

Drew Morton

Roundtable Response: From Page to Screen to Classroom: Teaching Comic Studies

Over the past five years, comics have become an increasingly visible medium of study at cinema and media studies academic conferences. At the 2012 meeting of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference, I organized and appeared on a workshop entitled "Teaching Comics Studies." Joined by Scott Bukatman, Greg Smith, Jim Thompson, and Suzanne Scott, the workshop members shared syllabus ideas with the audience, addressed methods for teaching Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, and settled into a long debate on the nature of Comics Studies and how it should be defined with regard to media studies at large.

The workshop was polarized regarding the role that discussions regarding adaptation, transmedia storytelling, and film theory should occupy regarding defining what - exactly - Comics Studies is. Greg and Scott believed that comics had spent the past decade being defined against film and television via discussions of ontology, industrial synergy, and yes - adaptations. They felt that the new wave of Comics Studies scholarship to emerge within the pages of *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Studies in Comics*, and *Cinema Journal* - along with manuscripts by Jean-Paul Gabilliet, Jared Gardner, and Charles Hatfield - had liberated the field. As the author of a dissertation on the formal and industrial relationships between American comics and Hollywood film, I was much more ambivalent. Yes, I understand that areas of scholarly study experience growing pains and should - ultimately - manifest their own theoretical frameworks and methodologies. However, as I observed, many of our students approach comics through film. In many cases, a newbie to the comics form has been introduced via a Christopher Nolan Batman film or Marvel franchise film. I certainly was (I can blame the films *Batman Begins* and *Sin City* for my refueled interest).

Moreover, to try to sever the ties of comics to film and television - specifically in the context of America - is to deny industrial bonds that have existed for decades. Dell Comics, one of the largest comic book publishers in history, secured its position at the top of the industry during the 1940s and 1950s due to licensing deals that resulted in titles based off of Walt Disney and Looney Tunes characters. Moreover, these titles aided in the definition of one of the most prevalent genres of comic book - apart from the superhero of course - in the first half of the medium's existence: the "funny animal" title. Obviously, these linkages have become increasingly common during the past decades. For instance, Marvel secured the licensing rights to *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, the former of which was a constant seller that also - in Gabilliet's opinion - started skewing comics towards a the medium that existed less for its own merits (sales had peaked in the 1950s) and more as the "purveyors of concepts destined for other media." DC's relationship to Warner Brothers and Marvel's recent acquisition by Disney have only continued this trend.

This brings me back to the question I see as being at the core of this panel. If we acknowledge that film, television, and comics are intertwining industries in America and that much of the Comics Studies scholarship to emerge during the past decade has teased out the ties that bind these forms, where do we go from here? What less obvious theories and

methodologies can we crosswalk over to Comics Studies, while allowing the new subject of study room to re-define those theories and methods?

One theory and methodology I would like to propose is the pairing of cognitive theory to Tim Smith's work in eye tracking to better understand the ways in which readers engage with the comics form. My experiences in the classroom have given me the impression that students tend to prioritize written narrative content (text balloons and captions and their contents) over visual narrative content. For instance, when reading *Watchmen*, the hook of the mystery plot seems to be the narrative equivalent of Homer's Sirens, distracting unsuspecting readers from the visual braiding and symmetrical layouts that Moore and Gibbons have constructed. It is only after reading the book a second or third time - or perhaps after reading one of Moore's incredibly dense script pages - that they realize how intricate the panels are and how much they complicate the narrative with devices such as foreshadowing and formal emphasis. One way in which I have attempted to account for the differences in the reader's activity is to copy pages and have students "map" their area of engagement. What panel draws the eye first? Why? Does the reader register the many breaks in the graphical continuity of comics? Given the central role that reader plays - as Scott McCloud has written - as a collaborator by performing the act of closure, I would argue that we should expand the field by nuancing our view of the reader.