken by critical commentators when discussing this children's magazine. For Sabin the space adventures of Dan Dare were the main selling point of the comic, describing it in the following terms:

It told the adventures of a squared-jawed British spaceman and his intergalactic battles with the Mekon, an evil green alien with a huge head (this was in the days when a British space programme seemed a feasible project). Beautifully produced in photogravure colour, the *Eagle* was intended as wholesome boy's entertainment, and had a highly moral tone (with an overt Christian religious bent): it was also very British, and imperialist/Cold war undertones were never far from the surface. (1993, p. 25)

The themes Sabin highlights are the underpinning notion of scientific progress, moral Christian instruction, and an imperialist worldview, all positioned in relation to a certain kind of nationalistic rhetoric. Later Sabin additionally stressed the comics' popularity with working-class as well as middle-class audiences and emphasised the way it put adventure stories to the fore "spawning a flood of imitators" (1996, p. 49) such as *Lion*, *Tiger* and *Valiant*, with old story papers, like *The Hotspur*, also being turned into comics. It is not the purpose of this study to refute Sabin's observations on the *Eagle's* ideological dimensions, or his focus on audience and situating the *Eagle* in relation to the emergence of boy's adventure comics, rather it is to suggest that alternative perspectives are possible by giving attention to other factors more closely aligned with Cultural History.

Kevin Carpenter had earlier outlined similar ideas to Sabin about Dan Dare and the *Eagle* emphasising that it was a reaction to the horror comics being imported from America in the post-war period with the aim of providing the correct moral values for children. He noted the role of science and technology as being central to the *Eagle* but felt that "Colonel Dan Dare himself, however, is something of a museum-piece among all this thrilling technology and innovative colour graphics in a throwback to the clean limbed, righteous Victorian hero" (1983, p. 93) a position echoed in Sabin's reference to imperialist undertones. More recently Chris Murray has made the same argument seeing the both the comic and the main character of Dan Dare as:

opposing supposedly vulgar American values by substituting an equally problematic nostalgic vision of British imperial greatness. They depicted the Great British Empire in space, fighting against an intractable enemy, the Mekon, along with Treen soldiers who obey his will unquestionably. (2017, p. 110)

In his evaluation Murray not only follows Carpenter and Sabin but also Chapman's detailed analysis of the *Eagle*, which is comprehensive in giving the

historical context of the *Eagle*'s creation and origins, the kinds of strips it contained and an overall sense of its publication history. As noted earlier, Chapman takes an approach that foregrounds ideological, political and social concerns and therefore describes the *Eagle* in the following ways; "The back-page story of inspirational Christianity was the clearest marker of *Eagle*'s moralizing outlook" (p. 55); "The moral and social values of *Eagle* were also evident in its editorial content" (p. 57); "*Eagle* also identified itself with the promotion of Britain and British values" (p. 58); "In identifying itself so closely with the institution of monarchy, *Eagle* was very much a product of the ideological climate of the 1950s" (p. 58). The paragraphs that follow Chapman's opening statements proceed to develop this predetermined framework with little supporting evidence or reference to what the readers might have made of the ideas supposedly being promoted. Even though Chapman posits that it was one of the main reasons behind the *Eagle*'s success, the comic's production values, including the use of photogravure printing, and overall visual style are only examined in one paragraph (p. 55). Although the social and political factors examined by Chapman and others are important, the result of such approaches is a history that is partial and foregrounds how the comic reflected its contemporary ideological climate above exploration of the overall visual culture to which it belonged.

The same is true when it comes to discussion of the *Eagle*'s flagship story "Dan Dare – Pilot of the Future". Chapman describes the strip in the following ways: "conditioned by the social attitudes of 1950s Britain" (p. 65); "The chief ideological strategy of 'Dan Dare' is its promotion of Britishness" (p. 66); "'Dan Dare' may also be read as a narrative of British power" (p. 66); "'Dan Dare' is replete with references to the British historical experience of the mid-twentieth century" (p. 67). Ideology and socio-political context are everything, yet any statements, such as those highlighting Dare's Britishness, are never unpacked in all their complexity. The relationship to post-war notions of reconstruction and technology are more effectively argued and for Chapman:

The future imagined in 'Dan Dare' embodies the idealism of the Festival of Britain where technology is both functional and employed for the benefit of mankind...It is also for the most part a utopian future. (2011, p. 63)

Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury have also considered the ways in which the strip references the technological ambitions and modernity of the Festival of Britain, and similarly touch on the relationship to post-war British modernism not only in architecture but also in design (2006, pp. 105–6).⁵ Again, in these accounts very little attention is paid to the artwork itself and the ways such modernity is represented, however, looking at "Dan Dare – Pilot of the Future – Operation Saturn" on the cover of the *Eagle* from the 6th of March 1953 (Fig. 1) the focus on science and technology is evident in the representation of the launch of the spaceship and the Space Fleet HQ building in the second tier of panels.



Fig. 1 Dan Dare Pilot of the Future – Operation Saturn, *Eagle* 3:48, 6 March 1953. Frank Hampson (Art)

Many commentators have considered the ways in which Dan Dare influenced the next generation of British comics both in terms of subject matter and visual style, often referencing the character of Captain Condor on the cover of *Lion* which was the response of Amalgamated Press to the challenge posed by the *Eagle* (Carpenter 1983, p. 94). Chapman suggests that “A further

indication of the popularity of Dan Dare is the proliferation of British space-men who followed in his wake" (2011, p. 70) while Gravett and Stanbury go further in stating that "Dan Dare was the first of several "Pilots of the Future" whose creators and characters were often rooted in the RAF and the dawn of the jet age" (2006, p. 108). Besides Captain Condor they list the following characters as building on Dan Dare's legacy, Jet-Ace Logan, Rick Random, Jeff Hawke from the *Daily Express* newspaper strip and Captain Falcon from the *Rocket* launched in 1956, printed in photogravure and clearly imitating the *Eagle* (Chapman 2011, pp. 70–2; Gravett and Stanbury 2006, pp. 106–8).

However, very little attention is given to those comic characters that may have been the inspiration for Dan Dare, or at the very least would have suggested that there was a market for a science fiction adventure story based around such a character. Gravett and Stanbury do note the launch in 1948 of *Swift Morgan* "a series of American sized comic books printed as orange-and-green photogravure" (2006, p. 104) but do not make any causal link to Dan Dare.⁶ *Swift Morgan* was created by Denis McLoughlin, who also worked as an illustrator producing book covers for T. V. Boardman's popular paperbacks, and was only one of a whole series of characters dating back into the 1930s and 1940s that preceded the *Eagle* and Dan Dare.

The most comprehensive overview of these characters is Dennis Gifford's *Space Aces: Comic Book Heroes From the Forties and Fifties!* (1992) which focuses exclusively on British comics of the period. Gifford's chronology starts with *Spaceman: Comics of the Future* from 1935 starring Captain Future who was a member of the Galactic Police Force known as the Star Rovers Patrol, which is very similar to Dan Dare's Interplanet Space Fleet. In a similar vein there were also; *Dane Jerrus: Agent One of the Interplanetary Solar Force* (1948); *Pat Peril: The Fearless Fighter of the Future* (1949) an investigator for the Universal Police; and *Martin Power: Space Investigator* (1950) created by Mick Angelo where again the main character is a member of an interplanetary police force dedicated to enforcing law and order. Gifford charts many other science fiction heroes of the period, both before and after the launch of Dan Dare, and although the production values do not match those of the *Eagle* the imagery is similar in terms of the depiction of spaceships and the main characters. Gifford makes no mention of Dan Dare at all, perhaps seeing him as receiving detailed attention whereas his project was to recover the lost history of these British science fiction comics, in the process providing a different context for understanding the origins of the character (1992, n.p.).

Having considered Dan Dare in relation to other comics of the surrounding period it is worth considering the *Eagle* in relation to other ecologies and its relationship to the wider fields of magazine design and the related print industries. Much is made of the *Eagle* being printed in photogravure with virtually every source considering this as a significant aspect of its success. Sabin, when commenting on the impact the launch of the *Eagle* had on contemporary audiences, emphasised both its size and production values:

In many ways it was a revelation: the tabloid size, the unprecedented production values, the high price (3d), the exquisite artwork and above all, the stunning photogravure colour all marked it out as different in quality both to the comics that had come before, and to the D C Thomson story papers. (1996, p. 46)

Roach suggests that Hulton and Morris had no experience of comics and that the result was a comic “printed in full gravure colour which was utterly unlike anything else seen before” (2020, pp. 42–3) but in fact there was a tradition of comics being printed in photogravure stretching back into the 1930s. The first of these was *Mickey Mouse Weekly* which launched in 1936 on the back of the success of Mickey Mouse albums which were reprints of American material that had been specially created for the British market from 1930 onwards, to create these comics Disney set up a studio in London to make original material (Murray 2017, p. 56). The “sensational effect” the full colour photogravure of *Mickey Mouse Weekly* had in the 1930s has been noted by Gifford, who also highlighted the quality of the photogravure printing, art and design of the short-lived comic *Happy Days* first published in 1938, going on to suggest that the *Eagle* had a similar impact on audiences as these pre-war comics (1985, pp. 9–10). *Mickey Mouse Weekly* was printed by Odhams Press and noted as one of the earliest and most significant jobs they undertook in terms of comics at their new photogravure facilities in Watford (Hansen 2008, pp. 31–3). Until this point Odhams Press had been reliant on the Sun Engraving Company for providing most of their printing needs but when they decided to launch the first British weekly colour magazine *Woman* in 1937 it made more sense to create their own print subsidiary.⁷

Of course, *Mickey Mouse Weekly* and *Happy Days* were humour-based comics both aimed at audiences consisting of younger children so the comparison to the adventure stories based *Eagle* is not straightforward. However, there were adventure comics being printed using photogravure during the late 1940s. One of these was *Fitness and Sun*, later abbreviated to *Sun*, first published in November 1947. Its cover story “The Swiss Family Robinson” was a retelling of the novel, and the back cover had a story based on the legend of Robin Hood (Fig. 2). Although only the front and back covers, and centre-spread contained colour, the whole comic was printed in photogravure by Rembrandt Photogravure Ltd, a subsidiary of the Sun Engraving Company, which had bought them up in 1932.⁸ The *Secret Service Series* comics published between 1948 and 1949 were also printed in photogravure by Percy Brothers Ltd and published by The Hotspur Publishing Company of Manchester. Their main strip “Smugglers Creek: A Headline Halliday Story” was only in colour on the front cover (and then only using black, red and green), but even though the interior was in black and white it was still printed from fully painted artwork (Fig. 3).

Clearly there were adventure stories being printed in photogravure in the late 1940s and we can track this activity to before the launch of the *Eagle*. Interestingly Hulton Press the publishers of the *Eagle* were most well-known



Fig. 2 The Swiss Family Robinson *Fitness and Sun* 1, 11 November 1947. Bob Wilkin (Art)

at the time for the pioneering photojournalism magazine the *Picture Post* which was also printed by the Sun Engraving Company (Kee 1989, n.p.). In 1959, Odhams Press brought Hulton Press, which published in addition to the *Eagle* its companion comics *Girl*, *Swift* and *Robin* and the magazines *Farmer's Weekly*, *Housewife* and *Lilliput* (Hansen 2004, pp. 108–9).



Fig. 3 Smugglers Creek: A Headline Halliday Story *Secret Service Series* 5, ND 1949. Bob Wilkin (Art)

The *Eagle* can also be situated in relation to other aspects of magazine publishing of the period. When Marcus Morris was planning the creation of the *Eagle*, he took the innovative step of employing the designer and typographer Ruari McLean, who had designed the Puffin range of Penguin books, to create the layout of the first issue and the result was a much cleaner overall appearance compared to other comics and story papers of the period. In addition, Morris

employed the typographer Berthold Wolpe who “created the Eagle MASTHEAD based on his Tempest typeface which demonstrates the close links between TYPOGRAPHY and lettering” (Horton 2022, pp. 336–7).⁹

The impact these design decisions had on the *Eagle* can be traced by comparing it to pre-war story papers such as *Modern Wonder*, which was published by Odhams between 1937 and 1941, and was the same tabloid size as the *Eagle* and printed in photogravure as can be seen in the cover illustration. Comparing the covers of the two magazines the typography for the *Eagle* masthead and the title of the Dan Dare strip is clean and refined and the use of the eagle logo against the all-red background is distinctive and instantly recognisable. In contrast the *Modern Wonder* masthead with its contrasting use of red and green is rather crude, with the two words using different-sized letters when they could have been combined into an effective logotype if designed at the same scale (Figs. 4 and 5). In addition, *Modern Wonder* uses a confusing and clashing array of typefaces to indicate its contents. In terms of the illustrations then there are some striking similarities, with *Modern Wonder* showing rather futuristic designs for new armed motorboats powered by airscrew propellers which resemble the designs of the spacecraft we see in the Dan Dare strip. Looking at the interiors of the two magazines, again in terms of design, the *Eagle* has more space around the illustrations and the text is correctly spaced and kerned compared to *Modern Wonder* giving it cleaner more modern appearance.

Yet in terms of content there are many shared aspects of the two magazines. Even though the *Eagle* is remembered as a comic book, in the early issues there were only six strips with the rest of the comic composed of factual articles, infographics and illustrated ‘picture stories’ in the tradition of story papers. As to be expected *Modern Wonder* also contained factual articles, infographics and ‘picture stories’, and although these were fictional, they were often written from an eyewitness perspective giving them a factual veneer. A surprising shared aspect of the two magazines was the inclusion of a comic strip in *Modern Wonder*, which from 1939 included reprints in full colour of Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon* strip (Gravett and Stanbury 2006, p. 104). Some commentators have suggested that Frank Hampson was directly influenced by *Flash Gordon* in creating Dan Dare and that there are strong similarities between the two strips (Chapman 2011, pp. 62–3; Hansen 2004, p. 106). Looking at this *Flash Gordon* strip it certainly shares the same vibrant use of colour and futuristic cityscapes and spaceships that we can see in the Dan Dare strips (Fig. 6).

In his discussion of the *Eagle* Sabin noted that:

Also in common with the story papers, and somewhat in contrast to the moral message, it was war that constituted the single most featured subject, with ‘cut-away’ illustrations of tanks and battleships proving particularly popular. (1996, p. 49)

Taking *Modern Wonder* as an example of the story paper then war certainly featured heavily in the articles and ‘picture stories’, but it is also notable for



Fig. 4 Cover *Modern Wonder* 2:28, 27 November 1937

including cutaways in the centre-spreads some of which also addressed the topic of war (Figs. 7 and 8). Not only did both publications include cutaways, but these two examples were both produced by the same artist Leslie Ashwell-Wood who specialised in these kinds of images of machines such as aeroplanes,



Fig. 5 Dan Dare Pilot of the Future *Eagle* 2:11, 22 June 1951. Frank Hampson (Art)



Fig. 6 *Flash Gordon*, Back Cover *Modern Wonder* 5:105, 20 May 1939. Alex Raymond (Art and Script)

boats, trains and weapons of war. Usually focused on new technologies or sometimes scientific discoveries, these cutaways were a constant feature of both magazines and in these two examples we can see both the detail of the illustrations and the factual information that accompanied the images.¹⁰ Cutaways



Fig. 7 Guns, Cutaway Centre-Spread *Modern Wonder* 5:106, 27 May 1939. Leslie Ashwell-Wood (Art)



Fig. 8 King's Cup Competitor *Eagle* 2:11, 22 June 1951. Leslie Ashwell-Wood (Art)

were also used in fictional contexts, as can be seen in the Dan Dare story on the cover of the *Eagle* published on 22 June 1951, in this case showing how the antigravity system would work on his spaceship (Fig. 5). Cutaways, both factual and fictional, became a feature of many children's magazines of the 1950s and 1960s such as *Look and Learn*, *Ranger* and *World of Wonder* which were all printed in photogravure by the Liverpool based company Eric Bemrose Ltd who also printed the *Eagle*.¹¹

Using Cultural History to directly contrast the *Eagle* with *Modern Wonder* is revealing. Because most comic scholars have focused on the ideological, political and social aspects of the *Eagle* and Dan Dare there is a tendency to gloss over other aspects of its production to see it as a new kind of boy's comic that is successful because of its use of photogravure and by placing a science fiction adventure strip on its cover. As has been shown, however, there are precursors for many aspects of the *Eagle* but only if we consider the relatively hidden pre-war culture of science fiction comics revealed by Gifford and take account of the wider magazine and print culture of the period.

DARING TO USE CULTURAL HISTORY IN COMICS STUDIES

Of course, it could be objected that this analysis of the *Eagle* and 'Dan Dare Pilot of the Future' is very particular and specific, and that Cultural History might not work so effectively for other examples. To stick with a related subject we can sketch how this might work for "Dare" the revisionist comic strip created by Grant Morrison and Rian Hughes and published in seven issues of *Revolver* in 1990 and 1991 (Fig. 9).¹²

To return to Sabin we can see that ideological interpretations are to the fore when examining this strip. In discussing the emergence of a whole generation of new British comics Sabin notes the shift to a more adult audience and that "*Revolver* (1990) similarly tried to broaden its range away from science fiction, but paid its dues to the genre by revising Dan Dare – this time as a straight parody, deriding the original's imperialist sensibility" (1996, p. 140). Similarly, for Chapman "'Dare' is a brilliantly rendered revisionist strip that pays homage to the original while reinterpreting its ideological values for the present" (2011, p. 237). Again, the result of such an approach is a history that is partial and foregrounds how the comic reflected its contemporary ideological climate above an exploration of the overall visual culture to which it belonged. So how could we reconsider such interpretations of "Dare" informed by a Cultural Studies standpoint and approach this strip from the perspective of Cultural History?

Firstly, we might do what other comics scholars, including Sabin and Chapman, have done and situate *Revolver* in the context of other adult comic magazines of the period, taking note of titles such as *Crisis*, *Toxic* and *Deadline* (Sabin, 1996, p. 140; Chapman 2011, pp. 232–9; Roach 2020, pp. 122–4.). We could then go further and see how such magazines fit within wider shifts in the publishing industry of the period in terms of production.



Fig. 9 Cover *Revolver* 1, July 1990. Rian Hughes (Art and Design)

Secondly, we could say more about the visual design of the magazine and the strip itself. As well as drawing the “Dare” strip Rian Hughes designed the masthead and layout of *Revolver* and it is possible to consider his work within the wider design culture of the 1990s particularly in relation to postmodernist approaches to typographic design. Looking at Hughes’ treatment of the visual

elements of the strip might then show not a revisionist critique of the original strip but a celebration. He consistently used the original logo from “Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future” even though he had created a different “Dare” logo used elsewhere in the magazine (Fig. 10). This is more of a tribute to the



Fig. 10 *Dare Revolver* 3, p. 14, September 1990. Rian Hughes (Art) Grant Morrison (Script)

original strip and not a critique or attack, in this image Dare is shown wearing the original spacesuit design from the 1950s strip and the background is collaged from print designs created for the Festival of Britain.¹³

As this outline suggests it is possible to take the existing Cultural Studies interpretations of the different revivals and reboots of Dan Dare over the past 70 years and reconsider them through the lens of Cultural History. Of course, it need not stop there, and such an approach would at least allow us to start constructing a different kind of history for British comics built on the foundations provided by Gombrich and other art historians. This is not a choice between examining ideology and paying attention to visual form, production and publishing contexts or the relationships to visual culture more broadly, but rather that these approaches must go together if we are to build a more complete history of British comics cultures.

NOTES

1. For the use of Warburg's ideas within Comics Studies see Von Rosen (2017), and the chapter "Reading Comics with Aby Warburg: Collaging Memories" by Ahmed (2022) in the companion volume to this book.
2. For more detail on Visual Culture Studies and what it might offer the study of comics, see the chapter "What is an Image? Art History, Visual Culture Studies, and Comics Studies" by Roan (2022) in the companion volume to this book.
3. Capitalisation retained from the original. It is worth noting that the *Key Terms in Comics Studies* (2022) book from which this quote is taken has many more contributions from authors identified as working in Cultural Studies departments relative to those working in Cultural History.
4. For a discussion of the relationship between Cultural Studies and Popular Culture see Rak (2022). In America Cultural Studies as such had little impact but the Popular Culture Association fulfilled a similar role, see Coogan (2017) and Lent (2017).
5. It should be noted that the Festival of Britain launched over a year after the *Eagle* first appeared and the modernity of the spaceships, hovercars and buildings in the Dan Dare strip were present from the outset. There is the potential for further research that examines the relationship between British modernism in art, architecture and design and the Dan Dare strip.
6. For a detailed history of Swift Morgan comic books see <http://andrewdarlington.blogspot.com/2019/02/comicbook-history-swift-morgan.html>.
7. For a brief history of Odhams Press see https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Odhams_Press. For a brief history of the Sun Engraving Co. see https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Sun_Engraving_Co.
8. For detail on Rembrandt Photogravure Ltd as a subsidiary of the Sun Engraving Company see <https://www.sunprintershistory.com/history.html>.
9. Capitalisation retained from the original.
10. Little is known about Leslie Ashwell-Wood but some background information can be found here <https://bearalley.blogspot.com/2007/03/leslie-ashwell-wood.html>. Interestingly Leslie Ashwell-Wood also did the illustration for an article about an aircraft catapulting system in the issue of *Modern Wonder* which

- contains the first *Flash Gordon* strip, which itself shows Flash's spaceship being catapulted into space <http://www.cyber-heritage.co.uk/cutaway/cata.jpg>.
11. For detail on Eric Bemrose Ltd see <https://www.craxford-family.co.uk/theme-olive/mlsart4simmonds.php>.
 12. The final episodes of "Dare" were published in the magazine *Crisis* issues 55 and 56 in 1991 as *Revolver* folded after seven issues.
 13. In 1989 Hughes had already published a comic *The Science Service* in which he played homage not only to the Festival of Britain but also to the *Style Atome* of the 1950s.

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A Social History of Comics Art: Looking at Writers and Readers' *Capitalism for Beginners*

Abstract This chapter builds on the chapter, “[Art History Turned Upside Down: David Kunzle and the Social History of Art](#)”, by reassessing the significance of the social history of art to Comics Studies by tracking the development of concepts of style, class and ideology from the work of early Marxist art historians such as Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro to that of New Left art historians like T. J. Clark and O. K. Werckmeister. It goes on to examine subsequent work by art historians and theorists taking a Marxist art-historical approach to print, graphics and popular culture such as Adrian Rifkin, Frances Stracey and Esther Leslie, before sketching what a social history of comics might look like through an analysis of the Writers and Readers' ... *for Beginners* series of “documentary comic books”, specifically *Capitalism for Beginners* by Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon.

Keywords Social history of art • Marxist Art History • Ideology • *for Beginners* • Borin van Loon • Applied comics

Resituating David Kunzle's work within the renewal of a social history of art in the 1970s, begs the question of what Marxist Art History might continue to offer Comics Studies, and what a social history of comics art could look like.

There is not much comics scholarship explicitly situated as Marxist in methodology (e.g. Wysocki 2020), as compared to work that roots itself within anarchism or feminism for example, and less still from a Marxist art-historical perspective. However, an enduring impact of Marxist cultural and aesthetic theory on Comics Studies is borne out by frequent reference to figures like Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Mikhail Bakhtin, and concepts like hegemony, ideology and autonomy. This has come in large part via the significance of Cultural Studies, with its foundations in Frankfurt School critical

theory and the “culturalist” social history of figures like E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, in opening up possibilities for comics research.

