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*Creating Comics, Creative Comics:*

Symposium 1st June 2018.

University of South Wales:

Cardiff Campus.

(18-minute paper: 2500 words)

***Comic Books as Philosophy***

(Open by handing out a copy of John Barth’s *Frame-Tale*)

The handout is from John Barth’s *Frame-Tale* that opens his collection of short stories, *Lost in the Funhouse,* from 1966, and is in the form of a Mobius Strip that loops infinitely to create **both** the longest **and** shortest story ever written. Barth’s *Frame-Tale* is an illustration of ‘literature as philosophy’ and not merely literature used to elucidate philosophical concepts.

This paper develops on from this idea and also draws upon the writing of Antonio Gramsci on grammar from the *Prison Notebooks*, and on Hegel’s writing on Immanence, from his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I will also examine two comic books from the *Superhero* genre, *Omega Men #9* and *Silver Surfer #11,* both fabricated in 2015.

The main intention of this paper is to present my research into the idea that the comic book form **is** philosophy. An examination of comic books as something more than a supplement to philosophical ideas. It’s my intention in this research to make the assertion that western society has been radically transformed through our fabrication of, and encounters with, the form of the comic book. This claim suggests that our engagement with sequential art has caused a measurable change in our interpretation of time, space, text, image, and composition, as a combined intensity. In this sense I’m suggesting that the comic book form runs parallel to the leap that has taken place in our understanding of the world since the early years of the 20th century, which has shifted paradigmatically from a Newtonian world view to one of Quantum Physics. This I suggest is similar to that of renaissance painting, and the manner in which it runs parallel to the new scientific discoveries of linear perspective, motion, and mathematics, that we associate today with the leap made in science from Aristotle to that of Copernicus and Galileo. This paper is not a history of comics that maps the development of this process through the 20th and 21st century, although I would invite and encourage historians of comics to undertake this research. Nor is this paper an examination of comic books which set out to elucidate complex scientific and philosophical ideas via the medium of sequential art, such as Thibault Damour’s *Mysteries of the Quantum Universe* (2016) or Nick Sousanis’s *Unflattening* (2015), but rather it’s a paper that examines the form of contemporary ‘every day’ comics that are a part of popular culture. Comics that tell and re-tell folk stories, myths, and tales of heroes and heroines. This is not to suggest that comic books which exist on the independent scene or comics that address philosophical works and metaphysical questions are not incredibly valuable and important artistic endeavours. Indeed, many of these are some of my favourite comics including Martin Rowson’s recent *The Communist Manifesto* (2018), which via his Hogarthian political satire helps us to reconnect with Marx and Engels’ classic call for class consciousness. There is also Nathan Kilburn’s beautiful modernizing adaptation of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* from 2015, which manages to tame this sprawling work of comedic philosophical prose whilst also addressing the themes of our responsibility to our future selves not to be meek but rather to act in the face of times’ endless recurrence in a world where truth is exposed as an illusion. Nathan Kilburn manages to explore how the medium of comics can re-imagine the stylistic form employed by Nietzsche such as aphorisms, Socratic dialogue and New Testament rhetoric. Lastly, in setting out what this paper is not, I want to highlight its difference from academic articles written in Jeff McLaughlin’s mis-titled *Comics as Philosophy* (2005) and *Graphic Novels as Philosophy* (2017) each of which explores the ways in which comic books can be used to elucidate ideas in philosophy, from how a reading of the *Amazing Spider-Man,* enables us to understand Plato’s questions about the meaning of life from his *Republic* and *Symposium*; how a deeper reading of DC Comics *Crisis on Infinite Earths* gives us a way of comprehending Leibniz ‘possible worlds theory’; and how by understanding Sartre and Heidegger’s existential writing we gain a far deeper understanding of Daniel Clowes *Ghost World* (1998).

Therefore, contrary to this academic approach to the comic book as a supplement to philosophy, I have set out to examine the manner in which the comic book develops both epistemological questions concerning our knowledge of the world, and ontological questions concerning the nature of existence, and most especially how these can be seen in the form of the popular genres of comics that we buy each and every Wednesday.

