IN FOCUS: Comics Studies

Fifty Years After Film Studies

Introduction

by Bart Beaty, editor

It is hard not to arrive at a reductive, teleological argument when comparing the evolution of Comics Studies with the intellectual history of Film Studies. In most respects, Comics Studies lags about a half century behind the academic study of film. While the scholarly study of cinema dates to the work of Arnheim, Balázs, Bazin, and Kracauer, it was only later, in the 1960s and 1970s, that Film Studies was institutionalized in academe by the creation of departments, peer-reviewed journals, and learned associations.[1] One of the important steps toward institutional legitimacy was the push to create a specific grammar for writing about film. By outlining the particular language used by cinema, scholars were able to move past the naive claim that the form could be understood analytically through the parallel use of terms and techniques developed for the study of literature, theater, or art history. Theories explaining the aesthetic and psychological impact of montage, for example, helped to lead the study of film out of departments of English Literature, by revealing it as a distinct and highly specialized art form. Subsequent critical and theoretical developments accelerated exponentially as the discipline consolidated and film became an object of study alongside, not subservient to, literature and art history.

The current state of the scholarly study of comics is strikingly akin to that of film in the 1960s. Important and influential theoretical works, often by practitioners, like Will Eisner and Scott McCloud, have been published, and the number of critical works is clearly growing quickly. A host of university presses are now developing series dedicated to the study of comics. In the past two years, three new journals dedicated to the study of comics and graphic novels have been launched, and

---

1   For more on the roots of Film Studies, see Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); and Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginnings of the U.S. Study of Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

the number of conferences is steadily growing. SCMS has offered panels on comics since the London conference in 2005, and the MLA voted last year to create a comics research area. It is likely that more than one hundred courses on comics will be offered at universities this year (the vast majority, like the earliest film courses, through literature departments), and degree programs catering to aspiring comics practitioners are flourishing at the School for Visual Arts in New York City, the Center for Cartoon Studies in White River Junction, Vermont, and elsewhere. Nonetheless, there are no signs on the horizon that departments of Comics Studies are soon to be created, and tenure-track jobs for comics specialists are extremely scarce. Despite the fact that comics are significantly older than cinema, consecration as a legitimate art form has not come easily, and the academic study of the form is still marginal. Moreover, with each passing year it seems less likely—not more—that comics scholars could attain the victories that film scholars have won. Ironically, Comics Studies lives in the shadows not only of literature and art but also, increasingly, of Film Studies.

The curious status of the scholarly study of comics owes a great deal to the unusual evolution of the medium itself. The rapid rise of the American comic book format in the 1940s, and the targeting of a juvenile audience, cemented the association of comics and children in the public mind. Although cinema has a similarly degraded origin, for many years comics had very few practitioners who were akin to the cinematic modernists exploring the formal boundaries of the medium. While cinema moved hand in hand with the important conceptual developments in literature and art throughout the course of the twentieth century, the comics field focused resolutely on the rapidly growing youth market, only to be cast aside by that audience with the growth of television after the Second World War. In the postwar period, the academic study of film was tied to the development of self-consciously art-driven cinemas, particularly across Western Europe, which could convincingly be compared with the best of contemporary literature. Only much later did the study of popular cinema become commonplace. By contrast, what studies of comics did exist at that time were clustered around socio-psychological media-effects studies concerned with the potentially degrading influence of mass culture. The social history of comics and television are inextricably linked, with the collapse of the comic book market from its sales zenith in 1952 coinciding directly with the rise of television. When comics were replaced by television as the most popular entertainment form for children, they were left in an awkward position. Having pursued only a single (and highly fickle) demographic group, comics found themselves left out in the cold. Moreover, when media scholars turned their attention to a new cultural bogeyman, television, no one was left to study comics. They were not seen as a genuine art form whose poetics might be mined for insights into the human condition by humanists, and they were no longer a mass medium warranting sustained attention from social scientists.

Not surprisingly, the turn toward Comics Studies over the past two decades has arrived on the heels of comics that are justifiable to tenure committees as aesthetically meritorious. Art Spiegelman's autobiographical *Maus* (vol. 1, 1986; vol. 2, 1991) is undeniably the cornerstone of the canon of art-driven comics. It has been followed now by hundreds of "serious" comic books for adults. To distinguish them from the comic book's pulp origins, these self-consciously aestheticized and politicized texts now travel

under the gentrifying term "graphic novel." Spiegelman's peers—Alison Bechdel, Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, Posy Simmonds, Adrian Tomine, Chris Ware—are the Antonionis, Bergmans, Fellinis, and Godards of the graphic novel age, producing deliberately auteurist work that is deployed by scholars to legitimize the study of comics and to serve the contemporary university's conflicting goals of meeting the consumerist demands of students while also maintaining conservative notions of cultural legitimation. Nonetheless, the gains made by scholars on this front remain tentative, not least because Comics Studies has so far failed to develop analytic and theoretical innovations that could be exported to cognate fields. Rather, it continues to rely on terminologies and theories handed down from other disciplines.

One of the turning points in the legitimization of Film Studies as a discipline was its ability to develop models of spectatorship that were unique to cinema but also offered useful insights for the study of other art forms. The contributions of scholars like Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz are still taught even outside the confines of Film Studies. Comics Studies, by contrast, has had no such breakthrough, and in fact relies largely on terms borrowed from Film Studies to describe common elements of the comics form. ("Camera angle," for example, is routinely used to describe compositional framing in comics even though no camera is employed in the construction of the image.) Thus, Comics Studies remains peripheral to a broader rubric of media arts, dominated initially by Film and Television Studies and now secondary to the study of digital art, advertising, sound recording, magazines, the Internet, and other media.

For Comics Studies to reach parity with Film Studies, it would have to move beyond the narrowly thematic readings of key works and begin to offer critical insights into comics as a social and aesthetic system that has broader transmedia and intermedia implications. There are several areas where this may yet occur.

Form. While both comics and cinema are most commonly used as forms for visual storytelling, the key distinction between them pertains to the arrangement of images. While film proceeds as the unspooling of successive images on the fixed space of the screen, with one image receding into the memory of the viewer as it is supplanted by the next, comics operate on a system of co-presence, where images exist within the space of the page or double-page spread simultaneously. This allows for extremely complex relations between images to be developed by skilled cartoonists. The semiotic potential, as Thierry Groensteen has detailed in depth, is structured around very different sets of operations.[2] For instance, the co-presence of images allows the reader to assess the space of a scene relationally in a way that is not possible on film, allowing the norms of continuity editing to be routinely flouted. Perhaps no difference is as striking as the ability of the comic book artist to play with the relative size of images. While many cartoonists, particularly those working for newspaper-strip syndication, rely heavily on individual panels that are identically sized, this technique, which French cartoonist André Franquin has termed *gaufre,* in which panels take on the gridlike regularity of the waffle, is much more the exception than the norm. The ability to enlarge

---

2   See Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics,* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007). Originally published as *Système de la bande dessinée* (1999).

the scale of individual images on the page is a key rhetorical strategy of the form. While many avant-garde filmmakers have sought to expand or narrow projection size, for the most part filmmakers lack the cartoonist's ability to create drama through the differential weighting of images within the same text, or even the same page in a text. Greater attention to the particular grammar of comics and its influence on the interpretive limits of visual culture is certainly needed.

Narrative. Until the 1960s, American comic book stories were largely independent of each other, so that any one Superman adventure might be read by someone with only the scantest knowledge of other Superman adventures. The comic books produced by Marvel Comics under the editorship of Stan Lee in the 1960s transformed this model. Lee created stories with stronger serial components, thus heightening the stakes of the shared-universe storytelling that had been introduced by rival DC Comics two decades prior. The closed world and shared universe of contemporary serial superhero comics is one of the most distinctive features of the comics world, and, to outsiders, one of the most confusing. While serial narratives have long existed in other media, it is in comic books that they have found their fullest complexity through the sheer volume of output in any given year. The maintenance of shared superhero universes, particularly those that extend to incorporate dozens of monthly titles, has a great deal to teach us about collaborative authorship, audience knowledge, and editorial oversight in the culture industries. Further, as the films produced by Marvel Studios relating to the Avengers characters (Iron Man, the Hulk, and, in the coming years, Thor and Captain America) demonstrate, the narrative model on which Marvel Comics built its success in the 1960s will have an important impact on the Hollywood blockbuster logic of the 2010s. Factor in the additional impact of ongoing transmedia storytelling, through which comics are positioned as an important nexus in the development of films, television programming, and video game content, and it appears that the study of comics has a great deal to offer scholars interested in narrative experimentation.

The Comics World. Over the course of the past decade, San Diego's Comic-Con International has become one of the most important marketing venues for media properties targeting children, teen, and young adult audiences. Even in cases where the property has no direct connection to the comic book industry—as in the *Twilight* films—San Diego is regarded as an important marketing venue by studios. At San Diego the conflation of the comics world—that is, the social field that encompasses the production, circulation, and reception of comic books and strips—with a particularized taste formation has taken shape. The loosely organized comics fandom has emerged as an important sociological phenomenon precisely because that fandom's behaviors are largely atypical of media audiences. Comic book fans are often among the most devoted of all audiences, and their patterns of consumption—which includes the recognition of Wednesdays as "new comics day"—are marked by such a high degree of brand loyalty that comics become inelastic cultural goods. Indeed, comic book collectors, a significant subset of comics fandom, exhibit a much stronger fealty to the medium than do, for instance, cinephiles, particularly insofar as their devotion manifests itself in an acutely fetishistic fixation with the comic book as a consumable good

and trophy object. A highly structured commercial apparatus has evolved since the 1970s that both caters to and constructs the limits of the comics world, and its complex social relations provide an important case study in the construction of value—both cultural and economic—in a media field. From the point of view of cultural producers, if all audiences could be converted into San Diego–style fans, the industry would operate along even more predictable lines than it currently does.