While questions of ideology, class, labour and capital fell by the wayside as Comics Studies gained a stronger foothold in more established academic disciplines, and class as a structural antagonism was side-lined in postmodernist theory, there has been an increasing interest in class and work within comics scholarship, including the representation of class identities and labour in comics (DiPaolo 2018), the character and organisation of work in the comics industry itself (Brienza and Johnston 2016), and the class composition of comics creators and audiences (stemming from ongoing debates about whether comics were or are a “working class medium”—see Nilsson 2019). Historical work on comics has examined their use in labour movements, and in turn labour history and activism have been documented and communicated through comics (with both to be found, e.g. in Paul Buhle’s output as historian and editor, e.g. 2001; 2005; 2006; 2016).

That Marxist Art History has been largely absent from these discussions and developments speaks to the double marginality of Art History in Comics Studies and Marxism in Art History. Yet significant attention has been given in Marxist Art History to cartooning, print culture and popular art, with collector, writer and publisher Eduard Fuchs at the beginning of the twentieth century an early theorist of the dialectical possibilities of caricature as a political weapon (Mandarino 2018). It is not possible to summarise here the development of Marxist Art History since then, in dialogue with multiple other disciplines and diverse political mobilisations, and subject to intense internal and external critique, or even talk of a singular Marxist art-historical method. This chapter will therefore describe how core questions of class, ideology and value have been applied to comics, cartooning, print and political graphics by Marxist art historians beyond Kunzle. This will provide the basis for an analysis of the Writers and Readers series of ... *for Beginners* “documentary comic books”, specifically *Capitalism for Beginners* by Robert Lekachman and alternative cartoonist Borin Van Loon first published in 1981.

MARXIST ART HISTORY AND COMICS

Kunzle’s approach, and the Marxist vein of Art History it was shaped by, raises questions that idealist, formalist models of meaning making in comics struggle to answer: what do comics do socially and politically? What are their relationships to class and capital? What ideological role do they play (in articulating and modulating class conflict, as intermeshed with other axes of exploitation and oppression)? How are they shaped by the contingent historical and material circumstances of their making and use, and how do they resonate with contemporary political and social antagonisms?

From a Marxist perspective it is not possible to define a “system of comics” removed from the economic, social and cultural nexus in which they are produced, distributed and consumed, and a wider totality of social relations.

Comics cannot be extracted from definite historical and material conditions, and nor can comics scholarship. The social history of art equally asks (with implications for the establishment of Comics Studies as a discrete discipline): how is academic research shaped by the conditions of its production and consumption, and what is its role in the construction and circulation of value? We might consider, for example, the impact of the way comics scholarship has defined authorship, creative practice and the cultural significance of the form on the structure of the comics industry and market (e.g. in embedding the category graphic novel), and how this might relate to the political economy of academia itself.

Very broadly speaking, Marxist Art History contends that art is shaped by concrete historical circumstances of production and consumption—individual works must therefore be situated within specific relations between artists, patrons, institutions and audiences, themselves framed by broader economic, social and cultural forces. Both artistic labour and the use and experience of artworks are sensuous and social processes, tied up under capitalism with the commodity form. The meaning of artworks is not internal but historically and socially determined, art is not transcendent but contingent, and ideological in content and form, refracting and reifying particular prevailing interests and values, as do discourses *about* art. However,—and despite dismissals of Marxist Art History as reduced to its cruder orthodox variants—art is not simply reflective of, or structurally overdetermined by, the dominant economic organisation of society, but complex and contradictory, a site of contestation and a source of cognitive value and/or a kind of truth. Its critical possibilities have been partly ascribed to its peculiar commodity status and relative autonomy (as outside the rationality of socially necessary labour time), although debates over ideology and aesthetics have been acute.

Style, Ideology and Class

An initial elaboration of a social history of art emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, looking to a wider range of cultural artefacts as part of its challenge to the dominance of a narrow canon of “great” works. This included caricature, prints and popular illustration—as in the work of Frederick Antal and Francis Klingender who both wrote on the work of William Hogarth. A major aspect of established Art History they contested was the primacy of style treated in terms of fixed successive categories evolving according to an immanent logic divorced from wider historical factors (van Dyke 2019). For Antal, this model could not explain the co-existence of divergent styles within the same period, such as in fifteenth-century Florentine painting (1948), which he accounted for as expressing (in specific combinations of form and subject) the “outlook on life” of conflicting class fractions within early capitalism. Hogarth’s work at a subsequent historical juncture gave form to the values and consciousness not just of the rising English middle class, but, particularly in his engravings, a broad cross-section of society—with different visual approaches related to

different publics and different artistic needs (Antal 1962). As such, stylistic analysis had to be rooted in in-depth exploration of wider social, economic and political history, as well as detailed evaluation of class relations between artists, patrons and consumers.

Debates about the relationship between style, ideology and class were deeply tied to left politics of the 1930s and 1940s, and had played out in intense debates about realism and modernism within the cultural and political organisations of the anti-fascist Popular Front. Klingender, in a book based on the 1943 exhibition Hogarth and English Caricature organised with the Artists' International Association, took the orthodox Marxist view that it was Hogarth's realism that enabled him to reach beyond his own "middle station" and express "the moods and aspirations ... of the broad masses of people", displaying "the different circumstances and relations of life, not abstractly, but as they actually are" (Klingender 1944, pp. xiii, viii). Hogarth was therefore a model of a socially engaged artist addressing the experiences of "a less sophisticated public" by tapping into the blunt realism of a popular lineage of visual satire from medieval miniatures through seventeenth century chapbooks. Antal, who rejected Soviet avowals of realism as transhistorically progressive, identified greater complexity in Hogarth's work, with various styles (baroque, rococo, classicist, realist, expressionist) intermingling within it, mediating differing ideological currents and the complexity of its "social and artistic background" (1962, p. 57).

American Marxist art historian Meyer Schapiro, like Klingender, endorsed popular graphics as a model for revolutionary art (albeit from a different political perspective sympathetic to Trotskyism). He advocated the political value of newspaper cartoons, posters and print series and argued "the good revolutionary picture... should have the legibility and pointedness of a cartoon, and like the cartoon it should reach great masses of workers at little expense" (Schapiro quoted in Hemingway 1994, p. 16). Rejecting ideas of style as homogenous and discrete as inflected by nationalism and racism, like Antal he saw the co-presence of different styles as articulating conflicting social interests and perspectives in periods of political, economic and cultural transformation (Schapiro 1939), positioning stylistic categories as mutable and provisional, rooted in definite but dynamic historical circumstances.

This was a view shared by Hungarian art historian Arnold Hauser, who, despite the allegations of critics like Gombrich, rejected a crude reflective sociology of art, conceiving styles as a broad shifting patterns of collective cultural forms shaped in complex ways by economic, political and technological developments, and interacting with psychological and social factors in producing individual artworks. Art is "eminently social... a product of social forces and source of social effect" (Hauser 1963, p. 276), but examining its ideological dimension was not a simple matter—"the formation of ideologies is a long, complicated, gradual process... full of interruptions and contradictions" (p. 11), and "art's dependence upon society can take the most varied forms", art "can express the structure of a given society either positively or negatively,

can assent to it or reject it, promote some features and oppose others, serve as a propaganda weapon, defence mechanism, or safety valve" (p. 268). For Hauser, art also has a cognitive and communicative dimension beyond its instrumental uses, in which style is among the material, intellectual and technical resources worked by artists (Gelfert 2012).

Schapiro scrutinised how art-historical analysis was framed by the political context and social position of the art historian, and was scathing about the role of "bourgeois art-study" as "ultimately tied to the market interest in pictures", "usually servile, precious, pessimistic and in its larger views of history, human nature and contemporary life, thoroughly reactionary" (quoted in Hills 1994, p. 35). Likewise Hauser attacked the ideological alliances of mainstream Art History, arguing that "requiring the spiritual to be preserved from all contact with the material frequently turns out to be a way of defending a position of privilege" (Hauser 1963, p. 4).

Style fell from use as a category in both Marxist Art History and Art History in general from the 1970s, displaced by a focus on representation informed by semiotics and structuralism, and the wider influence of Althusserianism on cultural theory (as in Nicos Hadjinicolaou's 1973 reconceptualisation of it as "visual ideology").¹ Nevertheless, the early social historians of art laid important groundwork in insisting on the politics of the treatment of material and visual form in combination with iconography or represented content, taken up by the Marxist Art History of the New Left as it further interrogated the ideological dimensions of art. The critique of the art historian as servant of the market intensified in New Left social history of art, and accounts of comics, cartooning and popular print were similarly indicative of its key concerns and fissures.

Ideology and Autonomy

As noted in the chapter, "[Art History Turned Upside Down: David Kunzle and the Social History of Art](#)", New Left art historians called for a return to fundamental historical, political and philosophical questions, advocating rigorous materialist analysis of the conditions and relations of artistic production to unpick relationships of art and ideology. For T. J. Clark, this included "blindness as much as vision" (1973, p. 15), not just what is enabled to be seen and depicted but what is occluded, and moreover the *mode* of seeing, emphasising the need to examine "what kind of visibility a certain symbolic system [makes] possible" (pp. 16–7). Critical of earlier Marxist Art History for drawing what he deemed too generalised correlations of styles and ideological outlooks across wide stretches of time, Clark explored "connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes and more general historical structures and processes" within more precise conjunctures (1973, p. 12). This included examining the work of French Realist painter Gustave Courbet in the 1840s as means to explore how art in certain historical moments could actively participate in

social revolution and counter-hegemonic disruption, “how art during moments of social upheaval can become disputed, even effective, part of the historical process and ... work against the grain of dominant regimes of power” (Clark 1973, p. 10), with an important focus on reception and the relationship to, and construction of, publics. A key element of Courbet’s work was how it appropriated motifs, techniques and the “repetitive forms” of popular woodcuts “for the purpose of putting history painting ... at the disposal of workers and peasants” (Eisenman 2013, p. 52), articulating a modernist flatness thereby cast as a mode of seeing rooted in radical social movements.

The idea of art’s autonomy (often defined in contradistinction to commodified mass culture determined by exchange value), and claims made on that basis for the aesthetic as a specific kind of truth were sharply contested within Marxist Art History in the 1970s and 1980s. O. K. Werckmeister in particular challenged such assertions as themselves an ideological abstraction, whereby the aesthetic provides a utopian surrogate for actual political transformation (1991a, p. 87). Werckmeister argued the turn to the Frankfurt School by the New Left, and Adorno’s aesthetic theory in particular, marked a retreat from a full-blown materialist emancipation of Art History directed at political activism. Rejecting art’s supposed autonomy and the modernist canon Clark reinscribed (a criticism also made by Marxist-feminists like Griselda Pollock), Werckmeister’s own ideology critique has incorporated a broader array of creative media. This has included analysis of comics and manga—notably Enki Bilal’s work on the Nikopol trilogy and *The Hunting Party* (written by Pierre Christin). For Werckmeister, Bilal’s comics spoke more profoundly of the contradictions of 1980s neoliberalism and its neurotic, brutalising “Citadel Culture”, which neutralises political consciousness by staging a spectacle of its own self-critique as “radiant pessimism” and “empty subversion”, than work found in galleries (Werckmeister 1991b, p. 18). In a situation of blurred distinctions between elite and popular culture, and market expansion across cultural borderlines, adult comics that drew on the “dynamic pictorial forms of film and television”, adopted new technologies of colour printing, and experimentally exploited “the license of the comic strip to manipulate text, space and time”, had greater historical relevance and critical purchase (pp. 48, 55).²

Clark’s reinforcement of a narrow canon of culturally consecrated objects and (male) artists, was equally criticised by Adrian Rifkin, as merely disputing the interpretation of “one series of valued objects whose culturally ascribed value demands that they have their own history”, rather than challenging that system of values (2018, p. 52). Rifkin saw the eschewal of fine art “masterpieces” in favour of popular culture as part of dismantling Art History, writing on a range of forms including prints, cartoons, posters, songbooks, popular magazines, film, entertainment venues and topographies of gay sex, in dialogue with currents in social history, art and design theory, Film Studies, Cultural Studies, feminist and queer theory. Rifkin also focused on France and the nineteenth century, but instead looked at mass print culture and cartooning, like that of the Paris Commune, not just as background source material or

“decorative fringe to the ‘real’ fabric of social conflict” (2018, p. 217) but “itself a field of struggle and of the emergence of various forms of consciousness” (p. 487). Cartoons were part of the “autonomous culture of the working class” (Edwards 2018, p. 12), as well as means by which the middle classes expressed their hatred and fear of them.

Rifkin approached popular art as just as comprehensive, “semantically dense and polysemic” and demanding of detailed thematic, discursive and historical analysis as easel painting (Edwards 2018, p. 20). Cartoons and caricature mediated in complex ways wider social conditions and institutions (notably legal), and experiences and spaces of everyday life, in dialogue with other forms of creative production as part of a wider cultural economy. However, Rifkin resisted arguing for their quality or significance on terms that reproduced problematic cultural hierarchies and normative values, whereby cartoons by certain figures, like Daumier, are elevated on the basis of aesthetic criteria detached from historically specific meaning. Rifkin looked at work by amateur, unknown, “run of the mill” illustrators and printmakers, and refused to sentimentalise the popular art of or about the Parisian working class or make apologies for its crudeness, obscenity and violence, but, particularly in attending to censorship and surveillance, identified its instances of militancy, dissent and transgression. Artists searched for imagery, forms and methods that embodied the political demands, experiences and enmities of the moment, reworking and adapting existing symbolism and techniques to produce new meanings, that, while “concentrating complicated relations into a form through which they can be realised and fought over” (Rifkin 2018, p. 215), were not fixed, stable or one-dimensional, but many-shaded, and shifting in processes of reception and use.

Affect, Materiality and Ways of Reading and Seeing

In the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of the “recuperation” of a watered-down social history of art into mainstream Art History, as one of a mix of methods and theoretical perspectives that provided it with a sheen of academic radicalism, many Marxists decamped for Cultural or Film Studies (Roberts 2013). Nevertheless, Marxist art historians and theorists have proceeded to work on cartooning and comics as well as wider forms of popular visual culture and political graphics in ways that continue to flesh out a provocative model for Comics Studies.³ To take just one publication, *ReNew Marxist Art History* (Carter et al. 2013) included chapters on cartoons in the communist-aligned US paper *New Masses*, and José Guadalupe Posada’s calaveras imagery in a range of newspapers, chapbooks and single-sheet prints, as well as Rockwell Kent’s illustrations of *Moby Dick*, Louis Lozowick’s lithographs of Soviet Tajikistan, and William Morris’ printed textile designs. Among the most relevant to Comics Studies is Frances Stracey’s chapter on Situationist détournement of images culled from women’s and pornographic magazines using comics devices like speech balloons, part of wider research into their artistic

and political output, including Asger Jorn and Guy Debord's books and Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio's industrial painting (Stracey 2014).

Stracey draws attention to the Situationists' tactical use of media based on specific visual and material affordances—the montage, splicing, drawing over and resituating of photographic imagery a key part of its counter-hegemonic recoding and the group's broader playful disruption of the fabric of alienated everyday life. *Détournement*, as an act of “determinate misplacement or disjunctive conjuncture”, challenged “the conventional meaning and role of [...] images” operative in a concrete historical context and wider cultural economy in which the image of femininity was in flux (Stracey 2013, p. 420). Pictures of women pillaged from advertising and pop-porn bore meanings tightly related to women's changing role in post-war labour markets and patterns of consumption, whereby “commodity aesthetics used women as a privileged site of desire” (Stracey 2013, p. 442). Their destabilising recontextualisation exposed (while remaining complicit in) how the “commodity aesthetic of late 50s and early 60s was hegemonically coded as feminine”, ridiculing the sexual semblance of the commodity-spectacle and its “coercive and dissimulating drives” projected through “fantasy images of the proper way to look, act, cook”, and the fractured semi-naked female body (Stracey 2013, p. 442, 425).

Thus not only images as representations, but the techniques of producing, manipulating and presenting them, have ideological inflections and particular material affects related to the socialising roles they play at a particular historical juncture in producing models of subjectivity. Stracey draws us towards the politics of affect as connected to precise material practices—how Situationist graffiti, for example, embodied in its palimpsestic ephemerality and mutability a “refusal of definitive language regimes” (2014, p. 81). Avowing instead a liquidation of language, this was part of a wider sensuous and eroticised poetics of “fluidity, promiscuity, *jouissance*, impropriety, contamination and insubordination”, found equally in Situationist writing *about* images and contemporary capitalism, and the “photo-graffiti” of Situationist graphic design (Stracey 2014, p. 86). In its cropping, reframing and re-siting of “ready-made photo-journalistic images” in ambiguous disjunctures of text and picture, “*détournement* of the photograph puts pressure on fixed meaning by making its framing borders porous ... open to contamination... subject to leakage.... the meaning of the image is both within it, but also constituted by what lies outside ... starting with the pages of the book” (Stracey 2014, p. 88).

The Situationists didn't believe either photography or graffiti were essentially radical forms, but attention to their affective and sensuous affordances in particular historical moments, and specific material contexts of design and reproduction, opens up questions of the disruptive and revolutionary possibilities of comics' form. Marxist cultural and aesthetic theorist Esther Leslie has similarly attended to the political affordances of comics on the basis of materiality and aesthetics, as part of an expansive body of work covering animation, illustration, fine art, fashion, film, technology and science.

For Leslie, treatments of form and material—the aesthetics of the cartoon line, the organisation of a page's surface, the use (and chemistry) of colour, techniques of facture and processes of reproduction—make political meaning and “perpetrate a philosophy” (2006). Thus in an article for *ImageText* on William Blake she examines how his spiralling line ideologically confronted the blank, rational line of instrumentalist empiricism that classifies and fixes meaning and exchange values, and his “infernal” corrosive printing method appropriated metal for expression and imagination at a time when it was “ever more tightly bound to trade and finance”, while stripping away “the veil of obscurity” to demystify and profane creative production (Leslie 2006). Blake's treatment of the page's surface invites a particular embodied way of seeing, with relations darting across it as a deep and full space, confounding any reader “who wishes to glide from line to line, in one direction only” (Leslie 2006). The visceral pleasures and “libidinal gratification” of reading comics like *The Beano*, with its “animosity to civilisation in favour of jokes, chaos and transformation” (in the vein of Dada iconoclasm and the “debunking satire” of *Tristram Shandy*), embodies a similar protest against mechanical reason and rationalised structures of language (Leslie and Watson 2002).

Drawn line and marked space have the potential to map new worlds, as well as describe the world as it is, both critical and speculative possibilities. For Leslie, reviewing Kate Evans' graphic biography of Rosa Luxemburg, *Red Rosa*, comics' “dialectical and intersectional nature”, their “capacity to mesh subjective and objective worlds”, exploit tensions between word and image, and “shift register and tone abruptly”, prompt “new ways of reading and seeing” with possibilities for activism and political education (2016, p. 278).

WRITERS AND READERS ... FOR BEGINNERS COMIC BOOKS

Drawing on the implications of Marxist Art History, a social history of comics would attend to the politics of form and design as a site of struggle, the ideological valences of the kinds of looking and sensuous engagement comics invoke, and the meanings produced and publics constructed through material processes, media affordances and graphic style. This must be grasped in relation to the contingent historical circumstances and social relations of comics' production and consumption as commodities within a wider cultural economy and larger structural class antagonisms. Marxist Art History's critique of the canon suggests comics scholarship should look beyond established “great works”, sceptical of criteria used to judge “quality”. This invites consideration of a much broader body of material beyond the graphic novels and comic book series put out by major publishers or newspaper strips with widespread syndication, including less well-known vernacular, local, provincial material appearing in a range of different digital and print formats. It also prompts attention to work across a wider range of genres, including non-fictional educational comics, such as the...for Beginners books published by Writers and Readers, whose

long history, as Aaron Humphrey (2014) argues, has been obscured by the ascendance and literary legitimization of the graphic novel.

Writers and Readers was founded in London in 1974 as a small press cooperative by Glenn Thompson, his wife translator Sian Williams, and writers Lisa and Richard Appignanesi, with the support of playwright and arts campaigner Arnold Wesker, anti-racist activist and teacher Chris Searle, and the art critic John Berger.⁴ Thompson, born in Harlem and raised in Brooklyn, had come to the UK in 1968 and settled in Hackney, east London, working first as a social worker and then for the publisher Penguin's educational wing. Drawing on his experience of the Beat and Civil Rights movements, he was pivotal in setting up community cafe and bookshop Centerprise, the only bookshop in the borough when it opened in 1971 against the prevailing opinion that "a bookshop would never work in the East End because East Enders didn't read" (Simpson 2013). Alongside seeing a "good, wide-ranging general bookshop as a 'cultural right'" for the local multiracial working class population (Centerprise 1977) and providing a space for community organising and activism, adult literacy and the democratisation of publishing were important priorities for Centerprise, which held regular reading and writing classes. After a children's book, *Hackney Half-term Adventure*, and a book of poetry by Vivian Usherwood (aged 12 at the time) were published and sold well in the bookshop, Thompson set up the Centerprise Publishing Project to put out poetry, stories and autobiography by local writers, as well as local history books by the Hackney branch of the Workers' Educational Association (Centerprise 1977).

Writers and Readers was similarly initiated with a commitment to community-based, democratised publishing, literacy and popular education. Among their range of fiction and non-fiction was a series of ... *for Beginners* "documentary comic books" which, encompassing politics, economics, science, psychology, philosophy, art, music and literature, aimed to make these subjects accessible and relevant using the comics form.⁵ Their breakout title was a 1976 English edition of Mexican cartoonist Rius' *Marx para principiantes*, translated by Richard Appignanesi as *Marx for Beginners*.⁶ Its instant success established the viability of a series using Rius' model of educational comics to introduce lay readers to the ideas of figures like Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Freud, Einstein and Darwin, and the histories of Ireland, Nicaragua, food, medicine, nuclear power and others, as Berger (2001) put it, "not in an arduous, condescending manner, but with a certain streetwise insolence".

Relations of Production, Distribution and Consumption

The cooperative organisation of Writers and Readers is significant and shaped the approach taken to the comics' design and visual and material form. As at Centerprise, it was intended that work would be distributed on an equitable basis with members receiving equal pay and rotating tasks so they could learn all aspects of publishing, as opposed to a hierarchical division of labour. Run on a not-for-profit basis, with some grants for specific publications from the Arts

Council, surpluses from more successful titles were fed into others and kept their range of books in print and available. The commitment to the democratisation and socialisation of printing and publishing on a non-commercial basis connects *Writers and Readers* to the wider community and alternative publishing movements in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, which included community printshops, poster workshops and the alternative press.⁷ A further connection was evident in the fact at least one title in the series was typeset at the alternative printshop Range Left. The aims of this movement were to create access for local working class communities and marginalised groups to resources of media and cultural production monopolised by the middle and upper classes. Similar motivations, and the same independent infrastructure and networks of production and distribution, were shared by the early alternative comics movement (see Gray 2020).

This anti-hierarchical, democratic and participatory way of organising production resonated with *Writers and Readers*' aims in terms of relations to audiences and modes of consumption. As with the publisher's output at large, the *...for Beginners* series was intended to open up knowledge sequestered and gatekept by academia, hoping to appeal to young readers, non-readers and those who wanted to educate themselves without going to university. Thompson was influenced by the pedagogic theories of Paolo Friere and Ivan Illich, both of whose works *Writers and Readers* published among a range of texts on education and literacy, viewing books as "weapons of liberation" (Coates 2001). According to Berger, for Thompson "literacy was more than the capacity to read, it was the capacity to lay claim to a legitimate inheritance" (2001). This was evident in his earlier work with Centerprise Publishing which was driven by the sense that non-readers would read if they had access to books that addressed their concerns (Centerprise 1977), yet books on politics and sociology were being written about working class people that were expensive and difficult to get hold of. Centerprise members felt strongly "that people have a right to read what other people, invariably from a different class, are writing about them" and it wasn't a question of working class people lacking interest in education, but the "active suppression of working class people becoming too interested in politics and literature" (Centerprise 1977).

