2013

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Recommended Citation

Mortimore-Smith, Shannon (2013) "From Skeptics to Fanboys: English Majors Encounter Graphic Narratives," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 12.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1985>

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PRACTICE

From Skeptics to Fanboys: English Majors Encounter Graphic Narratives

SHANNON MORTIMORE-SMITH

As a long-time advocate for the classics, I was slow to see the value of graphic novels. It was not until my second year as a graduate student at Western Michigan University that I began to recognize their worth. Operating on the presumption that comics were largely “brain candy” and “kiddie stuff”—how could capes and spandex tights be serious?—I was genuinely startled when I read my first graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. This visually complex, multi-layered, coming-of-age narrative was not what I expected. When later I encountered *Blankets*, Craig Thompson’s graphic memoir as a young artist growing up in Wisconsin, I was transformed.

Most striking in these narratives was the relationship or symbiosis between the image and the word. Reading became a multimodal practice; to read a graphic narrative well, I had to train myself to read differently. Not only did the linguistic cues inform my interpretation, but attending to the visual, aural, spatial, and gestural cues became crucial to reading these texts as well.

Soon after these first encounters, I was curious to learn how my students, undergraduate English majors, would respond to these texts. Would they harbor the same prejudices that I did? Would they recognize the power of these texts to transform their reading practice? Would they find opportunities within these texts

for rich and critical interpretation? Concentrated around the students’ reading experiences and interpretations of graphic narratives, these questions and others like them became the central focus of an original blog that each student created for the course. Each week, students responded to a variety of prompts related to the reading; in addition, they were required to read and respond to the blogs of their peers. In this way, our discussions expanded well beyond traditional classroom borders. Their conversations in this space were rich, honest, and deeply inflected by the comments of their peers, and it was through this virtual forum that the following representative student reading strategies emerged.

The Skeptic

Despite my insistence that experimentation and play with these texts would yield satisfying rewards, something about “comics” in a “Literary Interpretation” class just didn’t seem to jive. In the arena of skepticism, one student in particular personified (and proudly articulated) the pressing doubts shared by many of his peers. A non-traditional student, an intellectual, and a philosopher, Brian was not afraid to call me out. Reluctant to waste any time, it was on Brian’s first day that he respectfully demanded some answers:

“Can I talk to you a second in private please?”

“Sure,” I responded, gathering my books, “what’s on your mind?”

“I’m having trouble accepting the direction of this class. I’m thinking of dropping, but I really don’t know what else will fit into my schedule. Can we sit down a minute and talk about this?”

I gestured to a few seats and invited Brian to sit down.

“So, what are your specific objections, if I may ask?”

“Well,” he responded hesitantly, “Do you really think comics are literature? I mean, have you read ‘Get Fuzzy?’ It’s funny and insightful at times, but I would never consider it to be literature.”

I had to admit to him that I didn’t know what “Get Fuzzy” was, and when I finally gathered that it was a comic strip, a dawning realization that Brian was associating my use of the words “comics” and “graphic novels” with the colorful Sunday comic strips began to take shape.

“I’m more interested in looking at what I call graphic narratives—the ones I’ve chosen for us to study deal with some pretty significant issues.”

“But they talk in balloons. How can that be serious? I can’t believe that any narrative written in that way could have much substance...are we going to be reading any real literature in here?”

“Well, of course,” I responded. “In fact I’m interested in seeing how the class responds to the way each of these

texts, the graphic novels and the traditional novels, work together. “*American Born Chinese*,” I said, leaning over to shuffle through my bookbag, “is actually a very complicated narrative. It references Chinese and Christian mythology, and the interconnected stories illustrate critical messages about cultural identity.”

Brian watched, disbelieving, as I flipped through a few pages.

“The story works well with Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, which as you probably know, has received a good deal of literary acclaim.”

Brian seemed unconvinced. I paused for a moment and asked, “What is it that you would like to be reading Brian?”

“Well, like you said, I’m interested in looking through the anthologies of literature, reading some of the classics, learning more about philosophy, those kinds of things.”

“So you’re looking for Homer and Milton and Eliot and Shakespeare.”

“Maybe not Shakespeare, but yes, something more like that. Basically I’m here to learn Walt Whitman, not Walt Disney.”

I laughed. “Honestly,” I admitted, “I never thought I would be thinking of graphic novels in this way either, until I actually read one. Have you read any graphic novels?”

“Well, yes,” he said. “And some of them had good stories, but I didn’t see how they were any better than any of the literature I’ve read.”

