

# Introduction

The term “comics” has come to be used, within the Anglophone industry, as a non-count noun that collectively refers to the drawn strip medium’s various subcategories. It subsumes, but is not reducible to: children’s comic books, which first took off when newspaper strips were sectioned into supplements, and which were increasingly aimed at a juvenile audience from the early twentieth century; classic genre serials, popularly associated with the superhero Golden Age that kicked off in the 1930s; the unruly underground comix of the 1960s counterculture; adult graphic novels, which began to gain cultural currency in the 1980s; and a host of other subsets of format, content, and target audience that continue to develop and expand. It is broadly agreed that the form began to cohere into what is currently recognized as comics in the early nineteenth century, particularly with the work of Swiss teacher Rodolphe Töpffer (Chute 2008: 455, Beaty 2007: 21).

The coalescing of the conventions and practices by which we now identify the form was, of course, a gradual process, and the modern medium can count the likes of eighteenth-century satirical caricatures, such as William Hogarth’s series, and the strip narratives that appeared in popular prints of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as its antecedents. Some critics go so far as to include such artifacts as the Bayeux Tapestry and cave paintings under the banner of comics (McCloud 2000: 201), though most concur that “this kind of historical extrapolation is dubious in its logic, and often used to ‘justify’ comics by association with more culturally-respected forms” (Sabin 1993: 13). Despite efforts to argue otherwise, there is simply no traceable lineage from today’s *Beano* back to medieval stained glass windows.<sup>1</sup>

Though the form itself has a long history, comics scholarship has been slower to develop, only emerging as a coherent discipline within Anglophone academia over the past twenty to thirty years. (European comics criticism, particularly in Francophone circles where comics, not incidentally, enjoy a better popular reputation, predates Anglophone scholarship by several decades [McQuillan 2005: 7–13].) Throughout its evolution, the field has been pervaded by the sort of “justificatory” strategies that lead critics into dating the medium’s genesis at the very dawn of civilization,

or adopting the plural form as a universal label so as to avoid the light-hearted, jokey connotations of the singular “comic.” Comics scholarship has been riddled with “status anxiety” (Hatfield 2005: xii), and it may well be the case that the comics form is widely perceived as inherently low-brow, more readily associated, in the popular imagination, with *The Beano* and men in tights than with (to pick some diverse examples at random) the politically engaged New Journalism of Sue Coe, dark and dreamlike defamiliarization of Peter Blegvad, or the Tarkovsky-esque narrative stylings of Lorenzo Mattotti. However, the “belaboured alternately defensive and celebratory prose” (Chute 2006: 1,018) with which comics scholars have often attempted to combat this poor reputation does little to improve the standing of either the medium or scholarly interest in it. Comics critics too often extol the virtues of the form to the hilt, “championing [their] interest in comics with the aggressive attitudes of the fan [becoming] carried away into exaggerated statements of faith, if only to overcome a certain embarrassment [they] may still feel [themselves]” (Eco cited in Christiansen & Magnussen 2000: 20).<sup>2</sup> Critics have tended to overreact to perceived slights against the medium, often at the expense of responding analytically to the exigencies of the corpus itself. There is a growing sense that “it’s probably time to let go of that strain of earnest defensiveness” (Wolk 2007: 67), but the formal approaches to comics dominating current criticism remain the result of this very stance, and this book seeks to address the problems endemic in this defensively inspired formalist framework.

The origins of comics scholarship partially lie with the ascendancy of cultural studies (Sabin 1993: 92, Christiansen & Magnussen 2000: 18, Heer & Worcester 2009: xi). The field has consequently been imbued with democratic leanings, strongly bound up with a suspicion of both the distinction between high and low culture, at the bottom of which heap comics traditionally ended up, and the authority of academic institutions historically implicated in maintaining that hierarchy. But the Anglophone field is also widely acknowledged to have received its jumpstart from practitioner-theorists (Baetens 2001: 147, Whitlock 2006: 966, Lent 2010: 23). It was “non-scholarly researchers – critics, practitioners, journalists, and avocational researchers – whose work, in fact, laid much of the groundwork on which scholars now stand” (Troutman 2010: 437). This legacy has had significant implications for the field. Current scholarship owes much to these trailblazers and their work provides an immensely valuable basis for academic study, but it has tended to be “removed from the scholarly traditions with which it might best intersect” (Groensteen 2006: viii).

