

What more can semiotics do for comics?

Looking at their social, political, and ideological significations

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ABSTRACT

As early as the 1960s and through to the first decades of the 21st century, comics studies have attracted a large and perhaps disproportionate amount of attention from analytical semiotic approaches that foreground description and theory building. Many of them, culminating in McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993), have been accused of treating their subject with arbitrary abstraction and an overload of theory, and of engaging in a semiotic metaphysics that posits the reality of the sign apart from the social reality of each reading. But such opposition of content-oriented criticism and formally abstract semiotics, the accusation of *social myopia*, does not hold under closer inspection. This introduction to the present Punctum special issue on *The Social, Political, and Ideological Semiotics of Comics and Cartoons* traces some of the overlooked and often oversimplified concerns within semiotic traditions to comic book scholarship that can and often did investigate the historical setting of each sign used in comics in various ways. From this point of view, the social condition of communication is always already in its signs.

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There has been a time when studying comics seemed to be almost synonymous with studying their semiotic structure. As early as the 1960s – spearheaded by “two figures [...] of primordial importance to the rise of comics as a subject fit for academic study: Umberto Eco and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle” (Meesters 2017:100) – and through to the first decades of the 21st century,

comics studies have attracted a large and perhaps disproportionate amount of attention from analytical semiotic approaches that foreground description and theory building: Their combination of pictorial and scriptural resources offered a challenge to any attempt towards a systematic theory of signs, and their experimental treatment of their semiotic inventory as well as the genres, imageries, narrative structures, and conventions of other media and art forms invited descriptive scrutiny as well as playful engagement.

That approach took a more or less explicit departure from at least two older writing styles about looking at comic books, those arising from cultural criticism and those appearing in artistic instruction (cf. Woo 2020). Neither of these amounted to a systematic or encompassing study of comics, but for different reasons. As for the former, semiotics allowed research to turn away from the condemnation of comics prevalent in pedagogical and sociological as well as more deeply engaged culturally critical appraisals of the form. Frederic Wertham's infamous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) had convinced if not a comic-reading public, then at least a comic-fearing US Congress that there was something about the *funnies*, especially in those prevalent genres that depicted crime, horror, and homosocial relationships, that would indoctrinate youths and influence them towards the associated vices of larceny, violence, and homosexuality. The comics industry re-invented itself as a safe space for innocents by operating a self-muzzling Comics Code that recommended avoiding these and other adult topics so as not to mistreat them, thus rendering the ideal of the uninfluenced child as one supposedly, preciously, and unrealistically, unaware of most social, political, and ideological issues.

One might be tempted to read the later attention towards a theory of signs in comics partly as driven by a wish to embrace the art form while ignoring those struggles over the content. For example, Fresnault-Deruelle's series of seminal texts (e.g., *La bande dessinée, essai d'analyse sémiotique*, 1972, or *Récits et discours par la bande dessinée*, 1977) was undoubtedly profoundly embedded in a tradition of strictly formalist structural semiotics (cf. Wildfeuer and Bateman 2016) largely unconcerned with 'social contexts.' In the anglophone world, Scott McCloud's famous *Understanding Comics* (1993) has been hailed and criticized for its essentially semiotic approach, which it imparted to a large portion of the modern comics studies to which it had helped give rise. For McCloud, the attempt to formalize an understanding of comics purely as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993:9) explicitly pours out topics such as writers, artists, trends, genres, styles, subject matters, and themes, declaring: "the trick is never to never mistake the message for the messenger!" (6). This bold stance is itself, however, pictorially juxtaposed to a view of the history of the art form that is as vast as it is fast – in a few pages, McCloud covers stone age cave drawings, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Roman frieze, and medieval tapestries, all brought together against their topical heterogeneity through that semiotic abstraction, bordering on

the ideal. In as much as the historical expansion of the Ninth Art goes along with its apology as more than the mere messenger of popular and funny entertainment born in the restricted mass media setting of 1890s New York newspapers, the abstraction might itself take on some of that apologetic tone. By being less about its established subject matters and genres, comics might be more than had initially met the eye.

