theories and methodologies

Why Not More Comics?

STEPHANIE BURT

WHY COMICS? "ALL THAT IT IS *NECESSARY* TO SAY . . . UPON THIS SUBJECT, MAY BE EFFECTED BY AFFIRMING, WHAT FEW PERSONS WILL DENY, THAT, of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in comics, the comics will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once." That's not exactly what William Wordsworth wrote in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, of course—he had "verse" where I have "comics" (112). Nor did Wordsworth say that the pleasure of seeing expressive, hand-drawn characters could produce

> a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions . . . while, in lighter compositions, the ease and gracefulness with which artists manage their lines are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the Reader.

Wordsworth wrote "poet," not "artists," "his numbers" and not "their lines" (112).

And yet these characterizations seem no less accurate for comics created in 2019 than they do for verse written in 1798. Defined as hand-drawn or handmade words and images whose sequences tell stories (made-up or true), comics now have more readers, fans, creators, and critics than ever before. And more of those who read, create, and write about comics also recognize, as Hillary Chute explains in *Why Comics?* (2017), that this medium, in which "the words and the images each move the narrative forward," is not restricted to any or all of the genres in which comics in the United States historically excel: funny newspaper strips, superhero adventures, romances, war stories, and (more recently) remembered childhood trauma (21). Theorists and experts, in- and outside the academy, debate how the medium affects our brains; how it differs from prose, and from gallery art; how far back it goes; and how its continental, Japanese, and Afro-diasporic counterparts relate to the newest creations from the United States, United Kingdom, and New Zealand.

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In all these respects comics seem to be at about the point occupied by film in the mid-1960s, and, like film critics at that time—but far more credibly—one of the leading theorists and critics of comics supports a model that emphasizes auteurs. That leader is Chute, whose early books focus on works and creators that follow "the auteur model," "in which one person both writes and draws the comics" (399). These creators' preferred genres included documents of historical atrocity (Joe Sacco), melancholy modernist Gesamtkunstwerk (Chris Ware), and psychoanalytically influenced autobiography (Alison Bechdel). Art Spiegelman's *Maus* can be read as all three. (Chute has worked closely with Spiegelman.)

Chute's work from *Graphic Women* (2010) onward—her criticism, her interviews with creators, her editorial work, even her public events—has, in less than a decade, achieved what normally takes place more slowly and diffusely: the formation of a canon, whereby critics and teachers and future creators determine (on purpose or by accident) what the academy and other institutions of high culture will likely ask the next generation to read. Chute's process reached its conclusion, or at least a logical stopping point, in *Why Comics?*, which is also the first book Chute has written (rather than edited) for a nonscholarly audience.

And it's great. Chute establishes herself as one of the right people (not *the* right person; there is never one right person) to do this kind of canon-building work, not de haut en bas, not by flaunting her expertise in some other, older field, but by showing how much she's read, how often she's written about these comics before, and how elements of comics do their expressive and narrative work. To take one of many questions to which Chute provides sharp, and widely applicable, answers: Why do so many significant comics for adult readers involve childhood experience? Answer: the medium makes possible, and creators like Lynda Barry and Marjane Satrapi use, "the tension between" visually simplified versions of "their naïve younger selves within the comics frame" and "adult narrators [who] recollect those younger selves in overarching prose" (280).

Any quarrel with Chute's goals, choices, and methods, like any quarrel with those of Scott McCloud, in *Understanding Comics* (1994), or Douglas Wolk, in *Reading Comics* (2007), needs to begin by acknowledging just how good her work is. And more than Wolk's or McCloud's work, Chute's is suited to the making of academic canons. Not only are the works that Chute has done the most to promote interesting and memorable, not only do they let critics talk about formal choices—line-work and perspective, framing and reframing.[1] Most of those works also come across as tragic, absurd, or intensely sad. They require or solicit (rather than merely reward) interpretation. They often seem ugly at first, or unartful, or else excessive, fussy; they fail to meet commercial popular standards. They oppose escapist elements in popular culture: "the literary graphic novel," Chute writes, "might be called anti-superheroic" (75). Many of them might be labeled either neomodernist or aggressively amateurish, punk (a word Chute uses often) or at least subversive.

These descriptive terms unify such otherwise dissimilar comics as Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Spiegelman's *Maus*, Gary Panter's *Jimbo* series, Sacco's *Palestine*, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*, Barry's oeuvre, and Charles Burns's *Black Hole*. These terms have shaped academic canons for novels since at least Henry James, for poetry since Gertrude Stein and T. S. Eliot, and for drama since Eugene O'Neill, and it is no surprise to see them as guides again while the canon for another medium forms, as it were, before our eyes.