The contributors to this In Focus highlight many of these issues by engaging with the institutional restrictions on Comics Studies while also presenting their own unique approaches to the field. Greg M. Smith brings his experience as a comics scholar to bear on some of the ways in which work in this field is challenged by the exigencies of the form, including the difficulty of the paraphrase and the complex multimodality that comics represent. Similarly, Angela Ndalianis stresses how comics exist as a nexus in an increasingly convoluted web of media influences that is a challenge for scholars to untangle. Scott Bukatman's essay forcefully considers the comics-film relationship as a form of translation and adaptation, examining contemporary Hollywood superhero blockbuster films and finding that they come up short relative to the comic books that inspired them. Catherine Labio intervenes in the debate about nomenclature, demonstrating how the very term most frequently used to legitimate the study of comics, "graphic novel," tends to drive research in certain directions while obscuring the full reality of the form. Finally, Darren Wershler's examination of the migration of comics into new digital formats demonstrates just how quickly issues of form can become convoluted in the brave new world of Comics Studies.   ✻

It Ain't Easy Studying Comics

by Greg M. Smith

After having moderated a *Cinema Journal* conversation about the state of published research on comics in this issue, I find myself thinking more than ever about the challenges of doing good academic work on comics. One challenge may be particularly endemic to SCMS. Members who are interested in comics often approach them through their highly visible cross-media presence. Comics are "hot" now, which doesn't mean that sales of physical comics are up (they aren't, except for translations of Japanese comics), but that comics are increasingly used as a research-and-development source for mainstream films and television programs. One important (and entirely reasonable) way for a trained film or television scholar to explore this historical moment is to create conference presentations of the "Comics and . . ." variety. I am a veteran of such conferences. I get invitations to be on "Comics and Film" panels, an essay of mine appears in a "Comics and the City" anthology, and at the 2010

SCMS conference I cochaired a panel on "Comics and Television." At times this presentation format can feel like an attempt to justify the study of comics by linking them to more "important" media. Good scholarship on adaptation can certainly provide a vista onto both the original and the adapted form, and we need to lend our particular expertise to our increasingly transmedia world. But I worry that the "Comics and . . ." approach encourages us to neglect the actual comics themselves and to favor the elements (characters, iconography, storylines) that readily transfer across media. I grow tired of the impulse to tie comics to another medium. Dealing with comics alone is hard enough without compounding the difficulty by studying two different objects.

Outside of Film and Media Studies, some academics pair comics with a more established discipline as a fun way to sugarcoat difficult material, and thus we get "philosophy through comics" or "comics as history," using comics as a popular hook. This practice is not that different from the "(Insert Film Title) and Philosophy" books or "History Through Film" courses created by those without Cinema Studies training. Such approaches usually rely on the notion of the low-culture object (popular film, comics) as an illustration of more important principles. While such works do provide some academic recognition of popular objects such as comics, they also reiterate comics' position as the "less serious" member of the pair.

Film and television have "arrived" on the academic scene as objects that may be studied without justification, but comics have not yet achieved that status. Given the widespread sense of needing to justify our own activity, what is the way forward for comics scholars? I think that as long as you feel you have to argue overtly for a place at the scholarly table, your place will never be assured. For Comics Studies to mature as a field, academics need to assert they can study comics (as complex texts, as industrially produced objects, as culture in circulation) without making excuses for their devalued status. My suggestion would be to do solid, complex scholarly work on comics without apology, work that undisputedly provides insight. If we act as if we don't need to justify our place, then the work itself will be its most powerful justification.

Studying comics is challenging not only because of their current cultural location but also because of their distinctive qualities as texts. One specific reason comics are hard to study is that they are tough to paraphrase. The obvious answer here is to use illustrations, but Comics Studies is coming of age at a time when publishers are restricting the reproduction of images, partly because of expense, partly because of a stronger attention to obtaining image permissions and an apparent unwillingness to test and to take advantage of fair-use principles. I've had conversations with book publishers in which the first question they ask me about a new book project is "How many images do you think the book will need?" In this climate, how do you publish work on comics? Historical work using materials obtained from archives can make things easier, since archives are well prepared to deal with scholars' publication needs. But what about working with more contemporary comics images, where obtaining permissions can be much thornier than the well-established practice of using film and video frame grabs?

The challenge of paraphrasing goes beyond summarizing a panel or page. Comics' long form provides its own difficulties, since serial storytelling in comics creates much vaster universes than those created by films. By the time you summarize the plot of *Sandman* or *Cerebus* or (God forbid) *X-Men* or *Superman,* you've run out of room and

exhausted your audience. When I go to an SCMS conference, I can assume that my audience knows the film or television show that I'm discussing (and so I don't have to attempt to summarize *Lost*'s long-running narrative). But without such plot summary for comics, how do I reach an audience that probably doesn't know the work I'm discussing?

Comics are daunting not only because of their long histories but also because of their complex, multimodal expression. Comics combine the arts of drawing and painting (in all their various forms from caricature to abstraction to photorealism), the layout elements of print media, the verbal tropes of literature, the visual narrative language of film, and the storytelling of serials, and then they transform these shared elements into something different from their uses in other media. What single approach wouldn't feel reductive for examining such texts? How would you prepare yourself to do a comprehensive analysis of a comic text?

All the comics scholars I know make some sort of apology as part of their scholarly presentations: "I'm not qualified to discuss the art," or "You may know more about the X-Men history than I do," or some such statement. As a scholar who deals primarily with texts, and as a comics reader for several decades, I am frequently humbled by how little I still know. My training in film and television is only the beginning of a full understanding of comics. Cultural Studies' multifocus approach might seem to promise an answer, but where is the great Cultural Studies work on comics? And who exactly would undertake a sizable Cultural Studies project on comics? What senior scholar would devote time to this, and what junior scholar *should* devote that kind of time to comics if he or she wants to be tenured?

I apologize for emphasizing institutional and analytic difficulties, but I want to guard against the notion that since comics and film are related, it should be easy for us film and television scholars to study comics. There is no shortcut to good academic work; there is no substitute for the interaction between a smart scholar (who uses theory but is not used by it) and a closely observed text or context. I believe that bright film and television scholars have a distinctive contribution to make to our growing understanding of this complex medium if we avoid the mistake of thinking that comics are "basically the same as film storyboards." A grounding in film and television history, theory, and aesthetics is as good a place to start as an understanding of art history or literary theory, as long as we finally move away from the "Comics and . . ." approach and recognize that comics are a distinctive form of cultural expression in their own right. ✱

Why Comics Studies?

by Angela Ndalianis

Asking the question "Why Comics Studies?" is like asking the question "Why Cinema, Television, Game, or Media Studies?" As a medium, comics are older than film, television, and video games, and yet there has been resistance from within the academy to the serious study and analysis of this medium. While there are many proto-comic examples, as a phenomenon of mass culture the comic form is believed to have originated in 1894. *Hogan's Alley,* drawn by Richard F. Outcault, began as a single-panel comic first published in *Truth* magazine in 1894, and one of its characters, the Yellow Kid, would soon become the main character in what were the first comic strips.[1] Others followed in the Yellow Kid's wake, including *The Katzenjammer Kids* (1897), created by Rudolph Dirks and drawn by Harold H. Knerr, and the astounding work of Winsor McCay, whose early comic strips included *Tales of the Jungle Imps by Felix Fiddle* (1903), *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (1904–1913), *Little Sammy Sneeze* (1904–1906), and *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905–1914).

Perhaps the negative attitude toward comics has historical roots tied specifically to the comic book form. In Western culture, the comic book's early association with the superhero genre (with the introduction of Superman in *Action Comics* in 1938) brought with it a large, youth-oriented audience. Despite its immense popularity, the public perception for a long time was that comics were a kid's medium–or, more specifically, a young boy's medium. As such, it was generally perceived (in higher circles, of course) as the lowliest of popular culture media. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham further sealed the deal in 1954 when he published his controversial and influential book *Seduction of the Innocent,* in which he proclaimed that the violent and unsavory actions and questionable sexual exploits depicted in comics (in particular, crime and horror comics) encouraged like-minded behavior in children.[2] The exploits of flesh-eating zombies in EC Comics, the drugged and demented protagonists of True Crime Comics, the homosexual charge of DC Comics' Batman and Robin, and the bondage subtexts that littered the pages of *Wonder Woman* all added fuel to the fire of the already delinquent mind of youth culture, Wertham contended.

---

1   *The Yellow Kid* was featured in the newspapers *New York World* and *New York Journal American.*

2   Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954).