Rius was similarly influenced by the postcolonial education theory of Friere and Latin American pedagogical traditions of critical consciousness raising (Priego 2002). From this perspective, comics were a widely read popular mass medium ideal for "the dissemination of ideas that lay at the heart of revolutionary self-emancipation" (Leslie 2016, p. 274). They allowed for graphic thinking and visual literacy, the reconsideration of the norms of writing and publishing practices (Humphrey 2015, p. 4), and the evocation of connections "in concrete graspable situations" through image sequencing, enabling "complex, abstruse thinking... to be hauled down to earth with raucous humour" (Leslie 2016, p. 274). With roots in workers publishing, independent radical media and traditions of popular political education, similar ideas of how cartooning could make theory entertaining, concrete, resonant and open,

constructing a reading public that actively educated itself rather than one into which knowledge remote from everyday life is deposited, underpinned the ... *for Beginners* series of comics.

Style, Materiality and the Politics of Form

One of the major differences between Rius' work and the comics that followed in the series was that, rather than being the work of a single creator, ...*for Beginners* paired writers with illustrators (Humphrey 2014, p. 77). Several of the cartoonists involved are well-known to the history of British and American comics, notably Oscar Zarate who illustrated several titles, but also Melinda Gebbie, William Ranking and Leonard Rifas,⁸ yet these comics have received relatively scant attention in Comics Studies (Humphrey 2014, 2015; Brunner 2014). Borin Van Loon is another British comics artist who has produced several titles in the series, including *Capitalism for Beginners* (1981), *Darwin for Beginners* (1982) and *DNA for Beginners* (1983) as well as later books on genetics, maths, statistics, philosophy, sociology, critical theory, Cultural Studies and Media Studies. Van Loon's roots were in the alternative press, providing strips featuring his ex-hippie character Bof to South London alternative papers *Lower Down* and *South Circular* in the 1970s. These comics featured images of urban alienation, including repeated images of tube tunnels and escalators, and played with ambiguous, elliptical narratives, silent storytelling and experimental layouts.⁹ Van Loon also notably contributed one of his "Intellectual Bull" strips to the women-led anthology *Heroïne* published in 1978 by the cooperative Birmingham Arts Lab Press' Ar:Zak imprint.

The design of the ...*for Beginners* series suggests how the relations constructed between those involved in the production process, and between authors and readers, was conveyed visually and materially. Like the Centerprise publications, the aim appears to have been "to produce the comics as cheaply as possible whilst keeping them as attractive as their commercial counterparts" (Centerprise 1977). The books were paperback (with some hardbacks produced for libraries), perfect-bound and printed on low grade paper, but A5 digest sized which, larger than most paperback fiction, better showcased the imagery. The front and back covers, designed by Louise Fili, combined a geometric slab serif typeface in red for the main title and authors' names, sans serif Kabel typeface with a distinctive tilted lowercase e for other text, and a prominent cartoon illustration, printed on textured card. Overall, the visual aspect was emphasised, and the design was simple and stylish, conveying a reading experience that was pleasurable and dynamic and a book that made itself felt, but was functional and relatable rather than precious or solemn (Fig. 1).

Van Loon's approach as an illustrator was highly significant in terms of design, materiality and their affective qualities, making substantial use of collage and photomontage in combination with dip pen/brush and ink drawings. Van Loon had first developed "collage comix" and a process of cutting up, combining and re-scripting a range of found imagery in his work for alternative

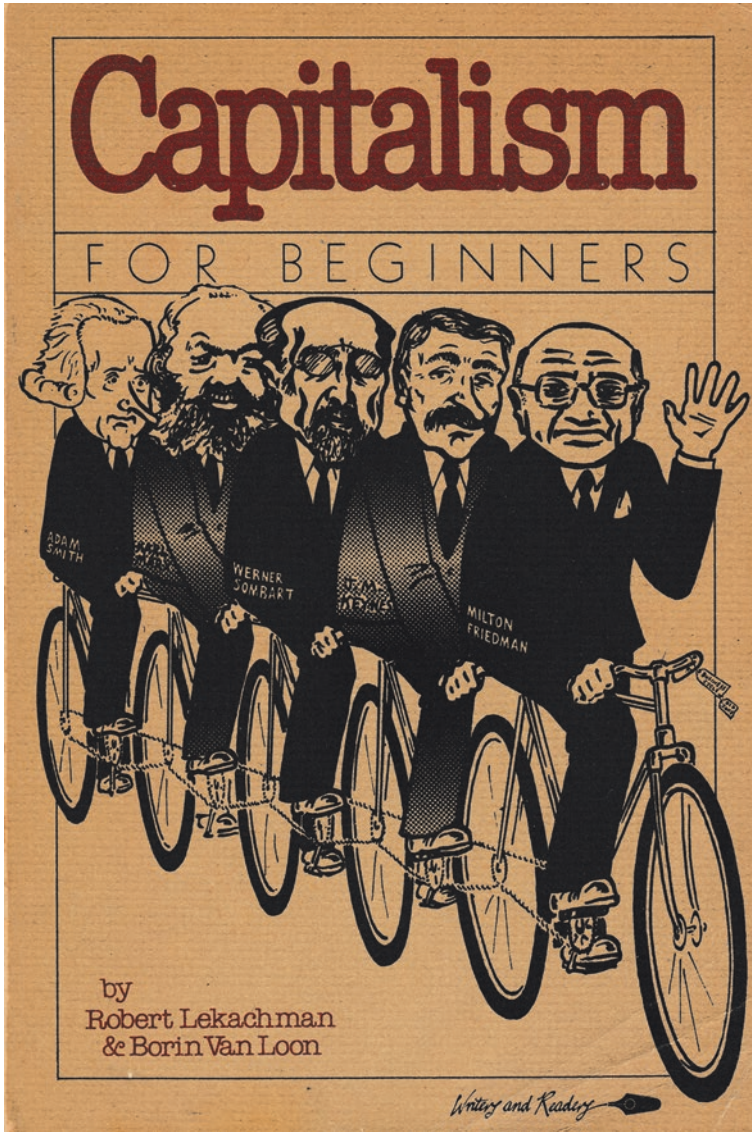


Fig. 1 Louise Fili, front cover design for Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners*. Writers and Readers

comics, notably his strips in Ar:Zak's *Streetcomix* and *Heroïne* that appropriated images from boys adventure and romance comics. He became increasingly drawn towards the idea of producing a comic wholly made up of pre-existing images. For Van Loon (2003), collage has a subversive appeal and he cites the influence of Surrealism, specifically Max Ernst's "revolutionary collage novels"

(as well as Terry Gilliam's Surrealist-inspired collage animation), alongside Situationist "agitprop collage" and the underground and alternative comics it influenced, like Martin Sharp's photomontage comics and Chris Garratt and Mick Kidd's *Biff* strip which featured in hippie papers *Oz* and *IT*. As discussed further in the chapter, "[Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore's I Can Hear the Grass Grow](#)", collage as a process, particularly as it was developed in modernist movements like Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, calls attention to the materiality of the page as a fractured and constructed surface and the physical, sensuous acts of making and manipulating material—cutting up, sticking down, drawing and writing over. In *Capitalism for Beginners* it also drew attention to the design process and Van Loon's hands-on paste up and layout of text and image for each page more generally. At the same time, in Stracey's terms, it highlighted the book's porousness, its contamination by a constitutive outside, and the dialogue it had within a wider economy of everyday visual and material culture consumed by the reader.

Van Loon's list of influences attests to the way the visual and material affordances of collage and photomontage, as applied in comics form, and the mode of seeing invoked, had been tactically deployed in the 1960s and 1970s by Situationist and pro-Situ groups.¹⁰ Steef Davidson's (1982) *Penguin Book of Political Comics* documents extensive use of cut up, recombined and reworded imagery culled from superhero, adventure, romance and funny animal comics (often in combination with photographic material from newspapers, magazines and adverts) by left-wing activist groups and the alternative press across Europe as well as in the USA and New Zealand. A key catalyst was the four-page comic *The Return of the Durutti Column* fly-posted around Strasbourg University in 1966 by the "the friends of Marx and Ravachol" and distributed as a "comics preface" to Mustapha Khayati's pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* (Paylor 2021, p. 1016), which détourned romance and western comics, film stills, adverts and cartoons with radical slogans and extracts from Khayati's text. Others included the comics produced by the Council for the Maintenance of Occupations (CMDO) during student and worker activism in Paris in May 1968 (see Fig. 2).

As a strategy, détournement had roots in the aesthetics of shock and chance developed in avant-garde modern art movements like Dada and Surrealism, but—in line with Situationist criticism of the ineffectuality and co-optation of such groups—was aimed directly at the radical critique and overthrow of contemporary capitalism and the function of images within it. The idea was to disrupt an economic system organised, in the context of post-war modernisation of manufacturing, expansion of the service sector, liberalisation of trade, diversification of media and extension of advertising, around an intensified, alienating commodity-spectacle. Détournement, meaning diversion but also embezzlement and corruption, disrupted and subverted elements of a social life reduced to the level of appearance, through appropriation and juxtaposition. By putting things together in incongruous combinations, familiar



Fig. 2 1968 CMDO comic, reproduced in Steef Davidson (1982) *The Penguin Book of Political Comics*, p. 142

fragments of text and image are organised into a new ensemble with a different effect, destabilising the commodity image through parody, exaggeration and violence.

The motivation for hijacking the imagery and format of comics was connected to this idea of corruption, profaning and deflating banal, affirmative bourgeois culture by appropriating comics as a lowbrow working class medium with an “ambivalent reputation”—associated with consumerism, Americanisation and youth in the context of the post-war anti-comics crusade, while receiving increasing attention from intellectuals (Paylor 2021, p. 1013). The CMDO comic in Fig. 2 summarises the rationale—subverting the comic strip (“the graphic form of proletarian expression, means the bypassing of bourgeois art”), while self-reflexively mocking its own pretensions (“all they do is change the bubbles.... we’re just too lazy to draw our own pictures”). This echoed the description of Situationist comics as “making shame more shameful still” through repurposing “the only truly popular literature of our century” by adding elements or rewording speech balloons (Viénet 1967). This was seen in opposition to Pop Art as restoring to comics their potency as a political weapon, but not by making them serious. Détourned images were deliberately ambiguous and nonsensical—the point was to create a dissonant recoding that readers had to grapple with rather than a clear prescriptive message or simple pastiche, attesting to the possibilities of actively rewriting (and re-picturing) the world.

In the UK this approach was adopted by pro-Situ groups like King Mob, and in the work of cartoonists such as Peter Kirkham, Ray Lowry, Garratt and Kidd in the underground, alternative and music press, including grass-roots local papers like *Mole Express* and *Grass Eye* (Dickinson 1997, pp. 50–4), as well as in punk graphics of figures like Linder, Gee Vaucher and Jamie Reid (Reid having been part of Croydon alternative print collective Suburban Press). Van Loon’s collage cartooning operates in a similar way, establishing an important relationship to Lekachman’s words in *Capitalism for Beginners*, puncturing the

authority of the typeset text, bringing the ideas presented down to earth, destabilising and multiplying meaning, and profaning both economic theory and Art History in the process. As Markus Brunner argues, Rius' works are the only "real" comics in the series in the sense of consistently using panels (2014, p. 107), although the others still operate as image sequences on the basis of seriality and repetition. *Capitalism for Beginners* has an inconsistent, even erratic visual structure and unstable image-text ratios. Images interrupt and impinge on typeset words, spreading across the spine and pushing columns awkwardly towards the edges of pages (Fig. 3), while figures spring up from and disappear into margins. As hybrids of line drawing, pieces of photographs and artworks, and redrawn pre-existing imagery, in which cartooned characters traverse paintings and prints like landscapes, and figures culled from one work of art appear in another, this splicing effect is intensified.

Characters are often the key theorists referred to in Lekachman's script, such as Adam Smith and Milton Friedman caricatured visually and verbally as "Smiff" and "Milt". A similarly irreverent and iconoclastic approach is taken to the treatment of canonical artists and illustrators like Rembrandt, Albrecht Dürer, Giorgio de Chirico, Aubrey Beardsley, Gustave Doré and William Hogarth, whose works are cut up, rearranged, written and drawn over. Both art and theory are thereby dethroned, humbled and made handy. The interplay

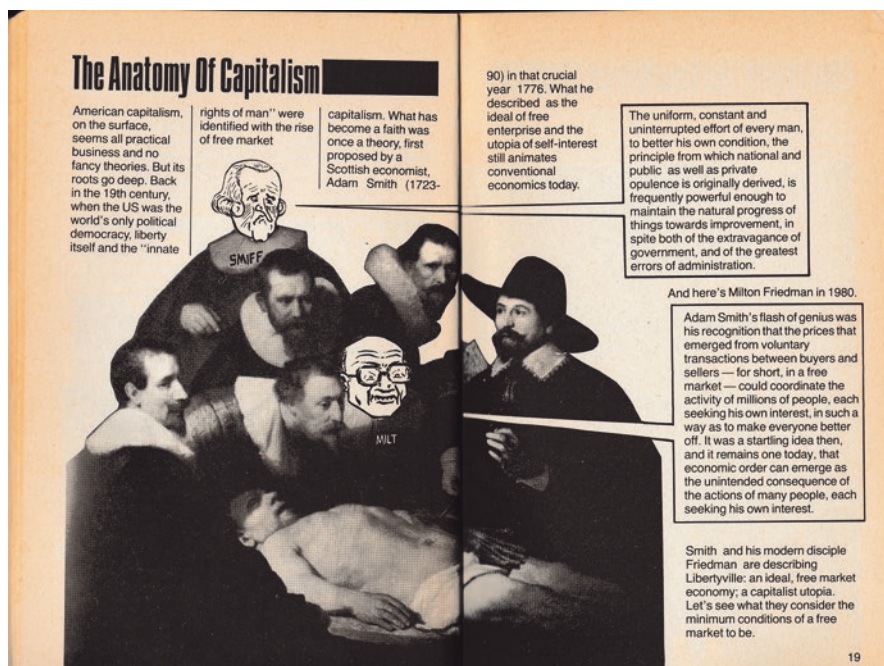


Fig. 3 Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners*. Writers and Readers, pp. 18–9

of images and text is used to underscore and clarify the analysis and history of capitalism presented, with braiding of repeated imagery establishing links between sections of the book. Dürer's work, for instance, is used to connect the opening discussion of crises as endemic to capitalism, in which his 1498 *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* are topically labelled unemployment, inflation, recession and energy crisis, and the introduction some 130 pages later of Margaret Thatcher's role in the monetarist toppling of the Keynesian social democratic consensus, in the form of his *Knight, Death and the Devil* of 1513.

Van Loon notably used imagery from medical illustration to delineate Lekachman's "anatomy of capitalism", particularly Andreas Versalius' Renaissance textbook *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, alongside representations of dissections from paintings and prints, such as Rembrandt's 1632 *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and Hogarth's 'The Anatomy Lesson' from the 1751 series *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (itself a pastiche of the title page of Versalius' book). Hogarth's print is reproduced repeatedly with varying visual additions to convey interconnected ideas (Fig. 4): Smith's economic theory (with the dissected Tom Nero tortured by the invisible hand of the market); Smith's own objections to wage suppression and price fixing (in which the physicians' faces are drawn over with skulls); John Maynard Keynes' converse theory of aggregate demand (in which the cartoon Keynes must wind a screw to manipulate the invisible hand); and finally the dismissal of Keynesian ideas of redistribution and social control of investment in favour of a focus on monetary and fiscal policy (in which Keynes himself becomes the anatomised figure).

However, as well as elucidating and accentuating Lekachman's narrative, the images also add different dimensions and alternative emphases. The anatomical imagery Van Loon appropriates makes its own argument about the effect of capitalism on human bodies and everyday lived experience. An early section setting out Milt and Smiff's ideal of the free market utopia of "Libertyville" is dominated by images of Versalius' flayed and dissevered (yet classically posed) bodies wandering through de Chirico's desolate cityscapes, carrying baskets, sipping cocktails and catching dismembered bats while opining on the rationality of buying and selling, supply and demand in competitive markets (Fig. 5). Pages before Lekachman's text arrives at criticisms of the "free" market, and discusses the rise of multinational corporations, pollution, inequality, instability and overproduction, Van Loon illuminates the alienating, dehumanising and violent material effects of capitalism (as well as the brutalising eye of economists). This continues with imagery of human bodies minced and pressed as part of the extraction of surplus value from labour, and rent apart by consumption, alongside further images of environmental distortion—emphasised by discordant perspectives in which giant Coke bottles, tins of junk food and smoke stacks loom over deserted, apocalyptic landscapes. The materiality of collage, the way the physical gestures of cutting, pasting, copying and inscribing are enacted on a body of visual material, combine here with the way the ... *for Beginner's* comics used, in Brunner's analysis, "presentative symbols" with



Fig. 4 Braiding of collaged imagery from Hogarth's 'The Anatomy Lesson' in Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners*. Writers and Readers, pp. 28–9, 47, 88, 106

unfixed subjective, emotional and associative connotations to “catch up with something that escapes the theoretical text: the reader’s world of experience” (2014, pp. 103–4).

This emphasis on the impact of capitalism on the human body as materially entwined with its environment reaches an apex in a section on Keynesianism



Fig. 5 Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners*. Writers and Readers, pp. 20–1

and the post-war economic boom which Van Loon illustrated with collaged imagery from Doré's illustrated editions of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1854 and 1873), combined with work of other illustrators like J. J. Grandville. Lekachman's text expresses some sympathy for Keynesian state intervention and reformed capitalism (while acknowledging its demise in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis and stagflation, and ending with a call for democratic socialism). But Van Loon's images, although captioned with handwritten extracts from the typeset text, double down on the sense that post-war growth and affluence was bought at the price of the bodies of migrant workers and people in the Global South at the sharp end of neo-colonial violence and the military-industrial complex, with an image of Gargantua eating a pilgrim spliced with a landscape littered with corpses (Fig. 6). The choice of Doré's work underscores the obsolescence of Keynesianism at the time of neoliberalism's entrenchment and the ascendance of the New Right, and in the subsequent section Keynes is pictured violently and repeatedly tortured by Friedman and F. W. Hayek as noir gangsters who spell out their monetarist economics in blood.¹¹ Lekachman argues monetarism isn't "old-fashioned" capitalism but a return to its fundamentals that Keynesianism remained rooted within. Van Loon's selection of imagery, recalling the prints Rius' included in *Marx for Beginners* which opens

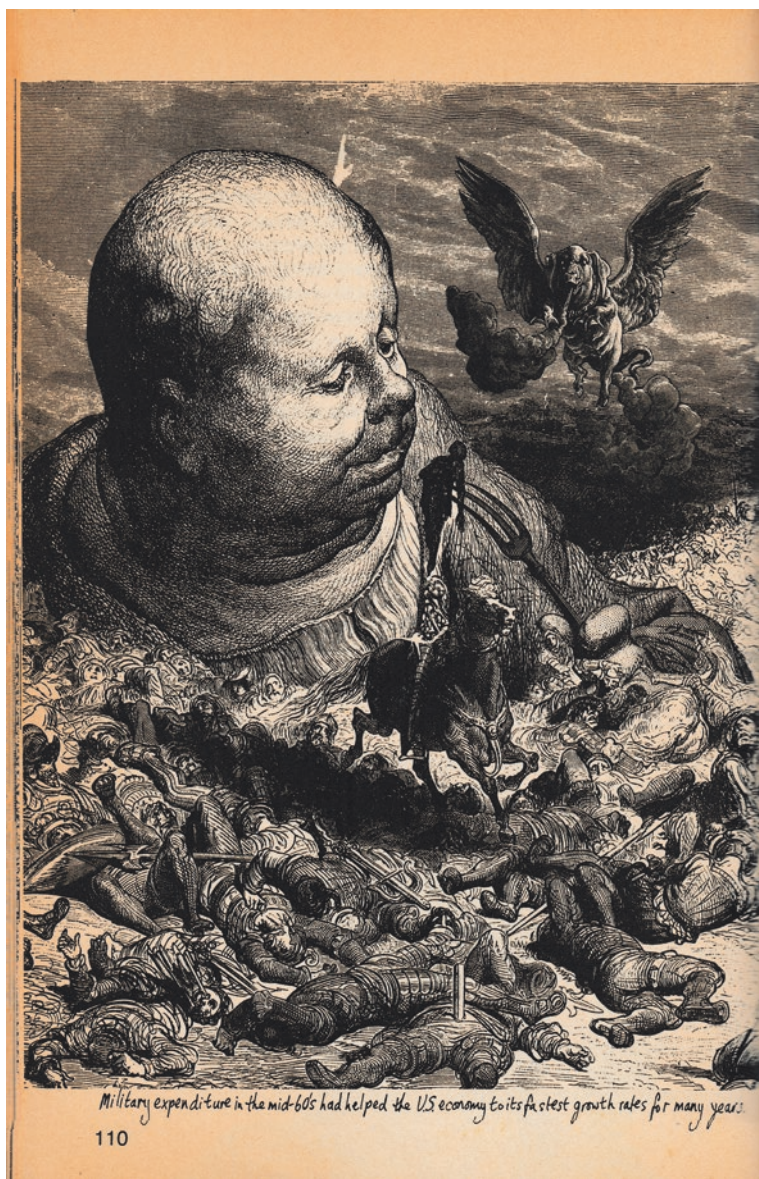


Fig. 6 Collaged imagery from Doré's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners*. Writers and Readers, p. 110

with an image from Doré's 1872 *London: A Pilgrimage*, pre-empts that point visually earlier on, meaning lines of textual and pictorial argumentation are not neatly parallel.

Ways of Reading and Looking

Using Doré's illustrations of Rabelais' novels in particular highlights some the productive disjunctures between Lekachman's writing and Van Loon's visual style. Van Loon's approach to collage comics as *détournement* aligns with Rabelais' grotesque realism (as described by Bakhtin), ridiculing and debasing ennobled and abstract theory, which contrasts with Lekachman's more patronising attempts to render complex ideas accessible via references to Led Zeppelin and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Van Loon frequently uses visual gags and visual-verbal wordplay to undermine the earnestness of the text and its expository tone. In a visualisation of the 1929 Wall Street crash, in which the city cracks and the image itself is a mash-up of wonky photographic fragments, the thought bubble of a figure falling from a building states "Talk about falling prophets". A graph showing "instability, crisis and business cycles" is disrupted by the tandem of Smith, Marx, Sombart, Keynes and Freedman cycling across it. A photo of Marx with cartoon eyes and manic grin tears through the corner of yet another anatomy lesson artwork urging the reader to "turn the page guys". Like Rius' work, the book features a chorus of interjections, observations and asides, either through speech and thought balloons imposed on artworks, or coming from drawn or cut out figures. Some of these are referenced theorists, whereas others—including Groucho Marx, an irate sheep, sunglasses-wearing statues and Van Loon's own Bof character—are not. As Brunner argues, the use of humour plays with expectations of "serious" educational texts and theory, lowering inhibitions and increasing reading pleasure (2014, p. 131). This chorus of characters establishes a dialogue with the reader that invites similar commentary, comebacks, disagreements and disobedience, while also drawing out the absurdities of capitalism and the gulf between the claims of its acolytes and the reality of people's lives. Combined with the way collage encourages the viewer to approach visual material as something to cut up, draw over and rewrite, this shifts the relationship between creators and audience, destabilising the work's discreteness, and opening it up to appropriation in turn.

