

“But Seriously, Folks . . .”: Comic Art and History

in: *American Quarterly*, 43:2(Jun., 1991), pp. 341-346

IAN GORDON
University of Rochester

History of the Comic Strip: Vol. 2, The Nineteenth Century. By David Kunzle. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. xx and 391 pages. \$100.00.

Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar. By Joseph Witek. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989. xiv and 164 pages. \$30.00 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

THESE TWO WORKS, SO DIFFERENT IN STYLE AND CONTENT, ARE UNITED by the desire to bring academic respectability to “graphic narrative” (Kunzle) or “sequential art” (Witek). The difference between the works can be gauged by the lack of a common term to describe their subject. For Kunzle “graphic narrative” is a term that includes illustrated broadsheets from as early as the fifteenth century and the comic strips of the twentieth century. “Sequential art” is also an inclusive term, although Witek confines its usage to recent work. The term has, according to Witek, “the advantage of avoiding the generic connotations of the word “comic” and sidestepping associations with the burlesque and the ridiculous” (6).

But as Kunzle’s exhaustive study of the antecedents of comic strips demonstrates, it is the link with the “comic” that distinguishes this particular form of artistic expression. His book provides the historical

Ian Gordon is finishing a Ph.D. thesis in history on comic art in American culture at the University of Rochester. He is the 1990/91 Swann Foundation for Caricature and Cartoon Dissertation Fellow.

perspective, and some methodological constructs, necessary to understand the production and cultural operation of the comic art form in twentieth-century America. Witek's study, which is not without merit, could have been strengthened by incorporating some of Kunzle's discoveries about the structure of the art form. This is not an unfair charge against Witek as Kunzle's work under review here is the second volume in a projected three-part study.

Kunzle's first volume *History of the Comic Strip: Vol. 1, The Early Comic Strip*, published in 1973, contained an account of the crucial transformation in graphic narrative in late eighteenth century England; "the stylistic revolution in popular graphic art known as caricature" (Kunzle, Berkeley, 1973, 1). Kunzle demonstrated that before Hogarth introduced a comic element in graphic narrative during the eighteenth century, it was primarily concerned with religious, moral, and political themes of a didactic or propagandistic nature. The narrative in Hogarth's panels was also easier to follow than in earlier, more static, graphic narrative. But Hogarth was no caricaturist. Nor did he use speech balloons, contrary to the view held by many comic art historians.¹ Caricature, a method of capturing a person's essential character by the exaggeration of features in a loose line drawing, entered the public realm of European art late in the eighteenth century. It lent itself to political commentary and to a new style of narrative fiction: the comic strip. Rodolphe Töpffer (1799–1846) undertook the first sustained work in the new medium of the comic strip, and *History of the Comic Strip: Vol. 2, The Nineteenth Century* opens with a discussion of his work.

Kunzle argues that Töpffer and those who followed him, most notably Cham (Charles-Henri-Amedée de Noé), Léonce Petit, Adolphe Willette, and Wilhelm Busch, effected a profound change in graphic narrative. They produced comic strips that aimed to entertain. The works presented not the facile comic strip offerings one so often encounters in the late twentieth century, but extended tales, gathered in albums, that addressed the emerging bourgeois order of Europe. For instance, between 1830 and 1846, Töpffer lampooned the pretensions of the petite bourgeoisie on the make, parodied scientific research, and in his final work, derided would-be revolutionists. To tell these stories, Töpffer and the others developed new graphic narrative techniques. These included dried pen etching and stunning montage sequences in which the images cut back and forth between protagonists, or ranged over movement through time and space.