But times have changed, and the delinquency charge has now been passed on to the new media kid on the block: the video game. The presence of comic book culture within the mainstream and within the academy has been on the rise since the late 1980s, influenced greatly by both the success of manga and anime in Western culture and by the rise of comic book auteurs like Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Art Spiegelman and the introduction of the "graphic novel." This visibility has been accompanied by a growing sense of comic book legitimacy. It only took a hundred or so years, but the medium is finally coming into its own. Its public prominence has been felt most overtly in the adaptation of comics to films, and while the superhero genre definitely dominates in the blockbuster arena (including two versions of *The Incredible Hulk* [Ang Lee, 2003; Louis Leterrier, 2008], *Fantastic Four* and its sequel [Tim Story, 2005, 2007], the *X-Men* trilogy [Bryan Singer, 2000, 2003; Brett Ratner, 2006], the *Blade* trilogy [Stephen Norrington, 1998; Guillermo del Toro, 2002; David S. Goyer, 2004], two *Hellboy* films [Toro, 2004, 2008], two *Iron Man* films [Jon Favreau, 2008, 2010], two attempts at adapting *The Punisher* [Jonathan Hensleigh, 2004; Lexi Alexander, 2008], the *Spider-Man* trilogy [Sam Raimi, 2002, 2004, 2007], *Watchmen* [Zack Snyder, 2009], *Kick-Ass* [Matthew Vaughn, 2010], *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* [Edgar Wright, 2010], and the latest incarnations of *Superman* [Singer, 2006] and *Batman* [Christopher Nolan, 2005, 2008]), other non-superhero comics adaptations have also proved to be popular (*Ghost World* [Terry Zwigoff, 2001], *A History of Violence* [David Cronenberg, 2005], *Road to Perdition* [Sam Mendes, 2002], *American Splendor* [Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003], *300* [Snyder, 2006], *30 Days of Night* [David Slade, 2007], *Sin City* [Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, 2005]). Other countries exhibit a similar trend, with Japan at the forefront of manga-to-film adaptations in examples as varied as *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988), the many *Doraemon* films (various, 1982–2010), *Ichi the Killer* (*Koroshiya 1;* Takashi Miike, 2001), *Lady Snowblood* (*Shurayukihime;* Toshiya Fujita, 1973, 1974), *Lone Wolf Cub* (*Kozure kami;* various, 1972–1974), and *Ranma ½* (various, 1989–1995), many of which are also among the many manga to have been adapted for immensely popular limited-run TV series. Even the French and Belgians have taken part in the trend with the recent release of *Persepolis* (Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, 2007), and the soon to be released Hollywood adaptations of *The Smurfs* (Raja Gosnell, 2011) and *Adventures of Tintin* (Steven Spielberg, 2011).

The transmedia logic that drives the economic structure of the entertainment industry definitely plays a key role in these media crossovers, and though such crossovers have occurred throughout comic book history, since the 1980s comic book characters and stories have migrated with increased velocity into films, television, and video games. With the purchase of DC Comics and Marvel Comics by media conglomerates Warner Bros. (a subsidiary of Time Warner) and the Disney Corporation, this transmedia dialogue—especially where superhero franchises are concerned—is bound to continue. Recently, DC Comics announced that it has partnered with Comixology and PlayStation Network for digital comics distribution deals. In addition, the company has released an application for the iPhone, iPad, and iPod Touch which gives users access to content from the DC Comics library, and also the affiliated libraries of Wildstorm and Vertigo.[3] Considering that comics can and are being easily adapted to new

3 "DC Comics Launches Digital Publishing," *Time Warner Newsroom,* June 23, 2010, http://www.timewarner.com/corp/newsroom/pr/0,20812,1999145,00.html (accessed October 2, 2010).

media formats—both in terms of previously existing comics content and new digital content—it's easy to see why the presence of comics is all the more visible in these early days of the twenty-first century.

In addition to noting that comics have been remediated for new purposes, it's also important to recognize that a comic book aesthetic is making its presence felt in a whole range of audiovisual media experiences. As early as 1991, in *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam,* Timothy Corrigan drew attention to a new comic book aesthetic in the cinema both in terms of films that brought comic book characters onto the screen (Tim Burton's *Batman* films [1989, 1992], for example) and also in terms of economized narrative practices and spectacular visuals that relied on the formal properties of comics.[4] Martyn Pedler has also commented on the way the superhero comic book aesthetic and experience has been reproduced in the cinema:

> Unlike the animated forms of superhero movies or cartoon, these scenes [in comics] are not cut up across time and space by frantic editing. They are laid out for the reader, who "edits" them only in the time it takes for the eye to flick across the page to a new point of attention. Temporality is further complicated by the fact that even when focusing on a particular panel, we remain aware of the panels composing the rest of the page; we take in now, past and future at once. Certain superhero films are now attempting to approximate these visuals. Ang Lee's underappreciated art-blockbuster, *Hulk* (2003), uses shifting splitscreens as panels, at one point pulling back from the frame to reveal a whole wall of "moments" before zooming in on another—much as the eye might on a page. In Zack Snyder's recent adaptation [of] *Watchmen* (2009), the director's stylistic trademark of "exhibiting velocity and action by jumping between painstaking slow-motion and abrupt fast-forward" served to mimic the unpredictable progress of a comic reader's time and attention across still images.[5]

Such stylistic homages acknowledge the presence of a comic book audience and fan culture that appreciate both the similarities and differences between cinema and comics. One thing that has become especially evident over the past decade is that despite the ease with which their stories, characters, and style can be translated into other media, comics retain a style, an approach to narrative and "reading," and a history that is medium-specific. This fact has been one of the driving forces behind the rise of Comics Studies over the past two decades.

It would probably not be overstating the case to say that Comics Studies as a serious scholarly undertaking has come into being because of a passion and commitment on the part of academics working in the field. The aim is to research, analyze, and debate the nature of this underexplored medium. The past few years have seen a rise in scholarship in the form of publications, university courses, and conferences that have an interdisciplinary focus that, in turn, reflects the range of disciplines that have embraced the study of comics. The University Press of Mississippi took a leading role

---

4 Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

5 Martyn Pedler, "The Fastest Man Alive: Stasis and Speed in Contemporary Superhero Comics," *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, no. 3 (November 2009): 259.

in publishing academic books about comics in the 1990s, and since then, many other university and commercial presses have followed suit. Two of the most influential texts about the form and interpretation of comics were published in 1994: Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and Richard Reynolds's *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology.* Other publications quickly followed, and since then, Comics Studies has tackled its subject matter from a range of formal, critical, aesthetic, and theoretical perspectives.[6] The field is nurturing an active critical discourse about what constitutes the form of the medium, its language, the ways it engages its readers, and its cultural, social, and historical impact.

Adding to this critical discourse are the numerous peer-reviewed journals that have begun to sprout up, especially in the past decade, each offering its own individual take on the study of comics. Some, like the *Comics Journal,* which has been in print since 1977, focus solely on comics, while others also publish on related forms, such as animation. The *International Journal of Comic Art* (1999–) lives up to its title in publishing on a range of comic art, including animation, comic books, newspaper and magazine strips, and caricatures from places as diverse as Brazil, Hungary, Africa, Japan, Spain, Taiwan, and New Zealand as well as the United States, whereas *European Comic Art* (2008–), published by Liverpool University Press, focuses on the European comics tradition. Based at the University of Florida, *ImageText* (2004–) is an online journal that stresses "the interdisciplinary study of comics and related media," and *Image [&] Narrative* (2000–), another online journal, includes comics as part of its focus on visual narratology.[7] Two more recent additions to the field are *Mechademia: An Annual Forum for Anime, Manga and the Fan Arts* (2006–), published by the University of Minnesota Press, which engages with topics "from manga and anime to game design, fashion, graphics, packaging, and toy industries, as well as a broad range of fan practices related to popular culture in Japan," and the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2009–), published by Routledge, which "examines the production and consumption of comics within the contexts of culture: art, cinema, television and new media technologies."[8]

These publications, and in particular the fact that they are published by academic and university presses, has granted legitimacy to the field of Comics Studies and opened the door to comics being taught at an advanced level. While I know of no undergraduate major in Comics Studies, there are many universities that include comics-related subjects in their programs. As such, the study of comics tends to spread across a number of disciplines—Literature, Art History, Cinema Studies, Media Studies, History, Political Science—and, in many respects, this is where this growing field's strength lies. I am currently supervising four doctoral students in the area of Comics Studies, and each has attacked his or her topic from different disciplinary perspectives: Theater Studies, Philosophy, Cultural Studies, and Cinema Studies. Observing the different approaches with which these students tackle their research has been an

---

6 For a comprehensive list of titles, see the roundtable discussion of comics moderated by Greg M. Smith in this issue.

7 *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies,* http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/ (accessed October 2, 2010); *Image [&] Narrative,* http://www.imageandnarrative.be/ (accessed October 2, 2010).

8 "About Mechademia," *Mechademia: An Annual Forum for Anime, Manga, and the Fan Arts,* http://mechademia.org /about/ (accessed October 2, 2010); "Journal Details: *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics,*" Taylor & Francis, http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/RCOM (accessed October 2, 2010).

experience in itself. Without doubt, their diverse tactics allow for original responses to the medium of comics.

The same fresh and innovative approach is also evident in the many conferences that are now beginning to occur as special one-off themes or as annual events. Conferences include the Graphic Novels and Comics Conference hosted by Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Florida's annual Comics Conference, and the International Comics Arts Forum, while other events have included the Understanding Superheroes Conference in 2009, hosted by the University of Oregon, the 2005 Holy Men in Tights Superheroes Conference hosted by the University of Melbourne, and the "Comics Across Media" roundtable session at the 2010 Flow Conference at the University of Texas. The Comics Arts Conference is also held annually at the San Diego Comic-Con International and at WonderCon, where the popular fan context of the conventions provides a venue for presenting serious papers and discussing the medium of comics.[9] Panels at the San Diego Comic-Con and WonderCon are usually composed of a combination of scholars, comics practitioners, and historians, and have grown in attendance over the past few years. Significantly, Peter Coogan, who cofounded the Comics Arts Conference with Randy Duncan, has organized an expansion of the conference to other major conventions in the United States.

