

Comics and Scholarship: Sketching the Possibilities

Erin Kathleen Bahl, Ohio State University

Thus far, attention to comics in academia has been focused *on* comics as a subject of literary (Chute; Gardner; Hatfield), theoretical (Cohn; Groensteen, *The System of Comics* and *Comics and Narration*; Postema), or pedagogical studies (Bakis; Carter; Jacobs). There has been less emphasis on scholarly composing *with* comics (some notable exceptions include Scott McCloud's celebrated *Understanding Comics* and Nick Sousanis's recently published dissertation, *Unflattening*). If you'll excuse the irony of writing on such a topic in an alphabetic format, I suggest that fusions between comics and scholarship can (1) fruitfully challenge definitions of scholarly genres, (2) offer resources for designing arguments in digital environments, and (3) invite all who practice scholarly composing to reflect critically upon their mediating decisions.

Messy Genres

In discussing comics and scholarship, I include texts within academic discourse in which the words, images, and layout all contribute substantially to the argument (rather than, for example, a primarily alphabetic text accompanied secondarily by images as illustrations). In *The Visual Language of Comics*, Neil Cohn argues that comics are not a language, but rather that “comics are written in visual languages in the same way that magazines or novels are written in English” (2; emphasis original). Whereas some scholars compose comics in the widespread sense, complete with full-page panel layout, speech balloons, an illustration-heavy environment, etc. (Losh et al.; McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, *Reinventing Comics*, *Making Comics*; Parish; Selfe and Kurlinkus; Sousanis), others compose in word-image fusions that draw from a vocabulary similar to comics' verbal-visual language (Bono and McCorkle; Crisp et al.; Delagrangé; McCloud, “Scott”).

Although the latter texts bear little immediate resemblance to traditional comics, I include these more ambiguous examples to explore how elements of comics might gradually be adapted as resources for academic communication, which would necessarily involve some experimentation and genre messiness along the way. Comics take an incredible amount of work to compose, and regardless of interest, the majority of academics do not have the time, training, or resources to fully flesh out an argument as a thoroughly composed comic. Additionally, there is a professional risk in composing nonprint scholarship that might not be valued as a contribution to the field (Purdy and Walker). However, a series of what de Certeau calls “small, potent gestures” (qtd. in

Selfe 1164), consisting of texts that equally weight words, images, and layout, may go a long way towards welcoming comics more fully into the field as a knowledge-making modality.

Digital Environments

Because I write from a digital media studies perspective, the overlaps and possibilities I highlight for scholarly composition are (with some exceptions) largely centered on webtexts and digital composing. This is not to say by any means that there are no such possibilities for incorporating comics practices into print-based scholarly composing, as Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics*), Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh (*Understanding Rhetoric*), and Nick Sousanis (*Unflattening*) have clearly demonstrated. However, digital environments have the benefit of rapid, comparatively inexpensive textual dissemination; screen-reader processing for broader accessibility; and image/text editing software for those with less training in (or time to complete) pen-and-paper rendering. These affordances suggest to me that digital spaces have the potential to become leading environments for the composition and communication of comics scholarship.

Some of the foremost online venues for publishing verbal-visual scholarship today include *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*; *Computers and Composition Online (C&C Online)*; *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion*; and Computers and Composition Digital Press (CCDP). *Kairos*, *C&C Online*, and *Harlot* all publish shorter, article-length webtexts, while CCDP focuses on longer projects and eBooks. Each of these publishers invites innovative, multimodal texts that take advantage of the communicative resources digital environments have to offer. It can be challenging to consider new ways of filling up an empty page as broad as an “infinite canvas” (McCloud, “The Infinite Canvas”). As scholars brainstorm new ways to organize and construct their arguments in these online spaces, comics’ familiar visual-verbal vocabulary can offer one potential blueprint for composing and experiencing the architecture of a scholarly argument in digital environments.

Reflective Making

Though many scholars’ preferred means of composing may seem distant from the works and venues mentioned above, there is value nevertheless in considering the intersections between comics and academic composing practices. Regardless of disciplines, contemporary academic discourse occurs within a “global order” marked by “the multiplicity of communications channels and media” (New London Group 63). Kress and van Leeuwen remark that “in the age of digitization, the different modes [...] can be operated by one multi-skilled person, using one interface, one mode of physical manipulation, so

that he or she can ask, at every point: ‘Shall I express this with sound or music’, ‘Shall I say this visually or verbally?’” (*Multimodal Discourse 2*). Such questions open up both greater abilities and responsibilities in critically considering how to communicate knowledge among peers within an academic community, and also invite an “ethics of making” (Hayles and Pressman), in which “conceptual understandings are deepened and enriched by practices of production, a conjunction that puts critique into dynamic interplay with productive knowledges” (xv). These practices are not opposed to print, but rather invite awareness of other possible ways of making and communicating knowledge and challenge composers to critically consider their expectations of what a scholarly text should be.