Kunzle's detailed account of the European development of the comic

strip is relevant to an American Studies audience because despite the unique and "specifically American humorous tradition" displayed in early American comic strips (5), their form, and indeed their content, owed much to the earlier European work. Beyond acknowledging that Rudolph Dirks based *The Katzenjammer Kids* on Wilhelm Busch's comic album *Max und Moritz*, historians seldom find any direct European influence on American comic strips. But Kunzle's tale of Cham's *M. Barnabe Gogo* (published in 1841) should cause some speculation as both the title and story bring Billy DeBeck, the creator of the classic American comic strip *Barney Google* (now *Snuffy Smith*), to mind.² *M. Barnabe Gogo* was the account of a young painter dedicated to a career in high art who made a living as a caricaturist because the *Salon* rejected his work. The artist eventually met his death at the hands of the very bourgeoisie he caricatured. DeBeck studied at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts with the intent of producing works on par with Rembrandt's. To support himself he sold caricatures to Chicago newspapers. Eventually William Randolph Hearst's King Features Syndicate contracted him to produce *Barney Google*. Apart from the similarity between Gogo's life and DeBeck's early career, Gogo and Google shared a common nature: *Gogo* is French for mug or sucker. *Barney Google* was often taken for a mug in his early days. Kunzle does not make a connection between Gogo and Google and the similarity may simply be coincidence, but it suggests a link between European and American comic art that needs investigation. Perhaps Kunzle will tackle the job in his promised third volume on American comic strips.

Witek's study focuses on comic books and only deals with comic strips in order to note the different cultural status, situation in the marketplace, and modes of reception that separate these two forms of comic art. Witek's project has two sides. First, he argues that comic books are an appropriate medium for new visions of American history that tell the stories of otherwise marginalized people. Second, in order to support his first argument, Witek poses and makes reference to an aesthetic of comic art. The book consists of an interplay between these two themes. But the main thrust of the work is the attempt to establish the credentials of Jackson, Spiegelman, and Pekar as "historians."

Witek presents the three artists as major contributors to a "body of work in the comic book form" that has broken with traditional formulas "while exploiting the rich formal and thematic heritage of the medium" (3-4). Witek argues that before the 1970s, attempts to tell fact-based stories through comics were as dry as dust. The E. C. comics edited by Harvey

Kurtzman in the early 1950s were a rare exception. But these comic books never made money and were discontinued shortly after Kurtzman left them to take charge of the parody comic book *Mad*. E. C. comics also suffered from Fredric Wertham's campaign directed at the supposed ill effects of comic books on America's youth. Witek points to the irony of Wertham's campaign and the subsequent establishment of a Comics Code Authority, which, in leaching out any contentious subject matter, ensured that comic books remained, for the most part, "ill crafted pap" that only children read (49). This situation was only remedied in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a new generation of artists broke out of the industry's constraints and published *comixs*—underground comic books dealing with sex, drugs, and rock n'roll. The freedom of *comixs* liberated artists who experimented with both content and form. *Comixs* were angry, contentious, and vibrant. It was in *comixs* that Jackson, Spiegelman, and Pekar first incorporated history in their works.

Jack Jackson writes comic book histories of the American Southwest that deal with marginalized Native American and Hispanic figures. Witek lauds Jackson for both his refiguration of frontier history and his implied notion of history—or historical forces—as "the aggregate of individual human" behavior (65).³ Witek's one complaint is that Jackson's recent book *Los Tejanos*, which recounts the story of Juan Seguin who at different times fought for Texan independence from Mexico and Mexican independence from Napoleon III's puppet Maximilian, resembles the dry, factual comic book of the 1950s. Witek is willing to overlook this weakness because of the subject matter and because he regards Jackson's work as insisting upon the validity of the comic book as a historical medium. But Jackson's recent books seem to undercut Witek's thesis. The striking thing about Jackson's work is his use of anachronistic speech styles to convey the difference between reality and perception. But his art seems flat compared to his underground *comix* days. In place of comic caricature as a narrative device, he now uses an historical portrait style. Jackson has toned down his art to reach a wider audience, and in doing so, he has lost some of the advantage of comic art as a medium. This loss relates to Witek's definition of the art form as "sequential art." Both Jackson and Witek seem to think that comic books need to lose some of their "comic" aspects before they can deal with serious subjects before a wide audience.