More recently, Coogan has founded the Institute for Comics Studies, a 501(c)3 organization registered in Missouri. According to its website, "The Institute undertakes its mission to promote the study, understanding, recognition, and cultural legitimacy of comics through communication within the scholarly, professional, and fan communities, and with the general public."[10] In addition to supporting conferences, the Institute aims to offer support for the development of Comics Studies programs, funding opportunities, and research collections, as well as to develop "relationships between and among the comics industry, the comics academy, and the public." This is a heartening development confirming that we have every reason to believe that comics will continue to be an exciting field of scholarly research.   ✱

9 See Greg M. Smith, "Conference Report: Comic Arts Conference at the San Diego Comic-Con, July 23–26, 2009," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 88–92.

10 "Welcome to the Institute for Comic Studies," Institute for Comic Studies, http://www.instituteforcomicsstudies.org/.

Why I Hate Superhero Movies

by Scott Bukatman

The book I'm currently completing, *The Poetics of Slumberland*, celebrates the plasmatic possibility that Sergei Eisenstein identified, in an uncompleted study, as endemic to the early cartoons of Walt Disney.[1] Mickey Mouse and his barnyard brethren represented a freedom from "once and forever allotted form," an anarchic release well deserved by those citizens laboring in the factories of industrial capitalism. *The Poetics of Slumberland* centers on such tales of playful disobedience in otherworldly realms, as encountered in early comics, animation, and beyond, and it further considers how such popular media can often *constitute* fields of playful disobedience. Disobedience is staged not only by fictive characters acting out in fantastic spaces: media such as comics and animation can themselves be considered disobedient in relation to other media such as the chronophotographic sequence and the live-action film, respectively. The book moves well beyond comics and animation, but the last chapter returns to comics, exploring the fundamental playfulness of the comic book superhero.

But what of the emergent genre of the superhero film? Students, after all, are far more likely to be familiar with Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man than they are with Steve Ditko's, and the Fantastic Four are more likely understood as the stars of two terrible movies than as the center of one of the great comics of the 1960s. The superhero film has displaced the superhero comic in the world of mass culture; comics, in fact, have become something of a niche market. One might see superhero films as occupying the intersection of comics and cartoons. They do, after all, depend to a large extent on computer-generated animated bodies to replicate the bodies in the comics (it's been joked, with some validity, that Hollywood has only now become capable of producing images like those Jack Kirby turned out forty years ago). And yet the superhero film feels, for the most part, like something less than the sum of its parts.

While I've been a devotee of superhero comics for a significant part of my life, my relationship to superhero *movies* is more ambivalent, more unsettled. Superhero films remain something of a provisional genre, still very much in a state of becoming. In a way, I feel like an aficionado of Broadway musicals pontificating on the inadequacy of the film musical

---

1   Jay Leyda, ed., *Eisenstein on Disney,* trans. Alan Upchurch (London: Methuen, 1986). My book *The Poetics of Slumberland* is forthcoming from the University of California Press.

in 1930: this was a time of ponderous, static films with lousy sound reproduction, but one of the most dynamic of film forms would emerge a scant three years later. The superhero film genre in the first decade of the twenty-first century yielded a glut of nearly identical films featuring dumbed-down versions of characters that were still appearing, to better effect, in the comics, just as the early musical films out of Hollywood dumbed down Broadway song lyrics for a non-urban and non-urbane audience. So I'm far from certain that superhero movies have discovered their real voice.

By rights, I should be enamored of the superhero film. It offers a range of phenomena that I've long celebrated—kinesis, immersion, weightlessness, bright colors, urban locations, fluidity, kaleidoscopic perception, and masquerade—in spades. It centers on the expressiveness of bodies and the eroticism of human movement. In that, it is like the musical. The heightened rhetoric of the musical took the form of exaggerated color, costume, and cinematic and performance style. The musical number became a space of liberation, of masquerade, a place where, as Richard Dyer brilliantly observed, emotional authenticity and theatricality—usually regarded as dichotomously opposed categories—combined.[2] For Dyer, this act of combination is at the heart of queer responses to the musical; the musical becomes a symbol of resistance to a culture that continues to insist, absurdly, on dualistic oppositions. Utopia is thus defined as a place of movement, of border crossings and crane shots, of choreographed transgressions and performances of liberation. So much of this applies to the superhero movie: compare Catherine Deneuve swinging down the street in an extended take in Jacques Demy's *The Young Girls of Rochefort* (*Les demoiselles de Rochefort;* 1967) to Spider-Man swinging above the street in a single take from Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002).

So what's the problem? First, there's the fact that almost all superhero films are blockbusters with gargantuan budgets. Superhero films are not B-movies made in the back lots of smaller studios, and there are few "little" or "quirky" superhero movies, apart from direct-to-DVD animated films and, long ago, *Mystery Men* (Kinka Usher, 1999). Further, superhero films seem to stake out the safest or most familiar version of their eponymous characters. The franchise comics are a different story: Marvel and DC will often use one title to hold down the "official" version of a character while other titles target narrower audiences, and there are definite auteurs among comics writers. The remarkable range of the superhero comic finds no real analog in superhero films, which seem to be one of two things: light or dark. There is no room for the distinctiveness of a Grant Morrison or a Garth Ennis, or even an Ed Brubaker, much less such idiosyncratic works as Paul Pope's *Batman Year 100* or Jonathan Lethem and Farel Dalrymple's *Omega the Unknown*.

For the comics fan in me, then, the superhero film generally feels like an impoverished version of superhero comics. But the film buff in me is also left wanting. Here it might be instructive to bring some other genres and filmmakers to bear upon the superhero film. Anthony Mann's westerns are characterized by a strong identification with the body of the protagonist (particularly when that protagonist is played by James Stewart). The films obsessively revolve around the fractured, punctured, trampled, and wounded body. In no other westerns, and perhaps no other cinema, is the pull

2 Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia" (1977), in Dyer, *Only Entertainment,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

of gravity so inexorable, so determining. So many Mann westerns take place on the edge—not just the frontier, but the timberline, the limit point. In *The Naked Spur* (1953), when the bounty hunter Howard Kemp (Stewart) climbs a rock face to confront Ben Vandergroat (Robert Ryan), chipping notches in the rock with his spur, we *feel* the strain on his body, pitted against the elementalism of surging water and barren rock; we *feel* the downward pull of gravity toward the abyss. Kemp's protracted struggle speaks to the need for the character to transcend his spiritual and emotional history— this is literally an attempt to raise or uplift oneself, posed in resolutely physical terms. The struggle reveals itself in Kemp's absolute physical exhaustion and the spectacle of his body brutalized, sweating, and frenzied.

Compare this to another vertical action scene, this one a battle taking place against the wall of a building between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus in *Spider-Man 2* (Raimi, 2004). Ock's mechanical arms can punch holes in the brick wall, holding him up with apparent ease, while Spidey's powers allow him to cling to walls. The camera (or a digital simulation of camera movement) careens about their figures, at times even turning their vertical arena into a horizontal plane. The only figure endangered in this scenario is Aunt May, hanging on by the skin of her umbrella. But her fall is followed by a rescue, and the battle continues. The figures are, in many shots, entirely computer generated, and the net effect is of some vaguely rubberoid action figures harmlessly bouncing each other around the space. There is nothing at stake—this is neither the first nor last time these characters will confront one another—and the only emotion in the viewer is the pleasure (and, make no mistake, it *is* pleasurable) provided by the vertiginous kineticism of the sequence.

I've proven perhaps nothing here, other than the fact that *Spider-Man 2* is not *The Naked Spur,* that the all-ages superhero film is not the adult western. *Spider-Man* is a thrill ride; the emphasis is not on a moral journey presented in physical terms. It's a lighter film. So let me bring another genre to bear and consider Fred Astaire's astonishing dance in *Royal Wedding* (Stanley Donen, 1951), the one in which he, like Spider-Man, climbs a wall. Using nothing but a rotating set with a camera mounted to it, the scene produces the illusion of Astaire dancing up the wall, across the ceiling, and down again, in a single glorious, giddy take. Viewed on a large screen, the scene produces an awareness of one's corporeal being in much the way that Annette Michelson claimed for *2001: A Space Odyssey* (and note that Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film used an identical rotating set for some of its effects). One is confronted by a body transcending bodily limits, defying gravity, mocking the real. It is lighter than air, liberated from earthly constraints. But, and this returns me to Michelson again, it is resolutely *a body in space*, it is a body that belongs to the space that it masters. We watch a body go from prosaic and inexpressive, bound by gravity's laws, to marvelous and profoundly expressive of the exuberance of new love. In *Spider-Man 2,* by contrast, we have encountered "bodies" in "space"—a phenomenon rendered by computer. The sequence gives us corporeality without *corpus*.

The superhero film, then, provides neither the psychological weight of the adult western nor the ineffable lightness of the classical Hollywood musical. It speaks to nothing but its own kinetic effectiveness. By removing the body from space, it removes meaning—lived meaning—from the body. My previous book of essays, *Matters of*

Gravity, was something of an ode to weightlessness, but perhaps there's such a thing as being *too* weightless.[3]

The central problem of the superhero film involves the integration of live action and computer-generated imagery (CGI)—and the word "integration" summons up the notion of the "integrated musical," which supposedly integrated song and dance with narrative and character. The rise of the integrated musical is usually presented as the moment of the genre's maturation. But, as Gerald Mast has argued, the dominance of the "integrated musical" wasn't necessarily a good thing—it also meant the submergence of the attraction, the sacrifice of diversity for unity, of pleasure for drama.[4] Yet even the integrated musical maintained a magical heterogeneity in the passage from speech to song, from mundane walking to ecstatic dance—a passage from an inexpressive to an expressive body. By contrast, after Tobey Maguire pulls Spider-Man's mask over his face, the figure onscreen literally ceases to be Tobey Maguire. This has the unfortunate effect of severing the connection between the inexpressive body and the liberated, expressive one. The films give us not a passage between states of being, but rather a *rupture* that denies the connection between them. Thus the superhero film is an exuberant, performative, embodied genre that, in many ways, inherits the giddy, sensual power of the musical, but without the actual bodies.

