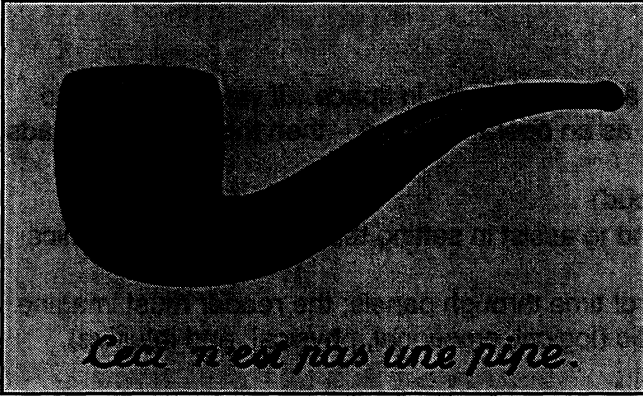


Moving Towards a Visual Culture: an argument for comics as educational media

In 1994, comic book artist and author Scott McCloud published an astonishing work called *Understanding Comics*. He used the following surrealist painting by Rene Magritte to begin the discussion on how comics are read. The following is a synopsis of that phenomenological discourse:



- It is a pipe and a statement.
- It is a painting containing a pipe and a statement.
- It is a painting containing what resembles a pipe and a statement.
- It is a painting containing a statement.
- It is a quadrilateral with paint on it.
- It is art.
- It is philosophy.
- It is irony. (McCloud)
- I think it's a Jpeg file.

It is the beginning of the following short argument for the inclusion of comic books, graphic novels, and cartoons in libraries. While the journal which contains this article is focused on comics for young adults, consider these arguments applicable to all age categories.

Consider what is entailed in phenomenological study; it is a scientific approach to the understanding of meaning. That is a study of how one perceives and then *conceives* of the meaning of stimuli. This sort of study began as philosophy, but quickly branched into psychology, sociology, education theory, neurology and the overarching realm of cognitive science. It is often and appropriately applied to studies in mass media.

Marshall McLuhan, Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault and many others have had impact on the perception of mass media as an entity. The quandary of such studies is well described by Alphons Silbermann in his article *The Way Toward Visual Culture: Comics and Comic Films*.

“...the arts (understood as part of culture) and mass communications (enabled by technological means) are put into a relationship with each other. Yet, a search for philosophically abstract ‘absolute values’ may easily make us forget to realize that behind art (culture) as well as behind technology (mass communications) *human beings* are placed.” (Silbermann)

The debate over comics in libraries has been mostly based on the perception of the medium. Since 1954, in the infamous *Roth versus United States Senate Judiciary Subcommittee Juvenile Delinquency/Comic Book Hearings*, comics have wavered in public support. Even now, there is an organization dedicated entirely to defence of censored comics. (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.) But this is not an article to discuss the morality of comic book content, but how to use comics to enhance a growing, universal language: the visual culture.

Returning to phenomenology, consider how many icons and comics you have perceived today. Icons are marketing tools used to associate particular moods and behaviours with products, such that we are trained, in the style of Pavlov, to crave a mood upon seeing the icon, or craving the icon upon entering a mood. The ‘Golden Arches’ are McDonalds, which is food, which is instant gratification. A circle containing two dots and an upward arc at the bottom is a happy face, which means ‘happy’.

Consider the legendary tale of products in African stores; to combat illiteracy, an image of a food item is placed on the jar which contains said food. Gerber, the baby food producer, in a feat of poor communication and cultural misunderstanding entered the market with its cherubic baby on the label with disastrous results.

Consider that pamphlets given out by Christians are often designed as easily accessible comics, that UNESCO once published the history of Africa as a comic book, that the biography of Pope John Paul II was also published as such. (Silbermann) Consider WHMIS, Canada's *Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System*, a federally required labeling and training system used to prevent workplace accidents. (WHMIS) It is based on icons.

Understanding comics, both as a reader and a communicator, is fast becoming essential in our global society. The ease of communication through comics propels readership, and vice versa. The question is why.

Both Silbermann and McCloud offer points describing the communication efficiency of comic books; since the latter is presented as a comic book and is not conducive to this article, the points are taken directly from Silbermann.

- "...words...develop their effects in time, and paintings and their effects in space...if we not only try to trace out the essence...but also seize their existences as an operating force – then this approach leads necessarily...to the facts themselves."(Silbermann)
- Picture and text are dependant on one another (McCloud)
- As text is used as conversation between characters and to assist in setting the scene, reading comics requires the understanding of words and icons
- The story is told through pictures and the conveyance of time through panels; the reader must imagine the actions between panels based on four forms of logic (logical, emotional, physical, and intuitive). (Ridolfo)
- Comic book symbols translate subject, character, voice, sound, thought and mood into simple icons
- Comics take their subject matter from the socio-cultural environment. (Ridolfo)

The use of icons and symbols has quickly become the most effective means to convey messages and ideas, thus the education of youth must begin to include iconic language, visual culture. As Silbermann states, the "field of education...tries to explain to the onlookers of objects what they have to see, i.e. what it means to see in the 'right way'." (Silbermann) Early preparation of young adults will be key in the coming generations.

A fantastic resource for youth educators was designed by Jerry Steinberg and illustrated by Ambre Hamilton. "*Whatch Gonna Learn from Comics?*" contains theory and practical lesson plans for teaching language through comic strips. This resource, written in English, lends itself to communicating in any language, and has areas of focus on slang, gender in language, grammar, logic, and others.(Steinberg) This sort of training combines the coming language of the icon with the language of the past and present.

Comics, cartoon, graphic novels and iconic language communicate efficiently and cleanly. All manner of thought and emotion can be expressed in this medium, as it ties traditional language with cultural symbolism. As the world becomes a 'global village', visual culture is likely to dominate mass communication. Preparation must begin so that our inheritors may continue to unite.

"If the relations between art and mass communication are to be kept in a cultural balance that serves society, the arts and the mass media, then means have to be found to guard against an undesired taste dictatorship. ...pseudo-sociopsychological arguments are to be eliminated that are not only of the opinion that taste *eo ipso* could be measured statistically, but...insist on being able to recognize, with the aid of philosophical analysis of a cultural item, the state of a society and its art consumers."(Silbermann)

Bibliography

- McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics. (HarperCollins, New York, 1994).
- Ridolfo, Christina. Multi-Modal Arumentation According to Michael Gilbert.
- Silbermann, Alphons. "The Way Toward Visual Culture: Comics and Comic Films", Comics and Visual Culture, ed. H. D. Dyroff and A. Silbermann, (München, New York, 1986).
- Steinberg, Jerry. Whatch Gonna Learn from Comics? (Pippin Publishing, Toronto, 1992).
- Comic Book Legal Defence Fund. 2002. 27 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.cbldf.org/index.shtml>>
- "The Big Triangle." Scott McCloud. 2004. 27 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.scottmccloud.com/inventions/triangle/triangle.html>>
- "WHMIS." 21 Oct. 2004. Health Canada. 27 Mar. 2005 <<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/whmis/index.htm>>