Final Thoughts

I believe that the comics form has much to offer contemporary scholarly composing practices: they invite attention to alternative ways of meaning-making, new spaces for thought and dialogue, new questions about what scholarship can and should do, and perhaps even a sense of fun. With recent technological developments’ expansion of the available meaning-making resources in screen-based digital communication, I view the present moment as an exciting time to experiment with new forms of scholarly discourse that draw on interdisciplinary literacies in order to broaden, enrich, enliven, and challenge our ways of making and communicating knowledge. Though I fully support the need for formal alphabetic prose as a mode of communication in academic discourse, I suggest that comics give voice to an alternative mode of meaning-making that (echoing Delagrangé) embraces a sense of wonder, discovery, and delight in the messy process of knowledge creation in and of itself.

Works Cited

- Bakis, Maureen. *The Graphic Novel Classroom: Powerful Teaching and Learning with Images*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2012. Print.
- Bono, Jamie, and Ben McCorkle. “Ludic Literacies: Mapping the Links Between the Literacies at Play in the DALN.” *Stories that Speak to Us*. Ed. H. Lewis Ulman, Scott Lloyd DeWitt, and Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State UP, 2013. Web. 25 Apr. 2014. <<http://ccdigitalpress.org/stories/bono.html>>.
- Carter, James Bucky. *Building Literacy Connections with Graphic Novels: Page by Page, Panel by Panel*. Urbana: NCTE, 2007. Print.
- Chute, Hillary. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.
- Cohn, Neil. *The Visual Language of Comics*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Crisp, Huey, Sally Crisp, David Fisher, Greg Graham, and Joseph J. Williams. “Scaffolding Stories.” *Stories that Speak to Us*. Ed. H. Lewis Ulman, Scott Lloyd De-

- Witt, and Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State UP, 2013. Web. 25 Apr. 2014. <<http://ccdigitalpress.org/stories/crisp.html>>.
- Delagrangé, Susan. "Wunderkammer, Cornell, and the Visual Canon of Arrangement." *Kairos: A Journal of Technology, Rhetoric, and Pedagogy* 13.2 (2009): n. pag. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/delagrangé/>>.
- Gardner, Jared. *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012. Print.
- Groentsteen, Thierry. *Comics and Narration*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2013. Print.
- . *The System of Comics*. Trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007. Print.
- Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005. Print.
- Hayles, N. Katherine, and Jessica Pressman, eds. *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013. Print.
- Jacobs, Dale. *Graphic Encounters: Comics and the Sponsorship of Multimodal Literacy*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.
- Kress, Gunther R., and Theo van Leeuwen. *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Losh, Elizabeth, Jonathan Alexander, Kevin Cannon, and Zander Cannon. *Understanding Rhetoric: A Graphic Guide to Writing*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013. Print.
- McCloud, Scott. "The 'Infinite Canvas.'" *ScottMcCloud.com*. Feb. 2009. Web. 25 Apr. 2014. <<http://scottmccloud.com/4-inventions/canvas/>>.
- . *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. Print.
- . *Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology are Revolutionizing an Art Form*. New York: Paradox, 2000. Print.
- . "Scott McCloud: A Comics-Format Interview." Interview by Scot Hanson. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 14.1 (2009): n. pag. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://technorhetoric.net/14.1/interviews/hanson/index.html>>.
- . *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. Print.
- New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-92. Print.
- Parish, Rachel. "Sappho and Socrates: The Nature of Rhetoric." *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 17.1 (2012): n. pag. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/17.1/disputatio/parish/index.html>>.
- Postema, Barbara. *Narrative Structure in Comics: Making Sense of Fragments*. Rochester: RIT P, 2013. Print.
- Purdy, James P., and Joyce R. Walker. "Valuing Digital Scholarship: Exploring the Changing Realities of Intellectual Work." *Profession* (2010): 177-95. Print.
- Selfe, Cynthia L. "Technology and Literacy: A Story About the Perils of Not Paying Attention." *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*. Ed. Susan Miller. New York: Norton, 2009. 1163-85. Print.

Selfe, Cynthia L., and Will Kurlinkus. "The Watson Symposium: What might we be missing . . . and why?" *Watson Response*. Blogger, n.d. Web. 1 Mar. 2014. <<http://watsonresponse.blogspot.com/>>.

Sousanis, Nick. *Unflattening*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015. Print.