An example of which is Marvel Comics *Silver Surfer* #11, *Never After,* from June 2015, fabricated by Dan Slott, Michael and Laura Allred. (I realise that this example falls under the dictum, “It’s all been done before, by Alan Moore”). However, with this as a given, I would like to suggest that this comic explicitly uses the form of a Mobius Strip, but unlike Barth’s *Frame-Tale*, Slott and the Allred’s example, does more than simply draw attention to the dilemma of existence on the twisted path of postmodernism, as that of being lost in the ironic funhouse of an And/Both universe. This science fiction folk tale, draws our attention to the connection between the mobius strip world of the Surfer and Dawn Greenwood, and our own world that is without possibilities, without future, and where time has collapsed in upon itself to the breaking point where morals are without purpose and where truth has become merely ironic. It’s a story that addresses the material existence of the subaltern classes who are the real suffers in Slott and Allred’s story and in our neoliberal world that so easily eschews truth, and morality, for profit. This fairy tale embodies Marx’s point from his *XI thesis on Feuerbach,* in which “philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways when the point is to change it.” A close reading of this story illustrates how both the words and visuals combine to break the infinite loop of ignorance and to tell four individual yet connected stories that address normative and immanent positions. The tale also offers us through a combination of words and images a way of stepping off the mobius strip.

The heterogeneous elements of the comic book which by their nature are an assemblage of separate elements (i.e. panels, words, images, colours, gutters, visual signs etc.) emerge and coalesce towards a temporary ‘whole’ in the mind of the reader. Comic books like *Silver Surfer #11,* quite naturally incorporate what philosophers like Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807[[1]](#footnote-1)) call Immanence. The idea that change does not come from outside, it is not transcendental. In order for a thing to change and to bring about change, that is, for something new to emerge into the world; the identity of that which is changing, or has changed, must have already been ‘contradictory’ in the first place. It must have been inconsistent, full of immanent tensions, unstable, and in this sense, ontologically ‘open’ to change all along. Therefore, what I’m suggesting here and hope to show through my research is that the form of the comic book is just such an inconsistency. The comic book form is full of immanent tensions that can, when re-thought, be seen as a form of philosophy that tells stories in a way that changes our perception of the world.

Comic books can be combined in a myriad of different groupings by fabricators of comics which can be placed together in an infinite variety of different styles and methods; and as such, can be interpreted by readers in a wide variety of ways. In this sense the elements of a comic book are a plurality taken as a unity and are like the mathematical sets in Cantorian or Zermelo-Fraenkel Set Theory, in which sets (combinations of things), can be reconstituted into new sets in an infinite number of ways. In reorganising and re-imagining the elements of the comic-book, we open ourselves out to the potential for new comic books to unfold and emerge immanently. Not all comic books do this, of course; and many, as we know only too well, are indolent, commercial blank parodies of previous comics which merely repeat an already existing set of elements. What I would argue however, is that the comic book becomes philosophy only when all of the elements of the sequential art form are not simply used to repeat what has gone before, or merely strive for an assemblage in order to be lost in a holistic form of assimilation as part of some larger universal singularity; but rather, become philosophy only when these elements that make up the comic book are made to strive towards a combined intensity in which each of the separate elements are actualised in terms of their own identity and become part of an emergent and integrated assemblage.

These ideas are also incorporated within Antonio Gramsci’s writing on linguistics[[2]](#footnote-2), where he develops two separate concepts of gramma to help us understand hegemony (the manner in which a ruling elite hold dominance over subaltern groups). The first is ‘Normative gramma’, which is used to standardize and stabilise meaning into a kind of etiquette which privileges the ruling elite. The class which gets to set up the rules for gramma that best suit themselves and are imbedded within their culture and whose familiarity to these normative rules enables them to maintain the status quo. The second is ‘Immanent grammar’ which opens up meaning to regional and individual speech acts, such as urban slang and folk art, that is spoken and performed by the subaltern classes, who when trying to mimic ‘normative gramma’ in order to fit in and succeed in a bourgeois society, merely draw attention to their outsider status. Gramsci suggests that neither normative nor immanent grammas are more important than the other, and perhaps surprisingly, and with great foresight, suggests that the overthrow of the elitist ‘normative’ gramma, via the revolutionary potential of ‘immanent’ gramma, should not equate to a simple replacement of one for the other, which would merely become the new normative position. What he outlines instead is an adaptive and flexible gramma, that is both normative and immanent, and which enable a variety of new meanings and ideas to facilitate developments in any culture which chooses to reach for the highest quality as opposed to resting merely upon a normative position that works only to exclude certain classes.

