The Sociological Image Nation

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Abstract

This article points to the origins of the comics format in nineteenth-century Geneva as a way to think through some of the fundamental questions posed by the use of comics production to report social scientific findings. Surveying the articles in this special issue, a case is built for the importance of transdisciplinary approaches in the field of sociology and elsewhere.

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Misgivings about the cultural status of comics and graphic novels have been with us since the Swiss school master, Rodolphe Töpffer, began publishing his *littérature en estampes* in the 1830s. Töpffer, termed "Father of the Comic Strip" by the celebrated art historian David Kunzle, began experimenting with graphic literature in his role as a school master in Geneva. Influenced by the diagrammatic systems developed to support the teaching of pantomime and dramatic action by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johan Jakob Engels, Töpffer's proto-graphic novels extrapolated the study of stage gesture into new narrative forms for the amusement of his students and, assuredly, the pleasure of the author. Lessing, who published *Laokoön oder Über die Grenzen Der Malerei und Poesie* (*Laocoön: or, The Limits of Poetry and Painting*) in 1767, had, more than a half century prior, decisively contributed to the Enlightenment separation of text and image into separate realms, one governed by time and the other by space. This distinction, flouted by Töpffer and his inheritors in the field of comics and graphic novels, has nonetheless persisted through the Modernist period and into the present day. Thierry Groensteen, himself one of the leading exponents of Töpffer's contributions to the pre-history of comics publishing and a leading theorist of the form, maintains that the text-image distinction derived from Lessing is one of the five "symbolic handicaps" that has served to reduce the cultural reputation of comics generally. While Groensteen's symbolic handicaps are contestable, it is true that, notwithstanding W.J.T. Mitchell's observation that images and words have always gone together, this distinction persists not only in the production of culture but in the more general organization of knowledge. Anxieties persist: what if, as Töpffer implicitly posited, comics and graphic novels are mere distractions for school children and not, in point of fact, a significant means of capturing, reporting, and conveying scientific knowledge?

Modernism's insistent need for the classifying knowledge into discrete categories gave rise to the social sciences as we know them, relegating heuristic and narratological exploration to the humanities. The humanities themselves have historically distinguished between creative and intellectual pursuits — departments of art and departments of art history; of creative writing and of English literature — and it has been the latter that has enjoyed a prioritized space of privilege within the academy even as the former captures the imagination of the public at large. While research creation exists uneasily within humanities disciplines, the social sciences, driven as they are by the need for empirical assuredness and rational logics, have found it difficult to incorporate elements of the imaginative and the fanciful.

In his 2005 book *Everything Bad is Good For You*, media theorist Steven Johnson develops a productive thought experiment. What, he wonders, would we make of books if their invention had come after the development of video games? Johnson ventriloquizes critics of an emerging literary form, decrying the fact that text understimulates the senses, that it activates only a small portion of the brain devoted to processing written language, and that books, with their consumption by the individual reader, are socially isolating in nature. Johnson's example nicely demonstrates that biases against new media derive from perceived differences with extant media (Johnson, 2006, p. 19). Following this logic, we might wonder: what we would make of the typical sociological journal article, with its well developed textual analysis, its graphs and charts and endnotes, if we had developed comics before text? How would the field of knowledge production differ if the word/image relationship had not been severed by an Enlightenment appetite for characteristic methods but had developed harmoniously out of traditions like the medieval illuminated manuscript? A sociology rooted in comics would presumably denounce textual approaches for lacking integrative values, for their linear undermining of multimodal thinking, and for the way that they privilege certain learning styles over others. In our thought experiment, a sociology accustomed to the integration of word and image would inevitably

see a turn to the exclusive domain of textuality as a retreat. Yet, in our reality, do we see an expansion of scientific communication in multimodal terms as an advance?

