

Introduction



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Any field busy and productive enough to merit a guidebook will by definition be too busy and productive for a single book to cover. Comics studies is one such field, a fast-growing area of scholarship at the intersection of many academic disciplines (and confined to no single one). The growth of comics studies in the twenty-first century has been explosive, so much so that scholars and students of the form can hardly keep up. That, we believe, bodes well for the field, but is also the impetus for this book.

A number of ambitious books have sought to cover comics studies in a single bound, yet it remains difficult to map this vast and spreading field. From our perspective, it has seemed that students in comics studies still lack a dependable text that succinctly identifies the field's core issues and debates, a compact volume that can serve as a first stop, critical sourcebook, and study guide. This book aims to be just that: an overview of comics studies that sketches the contours of the field and spotlights core critical issues. Of course, it is impossible to do justice to comics studies in one volume, but this book, composed of seventeen original essays commissioned from leading scholars, offers to show the lay of the land—or rather, one set of strategies for mapping it. We hope you find this book an engaging, provocative, and useful guide.

Consider this volume, then, a timely dispatch from a dynamic, unruly project shared (and its very terms contested) by a great many scholars. Comics studies is not the most conventional and respectable of fields in academia, and the terms of its acceptance remain in dispute.¹ Certainly, the liveliness of comics has not been corralled into a settled, predictable discipline. Comics may

remain, as Scott Bukatman has it, a happy “monster” that works the margins and interstices of culture: impure, hybrid, and hard to place, “a threat to established order and orderliness.”² The very idea of a singular academic guidebook to comics studies may seem crazy. Yet clearly comics studies does need maps and guides—it is that busy. The vitality of comics studies reflects the fact that comics itself, as a communicative medium and art form, has gained new ground and, indeed, undergone a drastic change in status within our culture. This book is an attempt to catch up.

While in America the disposable comic strip and comic book are no longer inescapable parts of everyday life—that is, comics no longer reach into the daily routines of millions—the cultural impact of comics has never registered more strongly among scholars than it does today. Indeed, the art form has attained greater critical if not economic clout than ever before. Even as comic books inspire world-spanning Hollywood blockbusters, introspective graphic books (novels, memoirs, histories) are making the best-seller charts and critical “best of” lists. Graphic novels have become a staple, even a pillar, of children’s publishing, overcoming decades of mistrust and disregard. Translated Japanese manga, familiar to so many readers raised on visually saturated media, constitute a robust literary form. Webcomics, with us now for well over twenty years, are likewise a thriving culture. Hence comics remain embedded in the cultural vernacular.

At the same time, a new generation of curators has rushed to exhibit comics art in museums and galleries, and new forms of comics criticism have emerged. In fact, comics have never been studied more intensively than now. This young century has seen comics win major literary prizes, shape the image-making practices of filmmakers and game designers, and inspire a burst of scholarly publications, both journals and books. Comics scholarship is booming, as confirmed by the launch in 2014 of the Comics Studies Society, the United States’ first professional association for comics researchers and teachers. Comics teaching in higher education has surged: courses on comics have sprouted everywhere from community colleges to public universities to Ivy League institutions. The academic landscape in North America is dotted with comics classes, and more and more schools are responding to the high demand for them. Comics studies degree programs and concentrations have begun to appear, both undergraduate and graduate. In addition, there are many comics-based studio programs within art schools, some new and some older, that are training new generations of creators.

As part of the first generation of academics to stake our careers on comics scholarship, we have witnessed this explosion gratefully and with awe.³ Our *Guidebook* attempts to make sense of it all in terms that will help up-and-coming scholars in the field. For practical reasons, we have centered this book on (broadly speaking) Anglophone comic strips, comic books, and graphic novels, yet we seek to situate those genres within the greater context of world comics.