Gramsci’s model of normative/immanent duality in gramma, connects to the word/image duality in comic books; where neither text nor visual image can be taken in isolation but that each must retain its own distinctive identity within this emergent intensity and should not, for this reason, be merged into a singularity or third way. Text is used in comic books, almost exclusively, as a mode of communication in terms of narrative and psychology, and in this sense, it needs to obtain a certain level of hermeneutic clarity. This includes the text in caption boxes from omnipotent narrators, to the interior monologue of characters, who can be either present or absent from the panel. Text is also used primarily in comic books for dialogue that is presented within speech bubbles. On the other hand, visual images in comic books are far more dynamic in their attempts to express a multiplicity of feelings and ideas that convey and receive meaning in a much less secure manner than that of text. Images are far more open to interpretation and therefore they are more permeable and porous in regard to notions of representation.

I would like to close this paper with a discussion of DC Comics *Omega Men* #9, *Peace for Vega*, which is part of a 12-issue maxi-series, that came out monthly between August 2015 to July 2016, and was fabricated by Tom King, Barnaby Bagenda, and Romulo Fajardo Jr. The books opening page begins with a nine-panel grid as each of the 12 issues in this series do. This format as we know from Moore and Gibbon’s *Watchmen* (1987) focuses the reader’s attention onto the narrative whilst restricting the level of background detail. However, unlike the previous issues of *Omega Men* that are made up predominantly of nine panel grids, *Peace for Vega*, reorders the collective elements of the comic book and plays with the forms immanent tensions. As each page advances through the story, the number of panels decreases by one, from nine to eight to seven down to one. Then we have a double page spread of an exploding planet and begin to move on up once more from a single page panel, to two panels, and then three, all the way back up to nine to finish the book. This formulaic device is fascinating in terms of how the reader interacts with the words and images in the panels which increase in detail the larger the panels become. In this episode of the series Kyle Rayner, the White Lantern, believes that he can bring about peace between the genocidal Citadel of The Alpha Empire, and the guerrilla group of Omega Men who commit ‘terrorist’ acts for ‘good’ reasons. Rayner believes that if he can expose the billions of murders committed by the Alphas to the general public and hence find a third-way, he will be able to take down the leaders of the Empire and make the terrorist actions of the Omega Men defunct. He fails miserably, and his position is shown to mirror the corrupt politician Ambassador Xznn, whose rhetoric is equally as self-aggrandizing as Rayner’s. What this almost mobius strip comic book presents through a clever use of colour, seen most explicitly in the final page, is not a direct answer to the complex political problems that mirror those of American interventionalism in the middle east and it’s resulting and continuing chaos, but an insight into human psychology that is inspired by King’s reading of William James whose quotations appear in the final panel of each issue. The manner in which each character in the story has the potential for greed, fear, rage, love, compassion, hope, will, as well as good and evil, is represented in the colours of orange, yellow, red, pink, indigo, blue, green, through to black and white, which are presented in the visual images of the comic book panels as a powerful but less direct counterpoint to the words that we read. This device is also used in the comic to draw attention to the difference between what people say they believe and how these beliefs go on to inform the ways in which characters act.

In conclusion I’d like to take this opportunity to leave you with a copy of my own comic book *Paint by Numbers,* that is my practice as research addressing some of the issues I’ve touched upon today. As a critical theorist I have learnt so much more about the fabrication of the comic book form through practice and only in this way am I beginning to discover how comics themselves, are philosophy.

Thanks for your time.

1. §§160 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (SCW 2012:180-191) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)