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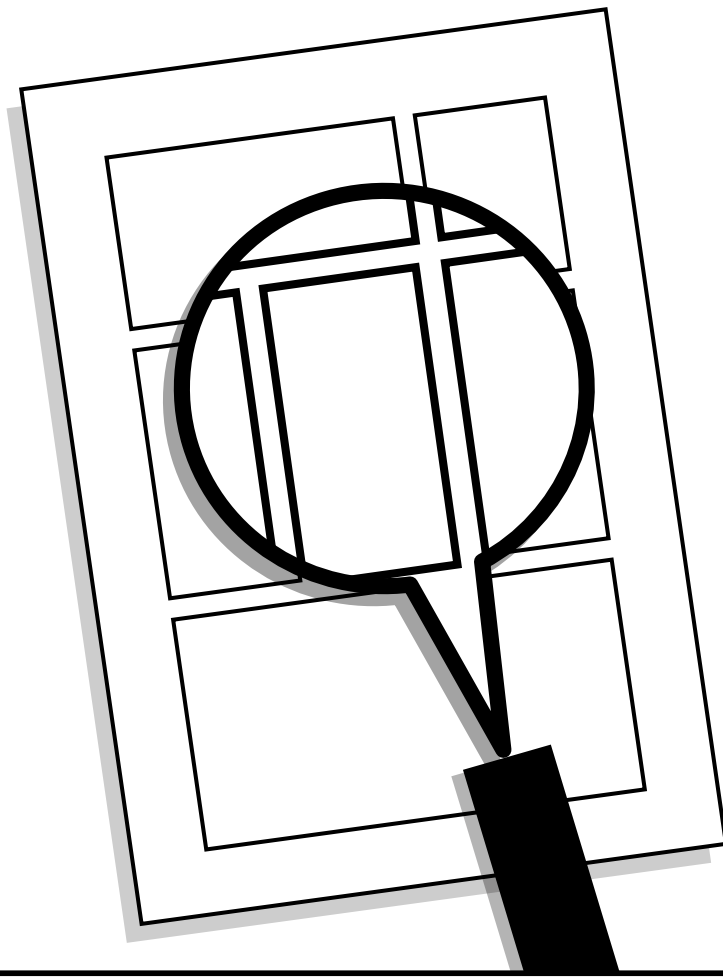
# **HOW TO STUDY COMICS & GRAPHIC NOVELS: A GRAPHIC INTRODUCTION TO COMICS STUDIES**

**ENRIQUE DEL REY CABERO, MICHAEL GOODRUM  
& JOSEAN MORLESÍN MELLADO**

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**OXFORD COMICS NETWORK**



**THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES**



**UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD**

*How to Study Comics & Graphic Novels:*  
*A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies*  
Text by Enrique del Rey Cabero and Michael Goodrum  
Illustrations and design by Josean Morlesín Mellado

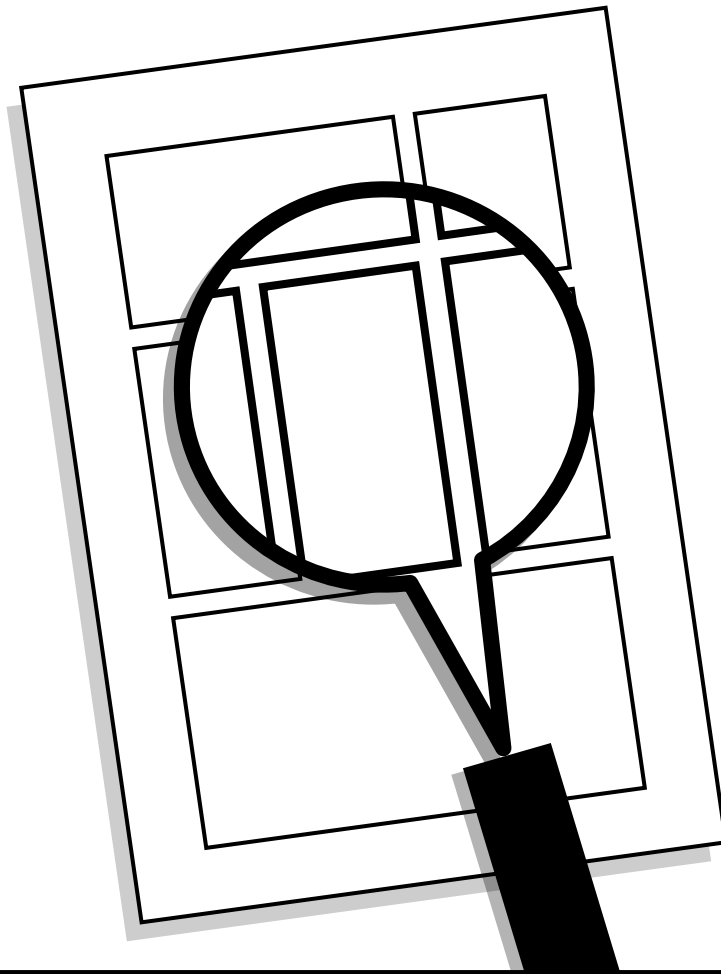
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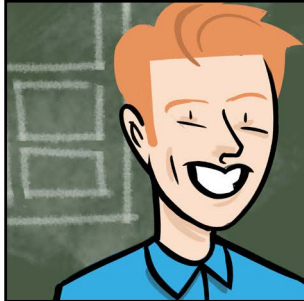
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Acknowledgements:

The authors would like to thank Marie Trinchant for editing and revising this guide so thoroughly, as well as Chris Paul and Sarah Jacobs for proofreading it.

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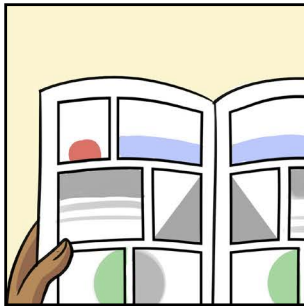
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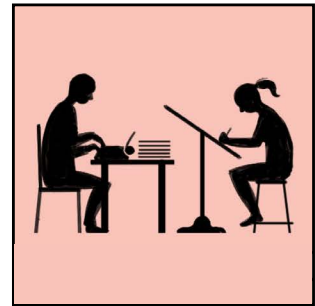
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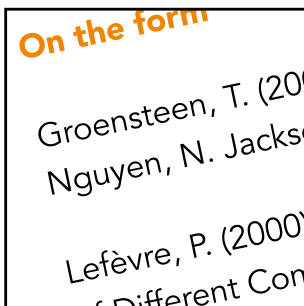
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# FOREWORD

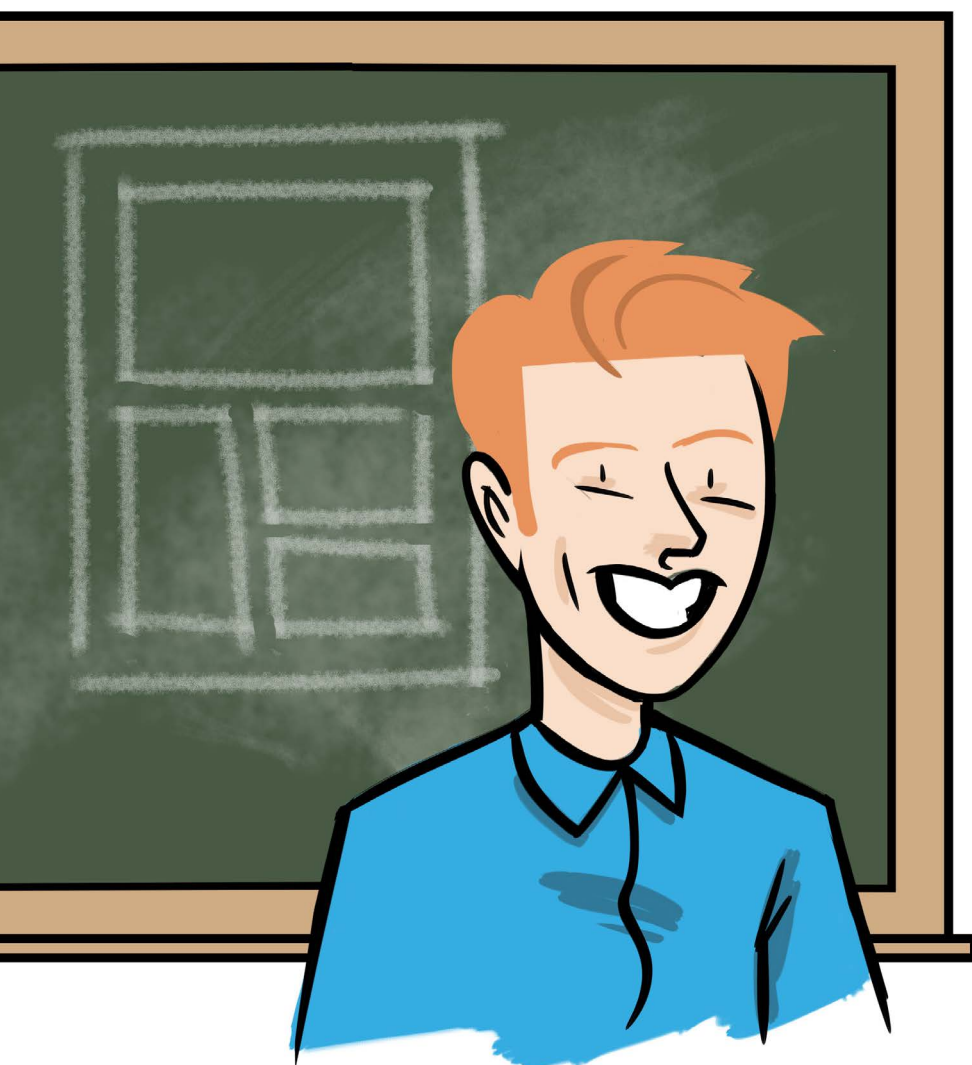
If you've ever designed a module on comics before, you'll know how difficult it is to decide where to begin. Do students need to understand the history before comics theory? Or do you need to talk about comics form before everything else? And where do institutions, politics and readers come in? It's a bit like when a student comes to your office and asks what they need to read in order to start writing an essay on graphic novels. What's the first book or article they need to consult?

There's no one right way to start studying comics, but there are plenty of wrong ways (trust me – I've tried 'em), and it's to the credit of Enrique, Michael, and Josean that the reader is captivated as soon as they turn the first page of *How to Study Comics & Graphic Novels: A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies*. Josean's art deserves plaudits for its subtle colour palate and an unobtrusive line that's as graceful as it is simple. And it's definitely not the case that the words do the heavy lifting while the pictures provide ornamentation. The layout on page 13 is a great example of the expressivity of Josean's style: the arrangement of panels pays homage to the work of Chris Ware as well as providing a visual glossary of the options that creators have at their disposal when opening up channels for readers to follow across the page. Gems like this are scattered throughout, such as the paralleling of the opening book and the toppling tree on page 24, or the polyptych on page 20 where the cave painting in prehistoric times becomes the protocomic studied in the present. (And if you want to know what a polyptych is, you can find out on page 11!)

Another one of the visual charms offered by this guide is the use of Oxford as a backdrop. On their way to the library, the characters run past The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH), not just a recognisable landmark but the home of this project. Where the scholarly conversation surrounding comics is concerned, TORCH and the Oxford Comics Network have played host to many speakers and conferences in recent years, and *How to Study Comics & Graphic Novels: A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies* emerges from those interactions. It's important that there's no lone narrator to this guide, since there's no single way of doing comics studies, and there's still plenty of debate about the ways that academics approach comics and graphic novels. It's a triumph of compression that it incorporates such diverse approaches!

Like the best essays in comics form, it knows when to keep quiet (figuratively speaking) and show the reader how comics operate, instead of just telling them. The economy of the artwork extends to the writing – there are no panels overburdened with long descriptions, or speech balloons that squeeze the characters out of sight. The guide keeps things concise, and its explanations are all the more vivid for that concision. This, after all, is where the Further Reading comes in: if you've enjoyed this guide and are keen to explore Comics Studies further, the authors have compiled the roadmap you need to begin your journey.

But the best thing about Enrique, Michael, and Josean's introduction to analysing comics? I don't need to worry what to do when a student arrives at my office, wanting to write an essay about comics but unsure where to start. Now I can give them *How to Study Comics & Graphic Novels: A Graphic Introduction to Comics Studies!*

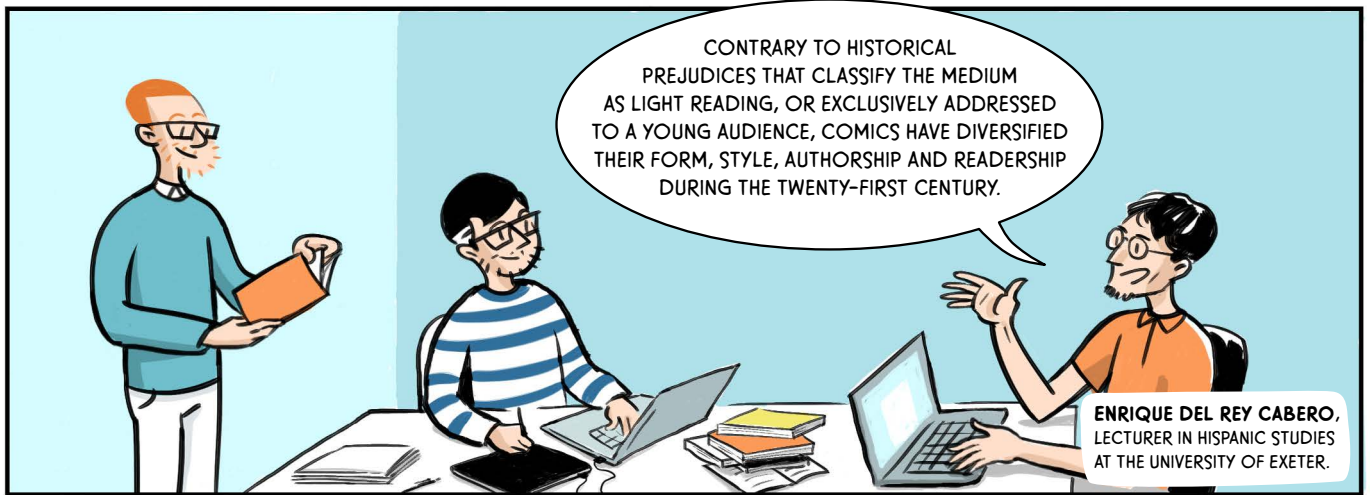


**Paul Williams**

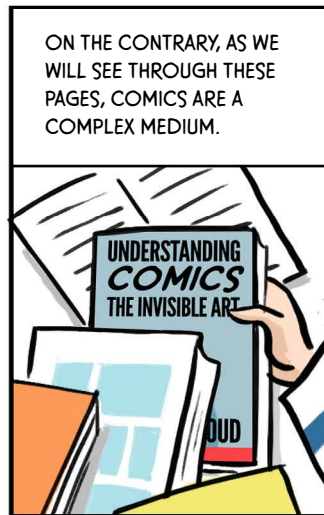
Associate Professor of  
Twentieth-Century Literature  
and Culture.  
University of Exeter.