As in Humphrey's (2015) analysis of multimodal authorship in *...for Beginners* books, the interplay of the text, image and layout in *Capitalism for Beginners*, particularly because of the way their relationships shift and how collage highlights processes of material facture, draws out the overlooked visual and spatial modalities of writing. Emphasis on the linguistic has "elevated the myth of authorial voice agency and authority" of the writer, while "subjugating or ignoring the roles of other actors" (Humphrey 2015, p. 2). Contrastingly, Van Loon's participation in shaping meaning as illustrator and designer is evident, but at the same time in these works with multiple creators modalities "are merged together, creating meanings... which cannot be separated cleanly as the work of "just" the writer, "just" the artist or "just" the designer" (Humphrey 2015, p. 7). Despite having referred to "Lekachman's text" and "Van Loon's images" in the above, it is really not that clear cut. *Capitalism for Beginners*

comprises multiple voices. Lekachman quotes from the writings of economists, and Van Loon visually cites paintings, prints, illustrations, sculptures, photographs and films, or fragments of them. Sometimes quotes from written sources are identified by quotation marks, or appear in drawn speech bubbles, rendered visually distinct from asides and interjections by being typeset and in square balloons, rather than handwritten and in round balloons. It might be assumed that these quotes appeared in Lekachman's script, to be assigned to specific characters, and the asides and interjections were added by Van Loon. However, this is unclear due to inconsistencies. Certain asides and throwaway comments also appear in typeset text and square balloons, and are sometimes assigned to named theorists. At other times, quotes from sources, and other parts of Lekachman's script, appear in speech balloons connected to random figures from collaged imagery, such as Versalius' flayed and skeletal bodies, policemen engaged in violent assault, or an ape in a suit. Alongside the superimposition and intercutting of images and text, this ambiguous polyphony undermines any sense of privileged authority or polite erudite neutrality, emphasising the work's constructedness and positioning it as open to contestation, overriding and interruption. Van Loon's use of collage, partly dictated by chance—with images found through “serendipity” or what he happens to recall from his files (2003)—similarly challenges ideas of artistic originality and a specialised aesthetic sensibility. With a lack of referencing of written or visual sources, this aligns with Situationist ideas of expropriation and refusal of copyright and intellectual property, as well as Thompson's insistence on laying claim to knowledge, literature, and by extension art, as something dispossessed.

Combining these multiple modalities and voices, the book invokes a different kind of reading and looking. As Brunner notes of Zaraté's *Freud for Beginners*, “the pictures teem with details that want to be discovered” which “break through the narrative structure of the text” (2014, p. 111, authors translation). The unresolved ambiguities of authorship and argument, shifting relationships of images to text, and conflicting verbal, visual and spatial registers (earnest and ribald, lucid and dense, orderly and chaotic), invite a meandering, ragged and disrupted form of reading, zooming in and out, panning across spreads, and looping between handwritten and typeset text, found and made imagery. The collage process reiterates this, requiring the viewer to navigate inconsonant visual styles, discrepant perspectives and irreconcilable planes, including details of prints blown up to near abstraction, as well as fragments of Van Loon's own imagery repeated at different scales. The same images appear in multiple forms, collaged and redrawn, in black outline and in greyscale. Characters constantly reappear in different guises (Friedman shifting from medical student to barber to cabaret dancer to gangster to the Statue of Liberty to a scarecrow), and pop up in different bits of images and locations on the page. All together the book is visually dynamic and mutable, distorting space and time, and foregrounds the embodied act of reading. As in Situationist *détournement*, the reader must infer meaning from different, sometimes contradictory, elements, with “fractures and irritations” inviting doubts about

what is represented (Brunner 2014, p. 127) and furthermore the apparent transparency and ubiquity, sheen and seamlessness of the commodity aesthetics that saturates the world of everyday experience.

The restless, mercurial absurdity of the visual world in *Capitalism for Beginners* stages the way that the lived reality of the reader is socially constructed, reflexively highlighting, partly through collage, how reality is made and remade. *Capitalism for Beginners* is full of theatrical images: circus impresarios, faceless barbershop quartets, pantomime horses, ballet dancing and cabaret performances, alongside lectures, demonstrations, slideshows and sermons by the featured economists. Photographs and paintings often feel like background stage sets from which characters address the reader. This again emphasises the contingency of meaning, eschewing the stiff, definitive language and rationalised structures of conventional academic texts in favour of “fluidity, promiscuity, *jouissance*, impropriety, contamination and insubordination” (Stracey 2014, p. 86). The emphasis is on readers’ active interpretation—with the back cover stating “no sermons are preached. Readers must consider for themselves the dilemma that confronts us all: the future of capitalism and its effect on the world”. In alignment with Writers and Readers’ interest in a radical pedagogy and literacy grounded in working class agency, this set up an alternative orientation of reader to book than that experienced in the education system, defined by collective self-education rather than deference to a paternalistic pedagogic authority, and the positioning of knowledge as something graspable and manipulable, rather than transcendent and removed. In Friere’s terms, this can be part of conscientisation, as an active process enabling people “to see themselves as both the products and potential changers of their social circumstances” (Carleton 2014, p. 161).

However, the foundational ethos of Writers and Readers wasn’t sustained. It dissolved as a cooperative in 1984, with Thompson and Richard Appignanesi setting up rival publishers, Writers and Readers Inc. and Icon, respectively, in the 1990s.¹² Brunner argues Icon books became more standardised in format and rigid and text-heavy in layouts, which restricted visual design, taking themselves more seriously and aiming more at a student audience. There is a further question of how far the strategies of *détournement*, collage and photomontage appropriating the visual language of advertising had themselves been defanged as a mode of persuasion by the early 1980s. Brunner additionally raises important issues with the way ...*for Beginners* books’ use of associative and affective presentative images pulls on stereotypical representations and pictorial traditions rooted in racism, anti-Semitism and sexism. Nilsson (2018) also discusses the use of simplification and stereotypes and how making abstract concepts concrete can fix them in unproductive and problematic ways. Van Loon deploys stereotypical images of nationalities in a section on multinationals, and racial stereotypes in passages on colonialism, immigration and racism. He also uses stereotypical markers of capitalist and worker—the top hat and flat cap. As Nilsson notes, this risks “pushing petrified *historical* manifestations of class to the foreground” and thereby obscuring “*structural* relations between labor

and capital” (2018, p. 12), at a time of their dramatic reorganisation through globalisation and deregulation, and a few years before a brutal attack on what was left of industrial working class culture (in the form of the 1984–85 Miners’ Strike) by the forces described in *Capitalism for Beginners*.

A study of the representation of class as structural antagonism and subjectivity in this context would need to look at more than one book, and more deeply at their production and audience. The limitations of the above analysis mean it inevitably reproduces a problematic emphasis on the individual work and creator. Drawing on Marxist Art History and its critique of the discipline’s role in the art market, and applying ideas of the politics of form, style, materiality, ways of seeing and the construction of meanings and publics to educational comics, leaves questions for Comics Studies. Creator Bambos Georgiou, involved with publishing co-op Acme, has argued that comics have become dominated by middle class publishers dealing with middle class creators (the only ones with the financial security to make comics), who “in turn produce works aimed at a middle class audience” (Johnston 2020). We might ask what role academic Comics Studies plays in this, in conferring value on, and canonising, a limited set of comics through the material selected for analysis and the mobilisation of categories and evaluations of quality. But we might equally ask how the manner in which we write and present research, often in what Rifkin called the “archaic essayistic form” (2018, p. 83) or ways that obscure “the text’s productive source in the writer’s physical and social being” (Leslie and Watson 2002), and the modes of reading and looking invoked, construct relationships between writer and reader that perpetuate the dispossession of knowledge and shore up the privatising logic of neoliberalism. As Humphrey argues, most academic texts (including this book itself) “assume a fairly uniform multimodal structure”—but “educational comics like the “Introducing” and “For Beginners” books can help us challenge & re-evaluate normative academic discourses and hegemonic textual practices” (2015, p. 20).

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the impact of semiotics and structuralism in Art History and Comics Studies see the chapter, “[Iconography for Comics Studies Reconsidered: Interpreting Visual Transformations in Jack Kirby’s *The Mighty Thor*](#)”.
2. This included dissecting the psychopathology of Soviet Communism at the threshold of its collapse (see Werckmesister 1999).
3. This is to say nothing of work on post-digital art that has updated debates about art and autonomy in the context of the wider neoliberal restructuring of work (and the art market), with important bearings on any study of contemporary cultural production (see Stakemeier and Vishmidt 2016).
4. Writers and Readers published several books by Berger including *Permanent Red* (1979), *About Looking* (1980) and the novel *Pig Earth* (1979), as well as work by other art critics like Peter Fuller.
5. In this sense the ...*for Beginners* books come under the definition of applied comics—aiming to communicate information to a specific target audience in a

way that shapes how the works are designed. Like many applied comics the majority of the ...*for Beginners* titles were collaborations between subject specialist writers and comics artists (see Wysocki 2022).

6. This followed the first of the series, a translation of Rius' *Cuba for Beginners* in 1975. A 1979 animated trailer was produced for *Marx for Beginners* by Bob Godfrey's Movie Emporium and Cucumber Studios.
7. The setting up of Writers and Readers was apparently directly influenced by Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay "The Author as Producer", which was a touchstone for these movements (see De Bolla 1987).
8. Rifas was due to illustrate *Middle East for Beginners* written by Allan Solomonow, but the project never moved beyond the proposal stage, possibly due to the fallout from Writers and Readers disbanding as a cooperative (see Anderies 2017).
9. These strips were published in collected form as *Urban Paranoia* by Suburban Books in 1977, Van Loon having met publisher Alan Courtney working at *Lower Down*.
10. As Jelena Stojanović (2014) and A. J. Paylor (2021) observe, as well as détourn-ing other visual imagery using comics devices the Situationists détourned comics themselves and drew their own comics from their founding in 1957 onwards, firstly with the inclusion of decontextualised single panels in Jorn and Debord's experimental collage books *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1959), but also in their films and periodicals—Paylor describes their journal *International Situationniste* as "littered with comics" used to propagate their ideas (2021, p. 1015). But it was particularly from the mid-1960s onwards that they created comic strips, comprising a range of collaged imagery combined with phrases from their texts, including several to publicise their journal and books. This followed the publication of René Viénet's 1967 text "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Politics and Art" asserting how easily comics lend themselves to détournement and how easily "other mediums could be detourned through using the graphical conventions of comics" (Paylor 2021, p. 1023).
11. The only photograph reproduced without any amendment is one of far right dictators Chile's Augusto Pinochet and Argentina's Jorge Rafael Videla (Lekachman and Van Loon 1981, p. 161).
12. The split apparently followed a dispute over rights to some titles in the ...*for Beginners* series being sold to Pantheon Books. Thompson moved back to New York and set up Writers and Readers Inc. and later formally incorporated the London-based Writers and Readers Limited in 1992. Appignanesi co-founded Icon Books that same year. Both reprinted several ...*for Beginners* comics while adding new titles to their respective series. From 1999 the Icon series was renamed *Introducing...* (Today they are called ...*A Graphic Guide* and the series includes works in larger formats including Meg John Barker and Jules Scheele's *Queer; A Graphic History* and *Gender: A Graphic Guide*). After Thompson's death in 2001, For Beginners, LLC was established which also republished older titles and commissioned new ones. Appignanesi was also involved in establishing and writing SelfMadeHero's Manga Shakespeare adaptations.

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Re-framing the Avant-Garde: Different Ways of Seeing Escape

Abstract Although the chapter, “[Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction](#)”, noted connections made in Comics Studies between comics and early twentieth-century modernist art movements, as well as the implicit application of models of the avant-garde in formalist analyses of the medium, the subtleties of debates about this historical and conceptual category have not been accounted for in any detail. This chapter examines how the relationship between practices designated “mainstream” and “alternative” has been constructed in comics scholarship and explores the insights contrasting art-historical definitions of the avant-garde by figures like Clement Greenberg, Peter Bürger, Benjamin Buchloh and Rosalind Krauss could offer. Different framings of what is meant by avant-garde practice are applied to the case study of Escape Publishing in the context of the British small press comics scene of the 1980s.

Keywords Avant-garde • Alternative comics • Escape • Small press • British comics

Comics scholars since the 1960s have drawn connections between comics and artistic modernism, and identified alternative lineages for the form in avant-garde modern art movements. At the same time, they have implicitly and explicitly proposed various comics avant-gardes. This is seen in David Kunzle’s focus on more rebellious cartoonists of the nineteenth century,¹ CBD and SOCERLID’s celebration of the originality of 1930s newspaper cartoonists, and Andrei Molotiu’s identification of an “avant-garde community” of abstract comics creators ([2009](#), p. 3).

POSITIONING THE AVANT-GARDE IN COMICS STUDIES

A notoriously slippery concept, “avant-garde” has been variably applied in Comics Studies to describe individual artists, organised collectives and looser networks or scenes, as well as comics with certain qualities—experimentalism, self-reflexivity, defying genre. It is often assigned to practices differentiated from established “mainstream” forms, whether in subject, style, media, or modes of authorship, circulation and reception. As Martha Kuhlman (2012) notes, many works identified as avant-garde are more commonly referred to as “alternative comics”, and related to the independent forms of production and distribution that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in the wake of the underground comix movement.²

Charles Hatfield positions alternative comics in opposition to the medium’s “populist, industrial and frankly mercenary origins” (2005, p. ix). Seizing the opportunity for independently published titles that came with the direct market, alternative creators were, in his view, able to transcend the commercial mainstream’s “stultifying convention” and “shopworn genres”, realising comics’ possibilities as a means of artistic expression through “disarmingly original work” (Hatfield 2005, pp. x, 163). Here qualities of convention-breaking, innovation and originality, and models of artistic value and authorship, are ascribed in ways that invoke oppositions between art and popular culture. Certain kinds of comics and comics artist, more consonant with the values of highbrow art and literature, are afforded the status of art in distinction to their kitsch counterparts.

As sociological analyses have pointed out, many drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, this speaks to strategies of legitimation and position-taking in the comics field, and the production and accumulation of different forms of value and capital. In the 1970s Luc Boltanski identified an autonomising tendency in comics, linked to the expansion of higher education and an influx of art school-trained creators. Alongside a new demographic of readers they created an alternative institutional apparatus that asserted and assigned independent artistic value, as opposed to heteronomous subjection to the commodity form, the division of labour and commercial imperatives to maximise profits (see Miller 2007, pp. 31–2).

This leads onto the question of what exactly any comics avant-garde is positioned in advance of, or opposition to. Are avant-garde practices pitted against mainstream comics as debased mass culture? Or, rather than seeking admittance, do they stand opposed to the dominant consecrating institutions of high art? Or both? Hatfield identifies tensions within alternative comics between a learned “curator” approach arguing for the form’s cultural legitimacy on established modernist art principles, highlighting introspective formal examinations of the medium, and an iconoclastic “punk” approach that aims to shock, profane and provoke via “self-conscious rejection of bourgeois norms” (2005, p. xii).

European alternative comics artists and collectives directly claimed the mantle of the modernist avant-garde. Jean-Christophe Menu, co-founder of French artist-run publisher L'Association, articulated his vision of it as a comics avant-garde with direct reference to movements like Surrealism. L'Association's output, particularly that by the OuBaPo group, has adopted pre-existing experimental strategies including Surrealist uses of chance, automatism and free association and OuLiPo's application of constraints. For Menu, they stand in opposition to commercial comics publishing, producing unique artworks rather than standardised commodities.

Unpopular Culture and Postmodern Modernism

Bart Beaty has argued that such 1990s' European small press comics represent comics' first "genuine" avant-garde (2007, p. 71). He analyses how collectives like L'Association, Frémok and BūLB signalled their alignment with an autonomous principle of artistic production in the material and visual form of their comics. An emphasis on specialisation and rarefaction—privileging single creator works using atypical visual techniques and artisanal handicraft methods, printed in artificially limited runs—brings comics closer to the artist's book. For Beaty, it is the degree to which these groups test comics' formal limits, challenge their established conventions and interrogate their unique elements that secures them avant-garde status. In this he draws on definitions of the avant-garde based on high modernist touchstones of difficulty, authenticity, separation from everyday life and medium-specificity, with reference to Clement Greenberg (Beaty 2007, pp. 72–82).

The Bourdieusian model figures the avant-garde as successive ruptures, whereby incomers seeking to make their mark revolt against a venerated generation trying to preserve its dominance. The challenge of applying it to comics is it is not a straightforward question of "wresting symbolic capital" from culturally consecrated antecedents (Miller 2007, p. 69). In Ann Miller's view, Menu is clearly awake to the implausibility of strategically mobilising "the high-cultural notion of an avant-garde" in a historically lowbrow mass medium and postmodern context (2007, p. 68). To Beaty, this therefore marks a contradictory instance of "postmodern modernism", an attempt to elevate comics into "the aesthetic canons of modernism" both after the fact, and as a result of, the postmodernist challenge to high/low distinctions (2007, p. 95). Where examples analysed go beyond high modernist principles, by reworking older comics through appropriation and bricolage, or engaging with social and political realities, for Beaty this reveals the encroachment of postmodern aesthetics. Beaty's account reproduces a homogenised narrative of modernism, overlooking the degree to which detachment from the social and historical, and antipathy to mass culture, were contested, including within a range of modernist practices that made substantive use of appropriation, assemblage and montage.³ Similarly, defining the avant-garde on the basis of art's autonomy bypasses debates about it within Art History, particularly since the 1970s.

Revisiting these debates provides contrasting frames through which to assess the complexity of avant-garde practices in comics.

FRAMING THE AVANT-GARDE IN ART HISTORY

As noted in many art-historical overviews, despite being identified with artistic modernism and often associated with ideas of art's detachment from worldly concerns, the origins of the classification "avant-garde" are political—connected to socialist ideas of emancipation, and developed in contradistinction to the aestheticist defence of art for art's sake (Wood 1999, p. 24). In Saint-Simonian political theory the military term was used to identify art's potential to act as the advanced guard of social transformation. Debating with the scientist and the industrialist, the artist claims "we the artists will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious... when we wish to spread new ideas amongst men" (in Edwards 1999, p. 190). Thus the ways in which nineteenth-century painters and sculptors developed new forms and techniques adequate to the experience of modernity, in and against established traditions of academic art, were associated with social and political freedom. A notable discursive shift was the move from speaking of art as a whole to describing work by particular artists or groups, from avant-garde meaning "in advance of" society in general to being in advance of "other, more conventional types of art" (Edwards 1999, p. 188).

Advancing Towards the Picture Plane

By contrast, Greenberg conceived the avant-garde in the mid-twentieth century on the basis of art's autonomy as a separate sphere of activity, and continuities between advanced modernism and the great work of the past as a repository of human values rather than any definitive break with tradition. Greenberg wasn't truly a formalist. In his two pivotal articles published in *Partisan Review* at the start of the Second World War, "Avant-garde and Kitsch" [1939] and "Towards a Newer Laocoon" [1940], he argued that art's withdrawal from society, its search for absolute validity solely on its own terms, was historically necessary in the context of capitalist crisis and the rise of fascism and Stalinism—a way to preserve "the only living culture we now have" and keep culture "moving" (Greenberg 1992a, pp. 531–3).

The avant-garde's ability to take up this role of safeguarding and advancing culture resulted from a distinctive historical self-consciousness. The avant-garde was caught in the contradictions of art in bourgeois society, tied to the elite "by an umbilical cord of gold" (Greenberg 1992a, p. 533), but resistant to instrumentalisation, rationalisation and commoditisation. For Greenberg, its task was:

to perform in opposition to bourgeois society the function of finding new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of that same society, without at the same time succumbing to its ideological divisions and its refusal to permit the arts to be their own justification. (1992b, p. 556)

Turning in on itself became a means of art's self-preservation, leading to formal abstraction by focusing on independent, medium-specific qualities and constraints. Painting, through the work of successive avant-garde movements progressively surrendered to "the resistance of its medium"—meaning, above all, the flatness of the canvas (Greenberg 1992b, p. 558).

This "radical delimitation" of its field of activity secured art from the fate of its Other, kitsch—formulaic, standardised, immediate, inauthentic popular art. In kitsch cultural production, artistic quality and the aesthetic value derived from the exercise of a cultivated sensibility are sacrificed in the interests of profit (also making it vulnerable to use as totalitarian propaganda). The embattled avant-garde artist struggles against pressures towards both academicism and commercialism that come together in kitsch, and kitsch appropriates avant-garde art in ways that dilute it. Certain movements and artists are more successful in preserving authentic artistic values than others—Greenberg (1968) dismissed the "popular" avant-garde art of Dada and Marcel Duchamp as evading issues of quality, eventually leading to banal, "easy" Pop and the "novelty art" that followed becoming a new pseudo-avant-garde academicism.

Advancing Against Art and into Life

Yet it was in looking at the work of avant-garde movements more closely connected to revolutionary politics, and which themselves challenged the way modern art had become institutionalised, such as Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism, that contesting definitions emerged. A pivotal text for Art History came from Literary Studies—Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Written in 1974, amid the waning of the radical political and intellectual movements of the late sixties, it was part of a wider questioning of categories by turning to the "Western Marxism" of figures like Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and a reappraisal of the art-historical curriculum's omissions, that had also shaped New Left social history of art. Translated into English a decade later, it impacted art-historical debates about modernism and postmodernism in the 1980s.

Bürger challenged the way "modernism" and "the avant-garde" were treated synonymously, and definitions of the avant-garde that took for granted art's autonomy, arguing for a repoliticised understanding of the category "art" in institutional and functional terms. His account has certain consonances with Greenberg's discussion of the avant-garde as both product of, and resistant to, bourgeois society. Evermore separated from everyday life in the discrete sphere

of the aesthetic, “art necessarily becomes problematic for itself. As institutions and content coincide, social ineffectuality stands revealed as the essence of art in bourgeois society and thus provokes the self-criticism of art” (Bürger 1984, p. 27). The privatisation of bourgeois art, resulting from secularisation, professionalisation and the development of the art market, theorised by Kant and Schiller as disinterested pleasure and solitary contemplation, and epitomised in late-nineteenth-century modernism, provokes an avant-garde that emerges to destroy it. Bürger therefore located the avant-garde in those movements that actively sought to negate the separation of art from everyday lived experience: “the European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men” (1984, p. 49).

Crucially, this demand “that art become practical again” didn’t mean subjecting it to means-ends capitalist rationality. Bürger drew on Herbert Marcuse’s ideas of art as a safety valve, where values of humanity, joy, truth and solidarity are projected in imaginary inconsequential form, to argue that the avant-garde aimed to redirect the resistant values of the aesthetic back into everyday life—“to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” (1984, p. 49). The avant-garde therefore contested the function, production and reception of art, opposing “those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former” (Bürger 1984, p. 53).

Bürger designated such movements “the historical avant-garde”, and argued they had failed, their work having been assimilated into the gallery as affirmative rather than negatory. This closed down the possibilities of any contemporary avant-garde—the gestures of protest undertaken by “neo-avant-garde” movements like Fluxus, Neo-Dada and Pop could only be inauthentic. For Bürger, a situation of “total availability of material and forms” and all traditions, and a “simultaneity of the radically disparate”,—that is, the conditions of postmodernity—meant it no longer made sense to describe any movement as more advanced. In the end he speculated that, in the face of the recuperation of the avant-garde and the “false sublation” of the culture industry, art’s autonomy “as a free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable” might actually need to be maintained (Bürger 1984, p. 54).

