

CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART

"To construct a picture-story does not mean you must set yourself up as a master craftsman, to draw out every potential from your material—often down to the dregs! It does not mean you just devise caricatures with a pencil naturally frivolous. Nor is it simply to dramatize a proverb or illustrate a pun. You must actually invent some kind of play, where the parts are arranged by plan and form a satisfactory whole. You do not merely pen a joke or put a refrain in couplets. You make a book: good or bad, sober or silly, crazy or sound in sense."

(Töpffer, 1845, p. 35)

Comics as a genre

Several attempts have been made to define comics or cartoons as opposed to other forms of literature or art. These have several problems and do not include individual examples or whole sub-genres that are generally accepted as comics, or include examples that are generally considered to be a different category. Scott McCloud (1993) defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer", which could cover the medieval stained glass windows of Chartres Cathedral or the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel. R. C. Harvey (2001) described comics as "pictorial narratives or expositions in which words (often lettered into the picture area within speech balloons) usually contribute to the meaning of the pictures and vice versa. This is vague enough to include illustrated novels, but marginalises comics with no narrative or words.



Figure 1 Illustration from Alice in Wonderland, 1865. Woodcut by Sir John Tenniel

Another option is to emphasise sequential art, which could include an illustrated technical manual but exclude single-panel comics with a narrative. Humour is common, but many comics and cartoons use satire and many graphic novels are not intended to be humorous. Wordplay is generally a more consistent feature of comics and cartoons, whether humorous or not.

It may be that a better definition of comics is to look at family resemblances, history and social functions of comics and cartoons. While comics are not alone in their combination of words and pictures, or in their use of sequential images, the images used generally are not representational of the real world to the extent that other art can be. Super powers, talking animals, mutants, hybrids, grotesque caricatures and hyper-idealised bodies, fantasy worlds, utopias and dystopias, technologically advanced societies, time travel and historical fiction all have their place. The destruction of society through natural disasters, invasion, social unrest or other causes is a common theme. While real events or persons are sometimes depicted, magical realism, caricature, parody, absurdity or other means make the comic writer's voice more explicit and break away from the rules of social order and even physical reality. Extreme violence is common especially within genres like graphic novels or superhero comics, but also in many other sub-genres:

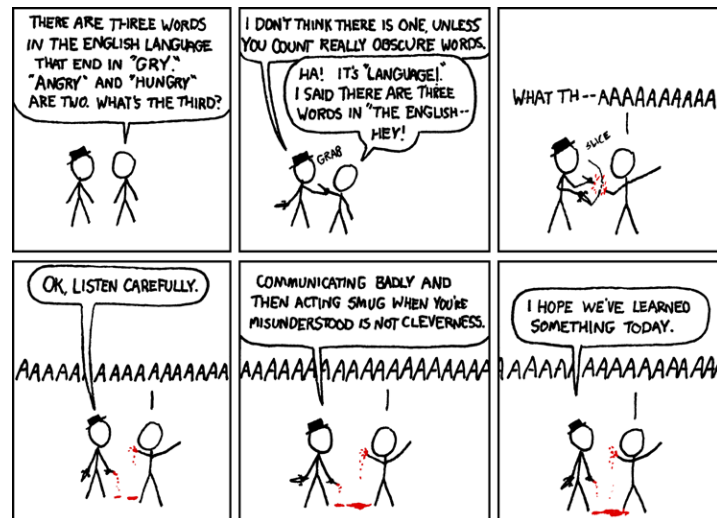


Figure 2 Words that end in GRY, retrieved from <https://xkcd.com/169/>. The mouseover text reads "The fifth panel also applies to postmodernists."

While there are exceptions to this, comics are overwhelmingly anti-authoritarian. The artistic freedom is often used to satirise those in power and heroes are often everymen or outsiders rather than conventional authority figures. Superhero comics give ordinary (often young and previously powerless) people superhuman power, while political cartoons depict authority figures as children or everymen who have the same failings and weaknesses as those they rule. Comics speak to their culture, but not according to its rules.

Artistic styles, typography, the shape and size of speech bubbles and panels, reading direction, perspective and other factors are highly diverse between comics, and may vary widely within one comic. Movement lines, speech bubbles and other features further break the rules of photographic realism, but often give comics a cinematic quality due to the immediacy of their narrative and the focus on action, dialogue, expressions, interaction, emotion and psychology. The 'truth' that is shared is inherently subjective and ideological rather than purely representational.

A history of sequential art

"In a socio-historical perspective comics have a precise time and place of birth: the end of the nineteenth-century, in the USA."