And yet—as Rita Felski has suggested—they are terms derived first from modernism and then from critique, from practices that regard with suspicion an uninitiated reader's pleasure; terms that do justice to certain

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creators' intellect and verve and moral force and yet may not adequately reflect what nonacademic readers choose to read, and recommend, and why. There are other ways that readers immersed in comics decide what to read and reread.

Comics by (Chute's) definition are hand-drawn visual narratives whose "pace of consumption" is controlled by the reader (332)—unlike video games and films, which flash past on screens. This fact, as Chute emphasizes—a person put those lines there; you decide how closely you want to engage with them—makes comics good at showing us what's hard to see: internal states like depression and OCD; taboo scenes and body parts; complex urban planning and architecture, as experienced by a city's inhabitants; historical catastrophe such as ongoing civil wars and even genocide.

But the same fact makes comics especially good at depicting the fantastic and wildly whimsical, at generating and sustaining escape. The ability of comics "to give shape to the darkest or wildest imagination," their "visual technology that can make the unseen concrete," permits the "intimate body-focused self-expression" (113) of Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky-Crumb (whose slogan is "proud of being gross" [127])—but it also enables the art nouveau whimsy of Winsor McCay (whose *Little Nemo* was nothing if not self-conscious about its escapism) and the ebullience of an Alan Davis. Comics as a medium can make worlds in which you can lose yourself, for a while; in which you can find, and follow, nonrealist adventures; in which you can see versions of yourself in nonliteral, perhaps therefore more flattering, terms.

As McCloud may have been the first to point out, comics can also take unique advantage of our ability to recognize faces: to see people like us, or even to see ourselves, as soon as we see three dots as two eyes and a mouth. And, as Wolk in particular has argued, before the advent of modern CGI, comics were the only place that you could see (not just read or hear about) people who could eat stars or burst into flame. That's why the medium lends itself not only to hard-to-represent disaster but also to wish fulfillment, to wonder, to what children (at least in Western anglophone culture) get permission to seek. It's easy to imagine comics without superheroes as characters—you don't even have to imagine it; just visit France—but it's hard to imagine that those heroic characters could have become so important without the comics form. And it's impossible to imagine *Calvin and Hobbes* as anything except comics (indeed its creator, Bill Watterson, famously averse to adaptations and even to toy licensing, refused to let it become anything else).

How would an antitragic, not-necessarily-auteur-based, formally and generically versatile way to read and teach comics (and works derived from comics) look? It might well begin from actual readers' attachments to fictional characters: How and when do they develop? How do they work? Why do so many young trans men now see themselves in Peter Parker?[2] What makes Jay Edidin, one of today's best critics of superhero comics (and a professional editor of independent and auteur comics), introduce himself in print as a "shameless Cyclops apologist" (4)? Why do so many people care about Charlie Brown?

Such a way of reading and teaching would strive to correct the tilt—built deeply into the academy, and into modernist criteria of value—toward tragedy and even horror and away from comedy, toward shock and knowledge and away from enchantment. "Shock," "knowledge," and "enchantment," as I use the terms here, come from Felski's *The Uses of Literature*, a study of why readers (in general) read and of what we get when we read for pleasure. Academics tend to highlight shock—uncomfortable realization, alienation—and the acquisition of knowledge. But comics, for reasons both Chute and Wolk acknowledge, provide an es-

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pecially helpful way to study (and to honor) what Felski describes as enchantment, "the perplexing elements of aesthetic experience that come into view when we speak of being swept up, transported, taken out of ourselves" (60). Comics can do almost anything novels (for example) can do. But they are especially suited for identification, self-recognition, enchantment, even (dare I say it?) escape.

What would an approach look like that emphasized not comics' subversive, tragic, and punk-rock potentials, nor their ability to convey information, but their capacity for allegory, for absorption in an ongoing story, for refuge and wonder, for seeing oneself anew? It would surely include some of the works Chute analyzes and recommends, among them Gilbert Hernandez and Jaime Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* and Allie Brosh's *Hyperbole and a Half*. It might well take in—I hope that it would—Ware's *Building Stories*, as well as Matt Fraction and David Aja's *Hawkeye*, a visually innovative mainstream superhero comic influenced (as Chute explains) by Ware, and the less visually innovative, but just as narratively compelling, Hawkeye comics written by Kelly Thompson and illustrated by (among others) Leonardo Romero. It might attend just as intently to Bechdel's decades-long serial *Dykes to Watch Out For* as to her chef d'oeuvre *Fun Home*, though the former is harder to teach (I teach *Fun Home* myself); it would also ask why so many readers love *Check, Please!*, Ngozi Ukazu's serial comic about friendships and queer romance in mens' college hockey, along with earlier, less popular, online queer-romance comics (say, E. K. Weaver's *The Less Than Epic Adventures of TJ and Amal*).

