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Graphically Speaking: Comics and Graphic Novels

in the Art Classroom

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Abstract

Art educators face a multiplicity of challenges in the classroom, especially given the number of theories, epistemological viewpoints, and pedagogical practices available today. Complicating matters significantly is the recent trend towards teaching visual culture in the art classroom where the variety of art forms available for study is limitlessly expanding (Mayer, 2008). In our technologically saturated society, young learners access information in diverse ways ranging from television to the internet to video games to music, movies, and more. Such forms of information and communication are primarily visual in nature which is typically more efficient than written communication (Duncum, 2003). As art educators, we must choose images and artifacts from visual culture that will provide compelling encounters in art for young learners (Graham, 2008). Graphic novels are a form of contemporary art which provides educators and young learners a lens through which we can examine and diversify our perceptions of the world (McCloud, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to examine graphic novels and comics as a valid form of contemporary art situated in the postmodern notion of visual culture.

What are comics and graphic novels?

The juxtaposition of text and image in a sequential format which is intended to communicate information and/or generate an aesthetic reaction in the viewer forms the foundation on which comics and graphic novels are built (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001). Through the arrangement of these words and pictures, the artist and writer attempt to describe a story or dramatize a concept. At the heart of comics and graphic novels is the concept of sequence. Sequential art is essentially a series of images and familiar symbols placed one after another (Eisner, 1985) where the text and image are linked, tied together in a box or created as a part of the visual structure of the scene or page. This link creates a mutualistic relationship wherein both word and picture benefit from and enrich one another. For example, word balloons in comics often intimate to the reader how the character on the page is speaking. Typical word balloons are outlined in thin black lines on a white ground. In issue #31 of the comic *The Savage Dragon*, God speaks to Dragon, but instead of the typical word balloon, God's words appear written in old English style calligraphy on worn parchment. The text and the image drawn with it provide the reader with clues to the interpretation of the character.

While the former describes the basic concept of the graphic novel and its parent, comics, the field of sequential art has been largely ignored by the academic world (Eisner, 1985). Will Eisner may be considered one of the most prominent figures in the promotion of sequential art as a serious field of study. In an interview with the *Baltimore Sun* in the 1940s, Eisner submitted that sequential art (comics) was a valid literary and

artistic form (McCloud, 2000). Eisner (1985) posits that while “each of the major integral elements such as design, drawing, caricature, and writing have separately found academic consideration, this unique combination has received a very minor place in either the literary or art curriculum” (p. 5). Sequential art and comics as we conceptualize of them have existed since the 1840s and have historically resisted validation as an art form through the work of the educational system and the world of art (Bucher & Manning, 2004). But with the recent surge in popularity in visual culture studies, comics and graphic novels may have finally found their place in the art curriculum.

Postmodernism and Visual Culture

According to Graham (2008), the postmodern conception of art is “characterized by appropriation, layering of styles, recontextualization, interaction between text and image, and a willingness to embrace multiple meanings” (p10). Graphic novels and comics often embody the notions of postmodern art and literature which have a tendency toward self-referencing and often times reject formal aesthetics in favor of visual impact. The graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* is one such work which eschews formal aesthetics and is deliberately drawn with thick, heavily inked rough lines reminiscent of an artist creating his art with a hurried sense of urgency.



From *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale*, by Art Spiegelman. Pantheon, 1986.

Visual culture is a virtually limitless field of study defined more by what it does *not* include in its broad canon of representation than by what it actually does. Generally, visual culture studies include the study of art, art history, philosophy, cultural studies, and anthropology; it is essentially the visual component of a group of people who also share experiences in such a way as to define how they understand and respond to the world around them. Through the lens of visual culture studies, it is apparent that art is no longer defined by the materials with which it is made, but by how cultural ideals create meaning and value through perception (Mayer, 2008). This postmodern, Deweyan notion of art and art making places the context of a learner's experiences central to the core of art education. Thus, the learner is responsible for ultimately constructing meaning based

on how his/her prior experiences have shaped or defined their perceptions through popular culture.