Such an apology is, of course, not McCloud's intention (even though his comic's avatar does literally choke on the assorted contents vacated from the studied purity of the art form, Figure 1). But his semiological turn might have, despite himself, become innocently seductive towards scholars unwilling to engage yet again with the



Figure 1. Scott McCloud Chokes on Content. *Understanding Comics* (1993:6)

condemnation of a cultural establishment and their established academic peers. This is undoubtedly the context in which a generation earlier, Umberto Eco's continental and fundamentally structuralist treatment of "Il Mito di Superman," and similar engagements with *Steve Canyon* and the *Peanuts*, were collected in his volume *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964). The opposition of cultural critics warning of the barbarian apocalypse and acquiescent ideologues willingly integrating themselves into existing power hierarchies framed this semiotic approach and its emphatic interest in the structures of plot, the semantics of political content, and the modern mythology of the comics, as a detailed close reading that promised a way out from the intellectual aporia of loving the comics while finding so many reasons to hate them.

But such opposition of content-oriented criticism and formally abstract semiotics does not hold under closer inspection. The second extant tradition of comics scholarship was in the self-descriptions of artists and studios instructing newcomers and enlightening audiences with reflections upon their devices (cf. Wirag 2016, Jenkins 2017). And these were, if more or less explicitly, necessarily fundamentally semiotic themselves. The much more practice-based work of Will Eisner (*Comics & sequential Art*, 1985), on which McCloud essentially builds, focuses on describing formal semiotic and semantic relationships. Ten years later, Thierry Groensteen's *Système de la bande dessinée* (1999) elaborated a semiological approach to the 'iconic solidarity' of images on the page that found the art of comics, in parallel to the literariness or poeticity of poetry as described by the formalists, to be fundamental to the very cohesion of images collocated on the page and across the many pages of a BD album (cf. Miller 2017).

Vice versa, for all its ideological faults, Wertham's reading of comic books was one of the first published treatises to engage with somewhat detailed semiotic descriptions of what could be found on the page. Creating his own version of the metaphor of 'close reading,' Wertham employs an ambivalent idea of *myopism* in his marriage of close attention to and abject judgment of comic art. On the one hand, he finds that parents who find nothing objectionable in comics cannot see them correctly: "[s]uch arguments are so superficial, and so evidently special pleading, that the only thing worth noting about them is that so many adults are naive enough to give them credence" (1954:86). Comics' proper readers discover more on the page than these short-sighted adults: "the parents, teachers, and doctors who asked discussion questions spoke of comic books as if they were fairy tales or stories of folklore. Children, however, do know what comic books are. [... A]dults are more readily deceived than children" (18). Wertham joins the children with whom he works and talks to them about the comics as they read them with him at their side. He is thus brought to the first inventory of stylistic and signifying elements, listing color schemes, types of bodily depiction and pose, panel sizes and structures, and relational page layouts.

But while this closer look avoids being deceived as adults would, it merely restages a different kind of gaze led astray, for those same children are regularly described by Wertham as blinded or blindfolded, unseeing, or unable to clearly distinguish what they see. In one emphatic case study, Wertham discusses 13-year-old Willie, from whom Wertham learns a lot about how to read comics: “He had difficulty with his eyes and had to wear glasses which needed changing. According to his aunt, he had occasionally suffered from sleepwalking which started when he was six or seven. [...] Willie was always a rabid comic-book reader” (7-8). There is an interesting diagnosis not just of comics but of their semiotic study in this contradiction. From this point of view, the semiotic approach recreates one kind of myopism as it avoids another. The antithesis makes sense from a place of semiological suspicion: Whoever reads comics best gives them the greatest power to disrupt and pervert. Whoever fails to understand their signs misses their dangerous content. Wertham’s way out of the conundrum lies in situating the close attention to the page with equal attention to its social, political, and ideological position: “It is necessary to analyze the comic books themselves, the children in relation to them and the social conditions under which these children live” (50-51).

