Political Engagements: Thinking Inside the Frame

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Abstract This essay reviews a number of recent critical works in which comics and politics are intimately connected. From explorations of the cultural and national contexts in which specific comics appeared, to the study of the actual politics underlying works, the essay gives a survey of comics scholarship published today, which evidences the growing interest in the study of political notions such as nationhood, globalization, propaganda, or womanhood. Additionally, the essay also considers the audience for such works, as while many of the works reviewed are intended for an academic audience, the field of comics scholarship often crosses traditional boundaries into creator and fan produced criticism.
Key words: comics, politics, geography, nation, women, global, manga, India, Mexico, Russia, Japan

Comics are an inherently political medium. The potential for a broad understanding of their narrative images, even when language is not present, can sweep across class, race, gender, language, and national boundaries. Although much of the emergent field of comics scholarship focuses on works conceived, marketed, and received as sophisticated literature, such as Sacco's *Palestine*, Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and Satrapi's *Persepolis*, it is important to remember that even so – called kid's stuff has a strong political element. Some of the initial works about comics, from Wertham's sensational *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) to Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck* (1972), recognize the way comics reflect and have the power to shape personal, religious, economic, and national identities. Because of our own interests, the focus of the conference the papers in this issue arose from, and the nature of this journal, our investigation of recent works of scholarship on comics takes a broad international and political focus.

Despite the relatively small number of critical works published about comics, the prominence of political approaches in the humanities makes attempting to produce a holistic portrait of the recent academic and critical work on comics more complicated than perhaps we initially expected. While the leading contemporary voices in comics scholarship have inherited the critical and rhetorical tools of the last decades to con-

tinue developing political interpretations, the polyvalent discourses surrounding not only the idea of the political but also the definitions of comics have fractured the field into countless approaches. Initially, the newness and the tendency toward approaches that variously combine semiotics, narratology, and cultural studies opened up innumerable avenues for the examination of comics, while trying to establish an overarching methodology and critical vocabulary. As a result, we are witnessing a scholarly unevenness in approaches to different media and genres as well as to works of differing national origins. Further, such work struggles with the difference in the levels of familiarity within both the academic and non – academic audiences. Thus, we see this as an opportunity for scholars and critics interested in exploring in detail specific avenues to discuss political issues as they manifest in comics. This review essay will look at six recent works on comics which variously address national comics traditions from Mexico, Russia, India, Japan, women in comics, and architecture and urban space. Many of these break new ground, some looking critically at their subjects for the first time, while others bring new perspectives to their primary material.

Bruce Campbell's *iViva la Historieta! Mexican Comics, NAFTA, and the Politics of Globalization* (2009) provides a comprehensive overview of the presence of NAFTA, globalization, and neoliberalism in the Mexican comics of the last decade of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. In an attempt to foreground the importance of the nation as a geo-political, cultural, and social framework in which comics are conceived, Campbell's main motivation is to emphasize that "[t]he shift to neoliberalism meant a final public abandonment of the kind of cultural work exemplified decades earlier in the revolutionary nationalist mural art of Diego Rivera" (14). Thus, sometimes a cultural-materialist text, sometimes an essay on neo- and post-imperialism, *iViva la Historieta!* navigates contemporary Mexican comics from very contrasting, sometimes antagonistic, perspectives in order to reveal the presence of comics across the Mexican nation as they emerge from very different ideological fronts.

Campbell's critical study emerges from the analysis of specific works that either promote or strongly react against the neoliberal and conservative agendas of the last three Mexican administrations, conciliating reflections on the political context of their publication and their reception. However, for Campbell contextualization and reception are insufficient to understand the importance of the issue at hand. The textual and visual analyses of the proglobalization and antiglobalization works that he selects deftly give shape to the cultural critique he constructs to point at the "ideological differences vis-à-vis the problematic of globalization" (19). A critique that, additionally, is unavoidably constructed around the inherently national tensions such as the country's modernization, Mexico's pre-Columbian identity in contemporary global society, or the economic and social policies that have given shape to the country as we understand it today.