I nodded. “I want you to know that even though these readings are assigned to you, there is no requirement that you become a comics fan or even enjoy them. What I’m ultimately looking for is that you can think about these readings in a critical way, and that you can

share your interpretations—and your skepticism—with others.”

Brian frowned a little. “Why don’t you think it over before you drop the class,” I suggested, “with the understanding that if you find no merit whatsoever in these texts you can feel free to share that perspective with your classmates. In fact, I would enjoy hearing that point of view. My interest in graphic novels is not so much because I am a fan or that I want to convert others to the medium, I’m simply interested in what students do with them when they read them—how they think about them and what they see in them.”

**“Basically I’m here to learn Walt Whitman, not Walt Disney,”
Brian said.**

Brian sat thoughtfully for a few moments. “So I can disagree? I can remain skeptical?”

“Yes. Be the skeptic, challenge the texts, ask tough questions of them, weigh their merits, listen to your classmates and make up your mind about them along the way.”

“I might be able to do that,” he said. The next class period, Brian came back. In the days that followed, as I instructed my students on how to develop and personalize their individual class blogs, I noticed that Brian had titled his blog “The Skeptic.” In the autobiographical section of his blog he wrote:

Why “The Skeptic”? Well, I have to admit that I am having a little trouble with the idea of a graphic novel. It sounds like an oxymoron to me. But I’m willing to be open-minded about this and try to have some fun with it. After all, I am here to learn. I doubt that I will ever be convinced but if I’ve

learned one thing it is that I never know what’s gonna happen next.

In an in-class writing assignment addressing the questions, “What are real books?” and “What knowledge, assumptions, and/or prejudices do you have about visual texts such as comics or graphic novels?” Brian wrote:

Comics are books. That’s a fact I’ll have to learn to live with. That however, says nothing of quality. I think the graphic novel has its place and it is certainly a valid art form. But of what art? I read *Blankets* and *American Born Chinese*. Both were entertaining but that was about it. Is that all a book is about? Entertainment? I don’t happen to think so. I think that comics still seem to be juvenile.

Brian’s perceptions mirrored those of many of his peers. For example, responding to the same question, Emily wrote,

I’ve never really been interested in visual texts because they have always seemed childish and nerdy to me. I’ve always thought of little boys with sticky fingers as the main demographic of comic books. I’ve also always thought visual texts were for people without enough imagination to read a novel without pictures.

This idea was shared by Erica as well, who wrote, “I personally have never enjoyed comics. I always thought comics were something boys did.” Both of these statements were of great interest to me, particularly the implications that comics were intended for a specific type of male reader and more intriguing, that visuals somehow implied that the reading was easier or “less imaginative.”

Indeed, many of my students’ initial objections to graphic narratives

were on the basis that reading comics meant that the experience of creating imaginative pictures from the written word was somehow compromised or co-opted by the illustrations—the creative work had already been done for them, resulting in a much less satisfying reading experience. These ideas were reflected by Ashley when she wrote, “I enjoy reading and creating an idea or vision in my head after I comprehend it. When it’s already out there for me, I’m not allowed to imagine anything for myself really. I don’t like to feel forced to accept the image in front of me because that’s what the author thinks.” Clearly, these students needed some convincing.

The Fanboy

However, while the majority of my students expressed reserved sentiments regarding the graphic narrative, the presence of a handful of “fanboys” (and “fangirls”)—those who considered themselves avid aficionados of the medium—helped balance prevailing preconceptions by lending their unique expertise. One such student was Azwar, a Malaysian media studies major, whose immediate reaction upon discovering that his “literature” class would be reading graphic narratives was that of disbelief and elation.

A student who we might refer to as Brian’s nemesis, Azwar was eager to dig in to the assigned texts. Appropriately, Azwar’s blog was illustrated with pictures of robots, parody videos of his favorite video games, and clips from his favorite comics as well. Approaching me after class one day, excited to share some of his comic preferences, Azwar appreciatively proclaimed, “It’s about time someone took comics seriously. Comics deserve to be viewed as litera-

ture.” These ideas surfaced later in his blog in response to my earlier questions: Graphic novels and comics are as much real books as anything else. All things being equal, they still present ideas, observations and commentary on the world around us. To dismiss a whole medium as being unreal or less serious because of biases is idiotic and, sadly, rather expected.

A self-proclaimed long-time fan of the comic medium who admitted to having to “defend his hobby countless times,” Azwar acknowledged that he had few if any hang-ups regarding comics. Azwar confessed that his initial interest in the medium was because of the art. Later, however, he shared that his discovery of comics with “solid stories” led him to admire the ingenuity of these texts even more. In defense of comics and graphic novels Azwar wrote:

The stories are generally faster to get through than having to wade through the normal books, but have enough fodder for the imagination to latch onto. Comics allow for more self-interpretation... Nowadays, I’m happy to report that comics have reached a point where both art and writing have become important in the storytelling process.

