‘More than the sum of its parts’: Interdisciplinary approaches to comics studies

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Abstract

Comics studies has been said to occupy, “a unique multi-disciplinary middle-space” (Birkbeck, 2013) and the growth of comics studies since the 1990s has seen significant ‘borrowing’ of instruments, methods, concepts, theories and techniques from other disciplines. Some of the many fields which have had an impact on comics research include: literary and cultural studies, visual arts, modern languages, sociology, geography and media and film studies.

However, just as comics themselves have been frequently described as, ‘more than the sum of their [literacy and visual] parts’, comics studies too needs to do more than simply draw on methods from multiple disciplines; the study of comics requires a truly interdisciplinary approach.

This paper illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of comics studies by examining a recent study of representations of food allergy in comics. It will describe how the authors drew on a wide range of theories and approaches, including reader-response theory (literary studies), semiotics (linguistics), representations of disability (media studies), health communications practices (health science), visual literacy (information studies), and theories of social stigma (sociology).
Introduction: comics and comics studies

Comic books, as they would now be recognised, have been in existence for more than a century\(^1\) and the history of the comic format, or sequential art, has been argued to date back to the Bayeux Tapestry, Mayan epics or even ancient Egyptian paintings (McCloud, 1994). However, the academic study of comics has a much shorter heritage. Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) is often seen as marking a turning point in the acceptance of comics as a topic worthy of serious study. Beaty (2011) argues that comics studies lags about half a century behind the closely allied discipline of film studies; it is only in the last few years that comics studies has started to become institutionalised in the way in which film studies was in the 1960s and 1970s through the creation of specialist departments, peer-reviewed journals, and learned associations. Notable examples include the University of Florida which offers a ‘Comics and visual rhetoric’ track for MA and PhD students\(^2\); the University of Dundee in Scotland which has run a postgraduate course in comics studies since 2011\(^3\); and Kyoto Seika University in Japan which established the first faculty for teaching manga in 2006\(^4\). A number of academic journals dedicated to comics studies have recently been launched, including *Studies in Comics* and the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, both publishing their first issues in 2010.

While comics studies is often associated with university literature departments, comics scholars can be found in a variety of disciplines. The table below lists the departments where members of the editorial boards of two comics journals are located, according to their institutional websites. While the English department was the most common location, recognised scholars in the field can also be found in screen and media studies, cultural studies, art and design, sociology, history, manga studies, humanities and languages.

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\(^1\) Often argued to date from Hogan’s Alley, drawn by Richard F. Outcault in 1894

\(^2\) [http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/study.shtml](http://www.english.ufl.edu/comics/study.shtml)

\(^3\) [http://www.dundee.ac.uk/english/prospective/postgraduates/comicstudies/](http://www.dundee.ac.uk/english/prospective/postgraduates/comicstudies/)

\(^4\) [http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/edu/manga/](http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/edu/manga/)
Naturally, this means that comics scholars might be interested in an array of different aspects of comics, including work and design, the production process, the cultural impact of comics, comics’ history and the educational value of comics to name but a few.

**Interdisciplinarity and comics**

While there has been work to establish theories, and a vocabulary, specific to comics studies, given the emergent nature of the field it is not surprising that the study of comics also draws heavily on other disciplines. As comics scholars will have been educated within a broader discipline and are usually located within a more catholic academic department, it is not unexpected that they make use of methods, theories and techniques from these, more established, fields in their work. However, it is rarely sufficient for a comics scholar to rely on the techniques of one discipline alone; they also need to ‘borrow’ instruments, methods, concepts, theories and techniques from elsewhere.

Nevertheless, as the above table indicates, the majority of comics scholar come from arts and humanities disciplines, where the practice of working in large, diverse research teams has traditionally not been the norm. So how does comics studies become truly interdisciplinary,

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Table 1: Location of journal editorial board members


rather than simply drawing on methods from multiple disciplines in a disconnected, and perhaps, improvised way? Part of the answer may be in the growing community which exists around comics studies; there is an increasing number of conferences, workshops and associations which bring together not only academics, but also practitioners, comics artists and creators, to share ideas and methods. Another approach is joint projects, often on a small scale, which bring together scholars from different backgrounds. It is an example of such a project which is described in this paper.