In an earlier essay I discussed the fantasy of the morph—a profound manipulation of surface that elides the history accreted beneath that surface.[5] Racial identity is repeatedly referenced but neutralized through the endless state of mutability that characterizes the world of the morph. The word isn't used much anymore, but superhero films have become the site of the morph. Shape-shifting characters like Mystique in the X-Men films recall the liquid Terminator of the second film of that franchise, and extended morphing sequences detail the transformation of, say, Flint Marko into Sandman in the third Spider-Man film.

The central fascination in the superhero film is the transforming body, whether of hero or villain. Much attention is given to the body's discovery of its own transformation, which explains why superhero films are even more obsessed with origin stories than the comics themselves. The first film always features the hero's origin, and subsequent films treat the emergence of each new villain's metamorphologies with loving care. As in the comics, the origin story is the real site of plasmatic possibility, and it is the most intriguing part of these films. The characters, and perhaps the audience, do not yet know how the bite of a radioactive spider, gamma rays, particle accelerator, or mutant gene will manifest within or, more importantly, upon their bodies. This is the moment when, rarebit-fiend style, everyday reality will yield to something more, the moment when the constraints of the mundane world will evaporate, forcing a new awareness of corporeal possibility as the body is rethought, physically (within the diegesis) and digitally (on the level of production).

---

3 Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

4 Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1987).

5 Scott Bukatman, "Taking Shape: Performance and the Morphing Self," in *Meta-Morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change,* ed. Vivian Sobchack (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

From there, however, the conventions of the genre quickly produce new constraints—the character is either permanently transformed or can shift back and forth. Rarely are there further surprises. A bank will get robbed or a weapon stolen, a battle will ensue, conflagration will be narrowly averted, noisy explosions will occur. A new normal has taken hold.

In the absence of a "real" body, the cinematic superhero becomes an incarnation of electronic technology—a digital being embodying the fact of being digital. It's no accident that this wave of superhero films followed the development of ever more convincing CGI technologies. Whatever they are within the plot, these are bodies that are newly adequate to the malleable conditions of digital culture. Taken at their most radical, they might be seen to capture and convey a sense that bodies are no more inviolate than any other form of coded information.

But the digital bears no scars and no history, and perhaps this begins to explain why the narratives are so obsessed with trauma: the death of Spider-Man's Uncle Ben, which leads to the notion that "with great power comes great responsibility"; Batman's Shakespearian anguish over the murder of his parents. The X-Men films even brought Auschwitz into the mix. (Actually, that kind of worked!) Of course, all of this comes from the comics themselves, but there it served more as backdrop to the colorful fantasies unfolding in every issue. Batman wasn't haunted by the murder of his parents until the 1970s, and he didn't become the psychological equivalent of his nemeses until the grim and gritty 1980s. Spider-Man was always neurotic, but the weight of his "great responsibility" didn't seem quite so heavy in the early years. Peter Parker arguably bore more of that load, looking after his aging Aunt May; his alter ego mostly seemed to enjoy the gig. But the films make a fetish of trauma, the better to compensate for the painlessness and weightlessness of digital being.

There is some pleasure in all this morphing and computer generating—superhero films deliver the goods on vertiginous sensation—but they finally present a constrained plasmatic. Origin sequences aside, the characters metamorphose predictably, and the films thus present more order than chaos. And there is that rupture, which finally separates human space from plasmatic space. The only rupture in an early Disney cartoon like *Plane Crazy* (Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, 1928) comes at the end, when the film is over and the real reasserts itself. Until then, one is immersed in an animistic world of metamorphosis, flexibility, and possibility. But the superhero film is a bifurcated form—not even hybrid—between actor and action figure, between live action and CGI (and the climax is inevitably overdependent on CGI, even in the otherwise sublime *Iron Man* [Jon Favreau, 2008]), and between plasmatic possibility and the limitations of not only the real, but also the inflexible conventions of genre.　　　✳

What's in a Name? The Academic Study of Comics and the "Graphic Novel"

by Catherine Labio

Comics, funnies, *bande dessinée, fumetti, historieta, tebeo, manga, cómic* . . . this varied nomenclature gives some indication of the formal complexities of a genre that is both narrative and visual, that first flourished as a form of popular entertainment, that has a global reach, and that is formally and geographically hybrid. "Comics" and "funnies" point to the genre's lowly origins; *bande dessinée* (drawn strip) stresses its visual and narrative dimensions (single drawings do not count); *fumetti* (little puffs of smoke, i.e., speech balloons) underscores the deep connection between text and image, including text *as* image; *historieta* (little story) emphasizes the narrative aspect of the genre and signals that it is not high literature; *tebeo,* a derivation from the name of the popular magazine *TBO,* reminds us that comics owe much to the growth of mass-market periodicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; *manga,* a term first coined by Katsushika Hokusai in connection with hastily drawn caricatures, tells us that these kinds of images do not belong to the traditions of fine art and calligraphy. Some of these signifiers have also migrated to other languages and acquired additional or separate meanings in the process. When used in a French text, "comics" refers only to North American comics. In Spain, "cómic" is gradually displacing "tebeo" and "historieta," and in Japan, "comic," according to Brigitte Koyama-Richard, now "covers mangas of all kinds."[1]

A more recent entrant in the semiotic field threatens this complex ecosystem: "graphic novel," an idiom that has been adopted by publishers, translated into many languages, and—my main point of contention—eagerly embraced by anglophone scholars. The move toward this term is evident in such events as the publication of the MLA's *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (2009) and even in the new layout of the undergraduate library at Yale University: when it reopened in 2007 after extensive renovations, classic and contemporary American, European, and Japanese comics were given pride of place in a "Graphic Novel" section.[2] I wish to argue against using "graphic novel" as an umbrella term for a whole genre, while

---

1   Brigitte Koyama-Richard, *One Thousand Years of Manga* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 7.

2   Stephen E. Tabachnick, ed., *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2009).

arguing for the retention of the earlier, makeshift terminology, and for the adoption of a multidisciplinary perspective to the budding field of Comics Studies.

Defining our object of study—comics—is a fraught yet obligatory first step in the process of academic disciplinary formation. I shall deal with this matter in some detail below. A few observations are nonetheless worth stating at the outset. First, comics have traditionally been mass-market products and continue to be so, mutatis mutandis. Second, they can be as short as a handful of panels, or they can be hundreds of pages long. Third, they are a global genre that draws on distinct traditions as well as on an important cross-cultural dissemination machine that features translations, cooperations between publishers and creators, and movie and web adaptations. Fourth, they are a hybrid genre that is both visual and literary, but that generally does not privilege text over image.

Scholars who use the term "graphic novel" to mean an entire genre are running from these basic facts. "Comics" is not a perfect term. (What term would be?) However, no one now thinks of comics as referring only to works created for the funny pages of American newspapers. By being in so many ways utterly inadequate, "comics" has become a generic term. By contrast, the adoption of the label "graphic novel" to denote an entire genre (as opposed to a subset of comics) reflects a sad narrowing of the field to a very small and unrepresentative canon.[3] Moreover, the process is doubly hegemonic: geographically, it relegates non-American comics to the background, while academically, it represents a problematic territorial grab by literature scholars.

It is true that defining "comics" or "bande dessinée"—to limit myself to the languages and traditions I know best—has not been easy. Patricia Mainardi, for instance, defines comics as "a single page or series of pages each containing multiple frames of images narrating an original story," while Pascal Lefèvre defines comic strips as "the juxtaposition of fixed (mostly drawn) pictures on a support as a communicative act. Comic strip stands here for the whole of drawn sequential stories: stop comic, comic book, graphic novel, small press, bande dessinée, manga, etc."[4] Both agree that multiple pictures and some form of sequentialization are necessary. Their definitions vary, however, in part because so many different kinds of narratives exist and because they come from different backgrounds. As an art historian, Mainardi takes pains to formulate a definition that eliminates stained-glass windows and lives of saints. Trained in communications, Lefèvre highlights different formal and sociocultural criteria. In particular, he wishes to distinguish comics ("fixed pictures") from film and factor in the material and transactional features of the genre.