# INTRODUCTION



IN FACT, LOOKING AT AUDIENCES THROUGH MUCH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY SHOWS AN AUDIENCE FOR COMICS FAR MORE DIVERSE



\*McCLOUD, S. (1994). *UNDERSTANDING COMICS: THE INVISIBLE ART*. NEW YORK: WILLIAM MORROW, P. 197.

YOU WANT TO STUDY COMICS BUT ARE UNCERTAIN ABOUT WHERE AND HOW TO START? IN THIS GUIDE WE WILL COVER SOME OF THE MAIN ASPECTS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHEN READING COMICS.

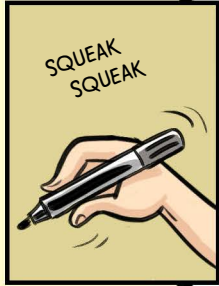


FROM HOW COMICS ARE PRODUCED AND READ TO THE VARIOUS APPROACHES TO STUDYING THEM.



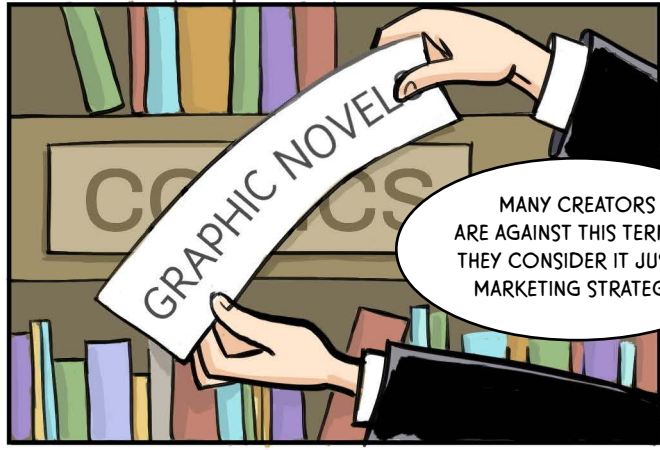
FROM COMICS TRADITIONS AND GENRES AROUND THE WORLD TO THEIR DISTRIBUTION METHODS.





# COMICS VS GRAPHIC NOVELS

SO, IN ORDER TO STUDY COMICS...

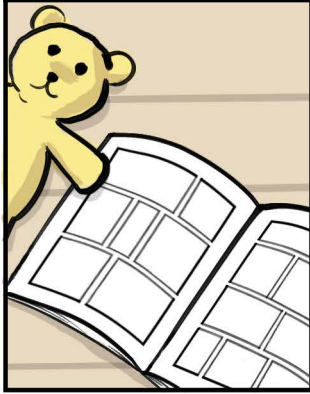


SOME CONSIDER THE GRAPHIC NOVEL AS A MOVEMENT: AUTEUR COMICS WITH COMPLEX THEMES FOR ADULT READERS.

IN THEORY, THE FORM IS WITHOUT GENRE OR STYLE CONSTRAINTS BUT IN PRACTICE, ACCORDING TO CRITICS WHO ADOPT THIS STANCE, THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IS CHIEFLY CONCERNED WITH REALISM, NON-FICTION, SOCIAL THEMES AND (AUTO)BIOGRAPHY.



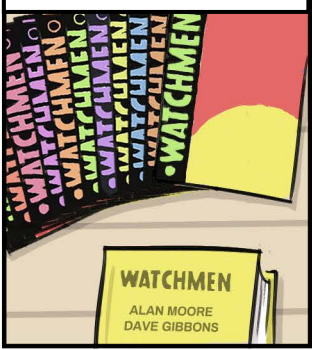
BOTH DEFINITIONS OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL POSE PROBLEMS: CAN A GRAPHIC NOVEL BE FOR CHILDREN?

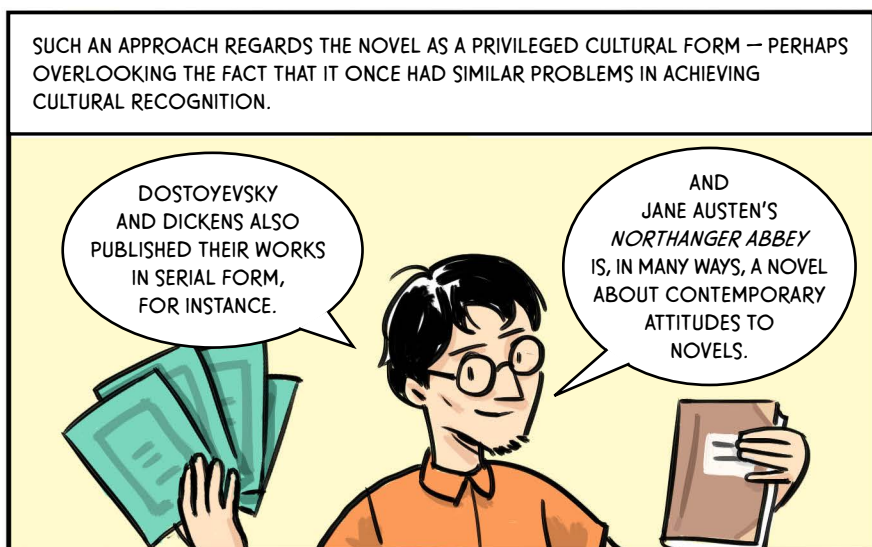
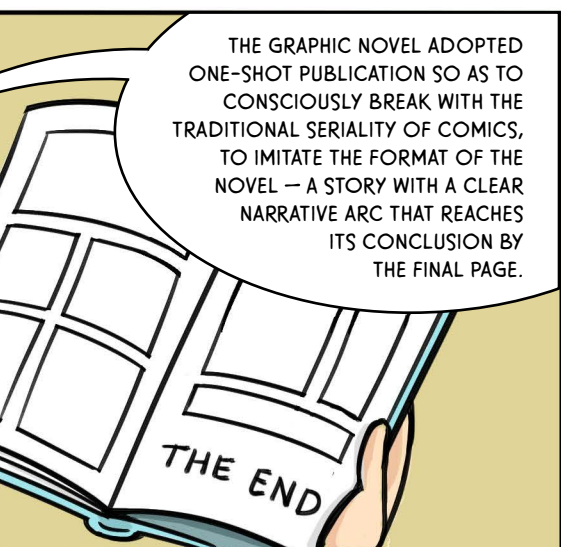
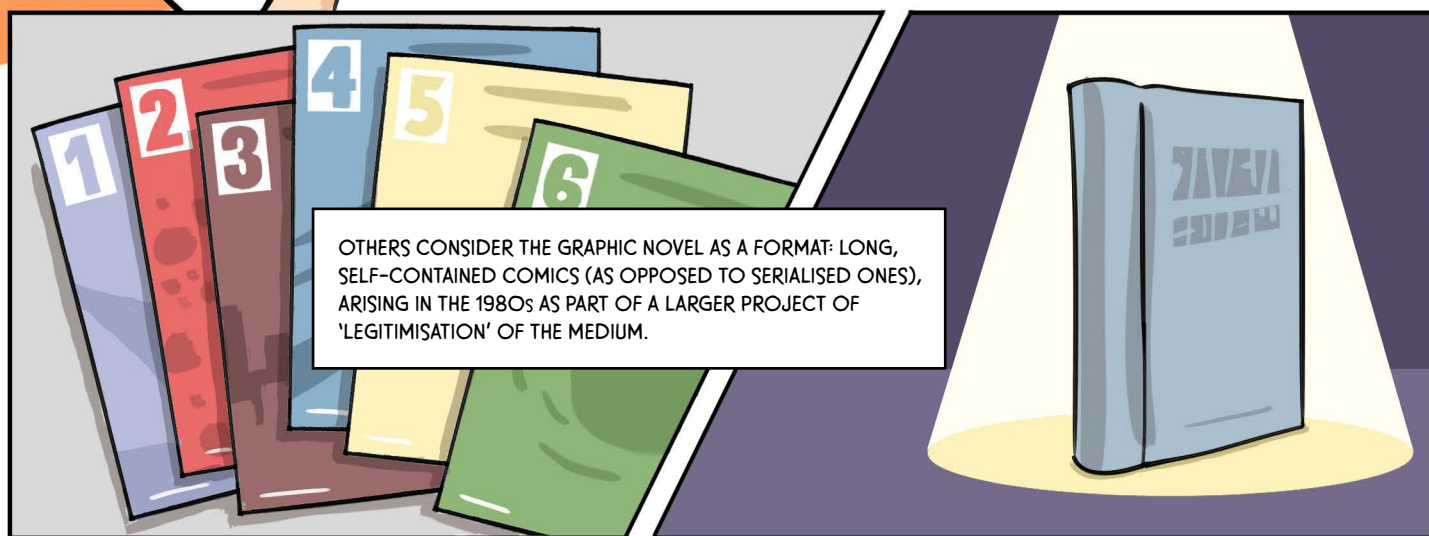
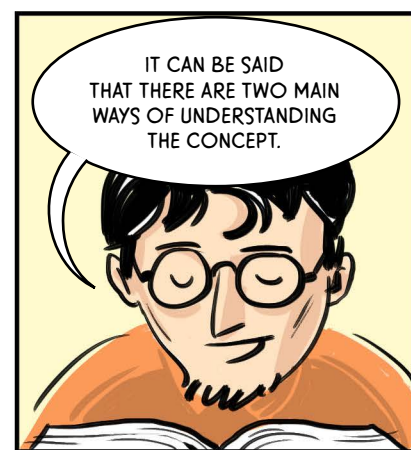
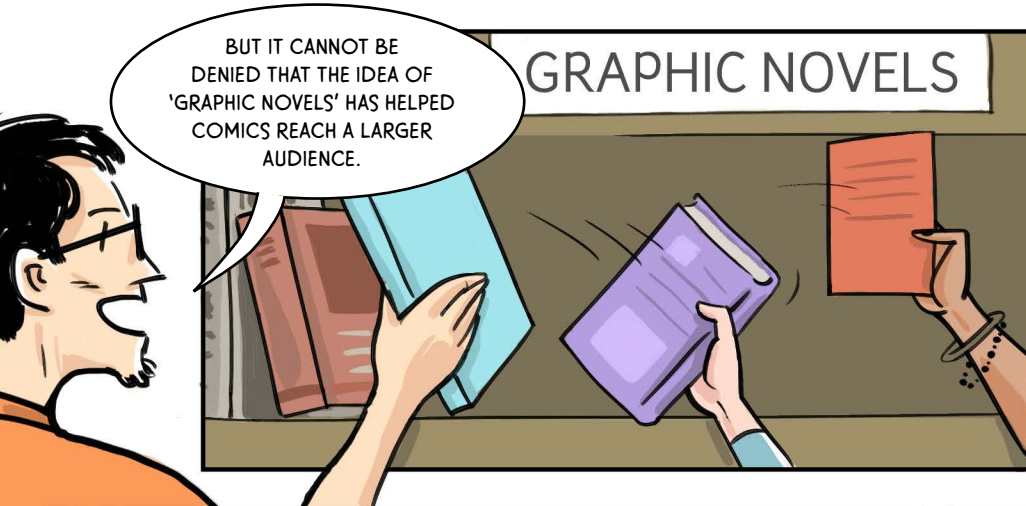
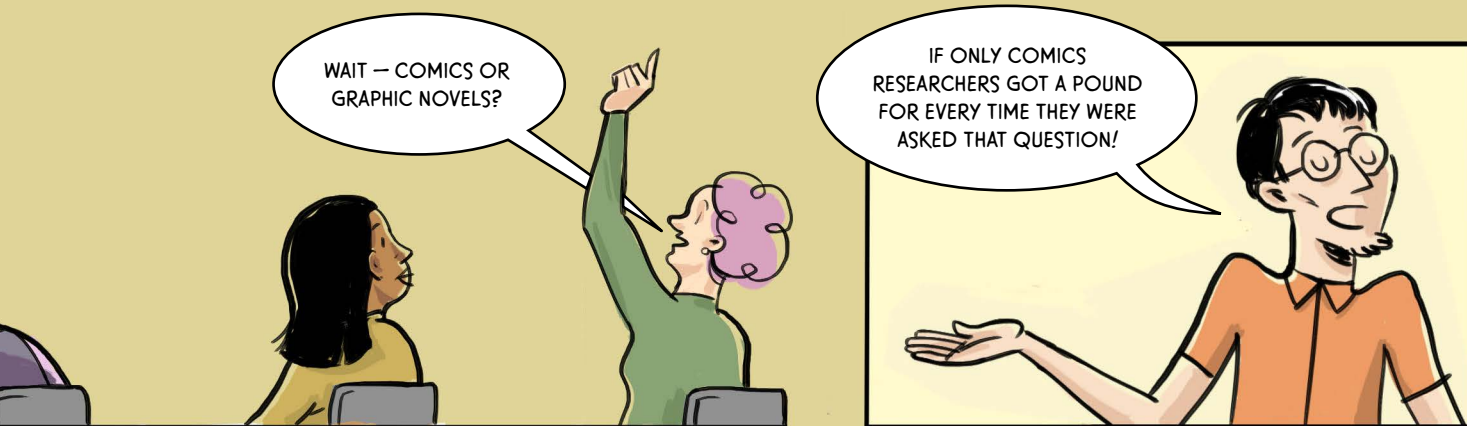


