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Contemporary Comics Storytelling

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Contemporary Comics Storytelling

KARIN KUKKONEN

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Many reasons for the rise of comics to a medium of cultural prominence have been put forward in recent years. Paul Douglas Lopes in *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (2009) emphasizes one: “While comic books originally were based on short stories in serial format, now comic books present long-arc narratives with complex storylines. Now the fastest growing market for comic books, graphic novels, presents this art in book-length format, again allowing for complex and compelling storytelling” (2009, xvi). Lopes then goes on to discuss how sophisticated storytelling in comics moves beyond genre boundaries and attracts the widespread attention of “cultural gatekeepers,” like journalists and professional reviewers, prize committees and librarians. Lopes embarks on a social history of comics in his book. What I am interested in, however, is precisely the “complex and compelling storytelling” that Lopes does not explore much further. How do comics tell their stories? How do they achieve complexity, playing with genre frames, immersing readers in fictional worlds, and helping them to construct the fictional minds of characters? *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* suggests a cognitive approach for analyzing comics in all their richness and complexity. As my case studies will show, contemporary comics use their complexity to engage with the legacy of postmodernism,¹ its subversion, self-reflexivity, and moral contingency, by positing their own alternatives.

This book is an investigation into how the storytelling of comics stands at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It has a narratological and a literary agenda. Dubbing comics “narratives” is hardly contested; dubbing comics “literature” certainly is (see Meskin 2009 for an overview of this discussion). Let me explain what I mean by that. Literature can be defined through different features: formal complexity, multiple meaning potentials, an imaginative reconsideration of the familiar, an intervention in a cultural debate, the institutionalization of a

canon, the social practice of creating texts as “literature,” and accumulating cultural capital by reading them, to name but a few.² On this account, literature is not tied to the written text (in fact, films can be seen as literature, too)³ or to the vexed distinction between high culture and low culture, which can (a priori) assign entire media, like comics, to the ghetto of prestigelessness and irrelevance. Texts and their features, the way they engage readers, and how they participate in cultural conversations all come together here. Seeing comics as literature means considering how these aspects interact.

A cognitive perspective on comics outlines the formal complexities and multiple meaning potentials involved when comics engage their readers and help them to revisit the familiar imaginatively. This does not necessarily take the shape of formalist defamiliarization; it can also be engendered in immersive renditions of storyworlds and thought experiments played out, such as what if fairy-tale characters lived in contemporary New York? What if there was a superhero aware of his fictionality? What if you could dispense your own justice aided by one hundred untraceable bullets? Comics like *Fables*, *Tom Strong*, and *100 Bullets* are literary because they make their readers think, even as they enjoy the read, and because they contribute through their imaginative revisiting of the familiar to the ongoing cultural conversation. Institutionalization and cultural capital in comics might be following hard on the heels of these features, as the *New York Times*’ assessment that comics might be the “new literary form” (McGrath 2004) suggests.

After waiting on the sidelines for decades, comics have also become more visible in academia in recent years. Comics are no longer confined to afterthoughts and asides (as in the writings of Roland Barthes 1984b, Seymour Chatman 1978, and Edward Branigan 1992) or to the occasional foray into the unknown (as, for example, in Umberto Eco 1972 and 1976); now they have journals, book series, and MLA discussion groups devoted to them.⁴ Special issues of established journals attest the interest of a larger academic audience,⁵ and publications like the *Comics Studies Reader* edited by Heer and Worcester (2009) point toward the emergence of a canon of comics criticism. However, as Heer and Worcester document with their collection, comics studies are highly divergent in their approaches. The essays, articles, and excerpts in their *Comics Studies Reader* range from the history of the medium to formal categorization

and analysis, and from cultural studies accounts to the appreciation of individual works.