Though this seminal work cannot be dismissed, it has often been theoretically unsophisticated. Comics scholarship continues to wrestle with the task of balancing due deference to this practice-oriented strain of commentary with a duty to correct its theoretical errors and omissions.

It has been suggested that, particularly within the arena of the Bowling Green State University hub and *Journal of Popular Culture*, a counter-culture atmosphere is fostered where “results can be described more as a celebration of popular culture than as methodological and theoretical new thinking” (Christiansen & Magnussen 2000: 20). These practices “reflect the conscious and conscientious ambivalence the Popular Culture Association historically bears to the academy in general” (Troutman 2010: 437), and within the field of comics studies this feeds into the parallel propensity of practitioner-critics to sidestep the theoretical traditions and discourses that might usefully inform their otherwise insightful observations and commentary. The result of this twin inheritance is “a kind of hesitancy or even resistance on the part of comics scholars to participate fully in the modes of academic writing and research” (Troutman 2010: 433). Even academic proponents of the field can neglect the relevant source theory, abandoning scholarly rigor in favor of respectful repetition. The state of Anglophone comics criticism’s consolidation period resonates strongly with James Elkins’s recent assessment of visual studies: “As a new field, visual culture has a nature [*sic*] propensity to search for founding texts and ideas, but theorists and critics can do themselves a disfavor by anchoring their work to those authors and ideas, especially where the directions of the new scholarship diverge from their sources” (Elkins 2003: 101).

Comics scholars’ adoption and perpetuation of popular generalizations, suppositions, and suggestions that the academic has a professional duty to engage with and challenge (in a way the expert pundit does not) does little to assist the ongoing sophistication of the field as a demanding discipline.

Given comics’ struggle against blanket dismissal beside elite cultural forms, it is perhaps understandable that critics are reluctant to embrace what might be charged with being another kind of intellectual snobbery. The cross-pollination of the field with practitioners and academics does not foster the kind of discourse that conscientiously speaks to and positions itself within ongoing scholarly practices. Art Spiegelman notes, of reactions to his own commentary on his work, that “academics were happier with idiot-savant cartoonists,” suggesting burgeoning scholarship enables an exclusion as “only now that this jargon has been perfected, is it

possible for everybody who's not in the club to be an idiot-savant, because they're never going to understand the framing device which the criticism is" (cited in Witek 2008: 218). Ivan Brunetti makes similar reference to academics "condescendingly" bracketing off "practitioners" under that dissociating label (2006: 7), implicitly protesting the colonization of the field by scholastically minded latecomers. Scholarly critics' capitulation to this sort of inverted snobbery, facilitated by cultural studies' open, democratic agenda, and exacerbated by an underlying fear that "everyone else thinks what they do is kind of trashy and disreputable" (Wolk 2007: 67), can work to derail scrupulous academic vigilance. It too often results in "an argument delivered from the defensive couch, a discourse addressed not to an audience of informed and sympathetic colleagues but to an imperfectly imagined hangman's jury of deans, intra- and extra-disciplinary experts, the editors and readers of the *Comics Journal*, and the people who write book reviews on Amazon.com, all of these divergent discursive expectations and often contradictory intellectual goals" (Witek 2008: 219).

The novelist and essayist Curtis White points out that "from a philosopher's perspective, one of the sure signs that there's no thinking going on [in a particular discourse] is that there is never a context for what they do. They are never thinking in the context of other thinkers. They are never reading, considering, interpreting what someone else has thought as a point of departure for what they think. It's all *ex nihilo*, as if ideas just burst in your head like an aneurysm" (White 2007: 79).