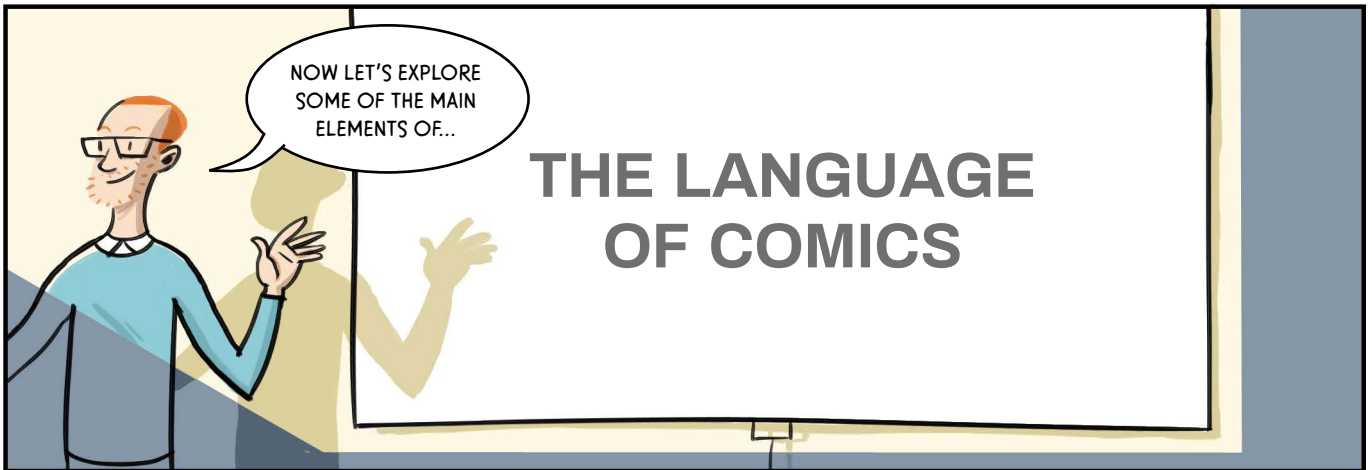
CAN YOU HAVE A GRAPHIC NOVEL OF ANY GENRE (EVEN ACTION-ADVENTURE OR SUPERHEROES)?



CAN IT BE PUBLISHED IN A SERIAL FORMAT? (CANONICAL GRAPHIC NOVELS SUCH AS WATCHMEN WERE FIRST PUBLISHED IN SERIES)







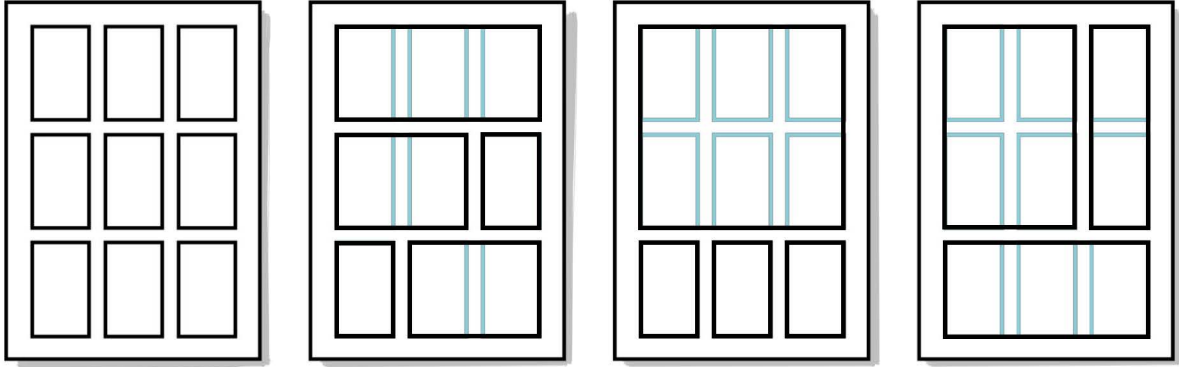
THE **PANEL** IS GENERALLY IDENTIFIED AS THE BASIC UNIT AND IT HELPS THE READER TO FOCUS ON A PARTICULAR SPACE OF THE PAGE.

A SINGLE PANEL CAN OCCUPY THE WHOLE PAGE (**SPLASH PAGE**).

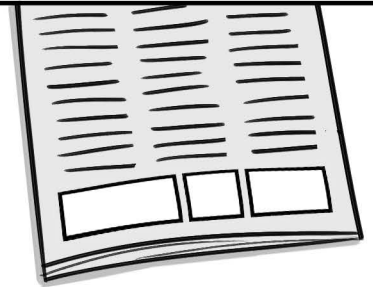
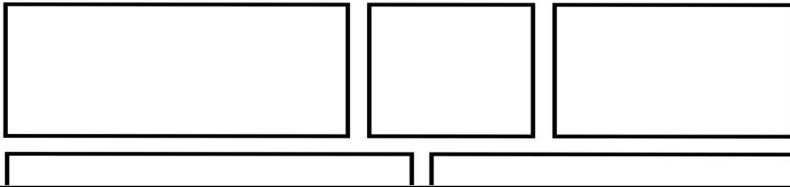
BUT USUALLY PANELS ARE ARRANGED ON THE **PAGE** OR **DOUBLE-PAGE SPREAD** WITH OTHER PANELS.

PANELS OF VARIOUS SIZES CAN BE ARRANGED IN MULTIPLE WAYS ALONG THE PAGE, PRODUCING AN INFINITE NUMBER OF DIFFERENT PAGE LAYOUTS.

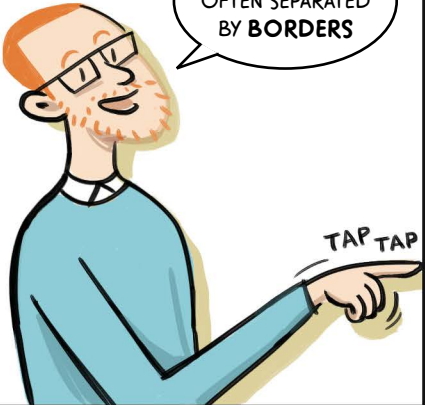
REGULAR GROUPINGS, WHERE ALL PANELS ARE EQUAL IN SIZE (**GRIDS**), CAN BE USED, WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF JOINING SOME PANELS WITHIN THE SAME STRUCTURE.



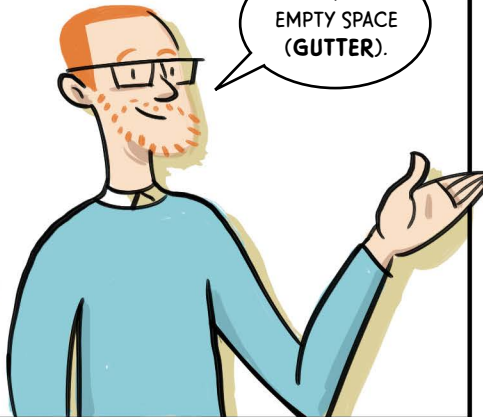
SOME ARTISTS ALSO DECIDE TO GIVE MORE IMPORTANCE TO EACH **TIER** (WHICH ALSO HAS A LONG TRADITION ON ITS OWN, ESPECIALLY IN THE PRESS, AS WE CAN SEE WITH THE COMIC STRIPS IN THE SUNDAY PAPERS).



PANELS ARE OFTEN SEPARATED BY **BORDERS**



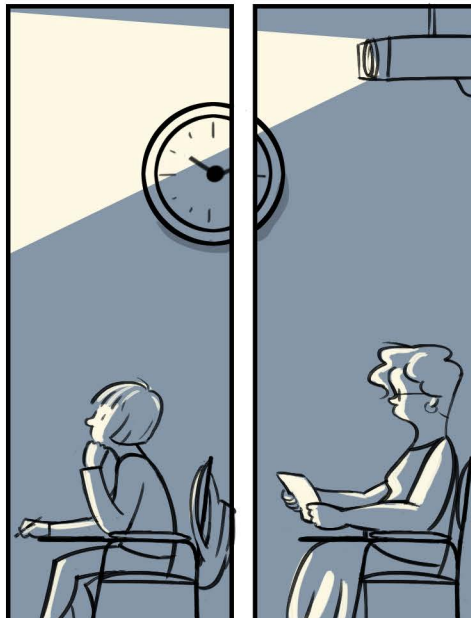
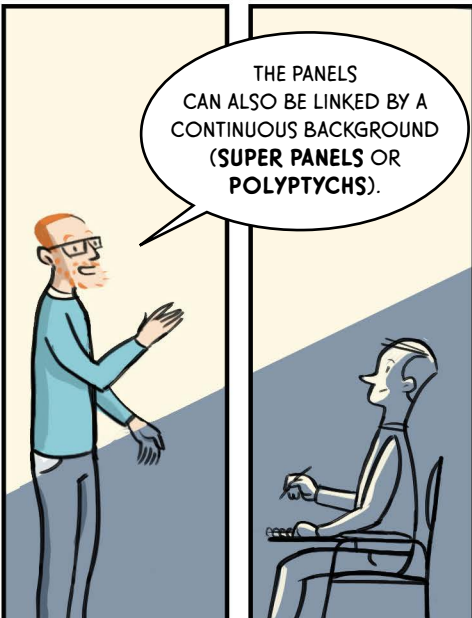
OR AN EMPTY SPACE (**GUTTER**).



BUT SOMETIMES THE IMAGES EXTEND TO THE EDGE OF THE PAGE (**BLEED**).

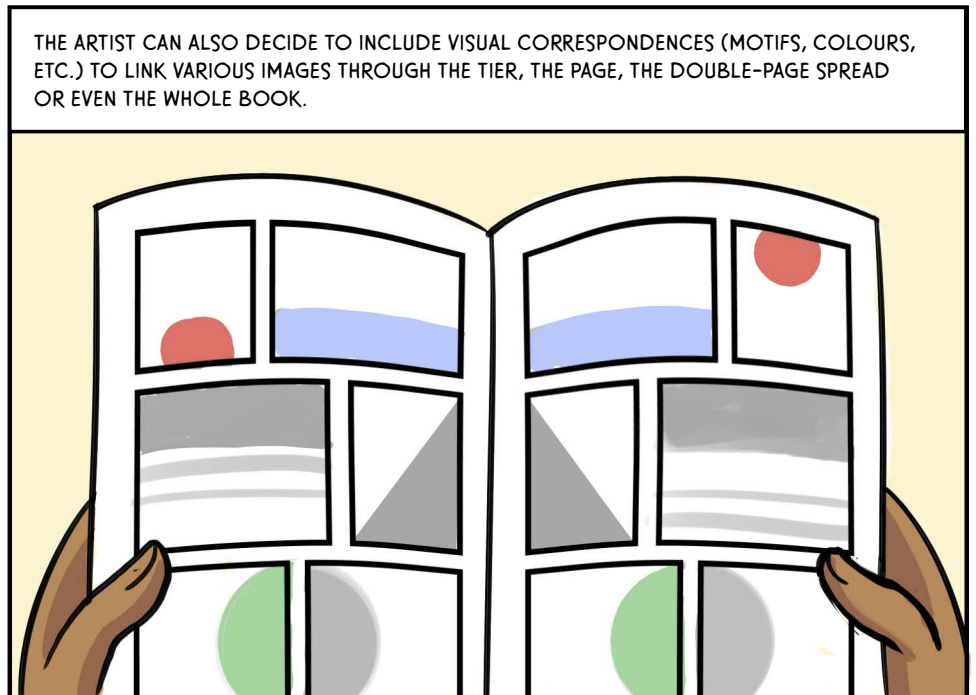
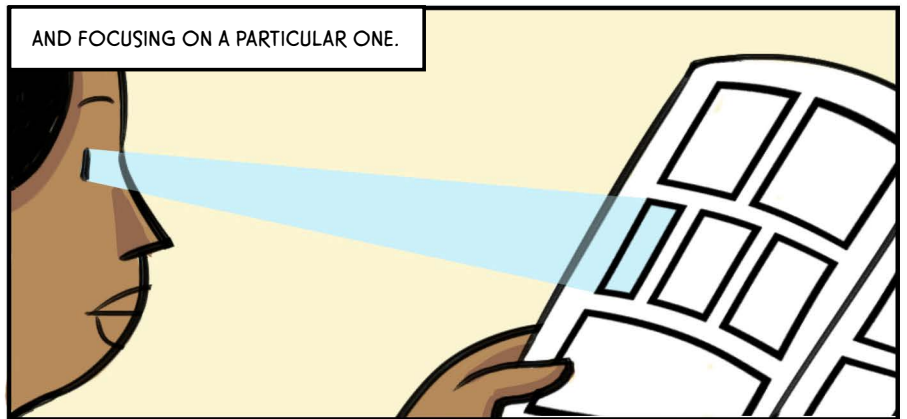
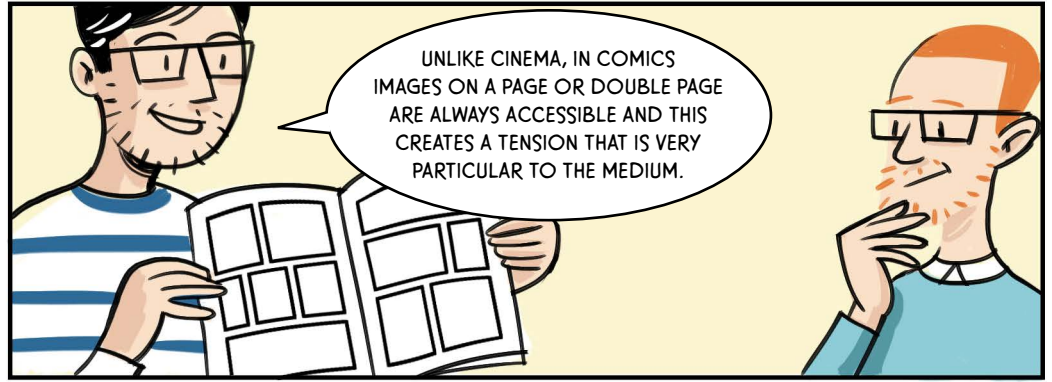
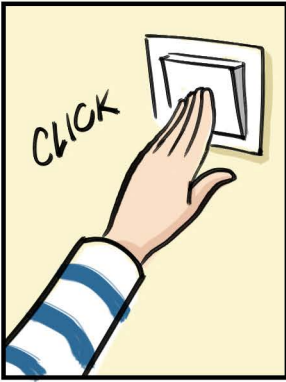


THE PANELS CAN ALSO BE LINKED BY A CONTINUOUS BACKGROUND (**SUPER PANELS OR POLYPTYCHS**).