This book considers the formal features of the comics text, provides close readings of individual works, and inscribes them into a larger argument about the renegotiation of postmodernism in contemporary culture. My account therefore connects to a wide cross-section of the approaches in comics studies. What I am mostly interested in, however, is not so much issues of form, close reading, or cultural context but the meaning-making processes that run through all of them. When we read comics, we pick up clues from the text and fill in the gaps it leaves; we construct stories, immerse ourselves in storyworlds, and project the fictional minds of characters. How does this meaning-making process work for comics? How do comics create clues, what kinds of gaps do they leave, and how does this contribute to storytelling? In the following pages I will venture to answer these questions and show how these processes are at work when comics balance subversion and tradition, self-reflexivity and mimesis, contingency and commitment in their encounter with postmodernism.

Storytelling and Postmodernism

Postmodernism is the dominant intellectual trend of the second half of the twentieth century. Its mode of thinking and perception of the world pervades philosophy, art and literature—in fact, all areas of cultural production. Since postmodernism is such a wide-ranging phenomenon, it is rather difficult to define it precisely. Linda Hutcheon, a leading theorist of postmodernism, repeatedly points out the many self-contradictory features of postmodernism and the problems for definitions this brings (see Hutcheon 1988). What is common to the different strands of postmodernism, however, is their engagement with modernism and the “project of the Enlightenment,” as Jürgen Habermas calls it (1981, 8). Postmodernism questions the hopes of modernism and amplifies its inherent contradictions.

Postmodern texts take the identity- and empire-building narratives of modernism and subvert them with retellings from a different perspective. J. M. Coetzee’s take on Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in *Foe* (1986) and Jean Rhys’s version of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) are exemplary cases here, as are the numerous post-

modern retellings of fairy tales. Postmodernism also engages with the quest for realism and psychological accuracy in the novel and self-reflexively discusses and enacts the very conditions of fiction. In *Postmodern Fiction* (1989), Brian McHale has conceptualized this as a shift from the epistemological to the ontological “dominant,” a move from scrutinizing what we know in modernism to demonstrating the utter contingency of our frames of reference in postmodernism. John Fowles’s visit of the author in the storyworld in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), the elopement of Madame Bovary from the storyworld of Flaubert’s novel in Woody Allen’s “The Kugelmass Episode” (1977), and Cortázar’s murder of the reader in “The Continuity of Parks” (1956) are much-discussed examples of this trend. The third trend is postmodernism’s insistence on moral contingency and relativism, which questions modernity’s attempts to replace religion with rational ethical principles.

In the three trends I identify, postmodernism engages with different varieties of modernism, from Enlightenment’s appeals to reason to the political and social programs of the Victorian novel and the psychological interests of high modernism. It is not quite clear whether postmodernism moves beyond modernism or whether it marks a further stage in its development. Nor is it quite clear whether the postmodern movement had run its course by the end of the twentieth century. Some critics in literature, art, and media studies seem to think so and aim to outline, name, and claim the new epoch (see Alan Kirby’s overview article “Successor States to an Empire in Free Fall” in *Times Higher Education* of 27 May 2010). For literature, Karl Stierstorfer’s edited volume *Beyond Postmodernism* (2003), Andrew Hoberek’s special issue on “After Postmodernism” in *Twentieth Century Literature* (2007), and Raoul Eshelman’s *Performatism, or, The End of Postmodernism* (2008) all suggest that old literary values of moral commitment, immersive storytelling, and genre traditions are reappraised after postmodernism. Hoberek’s introduction also points out that popular media like comics have now finally come into their own and are appreciated for their literary qualities rather than for their antagonism to modernism’s cultural hierarchies, as was the case in postmodernism (2007, 237–38). My book is at the edge of this contemporary development as it takes comics to be a serious literary mode and considers how cultural production today points beyond the subversion, self-reflexivity, and contingency of postmodernism. Taking

three current mainstream comics series as my case studies, I focus on the renegotiation of these three postmodern trends in comics fiction.