Not wholly unexpected, this statement led to a good-natured debate (via the class blog) between Brian and Azwar. In response to Azwar’s assertions, Brian commented, “I don’t think anyone really questions (in this class anyway) if comics are real books or art, the real question that we are leading up to, and I’m looking forward to this is: are comics literature?” Yet while this playful banter ping-ponged about the web, most students found themselves trapped somewhere in the quiet purga-

tory in between. Open to the ideas of both the Brians and the Azwars, the responses of these students fluctuated between thoughtful admiration and blunt disregard for the medium.

Spaces In Between

Working through her initial reactions to Scott McCloud’s book *Understanding Comics*, the first handbook on comics written in the comic book format, Nashon investigated these contradictions in her own think-aloud style:

Hey, it’s not that I don’t like comics, because I read them now and again, but I’m genuinely likin’ it, which is cool. My initial response was straight-up surprise, and still is. He really wants to relate to his readers and get them engaged for real hardcore/fun understanding of this art form. Which it is. There’s a lot more thought going into comics than I have given credit to in the past—I mean I gave it a little—but this stuff is a science! Basically. The whole thing’s enticing, and I really respond well to passion. He’s got it.

Likewise, discussing both her preconceptions of comics and the impact of McCloud’s text to help her redress her original assumptions, Jeanine added:

[Comics] were nothing I could really relate to, I mean, after all, I can’t fly, sling webs, or create laser beams or storms from my eyes. So I guess to be completely honest, I kind of looked down on them and saw them as kind of geeky and childish. Reading McCloud’s book has changed my thoughts on comics... I mean the very fact that an informative book was written/drawn in comic book fashion shows me that complex ideas CAN come from such pages.

As indicated by both Nashon and Janine's statements, the introduction of McCloud's book *Understanding Comics* (1993) greatly complicated the initial assertions of many of my students regarding "comics" and graphic novels. Now faced with their first graphic narrative, each student had the responsibility of weighing whether or not their original assumptions were valid. Most, like Nashon, expressed surprise and interest in the text.

They recognized the complicated inner-workings of comics in ways they had not considered previously. Operating at different levels of familiarity, some students, like Becky, a "fangirl" and self-proclaimed "Manga/comic book master of sorts" found the reading to be enticing and palatable. Others—newcomers—struggled to make it through the entire book, feeling enormously bogged down by the profusion of images scattered about the page. They expressed sentiments like, "I don't know where I'm supposed to begin and where I am supposed to end," or "I have a headache from doing all of this reading. There's too much stuff on each page!"

In this sense, those who argued that the medium was "kiddie-stuff" had to reevaluate their prior assumptions. If indeed the work required to "read" a graphic narrative was harder than reading a "regular" novel, as some of my students later admitted, then they could no longer dispute the power of the medium to transcend its "cartoonish" reputation. Some students, like Kyle, simply needed a solid understanding of the established conventions of comics

before they could begin to appreciate them. For example, Kyle wrote:

McCloud made me realize that the reader and his or her subconscious play much more into the reading of comics than I would have assumed. An example of this is where the reader is shown a man raising an axe to another man, telling him he is going to die [see Figure 1]. In the next panel the reader is shown a cityscape with a painful scream. It is up to the reader's imagination to figure out what happened in the gutter ... This chapter made me ap-

words simultaneously, and sometimes, even, the spaces in between:

In Chapter Three, [McCloud] says, "The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and unseen," which I strongly agree with. Comics are a form of art and vision. What's in between the panels is left for the reader to create, not the artist.

When students realized that their participation in the story was a key element to how the narrative itself operates, they began to take more ownership over the interpretations they discovered

there. Contrary to what most students believed, interpretation in comics was not so much about interpreting the information available to them as it was about interpreting what was not available to them—to be able to see, as McCloud suggested, the unseen.

Reading Between the Panels

To help my students understand these concepts, I asked them to reflect metacognitively on their experiences as a reader/viewer of these texts. In discussion following their reading of *Understanding Comics*, I asked them to raise their hands if they focused solely on the words, as I did originally. Not surprisingly, more than half of these English majors—trained in reading the word—raised their hands. Together we discussed how adopting new reading approaches might create a more satisfying and critical reading of both the visual and linguistic information on the page.