Neither definition refers to language in general or speech balloons in particular. Whether text must feature in any definition of comics, and if so, to what extent and in what capacity (equal, dominant, or subordinate), is obviously of some consequence, and not only to literary scholars. And yet, many examples of wordless comics do exist. Whether these are merely oddities, a practical answer to language barriers, or, more

3 Ann Miller addresses this issue in her review of *Teaching the Graphic Novel* (forthcoming in *European Comic Art*).

4 Patricia Mainardi, "The Invention of Comics," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2007), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/index.php/component/content/article/46 -spring07article/145-the-invention-of-comics (accessed August 9, 2010); Pascal Lefèvre, "The Importance of Being 'Published': A Comparative Study of Different Comics Formats," in *Comics and Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics,* ed. Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000), 91n2.

important, demonstrations of the primacy of the visual over the textual is still an open question. Nonetheless, there has been a marked shift away from the study of comics as text, even in the case of French-language scholarship, a remarkable development if one considers that bande dessinée criticism, which arose in the 1970s, was long dominated by structuralist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic methodologies. The decision of the International Bande Dessinée Society to title its journal *European Comic Art* illustrates the new trend well, as have Philippe Marion's *Traces en cases* (*Panel Traces*) and Thierry Groensteen's *System of Comics.* Writing from within the poststructuralist tradition, Marion insists on the primacy of drawing and questions the necessity of writing and even narrative: "*Bandee dessinée* is first and foremost a drawing that *evolves* from one image to the next, within a spatial structure that adds up to a specific *découpage,* most often with a narrative purpose."[5] More concerned with such questions as whether the panel or the page is the primary unit of meaning of a comic book, Groensteen pleads instead for a recognition of the preeminence of the iconic dimension of comics on the grounds that "meaning is produced essentially through it"—not, in other words, through text.[6] In spite of this clear trend in comics scholarship, however, the question of the respective roles of text and image and their hierarchy has hardly been settled once and for all, a point succinctly made by François Ayroles in Oulipian, or rather Oubapian, fashion in "Feinte trinité" [Feigned Trinity], a series of short comics made up only of speech balloons, created "while waiting for a comic strip without text or drawing."[7]

Defining comics is further complicated once one starts to study the taxonomy diachronically and to distinguish between particular languages and traditions. French critics, for example, have embraced and, more recently, rejected the colloquialism "BD," short for "bande dessinée." In 1976, when the editors of a special issue of *Communications* titled *La bande dessinée et son discours* [*Comics and Its Discourse*] decided to use the abbreviation "BD," they did so to underscore their characterization of bande dessinée as irreducible to "l'Ordre des discours légitimes" [the order of legitimate discourses].[8] Fast forward three decades to 2005, and Jean-Christophe Menu, one of the founders of the independent publishing house L'Association (which is often credited for the 1990s renaissance of bande dessinée), pointedly refuses to use the acronym: "We made it a point of pride to define the language that we defended by spelling out *bande dessinée,* leaving the abbreviation *BD* to those who were corrupting it through standardization and commercialization."[9]

Settling on "graphic novel" only compounds the problems associated with the existing terminology. First, "graphic novel," as well as the equally unsatisfactory "graphic

---

5   Philippe Marion, *Traces en cases: Travail graphique, figuration narrative et participation du lecteur: Essai sur la bande dessinée* (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium: Academia, 1993), 2. All translations are mine.

6   Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 10. Groensteen's essay has been translated as *The System of Comics* by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

7   François Ayroles, "Feinte trinité," *OuPus* 2 (2003): 24. Also see Aaron Meskin, "Comics as Literature?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 3 (June 2009): 219–239.

8   Michel Covin, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, and Bernard Toussaint, "Avant-Propos," *Communications* 24 (1976): 1.

9   Jean-Christophe Menu, *Plates-bandes* (Paris: L'Association, 2005), 75n9. *Plates-bandes* means "flowers beds." The title is a pun on *bandes dessinées,* here characterized as "flat" or uninspiring, and refers to 1980s francophone comics. It also evokes the phrase "marcher sur les plates-bandes de quelqu'un" (to encroach on someone's territory).

narrative," privileges, quite wrongly in my view, the literary character of comics over the visual, by assigning the status of mere qualifier to the visual dimension.[10] Second, the term "graphic novel" elides too much, starting with the work of some of the greatest American and European cartoonists, including Winsor McCay, George Herriman, Charles Schulz, and André Franquin, the author of many one-page masterpieces, most notably in the *Gaston Lagaffe* and *Idées noires* series. It also excludes many contemporary African comics as well as some of the more innovative *livres objets* published by small presses like B.ü.L.B. Comix and Frémok.[11] The list is not exhaustive.

Third, translating "graphic novel" presents its own set of challenges. The French reception of the term, translated without apparent difficulty as *roman graphique,* is a case in point. Jean-Christophe Menu of L'Association, which first published Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003) and David B.'s *L'ascension du haut-mal* (*Epileptic,* 1996–2003), dismisses the growing use of the expression "roman graphique" as a corporate gimmick used by established publishers to hijack the innovations introduced by small presses in the 1990s.[12] American critics and comics creators have expressed similar qualms.[13] The two critiques are grounded in different histories, however. Whereas the American underground comics tradition has always been, by definition, independent of large production companies, the publication of bandes dessinées was concentrated in the hands of a few publishers from the 1930s onward. This accounts in part for the standardization of bande dessinées to one format, the "48CC" (the forty-eight-page, four-color, hardcover album). Menu's principal worry is thus that major publishers' enthusiasm for the roman graphique will mean that the custom-fit formats of small-press productions will soon be history: "We're heading toward a time when we'll be entitled to two standards! Young authors will get to choose: 'Do you prefer characters or telling your life story?'"[14]

Finally, the eagerness with which the phrase "graphic novel" has been adopted in academic writing points to a stubborn refusal to accept popular works on their own terms. "Comics" reminds us of this vital dimension. "Graphic novel" sanitizes comics; strengthens the distinction between high and low, major and minor; and reinforces the ongoing ghettoization of works deemed unworthy of critical attention, either because of their inherent nature (as in the case of works of humor) or because of their intended audience (lower, less-literate classes; children; and so on). Indeed, much would be lost if scholars were to jettison the comparative study of the complex sociolinguistic and cultural codes associated with comics in favor of a monocultural, one-note "graphic novel" in a sad search for respectability, relevance, and larger classes.   ✳

---

10 See Hillary Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative," *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (March 2008): 452–465.

11 See Sandra Federici and Andrea Marchesini Reggiani, "Working with the African Comics Artists," *Africacomics,* catalog of the exhibition held at the Studio Museum in Harlem, November 15, 2006–March 18, 2007 (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 27; and Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

12 Menu, *Plates-bandes.* Some of Menu's positions are summarized in an interview he gave Matthias Wivel, *Comics Journal* 277 (July 2006): 144–174.

13. Not without humor, Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (4th ed. [Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2007]) is subtitled *A Picture Novella.* Also see Charles McGrath, "*Not* Funnies," illustrated by Chester Brown, *New York Times Magazine,* July 11, 2004, cover, 24–33, 46, 55–56.

14 Menu, *Plates-bandes,* 37.

Digital Comics, Circulation, and the Importance of Being Eric Sluis

by Darren Wershler

ERIC SLUIS
990 PERALTA AVENUE
ALBANY, CALIF. 94

These rubber-stamped words appear smack in the middle of the first frame of the first page of the first issue of Marvel's *The Fantastic Four*. That is, if you're looking at the PDF version of the comic on the DVD-ROM *44 Years of Fantastic Four*, issued by Graphic Imaging Technology (GIT).[1] In the version of *Fantastic Four* #1 on Digital Comics Unlimited, Marvel's online comic service, not only are those words absent, but the entire issue has been retouched and recolored. Further, all of the print comic's advertising and editorial content has been excised.[2] The Marvel Comics iPhone application also uses a retouched version of the issue, but it differs in another significant respect: it does not allow the viewer to ever see an entire page of the comic, moving instead from frame to frame. All digital comics are not created equal.

Imagine for a minute that you have access to the DVD archive of *Fantastic Four*. Digging into the editorial material in the comics provides some clues about how Mr. Sluis rose to his brief notoriety. The fan mail page in issue #10 reveals that by the time it appeared, back issues of #1–9 were long gone: "If anyone has a large supply to sell, we would be glad to print his name and address."[3] There were evidently other gaps in Marvel's archive as well: the file copy of Fantastic Four #101 used for the DVD had the numbers 5 and 12 inexplicably stamped on the cover before digitization. Certainly not having imagined a digital future in which an original copy of *Fantastic Four* would be needed again after its 1970 publication, Marvel was rather lucky that Eric Sluis was a better archivist than they were.

As comics continue their decades-old process of migrating off the page and onto the screen, the insights of Film Studies scholarship become increasingly relevant to their study. I began with the Eric Sluis example because I want to argue that the branch of cinema theory that deals with circulation is especially

---

1 Marvel Characters, Inc., "*Fantastic Four* 1," in *44 Years of Fantastic Four,* DVD-ROM (Brooklyn, NY: Graphic Imaging Technology, 2005).

2 Marvel, "*Fantastic Four* 1," Digital Comics Unlimited, http://marvel.com/digitalcomics/titles /FANTASTIC_FOUR.1961.1 (accessed October 5, 2010).

3 Marvel, "Fantastic 4 Fan Page," *Fantastic Four* #10, in *44 Years of Fantastic Four,* 14.

useful for thinking about digital comics. One touchstone is Toby Miller's "Cinema Studies Doesn't Matter; or, I Know What You Did Last Semester," which argues that "[w]e should acknowledge the policy, distributional, promotional, and exhibitionary protocols of the screen at each site as much as their textual ones."[4] Miller eschews content analysis for a consideration of the production, consumption, and distribution of onscreen cultural expression. Tracking the circulation of money and labor, he contends, demonstrates how the screen actively shapes society by acting as a component of sovereignty and an aggregator of cultural industries.

Will Straw's "The Circulatory Turn" adds to these concerns an emphasis on the materiality of cultural forms, but rather than focusing on their production or reception, Straw foregrounds the effect of their movement through culture. Surveying the work of theorists from Michel Foucault to Friedrich Kittler, Straw begins with the observation that material forms do not just transmit cultural expression; they also shape it in ways that are culturally relevant.[5] *Which* screens we view digital comics on, then, should be a matter of concern. (Paradigms from video game theory, such as Nick Montfort's "platform studies" model, could also be helpful in delineating the precise materiality of digital comics, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this brief article.)[6]

However useful materialist media theory is in terms of its insights into questions of the storage, transmission, and shaping of cultural expression, Straw finds it ill equipped to address questions specific to the *mobility* of contemporary digital technologies, and he turns to recent social theory for additional insights.[7] Invoking the work of Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli, as well as Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, Straw writes that "the key question is no longer that of how personal or collective life registers itself within communicative expression, but of how the movement of cultural forms presumes and creates the matrices of interconnection which produce social texture."[8] Rather than thinking about digital comics as bridges between a source and a destination, the point is to consider them as an aggregate in flux. As new types of digital comics continue to appear, there will be a constant realignment of their various forms in relationship to each other.[9]

"Digital comics," then, is an evolving assemblage whose cultural significance shifts as new hardware, software, genres, modes of distribution, publishers, policies, authors, and audiences enter the mix. Marvel's digital comics are one very interesting part of that assemblage. Like many media companies (Microsoft included), Marvel was slow to recognize the significance of the Internet in the 1990s. Registering neither Marvel .com nor MarvelComics.com, they had to acquire both domains later, at some expense.