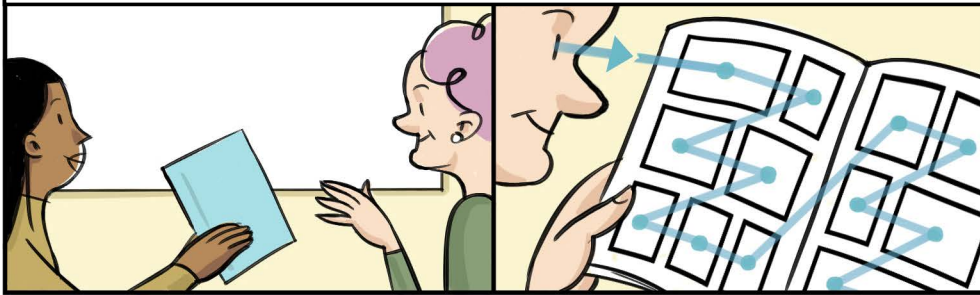


AND AUTHORS MAY EVEN CHOOSE TO ELIMINATE PANELS ALTOGETHER.





PANELS ARE TRADITIONALLY READ FROM LEFT TO RIGHT (RIGHT TO LEFT IN THE CASE OF MANGA) AND FROM THE TOP TO THE BOTTOM OF THE PAGE IN A Z-PATH, A SYSTEM INHERITED FROM THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK.



THIS IS THE MOST COMMON OPTION.



OR DEVICES SUCH AS ARROWS AND NUMBERS CAN OFFER MULTIPLE POSSIBILITIES.



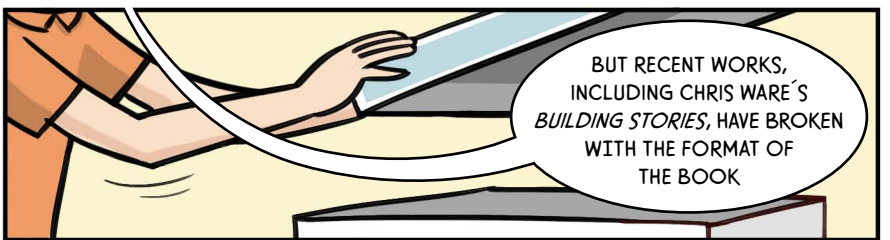
BUT THE PAGE LAYOUT, THE DRAWING



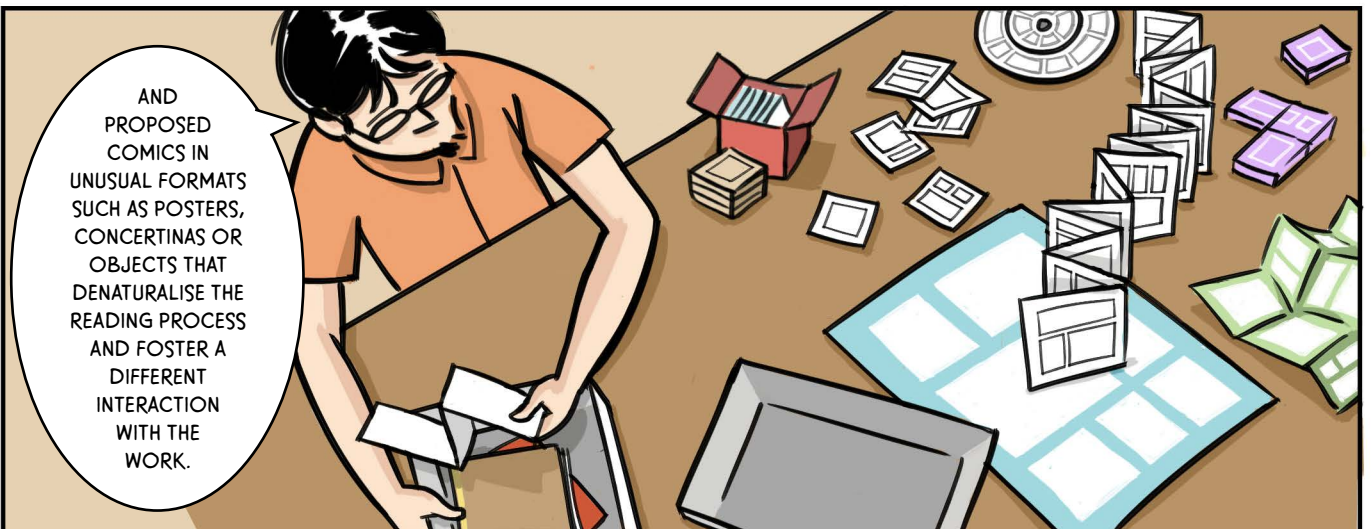
READERS CAN ALSO ENGAGE WITH THE PANELS IN ANY ORDER OR LEVEL OF DETAIL THEY CHOOSE, MEANING THAT EACH READING WILL BE TOTALLY UNIQUE!

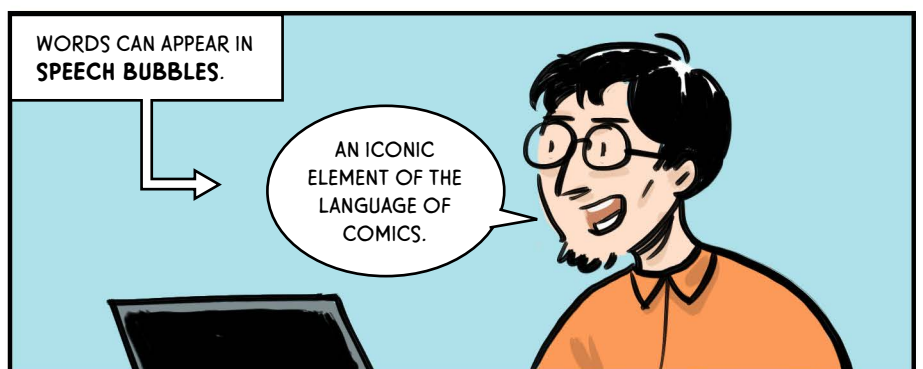
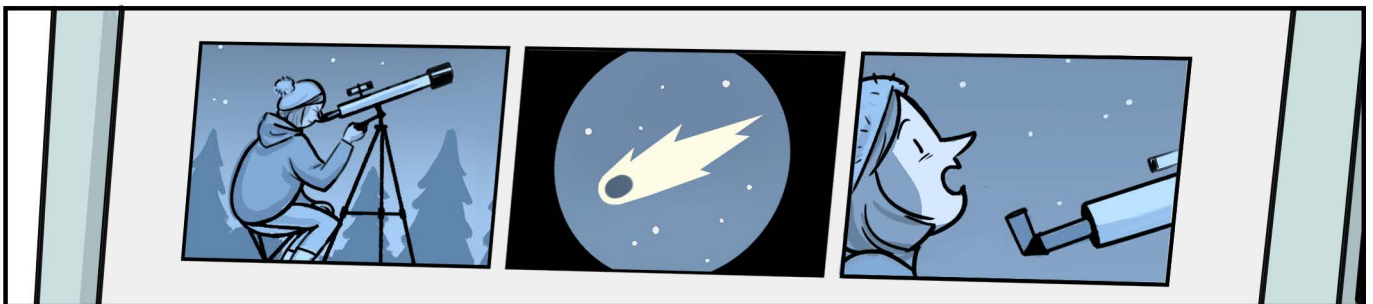
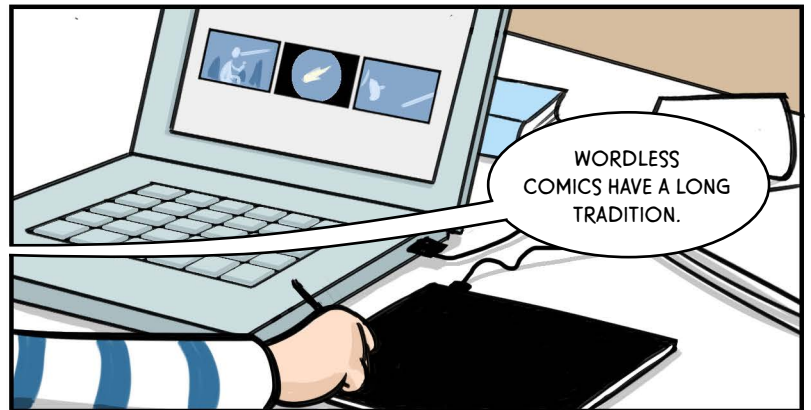
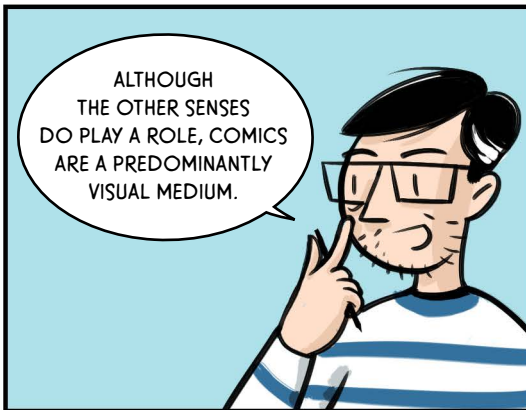
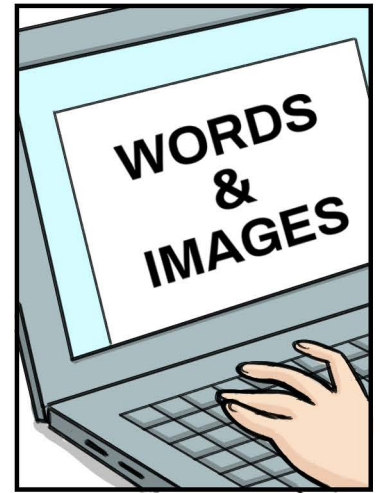
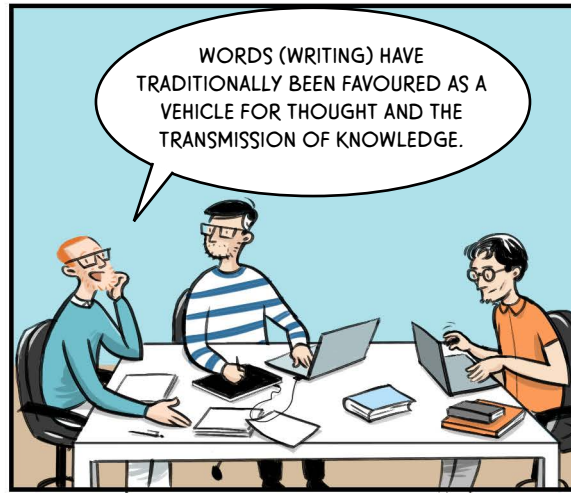


BUT RECENT WORKS, INCLUDING CHRIS WARE'S *BUILDING STORIES*, HAVE BROKEN WITH THE FORMAT OF THE BOOK

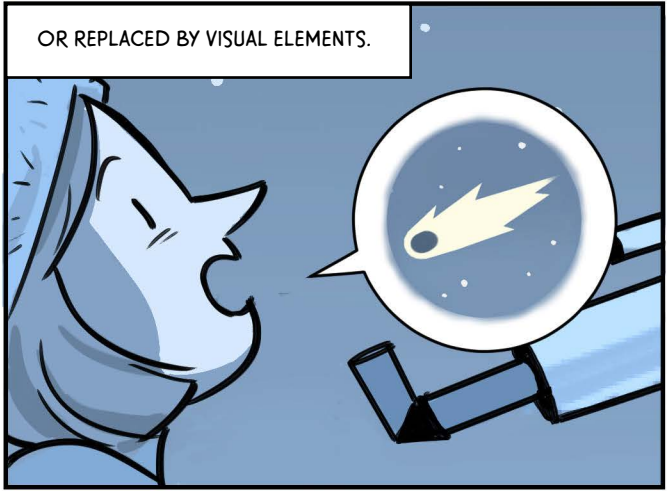


AND PROPOSED COMICS IN UNUSUAL FORMATS SUCH AS POSTERS, CONCERTINAS OR OBJECTS THAT DENATURALISE THE READING PROCESS AND FOSTER A DIFFERENT INTERACTION WITH THE WORK.









SEPARATED FROM THE IMAGE, CAPTIONS PROVIDE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION TO THE PANEL.