One of the most important achievements of the book is Campbell's downright refusal to assume a countercultural or alternative nature with which comics have been traditionally characterized. Instead, the multiple ideological foundations underlying the comics he revisits evince rather naturally that comics cannot be seen as simply

pertaining to specific pockets of popular culture, but as a highly versatile and politically motivated medium. As a result, Campbell spares us the now outdated and perhaps pointless comics-as-legitimate-cultural-product apology to dive head-first into the three-dimensional ideological world in which cultural production, including comics, occurs. On the one hand, official annual reports on the government's performance published in the form of comics (like President Vicente Fox's "A Mitad del Camino") and narratives on the Mexico City (like Mexico City Mayor López Obrador's *Historias de la ciudad*) emphasize the fact that comics have an invaluable potential for channelling "political competition for popular loyalties and the necessity of legitimating governance" (45). Simultaneously, from the point of view of the entertainment industry, we are introduced to pro-US Mexican border western narratives such as *El Libro Vaquero*, or the patriarchal central character in *Las Aventuras del Dr. Simi*, manifest the promotion of a specifically conservative ideology. On the other hand, Campbell discusses the other side of the political coin by commenting on the extremely powerful connections between the Spanish conquest and the US post-imperialism in projects like Edgar Clement's *Operación Bolivar*, which offers a "long view of globalization in the Americas, from the European conquest . . . to the trasnationalization of domestic markets under the twentieth-century hegemony of the United States" (165), or parodies of the superhero tradition like *El Bulbo*, a humorous narrative that features "Japanese manga, Star Wars, [and] Superman" and subverts the genre while engaging in a carnivalesque celebration of the figure of the antihero (191).

All in all, iViva la Historieta! succeeds in highlighting the complexities of the Mexican political landscape as represented in the ubiquitous medium, while demonstrating that comics are not governed by an innocuous and inherent ideology, but they are shaped as cultural artifacts with a specific underlying ideology. Ultimately, Campbell's book is an accessible and entertaining read that, while satisfying the of its scholarly audience, it has the ability to reach out to the interested comics reader.

Working toward similar goals, but on a much larger temporal scale, José Alaniz constructs both a history and a critical framework for looking at Russian comics in *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* (2010). Identifying a troubled and contentious history for sequential visual narrative in Russia, Alaniz works hard to create an argument for comics as a persistent Russian medium, assembling a genealogy for sequential narrative art in Russia that links them to "past visual cultural practices" (4) beginning with the essentially Russian religious icon paintings and continuing through to present-day comics, which exist almost despite a public that is and largely has been suspicious and sometimes hostile to them. In that context, he presents a visual tradition that the culture understood in ways that parallel comics, icons being quite literally painted on separate panels and conveying narratives. The message and visual form of the icon, which functioned as a portable device for conveying religion, was combined with printing to create the lubok, originally "a cheaply made sheet . . . depicting religious scenes through crude drawing and textual captions" (16). As the lubok form developed through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it began to include both folktales and political messages from oppositional forces. The lubok came to be viewed as a medium of the people, at times regulated by the government and

condemned by the Church. In the early twentieth century, however, its popularity declined with the advent of both cinema and radio, the strains of the Russo-Japanese War, World War I, and the various revolutionary struggles. However, apart from the lubok, visual forms of communication flourished. Experimentation in both posters and journals under the influence of vanguard forces such as Diaghliev's circle and the Futurists played with the relationships between text and image.

Alaniz recounts that with the formation of the Soviet state, the role of sequential art initially exploded. Posters conveyed propaganda and party messages, and sequential works hung in urban windows by the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) provided Communist party directives to the public in a decidedly comics-like form. These ROSTA windows criticized class enemies, warned of social evils, and formed a method of mass communication with a semi-literate public. During the same time, comics appeared in journals, most notably the satirical *Krokodil*, and artists such as El Lissitsky renewed experimentation in the interplay of image and text. This period was not to last, however, as the consolidation of Stalin's power and the rise of Soviet Realism put an end to ROSTA windows, many journals, and artistic experimentation in general. Alaniz describes the near-extinction of comics and most communication involving innovative uses of image and text: viewed as capitalist and part of primitive, backward culture, narratives that included pictures were seen as harmful to literacy efforts, and comics were relegated to consumption by children. Sporadic government poster work continued, but radio, television, film, and the printed word dominated. Alaniz traces some artists and comics creators that fled to environments more receptive to their work, especially Belgrade and Western Europe.