It would certainly notice the most popular English-language graphic narrative of recent years: Raina Telgemeier's kid-friendly *Smile* and its three sort-of sequels, whose clean-lined, inviting stories of girls' everyday troubles (braces, family road trips, difficult friendships) have a combined print run of over seven million copies so far (MacDonald). And it might ask the same question about *Smile*, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, *Love and Rockets*, *Hyperbole and a Half*, various *Hawkeye*s, *TJ and Amal*, and *Calvin and Hobbes* (though not about *Maus*): What in this comic makes a world that readers would like to visit, if not inhabit?

Such an approach could emphasize immersion, identification, and community, as well as consolation and escape. That approach might be at least as queer as the comics that Chute discusses in her chapter on queer comics, though it would attend also to the queer subtexts that fans find between the panels, as it were, of work that's not quite out. It would see queer identity (and other kinds of identity—around disability, for example) as a set of structures we build together, not only as a weapon or way to resist. It would ask explicitly about race (which Chute does not do here): How does race work differently in a medium where we often see characters' skin color (but never see a real person)? It would ask what fans of superhero comics see in their favorite titles, why fans disagree so passionately about everything in them, and why fans construct their own terms with which to do so (Was Jean Grey fridged?). Key texts in such an approach might include adaptations of and reactions to comics, not only in films but also in prose fiction and verse—Jay Cantor's *Krazy Kat*, Monica Youn's *Ignatz*, Catherynne Valente's *The Refrigerator Monologues*.

This broader (and antitragic, superhero-friendly) approach would have to emphasize collaboration: between words and images, between writers and others, between artistic and commercial imperatives, as film critics did when they took on the products of Hollywood studios (*Casablanca* is many things, but it is certainly not the product of any one person's unimpeded vision). Wolk divided the emerging cartoonists of ten years ago into two groups: a "rough wave" (366)—the heirs of Panter's ratty line—and adherents of a "much

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smoother, self-consciously pretty style" (369), inflected by manga (some of whom, such as Hope Larson, have since found commercial success). A way of reading and recommending comics attentive to what devoted fans want—and tilted away from the tragedy and the disillusion that characterize the emergent academic canon—might fit the smooth wave better and fit all-ages comics especially well.

This way of reading might do more to connect the study of comics to the study of comics' reception. Critics already make such connections—not only Chute but also Ramzi Fawaz, in his terrific, polemical *The New Mutants*, about queer identity and left politics in mainstream superheroes, and Jared Gardner, in *Projections*, which chronicles comics' century-long dialogue with radio, television, and film. Early comics and early cinema, Gardner shows, depicted cities, bodies, and the discontinuity of modern life in overlapping ways; only after the rise of feature films in the era of D. W. Griffith (when films began to tell long stories; when the novelty in their depictions of motion wore off) could the two media "move in different directions" (24). Such an approach to comics, emphasizing attraction and collaboration, would also overlap with the emerging—or has it emerged?—field called fan studies, with its ambivalently or half-concealed autobiographical and participant-observation elements. And it would take seriously what fans as well as creators have to say.

I'll conclude with two examples of comics that are never tragic, realistic, or reportorial, nor (so far) especially influential—and yet they might belong up there among the best the medium (at least in English) contains. One is a comic book that aims directly for humor—within a mainstream superhero universe, which it mocks the way Alexander Pope mocked eighteenth-century London, wanting like him to make the object of its wit more virtuous, less hypocritical, and more fun rather than wishing it did not exist. Marvel's *Damage Control* (published in 1989–91 with occasional follow-ups in the twenty-first century) tells the story of a scrappy, well-meaning company that cleans up after superhero fights, restoring buildings, filling in foundations, removing debris, and generally performing the nuts-and-bolts services that cities regularly hit by Thor, the Hulk, and their opponents require: "When titans clash, they leave a heck of a mess" (McDuffie et al. 118).

Damage Control's creator and writer, Dwayne McDuffie; its chief penciller, Ernie Colón; and their collaborators fashioned moments that recall classic Hollywood comedy—misunderstandings and physical humor and gags that depend on characters' disagreeing about what genre they're in. What happens when the supervillain Doctor Doom won't pay his bill? ("What's he going to do, kill me?" [51].) Can the superacrobat Nightcrawler get tripped up by "the old banana peel on the trapeze routine?" (105). It's a good test case for various theories of comedy that might extend far beyond the comics form—and a good way to see why superheroes matter to adults who may not take them seriously (or who may want to hide how seriously we take them and why).