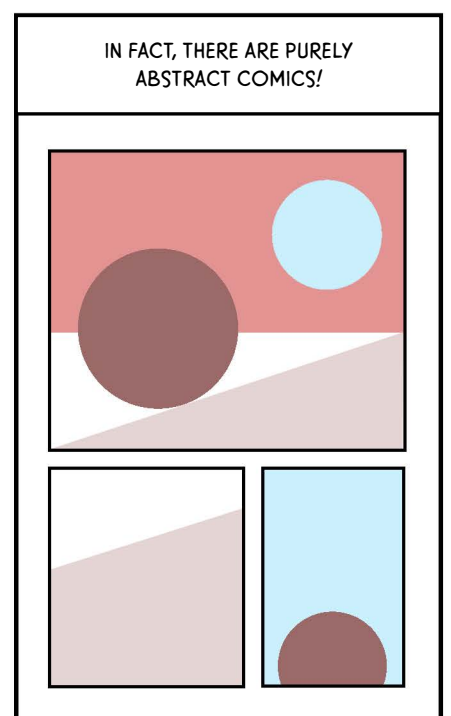
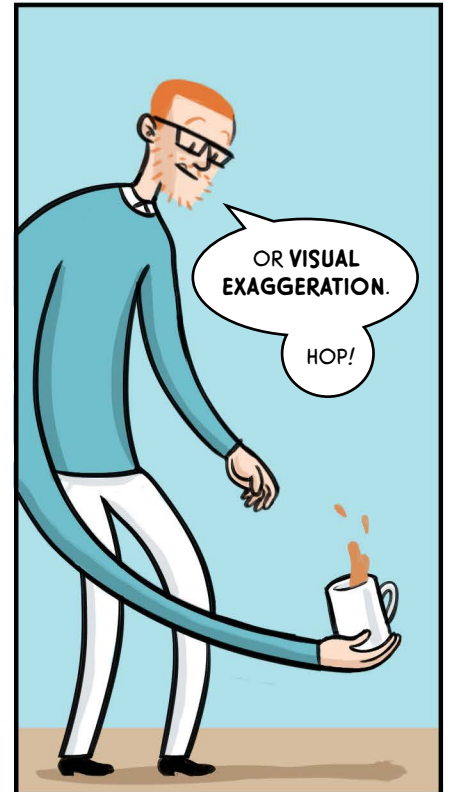
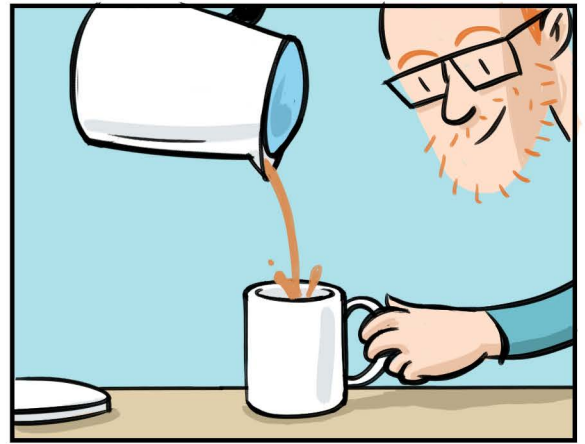


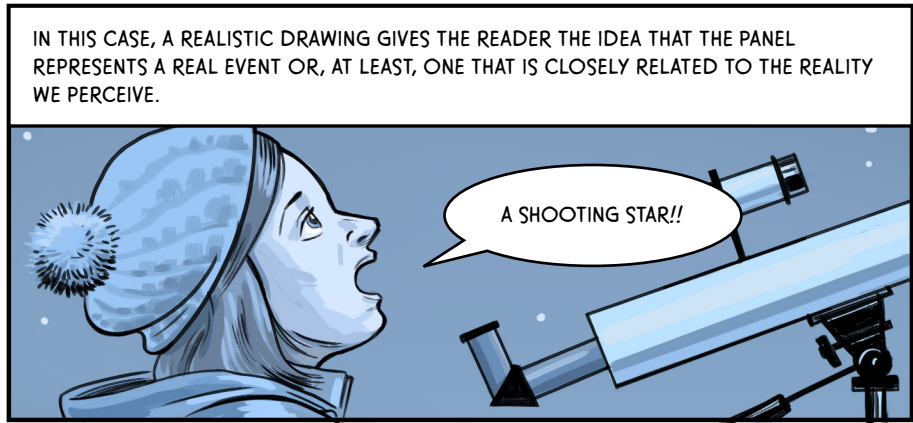
SOUND EFFECTS ARE USED TO GRAPHICALLY REPRESENT SOUND... FROM VERY DISCRETE...



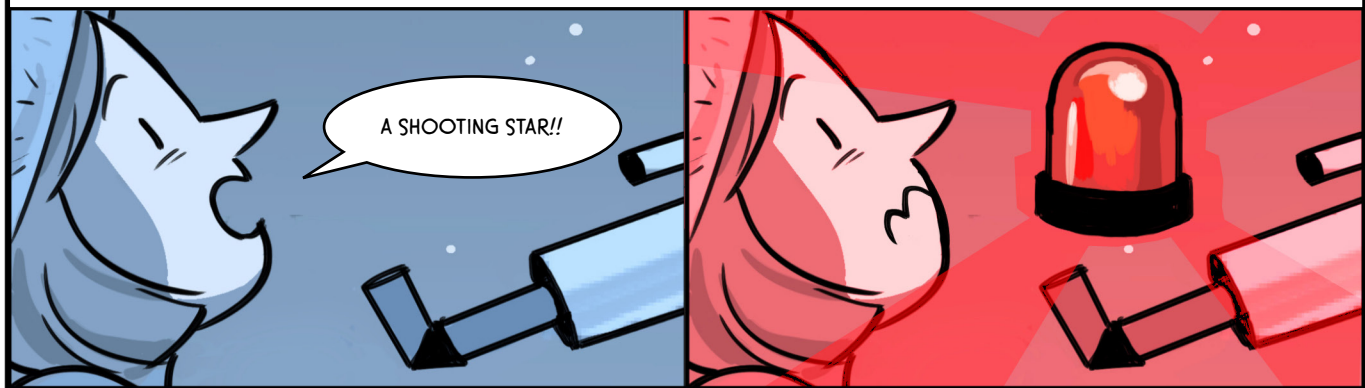
TO IN-YOUR-FACE, AS SEEN IN MANY MANGAS.





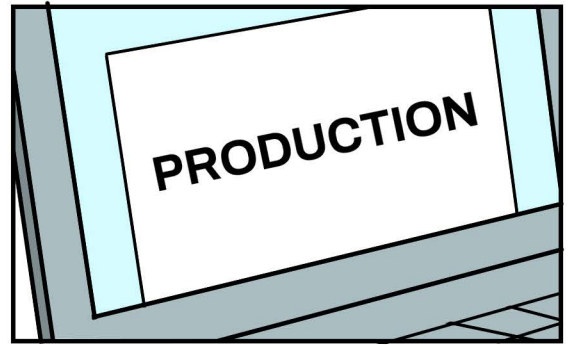


ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL RESOURCES USED IN COMICS IS THE **VISUAL METAPHOR**: AN IMAGE REPRESENTING AN IDEA, A THING, A PLACE OR AN OBJECT BY WAY OF SIMILARITY. IN THE PANELS BELOW, THE PANIC CAUSED BY THE SHOOTING STAR IS REPRESENTED BY A RED LIGHT THAT BREAKS WITH REALISTIC REPRESENTATION.



SOME PEOPLE CONSIDER HYPER-REALISTIC DRAWINGS "BETTER DONE" DUE TO THEIR CONVENTIONAL SIMILARITY WITH WHAT THEY REPRESENT. HOWEVER, DRAWING STYLE IS JUST ANOTHER COMPONENT OF COMICS AND IT OFFERS MULTIPLE EXPRESSIVE POSSIBILITIES.





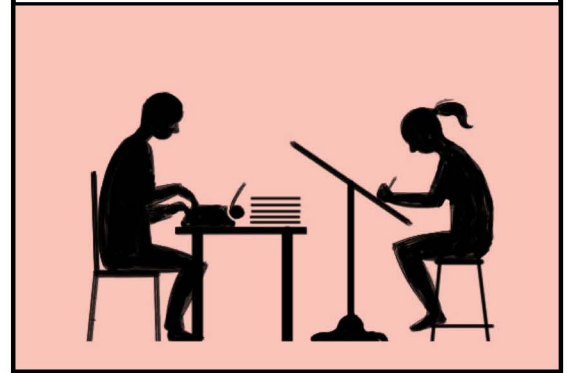
SOME COMICS ARE MADE BY A SINGLE AUTHOR WHO PERSONALLY DEVELOPS THE STORY AND THE IMAGES.



SOMETIMES, THEY MAY RECEIVE THE HELP OF ASSISTANTS TO PRODUCE THE WHOLE COMIC.



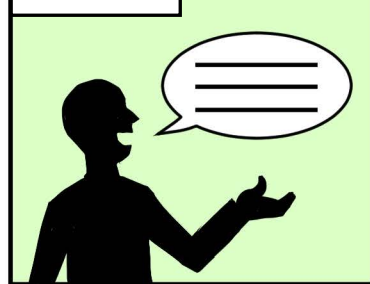
THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF COMICS, THERE HAVE ALSO BEEN MANY CASES OF COLLABORATION BETWEEN SCRIPTWRITERS AND ARTISTS.



THE SCRIPT CAN BE VERY BASIC,



JUST VERBAL,



OR THE ARTISTIC TEAM CAN COLLABORATE MORE CLOSELY (THE WRITER CAN EVEN DECIDE THE PAGE LAYOUT).



CREATORS CAN COMMUNICATE IN MANY WAYS (EXCHANGING SKETCHES, GRAPHIC MATERIAL SUCH AS PHOTOS, ETC.).



ARTISTS HAVE A WIDE RANGE OF TECHNIQUES TO TELL THEIR PART OF THE NARRATIVE, SUCH AS MIXED MEDIA, DIGITAL SOFTWARE, ETC.



THE PRODUCTION PROCESS BEGINS WITH THE SCRIPT.

THEN, THE CARTOONIST DRAWS THE PAGE.

IT THEN GETS INKED BY THE INKER.

THE COLOURIST APPLIES COLOUR

AND THE LETTERER ADDS THE TEXT.

AFTER THAT, THE PAGE IS FINISHED!

THIS PRACTICE IS WELL ESTABLISHED IN THE U.S. COMICS INDUSTRY, A DIVISION OF LABOUR THAT HELPS HIT TIGHT DEADLINES SO PUBLISHERS CONTINUE TO PROVIDE A GREAT RANGE OF TITLES EACH MONTH!

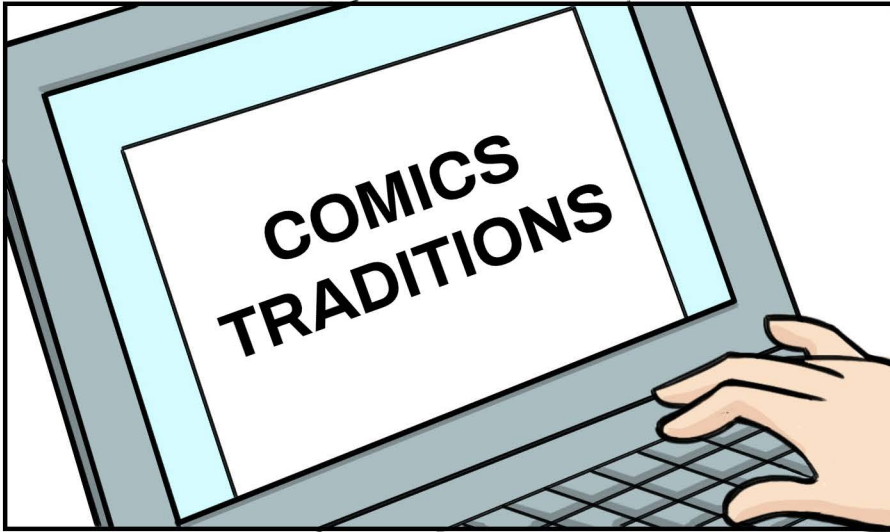
WAIT! NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT, WE CANNOT FORGET THE ROLE OF EDITORS AND PUBLISHING HOUSES!

YES, THEY ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PUBLICATION OF EACH COMIC AND ITS INCLUSION IN THEIR CATALOGUE. THEY REACH THE PUBLIC THROUGH GENERAL OR SPECIALISED BOOKSHOPS, E-COMMERCE, FAIRS, ETC.

EDITORS EITHER ACCEPT PROJECTS SUGGESTED BY AUTHORS OR COMMISSION THEIR OWN INITIATIVES.

THEY CAN ALSO GET INVOLVED IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT NARRATIVE AND GRAPHIC ASPECTS.

AS WE HAVE JUST SEEN, PRODUCTION PROCESSES CAN BE INDIVIDUAL OR COLLECTIVE, DEPENDING ON THE REQUIREMENTS OF EACH PROJECT OR THE WORKING HABITS OF THE AUTHORS INVOLVED!



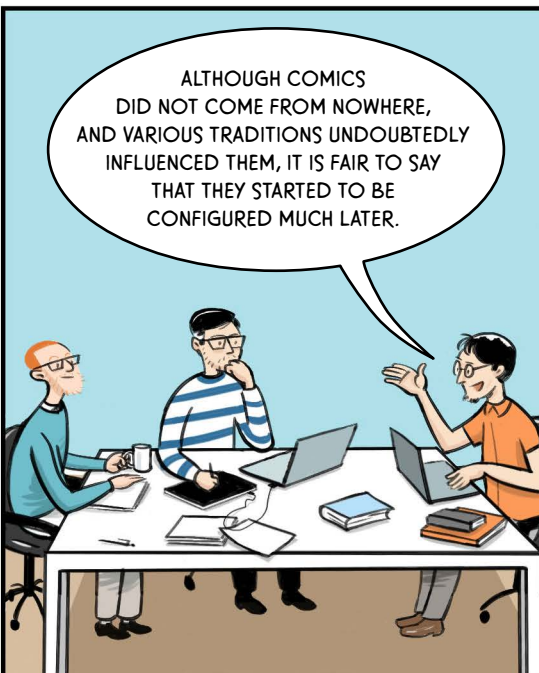
IF WE TAKE THE VISUAL, SEQUENTIAL AND NARRATIVE ASPECTS OF THE MEDIUM, WE WOULD NEED TO GO BACK TO AT LEAST CAVE PAINTING.