After laying out the often sad history of comics in the decades after Stalin, Alaniz then chronicles the return of Russian comics during Perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and beyond. Groups such as KOM and Tema took advantage of the new openness, but failed to find acceptance in a culture that had been trained to be mistrustful of comics. A second wave of post-Soviet comics arose in three main lines, but, just like its predecessors, it struggled for public acceptance and to compete with foreign imports. Alaniz credits the website *Komiksolyot* with saving Russian comics by becoming a gallery and encyclopedia that catalogs the lubok form, ROSTA windows, legal and samizdat publications, and various other forms of visual sequential narrative that have emerged over the past century or so. Despite the formation of an indigenous Russian comic convention, KomMissia, Alaniz's picture of Russian comics is still rather bleak. He mentions that no real distribution system exists for comics that are not imports or directly aimed at children, specifically citing the lack of any comic book stores. The comics community interacts through internet forums, a few conventions, and word of mouth, and faces a public that remains indifferent at best and a critical scholarly community that is often openly hostile. The book then looks closely at the place of comics in fine art, the commentary they provide on the emerging Russian society, the role of autobiography, and the place of women in Russian comics, identifying a small and contentious, yet vibrant group of creators. Especially fascinating are his discussions of the graphic novel *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, a contemporary retelling of the Russian classic, and the works of Lumbricus and

Elena Uzhinova, two Russian women who use autobiographical comics to navigate and challenge their positions.

In his conclusion, Alaniz laments the absence of the political in Russian comics; here, he seems to be using the idea of the political quite literally, citing the disturbingly jingoistic response of comic creators to the Russian conflict with Georgia and the repression of overtly political comics. Thus, while Alaniz identifies a small Russian comics community that deals with notions of globalization, class, and gender, he issues a hopeful call for directly politically engaged comics. Throughout the book, Alaniz does close readings of many comics and proto-comics, yet unfortunately, many of the least familiar forms, especially to non-Russian readers, are illustrated with infrequent examples, and regretably, many of the icons, lubok, posters, and ROSTA window displays, are reproduced at such a small size as to be almost useless.

The history of comics in India stands in stark contrast to those in Russia. Comics enjoyed a rapid rise in popularity after independence, and what is more a single Indian publisher became a force not only in the national comics market, but in the creation of the national imaginary, the process of defining India itself. Karline McLain's *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (2009) provides a history and analysis of Amar Chitra Katha (ACK), publisher of comics that have come to shape the religious, class, and national identities of India and Indians. ACK's comics take the form of 32-page volumes that tell the story of a religious or historical figure in one or more volumes, but are not ongoing series.

The book beings with a history of ACK, a venture that grew out of Anant Pai's disappointment in the lack of knowledge about Hindu culture that he perceived in the generation born just after independence. The comics, launched in 1969 with the volume *Krishna*, retold Hindu mythology in comic form, with a style that was both based on and fought the influences of comics imported from the United States such as *Tarzan* and *The Phantom*. ACK initially published its comics in English, a move which targeted the growing middle class. McLain identifies that by choosing English rather than Hindi, the comics appealed to the desire of parents from across India to both have their children learn Indian culture and practice English. Pai chose to begin by publishing religious tales, a potentially contentious move that ACK navigated by initially minimizing the depiction of miracles, a move that came from both Pai's scientific background and the general emphasis of the new state on science, technology, and progress as well as the desire to avoid creating objects of worship, as images of Hindu deities in any form may be venerated. The comics were wildly successful, sales surpassing foreign imports by the late 1970s, and reflecting and contributing to the growing idea of India as a Hindu nation. Even though ACK incorporated historical figures, colonial freedom fighters, and later political figures into its line-up, its comics McLain demonstrates the comics' strong religious connection with testimonies of people who specifically picture the ACK depictions of deities when worshipping.