That is, while our *Guidebook* highlights trends in comics that have had a very noticeable impact in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, it also takes an international view, tapping scholarly resources in other languages, acknowledging influences from Japanese and European traditions, and reflecting on the global circulation of comics culture. The result, we believe, will help students of comics gain much-needed perspective on the development of the form—indeed, a satellite view of comics studies as a vibrant and emerging field.

We use the satellite metaphor advisedly, to signal our interest in the entire comics world yet also to remind ourselves of the hazards of cultural imperialism. To speak or write of “world comics” invites charges of imperial overreach; after all, the Western label “comics” should not be the measure of sequential art and graphic narrative traditions worldwide. Anglophone comics traditions do not map neatly onto, for instance, Japanese manga traditions, as Frenchy Lunning shows in chapter 5 of this volume, or even other Western traditions such as that of Francophone *bande dessinée*. Nor do the many other histories of comics from around the world align easily with each other—and again, even to call them histories of *comics*, when other terms and concepts may take precedence in their cultures of origin, perhaps seems like a form of colonization. To be sure, the *lianbuanhua* of China, the *manhwa* of Korea, and the *historietas* of Mexico or Argentina (to name but a few examples) are not interchangeable with, or simply adjuncts of, Anglophone comics from the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom. To posit them all as aspects of a single object of study may flatten out important differences.

While certain comics cultures—take for instance Japanese manga, Franco-Belgian BD, and U.S. comics—have been exported widely and influenced the comics of other cultures, this does not mean that they are the only templates necessary for understanding how comics are made worldwide. Even what we have called “Anglophone comics” is a cluster of traditions rather than a single one, a complex field in which multiple national histories overlap and sometimes compete. Consider, for instance, the differences between U.S.-style comic books and the British tradition of comic weeklies. Australian artist-scholar Pat Grant, who was raised in a remote coastal town in New South Wales, describes his sense of distance from “the Anglophone comics tradition” in an essay included in his graphic novel *Blue* (2012): “Someone like me ought to take the dominant history of comics well salted.” Grant reflects, “I grew up with other things,” and notes that his own “local comics tradition” does not “intersect with the grand narratives” of comics history in any obvious way.⁴ Yes, he knows those grand narratives—his essay, dotted with famous American names, shows as much—but they don’t speak to either his own history or his sense of the current possibilities of comics. We take Grant’s point: there is always a risk that rehashing the grand narratives will hide other riches, that too great an emphasis on the famous and oft-exported will blind us to local scenes *and* to a larger, fuller world, one of diverse narrative art traditions.

We should admit up front that this *Guidebook* repeats certain grand narra-tives that seem important to grounding our sense of Anglophone comics. Yet our contributors have also brought new conceptual frameworks that can help boost understanding and appreciation of works from around the world. We do believe that there is such a thing as *world comics*, or international comics, inso-far as lines of influence among comics creators and industries increasingly over-step national boundaries. Many comics artists are aware of and draw inspiration from major figures in world comics, and translations play an important part in the reading lives of many comics readers. Whatever terms we use to denote the form—comics, BD, manga, or others— we know that many dedicated readers affirm the continuity of graphic storytelling across cultures and seek out graphic narratives in diverse traditions and styles. Comics, then, is a recognizable art form across borders.⁵ Further, the idea that any one culture “invented” comics is a canard that we can do without. Influence moves in every direction: for exam-ple, to understand American comic books, graphic novels, and webcomics in the twenty-first century, it helps to know about the influence of Japanese manga and anime; conversely, to understand the development of twentieth-century manga, it helps to know about the influence of early American comic strips and animated cartoons. Calling all these phenomena “comics” is, for us, a conve-nient way of tagging a multifaceted global art form, one that is never cordoned off from other influences but draws inspiration from myriad centers of culture (just as other cultural forms draw from comics). We see the idea of world com-ics as a pathway to cross-cultural understanding, not an inducement to search all over the world for the same few, familiar things. May this *Guidebook*, in part through its very limitations, spur further efforts at mapping, countermapping, and (re)framing.

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