
Why is it that comics have been historically excluded from the art world and the domain of art history? Why have they begun, in the last decades, to enter into the institutions (galleries, museums, and auction houses) that have for so long ignored them? What are the roots of the vexed relationship between comics and art and the source of tensions between these worlds? With Comics versus Art, winner of the 2013 Gertrude Robinson Book Prize for the Canadian Communication Association, Bart Beaty sought to answer such questions and in turn has produced a richly textured cultural history of comics, tracing their tenuous relationship with the art world, mapping their struggle for legitimacy, and charting the future direction of what he theorizes as the “comics world.” In this highly accessible and readable, yet rigorous and theoretically sophisticated work, Beaty focuses on the movement of comics from the wide held perception of them as a degraded, marginal, lowbrow, American cultural form, to their tentative and circumspect acceptance by the institutional art world, to the place of prominence that some “masterpieces” and works of “comic genius” have begun to occupy in museums and galleries.

Beaty’s comprehensive accounting of the cultural assumptions and biases that have historically rendered comics a form of non-art, “ignored and marginalized by cultural gatekeepers” (p. 44), and the tense and tenuous ways they have gained recognition in the art world, is achieved by exploring an exhaustive corpus of materials. These range from the work of early caricaturists in the 1700s, to the emergence of Richard Outcault’s The Yellow Kid and George Herriman’s Krazy Kat in broadsheets and newspapers in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the highly important and influential work of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee at Marvel and DC Comics in the 1960s and 1970s, to Charles Schulz’s Peanuts, the pop art of Roy Lichtenstein, the “lowbrow” stylings of Gary Panter, the careers of comic “geniuses” like Art Spiegelman and Robert Crumb, and onto the more recently heralded work of Chris Ware. Throughout his compelling exploration of this rich cultural history and landscape, Beaty develops a theory of the “comics world” that moves beyond conceptualizing comics as an essentialist art form judged solely on aesthetic value, to an understanding of the sociological value of comics, and how gains in their cultural legitimacy are inextricably intertwined with the formation of complex distribution networks and participatory fan culture.

Indeed, Beaty is masterful in the way he weaves together his non-linear historical and cultural analysis, working chapter by chapter through the themes that together form the basis of his theory of the “comics world” introduced in Chapter 1. He lays out the institutional politics behind definitions of art in Chapter 2; the “differential power relations of arts worlds competing for cultural resources and prestige” (p. 44), the hierarchy of genres, and how these relations fomented the long-held conception of comics as a degraded form of non-art.

In Chapter 3, he traces the emergence of the “ressentiment” (in the sense elaborated by Nietzsche) of the comic artist and their contempt for, if not “absolute rejection
of the arts world” (p. 52), paying close attention to the gendered relations of power that have marked comic culture, and the role that the pop art craze of the 1960s, and the work of Roy Lichtenstein in particular, played in the feminization and appropriation of the form. Throughout Chapter 4, he delves deeply into the political economy of the entertainment empire and how its regimes of intellectual property, labour and Fordist production models obscured individual artists. In this analysis, he locates fan culture as central and critical to the excavation of artists like Jack Kirby (Marvel and DC superhero artist who co-created X-Men, The Avengers, Fantastic Four, etc.) and Carl Barks (Walt Disney artist who created Donald Duck) from these arrangements by providing the first recognition of their individual creative labour.

In Chapter 5, he tracks how circulatory regimes of distribution, like record stores, played a significant role in altering the cultural status of comics, and how sites of participatory fan production, like fanzines, “established the earliest comic world discourses pertaining to artistry” (p. 112) and the designation of “comic book geniuses” and “masterpieces.” In the next chapter he considers the shifting context of comics as art objects, analyzing the blurring of the boundaries between fine art and commercial art, and the collapsing of distinctions between high and low brow culture.

Chapter 7 sums up the shifts in the relationship of fans to comics, from affective objects, to fetishized economic commodities, bought and sold by collectors, traders, auction houses and investors. In Chapter 8, he takes up the institutionalization of comics in galleries and museums and the seemingly hegemonic role that art historians and curators continue to play in establishing their cultural value. Finally, in Chapter 9, his theorizing culminates in a discussion of the current and future relations of the comics and art worlds, exemplified through the much heralded and intensely autobiographical and self-reflexive work of Chris Ware, who “occupies a unique social and aesthetic space somewhere at the nexus” (p. 216). As Beaty so eloquently tells it,

Ware reaffirms the supremacy of the art world relative to comics by maintaining and reinforcing existing prejudices about the inadequacies of the form presumed to be inexorably tainted by mass cultures and its audiences, and turning the loathing of the form into a highly aestheticized performance of the self-hating artist that makes him all the more acceptable by the art world he claims to disdain. (p. 222)

Beaty’s interweaving of these themes into a theory of the “comics world” is indeed an important and significant contribution to not only understanding the transformation of comics from a lowbrow, marginalized and degraded cultural form to their increasing prominence as art objects, but also provides critical insights into the ways that institutions and cultural forms evolve to accommodate one another, and the role that distribution networks and audiences play in establishing cultural value. It is quite clear that Comics versus Art is a book that was a long time in the coming: an exhaustive, sophisticated, definitive, and in all likelihood, seminal work that is at once accessible to fans of comics and highly insightful and illuminating for academics in a variety of fields including Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, English, and Art History.

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