Pai's insistence on basing the comics on historical texts, rather than contemporary retellings, led to the reception of the comics themselves as accurate historical depictions, used as references for film and television productions and in debates about the historical dress habits of women in the Indian subcontinent. The comics of ACK

were at various times officially endorsed by the state, and accepted as part of the public cultural fabric of India; as McLain's central argument goes, they "reached into the everyday lives of millions . . . [and] are a crucial site for studying the ways in which dominant ideologies of religion and national identity are actively created and recreated" (22). McLain traces the role of the comics in the changing roles of women in India, touching on depictions of sati, the emergence of women artists and writers, and the depiction of strong, martial Indian women throughout history. In investigating the goddess Durga, McLain reveals the dual nature of these texts as both popular and sacred as well as their role in the formation of modern Hinduism. In addition to the religious comics, ACK publishes historical stories, such as *Shivaji* (1971), that McLain reads as forming and reflecting Indian nationalism and uniqueness, both in relation its colonial past and its contentious relationships with neighboring nations. She also discusses the varied depictions of Muslims in the comics, from stereotypical villains to national heroes; fascinatingly, ACK publishes both the story of the Mughal emperor *Akbar* (1979) and the story of *Rana Pratap* (1979), a Hindu king who fought against him, and both men are portrayed as heroes in their respective volumes. The close readings conclude with a look at the various volumes on Gandhi, which Mclain reads as subtly questioning his philosophy of non-violence while simultaneously minimizing the fact that not all of India agreed with his message; a move that may not be surprising from a publisher whose works are largely composed of tales that involve combat and war and maintains a close relationship with the government. The book itself is replete with large reproductions of pages, panels, and even scripts, and should provide interesting reading to scholars who work on India, comics, religion and nationalism.

If national and socio-political concerns in the field have proliferated in the recent years resulting from an increasing interest in international comics, works offering approaches to individual politics have similarly appeared that expand the academic conversation. That is the case of a volume that has been much anticipated and should be well received is Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (2010), a work that turns its attention to the dramatic presence of five women comic authors in their autobiographical work, combining a commentary on the visual mise-en-scène of the authors-characters with a critical reflection on subjectivity, sexuality, and gender politics. Chute balances rather elegantly a well-articulated theoretical approach to these and other issues with a sharp textual analysis that reflects the authors' political and artistic endeavors. As she recounts in an anecdote involving one of the authors and her art teacher, Chute argues effectively for the value of a gender-specific approach. After Aline Kominsky-Crumb becomes disillusioned by her parents' lack of support, her teacher's encouragement is echoed throughout Chute's work as a marker of the urgency of these authors' production rather than an ungainly apologetic reminder that women indeed do matter: "'I think you have something to say,' and advises her to ignore the previous professors 'and their pathetic egos'" (48).

Graphic Women provides a rigorous analysis of works by five prominent contemporary authors. Following a chronological order, the book starts with Aline Kominsky-