One of the first African Americans to make a long and successful career in mainstream comics, McDuffie, along with his colleagues, built into *Damage Control* a series of jokes about stereotypes, especially those around race. When, in the comic book's storyline, Hollywood makes a movie about the company, the hyperarticulate, always professional black engineer Albert Cleary (who speaks standard English) becomes a figure from 1970s film, a "guy in a pimp suit" with green fedora, magenta coat, and exaggerated vernacular: "Albert, I know you're an angry black man, but the city needs your help!" "Yo, John, you know you be my homey" (268–69). The real Cleary is, of course, visibly horrified.

We should also teach comics that set themselves against tragedy and against re-

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alism without any jokes, or superheroes, involved. If *Damage Control* offers (in Felski's terms) recognition and humor, Tillie Walden's epochal *On a Sunbeam* offers recognition and enchantment, along with unselfconscious, smooth-lined beauty; the optimism of far-future space fantasy, heterotopic boarding-school tales, and queer feminist utopias; and the kinds of complex dovetailing plots, reader figures, and long-delayed happy endings familiar to some of us from Victorian novels. It's also a kind of sequel to Walden's brilliantly melancholy—and critically celebrated—graphic memoir *Spinning*, which chronicled her first love (cut short by intolerant parents), her mixed feelings about the sport of figure skating (which she eventually left), and her realization that she wanted to draw.

On a Sunbeam, whose nearly 550 pages of panels appeared one by one on her Web site before they became a hefty book, tells another, far more expansive, and ultimately exultant story about queer teens and their interrupted love. Our heroes spend much of the graphic novel living in a spacecraft shaped like a flying fish, restoring and remodeling antique buildings (in space). Walden's distant-future world includes no men (no characters whose pronouns are *he*, *him*, and *his*). It does, however, include a nonspeaking, nonbinary character (referred to with the pronouns *they*, *them*, and *their*), who is preternaturally gifted at mapmaking and engineering, someone Melanie Yergeau might call "neuroqueer" (10). *On a Sunbeam* uses discrete color blocks, black-and-white contrast, open space, and negative space to depict emotion (as *Spinning* had done). Its intricate curvilinear landscapes, seascapes, weather, and clouds are reminiscent less of comics than of John Constable. And it follows two generations of characters whose careful, sometimes minimal dialogue pursues the interdependence of word and image and the expressive reliance on small changes in faces that McCloud saw as special affordances of comics.

On a Sunbeam, with its interplanetary romances, displays both visual and emotional "potentiality for the future," to quote Angela Jones citing Jose Muñoz (11). In it, "queer world[s]" and "queer utopic spaces" are constructed, both in the extradiegetic sense (we see the hand of the creator at work) and in the intradiegetic sense (Jones 11, 12): the crew, a found family of explorers, outlaws, and restorers, literally makes (in the teeth of social disapproval) the spaces in which the next generation can live.

And Walden's book resists—consciously, consistently—the ideas we imbibe, sometimes without noticing, from many mainstream comics and from the most queer-friendly of high culture's greatest hits: the idea that an escapist work cannot have lasting literary value; that naive visual pleasure is something we leave behind as we learn to follow something more subversive, or more punk-rock or complicated; that language has no outside, so that nonspeaking people must perforce lack agency; and that growing up means giving up somebody, or something, you love.

These are harmful ideas, which comics seem especially fit to refute. And despite some of her own implicit preferences (for punk rock, reportage, tragedy, and the "anti-superheroic"), Chute is in this sense on comics' side. She certainly acknowledges the importance that young fans (especially girls) have for comics right now,[3] and she consistently names works (some of them about superheroes) that she admires but has no space to discuss. Her last chapter, "Coda: Why Fans?," set largely at the San Diego Comic-Con, emphasizes the participatory, antihierarchical, and therefore empowering nature not of any particular work but of comics fandom, taking examples not only from handmade, anticommercial comics and fanzines but also from cosplay. The cosplayers Chute interviews may not even be playing characters who originate in comics

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(there might be ten Leias to every Hawkeye), but they belong where comics belong. "In fandom," she writes, "as in so many contexts, comics places pressure on what constitutes the 'expert' and allows openings for the amateur" (410). May it always be so.

Notes

1. These works do, of course, lend themselves to discussions of their critical choices; if the second half of Chute's book has a hero it is not so much Spiegelman as the avant-punk cartoonist, painter, and designer Gary Panter, famous for his "ratty line" (217).

2. See, e.g., the blog *Trans Peter Parker Study* (transpeterparkerstudy.tumblr.com/about).

3. Her book includes a chapter called "Why Girls?"

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