

Comic Book Takeover: The Ubiquitous Influence of the Medium in Hollywood

Function Follows Form: Form and Interaction of the Comic Book Medium

Theresa Huh, State University of New York at Stony Brook

Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, published in 1954, provided 'evidence' that directly connected comic books to juvenile delinquency. The book elaborated more on Wertham's previous studies on the harmful influence of the comic book through collections of clinical analysis, personal studies and illustrations. While Wertham was concerned with the violent content, he was also concerned with the form of the comic book and how it shaped the reading process. The existence of gutters between the panels in comics allowed the reader to project one's imagination in the attempt to make sense of the image and the overall narrative. The reader filled in how a violent or dangerous action would happen both within individual panels and in between.

Wertham was not the only one during his time who was concerned with the form of comic books. To many educators the juxtaposition of text and image was problematic. Comic book reading impeded the development of proper reading skills, which was the understanding of the meaning of text. Comic book reading was not limited to reading textual information but included understanding the message images were trying to communicate, such as gestures or sound. This 'multimodality' was one major reason that made the comic book a controversial medium in the 1940s and 50s. The popularity of comic books was alarming not just because of its content but their ambiguous position and rupture in the hierarchy between text and image. Multimodality in comic books require more than understanding linguistic information of text or seeing images as mere visual descriptions of text. Contemporary studies now focus on the equal prominence of both the textual and the visual in communication, thus seeing comic books in a more positive light than before.

Yet there is more than 'equal prominence' of text and the visual in comic books. Text can function as visual information. Visual information is more than just drawings of characters or action. Panels, gutters, page layout, and the existence of pages themselves are visual information as well. Depending on the author(s) and the readers the boundary between textual and visual can be manipulated. Sequential and spatial at the same time, individual panels, gutters, margins and the page work as one structure. Reading comic books is not limited to imagining what happens in the gutters, but following a sequence of panels while simultaneously looking at the entire page. It is not only understanding what is being told but also how it is being told. In this aspect, the form of the comic book also becomes part of its content.

This is the aesthetic appeal of comic books as a medium. The author(s) designs the form and how it delivers the story, and readers are able to interact with the story through form. By interacting with the comic book the reading experience becomes part of the story. This process is done through the reader's own pace. The flow of action in comics is not necessarily equal the passage of time within that story's world (for example, one individual panel can have indications of multi-layers in time), nor is it necessarily equal

to the reader's 'real time'. Readers have some control over the pace of a story, creating momentum while they linger, go back, or go forward. How the story is told is created by the author then interpreted and recreated by the reader.

There is no doubt that content takes a huge part in the appeal of comics. Yet function follows form; the form of the comic book is a story of its own. While there is more in the world of comic books than those described above, it has been an attempt to emphasize the comic book as a medium. Interactivity enabled by the form of this medium would be one key point in thinking of its impact on media culture.