(Zanettin, 2008)

While satirical sequential art's association with periodicals was established in the 19th century, there are many examples of narration through pictures prior to this. In

fact, this genre has a very long association with intercultural and interclass communication, as well as satire and reinterpretation for political and social purposes. Zanettin is correct in his claim that this genre is closely related to the emergence of mass media, but it is possible to trace its development to technological and socio-political changes at many stages of the emergence of “mass media”, which could include the printing press or other technologies and social changes that democratised the consumption and production of media.

Sequential art has long been used to depict everyday scenes, make social commentary and pass on culture. Cave paintings from tens of thousands of years ago record hunting expeditions, religious rites, daily life, celebrations and other rituals. Greek pottery starting from the 7th century depicted mythological themes as well as scenes from everyday life, and included both individual and sequential images:

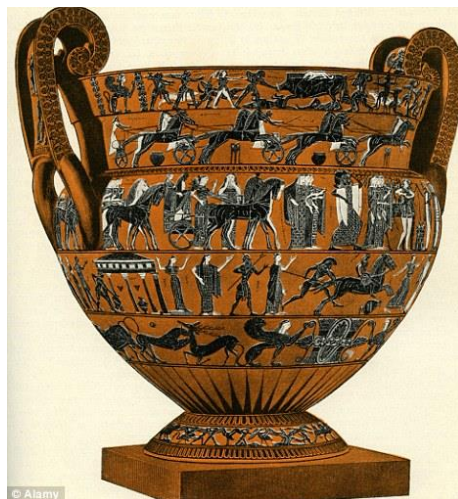


Figure 3 Greek vase, 6th century B.C.

In Rome, the tabula iliaca were miniature stone slabs that depicted episodes from the Homeric poems captioned with inscriptions. The best-preserved of these dates from the 2nd century B.C. and shows episodes from each book of the Iliad, a central scene from the Aethiopsis and a summary of the books. The titles of each section give the names of the characters and leading incidents, and the text includes both Greek and Latin:

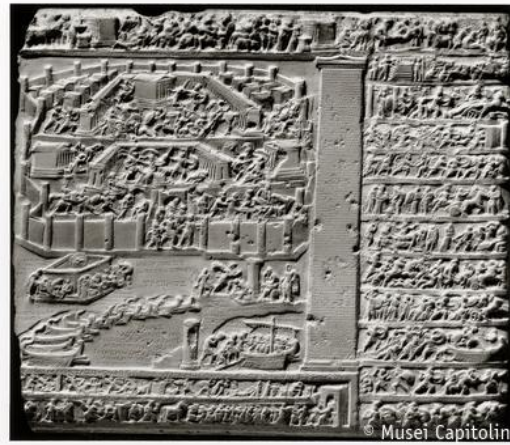


Figure 4 The Capitoline Tabula Iliaca, Capitoline Museum, Rome

The Romans used images to record their victories and display them to subjects, as can be seen in Trajan's Column, which was completed in A.D. 113. Originally, this column was painted in vivid colours and was intended to be viewed from bottom to top:

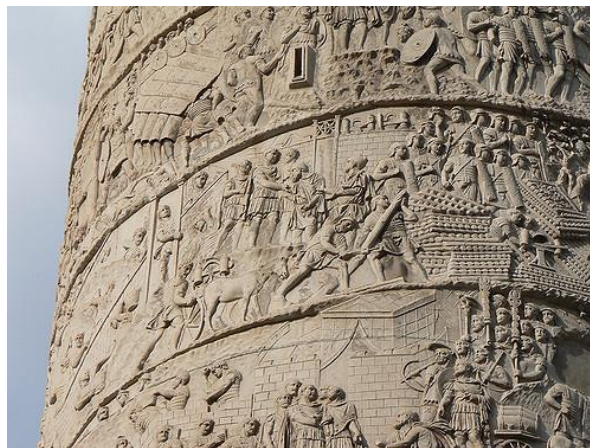


Figure 5 Detail of Trajan's Column, completed in A.D. 113

Roman and Carolingian rulers used hangings in halls and palaces to perform this function, while long strips of illustration were used in Scandinavia and Germany from the early 8th century (Rowley, 2013). Examples include the Oseberg ship burial tapestry, dating from 835 or earlier, and the Överhogdal Viking wall-hangings dating from the late 11th to 12th century:



Figure 6 Osberg Tapestry, c. 830 A.D.

