

☞ Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon, eds. *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2013. 416 pp. €93; approximately \$133.

By bringing together narratology and sequential art, this valuable volume demonstrates how sophisticated comics studies have become. Each of its sixteen essays, the great majority of them by European scholars, makes a useful contribution to this relatively new academic field of study, which offers considerable room for the application of diverse methodologies. Although such works as Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* and especially Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* offer important insights and some theoretical basis for the analysis of comics, they do not employ the specialized methodology that can be found in the essays in this volume, and which leads to a new understanding of both popular comics and their more sophisticated recent outgrowth, the graphic novel, or, as it is sometimes called, the graphic narrative.

The editors' introduction usefully discusses the terminology—including comics, graphic novel, and graphic narrative—that often bedevils discussion of the genre even today because each of these terms has its advocates. The editors allow the use of these three terms in the essays in their collection, thus displaying an admirable openness of mind (although surprisingly the useful term “sequential art,” originally coined by Eisner, does not figure anywhere in the collection). They also briefly explain and discuss the field of narratology and what it can offer this new field of study.

The volume is divided into four basic sections, each containing four essays. The first section covers “Graphic Narrative and Narratological Concepts,” and contains perhaps the most theoretical essays in the collection.

Basing herself on examples from Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and Charles Burns' *Black Hole*, Silke Horstkotte addresses the issue of how panels, frames and sequences impact the building of graphic stories, and demonstrates that graphic narrative is not limited to linear reading, but allows a variety of reading experiences. She argues that the potential variety of narrative techniques in the graphic novel goes beyond McCloud's now-standard classification, and, perhaps surprisingly, even surpasses the variety of such techniques possible in film.

Karin Kukkonen discusses space, time, and causality. She focuses on such issues as the portrayal of the body in the graphic novel and how it interacts with the reader's view of his or her own body and thus with his or her psychology, and how the use of time and space in the graphic novel impacts the reader's own perspectives on time and space. To make her points, she draws on examples from Winsor McCay's *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend* and *Desolation Jones* by Warren Ellis, J.H. Williams and José Villarrubia.

Jan-Noël Thon's essay about “Who's Telling the Tale” applies Gérard Genette's theories about narration to a discussion of the complexities of graphic narration, including the narrative influence of the several people who are usually involved in the construction of a graphic novel as opposed to a prose work, which is usually the product of a single author. He bases his discussion on examples from Craig Thompson's *Habibi*, Gaiman's *Sandman*, and Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* in his attempt to arrive at a suitable method of analysis for the varieties of narration in graphic narrative as opposed to other media.

The essay by Kai Mikkonen concludes this section with its discussion of “Subjectivity and Style in Graphic Narratives.” Mikkonen focuses on the impact on the reader of narrative perspective and graphic style. He discusses, for instance, the difference between what a character sees and what the reader is allowed to see, in order to analyze the ways in which such perspectives ultimately influence the reader's understanding of the story. His examples include European works such as Finnish cartoonist Tommi Musturi's *Walking with Samuel* and Italian Francesco Altan's *Ada*.

In Part II, “Graphic Narrative Beyond the ‘Single Work,’” the emphasis is less on general theory than on specific subgenres of the comics, including non-fiction and superhero titles.

Nancy Pedris' “Graphic Memoir: Neither Fact nor Fiction” asks the interesting question of whether the fact/fiction balance is the same in graphic narratives as in prose texts. She looks at Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marisa Acocella Marchetto's *Cancer Vixen*, Brian Fies' *Mom's Cancer*, and David Beauchard's *Epileptic* in order to conclude that even while they are bound by the same requirement of factuality as prose autobiographies, these recent graphic autobiographies openly acknowledge their partial fictionality, a fictionality that is perhaps made more likely because of their use of images as well as words. She finds that because of their

open acknowledgement of this partial fictionality, these recent graphic autobiographies seem more convincing to the reader than most autobiographies written only in prose.

Daniel Stein's essay on superhero comics focuses on *Batman* in order to show how fanzines, readers' letters and authors' and editors' responses, and biographies of the authors/artists, within the comics themselves, add to the reading experience because they amount to an ongoing dialogue between reader and creator which in turn may even influence future episodes. This is a very interesting aspect of comics production not often discussed.

The essay by Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter uses Moore's *V for Vendetta* and Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?* in an attempt to define "media" and the relationship between the graphic novel and other media, elaborating on McCloud's word/image classification while doing so. They bring a new way of looking at the narratology of the graphic novel by locating it in the broader media landscape.

Greg Smith's essay is devoted to a comparison of the comics and film, two visual media that would seem to have many intersections. While that is true, Smith points out that comics remain a reading experience, and therefore retain their own special impact. A comparison between film and sequential art, particularly early American comics such as *Hogan's Alley* and *Krazy Kat*, enables a more complete understanding of the importance of sequential art's use of window, frame, and panel, and how the comics have been influenced by the cinema.