**Studying nut allergy in comics**

In 2011, a colleague and I worked on a project studying the representation of nut allergy in comics. Although at the time of writing the article, we were working in the same health sciences department, we had come from different disciplinary backgrounds. I had previously worked in an information studies department and have a MA in literary studies, while my colleague, Simon Weaver, has a background in sociology; he is now a Lecturer in Media and Communications and is particularly interested in studying humour. The idea for the project came from some empirical research about stigma and nut allergy that we had both been involved in (Pitchforth et al, 2011). Our backgrounds, and the focus of our study, naturally, had implications for the main disciplines we drew on, as well as those which we chose not to use extensively. The following section describes the main theories and concepts which influenced our thinking whilst we were undertaking this work.

**Semiotics and reader response**

Semiotic theories are among the ideas which have been most frequently used within comics studies (for example, Cohn, 2003; Dittner, 2010; Groensteen, 2007). Key to understanding comics is the ‘rhetorical triangle’ which involves a tripartite examination of the interaction, meaning construction and generation of emotional responses between the arguer, the argument and the audience through discourse (Weaver, 2011). Translating this idea to comics studies, results in a consideration of the position of the producer of the comic, the content of the comic and its meanings, and the reception of the comic by various audience groups. A similar approach from literary studies is reader response criticism, in particular, Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional theory of reading, in which a literary work is conceived not as an object, but as an experience shaped by the reader under the guidance of the text. Both these theories position the reader as integral to the comic, or as they have been described by
comics creator and scholar Scott McCloud, the author’s “silent accomplice” and “equal partner in crime” (McCloud, 1994: 68).

An example of the author proving ‘reading instructions’ (Iser, 1989) for the reader can be seen in *Peanut*, a comic book written by Ayun Halliday and illustrated by Paul Hoppe (2013). When we see the main character, Sadie, for the first time in this text, only the bottom portion of her face is visible alongside the slightly sinister phrase, “I knew I had to spell it out”. This sets the tone for what is to follow by giving the reader a sense that all may not be as straightforward as it seems; it suggests that something unpleasant will unfold, but it is left to the individual reader to imagine what this might mean.

**Visual literacy**

One of the differences between the analysis of comics and text-based materials is, of course, the role of images. In reading a comic, each person does not only have their own reaction to a word based on personal experience and background (Iser, 1989), but also their own individual reaction to each icon. Therefore, in studying the representation of nut allergy in comics, we also drew on theories of visual literacy from information and media studies. For example, the notion that, in visual communication, meaning is formed through a combination of universal icons, such as a circle with two dots and a line to represent a face, and culturally-based conventions, such as dollar signs to represent money (Bamford, 2003). In order to read comics, readers also have to understand particular conventions of the genre, such as streaking effects to indicate motion and balloons to indicate speech. Regular readers naturally become more skilled in interpreting these icons with practice. Eisner refers to the “series of repetitive images and symbols” in comics which, when used repeatedly to convey similar ideas, “become a language” (Eisner, 1985: 8).

An example from one of the comics we studied, *Allergic* (Tomite, 1993), occurs at points the point in the story when the main character experiences an allergic reaction. When this happens, the straight outline of the frame becomes a wobbly line, indicating the change for the character from a stable situation to one where he lacks control of his body. The reader comes to understand what this indicates as they read the story, but it helps if they are aware of the common practice in comics of using the outline of a frame to indicate the emotion conveyed within, for example jagged, irregular edges often indicate surprise or violence.
Bringing text and image together

Comics are frequently said to be, ‘more than the sum of their parts’; they are not simply an illustrated narrative, but “operate on a system of co-presence, where images exist within the space of the page or double-page spread simultaneously” (Beaty, 2011: 108). Therefore, it is not sufficient to adopt approaches devised for textual analysis to analyse the text of comics, and then theories designed to analyse images for the pictorial elements. A more integrated, and interdisciplinary, method is needed and approaches which allow for the integrated study of both elements are being developed. For example, McCloud describes how, conventionally, a dialectic is presented between pictures which are open and easily understood and words which are abstract codes. Yet in comics, the worlds of words and pictures are brought together, “When pictures are more abstracted from ‘reality’, they require greater levels of perception, more like words”, while “When words are bolder and more direct, they require lower levels of perception and are received faster, more like pictures” (McCloud, 1994: 49). However, as comics studies is still, essentially, in its infancy, it is likely that these ideas will be extended and refined in the future.