Art educators cannot ignore the connections graphic novels and comics have with student experience; virtually every child has read some form of sequential art by (or before) middle school. Comics and graphic novels are firmly embedded in the popular culture of contemporary society (Eisner, 1985). The artists of graphic novels and comics rely on common shared experiences in order to communicate their message to the reader. Eisner (1985) states that “comprehension of an image requires a commonality of experience,” and further “the artist must interact with the audience because he is trying to evoke images stored in the minds of both parties” (p.13). Through shared experience, the artist and the reader actively participate in the construction of culture.

Graphic novels and comics represent a fundamental shift in the way in which young learners interact with and understand their contemporary culture. In today’s visually saturated society, young learners look for modes of communication that promote visual literacy in its most economical state while retaining the same dynamism and verve as popular visual media such as television, video games, music videos, and the internet (Bucher & Manning, 2004). Graphic novels and comics characterize a popular form of visual media that impacts students using a mode of accessible contemporary art. Graham (2008) asserts that “[c]ontemporary art and popular visual culture intersect in graphic novels and create opportunities for teachers to connect students to postmodern notions of picture making while giving them a rich and diverse medium for personal and social

exploration” (p10). *Black Hole*, a graphic novel by Charles Burns, chronicles the lives of 1970’s suburban teenagers infected with a sexually transmitted disease which causes mutations, such as tails, shedding one’s entire skin like a snake, or webbed fingers. All of this takes place in the backdrop of a high school where teen angst and drama is the norm. While this particular work contains mature themes and is unsuitable for study in the classroom, it targets a number of personal and social themes important to teenagers such as peer pressure, sexual pressure, and fitting in.

Comics and Graphic Novels in Art

Art is a quality that cannot be perceived through the five senses; art is intangible (McCloud, 2000).

According to Roger Sabin, “[comics] are perceived as intrinsically ‘commercial,’ mass produced for the lowest common denominator audience, and therefore automatically outside the notions of artistic credibility” (as cited in Williams, 2008). Despite this perception, comics and graphic novels have established their presence in contemporary society as a form of postmodern contemporary art. Comics and graphic novels have a rich history, dating as far back as the 17,000 year old proto-comics of Lascaux. New York City's Museum of Natural History has interpreted a painting in the Lascaux Caves of a single deer as possibly following a path from jumping into a stream, swimming, and climbing out on the other side - a sequential series of images (McCloud, 2000).

The Bayeux Tapestry depicts the 1066 Norman Conquest of England in sequential images combined with captions over many of the panels. Trajan's column built in 113 AD shows a series of Roman military campaigns, about 625 feet in total length, wrapped around a column of marble. The spiral frieze of the column focuses on sequential images without text (McCloud, 2000). Further cementing the place of comics and graphic novels in the history of art is the Codex Nuttall, which records the genealogies, alliances, and conquests of the 11th and 12th century Mixtec culture. The Codex is deer hide pieced together to make a continuous 40 foot long strip, accordion folded into 10 inch sections making a 98 page long book. Viewing graphic novels and comics from the perspective of art history reinforces the current status of comics and graphic novels as a valid form of contemporary art.

Comics and Graphic Novels in Contemporary Art

Sara Wilson McKay (2008) posits that contemporary art draws upon the viewers' personal connections to a work of art but also acknowledges the dialogic possibilities (the meanings made *between* a work of art and its viewer, its history and context) that are born from the interactions of personal histories and artistic pastiche (p71).

It is these connections that are vitally important to the study of comics and graphic novels in the art classroom. Roger Shimomura and God City artist Marcus Kiser utilize the visual conventions of comics and graphic novels in their work as mirrors of a complicated postmodern world of art (Graham, 2008). Shimomura's art explores broad

social issues surrounding Asian Americans through the use of racist imagery, typically focusing on incidents in his own life, such as the time he and his family spent in a Japanese American detention camp in Idaho during World War II. His work blends American pop culture (i.e. comics and graphic novels) and ukiyo-e graphics using flat color (Hackett, 2004).

Shimomura collected comics all his life for their graphic quality, but “[he] began to use these comic characters as American icons which seemed appropriate in [his] work. Obviously the style of comics also became the biggest influence of [his] painterly style” (personal communication with the artist, 2010). Scott McCloud (2000) says that “comics is a simple idea in search of complex applications...” (p3). Shimomura and Kiser both apply the simple idea of comics to make complex statements about contemporary society.