Today we recognize that this is not merely a thought experiment, but an actual experiment in the true sense of the term. The scholars whose essays appear in this special issue are genuinely embarking on new directions in social science communication with a true sense of discovery — they have proposed experiments in the graphical integration of comics and sociology without a strong sense of precisely how these experiments will work, what will be their outcomes, and how they will be received. To read the essays in this volume is to be struck by the genuine sense of exploration that structures these inquires. While they are able to draw on previous exemplars — notably in the field of autography and life writing (Art Spiegelman's *Maus* [1996], Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* [2006], Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* [2000], and the reportorial work of Joe Sacco are the commonly cited touchstones) — these are not perfectly aligned. Notably, graphic memoirists are not (with the very notable exception figures like Nick Sousanis and Lynda Barry) working academicians, and their highly personal work is not structured by dispassionate scientific inquiry. The graphic memoirist has a responsibility to their individualized understanding of the past, but the graphic sociologist must necessarily serve the additional master of scientific rationality. Fascinatingly, the trepidations induced by this responsibility is discussed at length by the authors appearing here ("Academia is a world of words," note Giselinde Kuipers and Fiammetta Ghedini [2021]), who consistently rehearse their awareness of the novelty of their approach, as well as the frictions that arise from collaborating with professional and non-professional graphic novelists.

Comics is an art form chosen here not by chance. It is one that carries the weight of historical disdain. Dismissed by cultural mandarins in the early-decades of the twentieth-century as a form of sub-literature degrading the taste of young readers, comics were — in the United States, across Europe, and in Japan — the subject of extended contestation. Challenged by teachers, librarians, and community organizations, world-wide efforts to regulate and control the circulation and consumption of comic books was the norm in the mid-twentieth-century period. These efforts to contain and control comic books left them as one of the most denigrated of our popular cultural forms. Despite important advances in the cultural reputation of comics since the 1980s, in particular stemming from the so-called graphic novel movement led by Spiegelman and his contemporaries, the status of the form is still tentative. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, sociologists turning to work with cartoonists have a great deal to gain when they offer new avenues for communication and court audiences who might eschew the essayistic form, but, at the same time, it is clear that they also court risk. In wedding the seriousness of sociology to the frivolousness of comics, the risk is not that comics will be taken seriously, but that the sociologist will be reduced to the role of jester.

These concerns are explicitly given voice in the introductory paragraphs of Brad Evans' essay, "Portraits of Violence" (2021). I was particularly struck by the first of the many examples that he chooses to mobilize in exploring issues involving the hierarchization of forms is telling. "Could," Evans wonders, "an illustrated version of *Othello*, for example, really capture the drama and intensity a more literal reading of Shakespeare might offer as the reader is sat alone with its words?" (pp. 242–243). For me, a comics version of *Othello* always immediately recalls British artist David Hughes' edition of the play, the English version of which was produced in Germany by Alibaba Verlag (1998) because British publishing houses were "bluntly disinterested" in the idea of producing comics at that time, no matter how prodigious the repu-

tation of the artist.[1] Yet, Evans' concern that the visual production of Shakespeare's work might supersede the "images of thought" produced by the text alone fails to account for the fact that Shakespeare himself wrote *Othello* for live performance — a mode that by necessity dictates an impression — and that, for the playwright, there was no notion of a reader "sat alone with its words." Quite the contrary, and as Evans hints at, the very separation of text from image in book publishing was a deliberate institutional strategy. William Blake, to borrow another example from this same essay, conceptualized his poetry as working in close collaboration with his paintings, despite the fact that — far too frequently — his poetry is not taught alongside his etchings and engravings as constituted equal elements. The engagement of writers with the visual arts has a centuries long tradition, but, unfortunately, so too does the drive to place these undertakings in separate silos; the English Department rarely sits alongside the Department of Art History, no matter how aligned their interests and methods might seem to outsiders.

While these separations and anxieties persist as the background of many of the essays presented here, we must also acknowledge that this issue is a study of success. The past decade has generated a number of remarkable transdisciplinary efforts to think about new forms of knowledge dissemination, and this special issue brings together researchers involved in several of the most notable institutional endeavours, each arising in a different locale yet seeking similar outcomes. The ethnoGRAPHIC book series, launched by the University of Toronto Press in 2017 under the joint supervision of series editors Sherine Hamdy and Marc Parenteau, has, to date, released five volumes that combine comics with ethnographic field research in support of a "more imaginative and collaborative ethnography."[2] *Sociorama*, a collaboration between a team of French sociologists, the cartoonist Lisa Mandel, and the venerable Tournai-based comic book publisher Casterman (who produced Hergé's *The Adventures of Tintin* beginning in the 1930s), has resulted in fourteen volumes in which sociological research is communicated through the comics form for a non-specialist audience that might otherwise never engage with it. Finally, ERCcOMICS, funded by the European Research Council, a collaborative effort between the Sorbonne and the professional organization La Bande Destinée, has produced sixteen webcomics on a variety of scientific concepts. Despite the significant institutional differences between these projects — published by a scholarly press, published by a comics-specialist press, presented online — and despite the differences in their remits and the scope of their projects, it is notable that the central points of concern across all of them are common: the question of the narrativization of non-narrative research findings, and the issue of the use of stereotypes.