Crumb's explicit work, praising it for its daring reclamation of the grotesque as a non-gendered mode. Chute's main objective here is to go full circle, first implicitly degendering the grotesque in order to explicitly gender it, tackling it as the author envisages. As a result, Chute manages to offer a fascinating triangulation between gender, sexuality, and aesthetic value. In the second chapter, we read about the intermingling of personal and political implications that emerge in Phoebe Gloeckner's shockingly explicit work, in which the author explores her innermost personal anxieties, ranging from the depiction of her own decaying body ravaged by Pemphigus Vulgaris, to the "painful text teeming with adolescent sexuality" in her *Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* (74). While showing a similar interest in the presence of trauma in comics, Chute also approaches Lynda Barry's work from an aesthetic angle: "Barry rejected others' conception of "high art" and "mass art" . . . Although her statement 'I don't know the difference' might be seen as disingenuous or simply polemical, for Barry, in fact, the fluid boundaries between the various forms stems from the fact that images are at the core" of her work (99). Yet, the nude female form appropriately appears in her *Naked Ladies* to reflect, in a reverse mode, how women "look, [how] they act, [and how] they engage our gaze" (105). With regard to Marjane Satrapi's work, Chute characterizes it as explicitly political precisely because it deals with the author-character's reminiscence of her own individuality: "while we need not understand Persepolis 2 as less political, we may understand that in also focusing on the intimate trials and tribulations of Marji's adolescence and young adulthood it integrates a deeply charged, additional mode of witnessing to the first book's witnessing on a world-historical stage" (140). The conflation between personal and historical remembrance, between the national instability and personal trauma, yield, as Chute shows us, one of the most compelling narratives in contemporary comics. Finally, the last chapter tackles Alison Bechdel's symbolically-charged and *Fun Home*, a narrative that reveals the author's traumatic past as much as it does her investment in creating a narrative full of symbolism and nuanced ambivalence. In her analysis, Chute offers the most effective readings of the comic when she explicates the numerous strategies that Bechdel deploys to bridge the gaps that her narrative, one could argue, opens up in front of its reader, from childhood trauma to the conciliation of past and present. As she concludes, "*Fun Home* is a book about trauma, but it is not about the impassable or the ineffable. It is rather about hermeneutics; specifically . . . about the procedure of close readings and close looking" (182).

A much needed work, Hillary Chute's *Graphic Women* is an example of great scholarly work and spot-on textual analysis. Its approach effectively escapes the trivializations that are often uttered with regard to contemporary comics, obliterating the power of self-reflection camouflaged as contemporary authors' solution to an inherent lack of creativity. Her text powerfully invites us to think about the problematic of self-portrayal, casting as wide a net as the autobiographical comics category can embrace.

While the majority of political approaches to culture favor readings of nation, class, race, or gender, the exploration of other angles to understand the political underpinnings of cultural creation and consumption is most opportune. This is the case

of recent studies in space, architecture, and the urban mass, which Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling's edited collection *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence* (2010) comics. This volume offers a wide-ranging selection of perspectives on space and the city that other works like *iViva la Historieta!* or Komiks cover only marginally. Spanning the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the collection comprises sixteen essays that are grounded, for the most part, on the textual analysis of comics from various Western genres and traditions. Additionally, the essays demonstrate an interest in engaging carefully with the main theoretical trends in semiotics and space theory, to produce cultural critiques that highlight the importance of physical and geographical contextualization in comics.

The volume opens with an introduction to "History, Comics, and the City," which emphasizes the power of comics as visual archive and highlights a rather hermeneutical understanding of comics through the representation of space in the frame and the reader's gaze as the natural motion that causes meaning to flow from panel to panel. The second section, "Retrofuturistic and Nostalgic Cities," appears as a logical step forward from the theoretical notions laid out in the first section, complicating new readings of the city with postmodern theories of space in which time and space are closely linked as manifested in utopian and dystopian comics, as Henry Jenkins does in "'The Tomorrow that Never Was'—Retrofuturism in the Comics of Dean Motter": "Retrofuturism suggests the process by which ideas that once were emergent become residual as tomorrow becomes yesterday" (66). In one of the most engaging sections, "Superhero Cities," both mainstream and underground narratives are explored to consider whether or not cities are represented in the same mythical terms that characterize superhero comics so distinctly. Of special interest is Jason Bainbridge's "'I am New York'--Spider-Man, New York City and the Marvel Universe," which highlights the interdependence underlying the creation of the real and the fictional city and explores the desires of the actual city to become its comics counterpart and vice-versa. From there, we move to an investigation of morality, individualism, and evil in "Locations of Crime," to finally "The City-Comic as a Mode of Reflection," which explores in more abstract terms the representation of urban space in comics as a psychological environment, as Thomas Becker asserts in "Enki Bilal's *Woman Trap: Reflections on Authorship under the Shifting Boundaries between Order and Terror in the City*": "The emphasizing of a single panel in stream of pictures is a genuine urban perception first established by the social conditions in New York at the end of the nineteenth century" (273).