Fables (2002–present), the comics series that constitutes my first case study, takes familiar fairy-tale characters into present-day New York. Cinderella, for example, has moved beyond her happy ending, gotten a divorce from Prince Charming, and started a career as a glamorous secret agent. She and the other fairy-tale characters have grown up, left their fairy-tale worlds, and inscribed themselves into other genres of popular culture. *Tom Strong* (1999–2005), the series I use as my second case study, reflects on the figure of the superhero. Tom Strong revisits the history of the genre, explores alternative storyworlds, and considers his own fictionality. The series asserts the importance of the imagination and of fiction as a realm of possibilities. *100 Bullets* (1999–2009) is my third case study; this series posits the thought experiment of revenge without consequences. Characters have to decide whether to kill or not to kill with the (untraceable) one hundred bullets of the title. As they make their choices, these characters develop a sense of commitment in an ethically contingent world.

These three series are not only representative of a renegotiation of postmodernism currently under way but also have great heuristic value for discussing key concepts of storytelling: *Fables* shows new aspects of the treatment of genre, *Tom Strong* offers a sustained revisionary account of the superheroes and their worlds, and *100 Bullets* opens up the ethical implications of fictional minds. All three series were highly successful, top-selling series when they first appeared, and they arguably represent the field as it stands now. As examples of contemporary comics storytelling, they showcase the complex narrative strategies of comics and their engagement with larger cultural developments.

Comics and Cognition

Why would I turn to cognitive approaches, which are virtually nonexistent in comics studies,⁶ for the analysis of these narrative strategies? There are basically three reasons for this: first, cognitive approaches focus on the question of how readers⁷ make meaning from comics; second, they allow me to address images, words, and sequence in comics without privileging the one over the other; and third, they connect the study of comics to a rich and varied corpus of research on the human mind and

its meaning-making processes. This marks a shift in perspective from the code-based comics semiotics of Thierry Groensteen and others: considering comics from a cognitive point of view, as I hope to show, offers a pragmatic account of the diverse narrative strategies at play when contemporary comics engage with postmodernism, from intertextuality in *Fables* to complex storyworld constellations in *Tom Strong* and fictional minds engaging with moral conundrums in *100 Bullets*. More generally, I propose that a cognitive approach to comics studies is applicable to all comics narratives, including those that precede or exemplify postmodernism.

Comics can be defined as words and images combined into a sequence.⁸ What is more important, usually they are words and images combined into a sequence for a particular purpose, namely, to tell a narrative. Readers make meaning from the patterns of black and white (or indeed color) they encounter on the comics page, and this meaning usually takes the shape of a narrative, be it a short, funny tale like the latest installment of *Peanuts* in the daily paper, a formal tour de force like Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1985), or a sprawling epic like Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989–96). How does this work? How do these words and images turn into breakfast entertainment, superhero iconoclasm, or an exploration of the human psyche? Cognitive models of how readers pick up clues from the text and fill in gaps, drawing inferences and projecting a mental world in which the events take place, provide an understanding of how readers make meaning from what they see on the comics page, and in turn, how the words and images in sequence can convey a story, the excitement of its action or the experience of its characters.

Words, images, and their combination into sequences all contribute to these meaning-making processes. Each, however, is a different mode; it involves a different set of choices among communicative means (see Page 2010). In particular, the differences between the visual and verbal mode have been discussed for centuries, most famously in connection with Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766)—with its present-day reconsideration for transmedial narratology by Marie-Laure Ryan (2005). For the analysis of comics storytelling, we need to move our attention from the differences between images and words to the way they work together. The facial expressions, body language, and visual symbolism in the images and the verbal discourse of a character in comics give readers clues to understanding her feelings and state of mind and allow readers to project

possible courses of action for her. The verbal and the visual mode cue these readerly inferences in different ways, but they work together for this common purpose.

My cognitive approach to comics is mainly interested in processes of meaning-making; it works toward a pragmatics rather than toward a system. When considering fictional minds in comics, for example, I take into account the role of facial expressions and gestures in embodied social cognition and what is known as “theory of mind,” that is, our capacity to project another’s state of mind from their looks and demeanor, rather than define normalized verbal and visual signs of “fear” or “happiness.” The clues and gaps in comics prompt our minds to run the schemata of our genre knowledge, to immerse ourselves in storyworlds, or to empathize with characters. At stake is not a vocabulary or grammar of comics storytelling but rather a pragmatic account of how comics awaken their readers’ imagination, how they elicit meaning-making processes, and how they thereby tell their story—in short, what turns patterns of black and white into an experience.