Shimomura and Kiser push the boundaries of contemporary art and culture to realize McKay’s dialogic possibilities of context, history, and personal experience and both apply some of the complex applications of comics, such as contrast and conflict, to their art. Annette Lawrence says, “I think the main problem with contemporary art is most people don’t acknowledge it as art, so you are climbing an uphill battle once people establish what art is in their head.” (as cited in McKay, 2008, p 72). But this uphill battle is good for art educators whose job is to expand the critical and creative thinking and art making skills of young learners. Without questioning the status quo of what is or is not art, art remains stagnant, a limpid force of creation.

Roger Shimomura juxtaposes images of Japanese culture and American popular culture in his art in order to explore racial stereotypes from the racist's point of view. In Shimomura's painting, *Untitled*, cultural icons like Donald Duck, Pinocchio, and Snow White are used as representations of American culture. Perhaps the most startling part of the image are the masks of Superman and Wonder Woman with dark, empty eyes worn over the faces of two Japanese individuals. This work of contemporary art, borrowing



Untitled, 1985, by Roger Shimomura. 60"x72" acrylic.

heavily from the style of comics and graphic novels, raises many interesting questions: How do individuals from "other" cultures view themselves in relation to American society? Are the Japanese individuals ashamed of their culture? How do members of "other" cultures attempt to assimilate into America? These complex questions allow young learners to exercise critical thinking skills necessary for survival in the 21st century.

God City is a collective of artists whose art is influenced by music, comics, and street culture. God City's aim is to create works of art that engage and challenge viewers. Marcus Kiser, part of the God City collective, utilizes the conventions of the comic book

and graphic novel genre in much of his work. Kiser's work taps into the shared culture of society using icons such as Barack Obama and popular culture figures like Captain



Obama/Captain America, 2009, by Marcus Kiser. Digital print.

America which engages young learners, drawing on their shared experiences as part of the American culture and consumers of pop culture. Once engaged, learners will critically analyze, interpret, and decode the meaning of the work. By placing these two images together, Kiser generates a relationship between the two where none existed before. Barack Obama, with the shield of Captain America becomes almost knight-like in his presence; Obama becomes a protector, the carrier of the ideals of America; a guardian willing to fight for what is right. By altering the context in which each cultural icon is known, the meaning of each image changes.

Kiser's use of familiar cultural symbols and comic book conventions is apparent in his representation of the Statue of Liberty in his work, *American Gangsta*. In this work, the artist has taken Lady Liberty and strapped a gun to her back and another in her hands.



American Gangsta, 2009, by Marcus Kiser. Digital print.

Viewers familiar with the values and beliefs represented by the Statue of Liberty are asked to reinterpret the very nature of the ideals she represents; but further, to reexamine the role of violence in American society and how it was/is used for gain in the United States.

Learning through Comics and Graphic Novels

In our visual society, young learners must learn how to read and write traditional printed words, but this type of learning is no longer sufficient to satisfy their needs; rather, young learners must also learn to read movies, television, magazines, and the internet (Schwarz, 2006). Comics and graphic novels can be used to teach traditional literacy as well as visual and cultural literacy. Graphic novels and comics, deal primarily with two major modes of communication – words and images (Eisner, 1985). When young learners read a graphic novel, they must use complex verbal and visual interpretive

skills to actively decode the meaning of the story and to describe events between visual sequences, in the spaces between the panels (Bucher & Manning, 2004). Tabitha Simmons states that

[g]raphic novel readers have learned to understand print, but can also decode facial and body expressions, the symbolic meanings of certain images and postures, metaphors and similes, and other social and literary nuances... (as cited in Bucher & Manning, 2004, p.68).

This suggests that graphic novels and comics engender the use of complex cognitive skills which require the reader to interpret, analyze, and comprehend a variety of modes of communication from the non-verbal (posture, facial and body expressions) to the written (metaphors and similes). Many of the same skills required to read and comprehend conventional prose is required by readers of comics such as understanding narrative structures, symbolism, point of view, puns and alliteration. Gretchen Schwarz (2006) argues that comics offer an “alternative, appealing way for students to analyze literary conventions, character development, dialogue, satire, and language structures as well as develop writing and research skills” (p.58). Comics and graphic novels may help students who struggle to develop language skills, as the images offer contextual evidence to the meaning of the printed story (Crawford and Weiner, 2005). Because of the postmodern nature of contemporary sequential art, readers take an active role in the creation of the narrative, supplying images and words in their minds, actively constructing the story in the spaces between the panels. McCloud (2000) asserts that these spaces are where “the heart of comics lies...where the reader’s imagination makes the still pictures come alive” (p.1).

