

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Transitions 8
(November 10, 2018)

Conference Report by Paul Fisher Davies

Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

TRANSITIONS 8 (NOVEMBER 10, 2018)

Conference Report by Paul Fisher Davies

***Transitions 8: New Directions in Comics Studies.* Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK, 10 November 2018.**

The long-running, free, one-day symposium for rising comics scholars returned in 2018 after a year's break. *Transitions: New Directions in Comics Studies* was inaugurated in 2010 by Tony Venezia (Birkbeck, UK) as a forum for PhD students and early-career researchers to share their developing work in a collegiate and supportive environment. Its timing at the weekend, its annual regularity, and its accessibility have meant that *Transitions* has been a staple of the comics scholarship community since its inception. Its return this year was welcome and it promises to resume its regular schedule. This year, with the inevitable tweaks to schedule ahead of the conference day, only two panels ran in parallel – but this still meant I missed some excellent sessions, in particular Nicola Streeten and Sarah Lightman's panel bringing together a range of comics creators and scholars who shared an interest in how comics express the experience of maternity. The sketches made of the papers I did see can only reflect some of the key ideas that caught my attention and interests; any misrepresentation is my own.

After a welcome by Joe Brooker (Birkbeck, UK) and *Transitions'* Hallvard Haug (Birkbeck, UK), Maggie Gray (Kingston, UK) gave a powerful and provocative keynote which did its job admirably in setting the tone and theme for the day. She built on her recently published monograph on the work of Alan Moore to present some provocations about the nature of comics creation and comics studies. The supportive nature of *Transitions* and other comics studies forums presents a risk: are we being too polite to each other and not challenging one another's approaches? In particular, Gray suggested that comics studies should not be merely structuralist or formalist in its approach (a declaration which led to a number of us formalists in the audience to add disclaimers at the head of our own papers later in the day). Rather, comics studies should consider historical contexts of production, including comics-making practice and the conditions in which comics can be made, instead of treating them as ahistorical texts.



Figure 1: Keynote sketchnotes

Panel 1A, "Storytelling" turned to comics as tools of storytelling and brought together a range of papers necessitated by a change-around in schedule, incorporating from the former Panel 4A Daniel Goodbrey and Simona Spinelli on digital comics and hybridity. Barbara Chamberlin's (University of Brighton, UK) paper on the witch in comics pursued "haunting" as a metaphor for comics' form and history: suggesting that the gaps and spaces in comics which are occupied by elements elsewhere in the text, along the cohesive lines suggested by Thierry Groensteen's "braiding," make the gutter seem a "haunted" space. Likewise, comics are haunted by their own history: by nostalgia for past creations and echoing forerunners in production. Finally, the reader's own involvement in the production of the comic's text acts as a kind of haunting: the reader occupies the spaces the comic leaves, and enriches the text with active engagement in creating meaning.

Daniel Goodbrey (University of Hertfordshire, UK) was the first of several to confess upfront his interest in form – but one which was firmly embedded in the attention to material concerns for which Maggie Gray had called. Goodbrey appealed for a renewed attention to the word in comics studies, noting the importance of a script in the process of much production. However, digital comics especially trouble the usual view of the relationship between word and image (so often viewed as 'tracks' parallel to film visual and audio tracks), since they bring in other possibilities to that relationship. Word and image may be composed dynamically in digital comics; audible sound, with or without spoken words, may combine with visual text and visual images. The 'font' used to present text may change as a digital comic is viewed in different browsers or other presentation software. I am always troubled by 'blend' and 'hybrid' as metaphors for the relationships between word and image – they strike me as being metaphorical like Chamberlin's "hauntings." This makes them likewise productive, but often taken at face value, and Goodbrey's re-analysis challenged this.

Simona Spinelli's (King's College London, UK) discussion of Madefire software also explored hybridity, in a discussion of this digital tool which enables comics to be presented as a motion comic, representing "multidimensional storytelling" (MDS) as described in Spinelli's doctoral research. These comics forms, which resemble animation and film, present challenges for existing approaches to the analysis of comics. At the far end of such innovation is the possibility of virtual reality comics. What would such texts look like and how would we interact with them? These questions led to spirited discussion in the Questions and Answers.

PANEL 1A What LURKS BENEATH: The SPECTRAL READER and the WITCH in COMICS STORY TELLING

BARBARA CHAMBERLIN

I'm exploring WITCHES in COMICS for my PhD - and still FORMING my thoughts in this VENUE...

Is COMICS a HAUNTED MEDIUM? The 'SPECTRAL' nature of COMICS readership...

COMICS IS FLAVOURED and ECHOES the PAST... "HAUNTOLOGY"

LEAST PRESENTS of GAPS, BLANKS and UNDETERMINED all suggest the FORM of COMICS...

FRAMING both suggests we see through a window and HIGHLIGHTS our absence!

THE CILLIAN ADVENTURES OF SABRINA

JULIA ROUND: HAUNTED ARCHITECTURE of the page... co-present which we experience sequentially.