Rid of its ideological short-sightedness, such a three-fold tension between semiotic naiveté, successfully blinding semiosis, and socially embedded sign processes might yet prove key to a proper understanding of the critical power of semiotic comics scholarship. The plethora of early international contributions to the semiotic study of comics, including Ulrich Krafft’s *Comics lesen* (1978), Ursula Oomen’s *Wort - Bild - Nachricht* (1975), Daniele Barbieri’s *Il linguaggio del fumetto* (1990), and Anne Magnusson’s Peircean approach in *Comics & Culture* (2000, with Hans-Christian Christiansen), among many others, have been criticized – wrongly, we believe – for engaging in a semiotic metaphysics that posits the reality of the sign apart from the social reality of each reading (cf. Frahm 2010:20). Many of these approaches have been accused of treating their subjects with arbitrary abstraction and an overload of theory, neglecting political and material conditions of comics production, contents, distribution, and fandom, and reproducing distinctions of class, race, and gender by elevating the body depictions of a popular genre to the metaphysical dignity of seemingly ahistorical semiotic principles (cf. Horrocks 2001). If the same criticism has been spared other approaches, it might be because they hardly reach the same audiences: Natsume Fusanosuke’s and Takekuma Kentarō’s collection *Manga no yomikata* (漫画の読み方, 1995, roughly: *How to Read Manga*) inspired a similar Japanese tradition of formal-aesthetic and semiotic reflections of writing, images, and abstract line-art in manga, although this has hardly been noticed internationally due to a lack of translations (cf. Theisen 2017). More recently, the multimodal linguistics and semiotics of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) have given rise to new methods, such as Janina Wildfeuer’s empirical discourse analysis of comics (e.g., 2019) as well as related annotation schemes (Bateman

et al. 2016), Paul Fisher Davies' multimodal systemic-functional linguistics (2019), or large-scale formal corpus analytics (cf. Alexander Dunst, Jochen Laubrock, and Janina Wildfeuer's *Quantitative Analysis of Comics*, 2018) – and the combination of semiotics and cognitive linguistics has opened new venues, such as Neil Cohn's description of comics' distinct visual language (Cohn 2013, 2016).

In the face of the criticism that would accuse some of these studies of social myopia, and perhaps as a suggestion to those studies that most clearly focus on the sign on the page apart from its social setting, we contend that a semiotic approach to comics studies always has and can continue to engender a thorough and critical engagement with the social, political, and ideological dimensions of comic books. The naturalization of 'improper,' comical, and deformed shapes in comics can be exposed at the very heart of its ideological tendencies and implicit traditions. Carefully examining the cartoonish depiction of bodies and stereotypes against the political history of caricature offers insight into the processes of reproduction that structure these comical signs. The formation and transformation of plot and figural schemata in serial storytelling invites closer looks at the currents shaping and tearing at the conventions of the popular and the experiments of the art form's avantgarde. The freedom of the drawing pen inevitably leads to a pictorial database in which all aspects of the depicted world are specifically appropriated and thus inviting interpretation. The reinvention of panels, pages, habits, and means of inferences in web-comics demand specific formal scrutiny alongside the social implications of their extended and postdigital usages. And if we are to see transnational mainstream comics enter a "Blue Age," as Adrienne Resha has recently argued (2020), it is not least in the reordering of code, address, and communicative situation that the expansion of topics and reader bases has to take place.

More fundamentally, what might have been neglected in much of existing comics scholarship, and has undoubtedly been overlooked by its apocalyptic critics, are the social implications of a theory of signs that must always already be understood as the examination of an inherently social process of "unlimited community," as Charles Sanders Peirce (1878:606) argued in his conception of the probability-oriented continuum that takes us from each individual reading to the collective or code-bound conditions of its possibility, the alternatives offered by other interpretants, and the dramatic variety of the consequences suggested by its not well-defined and never endless but multitudinous readings. Equally, a structuralist account has to live up to Ferdinand de Saussure's demands for a "science of the life of signs in society" (Saussure quoted in Hodge and Kress 1988:v).

Semiotics thus understood will engage with the historical setting of each sign use, and each semiotic structure in comics, in at least three ways: By differentiating collective and individual conditions of each reading and hermeneutic process, detailing

a social situation inscribed into a comic as its condition of possibility as well as the grounds of its interpretation; by detailing the political affordances assumed to hold by the production and distribution as well as by the communication through, about, and with comics, as each actor involved in those processes posit themselves within the power relations that in turn inform the semioses they drive; and perhaps most importantly of all, by tracing the emergence as well as the apology of false naturalization through a criticism of the ideology attached to whatever is seemingly evident in the apparent mere visual representation of ultimately invisible ascriptions. If there is one thing the cartoonish aesthetics cannot help but expose in every panel, it is the misleading but ubiquitous tendency to think that we know what we are looking at because we can see what it looks like (cf. Packard 2006, 2017; Wilde 2020), even though we are unable to accomplish either. From this point of view, the social condition of communication is always already in its signs.

