

Introduction

Bridging Gaps

Maaheen Ahmed

Comics seem to have changed in recent years: superheroes are not a given, and when they are, they don't easily incarnate the good-evil binary; new superheroes, such as the latest Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, and the female Thor reverse established racial and gender stereotypes; powerful personal narratives (Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*) have entered university classrooms, figuring very often but not exclusively in literature courses; art galleries and museums display and sell comics art; and perhaps, most importantly, comics are available in regular bookstores instead of specialist comic book shops or newsstands. This change encouraged the assumption that comics have grown up, offering content suitable for adults rather than child readers. Such narratives of comics growing up have been rightly criticized. Pointing out how the alleged maturing of comics in the 1990s was essentially a media hype, Roger Sabin traces a history of comics for adult readers which starts with the use of engraving in printing processes and the rise of satire in the eighteenth century, before leading to the publication of "the first modern comic," *Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday* in 1884 (17). Turning to the contemporary US American context, Christopher Pizzino problematizes the two sides of the comics "*Bildungsroman*" discourse: while it offers new opportunities for comics and attracts new readers, it also imposes the biases of legitimized literary and artistic media and increments anxieties against the supposed lack of value of mainstream comics. In our search for the artistic and literary elements in comics, we lose sight of the actual medium and flatten out aspects that are distinctive to it.

In many ways, the graphic novel incarnates the change implied by the alleged maturing of comics: its one-shot, book-length form (and sometimes size) and complex content calls for careful reading and rereading. Consider, for instance, the intertextual references in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, ranging from James Joyce, Albert Camus, Colette and Henry James to pioneering homosexual and feminist authors such as Adrienne Rich,

Anaïs Nin, Barbara Love (*Sappho Was Right*) and Radclyffe Hall (*Well of Loneliness*). Often written and drawn by one author instead of several, the graphic novel edges closer to the kinds of works we are accustomed to classifying as highbrow, as opposed to the mass-produced items made by several, often anonymous hands. We frequently encounter this tension between high and low in academic and popular discourses around comics. While it may blur attempts for clear definitions – literary graphic novels versus popular comics? – such tension is productive. It tests the limits of literature and art and popular culture and can help trace how these limits mutate over time and in different contexts.

Charles Hatfield argues for understanding certain comics published from 1968 onwards as alternative literature, a literary form in its own right that does not need the graphic novel label. He traces the origins of personal, unabashedly confessional comics narratives that are imaginatively peppered with satire, science fiction and fantasy elements to the underground press, for which he takes the publication of Robert Crumb's *Zap Comix* as a starting point. Calling for a new kind of reading attuned to the specificities of the medium, the many “tensions,” including imagetext and sequence and surface (32–67), require us to not only read (from left to right, for instance) but also to look (at the comics page in its entirety). The composite word, imagetext, as well the notion of constant tension between image and text were introduced by the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell to consider hybrid works such as William Blake's illuminated poems that rely on a complete synergy of words, images and lettering (89–107).

Like Hatfield and Pizzino, Bart Beaty offers a nuanced view of comics reception (and appropriation) in the art world, highlighting the limits of legitimization. Instead of getting tangled up in attempts to define comics – which can be problematic given the amount of comic-like artbooks and artbook-like comics, to give only one example – Beaty proposes understanding comics “as products of a particular social world” (43). Instead of formal properties, the contexts of production, framing, and reception contribute to our considering a work as comics. Comics can also be seen as “social objects” which, as Samuel L. Delany explains,

resist formal definition, i.e., we cannot locate the necessary and sufficient conditions that can describe them with definitional rigor. Social objects are those that, instead of existing as a relatively limited number of material objects, exist rather as an unspecified number of recognition codes (functional descriptions, if you will) shared by an unlimited population, in which new and different examples are regularly produced. Genres, discourses, and genre collections are all social objects. And when a discourse

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(or genre collection, such as art) encourages, values, and privileges originality, creativity, variation, and change in its new examples, it should be self-evident why “definition” is an impossible task (since the object itself, if it is healthy, is constantly developing and changing). (239; see also Hatfield 4)