DISRUPTIONS of WORD and IMAGE

I'm a FORMALIST - but it's just ONE WAY of viewing COMICS... I'm interested in DIGITAL FORMS - which have been around for years!

DAN acknowledges text + material + digital + button...

PANIEL MERLIN GOODBREY

the IMAGE - WORD debate has been around in COMICS STUDIES for years too...

Words have commonly been seen as SECONDARY - esp. since MC CLARD - with RE HAKUET's response exemplifying PUSHBACK to the VERBAL-VISUAL BLEND.

WORD + IMAGE as "TRACKS" - draws, FILM? BLEND?

I'M a PRACTITIONER - I MAKE COMICS... SCRIPT (often) COMES first... & PLAY - joined or FILM - joined... WORDS - BALLBONDS (CAPTIONS) - PANELS then EDITING!

PANEL 2 COMICS and the CASE of MADEFIRE: The EVOLUTION of a HYBRID form of storytelling

SIMONA SPINELLI

I'm looking at MOTION COMICS and their HYBRID narrative structure...

DIGITAL INTERACTIVE + TRANSMEDIA storytelling

I'm trying to outline CATEGORIES for analysis of MDJ texts...

PLATFORMS INTERACTION MEDIA TEXT AGENTS = MADEFIRE

CINEMATIC ELEMENTS SET the mood for the COMIC in addition to TEXT.

MOTION BOOK COMPANY + COMICS PUBLISHER

THE READING EXPERIENCE IS ENHANCED... MADEFIRE offers an AUTHORIZING TOOL for LITERATURE.

V.R.?

THE COMIC as a REVULSIVE: EL ROTO's COMIC STRIPS as COUNTER-MEMORIC ART

POWER AND POLITICS of REPRESENTATION

SARA GARCENDO LESAME

ANDRÉS RABAGO, EL ROTO, published VÍÑETAS PARA UNA CRISIS between 2009-11.

These were not humorous COMICS... he presents PARADOXES and CONTRADICTIONS arising in the wake of the FINANCIAL CRISIS of 2008 in Spain.

He uses GRAPHIC HUMOUR in the CARTOON but pushes at the limits of what is "FUNNY" and what prompts SOCIAL CHANGE... ARE THEY SHARED??

CAPITALIST figures are often the TARGET for EL ROTO.

Figure 2: Panel 1A and Panel 2 sketchnotes

Panel 2, "Power and Politics of Representation," was just two papers on the day. My own paper, not drawn here (since I was presenting and not sketching!), described the linguistic discipline of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which aims to use textual analysis tools to uncover power relationships inscribed in texts, using functional categories of language use derived from the work of M. A. K. Halliday. I proposed a way that this framework might be adapted to comics, with a bridging description of comics' visual resources which serve the same functions that language does. This led to enacting a CDA of comics on a sample text in which political viewpoints and power relations are traceable – "Spider-Woman #1" (2015) – as well as exploring the ways in which power may be wielded through the drawing of comics and their images, recounting the controversy surrounding Milo Manara's variant cover for that issue, which led to commentators' re-drawing of the image as a way of engaging in political discussion.

Sara Gancedo Lesmes' (Complutense University, Madrid, Spain) paper also explored image-making as the production of opinion, in the explicitly political work of "El Roto," critiquing the fallout from the financial crisis of 2008. The strips use primarily visual means to present the paradoxes arising from the financial crisis, presented in a format which would view them as 'humorous,' but with a vivid edge that transforms the humour into a politically-mobilising critique. Here, comics production consciously uses its form and affordances to bring about political change. This was another among many panels which started with an apologia about the focus on form, but nonetheless demonstrated that there are approaches to formal discussion of comics that engage with the concerns about material and social context raised in the keynote.

Panel 3 returned to the parallel format. In Panel 3A, "Autographics, Truths and Conceits," Eszter Szép (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary) opened with a paper which focused on bringing the materiality of comics to the foreground as a site of engagement between the author and the text in relation to the line with which the creator marks the page. Rather than focusing on storytelling, Szép wishes to foreground the line as a mark of the maker which lends the text authenticity, but an authenticity which can nonetheless be learned. The subjectivity of comics was similarly a concern for Chantal Cointot (Nottingham Trent University, UK), who presented the work of 'Judith Forest,' who turned out to be an ('inauthentic') construction of male comics creators riding a wave of interest in autobiographical comics. Cointot identified, in a reading of the images in the work of 'Forest,' evidence of male preoccupations and a gendered gaze. Its mark-making is engineered to suggest an authenticity which is supported by photographic 'evidence' (actually posed by a model); but the enacted embodiment in the work, purportedly of self-observation and self-absorption, gives away the actual embodiment of the creators and their desires for the protagonist/author's body and private life in the final assessment.