It is then perhaps no surprise that one of the most-quoted traditional sources in the contributions to this issue is Roland Barthes' 'Rhetorique de l'image' (1977). Sometimes unnoticed by its more technically-minded epigones, Barthes' distinction of denotation and connotation across verbal and visual messages does not stop with the classification of these different components of the semiotic structure of modern pictorial communication but goes on to pinpoint the ideological nature of their confounding readings: We wrongly assume that what we have seen justifies our description of it. At the same time, these contributions bring together re-discovered semiotic concepts as well as continue to develop recent approaches to multimodal analysis, all of which go beyond dealing with the provocation of cartoonish images in sequence and assorted scripts on the page, and move into the analysis of semantics, of multi-dimensional modal complexities, and the focused examination and expanded scope of a linguistic tradition turned towards an art form that has historically served as a laboratory for the encounters and deviations between language and other means of expression.

One such re-discovered concept is the structuralist view of semantic isotopies, which **Chiara Polli** turns to one of the most promising and complex studies of signs: The art of translation involved in several versions of Gilbert Shelton's *Freak Brothers* (e.g., 2008). Rather than distracting from the careful semantic analysis of the shifts of meanings and connotations involved she draws our attention onto the changing political situation of the original and its various transformations that cannot help but become appropriations to the assumptions of later translators and editors, and the actual affordances of their reading publics.

Following the detailed technique of this examination, **Nicholas Wirtz** argues against a too simple understanding, and apotheosis of the 'handmade mark' as an entry point to understanding the aesthetic of autobiographically inspired comics. Rather than following an easy assumption of automatic authenticity and immediacy

guaranteed by the work of the artist's hand on the page, Wirtz showcases effects of quite different devices from digital hand-lettering and repeated means of body depiction and pose that arrive at ethically forceful and aesthetic risky versions of artistic autonomy in Mira Jacob's *Good Talk. A Memoir in Conversations* (2019). The question of autobiographical signification is taken up again by **Adam Whybray**, who re-examines critiques of the objectification of female characters by looking at the visual language in autobiographically oriented comics by Chester Brown (2011), Joe Matt (1997), and David Heatley (2008) – and by Ariel Schrag (2018), whose artwork goes beyond the appropriation of such ostentatiously restrictive graphic patterns. Continuing the look at intimate body depictions while moving far away from the intimacy of autobiography, **Caitlin Casiello** presents a semiotic catalog of the pages, the bodies, and the sighs transported in Japanese *eromanga*, a battleground for questions about freedom of expression or about defending youth and women from symbolic, or rather visual forms of sexual violence. Casiello investigates how the surfeit of visual information moves the reader into an imaginative relationship for fantasies which, in turn, allows us to reexamine other genres of manga in related, more informed terms, rather than singling eromanga out as an exception.

Moving towards more explicitly political topics, **Martin Foret** compares the depiction of abstract ideas through various visual devices in the comic book versions (e.g., Kosatík and Ticho 762:2013) of the historiographical and political Czech TV serial *The Czechs*. His close reading of several volumes and their specific artistic inventions is framed by, and illustrates, a comprehensive approach to reformulating the very semiotic nature of comics as a whole, preparing an innovative use of the concept of *code* to cut through problems of concepts of media, art forms, genre, or the sometimes metaphorical 'language' that comics may consist of. **Roula Kitsiou** and **Maria Papadopoulou** use Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Critical Metaphor Analysis to examine and appraise a large corpus of caricatures depicting, framing, interpreting, and judging the recent so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 in Europe. Their careful analysis reveals how artists use cartoons as 'perspectivisation devices' (Silaški 2012:216) for covert framings, not merely reproducing but also challenging persistent (verbal) metaphors through pictorial, or rather multimodal means that dehumanize immigrants throughout the 20th century.

Finally, **Eirini Papadaki** brings together a similarly large array of Disney animations from 1937 to the present to examine the myths and ideologies about the tourist industry and the concept of tourism in the depictions and narratives about Mickey Mouse either as such a tourist or as the native inhabitant of a beckoning destination. In her application of Greimas' (1983) semiotic square and Barthes' (1993) ideological critique, her contribution closes the circle by rediscovering established semiotic concepts for new applications in scholarship about comics and animation.

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