

Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon (eds.). *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative.* Narratologia 37. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013, vi + 416 pp., 50 figures, € 99.95/\$ 140.00 /£ 74.99.

Ever since *Time Magazine* included Alan Moore and David Gibbons' *Watchmen* in their list of the one hundred best novels of the twentieth century, comics has been steadily winning the battles for respect as a 'serious' literary/artistic endeavor. With the burgeoning of scholarship dedicated to the 'graphic narrative' and 'sequential art' of comics, it appears as if the war for status has been won, or nearly so. Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon's *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative* argues convincingly for the usefulness of the paradigm set of post-classical narratology in the discussion and analysis of works that participate in the comics medium, and this large and amply illustrated volume provides several valuable concrete examples as to how this may be profitably pursued. This book builds upon the breadth of comics scholarship, also outside of narratology, and has no single expressed agenda, i.e. it is not a 'system' of analysis, such as comics scholars can access with Thierry Groensteen or Scott McCloud. As the title indicates, the reader is presented with "[c]ontributions", and within this purview there is always a risk of a hodge-podge of articles related chiefly (sometimes only) by the object of study. Such is most decidedly not the case here. As a single volume testimony to the analytical and explanatory possibilities inherent in the application of post-classical narratology to comics, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* is clearly organized as a cohesive project, and in virtually every case, the chapter/article is successfully (often elegantly) performing the twin tasks of paradigm expansion and application and keen, insightful analysis of the target texts.

Taking their cue from Jared Gardner and David Herman, the editors state in "Introduction: From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels" that the aim of their book is "to explore new ways of thinking about the narrativity of comics" from the theoretical and methodological vantage of "graphic narrative theory", a "hybridized field of study" nominally under the broader "transmedial narratology". The introduction emphatically endorses the claim that "the most profitable [alliance] for comics studies will be that of narrative theory" (3). While this reviewer is not equipped to referee all rival claims for comics studies' potential new bed-fellows, the contributions to Stein and Thon's volume do illuminate comics in new and interesting ways, providing insights that benefit from the editors' perspective, but which are not limited by them. Since the vitality of theory and methodology rests just as much in the questions they raise as in the answers they can provide, the paradigmatic borders advocated in the introduction pertain a bit more to the former than the latter.

Rather than presenting a single strain among the post-classical approaches, Stein and Thon have helpfully grouped the chapters within four parts, “Graphic Narrative and Narratological Concepts”, “Graphic Narrative Beyond the ‘Single Work’”, “Genre and Format Histories of Graphic Narrative”, and “Graphic Narrative across Cultures”. Each part consists of four chapters which approach the topic from different angles and focus on different target texts. In the interest of size constraints, this review will briefly discuss one chapter from each of the parts.

From Part One, Karin Kukkonen employs cognitive narratology in “Space, Time, and Causality in Graphic Narratives: An Embodied Approach” to investigate how “the ways in which bodies relate to and interact with each other and the world around them shape readers’ perceptions of time, space, and causality” within and without “the storyworlds of graphic narratives” (49). Employing a three-fold notion of “transport”, Kukkonen demonstrates how the bodies on the page from one of Winsor McCay’s *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* “evoke readers’ embodied simulations of being in the storyworld”, enable “emotional involvement with the characters,” and “guide [the readers] across the face of the page” (55). Given the readers’ relation with multiple bodies, and arguing for the need for verbal cues in addition to visual in order to fix detail, the embodied information derived from the bodies on the page needs to be supplemented. Posture, facial expressions, and linguistic information, for instance from speech bubbles, provide important emotional cues; this transports the reader via “embodied simulations” of responses to these emotional states. The third notion of transport is evoked by the images’ position on the page, within the panels, and the flow of the panels themselves, “thereby engaging the body schemata of the readers, thus contributing to the embodied reading experience in comics” (59).

Significantly, Kukkonen’s first example involves hypnotism and dreaming, and a clash of a dream storyworld with the ‘real’ one. The second target text, a page from Warren Ellis and J. H. Williams III’s *Desolation Jones* is treated briefly and suggestively. The aim of this comics page is to provide readers with a presentation of ‘supermodernism’ in which “they experience the transience of supermodernism in their bodies” (63). The point is easily taken that Ellis and Williams present familiar embodied postures (driving and sitting as passenger in a mini-van), emotional cues invoking previous emotional states (including those fixed while watching MTV), and, especially, the layout to put some elements of supermodernism into the reader’s body. But with such a complex image, this brief account serves as more of a teaser than a full-blown analysis. Yet, didactically, it does encourage the reader of Kukkonen’s chapter to go out and play with these ideas as soon as she can.

In Part Two, “Graphic Narrative beyond the Single Work”, broader textual issues of mediation and modality link the four chapters. In “Graphic Memoir:

Neither Fact nor Fiction”, Nancy Pedri negotiates the tension between “the graphic memoir’s proposed (and expected) factual portrayal of self” and “the cartoon image’s constructed and interpretative quality” (129). Pedri convincingly demonstrates how Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Tragicomic* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* volumes ironically gain in authority to the degree that they express doubt as to accuracy of the memoirs’ respective recollections. Both of these works balance a degree of uncertainty of memory expressed textually with visual representations that complement the narrative while counterpoising with strategies of authentication. The multimodal presentation of popcorn-making in Bechdel’s autobiographical account and the ethnic identity of a camp inmate in Vladek’s memory both foreground the presence of doubt, and provide a visual qualification of that doubt.