The *Companion to Comics* considers comics as the host medium of forms such as the graphic novel, the comics magazine, the comic strip, the web comic, and other digital comics. This medium, a means of communication, of telling stories, constructing narratives and creating aesthetic experiences is essentially multimodal, very often, but not always, relying on words and images, different kinds of materialities (ranging from paper quality and binding to display locations) and even sound and animation (see Chapter 5 on digital comics). Different kinds of drawing styles – individualistic as opposed to streamlined “house” or series styles, a single artist as opposed to multiple, changing artists, digitized elements – play an important role in telling the story and creating aesthetic viewing and reading experiences. This bare definition of comics is naturally porous and should be understood as a compass providing an initial orientation. The chapters in this *Companion* continue to tease and explore possibilities of understanding comics, confirming that the medium is “infinitely plastic” (Hatfield xiv). In many ways, Jack Cole’s *Plastic Man* embodies the modular potential of comics: like Mr Fantastic who appeared a few decades later, Plastic Man has an elastic body that can take any shape it wants (Spiegelman and Kidd). Such bodies incarnate the malleability and the visual potential of the comics form, both in the scope offered to the imagination and in the kinds of movement generated through the existence of multiple panels, different framing devices and page layouts.

Instead of boxing comics within fixed definitions, the more interesting way of approaching the medium is to trace its potentialities, to see how it works and how can we better understand it. For better understanding comics we need to turn to its diverse forms (Part I), the reading possibilities accounting for the diversity of comics production (Part II), and, last but not least, how the medium is framed in institutional and social contexts (Part III). The rest of this introduction turns to a few well-known (and one lesser known!) examples of comics to explain the basic elements of comics theory and history.

Even before the rise of the graphic novel, comics have showcased rich potential and variety and they have not always been for children alone. The association between children and comics is a product of the twentieth century with the appearance of “Children’s Corner” sections in illustrated

newspapers for adults around 1905 (Sabin 22), milking the attractiveness of pictures for children: too young to read, they could always look at and enjoy the pictures. That the earliest comics were intended for adults is evident from Rodolphe Töpffer's smart, ironic picture stories. His works, originally self-published, later avidly copied, famously drew praise from Goethe, who did not like caricature, nor did he seem to care much for Töpffer's prose and poetry (which outnumbered his comics). In the words of pioneering comics scholar David Kunzle:

Goethe kept the two albums [*Mr. Cryptogame* and *Adventures of Dr. Festus*] a few days, "looking at only ten pages or so at a time, resting afterwards, because, he said, he risked getting an indigestion of ideas". In the written (dictated) judgement which Goethe was then pressed to render, he praised the artist warmly for being able to "draw multiple motifs out of a few figures", as "the most fertile inventor of combinations", and for his "innate, gay, and every-ready talent." (52)

Let's take a look at a page from Töpffer's *Histoire d'Albert* (Figure 0.1), published at the same time as *Histoire de M. Cryptogame* in 1845. It captures a moment when the antihero – all of Töpffer's protagonists are

