

THE COMICS WORLD: COMIC BOOKS, GRAPHIC NOVELS, AND THEIR PUBLICS.
By Benjamin Woo and Jeremy Stoll (Eds.). Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. 250 pp.

This book takes the readers on an exciting tour to an imaginary industrial setup, where we are shown the three major stages in the life cycle of comics. It begins with the authorial persona asking the reader to “Imagine a world with comic books and graphic novels at its centre”, with a promise of an adventure trip to the “exciting, messy world of comics”. We are shown different ways of looking at the comics world which is inhabited by the agents, institutions, and social fields that form and are formed through their relationships with comics and graphic novels.

The book explores the “three big moments” in the existence of comics: production, circulation, and reception, which also resonates with the structure of the classic model of communication. Thus, we are made to understand the world of comics through the lens of economics among other disciplines. For instance, a couple of essays are dedicated to examining the field of comics from a social scientific point of view and also from the perspective of sociology and political science. Thus, Benjamin Woo and Jeremy Stoll appear not only as social psychologists but also as historians, folklorists, business analysts, and rhetoric scholars, among other specialisms. Their accounts of comics are rooted in the social and cultural contexts where comics are created, circulated, and consumed.

The book intends to attain three-fold objectives: (1) to help establish comics and graphic novels as an area of research within social-science disciplines (2) to bring together examples and present some findings from a range of case studies that can enrich an understanding of contemporary and historical comics and (3) to promote interdisciplinary dialogue across the humanities/social sciences divide and thus strengthen comics studies as a field.

The term Comics work is “as applicable as much as to Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning epic *Maus* as it is to a 12-page, photocopied, hand-stapled zine given out for free at a small-town comics convention attended by ten people, never to be seen again” The writers intend to problematize comics and graphic novels in order to encourage a reflection on how they appear as a problem to be investigated and on what we want to know about them. We are introduced to the world of comics as “one of the many art worlds” and as a “collection of individuals necessary for the production of works that the world defines as comics”. However, there is no single, unified comics world. There are as many potential comic worlds as there are kinds of comics. The writers have rightly labelled the world of comics as an “exciting” yet nevertheless “messy” world of comics, the word messy here is used in the most positive possible meaning of the term indicating the pluralistic characteristic of this world as it is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary and even undisciplined. The book grapples with the complexity of what comics and graphic novels mean to different people at different times and for different reasons.

The process of Production is an entry point into the world of comics which leads us to the scene of the birth of comics and how different people come together to contribute to the process of creation. Under this section, the book talks about the genesis of the comics world. The writers assert that the lineage of comics cannot be linked with mythology since the “modern-mythology” rhetoric erases the labour performed by its creators. Rather, they insist that roots of comics can be linked with “named people who are trying to make a living from their artistic labour” and in this multifaceted Industrial setup, the writers introduce us to the Comics Workforce who are equivalent to “creative workers in comics” who perform work, “whether paid or not, that affect the content or aesthetic presentation of a comic book, graphic novel, minicomic, or webcomic that was made available to the public in English in 2010 or later.” This entry point helps us in identifying

comics' impact and in return get impacted upon in the social world. From this point onwards we are led to see the role of comics existing in dynamic relationships with intermediaries and audiences.

Comics production is not merely limited to comics publishing, in the traditional sense of the term. "What we're looking at is not so much an industry as an ecology, a space where different kinds of comics-making activities, many of them only semi-professionalized, are taking place (Woo 2018)". For instance, Melbourne is cited as an epitome of the centres of comics production. Pierre Bourdieu's theories of the cultural field and contemporary creative industries are also applied to examine the elements that encourage the production and circulation of comics in Melbourne, which offers a new kind of cultural tourism. The reasons for the high levels of sustainability and growth apparent in Melbourne comics are that it redresses gender imbalances among both creators and audiences and produces a variety to choose from for consumers, as a result of which, "The Melbourne comics scene is a participatory culture where consumers often become producers and producers are still enthusiastic audiences for their peers' comics" (Baccini). According to Baccini, "there is a circular pattern between competition, diversity, and innovation" found in Melbourne's comics world.

