Comics and Cartoons: A Democratic Art-Form

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The cartoon, comic, or—as influential cartoonist Will Eisner called it—"sequential art" is an art-form that is cognitively friendly to contemporary notions of individualistic-liberal-democracy.[1] Whereas traditional forms of art have rather hierarchical standards of aesthetics, which then enforce customary notions of power and the conventional hermeneutic pecking order, the iconography of comics and cartoons is supportive of a kind of pluralistic democratic individualism. If, as some thinkers suggest, the world is understood by cognitive images in the brain, then—as the work of C. S. Pierce, Scott McCloud, and others support—comics is an art that allows for the individual self-creation that subsequently supports democracy.

C. S. Pierce, Scott McCloud, and the Iconography of Cartoons and Comics

To understand this "cognitive democracy," one must comprehend the language of modern cartoons and/or comics. The work of C. S. Pierce is helpful here. American semiotician and pragmatist, Pierce developed a notion of iconography that helps form a lexicon of cartoon art. Pierce developed a trinity of fundamental icons: qualisigns, sinsigns, and legisigns. Qualisigns do not represent anything specifically except their own existence—they are seen in the abstract paintings of such artists as Jackson Pollock and Wassily Kandinsky. In contrast, sinsigns are images that signify an actual object in the empirical world. These images are best expressed by the creations of photo-realists. And finally, Pierce argued that the third kind of icon—as legisign—was based on empirical appearances but was essentially abstracted from the empirical sense data. Cartoons and comics—as well as diagrams and maps—often fit into this last icon grouping (Pierce 1940, 99–103).[2] Pierce (1940, 116) defines this group, writing:

> An Iconic Legisign [e.g., a diagram apart from its factual individuality] is any general law or type, in so far as it requires each instance of it to embody a definite quality which renders fit to call up in the mind the idea of a like object. Being an Icon, it must be a Rheme. Being a Legisign, its mode of being is that of governing single Replicas, each of which will be an Iconic Sinsign of a particular kind.

Though Pierce writes of "Replicas," in his understanding, these symbols—or icons—do not contain a metaphysically "inferior" reality:

> A Symbol is a Representation whose Representative character consists precisely in its being a rule that will determine its Interpretant. All words, sentences, books, and other conventional signs are Symbols. We speak of writing or pronouncing the word "man"; but it is only a *replica*, or embodiment of the word, that is pronounced or written. The word itself has no existence, although it has real being, *consisting in* the fact that existents *will* conform to it. (1940, 112; emphasis in original)

For Pierce, the icon shaped the reality itself—creating a space for interpretive meaning in certain contexts.

Many years later, comic scholar Scott McCloud elaborated on Pierce's work, and applied it directly to the aesthetic theory of cartooning. McCloud argues that comics work best when they employ a large element of legisign iconography. As cartoonists attempt to be more realistic in their art, they decrease the hermeneutic value of the art-form. This is because—on McCloud's account—humans use a cognitive technique called "closure" when understanding the meaning of comics. This closure is the filling in of the blanks that a comic leaves open. These blanks occur in the somewhat simplistic nature of human renderings, as well as in the space between comic panels—the implied montage of all sequential art. McCloud (1994, 30–1) writes:

> Film critics will sometimes describe a live-action film as a "cartoon" to acknowledge the stripped-down intensity of a simple story or visual style. Though the term is often used disparagingly, it can be equally well applied to many time-tested classics. Simplifying characters and images toward a purpose can be an effective tool for storytelling in any medium. Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it's a way of seeing.

In other words, comics—as opposed to many other narrative visual art-forms—leave a large *cognitive space* for the viewer/reader to interpret their meaning. The closure takes place between the movements from abstract legisign to signified data in the brain, as well as between panels in the movement of sequential art across a page. In either case, comics employ a large decree of cognitive freedom. Manning (1998, 67–8) writes:

> Thus cartoons and cartoon-like sketches provide an ideal medium for new ideas, new ways of seeing. Compare an *X-Men* comic book with a

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> well-illustrated text on nuclear power. A pre-adolescent first explores ideas of conflict, loyalty, honor, and self-sacrifice by reading one. A Naval ROTC student first grasps the workings of a nuclear sub's atomic reactor by following simplified, schematic, drawings in the other. . . . In McCloud's terms, cartoons amplify new ideas by simplifying them and cartoon-like sketches embody general concepts in a way that no photo-realistic image of an actual thing can.

Indeed, the art of cartooning and/or comics has a form that—in its twentieth and twenty-first century versions—helps create a subversive way of understanding the world.

Most discussions of comics engage in the analysis of the content of the art-form. This is—of course—of great importance, especially as in the way that comics offer a critique of the dominant power structure. Because comics are often popular in subcultures and generally fly below the radar of the intellectual elite, cartoonists can often tackle serious issues in ways that would not be tolerated in mainstream media (Schmitt 1992, 155). Additionally, comics' subterranean existence allows cartoonists to create a unique aesthetic and a "distinct alternative vision" that often says more about our culture than so-called high art (Schmitt 1992. 155). In fact, the radical cultural elite has often exalted comics as a kind of exotic "other" art. Marshall McLuhan (2004, 109) writes:

> Picasso has long been a fan of American comics. The high-brow, from Joyce to Picasso, has long been devoted to American popular art because he finds in it an authentic imaginative reaction to official action. Genteel art, on the other hand, tends merely to evade and disapprove of the blatant modes of action in a powerful high definition, or "square," society.