One of the best known responses to Bürger came from art historian Benjamin Buchloh, who criticised his limited knowledge of the visual arts, and oversimplification and decontextualisation of concepts of shock, allegory and montage drawn from Benjamin to describe the characteristics of avant-garde manifestations. Buchloh argued that Marcuse’s model of ideology and affirmative culture was insufficient, leading Bürger to both underestimate the way ideology shapes subjectivities, and overestimate art’s subsumption by ideology. But above all Buchloh contested Bürger’s characterisation of the neo-avant-garde, arguing it ignored artists of the late sixties like Marcel Broodthaers and Hans Haacke who had undertaken a similar institutional critique of art, surrendering

instead to postmodernist relativism in a “state of acquiescence to the given” (Buchloh 1984, p. 21).

Buchloh challenged the construction of an “original” avant-garde moment of rupture that contemporary practice could only repeat in empty imitation, asserting the need to analyse the conditions in which avant-garde paradigms were received and redeployed in the period following World War Two. Repetition could be part of how the neo-avant-garde challenged traditional ideas of the “self-enclosed, self-sufficient” artwork and immanent development of an artistic oeuvre by insisting on art’s “contextual heteronomous determination” (Buchloh 1986, p. 48). Thus Yves Klein’s 1950s replaying of the materialist monochromy of Alexandr Rodchenko’s 1921 *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour* triptych, despite (and because of) Klein’s claims to resuscitate the experience of art as mythical and sublime, reveals instead art’s total commodification as spectacle, “luxurious perceptual fetishes for privileged audiences”—capitalism “liquidating the oppositional functions of high art” (Buchloh 1986, pp. 50–2).

Advancing as Reaction and Repetition

From this perspective, attempts to fall back on art’s autonomy as a “domain of resistance... where cognition and vision, sensual play and apperception could be experienced and integrated” are spurious (Buchloh 1986, p. 50). Strands of Marxist and feminist Art History of the 1970s and 1980s had similarly argued that the institutionalisation of avant-garde art and its ideological role in shoring up capitalism made defence of its autonomy untenable. They also scrutinised avant-garde claims to social radicalism and universal liberation as embodied in artistic freedom and formal innovation. Carol Duncan (1973), for example, analysed how art by the Fauves and Expressionists was predicated on the assertion of uninhibited male virility enacted on the dehumanised, primitivised, sexually subjugated bodies of naked women. Claiming to protest “the rationalism and authoritarianism of modern industrial life” and challenge the existing social order, this work was actually a highly regressive reaction to women’s changing social, political and economic position and first-wave feminism (Duncan 1973). Rather than “preaching universal freedom” it represented only the fears and fantasies of middle-class men and a “desperate reassertion of male cultural supremacy” (Duncan 1973). Conceptions of the avant-garde were rooted in a “cult of the penis”, locating authentic art in “male libidinous energy” (Duncan 1973). This was tied to class relations—the liberation of the avant-garde artist was contingent on expropriating the bodies of working class women, with the artwork itself representing the “symbolic transference of male sexual mana from bohemian to bourgeois and also from lower to upper class” (Duncan 1973).⁴

This re-evaluation of the avant-garde persisted within art-historical reassessments of modernism in the 1980s. Rosalind Krauss, co-founder of the highly influential journal *October*, which pulled heavily on structuralism,

post-structuralism and feminist psychoanalysis, produced a key article “The Originality of the Avant-garde” in 1981, which had also broached the question of repetition. Krauss argued that, despite claims to continual ground-breaking invention, the putative originality that united disparate avant-garde groups was reliant on “a ground of repetition and recurrence” (1986, pp. 157–8). This was evident in the emblematic modernist grid—static, silent, non-hierarchical, anti-narrative. In an earlier article, Krauss described the grid as spatially declaring modernist art’s autonomy—“flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal”—and temporarily enacting its separation “from everything that went before” (1986, p. 9). Yet the grid was “extremely restrictive in the actual exercise of freedom” (Krauss 1986, p. 160). Formulaic and inflexible, it could only be repeated, revealing artistic originality as fiction, and furthermore exposing the illusion of the advance to the pictorial surface described by Greenberg. For Krauss, the grid doubles the surface of the canvas rather than fusing with it, maps and represents it as a matrix. Grids are at once centripetal, asserting the opaque boundedness of the work, and centrifugal, opening it out as a fragment of a larger field.

Challenging the vested terms of high modernism—originality, authenticity, autonomy—raises questions of the wider interests they serve in the “shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art” (Krauss 1986, p. 62). Krauss maps interrelationships of copy and original, formulaic and singular, onto constructions of taste. Discussing the emergence of the picturesque in eighteenth century art discourse and landscape painting, she explores how identification of a work’s singularity became located in the eye of the beholder in the exercise of aesthetic judgement—closely related to a new class audience. Such recognition is only made possible with reference to prior examples, and thus “what allows a given moment of the perceptual array to be seen as singular is precisely its conformation to a multiple” (p. 166).

Advancing Beyond the Frame

Drawing on her work on sculpture, Krauss identified how multiples pose problems to myths of originality, creativity and authenticity located in the hand of the artist and the autographic character of the work as bearing the trace of “spontaneous, unrepeatable process” (1986, p. 177). The idea of an immediate, direct relationship between conception and mark-making is no less illusory in modernist painting, where spontaneity and instantaneity is “product of a fully calculated procedure”, conventionalised, codified, planned and often highly repetitive (Krauss 1986, p. 167). Ideas of individual authorship, originality, style, expression and intentionality are further challenged by considering the picture *frame*, moving attention beyond the picture as a bounded, unitary object to the “great sea of anonymous artisanal practice that formed the shop system of the arts” (pp. 190–1).

Krauss’ text, not least for the discussion of grids, is pertinent to Comics Studies.⁵ It raises important questions of how far comics scholarship redeploys

some of the concepts operative in high modernist art theory—authenticity, singularity, autotelic aesthetic value, romanticised individual authorship, the privatised, contemplative judgement of taste. Likewise, the complex interrogation of the term “avant-garde” in Art History, its history, politics, function, ideological valences and relationship to art as a category, offer ways to question and develop its use in Comics Studies.

ESCAPE ARTISTRY

Following Beaty, we can apply these different ways of framing the avant-garde to an example of a publisher closely connected to alternative and small press comics—Escape Publishing run by Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury from 1983 to 1990.

Roger Sabin describes Escape as “Britain’s homegrown contribution to the avant-garde” (1993, p. 80). In 1983 Gravett and Stanbury launched *Escape Magazine*, an anthology of local and international comic strips alongside news, reviews, features and interviews, akin to Art Spiegelman and Francois Mouly’s *Raw* but particularly modelled after continental bande dessinée titles like *À Suivre*, *Charlie Mensuel* and *PLG*.⁶ They produced nine issues before Titan Books took over as publisher from 1987 to 1989 when the final 19th issue appeared. Escape also published a series of books, notably three collected volumes of Eddie Campbell’s *Alec*, and collaborated with curators of several exhibitions, the best known being the touring exhibition *Comic Iconoclasm*, first held at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in June–September 1987.

Escape emerged amid an effusion of different forms of comics publishing that came with the shift in distribution towards direct sales. This included glossy *Métal Hurlant*-inspired titles focused on fantasy and science fiction, as well as “ground level” independents, self-published small press comics and what remained of the underground comix scene. While all these publications came together on the shelves of specialist comics shops, for Sabin “avant-garde” titles like *Escape* stood apart in their uncompromising difference to mainstream conventions—distinguished by “a willingness to experiment, commitment to self-motivated work and often a ‘fine-arts’ orientation... the antithesis of the mass-produced superhero comics, and at the same time a reaction against the fantasy vogue in adult comics” (2003, p. 80).

Reading Escape as Unpopular Culture

It is not hard therefore to see Escape in terms similar to Beaty as aligning with an autonomous principle in opposition to a heteronomously determined mainstream comics industry. Gravett and Stanbury’s editorial vision was grounded in the idea of comics as an art form in their own right and driven by a commitment to its artistic development. This vision was defined against established practices of British comics publishing seen as stale, bland and conservative. For their flagship title, Gravett wanted a magazine that would encourage young

creators' "own ideas, individual and inspired", nurturing originality rather than "any more impersonators of the American mainstream giants" (Gravett and Stanbury 1983, p. 1).

This distinction was conveyed in *Escape*'s visual and material form. As designer Stanbury aimed for high-quality, stylish production using bold and contrasting typography, borders and rules in ways that emulated the work of Neville Brody and Terry Jones for trendy fashion, music and culture magazines like *The Face* and *i-D* (minus the budget). This was particularly evident in the distinctive typeface with a three-barred E Stanbury designed for the new logo and masthead introduced with issue 8, when the magazine also increased from A5 to A4 in size (Fig. 1). Covers, designed by key contributors like Phil Elliott, John Bagnall, Rian Hughes and Hunt Emerson (including several wrap-arounds—see Fig. 2) were full colour, with several additionally available as limited-edition posters.

Escape carried a series of strap-lines stressing this independence, currency and commitment to "Comics of Style and Vision". Covers of issues 4–6 carried the line "Comics, BD, Fast Fiction, Tebeos, Story-Strips, Fumetti, Cartoons, Manga" signalling internationalism but also a straining against the lowbrow associations of "comics"—"BD" (standing for *bande dessinée*) and "story-strips" being the most favoured alternatives in the inside pages. After the title "*Escape*" itself, names of creators tended to feature more markedly in cover lines than characters or series. This prominence afforded to individual artists was equally seen in the regular "Escape Artists" feature that carried short statements about contributing cartoonists, their influences, art training and ambitions, alongside sketched self-portraits. This affirmed principles of artistic freedom and authorship—for Gravett (2006) what united these artists was their difference, "their strong individual approaches that ignored genre and formula".

The emphasis was therefore on unconstrained creative self-expression and innovation, with single creator works privileged. Individual authorship was constituted by the fact contributors retained all copyright. They were however unpaid, at least at first, until Gravett and Stanbury determined to match the terms of competitors like underground publisher Knockabout and subsequently introduced contracts. This foregrounds the atypical business model in play. Up to that point *Escape* had been run "in an informal, gentlemen's agreement manner" (Gravett 2006)—the priority was not remuneration for work or shareholder dividends but aesthetic accomplishment, and raising the profile of both creators and the medium on artistic terms.

This was reinforced by the critical framework put forward in the magazine's regular text columns, which to Sabin were "in the style of European critical journals" (1993, p. 81). While Gravett was responsible for most interviews and features, many reviews were written by contributing artists or creators from the wider comics field. Quality was evaluated on the basis of criteria such as skill, invention, expression, detail, vitality, singularity and deviation from



Fig. 1 Peter Stanbury, new masthead, cover of *Escape* No. 8 (1986)



Fig. 2 Phil Elliott, cover of *Escape Magazine* No. 5 (1984)



Fig. 3 Rian Hughes, “Norm”. *Escape Magazine* No. 5 (1984), p. 62

conventions and clichés. This carried through in *Escape* strips themselves which ranged in their visual design from Elliott’s dapper *Ligne Claire* style to Rian Hughes’ more shape- and tone-based (near-abstract) approach (Fig. 3), and from Phil Laskey’s more texturally rendered work (Fig. 4) to the dense patterns



Fig. 4 Phil Laskey, “Alex and Ali”. *Escape Magazine* No. 7 (1985), pp. 64–5

of Pinsent’s “Primitif” and Tim Budden’s offbeat badger strips (Fig. 5). Individual creators like Pinsent explored varying styles and techniques, an experimentalism that extended to issue 3’s “3DBD” by Hughes, Paul Bignell and Shaky Kane.

As Nicholas Robinette argues, being juxtaposed in an anthology brought these artists’ “experiments and innovations to the fore”, emphasising idiosyncratic formal techniques “largely unimaginable in the pages of a Marvel or DC comic” (2017, pp. 99–101). Many came from an art school background, and shared an emphasis on expressive mark-making, with several opting for assorted “neo-expressionist” drawing styles (Sabin 1996, p. 188) carrying a sense of autographic immediacy, such as the scratchy line-work of Glenn Dakin and Myra Hancock, or the compulsive, rough-hewn calligraphy of Savage Pencil. For Gravett (2006), the shift to A4 format better showcased this visual quality, bringing the reader closer to the drawing table.

Such emphasis on the authentic immediacy of the authorial mark was echoed in a general favouring of slice-of-life observation and autobiography. Robinette argues *Escape*’s philosophy was “strongly indebted to Eddie Campbell” and his “presentation of everyday wonder” (2017, p. 100)—low-key, semi-autobiographical narratives related in a similarly divergent form of visual storytelling. Campbell’s was a “non-melodramatic language” which shunned Will



Fig. 5 Tim Budden, final page of "Badger Tales". *Escape Magazine* No. 7 (1985), pp. 37–40

Eisner-esque cinematic fracturing of sequences, preferring to treat panels as a series of "autonomous cartoons" in which interlocutors appear side by side (Campbell and Moore 1984, p. 43). This more subdued, evocative form of visual narration corresponded to a considered, contemplative reading: Campbell

valued the suggestive qualities of counterpoint and visual metaphor; Hancock's experimental integration of text into panels without speech balloons compels the reader "to consider each panel more slowly" (Robinette 2017, p. 101); and Elliott stressed how "comics can offer the reader a chance to retrace their steps and enjoy things in life that might normally pass them by" (1984, p. 63).

In the above senses *Escape* adheres to the model of L'Association, and, in Beaty's words, an "ideology of independence, autonomous production and selection that privileges an idea of creation as founded exclusively in the arena of personal expression and individual style" (2007, p. 43). As a publisher, it could be seen to ascribe to the bourgeois art world's ideological values of individualised, disinterested production and consumption, and to prioritise art's self-sufficient formal development in contradistinction to circumscribed, inauthentic kitsch, in line with high modernist accounts of the avant-garde like Greenberg's.

However, *Escape* doesn't neatly fit that mould. In many ways its openness to stylistic diversity was in the interests of seeking as wide popular appeal as possible. Gravett and Stanbury pursued broad distribution, not just through specialist comics shops, but record stores, book shops and high-street newsagents. *Escape* aimed at a wider audience than the existing comics readership, courting older readers through lifestyle features on film, music, TV and fashion. It included adverts for music and listings magazines like *NME*, *Sounds* and *Time Out* alongside those for comics shops, conventions and marts.

Its editorial vision was similarly pretty catholic, featuring artists who drew as much on the stylistic traditions of British humour comics as art school references, with work by Bob Lynch, John Bagnall and Chris Long bearing the influence of titles like *The Beano*, including in recurring protagonists like Lynch's Sav Sadness. As well as more "realist" autobiographical work, many strips involved what Doug Singsen calls "genre-slicing" whereby funny animal, science fiction, horror, superhero and situation comedy blended in incongruous ways (2014, p. 174). *Escape*'s "unprejudiced attitude to comics art" was picked up on by readers (Hender 1985, p. 77), whose similarly eclectic tastes were evident in its "Hip Parade" favourites chart, for which entrants could win prizes in an echo of children's comics competitions. This was also reflected in its text features, themselves a regular component of traditional British weeklies. Reviews valued qualities of humour, entertainment and pop culture allusion as much as experimentation and expression, and were often critical of any prioritisation of graphic flair over storytelling. Rather than a rupture from tradition, *Escape* was urgently seeking to construct and venerate one, reviewing not just contemporary alternative and small press titles but "mainstream" comics new and old, and highlighting reprint editions of everything from Roy Wilson children's comics to newspaper adventure strips like *Modesty Blaise*. As Robinette points out, *Escape* was driven by a sense of the UK being backwards in its disregard for comics and failure to nurture its national industry in comparison to European and American output, whether alternative or mainstream—feeling the need to catch up as much as forge ahead.

Small Press and Alternative Avant-Gardes

As well as reading *Escape*'s editorial features as emulating erudite critical journals or as homage to traditional British anthologies, there is another way to frame them which speaks to a different way of thinking about a comics avant-garde. Sabin also points out that these features "demonstrated a fanzine aspect to *Escape* that was absent in *Raw*" (1996, p. 190), and this connection also materialised in the magazine's original A5 size—the digest format used by many fanzine and small press creators as cheaper to print and easier to distribute by mail (Gravett 2006). *Escape*'s roots were in the small press and the Fast Fiction stall selling self-published comics at the bi-monthly Westminster comic mart Gravett had started in 1981.⁷ The small press in turn had its roots in fanzine production, which burgeoned in the late 1960s with mimeographed comics zines that became specialist fan magazines, and was invigorated in the 1970s by an explosion of photocopied punkzines. Small press self-published comics were DIY, low tech, yet experimental in their design, playing with layouts and typography, different formats and materials. Not beholden to advertisers or concerned by censorship they took risks in both form and content, and could include dark humour, exaggerated violence, satire and strident political comment, as well as understated tales of everyday life.

Fast Fiction boasted the "largest collection of comics-related zines in the country", sold on behalf of creators for a 10–20% service fee, and also available mail order. Gravett compiled its regular infosheet listing available titles, which included not just small press comics but comics fanzines—bringing together the British comics self-publishing scene in print in the same way the stall itself acted as a social hub, with creators, editors and readers meeting up as a community. In 1982 Elliot, Campbell and Ian Wieczorek started a *Fast Fiction* anthology as further nexus and outlet, which ran until 1990 (with Pinsent taking over editorial responsibilities in 1984).

Escape and Fast Fiction maintained close links. *Escape* carried a regular "Fast Fiction Facts" column listing a selection of small press titles and details of the stall. It also introduced an "Escape Exchange" small ads space where self-publishers could advertise and solicit collaborators, and readers could seek out back issues. *Fast Fiction* and *Escape* also shared many of the same contributors. While aiming for professional standards, *Escape* retained a kind of small press ethos, run out of Gravett and Stanbury's flat with irregular publishing schedules and production values that remained somewhat rough and ready.

Escape also supported and encouraged self-publishing via a "D.I.Y.B.D." series of articles covering photocopying, design, distribution and print shops, providing hints and tips and stressing "the best way to see your work in print is to do-it-yourself" (D.I.Y.B.D. 1984, p. 49). While emphasising the sense of authorship and agency offered by designing, printing and circulating your own work, this also laid bare the creative process, encouraging readers to become producers despite a lack of professional training or technical expertise. Readers picked up on the way this DIY ethos carried across in the expressive, rough

drawing styles of *Escape* strips that bore connections to the deskilling of punk-zine illustration, one arguing that “primitive” styles like Savage Pencil’s which weren’t “perfect and distant... prove that story-strips don’t have to be drawn in intricate art styles to be brilliant”, prompting “potential cartoonists to reach for their pens” (Hitchman 1984, p. 57).

This aspect of the small press self-publishing scene, aiming for a kind of socialisation of art by which it would be demystified and made more universally available, could be read in relation to Bürger’s idea of the avant-garde as seeking to destroy the separation of art as an autonomous sphere and integrate it into everyday life. Emphasising non-hierarchical collaborative networks of small press production and distribution worked to blur the distinction between producers and consumers. This wasn’t seeking admittance into the institutions of the art world, and art as something remote, mythical and socially ineffectual, but the formation of an alternative creative infrastructure that supported active engagement and participation not disinterested and recondite contemplation. These forms of independent self-organised production and distribution equally stood as an alternative to the structures of the established comics industry. Furthermore, the small press—particularly in its punkier veins—retained some of the underground’s confrontational content that resisted easy incorporation into mainstream art or comics. Alongside more whimsical observational strips, *Escape* featured some bleakly violent, darkly humorous and acerbically satirical works.

In this regard, an anti-art stance can be seen in small press practices, hostile to both fine art and mainstream comics at an institutional level. A similar position was seen in *Escape*’s engagement with the art world via exhibitions, particularly Comics Iconoclasm. The show mainly featured post-war painting and sculpture that quoted the characters, narratives, styles and iconography of comics and cartoons. Attempting to “resist the museum’s impulse to homogenise the comic strip within an institutional framework” (Blazwick 1987, p. 6), comics themselves were presented in reading rooms as printed material, rather than isolated pages of original artwork or blown-up reproductions hung on the wall. *Escape* provided a supplement to the exhibition catalogue, conceived by the exhibition organisers as a “state-of-the-art survey of most innovative comics artists working today” (ibid). However, what Gravett and regular *Escape* contributors Pinsent, Trevis (Woodrow) Phoenix and Savage Pencil actually produced was pretty strident criticism of the exhibition, expressing deep ambivalence, if not open hostility, towards the “museumification” of comics—speaking to the conditions in which the legacy of the modernist avant-garde was interpreted in the late-twentieth century following its own institutionalisation.

Comics Iconoclasm focused particularly on the citation of comics characters as universally recognisable “icons” of modern consumerism. For curator Sheena Wagstaff, this appropriation of disreputable mass culture, decontextualising such images to foreground “their status as endlessly repeatable signs”, challenged the art world by upsetting “many of the notions upon which the

appreciation of art has traditionally rested”—originality, authenticity, expression and individual style (1987, pp. 7–8). Gravett concurred, stressing how Roy Lichtenstein’s work drawing on the impersonal styles, clichés and technical limitations of romance and war comics “upset seriousness and abstract purity” (1987a, p. 3). However, he argued, with reference to art critic Adam Gopnik, that the repetition of Pop appropriation treated comics as an unchanging, nostalgic folk tradition. It at once refused to recognise the talented artists who had shaped the comics medium, “from its famous classics to its latest dynamism”, and at the same time gave “highbrow art aesthetes a respectable way to enjoy comics and yet remain aloof from the ‘masses’ who read them”, reinforcing the sublimation model by which fine artists confer “subtlety and sophistication” on comics (Gravett 1987b, p. 6).

Phoenix was also deeply suspicious of how the incorporation of comics into the art world through quotation aligned with class interests in cloistering culture and gatekeeping the ability to confer aesthetic value, noting that “when removed from their sequence, strip images are contextless and require ‘critical mediation’ for their content to be revealed”—the exclusivity of the cultural “status circus” maintained by “densely polysyllabled obfuscating critical theory” (1987, p. 11). This blunted the accessibility of comics by assigning the idea of the singular, esoteric work—“comics are low status, anybody can pick them up, their content needs no explanation or mediation” (Phoenix 1987, p. 11). Pinsent similarly decried how applying twentieth-century Western art ideals of “the artist as individual creator” and the importance of privatised interpretation negated the alternative model of the artist as “community figure” and style as public, “shared perception”, common to comics and actual traditions of icon painting (1987, p. 9).

Yet, despite coming from different angles, the Escape artists and exhibition curators seemed to agree that the appropriation of comics by contemporary fine artists was an ironic gesture that undermined ideas of artistic legitimacy and value. Pinsent spoke of artists patronisingly harnessing the energy of comics to “give spurious meaning to work which would otherwise be pretty much devoid of content” (1987, p. 11). For Savage Pencil, the extraction and abstraction of characters and devices didn’t lay bare the inner formal workings of comics like George Herriman’s, or safeguard values of joy, humanity and solidarity, but dismally stripped them: “modern art has failed to gently grasp hold of what was perfect. To make it theirs it must be crushed, its shape twisted to fit into the void of an art gallery” (1987, p. 12). Escape’s response to neo-avant-garde appropriations of comics suggests that what such blank repetitions actually revealed was the intensified commodification of art discussed by Buchloh—the assimilation of shock devices as a means of shoring up the art market, the avant-garde having become institutionalised as “an ideology of the status quo rather than a challenge to it” (Wood 1999, p. 10).