The issue of narrativization is a foremost issue in these projects. As Kuipers and Ghedini note, "making the research into a narrative was the most dramatic intervention" (2021, p. 159) for ERCcOMICS. Similarly, driven by their contribution to this issues, Schiemer and Duffner (2021a & 2021b) describe a determination to create a narrative symmetry from a story that draws on potentially existing genre tropes, not the least of which was a desire to introduce a strong protagonist-antagonist relationship that would generate action. The papers in this issue describe a wide range of approaches to story-telling, from the protagonist-investigator who gradually uncovers the complex truth of a social problem to the battle among subjects who seek to demonstrate the situatedness of positions. As the examples included here so ably demonstrate, there is no fixed solution to the narrative question, just as there is no ideal form of the

1.   Alibaba Verlag, Literatur und Kunst. *David Hughes Shakespeare's Othello*. Available at: http://www.alibaba-verlag.de/LitKunst/othello_english.htm

2.   Ethnographic. https://utorontopress.com/ca/books/by-series/ethnographic

scholarly essay. As each of the authors describe, one of the most common discoveries in this approach is the necessity of dramatic through-lines. The rise and fall of action, inciting events, narrative turns, and issues around story resolution are all real and present concerns familiar to cartoonists but all too often absent in work produced by scholars. It is not surprising that Berthaut, Bidet and Thura (2021) report that "accuracy with regard to the sociological subject matter and narrative concerns sometimes clashed" (p. 269) (indeed, the most surprising element may be the use of the word "sometimes" rather than "always"...).

The struggle, all too easy to imagine, between scientific and narratological concerns is common in multidisciplinary projects where conventions are frequently at odds, but the essays in this volume point to a different tension that is particular to comics. Several of the essays dwell on the issue of visual stereotype, a central concern of both scholars and practitioners of comics. Berthaut, Bidet and Thura (2021) express their concern surrounding the tension between sociological verisimilitude and reproduction of stereotypes, while Schiemer and Duffner note that some of their key concepts "could not even be translated into a suitable picture" (p. 198). Here the sociologists discover an issue as old as the art of cartooning itself — comics is an art of simplification that traffics in types more easily than in particularities and specificities. Indeed, if we return to the case of Rodolphe Töpffer we discover that not only he was the first to collect comics stories in printed books, but he was also the first to reflect deeply on the problems and possibilities offered by the newly emerging art form. In his 1845 *Essai de Physiognomonie*, published the year before his death, Töpffer outlined a dozen arguments about the nature of storytelling and meaning making in comics. Among the findings that he highlighted was the important role that extremely subtle design choices play in shaping the way that we read characters. He famously noted that the simple curve of the line designating a character's nose might signify — through stereotype — the full complexity of personality type. This reductive element of comics need not be a handicap — Spiegelman's *Maus*, one will recall, features characters exclusively depicted with the spare, cartoonish heads of mice but is no less compelling as a record of trauma because of it — but it is, nonetheless, an element to be struggled with. The power of visual shorthand — of stereotype — paradoxically allows comics to create complexity through simplicity, but for the sociologist trained to avoid reductionism wherever possible embracing this reality is a leap of faith.

Ultimately, what are we to make of the desire to disseminate sociological research through one of the most historically denigrated of cultural forms? An epistemology of the comic would entail our recognition that visualization has always played a central role in empirical research and in the social scientific essay form. Shifting our attention from the incorporation of charts and graphs towards a more fulsome redefinition of data visualization as visual narrative isn't, as these contributions demonstrate, as big a leap as some might imagine. The historical dominance of the essay form as the best and only form for the dissemination of new knowledge is no less arbitrary than is the historical separation of word and image into separate disciplines. A more progressive transdisciplinary epistemology will seek to uncenter not only the distinction between research methods, but those that structure research communication. The essays in this special issue draw on the experience of some of the most notable efforts in this regard to demonstrate the perils and possibilities of thinking in new ways about how we report the work that we do.

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