Notwithstanding the fact that the *content* of comics is often radical, it is possibly more important to note that the *form* of the comic—as an *art*—is extremely well suited for democratic society, which continuously re-evaluates its own ethical positions. Ronald Schmitt (1992, 153) writes: "The effects of comic books on youngsters are quite subversive but not in the moral, behavioral sense in which conservative educators perceive, but rather in their effects on traditional, hierarchical modes of reading and on the entire notion of literacy." The "reading" of comics and cartoons—the hermeneutic act involved in the artistic exchange—is very different from the act of reading a traditional text. Given the exchange of meanings between the words, the picture, and the net set of meanings, comics open a complex web of understanding that is very different than the left-to-right reading of standard text. As W. J. T. Mitchell (2005, 11) writes, the images in these circumstances almost act as "living organisms," demanding to interact with the reader. Schmitt (1992, 157–8) applies an explicitly Derridean approach to comic analysis:

> The relationship between the words and pictures in a comic book, rather than being the collision of dialectical opposites . . . is more akin to Derrida's concept of "differance." Since it is impossible to "see" both pictures and words simultaneously, the presence of the one necessitates the absence of the other creating a continual unresolvable [sic] play off between the two textual forms. In addition, signification and stable meaning is continually deferred as the eye, instead of scanning left to right in even, linear patterns, jumps between words and pictures, spiraling zig-zagging and often interrupting the entire process to re-scan the information in a new way. Rather than two "stable" texts (words and pictures) juxtaposed, the comic book is a form of self-inflicted "double-writing," collapsing traditional strategies for reading word and picture texts.

In this sense, the interplay between the words and text create a tension that allows for cognitive freedom. In fact, as suggested above, this type of art is unique to comic artistry. Manning (1998, 68–9) writes: "A photograph is the imprint of one and only one object. A sketch potentially represents all objects of a general conceptual type. . . . Cartoons lie closer than photo-real images to language and symbolic thought in the McCloud/Pierce scheme. In their theory, thoughts and ideas likewise exist mainly as vaguely sketched forms."

Hence, cartoon art is the perfect vehicle for individual cognitive interpretation.

Comics and Democratic Individuality

As noted above, comic art fulfils a great role in the cognitive individuality of democracy. In fact, as George Kateb (1992, 90) points out, cognitive self-creation is a key to the positive individuality needed for a healthy democracy:

> One's *dignity* resides in being, to some important degree, a person of one's own creating, making, choosing, rather than in being merely a creature or a socially manufactured, conditioned, manipulated thing: half-animal and half-mechanical and therefore wholly socialized. Living a life is not like going through motions. The encouragement of positive individuality is the encouragement of courage, so to speak: the courage to "live deliberately," as Thoreau puts it, so as not, when one came to die, discover that one had not lived. We all benefit if each is not penalized, but allowed and encouraged to be himself or herself.

In other words, applying this concept to aesthetics, the art-form of comics/cartooning has an inherent element of democracy to it: democracy based on cognitive freedom and self-creation. This notion of cognitive freedom forms a basis of democratic individualism (Kateb 1992, 98).

The creation of meaning that is implied by the inter-textual play between words and images has a fundamental role in creating a liberal-democratic society. If democratic individualism is fueled by our ability—as sovereign agents—to create our own lives, then comic art is a perfect compliment to such a society. Hence, if liberal-democratic society is based—as Richard Rorty (1999, 48) suggests—on our ability to move past the "Greek distinction between appearance and reality," then an art-form with constantly shifting—almost Derridean—notions of meaning is perfect for modern democracy.

Of course, there is always an inherent risk in any individualistic notions of society. Often, democracy as a means does not have leftist ends that many democrats would desire. This risk based on individual judgment includes—of course—the worlds of both politics and art. As Leslie Fiedler (2004, 132) writes when discussing comics:

> The problem posed by popular culture is finally, then, a problem of class distinction in a democratic society. What is at stake is the refusal of cultural equality by a large part of the population. It is misleading to think of popular culture as the product of a conspiracy of profiteers against the rest of us. This venerable notion of an eternally oppressed and deprived but innocent people is precisely what the rise of mass culture challenges. Much of what upper-class egalitarians dreamed for him, the ordinary man does not want—especially literacy.

Traditional literacy is exactly what comic art challenges—and with it whole notions of hierarchical understandings of society and art. Comics—hence—are just one of many keys to breaking down conventional society's standards of meaning. Therefore, comics/cartoons are aesthetically supportive of cognitive democratic individualism, and they work as an exemplar of contemporary art in liberal society.

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Notes

1. I will not spend time in this piece attempting to flesh out the strict definitions of these terms. Such work has filled volumes. One can assume that I generally endorse a type of democratic individualism akin to the authors I cite in this brief essay.

2. My understanding of Pierce's work here is in debt to Alan D. Manning.

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