SOME SCHOLARS INDEED DO SO, AND STUDY WHAT THEY CALL "PROTocomics".



ALTHOUGH COMICS DID NOT COME FROM NOWHERE, AND VARIOUS TRADITIONS UNDOUBTEDLY INFLUENCED THEM, IT IS FAIR TO SAY THAT THEY STARTED TO BE CONFIGURED MUCH LATER.

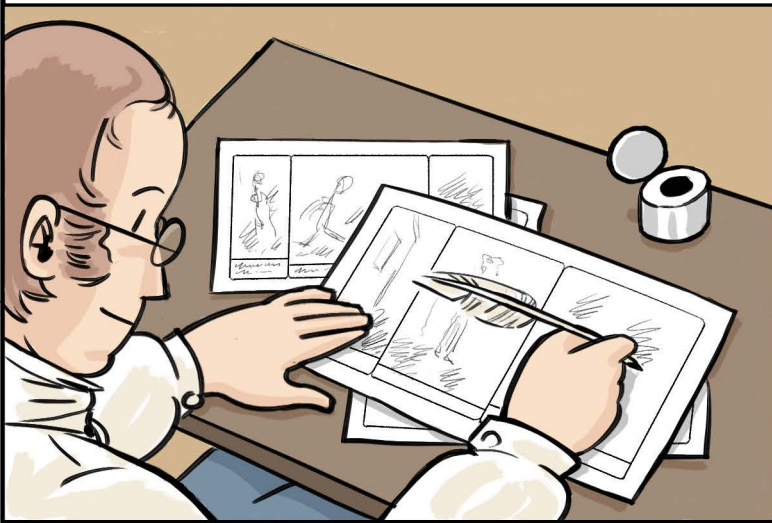


IN EUROPE, CARICATURE HAD A LONG TRADITION, BUT PARTICULARLY FLOURISHED IN VISUAL SATIRE IN LATE-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN.



SERIOUS RESEARCHERS STUDYING COMICS... IS THAT A JOKE?

WILLIAM HOGARTH AND OTHER CARICATURISTS HAD AN ENORMOUS INFLUENCE ON RODOLPHE TÖPFFER (1799-1846), CONSIDERED BY MANY EXPERTS TO BE THE "FATHER OF COMICS".



HIS SATIRICAL WORKS, WHICH WERE INTENDED FOR HIS STUDENTS AND FRIENDS, NOT FOR PUBLICATION, USED MULTIPLE PANELS AND A LONG FORMAT (THE HORIZONTAL ALBUM) FOR THE FIRST TIME.



\*DRAWN REPRODUCTION. TÖPFFER, R. (1840). *MONSIEUR PENCIL*. PARIS: LIBRAIRIE D'ABM. CHERBULIEZ ET CIE., PP. 2-3.

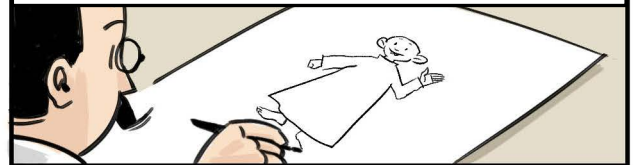
FOR MANY DECADES, THE PREFERRED VEHICLE FOR COMICS WAS THE PRINTED PRESS. IN THE U.S., COMICS HAD A MASS READERSHIP IN THE ERA OF YELLOW JOURNALISM.



COMIC-STRIP CHARACTERS AND THEIR AUTHORS BECAME NATIONAL CELEBRITIES,



AMONG OTHERS, RICHARD F. OUTCAULT'S YELLOW KID...

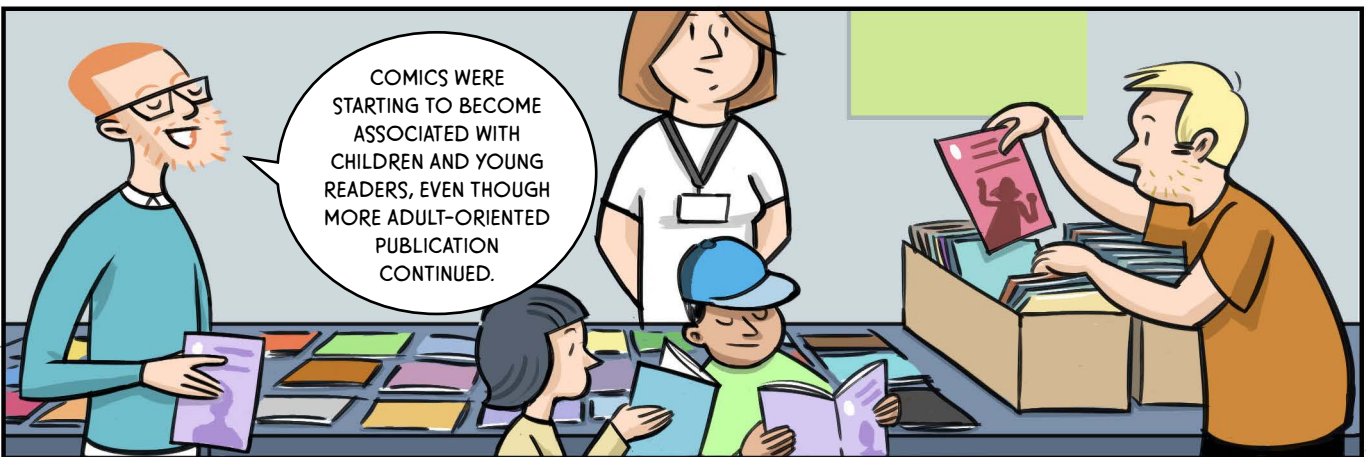
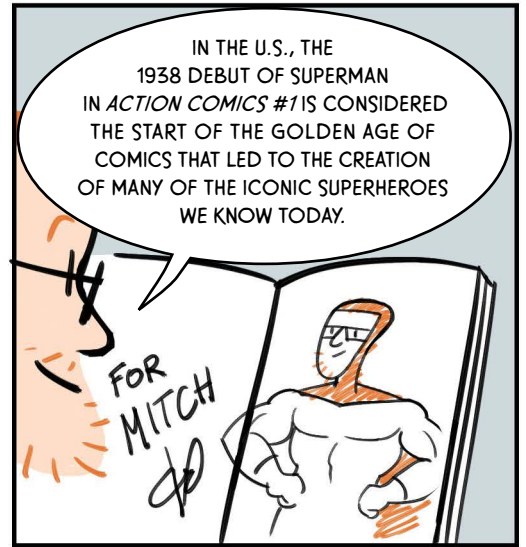
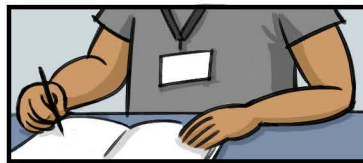


AND WINSOR MCCAY'S LITTLE NEMO.

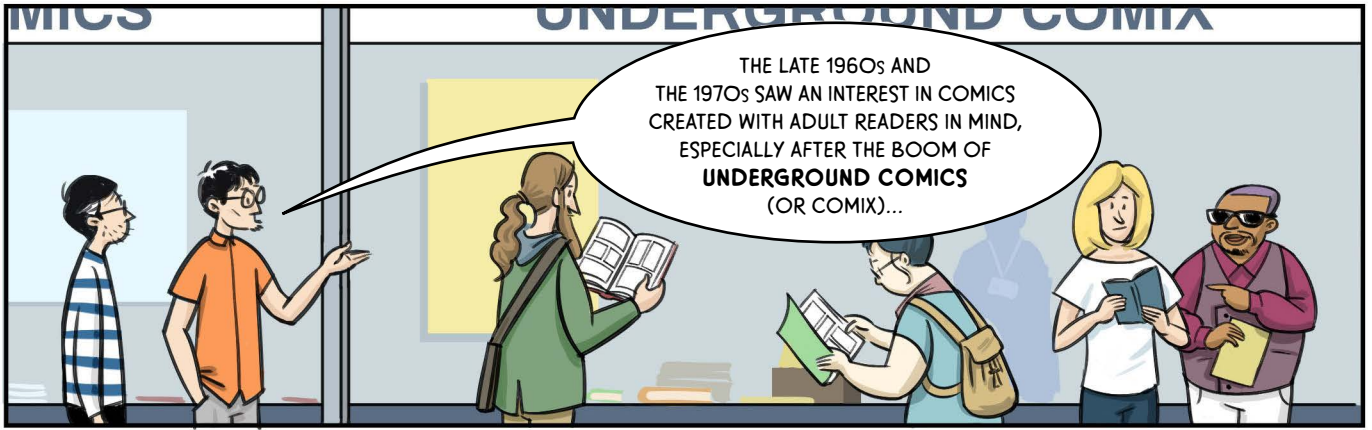


BUT IN THE 1930s ANOTHER FORMAT APPEARED...

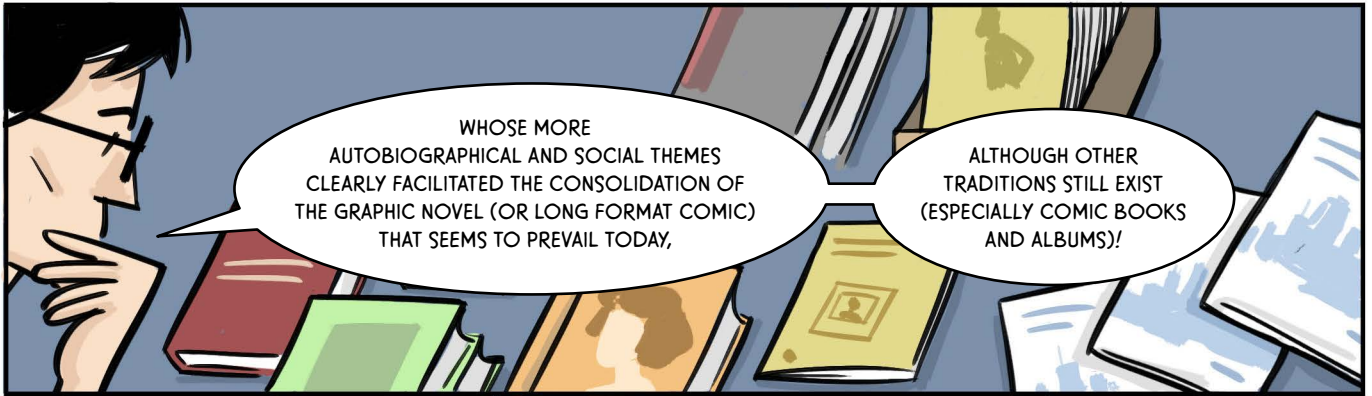






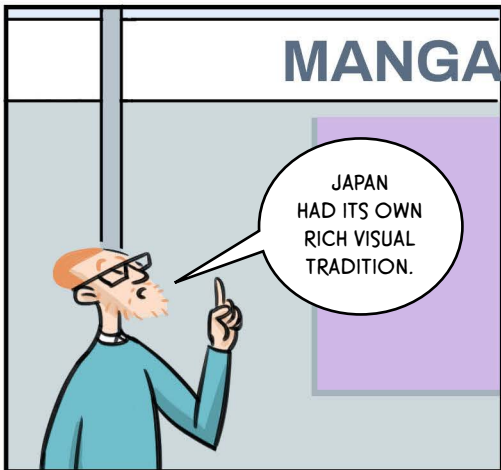


THE LATE 1960s AND THE 1970s SAW AN INTEREST IN COMICS CREATED WITH ADULT READERS IN MIND, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE BOOM OF **UNDERGROUND COMICS** (OR COMIX)...



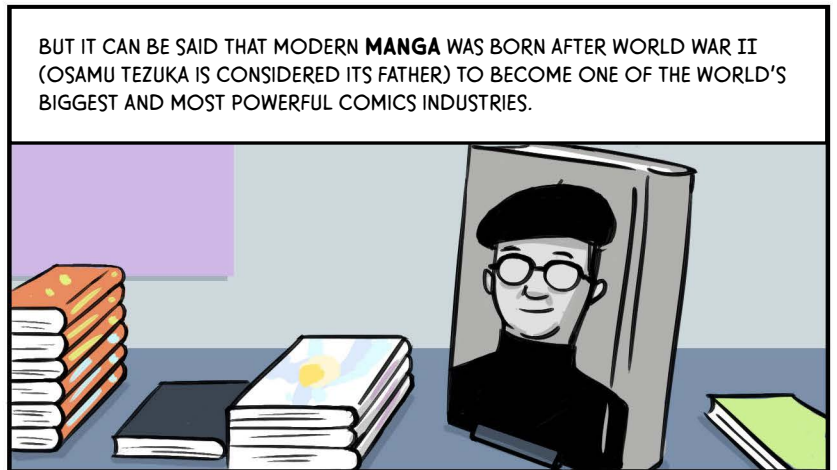
WHOSE MORE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL THEMES CLEARLY FACILITATED THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL (OR LONG FORMAT COMIC) THAT SEEMS TO PREVAIL TODAY,

ALTHOUGH OTHER TRADITIONS STILL EXIST (ESPECIALLY COMIC BOOKS AND ALBUMS)!



## MANGA

JAPAN HAD ITS OWN RICH VISUAL TRADITION.



BUT IT CAN BE SAID THAT MODERN **MANGA** WAS BORN AFTER WORLD WAR II (OSAMU TEZUKA IS CONSIDERED ITS FATHER) TO BECOME ONE OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST AND MOST POWERFUL COMICS INDUSTRIES.