At the same time, Escape itself can be seen to expose the ideological recuperation and commodification of the small press as comics avant-garde. In many senses it was part of the aestheticisation and professionalisation of the

small press, deploying ideals of the romanticised artist and self-enclosed artwork to assign comics more lasting value, and elevating pragmatic aspects of DIY zine production, like cheap black and white printing, into a cultivated style. *Escape* was different from self-published titles in its higher cover price, professional typesetting and printing—giving small press creators “more formal... publication” (Robinette 2017, p. 96). Ultimately this aimed at stabilising the comic book industry by attracting a different audience—Pinsent (2020) designed *Fast Fiction* publicity as the antithesis of typical comic shop ads in order to “appeal to a more discerning reader” (see Fig. 6). What *Escape* seemed to really want was institutional support for the renewal of the British comics industry, in the vein of François Mitterrand’s “BD Plan”, and a more robust market: to open the eyes of “unimaginative publishers and retailers... who fail to appreciate the potential of strip magazines for wider audiences” (Gravett and Stanbury 1983, p. 1).

In this *Escape* struggled to remain anchored to its small press origins. Gravett maintains that making a deal with Titan didn’t impact editorial autonomy, however Robinette argues it led to a move away from strips by local self-publishers in favour of reprinting more high-profile material from overseas. This was enabled by the shift to the larger, standard A4 size, more prominent on comic shop shelves, which also saw sought-after back cover space given over to advertisers. Titan’s interest was in glossy trade paperback collected editions of comics, be they licensed characters from TV and film franchises, reprints of British and American mainstream titles, or creator-owned alternative works. *Escape* thus sits within the wider reorientation of the comics market in the 1980s and 1990s towards greater internationalisation and more expensive book formats associated with the graphic novel—touted by Titan as “the future of comics” (Titan Books 1987). There was a self-awareness of this contradictory position, navigating between the ideology of the bourgeois art world, the alternative values of the self-publishing scene, and the commercial interests of the comics industry. John Bagnall’s “Punk Memories” strip noted how a punk aesthetic had been absorbed into the “chic graphix” of the style magazines that *Escape* emulated (Fig. 7). In similar tongue-in-cheek fashion, the cover of *Fast Fiction* 29 showed a crocodile reading a publication entitled “the plight of comics as an art form”, while Pinsent’s publicity for the stall lifted the phrase “the original and best” from adverts for instant gravy (Pinsent 2020).

A Mainstream Alternative

In questioning how far *Escape* reproduced, escaped, exposed or was co-opted into the institutional frameworks of the art world and mainstream comics industry, the gendering of artistic authorship and independence within it, and alternative and small press comics more broadly, also merits scrutiny. The 1980s’ alternative comics anthologies provided a platform for women cartoonists and attracted more female readers (Sabin 1993, p. 232). *Escape* regularly featured work by Hancock, Carol Swain and Julie Hollings, alongside



Fig. 6 Ed Pinsent, advert for Fast Fiction (c. 1986–88). See comics.edpinsent.com/2020/09/16/fast-fiction-flyers-and-small-ads



Fig. 7 John Bagnall, opening panels of “Punk Memories”. *Escape* No. 9 (1986), pp. 18–20

international artists like Lynda Barry and Carol Moisewicz. *Escape*’s writing team also included women, notably Louise Tucker who took over the “Popular Graphics” news column. However, as Nicola Streeten argues, “it was largely a masculine alternative”, mainstream in its marginalisation of women (2020, p. 108). This was evident in *Escape*’s collaboration with Camden Council on the 1990 exhibition *Strip Search*, a showcase of the “widest possible range” of the “New Breed” of comics which included only one female cartoonist, Posy Simmonds, in its catalogue (*Strip Search* 1990).

Duncan’s critique of the misogyny and “cult of the penis” in Expressionist visual art finds echoes in models of artistic liberation asserted via representation of the brutalised female body in many underground comix. Although conveyed in a much more slick and painterly style, a similar construction of artistic freedom in terms of (heterosexual) male virility was evident in glossy adult science fiction and fantasy titles. *Escape*’s claims for “comics as a genuine Art” were founded in opposition to ideas of “comics as boys’ power fantasies” (Campbell in Gravett 2006), and it engaged in debates about this “tits and bums” tendency that were taking place across comics fandom and criticism at the time. Reviews challenged the representation of women in alternative comics—Phoenix, for example, criticising the “continual sexism” of Howard Chaykin’s *American Flagg!* (1985, p. 61).

However, the model of authorship put forward by *Escape* arguably remained largely masculinist. This was prominent in confessional slice-of-life and

autobiographical narratives that naturalised a (white straight) male perspective, including through the male-coding of the artist and ideas of artistic authenticity as embodied in personal expression—Eddie Campbell’s work, or at least its interpretation in Comics Studies, being a case in point. Campbell rejects myths of the Romantic artist-outsider and “the personal touch of the master” underlying oppositions of art and craft (2009, p. 251). Yet his semi-autobiographical strip, in both narrative structure, with its ambiguous iterations of himself as character, narrator and author, and in visual design, with its “calligraphic line” and movement between “sketchy impressionism and detailed realism” (Fischer and Hatfield 2011, p. 70), can be read as circling back to the autonomous, heroically self-expressive artist and the work as self-sufficient aesthetic whole. That the artist is *de facto* male is resisted yet recurs in Campbell’s metafictional observations about comics—the collected “How to be an Artist” highlights the presence of Hancock and Helen Cusack in the small press, but slips into repeated normative references to the “guys” who make up the comics scene (Campbell 2009, pp. 203, 211). While self-deprecatory in showing his alter ego Alec MacGarry’s efforts to live up to expectations of hegemonic masculinity, and providing complex, nuanced portraits of recurrent figures like close friend Danny Grey, women can be othered in this wry “anatomisation of self” (Campbell and Moore 1984, p. 43).⁸ In an episode published in *Escape* 8 Alec expresses surprise at his girlfriend Penny Moore’s fight to save an unruly horse from being sold off, jokingly remarking “I admire you sticking to your principles, women don’t usually understand that sort of thing” (Campbell 1986, p. 56). While the British alternative comics scene was apparently more “Vicars’ Tea Party” than Haight-Ashbury (Gravett 2006), that the construction of artistic autonomy in play in alternative comics remained conditional on the expropriation of the female body was suggested by a publicity stunt organised by promoters of the BD ‘86 festival in Switzerland which showcased British comics. As recalled in “How to be an Artist,” Campbell, Emerson, Don Lawrence and Denis Gifford were invited to draw cartoons on a topless woman model (Fig. 8).



Patrick Andersen, the Festival’s press photographer, arranged for a publicity gimmick of dubious taste. Don, Hunt, Eddies (from left to right) and Denis drew cartoons on the back of a topless girl named Titiana as she sat Godiva-like on the throne in the Town Hall.



Fig. 8 Left: Patrick Andersen, photograph. Reproduced in *Escape* No. 9 (1986), p. 11. Right: Eddie Campbell, excerpt from “How to be an Artist.” In: *Alec: The Years Have Pants* (2009). Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, p. 280

While it is important not to overstate the prevalence of “real-world” life narratives in *Escape*, it can be situated within an emerging validation of comics autobiography as aligned with commitments to artistic freedom and the independent aesthetic criteria of “art”. This can be seen to reproduce the mythology Krauss discusses, deploying notions of originality, intentionality, expression and the bounded singular artwork that obscure repetition, normativity and the way such concepts are tied to the art market’s production and circulation of value. In this sense *Escape* can be seen to have contributed to the entrenching of the realist, longer-form work by a single creator (most often in the guise of the “original graphic novel”) as a new normative frame for comics, described by Marc Singer (2018) in relation to the work of Chris Ware.⁹ John Bagnall recalls readers remarking on *Escape* as instituting a school of comics “where nothing happened” (in Gravett 2006). The idea of a school underpins the importance of repetition and recurrence in shaping what alternative comics are, and the cultivation of an audience with the connoisseurial sensibility to recognise and value their ‘originality’ as instances of a multiple.¹⁰

PUTTING COMICS STUDIES IN THE FRAME

What is the role of comics scholarship in shoring up this mythology, and “reinscribing the aura of the work of art in a form... synonymous with mechanical reproduction” (Beatty 2007, p. 54), as part of the shared discursive practice of maker, museum and publisher? Craig Fischer and Charles Hatfield identify visual effects that confer the unity of a “self-contained literary novel” on Campbell’s strip despite its long, fragmented serialisation (2011, p. 77). These include the “autographic or doodle-like immediacy of *Alec’s* graphic style... akin to handwriting” that brings together “illustration, diagram, pictogram, and writing” as “extensions of a single artistic sensibility” (Fischer and Hatfield 2011, p. 75). In this account, Campbell becomes a painter on a small, intimate scale (ironic given his later adoption of a workshop set-up to produce *From Hell*). A mode of graphiation connoting spontaneity and instantaneity inscribes the authenticating mark of the individual artist on the comics page, despite that fact it is a printed multiple, a product of several hands’ work, and a calculated and coded style. As Arnaud Rommens notes in *Abstraction and Comics*, the concept of graphiation, as linked to artisanal image production concerned with direct physical touch, has been “canonized in comics scholarship” as safeguarding the “uniqueness” of comics, despite the fact “graphiation is always imprinted by technology” (2019, pp. 33–4).

For Fischer and Hatfield, Campbell’s modulation of focalisation and perspective, through varying degrees of abstraction in his visual rendering, allows for emotional investment as well as a distanced self-irony and self-criticism. His braiding of recurrent symbols and motifs sustains philosophical flights of fancy that interrupt mundane events, lending weight to the work. Rather than joy, humanity, truth and solidarity becoming part of an everyday life for all freed from instrumental rationality, the fetishised, specialised sensibility of the

detached, introspective (male) artist “ennobles” the everyday by escaping from it: “the real escape artist is Campbell himself, who builds an imaginative playground out of such everyday occurrences” (Fischer and Hatfield 2011, p. 86).

This reproduction of the myth of originality in comics scholarship comes in the wake of substantial criticism of its function in the art market, and the art historian’s participation in it, applying models of individual authorial expression as part of what Krauss describes as the “sorting of hands” that authenticates and underwrites the value of the work (1986, p. 190). It naturalises a heroic masculinist model of authorship and fetishises auratic artisanal handicraft in an age of “digital mutability” (Rommens 2019, p. 35). Its view remains limited to the page or hyperframe, rather than the constitutive outside of the studio, publishing house, printshop, web platform, book store and academia itself. How have the structures and taxonomies “erected in conjunction with the legitimisation of comics”, including the mobilisation of definitions of the avant-garde to make claims for comics as art, prescribed and perpetuated “the kinds of comics that are produced and accepted academically” (Rommens 2019, pp. 25–7)? Comics scholarship is perhaps overdue its own institutional critique.¹¹

NOTES

1. Kunzle’s work includes clear points of convergence between a comics avant-garde and the art-historical avant-garde where he discusses the work of caricaturists affiliated to modern art movements, such as Adolphe Willette and Théophile Steinlen whose silent *Chat Noir* comics he contextualises in relation to Symbolism (see Kunzle 2001).
2. Jean-Paul Gabillet (2022) identifies underground comix of the 1960s to mid-1970s as Western European and American comics’ “most significant avant-garde phase”, with the alternative comics that followed their demise denoting a broader phenomenon of non-mainstream production “regardless of their adherence to any agenda of revolutionary innovation”.
3. For more on the way Comics Studies has predominantly engaged a narrow interpretation of modernism, see the chapter “Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore’s *I Can Hear the Grass Grow*”.
4. For recent work connecting feminist Art History to comics scholarship, see the chapters “Feminist Art History as an Approach to Research on Comics. Meta Reflections on Studies of Swedish Feminist Comics” by Margareta Wallin Victorin and Anna Nordenstam (2022) and “Towards Feminist Comics Studies: Feminist Art History and the Study of Women’s Comix in the 1970s” by Małgorzata Olsza (2022) in the companion volume this book, *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*.
5. For further discussion of Krauss’ work in relation to Comics Studies, and specifically the application of her work on the grid to the creation and curation of comics, see the chapter ‘VAST/O Exhibition (De)Construction: Exploring the Potentials of Augmented Abstract Comics and Animation Installations as a Method to Communicate Health Experiences’ by Alberda et al. (2022) in the

companion volume this book, *Seeing Comics through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form*.

6. In this chapter “Escape” is used to refer to the publisher in general, and the italicised “*Escape*” to refer specifically to the magazine.
7. Gravett handed the running of the stall over to Elliott and Ian Wieczorek in 1982. Pinsent later took over from 1987 to 1990. Many of the covers of the comics sold, as well as copies of the Fast Fiction infosheets are available on his website: comics.edpinsent.com
8. Although there is not space to fully develop this here, there are potential cross-overs with the “romanticization of the straight, white male subject as the object of society’s scorn” that Daniel Worden observes in the 2004 comics issue of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* guest edited by Chris Ware (2006, p. 894).
9. Singer discusses how Ware’s promotion of quotidian literary realism and life writing in alternative comics involves the establishment of their own set of “generic and stylistic conventions” and “canonical standards” grounded in a “privatising aesthetic” of interiority, confession and introspection sanctioned by the literary world and its institutions (2018, pp. 141–2). Crucially this involves positioning alternative comics as distanced from both the world of contemporary fine art and comics’ mass cultural roots in a way that recalls Leslie Fieldler’s description of the middlebrow—reinforcing stereotypes of comics as abject and shameful. As Singer notes, Ware is less concerned with challenging restrictive hierarchies than “ascending within them” (2018, p. 152).
10. For more on the concept of schools in Art History, see the chapter “[Establishing Canons, Styles and Schools at the Dawn of Comics Studies](#)”.
11. Singer’s *Breaking the Frames* is an important pathbreaker in this, examining how dominant discourses in Comics Studies “exalt favored artists and genres” and “exclude others from consideration” (2018, p. 35), including discussions of alternative comics that reinforce cultural hierarchies by affirming the aesthetic merit of the few comics legitimised at the expense of others (notably those that “flatter academic sensibilities”—Singer 2018, p. 238). But perhaps the most compelling institutional critique of both the comics industry and Comics Studies exists in the forms of comics themselves—specifically the conceptual comics (CoCo) defined, collated and produced by Ilan Manouach (see https://monoskop.org/Conceptual_comics). CoCos dispute myths of originality, individual expression, self-sufficiency, craft and the autographic trace, often using the appropriation, iteration, and reworking of existing comics to focus attention on fundamental material, industrial and institutional aspects of their production and consumption that are overlooked or treated as incidental—from the distribution of labour, to fabrication and printing, to circulation and promotion, to translation, to forms of social engagement and readership, to disposal and waste-age. Reflexive and speculative, these works foreground how “social and economic forces and their established commercial and communication routines affect the medium’s meaning”, how “[t]he rainforest of pulp production, the printer’s studio, the readers’ column and the landfill do not simply represent geographies of comics industry but are technologies of inscription in their own right... integral elements of a material language that actively shapes comics” (Manouach 2020). We are grateful to our anonymous peer reviewer for pointing to this body of work.

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Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore's "I Can Hear the Grass Grow"

Abstract The chapter “[Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction](#)” examined a shift in comics scholarship which has turned to modernist art criticism in developing formalist methodologies. Often scholarship on the relationship between comics and modernism does not fully consider the heterogeneity of modernism in both theory and practice. This chapter examines the different uses of the term modernism in Art History and traces the development of modernist formalist art theory from the work of Roger Fry and Clive Bell in the early twentieth century to Michael Fried’s defence of high modernist approaches to art in the 1960s in the face of the neo-avant-garde. It notes some of the criticisms of high modernism, particularly from the 1960s onwards, and how they map onto formalist approaches in Comics Studies, before applying different understandings of modernism in an analysis of Alan Moore’s 1988 “I Can Hear the Grass Grow” strip from music-themed UK comics magazine *Heartbreak Hotel*.

Keywords Modernism • Modernist criticism • Modernity • Formalism • Alan Moore • *Heartbreak Hotel*

COMICS AND MODERNISM

As noted in the chapter “[Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction](#)”, modernism is among the most disputed terms in Art History, accruing varied and conflicting meanings. As a phenomenon crossing visual art and design, literature, music, theatre and film it has also developed different inflections within

The original version of this chapter was revised. This chapter was inadvertently published with incorrect figure caption for Figure 1. The erratum to this chapter can be found at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07353-3_13

the critical discourses and disciplines related to those fields. In Comics Studies, discussions of the relationship between comics and modernism have been tilted towards literary modernism, for instance connecting the work of comics artists like Chris Ware, Alan Moore, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster to writers such as Ezra Pound, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner.¹ In this comics and modernism are often counterposed—with comics as artefacts of mass culture functioning as “modernism’s wretched Other” (Ayres 2016, p. 111). This is echoed in accounts of the relationship between comics and modernism in fine art—in *Comics versus Art* Bart Beaty similarly describes how “comics have been defined... as art’s mass cultural ‘other’ by institutional forces in the art world” (2012, p. 25).

The histories of comics and modern art are accordingly cast as out of sync, if not entirely divergent. Beaty highlights the “vast differences that existed between comics and high modernism in the first half of the twentieth century” (2012, p. 24). Against claims for the increasing convergence of comics and art, Thierry Groensteen argues that, as “two quite distinct art worlds”, “the history of comics has little to do with that of modern art and contemporary art” (2013, p. 173). Akin to Beaty’s (2007) description of the “postmodern modernism” of the European small press, David Ball explains comics’ development as the inverse of literature’s trajectory from modernist formal experimentation and dissociation from mass media to postmodern “playful self-referentiality and celebration of consumption”—contemporary alternative comics reinstating “*against themselves*” modernism’s antipathy to mass culture (2010, pp. 103–6).²

As such, discussions of modernist art in Comics Studies have tended to concentrate as Beaty does on ‘high modernism’, which became dominant in the late 1950s and 1960s, associated with the writing of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Correspondingly, they have tended to focus on east-coast American painting, New York being seen to have displaced Paris as the centre of canonical modern art in the post-war period, especially with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism. This has obscured modernism’s historical and global heterogeneity and its contestation in both art practice and theory, as well as sidestepping objections raised to the formalism prevalent in mainstream modernist criticism. Exploring the various art-historical meanings of modernism and the development of, and challenges to, modernist critical approaches to art can spotlight the value of formalist accounts of comics, but also their many shortcomings, and draw out confluences of comics and modernism that have been overlooked.

MODERNISM IN ART HISTORY

Charles Harrison (2003) identifies three different functions of the term modernism in art-historical discourse: firstly, its use to broadly describe the ways modern art and culture of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries critically responded to the experience of modernity; secondly, its narrower, more specialised use to describe a specific tendency in painting and sculpture

self-reflexively concerned with the formal demands of those mediums; and finally, its attribution to a corresponding vein of art criticism grounded in conviction of the value of the aesthetic as an end in itself and sole arbiter of quality.

The first, broader view of how modern art engaged with the upheavals and transformations of modernity, and the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on the body, society, self, perception, nature, labour and technology, surfaces in Comics Studies in accounts that situate the form's emergence within wider histories of art and (audio)visual culture in the context of mass reproduction, such as David Kunzle's (1973, 1990) *History of the Comic Strip*, Thierry Smolderen's (2014) *The Origins of Comics*, Ian Gordon's (1998) *Comic strips and consumer culture, 1890–1945* and Jared Gardner's (2012) *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling*. The second and third uses have been more commonly evoked in formalist approaches to comics, particularly within what Daniel Worden calls the "first wave" of comics scholarship concerned with legitimising the medium as "an acceptable object of art historical or literary analysis" (2015, p. 59), and in work on abstract comics.

The second, more specific art-historical usage of modernism differentiates between an avant-garde tendency within modern art on the one hand, and kitsch (incorporating both classical academic art and commercial mass culture) on the other, both of which share the condition of modernity. Modernist art in this sense is distinguished by being not externally but internally directed, its development "governed by *self*-critical procedures addressed to medium itself" (Harrison 2003, p. 191). Increasing liberation from a mandate to mimetically represent reality enabled artists to home in on what made art art—its autonomy, or the separateness of the aesthetic from everyday experience, through intensely self-reflexive processes of formal investigation. As observed in chapter "Variations of Formalism, Modernism, Abstraction", this roots modernism in late-nineteenth-century aestheticism and its romantic defence of a free artistic sensibility in the face of the growing subjection of all aspects of life under capitalism to the rationalist, instrumentalist imperatives of the market. Against demands that art must have a didactic function, be moral or useful, aestheticism held up the value of beauty and art for its own sake. This had important emancipatory queer undertones—key precursors of and participants in the Aesthetic Movement in Britain for example, such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and Algernon Swinburne, were gay.

A fundamental insistence on art's autonomous value, the distinctiveness of aesthetic perception, and that the only criteria relevant to the judgement of artistic quality are intrinsic to art itself, underpins modernism's third sense as a critical tradition running alongside this tendency in art practice. Harrison locates the origins of modernist art criticism in nineteenth-century Symbolism (closely related to aestheticism) and the writings of the painter Maurice Denis. It was subsequently developed in England by Roger Fry and Clive Bell affiliated with the Bloomsbury Group, who in the 1910s organised exhibitions of French painting at London's Grafton Gallery which Fry termed 'Post-Impressionist'.

The Significance of Form

Fry argued that what distinguishes art is its expression and stimulation of the imaginative life, “a life freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence” (1940, p. 26). The kinds of perception, emotion and pleasure that art invokes are thereby of a different character. Art involves a more disinterested (if intense) pleasure of contemplation, emotion appreciated in and for itself rather than requiring responsive action, and a clarified sense of perception and purer kind of vision—indeed for Fry “it is only when an object exists in our lives for no other purpose than to be seen that we really look at it” (1940, pp. 29–30).

The essential quality of a work of art that provokes this distinctive aesthetic emotion Bell named significant form—“lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms” (1992, p. 113). Any representative element or “informatory matter” is incidental and irrelevant (Bell 2003, p. 6). For Bell, descriptive painting, including “pictures that tell stories and suggest situations”, can only be art, that is, can only “move us aesthetically”, by virtue of form rather than depicted content (1992, p. 114). Fry identified the key aspects of visual design as being unity and balance, the spatial organisation of various formal elements—line, mass, shape, tone, and colour—into an ordered whole. Modern French painting, particularly the work of and influenced by Paul Cézanne, as an “attempt to isolate pure aesthetic reaction”, opened up the possibility of completely non-representational art (Fry 1940, p. 242). For Fry and Bell this was a return to the centrality of formal design in the work of the “Old Masters” of the Italian Renaissance, “which had been almost lost sight of in the fervid pursuit of naturalistic representation” (Fry 1940, p. 234). But it was also comparable transhistorically to so-called “Primitive art” ranging across ancient Egyptian, Chinese, Byzantine and pre-columbian art and African sculpture—all apparently free from “descriptive qualities” and only concerned with pure plastic design (Bell 1992, p. 114).³

This necessitated a new model of analysis. Fry, like many modern painters, was particularly interested in music, and used its terminology to identify how aesthetic judgement involves being attuned to “the intervals and relations of forms as a musical person feels the intervals and relations of tones”—while resisting the interference of “dramatic overtones and implications” (1940, p. 240). Perceiving the form rather than represented content of an artwork was akin to listening to the music of a song rather than its words. While claims that all that is needed to appreciate art is “a sense of form and colour” might appear to open it up to wider democratic accessibility, for Fry and Bell this attunement to significant form required a refined sensibility only a few possessed—“ordinary people have almost no idea of what things really look like” (Fry 1940, p. 30).