In this endeavor, cognitive narratology and cognitive approaches to literature at large offer a substantial body of research to tap into, from evolutionary perspectives on empathy and mimesis (see Zunshine 2006 or Tooby and Cosmides 1995; 2001), to psychological research on how our memory provides frames and contexts (see Bartlett 1995) or how we reason through mental models (see Johnson-Laird 1983; 2006), to cognitive semantics and conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). This is only a truncated list of the cognitive approaches to fiction that I will bring to bear on comics in this volume, but it gives some impression of the breadth of the field and the wealth of new methodological possibilities it offers to comics studies.

Looking into meaning-making processes connects comics studies not only with the future, including emergent cognitive approaches to literature, but also with past traditions of the humanities, such as hermeneutics, close reading, and rhetoric. These traditions explore different aspects of our engagement with texts, and even though they rarely explicitly address the cognitive processes involved, they still offer important frameworks for thinking through the reading and rereading of texts, the forming of a whole out of many clues and gaps, and the communicative situation implied in fiction. Inscribing comics into the critical tradi-

tions of hermeneutics, close reading, and rhetoric, as I seek to do in the present study, not only connects cognitive and humanist approaches but also allows comics studies to participate in larger discussions of intertextuality, the scope and nature of mimesis, and questions of ethics.

The Argument

Contemporary Comics Storytelling is about narrative strategies in comics, the analytical tools they require, and the interventions they make in larger cultural conversations. In order to engage with these issues, I begin with an account of meaning-making processes in comics. In other words, I consider the clues, gaps, and inferences that shape the encounter between readers' minds and textual features. Chapter 1, "How to Analyze Storytelling in Comics," outlines an approach to comics based on cognitive semantics (which investigates non-arbitrary processes of signification), discourse psychology (which investigates inferential processes and the construction of mental models), and cognitive narrative studies (which investigates narrative strategies emerging from these processes). In the following chapters, this approach is put to work in three case studies. The main issues of my case studies are also key areas of cognitive narrative studies: genres and the ways in which they prompt readers to expect a particular set of characters, situations, and plot complications in *Fables*; storyworlds and the ways in which readers navigate them and negotiate their boundaries in *Tom Strong*; and fictional minds, their reasoning, experience, and ethical evaluation in *100 Bullets*.

Chapter 1, "How to Analyze Storytelling in Comics," revisits Umberto Eco's classic semiotic account in "A Reading of *Steve Canyon*" (1976). It offers a new reading of this comic based on clues and gaps in the comics text rather than on semiotic codes. Clues and gaps elicit cognitive processes such as establishing a generic frame of reference within whose parameters we read the story, positing a mental model of the storyworld within which we imagine the events of the story, and projecting fictional minds, their moral judgments, and learning processes. These textual features lead to "textual effects" that activate certain cognitive processes in the reader. For example, when a text presents two conflicting frames of reference, this creates subversion. Chapter 1 rereads *Steve Canyon* cognitively and shows how complex, polysemic patterns of meaning-making emerge from the encounter between the readers' minds and the features of the text.

Chapter 2, “Textual Traditions in Comics: *Fables*, Genre, and Intertextuality,” investigates how the series *Fables* responds to the postmodern fairy tale. Postmodern fairy tales have subverted the conventions of the genre by presenting self-reliant heroines, attractive witches, and depraved princes. *Fables* presents similarly inverted value hierarchies and casts fairy-tale characters in different genre roles. These genres, however, are chosen in accordance with their decorum; that is, the story of a murder is told in the befitting genre of crime fiction, and they are presented as unified textual traditions. Through its treatment of genre, *Fables* turns the postmodern fairy tale back to highly gratifying, convention-driven storytelling. The series offers a case study of intertextuality in comics, of how visual and verbal cues refer back into textual traditions, of how the generic schemata can be evoked, either to break expectations or to tell a story readers immediately feel familiar with.