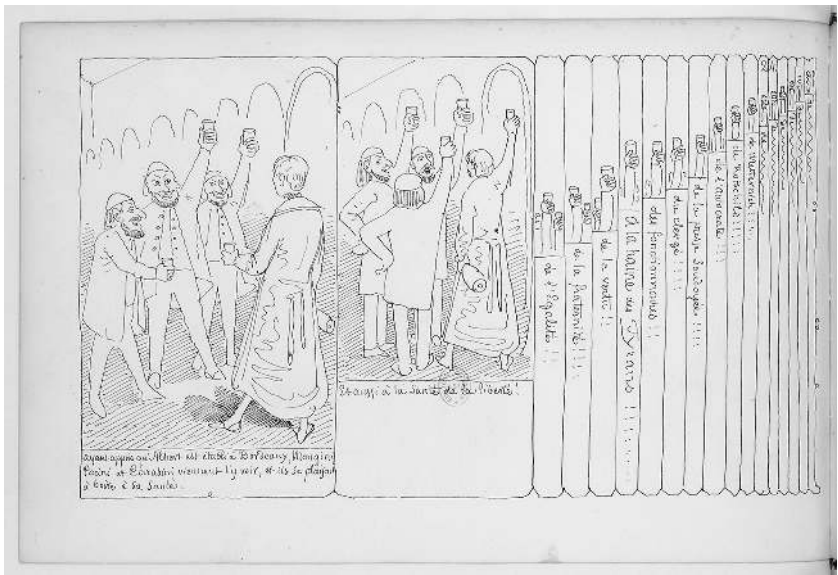


Figure 0.1. Simon de Nantua (Rodolphe Töpffer), *Histoire d'Albert* (publisher unknown, 1845), p. 24. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b85290242/f40.item>

antiheroes – in one of his many moments of drinking, this time in a failing attempt to become a wine salesman, meets his Carbonari friends, with whom he had already participated in a botched revolution. The narrative voice is deeply ironic, pretending to sympathize with Albert while mocking his stupidity. Very rapidly, the revolutionary ideals of the three friends are confused and lost and they end up drinking to Metternich's health, the Austrian Chancellor who was one of the Carbonari's most fervent enemies. The drawings are amateurish and unfinished but one can see why they moved Goethe to offer a few words of praise: the lines are playful, the drawings are in constant movement, text and image work in symbiosis to convey the narrative's tone and flow without flattening it out. While we read the page from left to right, we also absorb it in its entirety (and perhaps even look at the end of each page before the beginning). Like comics and other serial fiction, such as the installments in which novels were published, the image also ends on a page turner; we are curious to see how this drunken encounter will end (not well, as suggested by the increasingly narrow panels, the incoherent words and indecipherable images). We might also be encouraged to revisit the entire album and discover new elements with each new reading since the simplicity of the images is misleading.

In his seminal *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*, Thierry Smolderen examines William Hogarth's print cycles which produced "readable images [that] situated themselves between the *news* and the *novel*" (3). Already in the eighteenth century then, the medium of comics finds itself between modern print magazines and more literary publications, even though the novel did not have the canonical status it enjoys today. We can already see elements of both the press (satire, caricature) and the novel, especially in the long form, in Töpffer's comics. The picture stories are not simple imitations of the novel; they also mock its postures and preferences, recalling the satirical and caricatural affiliations of the comics medium. Many of the tenets of the novel and predilections of the nascent movement of romanticism – such as admirable, realistic protagonists and the emphasis on human emotions – are turned on their heads. The playful irreverence that we find in Töpffer's works, where a minor art pokes fun at itself and at the higher arts, persists in modern-day comics, many of which continue to cater to adult and mixed audiences, such as Georges Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, which ran from 1913 to 1944 and attracted an admiring readership that included the modernist poets, e. e. cummings and T.S. Eliot (see Heer and Worcester).

In *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), writer and cultural critic Gilbert Seldes writes about *Krazy Kat*:

It is rich with something we have too little of – fantasy. It is wise with pitying irony; it has delicacy, sensitiveness, and an unearthly beauty. The strange, unnerving, distorted trees, the language inhuman, un-animal, the events so logical, so wild, are all magic carpets and faery foam – all charged with unreality. Through them wanders Krazy, the most tender and the most foolish of creatures, a gentle monster of our new mythology. (244)

Notably Seldes situated comics among other “lively” elements of popular culture, including vaudeville, the circus, slapstick comedy, burlesque, musicals, the movies, especially those of Chaplin and Keaton, and jazz. The adjective “lively” is fascinating: these components of popular culture are alive, constantly in movement, in tune with their times. They are often joyous, even if that joy is bittersweet as readers of *Krazy Kat* will immediately acknowledge. Importantly Seldes places the higher and popular arts in dialogue, rather than in a hierarchical relationship.

Krazy Kat perfectly captures this dialogue between the “high” and “low,” much like Töpffer’s works. In Herriman’s case, a modernist sensibility meets with the older tradition of nonsense. We are not yet in the realm of screwball comedy which became popular in American movies and comics in the 1930s. Nonsense, like comics, has a close affinity with children’s literature. It defies adult logics and rationale, reverses established order. Consider, for instance, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and Carl Sandburg’s *Rootabooga Stories*. The latter offers a particularly apt comparison because of the important role accorded to the vastness of the American landscape where anything and everything is possible. In the comic in Figure 0.2, Krazy manages to create a fake shade. This “shady work” is a shelter from the sun for their love interest Ignatz.