A later and more famous example is the Bayeux Tapestry, which like the above examples features a narrative that is ‘read’ in a sequential order, but that does not feature divisions between different scenes. The images are accompanied by captions in Latin naming characters and describing events. In addition to the main panel, upper and lower borders feature scenes from agriculture, nature and hunting, omens and foreshadowings of future events (Halley’s Comet, a fleet of ships), captions of the main events, expanded central images and dead bodies during battle scenes. These can be used as decoration or to augment the main narrative:

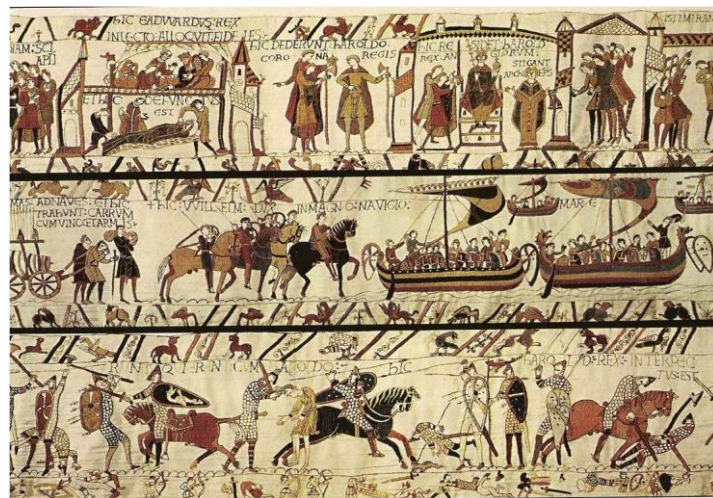


Figure 7 Bayeux Tapestry, Bayeux, France

In 1025, the Council of Arras authorised the use of hangings as a means of edifying and informing Christians (Caple, 2006). Such hangings depicted religious themes as well as military victories as in the Bayeux Tapestry, and were hung in churches and places of worship.

During the early medieval period, illuminated manuscripts featured marginalia that served many purposes: illustrating concepts, narrative and persons referred to in the

text for the benefit of illiterate viewers; decoration using gold and silver leaf and pigments created from insects, plants and chemicals; illustrations of everyday life or depictions of saints and religious figures. Increasingly from the 12th century onwards, the role of monasteries as the main source of manuscripts gave way to commercial scribes, rubricators and illustrators, particularly in major cities. The text would first be written, leaving a space for ornamented capital letters and other illustrations to be provided later (Hamel, 1986)(De Hamel, C. 1986).

During this period, it became increasingly common to see humour and satire in the illustrations. The Luttrell and Gorleston Psalters from the early 14th century is a good example of this: humans and animals are combined into a single figure; role reversals show rabbits hunting or riding humans; nakedness and genitalia are juxtaposed with more serious themes; relationships between the sexes, classes and religious and secular worlds are parodied. Some animals and themes are common: rabbits, snails, monkeys, donkeys, disembodied penises, grotesque hybrids. Those on the underbelly of society mixed with knights, monks and bishops: beggars, prostitutes, servants, voyeurs and others sometimes subverted the authority of respected figures.



Figure 8 Arthurian Romances, c. 1275-1300. Role reversal with a rabbit hunter carrying a captured human.



Figure 9 Juxtaposition of sacred and profane images



Figure 10 A nude bishop chastising a defecating cleric, from the Gorleston Psalter



Figure 11 Animal and human hybrids from the Gorleston Psalter

These texts were expensive and time-consuming to produce, and illustrations were discussed with clients before production, which makes their satirical nature more surprising. In *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (1992), Michael Camille explores the meaning of these figures that upended the social order and often mocked the patrons of the illustrator. While up to this point images had been used by those in power to speak to the masses, the commercialisation of this work led to the masses speaking back to power. Bernard of Clairvaux commented,

“What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities...? One could spend the whole day gazing fascinated at these things, one by one, instead of meditating on the law of God. Good Lord, even if the foolishness of it all occasion no shame, at least one might balk at the expense.”

(Bernard of Clairvaux, 1125)

Marginalia and other illustrated manuscripts show some of the development of direct speech. While some similarities with modern speech bubbles can be seen from the 14th century onward, forms such as banderoles or speech scrolls were mainly used:



Figure 12 Scenes of the Resurrection (1188) with banderoles (speech scrolls) indicating direct speech



Figure 13 13th century illustration featuring direct speech



Figure 14 The woodblock fragment Bois Protat (c. 1370-1380), which is the earliest surviving woodcut image from the Western world. A banderole emanating from the centurion's mouth reads "Vere filius Dei erat iste" ("This was really the son of God").



Figure 15 14th century onomatopoeia



Figure 16 15th century illustration

A further influence in the genre were the block books of northern Europe. In contrast to many manuscripts, the images were sequential and central to the narrative, while