Figure 1. From UNDERSTANDING COMICS © 1993 by Scott McCloud. Harper Collins. All rights reserved.

preciate comics more because I had never really realized the amount of closure that is involved in them. Comics give the reader much more opportunity to use their imagination than novels or film.

Ashley also shared similar revelations in her blog regarding *Understanding Comics*. While she initially struggled to make sense of all of the images that leapt off of McCloud's pages, her light bulb moment occurred when she realized that reading comics meant learning how to read/view the pictures and the

To begin this important conversation, I engaged my students in what I called a “comics close-reading” activity designed to help them isolate the specific multimodal features in each panel in order to derive meaning from the “symbiosis” or fusion of the picture and the word. Recognizing the tendency of most of my students to skim through the written information and sometimes skip over the visuals altogether, the overall purpose of this assignment was to help students slow down their reading patterns and help them to identify the iconic and symbolic significance of

to each panel—to understand the “auditory” cues inherent in each new page. These exercises took a great deal of time and practice to execute well. For example, to demonstrate to my students how multimodal cues fuse together to create a singular, unified experience for readers, I used the following panel from McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* to model and to teach multimodal analysis (see Figure 2).

In the panels depicted in Figure 2, I ask my students to tell me first what they see (visual meaning). In this step, students are quick to share, “a pot boil-

this way?” Some students speculate that it’s not so much the kitchen itself that the artist wishes to put at the center of the reader’s attention, but the sound, the activity, and the pleasure taken in the act of cooking. The objects on the stove, the knife, and even the egg-timer take on a new identity when presented this way.

When we discuss the use of words and language (linguistic meaning), students emulate the onomatopoeic “chop, chop chop!” and “tik tik tik” sounds. Further, we “write” the language of the panels through our unique interpretations of the events.

Last, we consider the mood of the woman in the third panel by examining her facial expressions and body language (gestural meaning). “She is calm, content, focused on the task at hand,” my students say. Others read a kind of melancholy in her mood. “She’s an unhappy housewife,” some of them suggest. “She’s wearing an apron. She appears to be lonely and sad.” Using the information available to them, students are empowered to make perceptive judgments about the movement and the meaning behind the text. It’s clear that students are “reading between the panels.”

I emphasize, during activities like these, that in our reading of highly visual or graphic texts, that we must consider how all of our senses work together to create meaning, especially in the absence of words and language. After the activity, my students begin to understand that there are multiple ways of approaching and interpreting a text. To become savvy readers of new literacies, they must learn to become attuned to each of these modes for creating meaning.

While inevitably, some students continued to balk at the suggestion

Figure 2. From UNDERSTANDING COMICS © 1993 by Scott McCloud. Harper Collins. All rights reserved.

the visual information available from each panel.

Furthermore, by applying the principles of both visual and multimodal literacies, the students began to recognize other avenues of meaning-making that they had not previously considered. I asked them to look carefully at the placement of the characters in the panels and to consider “spatial” ways of knowing. They scrutinized the “gestural” behavior of each character as well, learning to inflect emotion onto the characters based on their facial expressions and body movement. They learned to examine shapes, backgrounds, lines, and color for their emblematic impact on the passage, and they learned to listen

ing on a stove, a woman in the kitchen, a chopping block, a refrigerator, a mixing bowl,” etc. I explain that sometimes I call panels without any narration or word balloons silent panels, yet I promptly add, “but these panels are not silent at all. What do you hear? What auditory meaning is available from these panels?”

Turning to the panels again, the students reply: “the thunk of the knife on the chopping block, the sound of water boiling, the ticking of the timer.” We shift our thinking next to the way that the images are placed spatially (spatial meaning) on the page. “We know that we’re in a kitchen,” I suggest, “so what is the effect of dividing up the scenes in

that they shouldn't "judge a book by its panels," others seemed to experience a "great awakening" of sorts. Those who previously thought graphic novels were "simple" and "easy," began to report that it was taking much longer for them to maneuver through the reading when they dedicated themselves to reading it well. At the same time, I noticed that many students began to share a new sense of satisfaction in the reading, even feelings of enjoyment and pleasure.

By the time we finished *Understanding Comics*, I noticed a dramatic shift in the attitudes exercised by my students. Increased knowledge of the multimodal features embedded in graphic narratives further provided students with a powerful set of interpretive tools for penetrating and analyzing the distinctive features of the medium. Confident that the most difficult barriers had finally been broken, I looked forward to experiencing the remaining graphic novels in my course through the X-Ray vision of my students' eyes.

The images included in this article are low-resolution reproductions of single panels from *Understanding Comics*. They intended to illustrate ideas under discussion by the author. As such, the use of these images qualifies as fair use under United States copyright law.

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