4   Toby Miller, "Cinema Studies Doesn't Matter; or, I Know What You Did Last Semester," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies,* ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), 309.

5   Will Straw, "The Circulatory Turn," in *The Wireless Spectrum: The Politics, Practices and Poetics of Mobile Media,* ed. by Barbara Crow, Michael Longford, and Kim Sawchuk (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 21.

6   Nick Montfort, "*Combat* in Context," *Game Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2006), http://www.gamestudies.org/0601 /articles/montfort (accessed October 5, 2010).

7   Straw, "The Circulatory Turn," 22.

8   Ibid., 23.

9   Ibid., 26.

Writer, editor, colorist, and early online entrepreneur Glenn Hauman (the original owner of MarvelComics.com) writes, "Marvel corporate, at the time [c.1995], was completely clueless. Didn't want to know about licensing characters to computer companies, didn't want to hear about setting up a site, nothing."[10] Instead, Marvel invested its energies into creating Cybercomics for America Online (AOL), the most successful of the early "walled garden" digital information services.

Marvel Cybercomics were a hybrid form that fell somewhere between comics and animated cartoons. Many were written by D. G. Chichester, best known for his run as a writer on *Daredevil.* Today Chichester includes translations of several of them on his website so that they can be read panel by panel or watched as a video.[11] The basic compositional unit of the Cybercomics is a static rectangular frame, but each frame may contain several panels whose contents may change or animate as the user clicks on them. It is also possible to view thumbnails of all of the panels in a Cybercomic simultaneously, and to choose among them.

The Cybercomics began to appear as weekly releases on AOL in 1996, then on MarvelZone.com (Marvel's early URL) a year later. The Cybercomics were built using Macromedia Director, an authoring application to create content for the popular Shockwave media player which allowed for the inclusion of limited interactive elements, animation, sound effects, and music.[12] On September 13, 1999, comic book, game, and toy portal NextPlanetOver.com announced a one-year licensing agreement with Marvel, which included the rights to publish twelve previously created Cybercomics and to begin publishing new ones on a monthly basis.[13]

The Cybercomic form recently resurfaced as Marvel Motion Comics, which are viewable directly on the Marvel site or as downloads.[14] (Neal Adams, director of the *Astonishing X-Men* motion comic, said in 2009, "[T]here's never been a motion comic before."[15] Corporate memories are short.) The Motion Comic of Warren Ellis and Adi Granov's *Iron Man: Extremis,* produced by Magnetic Dream Studios from Granov's original art files, is over twenty minutes long and sells for $1.99 on iTunes, Zune, XBox Live, and the Playstation Network.[16] Marvel has even ventured into fan-produced Motion Comics. In 2009, they sponsored a contest where contestants

10 Glenn Haumann, "More on Marvel's Subscription Service (and a Parable for Our Times)," *ComicMix,* November 13, 2007, http://www.comicmix.com/news/2007/11/13/more-on-marvels-subscription-service/.

11 D. G. Chichester, "CyberComics," *Creative Direction / Capitalist Fiction,* http://www.capitalistfiction.com/web/cyber comics/comics_carousel.html (accessed October 5, 2010).

12 Frank Houston, "Creator of the Fantastic Four Is Ready to Spin More Tales on Line," *New York Times,* October 21, 1999. Macromedia was later purchased by Adobe Systems, who still own Shockwave, Flash, and other technologies created by Macromedia.

13 PR NewsWire, "NextPlanetOver.com Spins Licensing Web with Marvel Comics," *Free Library by Farlex,* February 13, 1999, http://www.thefreelibrary.com/NextPlanetOver.com+Spins+Licensing+Web+with+Marvel+Comics.-a055719341.

14 Marvel, "Introducing Marvel Motion Comics," http://marvel.com/motion_comics/ (accessed September 16, 2010).

15 Marvel, "*Astonishing X-Men* MC: Behind the Scenes 3" (includes an interview with Neal Adams), December 12, 2009, http://marvel.com/news/comicstories.10510.astonishing_x-men_mc~colon~_behind_the_scenes_3.

16 Kevin Mahadeo, "Marvel Motion Comics Get 'Extremis,'" *Comic Book Resources,* April 26, 2010, http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=25915.

could download comic and audio tracks and animate them according to their own sensibilities.[17] However, both Cybercomics and Motion Comics are likely to remain a sideline. Marvel originally abandoned the production of new Cybercomics in favor of a more profitable approach: making static digital editions of their backlist titles.

Marvel's first attempts at digitizing its backlist resulted in a series of multiplatform CD-ROM sets, then single DVD-ROMs with higher-quality scans, produced under license by GIT between 2002 and 2007. Each DVD, such as the aforementioned *44 Years of Fantastic Four*, contained a complete archive of one classic Marvel title, or collected titles from across several series that were related to "Marvel Events" such as *House of M* and *Civil War*. The discs contained a set of PDFs, each of which was a front-to-back high-resolution scan of a single issue of a print comic book, including ads, editorials, and fan mail. The PDFs lacked any form of digital rights management technology, other than a MARVEL watermark that showed up in some viewers, which meant they could be moved to any storage device and viewed using third-party software, including free and open-source applications.

On November 15, 2007, GIT president Raymond K. Pelosi announced that Marvel Entertainment had chosen to conclude GIT's licensee contract as of January 1, 2008, and that Marvel's digital offerings would be shifted to a subscription-based online model. GIT's last two Marvel titles, *Civil War* and *House of M*, were released in December 2007. Pelosi's letter also bluntly summarized the consequences of this shift in circulation methods for Marvel's readers: "[Marvel's subscription] service will not allow you the end user to physically own these publications; they are only readable from their website and not downloadable. Which means you are now only renting these publications, and when you choose to unsubscribe to this service, you will no longer have any access or own any of these great publications."[18]

While most of the GIT archives originally sold for anywhere from $9.99 for short-run collections like Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* to $49.99 for collections spanning forty years or more (*X-Men, Spider-Man,* etc.), their growing scarcity has revealed the arbitrariness of the pricing of digital editions.[19] On eBay, copies can be found for as little as twenty dollars, while on Amazon.com, resellers routinely attempt to sell their copies for hundreds of dollars. Regardless of the monetary cost of the discs, their discontinuation represents multiple losses for scholars and historians: the original page layouts; the rich historical context provided by the editorials, advertisements, and fan mail; the coloring and printing (admittedly often distorted by poor digitization techniques and low resolutions); and the traces that offer information about the passage of the print comics themselves through time.

Marvel actually announced its digital subscriptions on December 14, 2005, but didn't start producing them until November 13, 2007, when Marvel Digital Comics

17 Aniboom, "Aniboom Marvel Motion Comics Competition," http://www.aniboom.com/competition/Marvel (accessed October 5, 2010).

18 Raymond K. Pelosi, "Dear Loyal Customers and Retailers," letter, November 15, 2007, in Matt Brady, "GIT Loses Marvel License, Gains *Archie," Newsarama.com,* November 19, 2007, http://forum.newsarama.com/showthread.php?t=136823.

19 Graphic Imaging Technology, "All GIT Products," archived March 7, 2008, by Internet Archive, http://web.archive.org/web/20071121144915/www.gitcorp.com/group.asp?grp=14.

Unlimited (MDCU) went live.[20] Again, Marvel was following rather than innovating. Comics news site Newsarama had already been posting free online issues of *Powers* and other titles for a year, and ComicMix, another comics-focused news site, had been posting the full content of previously published comics for weeks, and new titles for months.[21] Marvel initially offered 2,500 titles, including the first hundred issues of *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four* and many issues featuring the first appearances of key Marvel characters. For a limited time, 250 issues were free. The initial cost of a subscription was $59.88 annually or $9.99 monthly.[22] Digital editions of new titles would be delayed for at least half a year after their print release.[23] Publisher Dan Buckley made it clear that Marvel had no plans to keep "complete runs of top selling trades like *Astonishing X-Men* up on the site for prolonged periods of time" or to post recent titles, unless they were "looking to generate interest in the trade paperback or hardcover anthology that shipped at approximately the same time."[24]

Marvel's stated goal was to introduce young audiences, especially boys, to the original versions of characters popularized by Marvel's successful transmedia franchising in movies and video games.[25] An equally likely explanation is that MDCU was designed to curtail the uncontrolled circulation of raw comic PDFs, either individually or in archives, by those same readers via torrents and file storage servers such as RapidShare. Marvel's use of Adobe's Flash technology for these new digital comics means not only that the comics are intended to be viewable only when readers are connected to the Internet but also that most readers can only download copies of those comics frame by frame, at the relatively low display resolution, which is a tedious and unrewarding process.[26]

MDCU brought with it markedly different priorities than those in play with the DVDs. With MDCU, the formal emphasis shifts from archival fidelity to onscreen legibility. An official press release states that "each Marvel digital comic will be presented in the highest resolution ever available. To ensure this, Marvel has gone back to the original source material and optimized it for the web by painstakingly re-coloring and re-digitizing select content."[27] It passes without comment from Marvel that all of the editorial and advertising material has vanished. Inside the Flash reader itself, the focus is on the frame rather than the page. Readers can still view pages as a whole, albeit at reduced size, and Marvel thoughtfully provides a digital magnifying lens, which can be

---

20 Marvel, "Marvel Goes Digital! House of Ideas Launch Classic and Current Comic Tales Online!," December 14, 2005, http://marvel.com/company/index.htm.