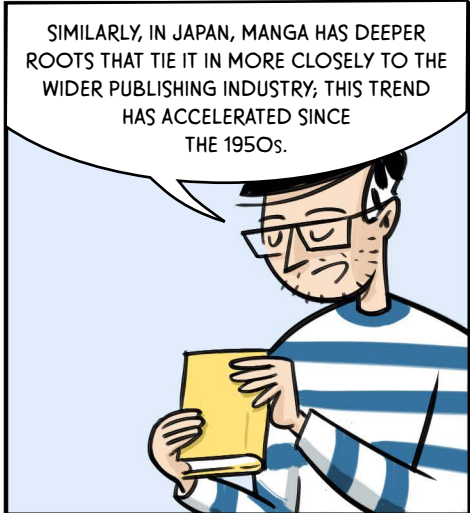
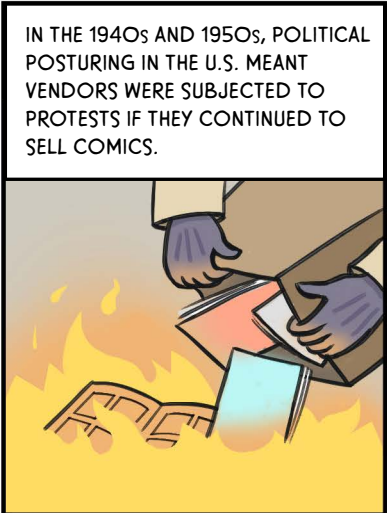
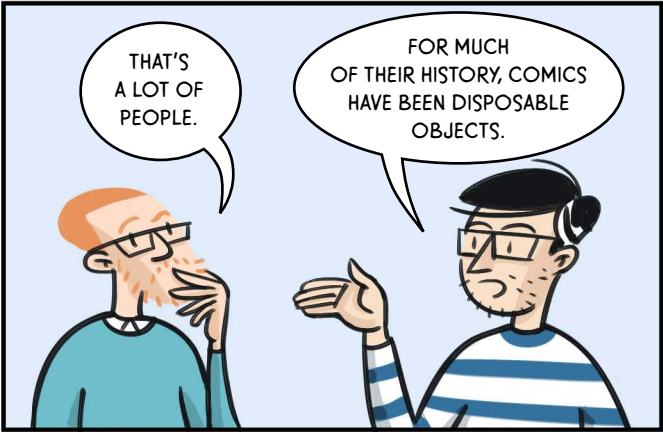
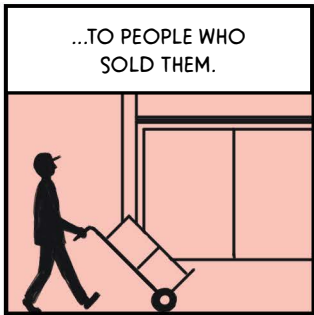
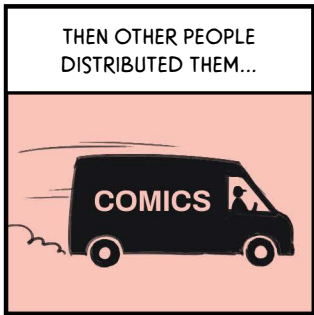
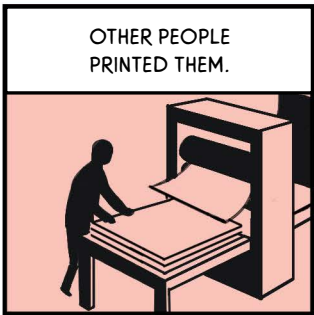
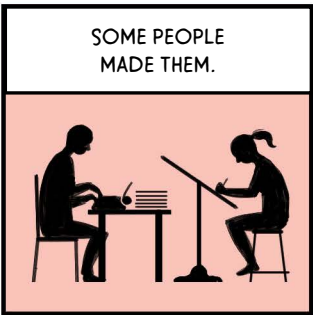
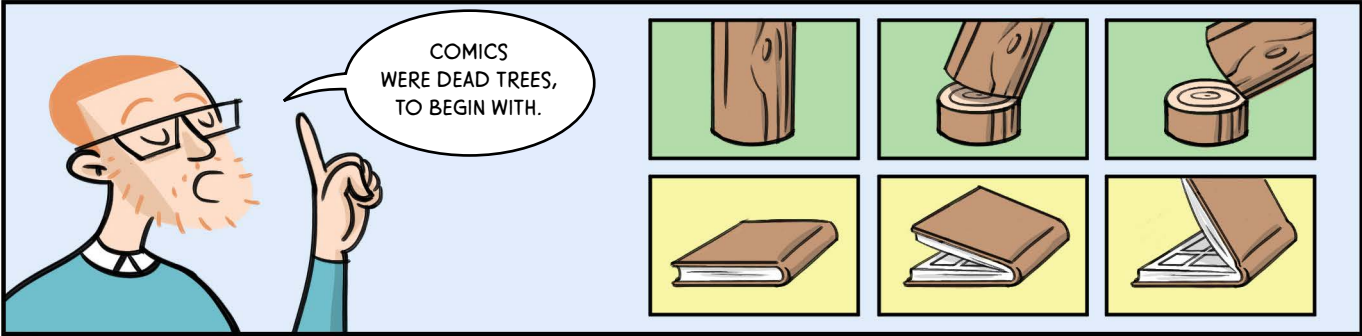
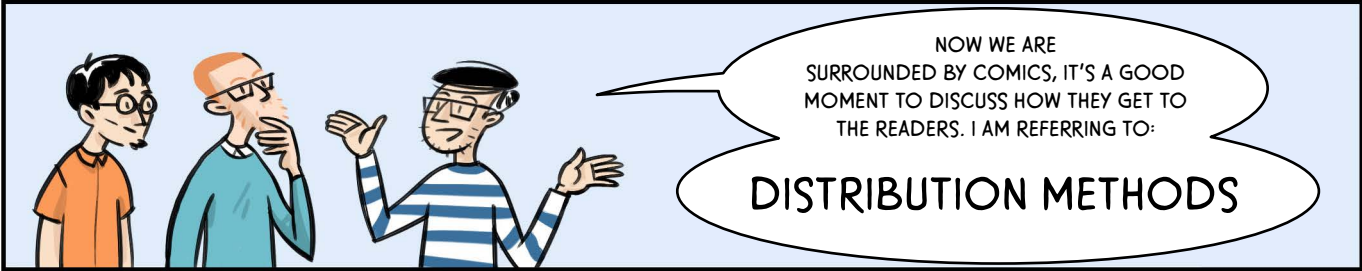
MOST MANGA SERIES ARE STILL PUBLISHED IN MAGAZINES AND THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ONES END UP BEING COMPILED IN SMALL AND THICK VOLUMES CALLED *TANKŌBON*.



WE HAVE ONLY COVERED VERY BRIEFLY SOME OF THE HISTORY OF COMICS, BUT IT SHOULD BE REMEMBERED THAT EACH COUNTRY AND REGION OF THE WORLD HAS ITS OWN TRADITION.



MORE IMPORTANTLY, THESE TRADITIONS SHOULD NOT BE UNDERSTOOD IN ISOLATION. JUST TO GIVE A FEW EXAMPLES, TÖPFFER AND EARLY EUROPEAN COMICS WERE INFLUENTIAL IN THE U.S., EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN COMICS CONTRIBUTED TO THE BIRTH OF MODERN MANGA, AND NO ONE CAN QUESTION THE IMPACT OF MANGA AROUND THE WORLD TODAY!



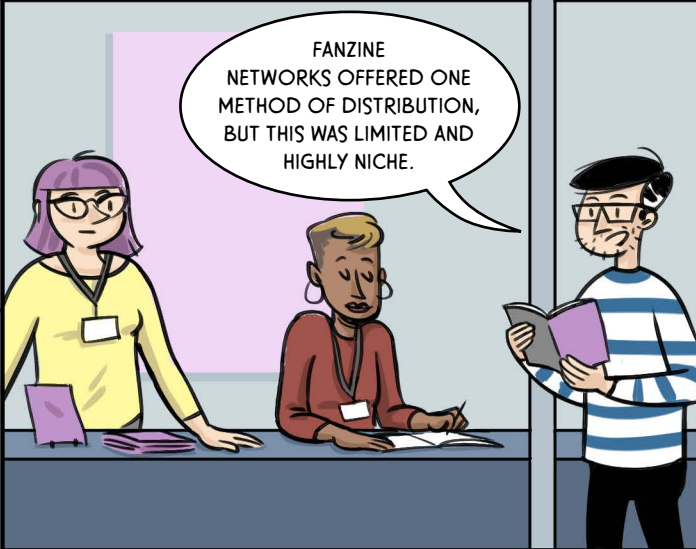
THE SECOND PROBLEM CAME IN THE 1970s AS COMICS CIRCULATION DECLINED. NEWSSTANDS STARTED DISAPPEARING.



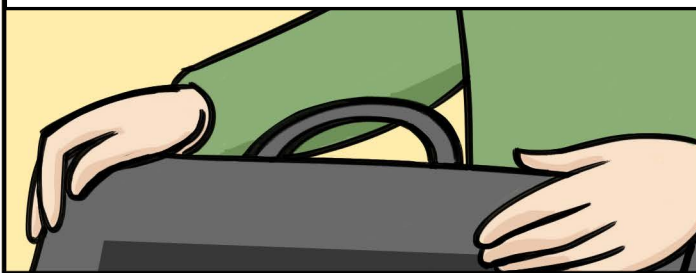
SUPERMARKETS BECAME THE STANDARD WAY TO BUY THINGS — AND THEY HAD LITTLE INTEREST IN SELLING LOW-MARGIN ITEMS LIKE COMICS.



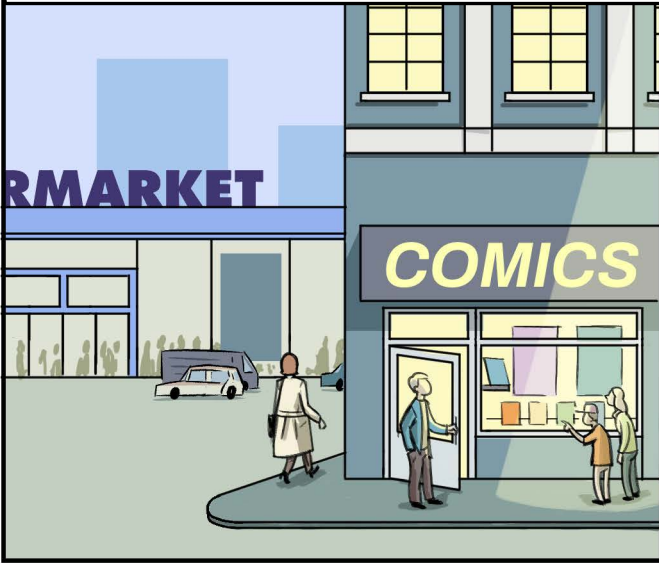
## FANZINES



ONE ADDITIONAL ISSUE FOR CREATIVE TEAMS WAS THE PULL OF GOING TO WORK FOR FOREIGN MARKETS (PARTICULARLY THE U.S. AND THE FRANCO-BELGIAN ONES), WHERE PAY AND WORKING CONDITIONS WERE BETTER.



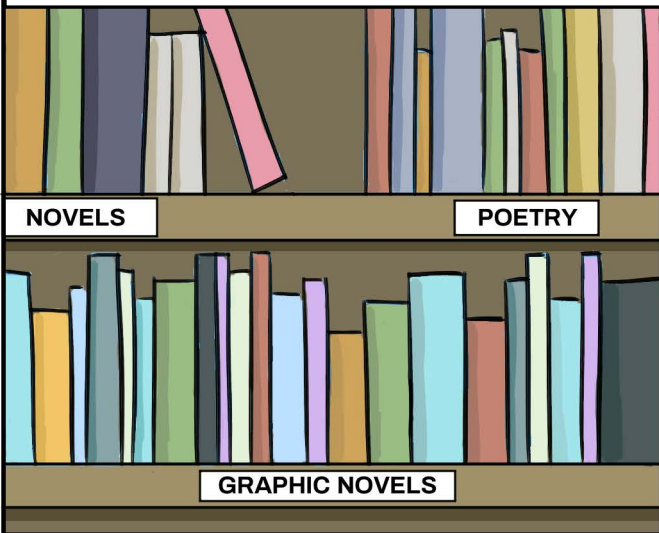
DIRECT MARKET DISTRIBUTION TOOK COMICS RETAIL INTO SPECIALISED SHOPS.



THIS MADE COMICS AVAILABLE FOR MANY READERS BUT ALSO IDENTIFIED THEM AS 'GEEKS' BECAUSE COMICS WERE SOLD ALONG WITH GAMES, FIGURINES AND OTHER MERCHANDISING.



THE GRAPHIC NOVEL IN BOOK FORM HAS HELPED COMICS MATERIALISE IN TRADITIONAL BOOKSHOPS AND LIBRARIES, PARTICULARLY IN THE LAST DECADE.

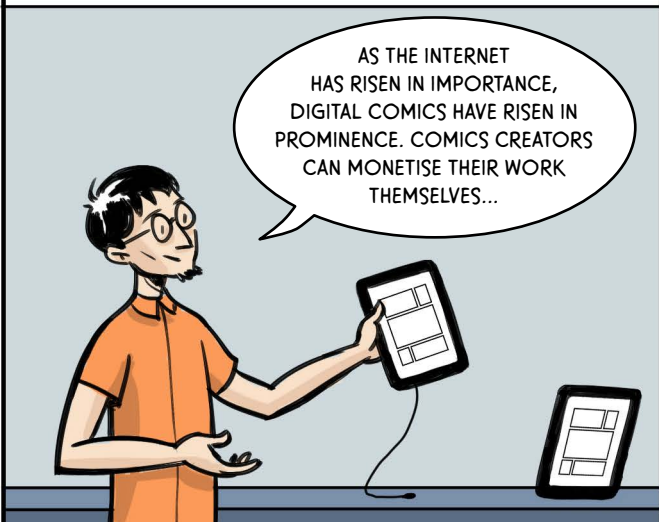


SINCE THE 1990s, IT HAS ALSO BECOME POSSIBLE TO PUBLISH ONLINE — TO CREATE AND CIRCULATE YOUR OWN COMICS, CUTTING OUT THE PUBLISHER AND DISTRIBUTOR ENTIRELY.

