

From Page to Screen to Classroom: Teaching Comic Studies
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If the discipline of Comics Studies is suffering from an identity crisis, perhaps that is not such a bad thing. In fact, we might be more concerned if Comics Studies was exempt from the regular need to redefine and reconsider itself, because that circumstance would suggest a field of study comfortably settled into stasis. The vitality of comics stems in large part from their refusal to adhere to, or even recognize, traditional disciplinary and social boundaries, and their ability to incorporate a variety of means of communication, including but not limited to words, pictures, photographs, facts, and narratives. Given the eclectic nature of comics, we should not be surprised if studies focusing on comics often fit uneasily within established academic boundaries.

My proposal is that comics should be considered as a means of communication, and those who consider themselves experts in comics should be able to articulate how a particular comic achieves its effects and communicates with its audience, no matter what is being communicated or to whom. It shouldn't matter if the work in question is a traditional superhero narrative, an underground comic, or a factual exposition of a current world situation: comics use words and pictures to communicate, and people who consider themselves experts on comics should have something intelligent to say about just about any type of comic. Too much focus on the current state of one aspect of the comics industry in one country may be leading us away from an understanding of comics as essentially a means of communication.

Transmedia storytelling may be a recently coined term, but sharing stories and characters among different types of media is hardly a new practice. To take one obvious example, the practice of adapting plays, novels and comics for the movies is almost as old as motion picture technology itself. If we are willing to set aside questions of copyright ownership, we can speak as easily of the *Frankenstein* universe or the *Flash Gordon* universe as we can of the *Battlestar Galactica* universe. To take another example, without adaptations of films—*Sister Act*, *Spiderman*, *Bring it On!*, *A Christmas Story*, etc.—the contemporary Broadway musical would be surprisingly bereft of material. Although much bemoaned in some quarters as a comparatively recent phenomenon, any historian of theatre knows that adaptations have always supplied the stage, and the musical in particular, with material. Movie, novel, and comics spinoffs from television, from *Star Trek* to *Sex and the City*, are also an accepted part of popular culture, and many comics in turn are spun off from other sources. The point is not to catalogue examples, but to consider how the same material is treated in the different mediums, and what effects those changes have on the audience.

What are some implications for Comics Studies? The first is that we need to establish minimum competencies expected of anyone writing seriously about comics. These include, but are not limited to:

1. sophisticated understanding of the communicative powers of both words and art, and how they can work together or at cross purposes in a given work;
2. historical and contextual understanding of comics, across generations and in different regions of the world;
3. knowledge of the economic and technological factors that influence comics and their creators;
4. an open mind willing and able to respond to comics on their own terms, not as a poor cousin of some other medium.

What does this imply for Comics Studies programs?

1. We need to enlist people from the Art, Film, and Communications departments, at the very least, rather than assuming that someone whose expertise is literature or verbal communication is also an expert on visual communication.
2. Students and professors need to become widely read in comics of all eras and regions. Since comics are rarely taught below the university level, and the preferences of individual readers are often focused on a narrow range of the total comics universe, this means a concerted effort to catch up at the university level.
3. People who write about comics should not only study the technical means of their creation, but also try their hand at creating some comics of their own. The point is not the quality of the finished project so much as the education value of trying, for instance, to break a story down into dialogue and panel descriptions.