The Specificity of Medium

The idea of modern art inexorably evolving via an internal process towards ever-purer abstraction was further developed in subsequent exhibitions, such as

the 1936 Cubism and Abstract Art show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Curated by its first director Alfred H. Barr, the catalogue carried on its dustjacket his famous diagram mapping a progression from 1880s' Synthetism and Neo-Impressionism to 1930s' geometric and non-geometric abstract art via interlocking avant-garde movements. Museums and galleries, alongside the expansion of the art market and gallery-dealer system, played an important role in the institutionalisation of modern art, within which formalist modernist criticism was ascendant. Clement Greenberg shared and advanced ideas of an immanent logic of art's development grounded in its autonomy, stressing the importance of medium-specificity as the means by which modern art verified its independence and sustained the quality of great works of the past. Greenberg took the origins of modernism further back—it was with the painting of Édouard Manet in the 1860s that art began the self-critical work of calling attention to itself as art, thereby defining what was “unique and irreducible” to art in general, but moreover within “each particular art” (1992, p. 755). To guarantee its standards and freedom, “each art had to determine, through operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself”, its “unique and proper areas of competence” (ibid). What Manet's work did was to frankly declare the flatness of the painted surface, which, alongside but over and above the shape of the support and the properties of colour, was “the condition painting shared with no other art” (Greenberg 1992, p. 756).

Yet at the same time that high modernist theory, in the form of Greenberg's writings, and high modernist art, in the form of the body of work he called “post-painterly abstraction”, reached a position of dominance in the mid-1960s, they came under sustained challenge. Already in the 1950s, Pop Art could be seen to adhere more to the broader idea of modernism as critically engaging with the lived experience of modernity, particularly the expansion of consumption and changing cultural, technological and urban landscapes of the post-war period. Pop and other neo-avant-garde movements of the 1960s like Neo-Dada and Fluxus contested the hegemony of modernist formalism by exploring art as matter, process and event, in forms of intermedial assemblage and performance. The way this drew attention to the contextual determination of art by interactions between work and spectator, embodied perception and experience, and institutional circumstances of display, was further pursued by Minimalism and Conceptual Art.

The Defence of Autonomy

It was in face of such movements that Michael Fried defended abstract painting and sculpture, and modernist art criticism. Fried modified Greenberg's “reductionist and essentialist conception of the modernist enterprise” as progressive revelation of an unchanging and absolute core (1982, p. 222), by insisting on the historical root of modernist art in a “new and profound and... positive conception of the enterprise of painting” which included a specific relation

between painting and beholder (p. 220). Gradually withdrawing from the representation of reality and the general preoccupations of the culture in which it was embedded, and instead increasingly absorbed by intrinsic formal concerns, modernist art became driven by a self-reflexive dialectic of engagement with its own recent past. This necessitated the formal methods of criticism developed by Fry and Greenberg that alone could “make convincing discriminations of value” (Fried 1992, p. 770). Fried affirmed Greenberg’s view that modernism preserved past standards of high art—to him “mainstream” modernist art situated itself in continuity with “previous work... whose quality is not in doubt”, attempting to “equal its highest achievements, under new and difficult conditions” by discovering conventions which at that particular moment are capable of bearing comparison with the canon (Fried 1982, pp. 224–5). For Fried, the defence of art’s autonomy and the painter’s responsibility to “an exalted conception or at any rate to an exacting practice of the enterprise of painting” has a moral and ethical dimension, a “politics of conviction” in which art’s true critical value and relevance lay (1982, pp. 226–7).

From Fried’s perspective, Minimalism represented an ideological attack on modernism, the specificity of painting and sculpture, and art’s autonomy as art, as a result of its literalism, collapse of distinctions between media, and emphasis on the contingency of the encounter between artwork and viewer. In a well-known 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood”, Fried argued that modernist painting suspended its own objecthood, treating shape, for example, as a pictorial phenomenon. By contrast, Minimalist art like the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Sol LeWitt *projected* objecthood by insisting on aspects like shape as a “fundamental property of objects”, reducing artworks to their literal, material attributes (often using industrial materials). While the pin-stripe paintings of Frank Stella and shaped canvases of Kenneth Noland had revealed the importance of literal shape in determining the structure of a painting, for Fried this remained in dynamic relation with depicted shape, in tension with pictorial illusion—and therefore these works were still experienced as paintings. The blunt objecthood of Minimalist work, asserting “wholeness, singleness and indivisibility”, negated this interplay between the literal and illusive, dealing only with the tangible rather than optical experience of space, securing its identity “as non-art, at least neither painting nor sculpture”, and foreclosing aesthetic engagement with it (Fried 1967).

To Fried, this literalism was fundamentally theatrical—making the situation in which an artwork is encountered and act of viewing it central, archly staging it as spectacle. The beholder, and their embodied experience in a particular setting, becomes the subject of the work, “and the piece in question... an object” (ibid.), contravening the self-sufficiency of the artwork. Straying into the territory of theatre (or in Fried’s terms “corrupted or perverted by theater”), and its very different relationship between work and audience, also brings in the dimension of time—“the *duration of the experience*” (ibid.). This too goes against modernist painting and sculpture which, in suspending objecthood, suspend time “by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness” (ibid.).

Theatre represented the disintegration of barriers between the arts. Maintaining that only medium-specificity guarantees the quality and value of individual art forms, for Fried “*the success, even the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater*”(ibid.), this overcoming of the theatrical being, in his view, a core element of the modernist sensibility.

The Occlusions of Modernist Criticism

Gail Day and Chris Riding point to the “specific knowledge” developed in high modernist criticism—the way that it compelled close visual analysis and rigours of thought that “at their best, opened up a critical language capable of finely nuanced distinctions” (2004, p. 192). Formalist comics scholarship drawing on this body of work has brought close attention to the visual design, plastic qualities and aesthetic affects of comics which have been often side-lined by a focus on narrative structure and literary content. Day and Riding also succinctly summarise the challenges to the high modernist paradigm that came from both art practice and criticism in the 1960s and 1970s:

It was criticised for its optical bias (and for downplaying the role of ‘tactility’ or that of human embodiment in the experience of art...); for its historicism (that is, the assumption that art progresses through a constant process of renewal); for its formalism, its advocacy of art’s autonomy and its criticism of historical and social interpretations; for its opposition to the analysis of ‘content’, narrative, symbolism and metaphor...; and for presuming that the beholder of modernist art was an undifferentiated universal human subject whose judgements were disinterested. (2004, p. 192)

Similar criticisms can be levelled at the ways that this paradigm has been adopted in Comics Studies. Several scholars have identified a lack of attentiveness to materiality and embodiment in the field (Lefèvre 1999; Hague 2014; Kashtan 2018; Gangnes et al. 2019–2020; Szép 2020)—as Christopher Pizzino observes, “in its earliest years, comics studies made little space for phenomenological approaches” and there remains relatively little consideration “of even basic haptic aspects, tactile and visual, of comics reading as such” (2020, p. 15). The interplay of formalism and historicism has been evident since Claude Moliterni’s work on narrative technique, in which the determination of comics’ medium-specific formal qualities involves an implicit tendency to cast comics’ history as the progressive discovery and continual evolution of those particular aspects of form, in turn establishing criteria of quality and value by which a canon of historically significant “masters” are identified. Scott McCloud’s (1993) search to validate comics as a unique art was grounded in the emptying out of content, iconography, genre, style—the comics medium as empty vessel or shell—and separation from historical context and framing conditions of production and consumption. As Jonathan Flowers argues, the visual language of comics identified by McCloud is “grounded on an assumption of cultural

neutrality. That is the language, and the reader constructed by McCloud's work, seems to presume an uninterrupted capacity to be embodied in the work absent cultural or social barriers" (2020, p. 207). McCloud assumes a "'default' or 'unmarked' reader" that, despite claims to universality, is predicated on his own experience as a white man, aligning the understanding of comics "with the dominant organization of culture around the experience of whiteness" (Flowers 2020, p. 208). Andrei Molotiu (2009) reproduces ideas of the disinterested objectivity of aesthetic judgement available to those who cultivate a certain sensibility, establishing a "right way" to learn to look at comics for their fundamental formal mechanisms (and thereby identify artistically significant work⁴), which recalls the writings of Fry and Bell.

But questions can also be raised over what taking this critical paradigm for granted leaves out, including in how its abridged teleological narrative of modernism casts the relationship between modern art and comics. It has become commonplace in Art History to talk about many or multiple modernisms, including local, regional and transnational iterations and constellations. Even within the narrow "main trajectory" of Western modernism (Elkins 2010), as Fred Andersson (2019) notes, there have been antagonistic tendencies. The neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s involved a rediscovery of interwar movements like Dada, Constructivism, and Surrealism that contested accounts of "mainstream" modernism—"a different modern art, not so much peripheral to modernist painting as a continuing challenge to it; an art of performance and construction, an art of adding things together and occupying physical space rather than of purifying form in pictorial space, an art of disunity and disruption rather than harmony and wholeness" (Wood 2004a, p. 271).

Such movements (and many others) went beyond particular, traditional mediums and challenged ideas of artistic authorship and the artwork as discrete, self-sufficient and auratic. They involved intermedial blendings and borrowings, and hybrid and syncretic forms developed through graphic design, publications, visual and concrete poetry, film and animation, product and fashion design, and, notably, performance and theatre. This included forms of collage, assemblage and montage in which fragments of mass-reproduced imagery and everyday objects and materials were combined and juxtaposed. Such use of non-traditional materials and media demonstrated enthusiasm rather than antipathy from artists towards mass culture and new media, for constituting ways of seeing the world more pertinent to the experience of modernity as flux, transformation and contingency. For Eugene Lunn "the Cubists pioneered the artistic acceptance of cheap, mass-produced objects, which they placed on their canvases and refused to see as inimical to 'culture' but regarded as its modern redefinition" (1985, p. 50).

As Esther Leslie has argued, the "generally accepted line that declares over and over that high culture and popular culture have been—for so long—enemies" belies the "intimacy between modernism and mass culture" (2002, p. v). Modernist artists turned to and engaged the ways technological and popular culture, including cartooning, pulp fiction, vaudeville, circus and amusement

parks, represented and dissected the modern world—"Artists found that cartoons touched on many things that they too wished to explore: abstraction, forceful outlines, geometric forms and flatness, questioning of space and time and logic" (Leslie 2002, pp. 18–19). Leslie's focus is on the importance of animation for artists involved in movements like Cubism, Dada, Futurism, Constructivism, Surrealism and thinkers like Walter Benjamin, but animation has important roots in, and crossovers with, cartooning, caricature and comics. As Jared Gardner points out (2012, p. 7), many of the creators who developed animation's "universe of transformation, overturning and provisionality" (Leslie 2002, p. vi) were also comic strip artists.

This was a key part of how participants in these movements saw their work as politically engaged and topically relevant rather than detached and autonomous: "both intellectuals and mass culture producers recognized, in some way, that all was to play for, that transformation was a virtue, a motive and a motif, that dissolution of form, including the form of the mass itself was on the agenda, indeed that there was a chance to return to the drawing board of social formation" (Leslie 2002, p. vii). As Lunn argues, one of the ways modernist self-reflexivity was inflected was from an anti-naturalist perspective: "The modernist work often wilfully reveals its own reality as a construction of artifice, which may take the form of ... suggestions that the wider social world is built and rebuilt by human beings and not 'given' and unalterable" (1985, p. 35). Strategies of defamiliarisation, estrangement and shock similarly aimed to show up the provisionality and constructedness not only of the artwork, but social reality itself, and therefore the possibility to collectively change it.

REFRAMING MODERNISM AND COMICS

From this perspective, "vast differences" and oppositions between comics and modernism are overstated. Treating modernism in its wider, more inclusive sense as "engagement with multifarious experience of modern life" (Wood 2004b, p. 1) highlights points of contact and convergence that have been overlooked. Alongside the often-cited influence of Rudolph Dirks' *Katzenjammer Kids* on Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein, and the well-known figures who were both painters and cartoonists, such as George Luks, Lyonel Feininger Théophile Steinlen, Marcel Duchamp and Philip Guston, other overlaps have been highlighted in comics research. Barnaby Dicker (2010) traces a thread of avant-garde graphic art from Rodolphe Töpffer, through the influence of comics and cartooning on the modernist avant-garde (specifically Symbolist and Nabi painting and drawing by artists like Pierre Bonnard), to the work of illustrator, book designer and filmmaker Franciszka Themerson. Mona Hadler discusses the impact of American comic books on Surrealist artists like sculptor David Hare as representative of "the liberating spark of the imagination, and potential for freedom" (2011, p. 94), a place where "hybrid and carnivalesque inversions occur and the personal and the ideological collide" (p. 105). Katherine Roeder has explored a modernist sensibility in the work of comics

artists like Winsor McCay (2014) and Cliff Sterett (2019), and Simone Castaldi (2010) and Barbara Uhlig (2015) note engagement with movements like Futurism in early twentieth-century Italian comics such as Sergio Tofano's *Signor Bonaventura*—an interest in modernist idioms of the historical avant-garde revived in the 1970s and 1980s by creators like Lorenzo Mattotti, Giorgio Carpinteri and Andrea Pazienza.

Groensteen dismisses such overlaps as “contamination *in the margins*” (2013, p. 173). Yet thinking more broadly about how comics engaged with the lived experience of modernity, particularly its visual perception, and the way that involved developments of, and experimentations with, graphic form, reveals how they engaged the same issues of time and space, flatness and depth, permanence and impermanence, movement and viewpoint, as modern art. As Roeder argues, rather than being seen as acting in opposition to one another, mass culture and modernist art can be positioned in conjunction “arriving at similar conclusions despite originating from very different places on a continuum of creative practice” (2014, p. 5).

Modernist artists were concerned with spatial synchronicity and simultaneity, but also fragmentation and discontinuity, the manifold, fluctuating and intersecting perspectives of the modern city, and the segmentation and repetition, fracturing and compression of space and time of mechanised industry. Comics artists self-consciously developed the graphic treatment of time, movement and space, the montage of panels in succession and contiguity. In Roeder's view, McCay “practiced a form of mass cultural modernism” engaging with the dynamism, disjunction and multiple viewpoints of modern urban experience, juxtaposing fragments in the way that the newspaper, vaudeville show and department store did. This was achieved by self-reflexively experimenting with the medium itself, exploring the relationship between full-page design and panel sequences, breaking the fourth wall and drawing attention to comics' own formal mechanisms (2014, p. 185). Scott Bukatman similarly highlights how comics engaged with the “stresses and strains of modern life” (2012, p. 36) and “the explorations of time, rhythm and tempo so characteristic of modernity” (p. 32). They participated in the mechanical breakdown of time and space epitomised by chronophotography—the instrumental “rationalist impulse to map the moving body's navigation of graphed space” (Bukatman 2012, p. 37)—but at the same time consistently parodied the worldview that underlay it, and its impact on human lives and bodies, through disorder, entropy, breakdown, instability, metamorphosis and play. For Bukatman “reflexivity is almost endemic to the media of comics and cartoons” (2012, p. 69) and McCay's intensely self-referential work, a vaudeville performance of the acts of making comics, is modernist in its undermining of its own structures and conventions, vacillating “between representation and the critique of representation” (p. 70). Smolderen (2014) sees this in the earliest comics, with Töpffer's work consistently, and theatrically, undermining its own conventions of visual narrative. But this was self-reflexivity not for the purpose of determining the medium-specific mechanics of comics as separate from the world, but

as a means of critically engaging with it. It involves a movement between illusion and literalism on the part of the viewer, which relates to Charles Harrison's ideas of a continuity between the varying senses of modernism located in the self-conscious critical attention of the spectator, responsive to both the work as object and the metaphorical meanings it sustains (2003, pp. 196–201). In this sense comics become, as Gardner argues, “the first and arguably most important of the new vernacular modernisms... dedicated to diagramming the social complexities of modern life and fixing the fragments of modernity on the page” (2012, p. 7)—echoing Kunzle's discussion of the medium as a means by which people “learned to live with ... a fragmented reality” (1990, p. 377).

Consideration of a perspective in which modernism and mass culture are not opposed also provides a different understanding of abstraction. Abstraction can similarly be seen not as the retreat of art into itself, and its formal self-purification, but as a more adequate means of representing the complexities and contradictions of modernity. Among the manifold debates about realism and abstraction that took place in the 1930s and 1940s, art historian Meyer Schapiro argued that the modernist formalism of figures like Fry, Bell and Barr was based on problematic ideas about representation and art's relationship to historical experience. Within it,

the logical opposition of realistic and abstract art.... rests on two assumptions about the nature of painting...: that representation is a passive mirroring of things, and therefore essentially non-artistic, and that abstract art, on the other hand, is a purely aesthetic activity, unconditioned by objects and based on its own eternal laws. (2003, pp. 26–7)

For Schapiro, both these assumptions were misguided. Considering representation as naturalistic or mimetic ignored the degree to which “realistic” modes of rendering are conventional—how “perspective, anatomy, light-and-shade are ordering principles and expressive means” that “proceed from values, methods and viewpoints” (Schapiro 2003, p. 27). Treating abstraction as separate from the external world and free from its representation, overlooked the fact that “there is no ‘pure art’, unconditioned by experience, all fantasy and formal construction... are shaped by experience and by nonaesthetic concerns” (ibid.)—including primitivist fantasies, seeped in imperialism, in which “the colonies became places to flee to as well as exploit” (p. 31). For Schapiro, the move to abstract painting “bears within itself at almost every point the mark of the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture” (ibid.). Thinking of abstraction as the development of a way of seeing more commensurate to modernity, and reframing the relationship between comics and modernism, suggests an alternative approach to abstraction than that of Molotiu—closer to Aarnoud Rommens' description of abstraction as “dirty, lived, concrete”, as “anarchic engagement with other media, with the political, with the past and present, and with whatever at hand”, an unlearning and a loosening up with a critical edge (2019, p. 27).

I CAN HEAR THE GRASS GROW

“I can hear the grass grow” was a comic strip Alan Moore produced in 1988 for *Heartbreak Hotel*, a bi-monthly title published independently on a profit-share basis by Don Melia and Lionel Gracey-Whitman as Willyprods.⁵ Roger Sabin describes *Heartbreak Hotel* as one of number of “style comics” that emerged in the late 1980s in the vein of Brett Ewins and Steve Dillon’s *Deadline*—design-conscious anthologies aimed at older audiences, influenced by punk, closely connected to the small press, and combining comic strips with magazine features, particularly about music (1996, pp. 142–5).⁶ *Heartbreak Hotel* named itself a “lifestyle comics magazine” and carried the tagline “where comics and music meet”, emphasising the connection by describing its comics as “graphic sound” and including a 7” flexi disc of The Savage Garden track “Jimmy the Turk” with its second issue. Each of the six issues in its short-lived run was themed around a particular music genre: rock’n’roll, country, psychedelic rock, punk, surf rock and motown, featuring strips based on songs from that genre. Moore’s strip, based on a hit by Birmingham band The Move from 1967, was published in the third issue on psychedelia.

As John Coulthart (2021) recalls, *Heartbreak Hotel* was notable for “running articles by and interviews with people who had little or no connection to the comics world”, including musicians like Sandi Shaw and Eartha Kitt, radio and television personalities like John Peel and Paul Gambaccini, writers like Jon Savage and Clive Barker, comedians like Lenny Henry and performers like drag queen Divine. Figures such as musician Helen McCookerybook and TV presenter Jonathan Ross contributed their own comics alongside established cartoonists including Moore, Melinda Gebbie, Floyd Hughes, Duncan Fegredo, Steven Appleby, Julie Hollings and David Shenton. One-off strips were accompanied by ongoing series like Parker and Calkin’s “Jessamy” and Groc’s “EyeStrainOVision” filofax comics, as well as “Spill It”—roughly autobiographical one-pagers contributed by a range of British comics artists. These were combined with prose features including a regular column by Trina Robbins, and reviews of comics, albums, books, fashion, art and design.

As Sabin notes, style comics, with their close connection to the small press, “featured a higher proportion of female creators than other contemporary newsstand comics” (1996, p. 144), and *Heartbreak Hotel* carried work by several women cartoonists including Hollings, Gebbie, Robbins, Rachel Ball, Kate Charlesworth, Linda Parker, Jackie Smith and Caroline Della Porta. What made it stand out further was its political stance. The editorial of the third issue, in which “I can hear the grass grow” appeared, opened: “Turn on. Tune in. But whatever you do, don’t drop out. Not now. The time has come to get involved again” (Gracey-Whitman and Melia 1988, p. 2). The cause it was necessary to participate in was the defence of LGBT rights—Melia and Gracey-Whitman, a gay couple, were strong campaigners against homophobic legislation Section 28 and involved in AIDS activism. They organised *Strip Aids UK*, a 1987 benefit comic for London Lighthouse, a centre for people with AIDS,



Fig. 1 Alan Moore, “I can hear the grass grow.” *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No.3. (April/May 1988), p. 43 rotated clockwise 90°, including caption with instructions for disassembly and reassembly (to left)

and supported Moore and his partners with the 1988 anthology *AARGH! (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia)* for the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Action, self-published by his company Mad Love. *Heartbreak Hotel*'s second issue also featured a pull-out supplement “Samizdat” on the issue of censorship, with text contributions by writer Kathy Acker, filmmaker Derek Jarman, designer Jamie Reid and journalist Roz Kaveney, as well as comics publishers, editors and artists, reflecting this activist bent.

Moore had contributed a one-page strip “Letter from Northampton” about a trip to New York to *Heartbreak Hotel*'s debut issue, written in the form of a letter to Melia and Gracey-Whitman on a torn-out page of a sketchbook. “I can hear the grass grow” was printed on a vertical axis as eight sections or “panels” set in two tiers across four pages. Readers were instructed to cut them out and stick them back together to create a single continuous circular frieze (see Fig. 1). As such, the strip self-consciously experimented with comics’ form in a way that lends itself to analysis from a modernist perspective.

Form: The Abstract Underscore, Medium and Modernism

Unusually for the comics in *Heartbreak Hotel* based on songs, which often used them as jumping off points for a story, Moore’s strip involves a

performance of the song itself, sung (or at least spoken) by a male character to his female companion. However, Moore rearranged and altered many of Roy Wood's (1967) lyrics—for example changing the last line of the chorus from “I see rainbows in the evening” to “In the evening I see rainbows” (emphasising the rhyme with the repeated “I can hear the grass grow”).

The strip has distinctive visual qualities in terms of the treatment of formal elements of line, tone, shape, texture, pattern and the way they combine in the overall composition. In contrast to much of Moore's earlier cartooning, which involved dense hatching and feathering, it uses a clear, thick line, particularly to outline the two main figures in a more *Ligne Claire* style that fits their initial resemblance to *Tintin* characters (they visibly age as the strip progresses). Yet Moore's line retains a lively, wavy, plasmatic quality, particularly in areas where round-edged, tapering lines of varying weights and thicknesses don't meet, providing a tense energy to the work that bares the influence of underground cartoonists like Robert Crumb, Gilbert Shelton and Kim Deitch. This sense of dynamism is echoed in the overall composition, in which the figures and repeated imagery of butterflies, birds and bubbles are arranged almost chronophotographically in arcs and waves, as are speech balloons (see Fig. 2).