Hannah Miodrag elaborates on *Krazy Kat*’s affiliation with nonsense: “The fractures Herriman creates between signifier and signified, the proliferation of words on one side and meaning on the other all refute [...] logocentrism” (30). In the comic in Figure 0.2, the fractures between signifier and signified unfold in part through word play, especially between the noun *shade*, Ignatz’s obsession to find one, and the adjective *shady*, which is both a result of shade and something dishonest, even illegal. Krazy’s painted “perminint” shade flirts with both significations of the adjective. Both characters adore repetitive forms, alliteration in Krazy’s “cool, cam, comfitting” and hyperbole in both Ignatz’s anger and Krazy’s elaborate oral idiom (“Umbridge as us pillite pipples will say”). As Miodrag points out, the words are essentially ornamental and the story is carried by the pictures. The panel at the center with its exceptionally thick frame, in a comic which uses frames only sparingly, highlights the strip’s

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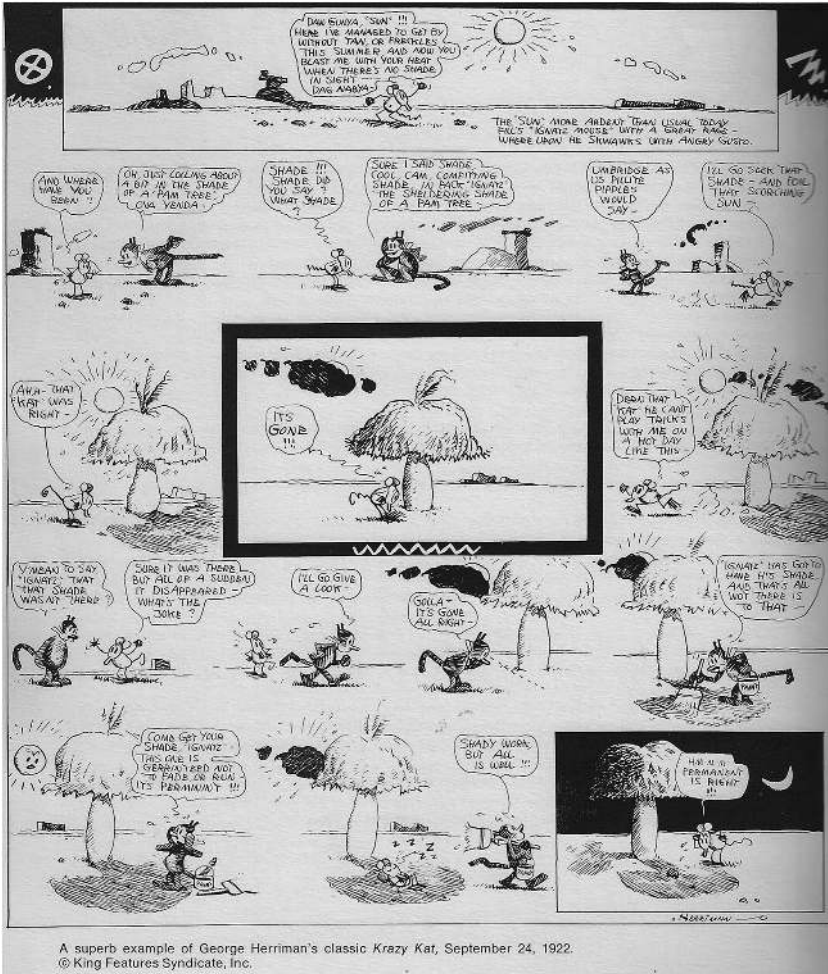


Figure 0.2. George Herriman, *Krazy Kat*, 24 September 1922

central problem: Ignatz's need for shade and the capricious clouds unpredictably killing the shade.