Comics and graphic novels use literary and artistic devices to present young people accessible ways in which to learn about and understand complex topics in science, art, literature and history (Crawford and Weiner, 2005). Judd Winnick's autobiographical graphic novel, *Pedro and Me*, recounts the love and loss in his friendship with Pedro, an AIDS educator who died of the disease. *The Tale of One Bad Rat* by Bryan Talbot explores issues surrounding sexual abuse. In the Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, Art Spiegelman shares his father's account of the Holocaust while allowing the reader a glimpse into the relationship between the two. In *Maus*, all of the human characters have been anthropomorphized into stereotypes of the time. Practitioners of the Jewish faith are represented as mice – sneaky, cheap, and bad to have around. The Germans are portrayed by cats – violent, stealthy, unpredictable hunters. This simple literary and artistic device engages the reader and invites him/her to participate in the decoding and comprehension of a difficult subject in world history.

Teaching with Comics and Graphic Novels

Williams (2008) asserts that “comics are a powerful way for students to envision the future, understand historical events, explore their own narratives, develop empathy, and learn about images, text, technology, and design” (p.18). Art educators should use comics and graphic novels to engage learners in the conception, creation, and evaluation of their own personal art. Line quality, aesthetics, history, perspective, value, light and shade, gravity, composition, page layout, focal point, dialogue, creative writing, personal style, digital imaging techniques (i.e. line and color), psychology, criteria for judging quality, figure drawing, design, anatomy, and body language are but a few of the artistic

and literary devices that teachers might focus on in the classroom and which students could translate into other styles and types of art (Berkowitz & Packer, 2001; Eisner, 1985). Teaching these skills through comics and graphic novels promotes creative thinking and problem solving, develops a student's visual and verbal vocabulary, and benefits the broader goals of education in general (i.e. tested areas such as reading, writing, and technology).

Approaching comics and graphic novels from a contemporary art and visual culture standpoint grants art educators the most freedom with which to design instructional activities. Graham (2008) describes comics and graphic novels “[a]s an art form that weaves image making conventions into contemporary art parlance...” and “can make valuable connections to student’s experiences and interests by evoking the situations that students are accustomed to seeing” (p.12). Mayer (2008) promotes the study of contemporary art and maintains that it is “most desirable to fashion instructional activities that have the students examining, reflecting, questioning and responding to the important issues of the world by engaging the concepts and inquiry that spurred the artist’s thinking and art making” (p.79). In teaching comics and graphic novels as contemporary art, art educators will most assuredly teach within their curriculum and students will learn the art skills, history, and popular and shared culture necessary to succeed in school and everyday life.

Conclusions

Viewing comics and graphic novels through the lens of visual culture studies and postmodern contemporary art opens up an infinite range of pedagogical practices and learning possibilities. In a visually saturated society, students are constantly bombarded

with a deluge of image. Popular visual culture shapes and is shaped by the ways in which young learners communicate, interpret and comprehend their world. Comics and graphic novels present students and educators with opportunities to explore and comprehend social and personal issues while exploring postmodern conceptions of art making in an accessible, easily understood format while simultaneously engaging students in multiple literacies such as reading, history, science, and language.

The history of comics is the history of art – from the cave paintings of Lascaux and the spiral frieze of Trajan’s Column to the racism of Shimomura and the pop culture references of Kiser. The language of prose fiction is the language of comics – from Shakespeare and Thoreau to Spiegelman and Talbot. There are limitless opportunities for art educators to use comics and graphic novels as the genesis of historical, scientific, anatomical, psychological, artistic, or language studies in the classroom. The unique nature of the comics and graphic novels requires students to read and interpret both image and written word wherein literary elements such as plot and dialogue fuse with page layout, color, shading, perspective, line quality and lettering style (Schwarz, 2006). Comics and graphic novels offer an engaging form of postmodern contemporary art that promotes the use of complex critical thinking and art making skills in the classroom.

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