In a manner reminiscent of cel animation, the sharply delineated figures dance across a more detailed setting. There is a striking tonal and textural contrast between the plain white figures and the dark background made up of dense photomontage, layering discordant scales, disparate shapes, diverse textures and incongruous perspectives. This creates a disjuncture between the sense of dynamism in the fluid, distinct linework and undulating composition which carries the reader's eye across the panels, and the repleteness of the embellished and ambiguous jittery visual surface that invites a more plurivectorial, restive and recursive kind of looking. The tension between these different modes of looking can be read in relation to the sequential dynamism and iconostasis that Molotiu (2012) identifies as formal structures fundamental to the aesthetic perception of comics. Molotiu's discussion of the “graphic music that underlies sequential art” (2009, n.p), what might be called comics' abstract



Fig. 2 Alan Moore, “I can hear the grass grow.” *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) sections of panels from pp. 43–4 as if cut up and combined as a continuous frieze

underscore, accords with the interest of modernist formalist critics like Fry in the correlations between perceiving musical form and ascertaining key formal qualities and relationships in visual art.

Moore's strip is interesting to consider in this regard, as the visual interpretation of a song, and, moreover, a song with lyrics like "a stream of coloured circles making their way around" and "my senses colour my own mind" seen to be about the sensory effects of LSD (although *The Move* denied this). Much of Moore's early cartooning and illustration drew on psychedelic poster art that used plastic visual elements—vibrating complementary colours, ornate patterns and distorted shapes—to emulate the synaesthetic perceptual experience of taking acid. Psychedelic rock itself tried to translate the visual effects of LSD into sound via unusual time signatures and shifts in tempo, intricate melodies, droning guitars, extended improvisational sections, drifting harmonies, layered instrumentation and distortion effects like reverb.⁷ Moore's strip conversely uses shape, tone, texture and layout to graphically express the sound of the track—for instance, using the shape of distended letterforms and speech balloons to convey the elongated vowel sounds of the chorus, and the combination of dense textured background and overlapping visual arcs and waves to impart some of the disjunctive shifts in the song's structure, as well as its strong, rhythmic momentum carried by a heavy bassline (see Fig. 3).⁸

Groensteen has drawn connections between musical metre and the rhythm imposed by "the succession of frames" in comics, while also pointing to the more complex visual rhythms created by "the distribution of word balloons, the opposition of colors, or even the play of the graphic forms" (2007, p. 45). Chris Ware has discussed the rhythm of comics in terms of how characters move, and how time is "sculpted" through the spatial organisation of multiple images (in Singer 2018, p. 136). Moore's strip mobilises a sense of rhythm in each of these ways—through patterns of tonal contrast and shapes, but particularly through the placement of speech balloons and characters. The rhythm of the track is emulated in the strip through the way figures and balloons are grouped by lines of the song, with areas of textured, darker background in between corresponding to instrumental segments, creating implicit frames or



Fig. 3 Alan Moore, "I can hear the grass grow." *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) sections of panels from p. 43 as if cut up and combined as a continuous frieze

panels even when cut out and attached together without dividing white spaces, and a visual beat. Each of the eight sections covers a verse, chorus or hook. The use of curly, looping shapes, lines and patterns, and photomontaged material, which hold up the eye in sections where the figures and balloons don't appear, creates a consistent tempo and rhythm across both the written lyrics and visual imagery, emulating the song, while also suggesting the way sound is perceived by showing these forms surrounding and enveloping the characters' bodies (see Fig. 4).

From this perspective Moore's strip can be said to draw attention to the formal understructure of comics and how they are read—the interplay of sequential dynamism and iconostasis, verbal and visual modes, abstract and representational forms, and the way temporal relations are evoked by through spatial arrangement of segmented content. This reflexive interrogation of comics' form comes via a notably experimental approach, playing with the medium's conventions and pushing at its boundaries. This is a comic without panel borders or gutters, which, once cut up and reassembled, becomes a continuous circuit that the reader feeds through their hands like a reel as opposed to flicking the pages of the magazine, creating an unusual relationship between the comic as material object and the body. This could be seen to collapse the tension between reading a sequence of successive frames and perceiving overall global design. Being a long, looping single panel, rather than multiple discrete panels organised across different spatial coordinates of a page, it might be deemed not to be a comic at all. Yet, as stated, there are implicit panels, created particularly by the way the music is visualised through the rhythmic graphic subdivision of space and treatment of formal elements. What is notable is how the work operates through visual jumps, disjunctures and fissures (made more emphatic by the use of photomontage), that have to be puzzled out—reflexively highlighted as the male character declares “these puzzling signs fill me with doubt”. Inviting the reader to physically dismantle it and then reattach the pieces, self-consciously stages procedures by which comics are



Fig. 4 Alan Moore, “I can hear the grass grow.” *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) first panel of p. 44 rotated clockwise 90°. This panel covers the second verse of the song

interpreted—through processes of taking apart and putting together (Ecke 2011) and making sense from fragments (Postema 2013). In this sense Moore's strip could be seen as a very modernist examination of comics' medium-specificity, frankly declaring the way they are constituted by gaps and fractures animated by the reader.

A Medium of Fragments: Modernity, Montage and the Politics of Form

However, Moore's strip resists being read in the high modernist terms of Greenberg and Fried, not least because its experimental reflexivity is so very theatrical. In his discussion of comics as a form that "scouted the frontiers of modernity" (Gardner 2012, p. 2) at the turn of the twentieth century, Gardner argues they are "rooted in the narrative structure of shocks, fragments, and discontinuities" (p. 5). The material format of Moore's comic once constructed, and the physical mode of reading it, recalls the "Zoetrope wheels, magic lantern slides, and praxinoscope ribbons" which Gardner views as sharing, if not being the source of, comics' formal properties and concerns (2012, p. 7).

This leads to a view of "I can hear the grass grow" in relation to the wider sense of modernism as critical engagement with the experience of modernity. The theatricality of the strip, which depends quite literally on the reader's performance of physical acts of disassembly and reassembly, has a political aspect related to the retrieval of interwar modernist practices by the 1960s neo-avant-garde, seen in the strip's use of photomontage.

Moore's comics often encourage unusual tactile interaction and play with material form (see Hague 2014), speaking to his roots in the underground and alternative press—which the third issue of *Heartbreak Hotel* echoed by using techniques like underprinting. As argued elsewhere (Gray 2017), his cartooning is deeply theatrical, calling attention to its own artificial, fabricated status, to the acts of drawing and printing, as well the reader's acts of looking, touching, manipulation and interpretation. The use of photomontage as a technique in "I can hear the grass grow," which includes scraps of imagery from toothpaste adverts, newspaper and magazine photographs, illustrations and diagrams, adds to this.

As Małgorzata Olsza (2019) observes, drawing analogies to comics, collage is a highly "self-conscious and self-critical" form driven by difference, setting up series of ambiguous, unstable and dynamic contrasts that problematise clear relations between figure and ground, flatness and depth, time and space, high and low, figuration and decoration, abstract and concrete, visual and verbal. Olsza highlights the destabilising and disputatious aspects of collage—the way it "stands for change, resistance and contestation", echoing Walter Benjamin's discussion of how montage works according to a "principle of interruption" with each superimposed element disrupting the context into which it is inserted (2008a, p. 85). Moore's use of photomontage aligned with its adoption in the 1970s and 1980s by artists like Martha Rosler, Peter Kennard and the

collective COUM Transmissions, as well as punk graphic designers like Reid, Linder and Gee Vaucher, each influenced by the tradition of political photomontage associated with artists connected to Berlin Dada such as John Heartfield and Hannah Höch. Indeed, Moore's strip includes Heartfield's 1932 cover for *AIZ* (*Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* [*Workers' Illustrated Newspaper*]) "Der Sinn des Hitlergrusses: Kleiner Mann bittet um große Gaben. Motto: Millionen stehen hinter mir!" [The Meaning of the Hitler Salute: Little Man Asks for Big Gifts], altered with the addition of a hand-drawn phallic missile to the figure of the fascist-funding industrialist (see Fig. 5). For Benjamin, Dada collage was a "ruthless annihilation of aura", displacing ideas of individual contemplation of art with the distraction and shock



Fig. 5 Alan Moore, "I can hear the grass grow." *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) section from first panel of p. 46 rotated clockwise 90°

of its incongruous and discordant elements: “from an alluring visual composition... the Dadaists turned the artwork into a missile. It jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [*taktisch*] quality” (2008b, p. 39). In Moore’s strip the use of photomontage is a core aspect of how it politically engages with social reality.

“I can hear the grass grow” makes a pointed political statement, self-described as representing “a bad trip lasting two decades” (see Fig. 1). Although the performance of the song begins in a benign organic landscape with photographic fragments of grass, waterfalls, trees, flowers, rocks, birds and butterflies, as it progresses and the characters age the landscape becomes darker and more desolate. The numbers on the characters’ shirt sleeves, which progress from 67 to 90, indicate that this is a progression through years from the utopianism of the psychedelic 1960s to the dystopianism of the present day and immediate future. This clearly allegorises the historical demise of the counter-culture and the rise of the authoritarian New Right represented by the figures of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher who appear in the late seventies followed by fascist imagery (Fig. 6). This decline is dramatised by the overblown gestures and expressions of the characters—the man goes from bounding, leaping and throwing his hands in the air to cowering and faltering, and ultimately



Fig. 6 Alan Moore, “I can hear the grass grow.” *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) section from second panel of p. 45 rotated clockwise 90°

the visual and verbal metre breaks down as he collapses to the ground head in hands under the shadow of nuclear mushroom clouds, the names of the colours of the rainbow having changed to radioactive elements (Fig. 7). These later panels include a satellite with the initials S.D.I., a reference to the Strategic Defence Initiative (known as Star Wars) pushed through by Reagan as part of his ramping up of Cold War tensions, which involved the stationing of missile bases and radar stations across the world, prompting a resurgence of anti-nuclear peace activism.⁹

However, the exaggerated, almost slapstick choreography (as well as the fact it is a looping sequence) also complicates any simple story of a progressive hippie counterculture being beaten back by external forces of reaction. The woman has a bad trip from the start—pulled about and knocked over by the oblivious singing man, before being violently shaken, kicked and finally drowned by him in the mud, pointedly contradicting the upbeat rhythm and inflection of the song (Fig. 8). Her interjections—such as “Oh God! Perhaps they know that we’re “tripping””—also act as a counterpoint, undermining the breezy tone. Moore’s rewriting of Wood’s lyrics in the hook and subsequent verse, for instance changing “put your head down to the ground” to “get your head down in the dirt”, makes explicit this critique of the hypocritical chauvinism of the counterculture, in which women’s inclusion in the ranks of the “hip” and “cosmically alert” is precarious, and underwritten by violence and abuse.



Fig. 7 Alan Moore, “I can hear the grass grow.” *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) p. 46 rotated clockwise 90°

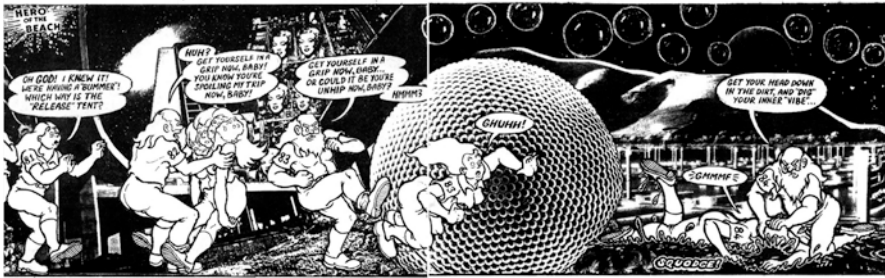


Fig. 8 Alan Moore, “I can hear the grass grow.” *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No. 3. (April/May 1988) sections of panels from p. 45 as if cut up and combined as a continuous frieze

This is underscored by the strip’s visual form—the fact it is black and white contradicts the male character’s “colour-vision”, and the psychedelic visual aspects (layered, fuzzy textures and fluid, mercurial line) contend with more punk elements (stark tonal contrast and noisy, discordant composition).

The political commentary of the strip thus works through the series of disjunctures and contrasts, ambiguities and abstractions, set up by juxtaposing and superimposing images, words, voices, gestures, tones, textures, visual registers and media—the way narrative content is formally rendered. Collage and photomontage foreground their construction through the layering of fragments as well as the active puzzling out required by the reader. Moore’s strip does the same for comics in general, highlighting the material paste-up process that was part of the fabrication of print-ready material and inviting the reader to literally re-enact it. The theatrical way it calls attention to its own contingency, its production through material acts that constitute the labour of artists, designers and printers, and, moreover, its physical performance and activation by the reader, has consonances with Minimalism as critiqued by Fried—the embodied experience of the work, and the duration of that experience (which depends on when the reader wants to exit the loop), is staged.

For Benjamin, the reflexivity of montage, as seen in Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre and Constructivist film, had political affordances in the way its shock character engaged the distracted perception of modernity but at the same time opened up its active appropriation—the possibility to construct new meanings from fragments, to unmask reality (as rupture, crisis and struggle) and “make a space for a different future” (Lunn 1985, p. 244). Olsza draws parallels between collage and the heterosemiotic structure of comics in which different modes are played off each other, echoing Smolderen’s discussion of the “poly-graphic” nature of comics, with roots in the cartooning of Hogarth, in which “the reader has to navigate the a multilayered visual text saturated with allusions to conflicting systems of representation” (2014, p. 9). For Hogarth this “game of stylistic collisions, ironic contrasts, and hybridization” was “a

powerful visual tool for making sense of the modern metropolitan world” (ibid.). Whereas the newspaper strips of the early twentieth century responded to the new ways of seeing ushered in by a mechanical age—developing, as Kunzle described, a new visual language appropriate to “urban, industrial perception” and the accelerated, abbreviated and abstracted experience of railway time (1990, p. 378)—the looping nature of Moore’s strip and its critical mobilisation of the immersive, multi-sensory, non-linear aspects of psychedelia could be seen more to engage the modes of perception and spatio-temporal relations of an electronic one. This highlights parallels between Moore’s strip and an article ‘State of the Art. Art of the State’ by Reid (1988) which appeared in the following issue of *Heartbreak Hotel*. Reid attacked the 1980s dominance of a nostalgic, consumerist technoculture of surface, style and spectacle that negated the imagination, arguing that the profusion of new media and communications technologies, concentrated in the hands of a few, needed to be “liberated”. Moore’s strip similarly limned this aesthetic—and pointed to its roots in aspects of the counterculture—while reflexively enacting the ways the nightmare of history could be actively disrupted.

The treatment of visual form is political. Engaging with a visual art like comics involves attending to graphic form, and formalist approaches to comics have drawn attention to qualities of their plastic design that are often overlooked. But, as Schapiro argued, contrary to formalist methodologies this cannot be dissociated from social experience and “the changing material and psychological conditions surrounding modern culture” (2003, p. 31). Sharing these conditions, comics and art cannot be seen as “two quite distinct” worlds with their own peculiar “essence” and “mission” (Groensteen 2013, p. 173). The relationship between comics and modernism is not so divergent. Indeed, as Daniel Worden argues, we can think of comics “as a major current within modernism and what follows modernism” as well as “a site where social change is represented, allegorized, resisted and even advocated” (2015, p. 62), including abstract comics which too can gesture not only to a different mode of representation but “the possibility of another way of living” (p. 65).

NOTES

1. See the special cluster of articles in the *Journal of Modern Literature* 39:2 coordinated by Jackson Ayres (2016), with articles by himself, Andrew Hoberek and David Ball.
2. Ball specifically examines Chris Ware’s work and the way it adopts “characteristics of modernist literature... epistemological difficulty, moral ambiguity, formal experimentation and a conspicuous rhetoric of literary failure” in dissociating itself from comics’ “generic conventions and mass media associations” (2010, p. 106). Ware is one of the comic artists most often discussed in relation to modernism. Daniel Worden (2006) has argued that, as guest editor of the 2004 *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* special issue featuring the work of well-known alternative comics artists, Ware mobilises the marginalisation of comics as vulgar

as the basis of claims for their artistic merit, turning comics' shamefulness into a point of connoisseurship and affective intimacy between artist and reader. Making claims for comics as an art form while maintaining a sharp distinction from high art, the works Ware selected pull on key tropes of "masculinist modernism", bringing together confessional masculine melancholy with a romanticisation of artistic labour as individual self-expression and pure creative vision, positioned against feminised commercial mass culture. Marc Singer (2018), pointing out that Ware celebrates forms of literary realism in comics while decrying both visual illusionism and abstract modern art as hostile to storytelling, argues that in staking out this middlebrow space between popular culture and high art Ware both promotes and defensively belittles comics, seeking admittance to the "claustrophobic categories" of literature and art for alternative comics at the expense of their mainstream superhero counterparts. For Beaty (2012), it is Ware's performative self-deprecation, playing the role of the pathetic artist in a debased art form that makes him palatable to the art world.

3. The relationship between modernism, modernity, colonialism and empire has been a core element of the rethinking of modernism in Art History and disputation of modernist criticism. Fry, like many European modernist artists and critics, despite taking an anti-imperialist stance, embraced the racist discourse of primitivism—for example, celebrating African sculptors' "profound imaginative understanding of form" while claiming they lacked "a conscious critical sense and the intellectual powers of comparison and classification" (1940, p. 91). Postcolonial and decolonial art-historical reconsiderations of modernism (as multiple, hybrid, cross-cultural, cosmopolitan, transnational, translocal, alternative, migratory and diasporic) in light of theorisations of the intersections of modernity and coloniality by figures like Aníbal Quijano and Walter Dignolo, or Dipesh Chakrabarty's ideas of provincialising Europe in historical accounts of modernity, are obscured by Euro-/Western-centric accounts in Comics Studies that approach modernism as homogeneous and uniform. This sits within a much larger question, beyond the scope of this book, of the need to decolonise Comics Studies itself.
4. It is notable that Molotiu's lionisation of abstract comics doesn't completely align with modernist criticism like Fry's. As Ryan Holmberg (2012) notes, much of the work featured in *Abstract Comics* deploys tropes of vitalism and vestigiality—which have consonances with mid-twentieth-century art, recalling Barr's description of non-geometric abstraction as "biomorphic" in earlier sketches of his diagram (Lowry 2012, p. 361), and works like Robert Rauschenberg's 1953 *Erased De Kooning Drawing*. This could be seen more as a derivative, academic replaying of past art than progression via the discovery of conventions in the contemporary moment that bear comparison with it.
5. All issues of *Heartbreak Hotel* are available online at: <https://archive.org/details/heartbreak-hotel-1988-ukcomics>
6. In this vein, *Heartbreak Hotel* had similarities with *Escape* magazine (which both preceded and outlasted it) analysed in the chapter "Re-framing the Avant-Garde: Different Ways of Seeing Escape".
7. For more on reading comics' visual form in musical terms, and the correlations between Moore's cartooning style and psychedelic rock (as well as, conversely, punk) see Gray 2017, pp. 222–32.
8. It's notable that The Move's single was more pop psychedelia than acid rock, with twangy guitars and vocal harmonies rather than prominent drones or studio

effects—although on stage it would turn into an extended instrumental jam. In some ways Moore’s visual translation makes it look more psychedelic than it sounds.

9. The globe-shaped structure with a geometrically-patterned surface that appears in the strip (seen in Fig. 8) could be an additional reference to the “golf ball” radomes of the American satellite receiving stations at RAF Menwith Hill and Fylingdales which were the sites of demonstrations and peace camps in the 1980s along with locations like Greenham Common where nuclear cruise missiles were based.

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Conclusion: Future Directions

This book has examined the “hidden history” of how approaches drawn from Art History shaped early comics scholarship and indicated how those art-historical methodologies might be applied to the present-day study of comics in light of the shifts and debates that have occurred within Art History in the intervening period. Its aim has been to provide, through a series of suggestive case studies, alternative models for thinking about comics that open up avenues for future research.

We have analysed examples of comics that speak to our research interests and specialisms but we hope it is evident we might have fruitfully applied these methods to different comics, and furthermore that they interrelate and can be intermixed. Even in the process of writing this book we have discussed how Jack Kirby’s work on Thor has been analysed in relation abstraction and might be productively discussed in relation to modernism. The use of symbolism in Writers and Readers’ ...*for Beginners* comics could be explored using iconography and iconology. Examining the development of collective styles and schools in comics like *2000AD* invites consideration of the conditions of production and reception from a social history of art perspective, while looking to the similarities and differences in the work of cartoonists involved with publications like *Escape* and *Heartbreak Hotel* returns us to questions of style.

What we also hope is evident is that the art-historical methodologies, categories and concepts that informed the emergence of Comics Studies in the 1960s and 1970s cannot be applied in the present without accounting for the substantive debates and developments that have occurred within the discipline since, as it has been challenged from Marxist and feminist positions, as well as postcolonial, queer, critical race and disability studies perspectives. There is much further potential to apply these and more contemporary art-historical approaches, beyond the scope of this present volume, to the study of comics, including work on migratory aesthetics, biopolitics, crip aesthetics,

decolonisation, ecocriticism and the Anthropocene, network aesthetics, post-humanist and speculative art histories.

We maintain that adopting art-historical methodologies can enrich Comics Studies and address some of its oversights and omissions when it comes to the medium's visual, aesthetic and material dimensions. As well as hoping to provoke more comics scholars to look to Art History, we also hope to prompt more art historians to look at comics—and Comics Studies—not only for ways to engage questions of sequence and seriality, multiplicity and mass production, but also for the possibilities of alternative ways to produce and communicate research through art practice and different relationships between text and image.¹

This effort to bring Art History back into the interdisciplinary fold of Comics Studies has also highlighted the *intradisciplinary* divergences within Art History as a contested field, particularly in the period since the 1970s during which it has subjected its own ideological and institutional functions to greater scrutiny (with strands of that challenge themselves having become institutionalised in the form of the New Art History). Each methodology applied in this volume is framed by a particular worldview, and underpinned by theories of history, society, culture, subjectivity and (human) nature, whether explicit or implicit. The approaches taken in Comics Studies are no less ideologically inflected. Drawing Art History into Comics Studies can potentially help provoke more fundamental questioning of what the categories, concepts and frameworks used in comics scholarship shore up and close down in terms of both critical writing about comics and the making of comics themselves—how they produce and circulate value, for whom and in whose interests.

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. In our analyses in this book we have looked at cover art, publicity, infographics, illustration, graphic design and typography, and aligned the study of comics with that of prints, drawings, paintings, sculpture, collage, photomontage, graffiti and animation. Bringing Art History and Comics Studies back into closer dialogue also generates avenues for further research at the edges and intersections of comics and other forms of visual art such as postcards, picture stories, stamps, editorial illustration, zines, book arts, posters, muralism, tapestry, stained glass, tattoos and body art, toys and video games. We are excited to see what might emerge from future forays down these avenues.

NOTE

1. See for example chapters in the companion volume to this book *Seeing Comics Through Art History: Alternative Approaches to the Form* by Miers (2022) and Mutard (2022).

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Correction to: Modernism and Comics Revisited: Form and Fragmentation in Alan Moore's "I Can Hear the Grass Grow"

CORRECTION TO:

Chapter 11 in: I. Horton, M. Gray, *Art History for Comics*,
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The original version of the book was inadvertently published with incorrect figure caption for Figure 1. The chapter 11 has now been corrected and approved by the author.



Fig. 1 Alan Moore, "I can hear the grass grow." *Heartbreak Hotel* Vol.1, No.3. (April/May 1988), p. 43 rotated clockwise 90°, including caption with instructions for disassembly and reassembly (to left)

The updated original version of the chapter can be found at
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