Part III focuses on the history of the graphic novel and the importance of different formats, such as the comic strip, the comic book, and the extended book or album, for the development of the graphic novel genre.

Jared Gardner details the development of the American comic strip from the cartoon, stressing the demands of its serial publication and the comic strip's competition with painting, film and radio in particular. He relies on Gilles Deleuze's and Walter Benjamin's theories, and brings the history of the comic up to its most recent development, the webcomic. Pascal Lefevre's essay brings us into the world of Flemish comics, and particularly Willi Vandersteen's *Suske en Wiske* strips from the 1950s and 1960s. He demonstrates the importance of a particular format by showing how the Belgian system of regularly collecting comic strips into albums influences the creators

of comic strips as soon as they begin creating a particular series. Deliberately confronting the academic neglect of adventure stories, he shows how the practice of collecting serial comics into albums led to the invention of the humorous adventure story, a new subgenre.

After a detailed discussion of the terminology revolving around "graphic novel," Christina Meyer focuses on Mike Carey and Peter Gross's *The Unwritten* and compares it to the serialized novels of the nineteenth century. Like Stein, she points out the role that acknowledgements, fan letters, and appendices play in the reader's ongoing engagement with the series. She also points to the self-conscious element in the text and images of *The Unwritten*, and how there is an ongoing discussion of what the graphic novel is and can be within *The Unwritten* itself. For her, *The Unwritten* is largely a story about the way stories are told and entangled in other stories and in literary history.

Henry Jenkins' essay shows how Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers*, about the events of 9/11, was influenced by earlier comics, which offer Spiegelman a language through which he can voice his own uncertainties about the future and his feeling that history repeats itself. Jenkins divides earlier comics into the archival (whose images are remembered), the ephemeral (whose images are forgotten), and the residual (which contain aspects of the past which we would like to forget). According to Jenkins, all of these elements of the older comics are invoked in Spiegelman's book, and increase its historical impact.

The fourth part of the volume, "Graphic Narrative across Cultures," as its title suggests, deals with Anglo-American comics, European comics, and Japanese comics, all of which have some basic commonalities despite their differences.

Julia Round discusses the convergences between American and British graphic novels as seen particularly in the work of Moore, and also in that of Gaiman, Ellis, and Grant Morrison. She finds that these and other British graphic novelists often revitalize American inventions, such as the superhero, and that in their work British doubt and pessimism are combined with American confidence. Coming together, these contrasting attitudes almost create a new subgenre.

Jan Baetens and Steven Sudiacourt discuss the ways in which new technology, new cultural influences, and new distribution channels have continually

affected the comics, starting with the innovative printing methods that influenced the work of Rudolph Töppfer, and moving on to the technological and other influences that impacted the unique styles of Wilhelm Busch and Hergé. They also take into account the developing influence of libraries, bookshops, schools, and different publishing possibilities, including publishing cooperatives, on the comics. They point out that with the advent of webcomics, present-day graphic novels are turning away from the physical book, thus revealing yet another technological influence that has resulted in the creation of new styles and formats.

Jacqueline Berndt analyzes Shigeru Mizuki's *NonNonBa*, showing how manga often utilize a non-Western style of plotting and other techniques, and she defends manga against those who would impose Western methods of comprehension on them and therefore find them lacking. She also discusses the relationship between manga and gaming, another recent visual medium that is beginning to attract academic attention.

In the collection's fittingly final essay, Monika Schmitz-Emans praises the acceptance of the graphic novel as a literary form, tries to find a common language for Eastern and Western forms of comics, and, following Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's idea of world-literature, sees the graphic novel leading the way in the creation of a truly international literature.

This excellent collection, which is useful, full of new ideas, and well-edited, could have been improved in two small ways. First, a short glossary of terms would have been helpful because specialized terms such as "diag-etic" and "storyworld" that are perhaps common in the field of narratology, are usually not defined in the essays themselves, and can prove a barrier to the non-narratologist. Second, the volume lacks a section giving a short biography for each essay writer. Such biographies are a common feature in most essay collections and—like the author/artist biographies sometimes included in graphic novels themselves—allow the reader to understand each writer's essay in the context of his or her other work and even in the field as a whole. Indeed, following the insights of both Stein's and Meyer's essays in this collection, it could be said that such biographies constitute part of the special narratological experience of reading a collection as opposed to a monograph.

A final, and much more important, fault of this volume than the two small matters mentioned earlier was not in the purview of the editors or essay

writers, but of the publisher. Even Amazon's somewhat reduced price of \$133 is a huge sum for a single volume of this size, and would make a large and indeed unjustifiable dent in most academic departments' library budgets, not to mention in the budgets of individual scholars who would like to buy it for their own collections. That is a pity, because owing to its price, this important and stimulating book is likely to get much less circulation than it deserves.

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