While in the *Krazy Kat* strip, we see Ignatz and Krazy in a relatively peaceful context (Ignatz contents himself with simply yelling at Krazy), the running joke punctuating many of the *Krazy Kat* strips is as follows: Ignatz waits with brick in hand for the most judicious moment to hit Krazy. He rarely misses his mark but Krazy takes these acts of brick-throwing as signs

of love which makes Ignatz angrier. This is the knot of nonsense propelling the action in the comic but the repetition is never identical. The mouse occasionally succumbs to the cat's love, for instance. But beyond Krazy's love for Ignatz, nothing is certain in *Krazy Kat*: shades can be made permanent, Krazy can be both male and female, and so on.

Like many strips relying on gag mechanisms, as masterfully broken down and explained by Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden in *How to Read Nancy*, the anonymous, short-lived comic strip from 1905, *Lucy and Sophie Say Good Bye* also relies on repetition of motifs with variations. These include modern, often urban, life and the subversion of heterosexual expectations as the two women embrace. Like *Krazy Kat*, *Lucy and Sophie Say Good Bye* is generally funny – when the two women get away with their kiss in the face of mounting social pressure – but occasionally also poignant and painful when the two women are forcibly separated by human, mechanical, or natural forces.¹ Lucy and Sophie hardly talk in the strip in Figure 0.3: their exchange is silent, unfolding through their eyes and postures. The voices around them gradually get louder and more urgent – children, schoolteacher, station master – who, like most members of the public, the “crowd” we encounter in *Lucy and Sophie* are quiet and patient at first and shocked, angry, and frustrated when the women, ignoring all pressure, take their time to say their goodbyes. Modern life, its speed, comforts, and anxieties were frequently pictured and parodied in comics (Gardner, *Projections*; Bukatman). In this strip, the women resist and even ignore the surrounding public's haste; they create their own time and space. In the fourth panel, the shock on the faces of the children and the ticket salesman is triggered both by the kiss shared by the two women and the realization that the train will be missed and the picnic cancelled. The strip ends in customary chaos while Lucy and Sophie leave unscathed.

Lucy and Sophie Say Good Bye highlights the advantages of looking beyond an established comics canon which can lead to new discoveries and often subvert assumptions. This is why the chapters in this *Companion* incorporate both well-known and lesser known works (see, in particular, Chapter 5 on digital comics and Chapter 12 on comics at the limits of narration).

Comics are lively, and modern and there's always more more than what meets meets the eye. Even seemingly simple strips such as *Krazy Kat* and

¹ See Caitlin MGurk's insightful article on this unsigned short-lived comic.