Next, the chapter uses examples of photographs in the graphic memoir, and how they, too, can be seen to function counterintuitively. A pedestrian perspective would assume that the truth claims of the photo in documenting memories would be stronger. But Pedri is convincing when she shows that, since “the authorial subject position [is] intrinsically linked to the cartoon itself [...] [and] the diegetic self, and not the real self, is the focal point and the filtering mind of a graphic memoir” (144–145), the truth claims of the photograph are problematized. She suggests that the much-discussed hand-held photograph of Artie with his mother is not true in a “documentary” sense, “but rather imagined to be so” (139). Another significant aspect is when “the cartoon renditions” actually provide more (even factual) information than photography. This is especially the case with medical photographs, such as the tumor in Marisa Acocella Marchetto’s *Cancer Vixen*, and substitution of a photo of a nebula “in lieu of the actual M. R. I. scan” (143–144) in Brian Fie’s *Mom’s Cancer*. David B.’s *Epileptic* is positioned as a possible counter-example. With its highly impressionistic and abstract renderings of their life situation and the grip of his brother’s disease on the family, one might assume that this particular comic’s depiction would challenge the “fidelity constraint”. Not so. The style of a graphic memoir, lettering as well as drawing, privileges the subjective interpretation of facts of the memoir’s author, as “the craftsmanship of cartooning proves to be particularly equipped to address the ins and outs of personal experience” (147). Pedri concludes, “Counterintuitively, the consideration of how fact and fiction meld by way of a variety of narrative strategies and operative conventions has revealed that in graphic memoir a diegetic self [...] gains the reader’s belief” (148). By treating textuality and the visual aspects in this way, Pedri’s contribution is extremely useful, also as a recommended secondary text to interested students and scholars, of which there are many when it comes to graphic memoirs.

Jared Gardner's presence is felt in this volume already in the introduction, along with collaborator David Herman, with an appeal to narrative theory as a valuable key to unlocking comics, and as sole author of the first chapter in Part Three, "Genre and Format Histories of Graphic Narrative". In "A History of the Narrative Comic Strip", Gardner recounts comics as a narrative medium, from the single-panel comic of the nineteenth century to speculations on the narrative characteristics and possibilities of web-comics well into the twenty-first. Since volumes have been and will be written on this, the chapter narrows the focus through a discussion involving visual and textual technique, but mainly by highlighting the interaction between audience, cartoonists, comic strips, newspapers, film, radio shows, the comic book, and the Internet. "The history of the comic strip as narrative medium over the course of the twentieth century is arguably the story of the impact of new players on the field [...], which] had forced the comic strip to reconsider its audience and the rules by which it told stories" (251). What is particularly engaging is how comics are shown to be filling a niche (for instance, "explore the dialectic between kinetic movement and framed stillness" [243]), evolving in the direction of visual realism and longer and more complex narratives, and then making a strategic shift to minimalist depictions with an emphasis on "inner lives and philosophical questions" (250). Gardner never takes his sights off of the 'production' aspect, and the chapter itself is a brief lesson in the sequential shifts in some types of narrative in the mass media. Perhaps most interestingly, the article concludes almost with a prediction that the serial comic strip as digital comic awaits its "Winsor McCay or Bud Fisher" and a relevant business model to "allow the narrative comics of the Internet age to develop and thrive" (252).

Part Four, "Graphic Narrative Across Cultures", considers graphic narrative as world literature, provides a history of the medium in Europe, and a discussion of Asian graphic narrative, but the chapter by Julia Round, "Anglo-American Graphic Narrative" holds particular promise for those researching and teaching English language graphic novels. Round discusses the late twentieth century influx of British writers into the American market and, most importantly, into the American superhero pantheon, in three related sections. The first one examines the British influence on DC's Vertigo imprint through refined 'literary sensibility', an emphasis on ideas led by writers, and a retconning sleight of hand in which previous incarnations of a superhero are metatextually incorporated in the new version. The article's strengths lie in its considering political policies (such as censorship) leading to creative responses to the eviscerated milquetoast work that was endorsed as suitable for children. In U.S. underground comics, adult comics featured drug use and sex almost as contemporary history (cf. 340), while in the U.K. a cynicism inspired by Thatcherism melded with a science fiction film

aesthetic (or, at least, influence) to bring to light the likes of *2000AD*, and in particular author Alan Moore.

With comics included more frequently in university courses, and entire courses more frequently treating exclusively comics, Stein and Thon's *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* is timely and highly useful. The scholar well-versed in the recent discussions in narratology will find its paradigm set keenly suitable for the discussion of graphic narrative. The comics scholar familiar with a wide array of comics, but accustomed to a more catholic theoretical approach, will certainly find the readings, especially of familiar material, insightful, complementing (and sometimes challenging) what she is familiar with.

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