This undercurrent in Witek's analysis contradicts his treatment of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a comic book that tells the story of the Holocaust by positing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. It is also the story of Art

Spiegelman's relationship with his father, a Holocaust survivor. Spiegelman insists, and Witek concurs, that *Maus* manages to be an authentic Holocaust narrative, and one that avoids sentimentality because of its comic stylization. Witek ties the reader's ability to comprehend the anthropomorphic tale to familiarity with "funny animal" comic books. He stresses the tradition of ignoring the animal nature of the characters in favor of treating them as human beings. But this connection seems too simplistic. Witek regards Spiegelman's use of animal characters as a metaphorical statement. But Spiegelman's tale is more allegorical than metaphorical. *Maus* posits a relationship between Nazis and Jews similar to that between cats and mice and vice versa. The Nazi/Cats in *Maus* are not human; they are cats who speak and dress like human beings. Likewise the Jews are depicted as mice. Spiegelman presents us with a world turned upside down where the Nazi/Cats force people, the Jews, to live like mice simply to survive. The extension of this anthropomorphic state to Spiegelman's relation with his father suggests the long-term psychological effect of the Holocaust. Further, Spiegelman's work relates not only to "funny animal" comics but also to a European topsy-turvy tradition in which, among other things, human beings acquire animal characteristics. Kunzle's *History* with its detailed account of the relationship between graphic narrative and European traditions would have provided Witek with a useful approach to explore further the complexity of *Maus*.

Witek's final chapter celebrates Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* series. *American Splendor* is an annual comic book written by Pekar and illustrated by a variety of artists. It depicts episodes from Pekar's life as a filing clerk in a Cleveland hospital. Witek hails it as collapsing the difference between public and private history and as "an evocation of the inescapable interconnections between [*sic*] human beings" (153). Witek dismisses the notion that this self-absorbed work may be banal or narcissistic because of its commitment to realism. He never questions Pekar's inability to conceive of human relations except as they apply to himself. Other people's experiences only achieve importance as they relate to Pekar. Witek does not consider the possibility that Pekar's "realism," for all its humor and insight into human relations, may be symptomatic of a culture of narcissism.

In general Witek backs away from placing comic books in a broad cultural context. For instance, when discussing *Los Tejanos*, he says that his discussion "cannot hope to deal with all the narrative, historiographic, and cultural issues raised by [the] complex and unusual work" (87). Instead

he favors description of the comic art techniques Jackson employs to determine how the comic book functions "to create a historical narrative" (87). Jackson's technique as outlined by Witek is to place incidents in a contiguous framework and then, literally, draw a common conclusion. Witek says that Jackson "presents a complex historical process in a way only comic books can do" (90). And this way shows "visually the conflict that words can only describe" (88). Witek collapses the distinction between narrative and history and favors the story over analysis. To my mind history shows more than how particular actions result in specific outcomes; it explains why. If Jackson's comic books achieve this result for Witek, then he needs to examine the narrative, historiographic, and cultural issues they raise because these ingredients account for Witek's ability to comprehend history from the comic book.

David Kunzle's *History* sets a standard for discussion and analysis of the comic art form. He not only recounts the technical and stylistic development of the form but sets it within the cultural matrix of nineteenth-century Europe. Witek's book raises the possibility that comic books may transcend their formulaic nature and produce a new literary medium. His analysis of the potential of that medium has a number of weaknesses, but it is at least suggestive of the work that needs to be done to develop an aesthetic of comic books. These works taken together indicate that the comic art form in the United States may, after a century of mass acceptance, be about to receive the critical attention it deserves.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Martin Sheridan, *Comics and Their Creators* (Boston, 1942), 16.

2. Cham may have borrowed the title from an earlier narrative by Daumier entitled *Mésaventures et désappointements de Mr Gogo*. Another *Gogo* character appeared in France in 1858. See Kunzle, *History of the Comic Strip: Vol. 2*, 87 and 146.

3. Witek's general conception of history stresses the importance of individual actions and choices. But an unresolved tension creeps into his work when he deploys terms such as "the causal chain of history" (20), "the impersonal objects of war" to whom things happen (30), and "historical forces" (65) without anchoring them in his analysis. Is there a process involved in the aggregate of individual choices becoming "historical forces," or are they simply equivalent? Do the comic books under discussion address this question?