Comics and the City provides its reader with a wide-ranging collection of perspectives that cover as disparate notions as the relations between fictional and real cities, reading as a spatial phenomenon, or the psychology of the city. Yet, this thematization of Western notions of space and Western cities in comics from all genres and traditions soon a similar volume will appear that deals with non-Western cities and spaces in comics.

Another recent collection, *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives* (2010), tackles comics from a more traditional, national perspective. The collection sets out with a grand intention: to provide an overview of the genres and histo-

ry of manga, several close readings of individual manga, some narratalogical and semiotic work on manga in contrast to Western comics, and to investigate the consumption and reception of manga on the global market. To that end, it is divided into four sections, "Manga and Genres," "Manga in Depth," "Reading Manga," and "Manga in the World." The variety of approaches and authors reflects the relative maturity of manga scholarship to the scholarship on other national traditions, like India, Russia, and Mexico. Perhaps because it seeks a place in a more crowded market, the collection seems to have trouble defining itself and its audience. Toni Johnson-Woods, the editor of the volume, delivers an introduction that simultaneously is directed at those approaching manga for the first time and manages to reel off details in a rapid-fire method that would be bewildering to the novice. generalizations about both manga and non-Japanese comics are made, and it is unclear if this collection is aimed at the casual reader who wishes to discover manga, the student in an introductory course about manga, or manga fans who wish to peek behind the curtain to see what the academics are saying about their favorite works.

The introductory section follows a similar establishing mode: Jean-Marie Bouissou covers the origins of the medium in Japan in "Manga: A Historical Overview," and the other chapters provide information on the genres of manga, with special attention to shōnen and shōjo, including an interesting but oddly placed chapter on representations of gay men in shōjo, "The 'Beautiful Boy' in Japanese Girl's Manga" by Mark McLelland. The next section comprises close readings of manga creators (mangaka) and manga. Of special note is Philip Brophy's "Osamu Tezuka's *Gekiga*: *Behind the Mask of Manga*," which looks at the idea of cuteness and gender in the hands of Tezuka, arguably the most important figure in the development of manga. Tania Darlington and Sara Cooper tackle transgendered and transitioning characters and how manga reflects and challenges social ideals in "The Power of Truth: Gender and Sexuality in Manga," and analyses of manga by animation legend Miyazaki, intersubjectivity in shōjo, and the oddly compelling genre of food-manga round out the section. Like the larger collection, these readings are inconsistent; some provide little more than a plot summary and a literature review, while others make serious critical and theoretical moves.

Neil Cohn's "Japanese Visual Language: The Structure of Manga" leads off the section "Reading Manga," is a detailed and statistical semiotic-literary cognitivist comparison of comics from the United States and Japan. While it is an interesting attempt to codify the structure of manga, it seems particularly out of place here, in a collection that has been thus far aimed at dedicated aspiring fans or academics unfamiliar with the genre. The rest of this section is similarly rigorous, although N. C. Christopher Couch's "International Singularity in Sequential Art: The Graphic Novel in the United States, Europe, and Japan" is much more about comics as a global phenomenon than about manga.

The collection ends with overviews of manga in the era of globalization, with chapters on its reception in Europe, the United States, and East Asia, and the role of Japan as a culture provider to the world. Many of the chapters are unfortunately too short to adequately treat their subjects with the level of detail they deserve. As a

whole, *Manga*: *An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives* might make an interesting critical text in a course about manga, but the variance between functioning as an entry-level text and assuming familiarity with both the medium and various schools of critical thought would most likely prove frustrating to students.

It is clear that the last decade has seen an impressive proliferation of studies on politics and comics motivated by a few of the seminal works that will set the tone for future scholarship. Yet, more important is the fact that comics no longer appear as mere exemplifications or anecdotal illustrations in works dealing with larger political issues. Instead, more and more scholarly and critical work is published that centers fully on political and ideological manifestations emerging in comics in the form of the cultural contextualization and formal analyses of specific works. Surely, with the support of major academic publishers, especially the University Press of Mississippi and the University of Texas Press, some of the most exciting recent works such as *Multicultural Comics*: *From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2011) and *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* (2011) will soon be accompanied by refreshing studies on other manifestations of politics in the medium.

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