PANEL 3A **AUTOGRAPHIC, TRUTH + CONCEITS**

LYNDA takes the LINE for a WALK:
ATTITUDES and PHILOSOPHIES of DRAWING in LYNDA BARRY'S COMICS

The LINE is understudied in COMICS!
But well-studied in FINE ART + very interesting in BARRY.
DRAWING has been considered a STAGE toward PAINTING - but has recently been reassessed.
PRIVATE... LACK OF FINISH... VISIBILITY OF PROCESSES... = AUTHENTICITY?
It can be LEARNED!
ESZTER SZEP

Does comics carry AUTOBIOGRAPHY in the MARK of the MAKER?
How 'transparent' is drawing?
SPIRAL

LYNDA BARRY ENCOURAGES seeking the "AUTHENTIC LINE"!

AN AFFAIR with JUDITH FOREST:
FRAMING the MALE GAZE with IMPOSSIBLE SELFIES

CHANTAL COINTEOT

JUDITH FOREST was a comics creator who illustrated her journey to work in 1625...
... who turned out to be FAKE - a creation of the three MALE PUBLISHERS!
The MIRRORS in the narrative - in 1625 and MOMON, her other graphic novel - hint at his FALGNESS / IMAGERY.
Some PHOTO IMAGES appear alongside DRAWING - (like the photograph he "A MODEL was hired to be Judith")

POV drawings emphasize EMBODIED Judith

The 'SELFIES' become more IMPLausible as the tale continues...

PANEL 4 **MICROHISTORIES** **SURVIVING UNTIL SUPERMAN!**

GUY LAWLEY THE AMERICAN COMIC BOOK AS PRINTED OBJECT 1933-38

FLIPPED (DIPNAD) FAMOUS (PUNNIES) ACTION (COMIC) How did the early comic books survive?
1930s saw the emergence of "COMIC BOOKS"!
1937-1938 is crucial for the establishment of the comic book format!
THAT NEWSPAPER COMICS PAGES were important precursors...
FOLD... FOLD... AND FOLD = 16 pages!
32 pp. 48 pp. 64 pp.
COMIC REPRINTS followed in the 1920s...
CHEAP (but shined) COLOURING: BEN DAY... CRAP LINE!
SHRUNK by 4x = need to RE-LETTER!
* it is E-C-H-H!

DOCTOR DOOM as the AVATAR of VILLAINY in "Not Brand ECHM" MARK HIBBETT

DOCTOR DOOM moves from being a FANTASTIC FOUR villain...
To NOTBRANDECHM - a spoof of MAD Magazine, spoofing SUPERHEROES!
It's not a great comic, TERRIBLE PUN! Silver BURPER! FANTASTICAL FOUR! STUPOR MAN!
DOCTOR DOOM = "HERE ARE THE BAD GUYS!"
If he's NOT there - it's a clue that the team aren't REAL villains!

The same creators spoofing their own work!
DOCTOR DOOM turned up regularly to LEAD a group of SUPER-VILLAINS!
I'm working through EVERY ISSUE in which he's appeared!
57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72...

Figure 3: Panel 3A and Panel 4 sketchnotes

Finally, Panel 4 “Microhistories” returned us to broader histories of production, from a material and then an intertextual perspective. Guy Lawley’s (University of the Arts, London, UK) account of the materiality of early comic book production, with his signature attention to the details of colour processing using Ben Day dots, gave a lively view of production practicalities, illustrated with physical artefacts: original comics the audience could interact with. Lawley explained how financial and physical constraints on comics production influenced the type and format of the stories these strips could tell, as well as the format’s iconic stylistic features. In an entertaining closing romp through Marvel comics history, Mark Hibbett (University of the Arts, London, UK) gave a thorough and quantified account of the use of Doctor Doom as a villain figure in the self-parodying series *Not Brand Echh* (1967-1969), a counter-spoof of *Mad* magazine’s superhero satire. The creators of original superheroes and villains also made the *NBE* comics, spoofing their own work with inevitable authenticity. These are comics that are aware of their own history as well as the audience’s responses to them and competing productions’ commentary upon them.

The day closed with responses from senior comics studies figures, Roger Sabin (University of the Arts, London, UK) joining Ian Hague (University of the Arts, London, UK), Nicola Streeten (University of Sussex, UK), and Joan Ormrod (Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) in conversation with *Transitions*’ Nina Mickwitz (University of the Arts, London, UK). The panel reflected on Maggie Gray’s “beefs” with comics and suggested that comics scholars should engage with and challenge one another’s positions and assumptions. The idea of staged debates intended to explicitly bring into conversation opposing viewpoints on comics was mooted, and this was met with acknowledgement of the challenge of organising panels – which so often tended to bring together certain related interests in comics, thus risking isolating the ‘schools’ of interest in comics scholarship from one another, devolving into more insular interest groups. Far from being austere formalist, the papers at the symposium seemed to be converging towards the sort of acknowledgement of material forces and political contexts for which Gray appealed in her keynote.

BIONOTE

Paul Fisher Davies gained his Ph.D. in 2017 at University of Sussex, UK. He has published in *Studies in Comics*, the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *The Comics Grid* amongst others, including academic work in comics form, encompassing sketchnoting of conferences, graphic articles, and book cover illustration. He teaches English Language and Literature at East Sussex College in Lewes, UK. His monograph *Comics as Communication: A Functional Approach* was published by Palgrave in December 2019.



Figure 4: Responses sketchnotes