An example of the way in which text and image need to be analysed together is demonstrated in Peanut (Halliday and Hoppe, 2013). The moment of the dramatic revelation, “I’m not really allergic to peanuts” is the first time that Sadie’s words appear in a speech bubble. In previous frames, she has spoken as a slightly detached narrator and avoided looking directly out at the reader, but now she addresses the reader directly, emphasising the significance, and truth, of this statement. It is therefore important that the reader takes account of both the text and the image to fully understand what the author intends to convey at this point.

Sociology: stigma and stereotyping

Our project also drew on several sociological concepts. A key theme was stigma, a concept derived from Goffman’s discussion of the social treatment of illness, disability and otherness. He explains how, through stigma, the individual is “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman, 1963: 3). In our research, we argue that the “parallel narrative” found in comics “may be useful in representing the complex emotions and reactions associated with stigma” (McNicol and Weaver, 2013: 220). For example, while the image might show the character’s outward behaviour, a thought bubble conveys his true feelings. We used previous work on stigma to identify specific examples within the comics studied. For instance, in What’s Up With Paulina from the Medikidz comic series, the felt stigma of nut allergy is depicted in the attitudes Paulina exhibits as she explains her
understanding of food allergy, “don’t eat anything that tastes good! You may as well just send me home now” (Chilman-Blair and Taddeo, 2009: 7), while crossing her arms against a dark background that works to heighten the sense of social exclusion.

We also made use of Barnes’ (1992) work on media representations of disabled people. In Allergic, the main character, Adrian, can be seen as representing six of the ten stereotypes described by Barnes. At the start, he is a pitiable, anxious child who experiences episodes of violence and curiosity from others. He becomes a paranoid teenager who is, perhaps, his own worst enemy, “sure everyone was out to get me” (Tomine, 1993: 65). By the end of the story, however, Adrian has moved beyond these stereotypes by realising that, if he controls his fear, he can enjoy life despite his allergy.

Another of the areas we considered, albeit briefly, was racial and gender stereotypes. In What’s Up With Paulina, there are five superheroes. Female stereotypes are presented through the masked, mysterious and exotic Chi and the blond girl-next-door Skinderella. The male characters are equally stereotypical: Pump reaffirms the stereotype of the strong black male; Axon represents a genius figure; and Gastro the overweight fool or joker.

Health communication

Finally, we also drew on approaches from health communication. There have been a number of studies around the world evaluating the effectiveness of educational comics to educate both children and adults about health issues, including back pain, HIV, condom use, diet, pesticides and cancer (Kovacs et al, 2011; Milleliri et al, 1999; Harvey, 1997). More generally, there is evidence that fiction can be an important method for conveying information on health issues. Previous research I was involved in looked at the differing reception of fiction and non-fiction books. This found that some teenagers thought that non-fiction books on issues such as sex and drugs were useful as basic information but that fiction helped them to understand more about the motives of behaviour and could have greater impact than non-fictional sources of information (McNicol, 2006). We were, therefore, not simply interested in whether the comics would help a child to better understand factual information about nut allergy, but also wanted to consider the possible impact on behaviour and emotional responses to the condition.
Conclusion

This paper has only described the theories and approaches we drew on most heavily in our research into the representation of nut allergy in comics. We also made reference to topics from the history of medicine, business studies and childhood studies amongst others. As our focus was on the potential interaction of the reader with the comic, we drew on methods which supported us in helping to understand and unpack this. There are, of course, many other possible ways in which this issue could be studied which might make greater use of ideas from other disciplines such as art and design or cultural studies for example.

At present, it could be argued that most of the work being conducted within comics studies takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on ideas from more established fields in order to better understand and interpret the genre. However, whether this continues to be the case as comics studies develops and becomes more institutionalised, consolidating its own vocabulary and methodologies, remains to be seen. Hopefully, it is a field which can grow as a discipline, while also retaining the advantages of strong relationships and widespread networks to support interdisciplinary approaches.

References