Chapter 3, “Fictionality in Comics: *Tom Strong*, Storyworlds, and the Imagination,” takes stock of the superhero genre and its responses to postmodernism. The superhero genre, with its highly immersive narratives in which the world is saved on a weekly basis, has been dismantled by the skepticism of postmodernity: its ideological complicitness has been revealed, its escapism highlighted through self-reflection and metafiction. Alan Moore’s *Tom Strong* series features many instances of such self-reflection: it presents heroes in exchanges with their fans or entrapped in magical comic books, and it consciously recasts the history of the superhero genre in the biography of Tom Strong. In *Tom Strong*, however, mimesis depends not only on referentiality but also on experientiality; that is, the storyworld not only has to *look* right, it also has to *feel* right to characters (and readers). The series redresses the balance between these two dimensions of mimesis and thereby reasserts the value of immersion and escapism. The self-reflexive moments and the history of the genre are integrated into the biography of Tom Strong, and the series thereby spins a new, coherent master narrative of the superhero genre that moves beyond its postmodern deconstructions.

Chapter 4, “Fictional Minds in Comics: *100 Bullets*, Characterization, and Ethics,” analyzes the crime series *100 Bullets* in order to trace the way in which fictional minds are constructed in comics, how these minds contribute to the identity of a character, and how this helps to find one’s way in the “ethical thicket” of the social world. Fictional minds can be

read through facial expressions, embedded narratives, and their connections to the action of a character. As characters aim to navigate the storyworld of *100 Bullets*, which seems to have lost all its moral moorings, they put conceptual metaphors to work and get to understand that their identity is the sum of their choices, and at least one of them develops what Aristotle calls “practical judgment,” that is, the ability to make an informed moral decision. Conducting an extended, and serially repeated, thought experiment in fictional minds and their moral choices, *100 Bullets* explores the necessity of commitment in an entirely contingent postmodern storyworld.

Contemporary Comics Storytelling develops a cognitive account of meaning-making processes and narrative strategies in comics. The clues and gaps of the comics texts, the hypotheses and mental models that readers construct from them, and their combination in genre schemata, storyworlds, and fictional minds form my stepping stones into comics as a narratological domain of inquiry. As we will see, these comics series present complex and considered renditions of intertextuality, fictionality, and ethics, and thereby engage in the cultural conversation after postmodernism.

A Note on Texts and Terminology

The comics terms I use are not highly specialized, but some introductory pointers might be in order to ensure that all readers can enjoy this volume without irritation about terminology. “Comics,” as readers will have noticed from my usage in this introduction, refers to the medium and its texts, but it also forms a part of compound nouns such as “comics studies” or “comics theory.” Comics texts are partitioned into panels, that is, framed images presenting the (narrative) events. If a comics page features empty spaces between panels, these are called the “gutter.” Ways to include verbal discourse in the panels are speech bubbles, when a character is talking in direct speech, or captions, that is, textboxes atop the panel which signal that the source of the utterance is not (spatially and/or temporally) located in the panel.

Comics are published in different publication formats, such as the comic book, the trade paperback, or the graphic novel. The comic book is a short magazine publication that features one installment of the comics narrative. The trade paperback is a collection of individual issues, or

comic books. The graphic novel is a self-contained narrative, published as a single volume. Technically speaking, none of the series discussed here are graphic novels, even though they might be marketed as such. Since I am interested in the comics medium and its narratives, but not so much in its publication formats, I talk about “comics” throughout. Alternative terms for comics would be “graphic narratives” or “sequential art.” I prefer the term “comics,” because it is more readily recognizable as a tag for the kinds of texts I am writing about, from newspaper strips to comic books and graphic novels.

For all three series in the case studies, I cite the trade paperbacks. In a citation like (4:123), the first number refers to the volume in question, the second number to the page number. For non-paginated comics, like *Tom Strong*, I also cite the issue number. In a citation like (4:16:23), the first number refers to the volume of the trade paperback, the second number to the issue in the series, and the third number to the page within the issue.

Since the uppercase letters in the speech bubbles and captions are a non-marked mode of expression, my citations use standard capitalization. Words with emphasis (bold in the comic) are rendered in italics. Dashes indicate that a new speech bubble starts in the course of the citation.