This charge resonates with the situation Elkins alludes to within visual studies, where critics use foundational works as a springboard without dealing with the wider established theory that could inform it. Within Anglophone comics criticism, the core *ex nihilo* text from which much subsequent theory has issued is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993). McCloud is widely cited as the founding father of the field, and though it is sometimes acknowledged that he is a distinctly "second-rate theoretician" (Baetens 2003: np), reverent allegiance to his seminal primer has more consistently seen it "elevate[d] [. . .] to the status of holy writ" (Harvey 2009: 25). McCloud himself defends his uncontextualized speculations, stating "my academic aspirations stemmed from a conviction that not every work of theory could be built on other works of theory. I was convinced that useful discourse often started with direct observation, logic and a horde of semi-educated guesses" (cited in Witek 2008: 219). Convinced as McCloud may be, and influential as *Understanding Comics* has proven, given the staggering multi-disciplinarity of comics studies, it

is vital that critics are responsive to relevant scholarly contexts if they are to engage in genuinely new thinking. The diversity of approaches to comics (variously treated as cultural, educational, literary, political, geographical, or socio-historical artifacts) means that robust, constructive theory must address itself to an established set of issues and questions it seeks to further and enrich, or risk instituting an enthusiastic but under-informed celebration of comics as the standard critical practice.

In the spirit of countering this tendency, this book anchors itself in literary and linguistic theory, addressing the sometimes over-general use comics criticism makes of these discourses. This is an arena in which the defensiveness that drives so much critical work on comics is most ripe. The comics form is (usually) a mixed one, so the characteristics of words and images, and the ways they operate in conjunction, are pertinent issues for anyone concerned with its structural mechanisms. But the usage of semiotic theory to illuminate these issues is shot through with an anxiety about the relative status of images versus words. Comics criticism participates in a historic rivalry between art forms, or “war of signs” (Mitchell 1986: 47), that has seen their relative attributes, virtues, and capabilities long debated. Comics critics are frequently keen to champion the efficacy and worth of images. A perceived “privileged status often accorded to narratives in linguistic media” (Walsh 2006: 860) leads to earnest insistence that “pictorial language seems as capable as words of communicating ideas” (Beronä 2001: 19); that “drawing, as a system, is not necessarily less true than other systems of representation” (Chute 2006: 1,017); and that before literacy extended beyond the privileged (read “elitist”) classes, “pictures were an effective way to communicate information” (Versaci 2008: 7). Notwithstanding the shortcomings of an approach to an art form that views words and images as functionalist vessels for information, anxiety about the value of images leads critics into dubious theoretical territory. Understandably keen to state the parity of words and images, critics too often overstate this equal validity as outright equivalence.

This practice runs throughout the critical literature. It is variously stated that the distinction between words and images is “an arbitrary separation” (Eisner 1985: 13); that “from the point of view of semiotics theory, images and words are equivalent entities [. . .] perceived in much the same way” (Varnum & Gibbons 2001: xi); and that snobbery about visual narrative forms such as comics is “reinforced by assumptions about essential ‘differences’ between communication by text and communication by images” (Hatfield 2005: 32), with those artfully placed scare quotes seeking to

unsettle any such assumptions the reader might be harboring. One does not need an extensive knowledge of semiotic theory in order to question this flattening of distinctions, but Anglophone critics typically invoke it in a very generalized way, positing all signifying practices as broadly similar instances of signs standing in for things, ordered by codes and conventions. In order to catch all semiological practices within a general science of signs (this general science was a hypothetical postulate for Ferdinand de Saussure [1983: 16] and had still not transpired according to Barthes, writing in the 1960s [1967: 9], or Mitchell, in the 1980s [1986: 54]; both these latter critics see semiotics' linguistic basis as a stumbling block to wider application), the initial linguistic model can only be invoked in a rather generalized, even vague, way in order to be applicable to the diverse modes of language, images, and the comics form. Such vagueness leads to an advancement of neither semiotic theory itself, nor the discipline that purports to utilize it. The distinction lies in the details, but heeding these specificities little serves the assertions of communicative parity that are routinely made via claims that any difference between visual and verbal is spurious to begin with.