The book also addresses the issue of representation of women in the sector of comics production. It aims to show that women too, have had significant careers as comic artists and also attempts to explain how their careers have been rendered invisible. It points out the main reasons behind the "ghettoization of many female cartoonists", one of which is the assumption that "works created by women are often assumed to be necessary for women". This conception had led to the prevalence of gendered genre comic books especially in Japan and South Korea. Other Asian countries also have histories of their own girls' comics besides Japanese *shôjo* manga (girls' comics) and their Korean equivalents. The early *shôjo* manga presented stories as fairy tales of princesses with magical powers, romances deeply rooted in a Cinderella complex. B. S. Jamuna, in her analysis of *Amar Chitra Katha*, reported that women are bestowed an image which becomes "metaphorically a dispossession of identity," and are "transformed to a spectacle for men's pleasure and of women's helplessness," and "relegated to a peripheral position," "treated harshly and afflicted with the "women in refrigerator syndrome." Whereas, Anant Pai, the creator of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic book series, while defending himself against accusations that he depicted women negatively, said that "Negative portrayals were necessary to preserve historical accuracy" (Lent 2004).

There are such stereotypes that remain in Asian comics, but with the entry of more women into the ranks of cartoonists, metamorphoses have occurred. The metamorphoses can be largely witnessed towards the end of the twentieth century, where isolated instances of the imaging of women differently from the "traditional, hackneyed way" can be found in works like Manjula Padmanabhan's creation, the newspaper strip *Suki* in 1982, featuring a character described as the "quintessential free-spirited urban Indian woman struggling to make her choices in a seriously unfriendly world." This, however, testifies the fact that a rich history of women creating and promoting comics in many Asian countries does exist, however, it is duly acknowledged that women cartoonists have rarely had the same opportunities as their male peers.

The book proceeds to the second stage of circulation, the process which takes the newly made comics to their journey forward "to find their way to readers". In traditional print media, the term circulation referred to the number of copies of a periodical that were sold and stood as a crude proxy for a publication's readership. In contemporary cultural theory, circulation refers to the "way of understanding how the movement of objects configures social relations." (Straw 2010). The public's organized around these "cultures of circulation" are pertinent intermediaries that "shape and are shaped by comics' circulatory matrix".

The reception of the world of comics is open to children as well as adults. The multimodal nature of these texts has something in common with video games and convergence culture. Children are thus able to understand quite complex and sophisticated relations between different

modes and media because these worlds are designed with lucidity and forethought that enable them to decode them. In this way, even “a very arcane vocabulary, found in comics based on Shakespeare’s plays becomes lucidly meaningful to even small children”. In this context, a comic book can be seen as a kind of “pocket-book theatre.” Akin to a play in which Shakespeare’s language is situated in action and is visually performed, the comic text offers the needful. While comic books have largely been imagined as entertainment commodities, yet, this is not the only use to which they can be put. Education is another standpoint which makes comics studies and the comics world relevant for mature consumers. In chapters by Shari Sabeti and Valerie Wieskamp, works that have been created for specific and distinctive purposes and circulated in spaces of education and gender-based are discussed. Sabeti’s “All That Shakespeare Stuff” examines the producers of graphic-novel and manga adaptations of Shakespearean plays, arguing that producers embed conceptualizations of cultural and educational value in their adaptations. In “Learning to ‘Speak without Shame,’” Wieskamp discusses Priya’s Shakti, a multimedia comic project intended as a culturally authentic response to and intervention in the problem of sexual violence in India.

Thus by following the movement of comics and their publics, we are led towards an understanding of how a given part of a comics world is embedded within the larger structures. We are shown how the orientation of one public, that is, from creators onwards to another, that is specific audiences, impacts the social life of comic art. The moment of reception too is not just limited to merely reading in the narrow sense. The text argues that “media consumption can only be understood as part of a practice that is not itself ‘about’ media.” So, in order to fully understand comics’ reception, we must try to understand how they enter into ordinary people’s lives and the uses to which they are put. Our work as researchers, teachers, scholars, and readers also has a valuable impact on the comics world.

At the closure, we are offered one last public for comics and graphic novels in the form of an interview with Charles Hatfield and Franny Howes. The authors have very succinctly brought forward the idea that Production, Circulation, and Reception are not isolated but interconnected moments. They seem to overlap and the boundaries between them get blurred as these social worlds within the worlds of comics are very much interdependent. The writers have been successful in whetting our interest in comics and graphic novels as an area of research and in enabling an understanding of contemporary and historical comics by promoting interdisciplinary dialogues which have thus helped them in making a strong case for comics as a promising field of studies.

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