21 Mike Gold, "Mighty Marvel MONEY Society," *ComicMix,* November 13, 2007, http://www.comicmix.com/news/2007/11/13/mighty-marvel-money-society/.

22 David Colton, "Marvel Comics Shows Its Marvelous Colors in Online Archive," *USA Today,* November 13, 2007.

23 Marvel, "Marvel Opens Its Comic Book Vault to the Masses for the First Time Ever Today with Innovative Online Digital Comics Destination at Marvel.com/digitalcomics," November 13, 2007, http://marvel.com/company/index.htm?sub=viewstory_current.php&id=1269.

24 ICV2, "Marvel's Dan Buckley on New Sub Site (Marvel Digital Comics Unlimited)," November 13, 2007, http://www.icv2.com/articles/home/11624.html.

25 Ibid.

26 Inevitably, some readers have found ways to download the Flash files and, in some cases, convert them to other formats and illegally distribute them via file-sharing technologies like BitTorrent.

27 Marvel, "Marvel Opens Its Comic Book Vault."

used to increase the size of a small square of the screen as the reader mouses over it. As in the Cybercomics, thumbnails of page spreads are also available as a navigation aid. However, the reader is implicitly encouraged to read comics frame by frame using the "Smart Panels" system, which pans from one panel to another in a predefined order (and not always correctly, sometimes skipping panels entirely or magnifying portions of the page to unreadable levels). The Smart Panels system also allows designers to add effects within particular panels, such as zooming in and out, panning within panels to follow characters' movement, emphasizing particular details, or revealing previously hidden text. Here are the beginnings of an identifiable digital comics aesthetic that is substantially different from the print aesthetic. The classical language of film criticism, with its pans, zooms, and shots, will be helpful, but not entirely sufficient to describe it.

As with the DVDs, the MDCU comics have a specific materiality that is most evident when something goes wrong. Occasionally a styling error occurs, and text in speech balloons appears in a typeface that is much more mundane than Marvel's regular set of digital fonts. Sometimes generic design elements, such as different types of speech and thought balloons reserved for specific characters or character types, appear in groups onscreen, presumably because a penultimate draft rather than the finished layout was rendered for the online edition. These moments of breakdown and error offer rare, unchaperoned glimpses into the production methods behind the slick facade of the Flash viewer—glimpses that become increasingly rare as digital comic platforms become smaller, more mobile, and more hermetically sealed.

Marvel's iPhone and iPad apps were built by Iconology, a company that began as an offshoot of ComiXology.com, the prizewinning graduate school project of David Steinberger, Peter Jaffe, and former Marvel Comics web designer John D. Roberts at New York University's Leonard N. Stern School of Business.[28] Roberts had previously been hired by Marvel in 2000 to develop an online comics initiative then called dot-Comics; he worked on it for two years, then went freelance. Over the next few years, he developed the iCOS widget, a tool that allowed comic book buyers to build "pull lists" of forthcoming titles which they could send to retailers. Around 2006, with Steinberger and Jaffe, Roberts came up with the idea for the ComiXology website so that customers could place orders directly with retailers who subscribed to the service. This also allowed ComiXology to track sales and sell that information back to retailers.[29]

In July 2007, ComiXology was still being coy about whether they planned to expand into publishing digital comics, but journalists were already asking the obvious question.[30] The company launched its iPhone app, Comics by ComiXology, on July 24, 2009.[31] The comics initially on offer were all from smaller publishers, but on October

28 New York University, "NYU Stern Entrepreneurs Awarded $150K in 8th Annual Business Plan Competition," *Stern in the News,* http://w4.stern.nyu.edu/news/news.cfm?doc_id=7217.

29 Vaneta Rogers, "So . . . Who IS COMIXOLOGY, the Digital Comics Leader?," *Newsarama,* June 24, 2010, http://www.newsarama.com/comics/who-is-comixology-digital-comics-100624.html.

30 Todd Allen, "Digital Comics from the Academy?," *Comic Book Resources,* July 30, 2007, http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=15618.

31 Chris Barylick, "Iconology Releases Comics Application for iPhone, iPod Touch," *iPod Observer,* July 24, 2009, http://www.ipodobserver.com/ipo/article/iconology_releases_comics_application_for_iphone_ipod_touch/.

30, 2009, ComiXology debuted seventy-one Marvel titles, initially in the United States only.[32] The iVerse, Scroll Motion, and PanelFly apps all followed with Marvel titles shortly thereafter. A year later, both Marvel and DC had partnered with ComiXology to build custom apps, with interfaces almost identical to the original ComiXology application.[33] Comics by ComiXology for the iPad appeared on April 2, 2010; unlike the iPhone app, it also includes a pull list generator and retail store locator. ComiXology is now the single largest online comic store, and it is the clear market leader in the design and provision of the software layer for comic book reading on mobile devices.[34]

The app version of Marvel's digital comics also has a specific aesthetic. ComiXology proclaims that it "offers a 'guided view' that keeps the entire page of a comic intact, unlike other solutions where the page is cut into individual pictures the user browses like a photo application."[35] Nevertheless, readers never see the "entire page," which exists only as an organizational concept. On the iPhone, the program window and the screen edge are coterminous, and, unlike Marvel's digital subscriptions, the app has no page-view function, so the "page" is entirely notional and the frame is the major unit. Rotating the device changes frame orientation from portrait to landscape, which sometimes is an improvement but just as often leads to inadvertent cropping. The only time the reader ever encounters anything like the page is in full-page panels, where it becomes very small, or when tapping the top of the screen to jump to another "page," which is more like fast-forwarding to another set of panels than turning to a new page. Because of the tight framing, though, the panning motion across individual frames can be very effective, mostly for conveying motion through space. It can also be used to convey dramatically different emotions in different sections of large panels to great effect.[36]

New aesthetic modes for digital comics always come with an economic and social price tag. Like the MDCU, the Marvel app requires a valid credit card for any purchase, but the value for the reader's dollar is even lower in this instance, restricting titles to an older, more affluent readership. Being able to afford an iPhone, iPod Touch, or iPad is only the first hurdle. Inside the Marvel app, comics retail at $1.99 each, which is only a dollar less than the price of most print comics; there is no subscription option available. Some free titles are available as teasers (there are more full-length free comics with the Marvel app than the DC one, which tends to drop the price only for promotional titles explaining the origins and history of their characters). Moreover, comics purchased inside an app can't be transferred to other apps or viewed on non-Apple devices. Apple's refusal to allow Flash on the iPhone may have been the impetus

---

32 ComiXology, "Marvel Comics for the iPhone," October 2009, http://www.comixology.com/news/59/Marvel-Comics-for-the-iPhone.

33 Rogers, "So . . . Who IS COMIXOLOGY?"

34 PR NewsWire, "ComiXology Brings the Largest Comic Book Store to Apple's iPad," April 2, 2010, http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/comixology-brings-the-largest-comic-book-store-to-apples-ipad-89798712.html.

35 ComiXology, "Comics by ComiXology iPhone App Debuts," July 23, 2009, http://www.comixology.com/news/46/Comics-by-comiXology-iPhone-app-debuts.

36 For examples of sophisticated examples of these techniques, see the app version of Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's *Daredevil: Yellow.*

for developing the Marvel app, but the walled-garden approach means that the price per unit of digital comics is now at its historically highest level for a product that offers readers the least amount of control.

Glitches and errors do happen inside the Marvel app, most often with type, but they are rare. Moreover, downloaded titles can and are frequently replaced with more refined versions of themselves as Marvel identifies its mistakes, reaches into your device, and "improves your reading experience." It should come as no surprise, then, that there is not even a vestige of Eric Sluis on the shiny, hyperreal app version of *Fantastic Four* #1. App comics, after all, are more of a leased service than a purchased product. This is the lesson of the circulation of digital comics through culture to date: their transfiguration marks the process by which we have traded the rights of ownership and first sale for ostensible conveniences, the duration of which remains uncertain.   ✱

Contributors

Bart Beaty is Professor of English at the University of Calgary. His books include *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2005), *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), *Canadian Television Today* (coauthored with Rebecca Sullivan; University of Calgary Press, 2007), and *David Cronenberg's "A History of Violence"* (University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Scott Bukatman is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University. He is the author of *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Superman in the 20th Century* (Duke University Press, 2003), *Blade Runner* (British Film Institute, 2008), and *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Duke University Press, 1993).

Catherine Labio is Associate Professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She is the author of *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant* (Cornell University Press, 2004) and the editor of *Belgian Memories* (Yale University Press, 2003).

Angela Ndalianis is Associate Professor in Cinema Studies at Melbourne University. She is the author of *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (MIT Press, 2004) and editor of *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* (Routledge, 2008).

Greg M. Smith is Professor of Moving Image Studies in the Department of Communication at Georgia State University. His most recent books are *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss: A Student Guide* (Routledge, 2010) and *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of "Ally McBeal"* (University of Texas Press, 2007).

Darren Wershler is Assistant Professor of English at Concordia University, where he works with the Technoculture, Art and Games (TAG) group. He is also on the faculty at the CFC Media Lab TELUS Interactive Art and Entertainment Program in Toronto. Wershler has authored or coauthored numerous books on new media, media history, and poetics, including *Guy Maddin's "My Winnipeg"* (University of Toronto Press, 2010) and *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting* (Cornell University Press, 2007).