Differences do exist and they are crucial to understanding the distinct ways words and images are deployed and perceived within comics. To begin with, language is built from a limited set of discrete minimal units, while visual signification, as I will go on to demonstrate, is continuous and infinitely gradated. Language is based around "a finite number of characters [. . .] and the gaps between them are empty; there are no intermediate characters between "a" and "d" that have any function in the system, whereas the dense system provides for the introduction of an infinite number of meaningful new marks into the symbol" (Mitchell 1986: 68). That is to say, the distinctions between language's limited set of distinctive sounds are binary either/or distinctions: there is no functional midpoint between "cat" and "cad," though the lines and curves that make up a drawing of a cat may be adjusted in myriad subtle ways with no definitive cutoff point determining when that sign has become a different sign. Language is founded on the principle of double articulation with a small fixed number of phonemes (distinctive phonic units) that make up a limited pool of morphemes (minimal significant units, for example, basic words such as "like" or "lady," or semantic fragments such as "un-" that can be combined to form more complex words such as "unladylike"), which can then be combined in infinite variation to create phrases, sentences, and texts.

It is not possible to find minimally significant units within visual images:

The image is syntactically and semantically dense in that no mark may be isolated as a unique, distinctive character (like a letter of an alphabet) [. . .] Its meaning depends rather on its relations with all the other marks in the dense, continuous field. A particular spot of paint might be read as the highlight on Mona Lisa's nose, but that spot achieves its significance in the specific system of pictorial relations to which it belongs, not as a uniquely differentiated character that might be transferred to some other canvas. (Mitchell 1986: 66)

Umberto Eco posits a comparable example of a semicircle and dot that, in a drawing of a human face, might represent a smile and eye, while the exact same forms within a depiction of a bowl of fruit might signify a banana and grape seed (Eco 1976: 215). Unlike the morpheme "lady," which contributes the same significance to the larger units "ladylike" and "unladylike" (or even phrases such as "green with envy" or "green around the gills," whose figurative significance is latent in the usual meaning of "green," and is drawn out and anchored by its context), the continuous and dense field of visual images proves much more manipulable.

Linguistic signs are, furthermore, arbitrary. The relationship between signifier and signified is purely conventional, based on knowledge. Visual signs are (certainly more often) motivated, with some logical relationship existing between a sign's form and its significance. Pictures look like the thing they represent, and though there are codes regulating the relationship between signifier and signified, it is not always necessary to have prior knowledge of a particular sign in order to work out what it represents in the way that it is with arbitrary words, whose signifier-signified association must simply be learnt. This enables a degree of freedom for images, whose potential deducibility, stemming from that motivated relationship between form and meaning, means signs need not be preexistent and already familiar in order to be functional. We may be able to interpret a visual form we have never seen before, but we cannot work out the meaning of a verbal signifier whose significance we have not already learnt: we can deduce the significance of "unladylike" only if we are already familiar with each of its arbitrary constituent units. As such, visual signification is less constrained than language by a preexistent *langue*—the abstract differential system of language that all instances of *parole* (particular utterances) are obliged to comply with in order to be functionally meaningful. Whereas individual words have an abstract, conventional meaning that recurs when they are used in different contexts, the spot of paint on the Mona Lisa's nose, or Eco's semicircle, are imbued with significance by

their place within a particular context—and before then, do not have a fixed significance. As has been asserted of cinema, visual signification “is *parole* and not *langue*” (Mitchell 2009: 119).

The key distinctions this book maintains are: arbitrariness and motivation; differing levels of constraint by a preexistent *langue*; double articulation and constitution in minimal units, as distinct from continuity and density. It will also touch on the issues of language’s dual graphic-phonetic form and the radical heterogeneity of visual signification, which subsumes an array of different codes such as size, color, texture, and location, very different to language’s finite pool of like units. This rather cursory summary will be fleshed out in the ensuing discussion, through which a more attentive use of source theory will help demonstrate not only that these differences exist, but that they are pertinent to our understanding of how each semiotic mode generates the specific effects it does. Supportive close readings from a range of texts illustrate the ways in which an understanding of the mixed medium’s operations in fact depends on addressing the different ways words and images work. The texts used are drawn from a range of comics formats and periods. The emphasis will be on more recent and, in particular, more “arty” or experimental comics, but these have been selected purely as they best clarify the points raised about comics’ formal makeup, which apply to comics in general and not only the formally innovative texts that best facilitate an explication of these points.