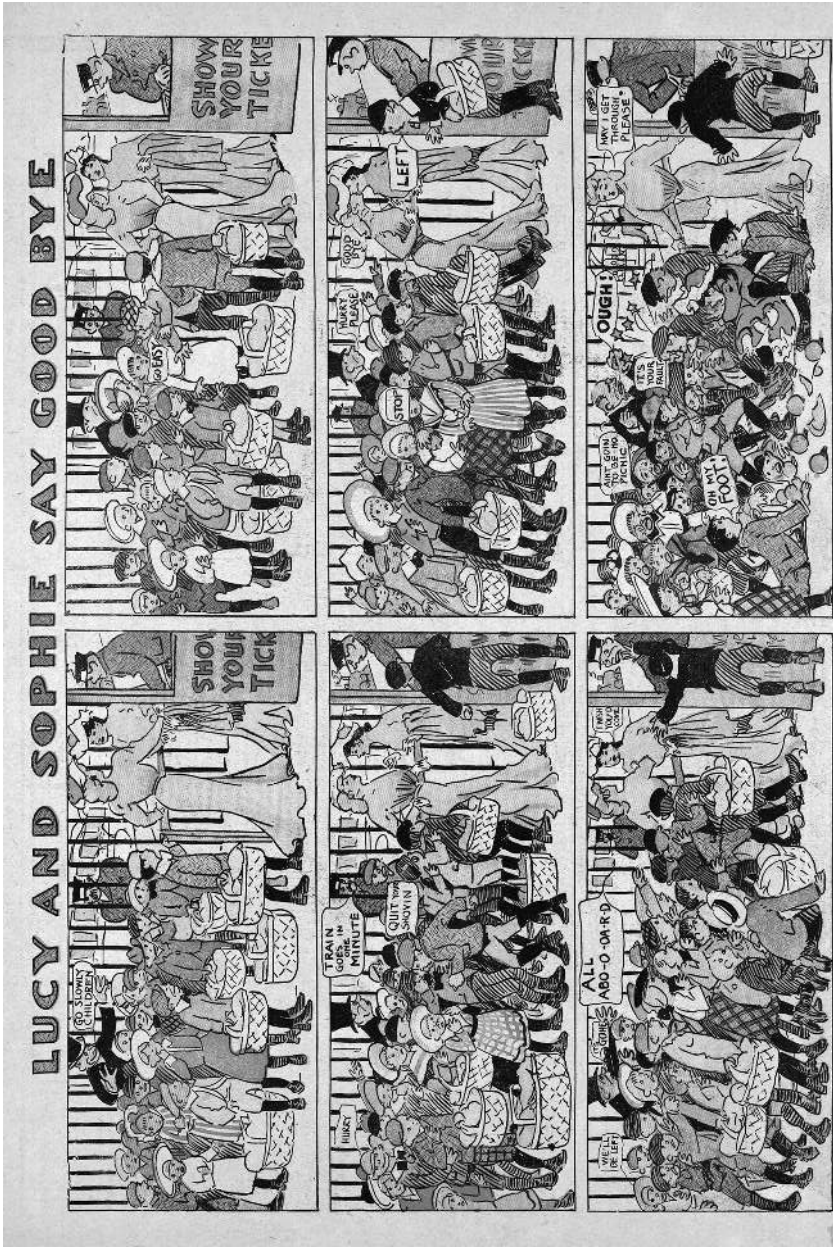


Figure 0.3. "Lucy and Sophie Say Good Bye," *Chicago Tribune*, 7 May 1905

Lucy and Sophie Say Good Bye, with their recurrent characters and motifs, reveal the mechanics of building suspense and resolving it with humor. Ernie Bushmiller, who prized the gag above drawing itself, used diverse techniques – incongruity, surprise, slapstick, verbal and visual puns, exaggeration, misunderstanding, irony, and absurdity – to entertain his readers on a daily basis (Karasik and Newgarden 69).

Reading comics, then, calls for honing new skills, paying attention to different kinds of details. Recently, Stephanie Burt has evoked enchantment and knowledge as a means of studying objects that still remain on the fringes of the academic radar, including comedy and comics (574). In Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature*, enchantment is the longest chapter, perhaps because of its intuitive and vast scope, encompassing a sense of wonder and fascination that is not limited to literature alone. Felski accords a few paragraphs to Hayao Miyazaki's anime, *Spirited Away*, among other works, including the B-movie *The Kiss of the Spider-Woman* and the Manuel Puig novel on which it is based. Found in all echelons of artistic, literary, and mass production, enchantment encourages engagement "with the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience" (Felski 76). Not limited to any one medium, such aesthetic experience offers a fresh way of studying works that do not fulfill familiar criteria of literary or artistic value.

Comics generate enchantment in different ways, many of which are channeled through images and action and the rest by the voices that concretize the story. Some enchantment is generated through the sheer size of the comics page. The *Krazy Kat* page, like any Sunday page, covering the entirety of a broadsheet and often in color, was a weekend treat, a pleasure for the eyes. Simulated movement can also be a source of enchantment. The overcrowded panels in *Lucy and Sophie Say Good Bye*, which are a recurrent feature of the strip, visualize the growing societal pressure that does not always leave the protagonists unscathed. All these panels are heady with movement and tension, much like Töpffer's playful pages.

As with any application of a literary concept to comics, the specificities of the medium need to be taken into account, including its tendency to destabilize and laugh at the assumptions and boundaries it relies upon, such as the frame or even the representativity of drawing.

Felski describes knowledge as follows:

Through their rendering of the subtleties of social interaction, their mimicry of linguistic idioms and cultural grammars, their unblinking attention