The ongoing anxiety about the supposed hierarchy of words and images means that comics are habitually defended against the benchmark of language and literature. If images—or even the comics form itself—can be argued to work just like verbal language, then comics must be as good as “proper books.” As such, “the dominant thread in the scholarly study of comic books has always been the literary and textual” (Beatty 2007: 8).<sup>3</sup> It has become near automatic to class comics as a literary form (Meskin 2009: 219, Wolk 2007: 14, Chute 2008), a kind of writing (Raeburn 2004: 17, Hatfield 2005: 33), or, most habitually, as a language itself.<sup>4</sup> The defensive root of this tendency, and extent to which it has become a mechanical move, are both exemplified by Charles Hatfield’s self-defeating claims (made on the very same page) that “recent insistence on comics-as-reading seems designed to counter a long-lived tradition of professional writing that links comics with illiteracy” and that, nevertheless, “my bedrock claim [is] that comic art is a form of *writing*” (Hatfield 2005: 33). Comics criticism has coalesced around the critical models of language, reading, and literature. However, the dominant usage of these models is theoretically



impoverished. Semiotics is used to obliterate pertinent distinctions and ideas of literariness imprecisely synonymized with narrative. Both critical models are invoked in service of aggrandizing the visual mode and comics form to the perceived privileged position of the verbal. Though not convinced these discourses are the only—or even best—available, and without room to fully espouse the possibility of using cinema as a closer structural kin (which has, at any rate, frequently been addressed elsewhere), this book expressly challenges the specific *use* that is routinely made of linguistic and literary theory, seeking an adjusted critical framework that is better attuned to the specificities of the visual and verbal modes. The aim is to minimize the defensiveness that can so often be found underpinning the dominant approach to comics' formal structure, and also to challenge the deleterious habit of using "language" as the "vernacular" "for what should properly be called 'symbol systems'" (Mitchell 1994: 349). In doing this, the revised framework does not aspire to "rehabilitate" comics beside the supposedly hallowed benchmark of other semiotic modes or art forms, but instead aims at incorporating the more consistent and established critical standards of adjacent scholarly disciplines.

The book tackles three particular problematic aspects of the linguistic model as it is currently used. Each section in turn is further subdivided, examining these three core issues from different but related angles. Part One addresses "Language in Comics," and is deliberately skewed towards linguistic content in an attempt to redress a common insistence that comics visual content must always—definitively—control the narrative and dominate the text. It is common for critics to assert that there must necessarily be "a preponderance of image over text" (Kunzle 1973: 2), and to suggest that where words undertake too much of the narrative burden, the very classification of a work is compromised. So keen can critics be to champion the power, efficacy, and importance of the visual, that they display an "almost universal" fear that words might somehow take over or conquer comics' images, an anxiety Dylan Horrocks terms "logophobia" (2001: 5). It is not difficult to find examples refuting the notion that words are always the ancillary extra to primary images within comics, but this section particularly aims to show how we lose out on an appreciation of literary language in comics if we refuse to recognize its *potential* centrality. Comics frequently incorporate highly literary writing, and Part One, focusing on three different authors in turn, looks at how those specific features of language (its arbitrariness, constitution in minimal units, and constraint by the *langue*) in fact enable the precise literary tricks these

texts accomplish. This section also looks at how text is read in comics, considering the verbally generated effects garnered by fragmenting text across comics' delimited panels, subframes, and speech balloons, and arranging these over a two-dimensional page surface. The purpose of this first part is to examine linguistic content, highlighting language's distinct semiotic features, but also showing how the comics form can deploy words in its own specific ways.

Part Two operates under the banner "Comics as Language," addressing two key aspects of the postulation that the medium's practices and devices are structured like a verbal symbol system. Typically, claims that comics possess a comparable "grammar, syntax and punctuation" (Sabin 1993: 9, Kunzle 1990: 349) are not quantified or explained. Such statements are so pervasive as to have attained the veneer of accepted fact, though attempts to enumerate how the features of comics replicate these linguistic properties vary immensely.<sup>5</sup> The first chapter in this section deals with the suggestion that, because visual and verbal interact, they become an inextricable blend that can therefore be framed as a unified language in itself; a suggestion I refute, by showing that distinctions between the two modes and their operations persist, even when they are drawn into collaborative play. The next two chapters address the question of sequentiality and the proposition that panels are semiotic units whose signifieds are units of story time, which are articulated in texts like linguistic units in longer phrases. I do not extensively address the elliptical nature of stories told through sequences of panels here, because the issue of how story content is delivered seems more a question of *narrative theory* than one of language or symbol system. Rather than the marshaling of story content, these chapters instead discuss the privileging of sequentiality within the current critical framework. This emphasis proves to be a mistaken move, for what truly distinguishes comics from other narratives is the *simultaneity* of narrative segments on the two-dimensional page, which is incidental in prose and does not occur with film's temporally progressing shots. Rather than the structural definition it is often claimed to be, sequentiality can be better explained as a kind of realism principle, a tendency, not an absolute, which can be altered, reinvented, or even discarded, in ways language can be seen to resist.

The third and final part considers the framing of visual signification in terms of language. "Images as Language" in part addresses comics' images and cartooning specifically, following on from and furthering the discussion of comics as a kind of language. It also provides parallel arguments

to those made in Part One, examining visual signification's continuousness, motivation, and flexibility, and showing how these features are as instrumental to its operations as language's contrasting characteristics are shown to be. A challenge is also raised to the very idea of a semiotic, language-based approach to images by examining the aesthetic visual style of comics artwork. By adopting the methodology of the art-historian's formal analysis, it can be implicitly demonstrated that semiotics does not provide an effective framework for analyzing visual art beyond its functional and reductive "message." Part Three also considers how comics systematically organize smaller constituent units into a coherent, larger whole, expanding on the issue of comics as language, but specifically looking at the page as a delimited unit, and thus at the possible linguistic structures organizing the page as an integrated image. While something must be conceded to the idea that some aspects of comics function as a symbol system, ultimately it will be shown that, as this system is motivated and non-minimal, it differs in crucial ways from verbal language.

The central thrust of this book is to demonstrate via close analysis of both texts and source theory the precise differences between the visual and verbal modes, which are habitually swept aside, seemingly for defensive reasons. It aims to show that *adjusting* the language-based model is necessary to make it appropriate for assessing visual images. Such an adjustment renders semiotics a useful tool for explicating the mechanics of the mixed medium, in terms of both its use of words and images, and its own devices and signifying practices. I focus on formalism because it is precisely in the conception of comics' formal structures that the field's greatest critical weak spots lie, more so than the plethora of sociological/political/historical/readership-centered approaches to comics that have developed in conjunction. Of course, strong theorizations of comics do exist, and the challenges raised here should not be read as an outright dismissal of the decades of diverse scholarship that have presaged the rise of the field as a recognized academic discipline. But, particularly where formalist approaches are concerned, critical standards remain distinctly patchy and there exists a real problem with adequately distinguishing between conceptually sound criticism and less carefully considered offerings. This difficulty needs to be addressed as comics criticism becomes ever more widely recognized within academia, if the field is to shake off any last vestiges of that denigrated status with which so many critics have been concerned. I do not aim to dismiss so much as alter and augment existing conceptions of comics' structure and workings, to yield a modified

framework that is more theoretically precise and more closely attuned to the scholarly discourses that inform it. The defensive reaction against the art form's "poor relation" status that has often sought to aggrandize both visual images and the comics form, if it is indeed necessary in the first place (is the Sistine Chapel ceiling really considered inferior to *Great Expectations*?), is ill-served by a vague and generalized use of theory that does little to bolster the perceived seriousness of either the art form or its study. As a discipline, comics criticism is gaining ground in the academic sphere, in both prevalence and esteem. It is therefore all the more imperative that the field's proponents finally abandon those core tenets that characterized the discipline's awkward adolescence, ensuring comics studies is instituted not as a vague and general pulp of piecemeal theory, celebratory criticism, and a denial of hierarchies that is extrapolated to a lack of discernment, but as a more consistently serious and rigorous discipline whose only necessary defense is that it self-evidently merits inclusion.