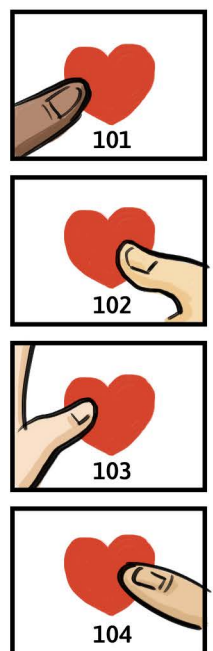


## DIGITAL COMIC

AS THE INTERNET HAS RISEN IN IMPORTANCE, DIGITAL COMICS HAVE RISEN IN PROMINENCE. COMICS CREATORS CAN MONETISE THEIR WORK THEMSELVES...

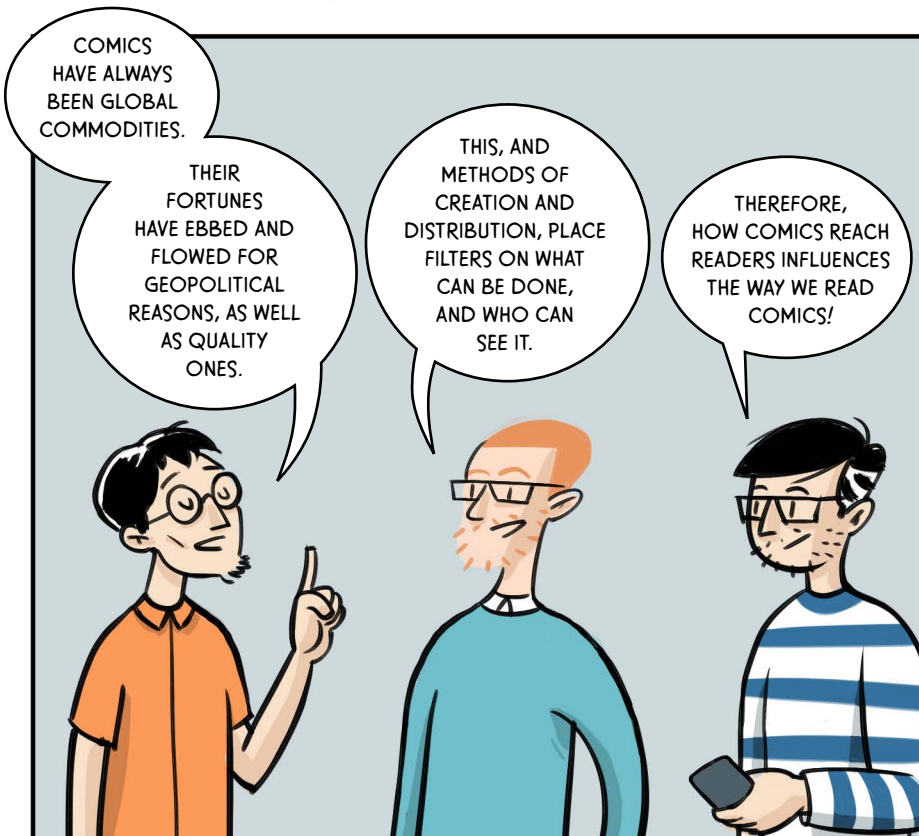
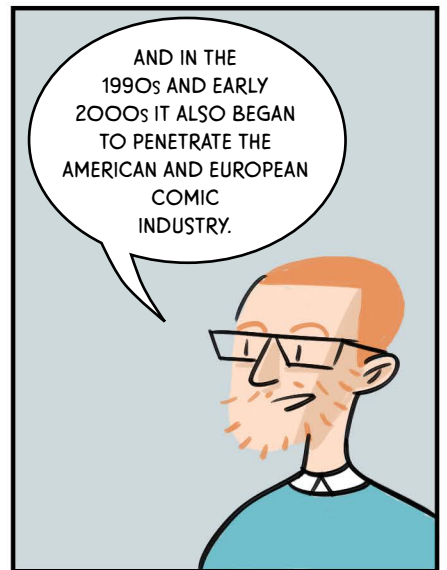
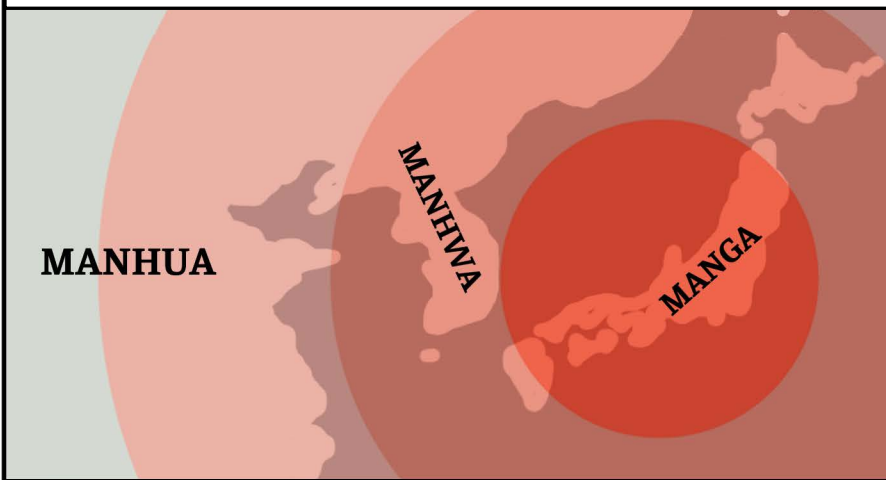


OR USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO INCREASE AWARENESS OF THEIR WORK AND FIND OPPORTUNITIES ELSEWHERE.





SINCE THE 1990s, MANGA HAS GAINED POPULARITY OUTSIDE JAPAN. MANGA HAD ALREADY INFLUENCED OTHER COMICS, SUCH AS CHINESE MANHUA AND KOREAN MANHWA...





PEOPLE HAVE BEEN STUDYING COMICS FOR AS LONG AS THERE HAVE BEEN COMICS. THEY HAVE NOT ALL DONE SO IN THE SAME WAY, THOUGH.

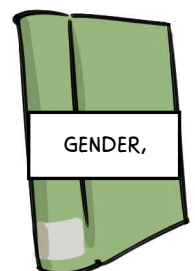
**APPROACHES TO STUDYING COMICS** INCLUDE:

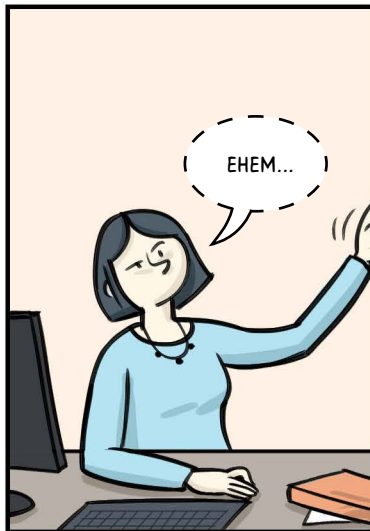
**FORMAL ANALYSIS (OR SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS):** AS THE NAME SUGGESTS, THIS ANALYSIS FOCUSES ON THE FORM, THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF COMICS WE COVERED EARLIER:

PANELS, PAGE LAYOUT, ETC.

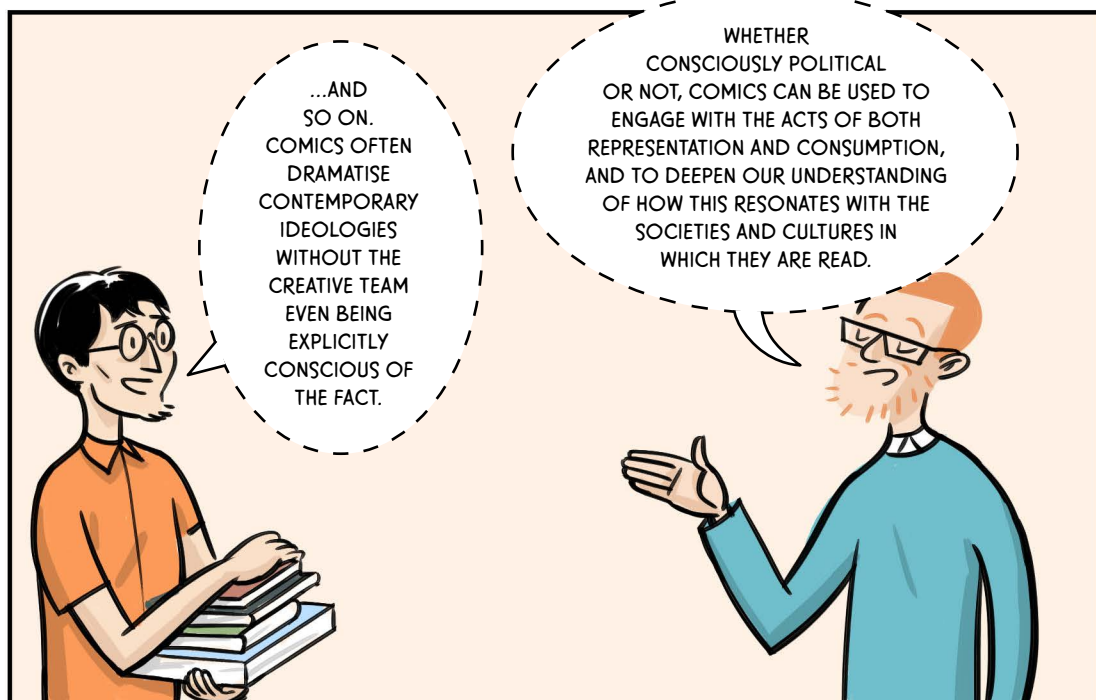
**CULTURAL STUDIES:** COMICS ALSO LEND THEMSELVES TO A RANGE OF WHAT MIGHT BE TERMED POSITIONAL READINGS.

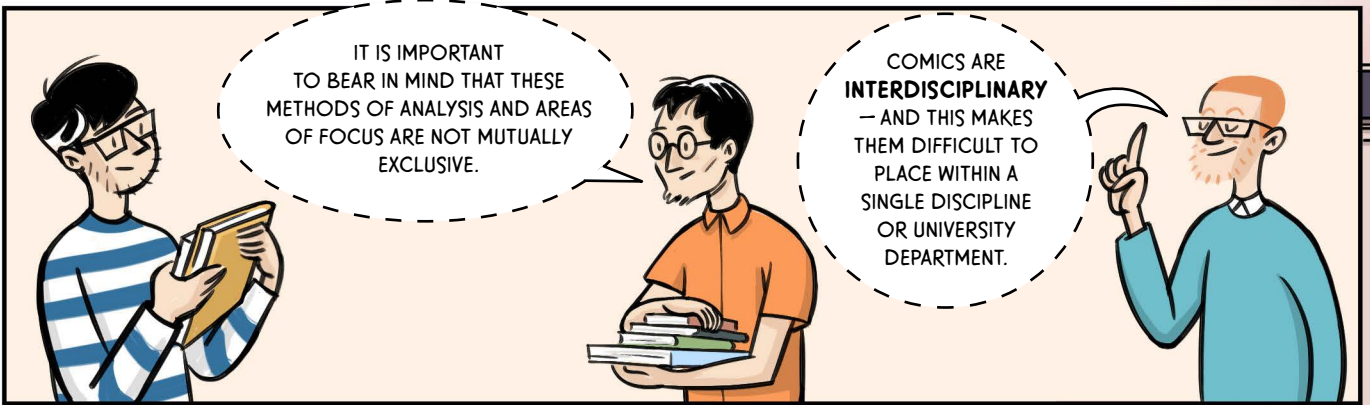
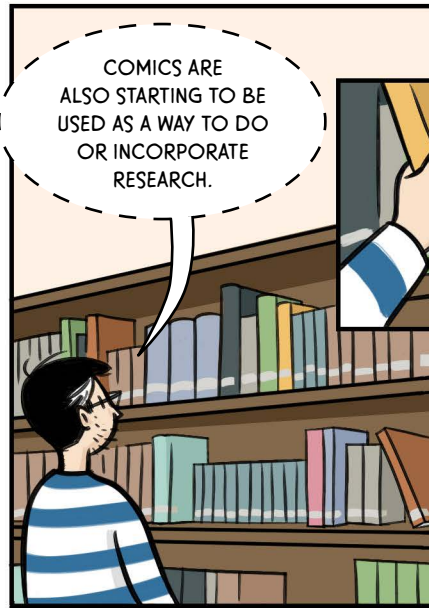
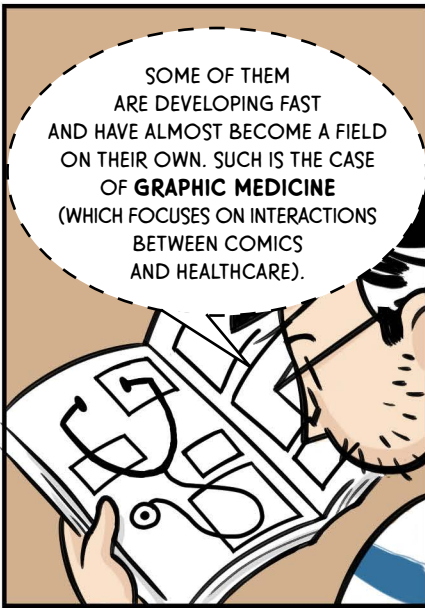
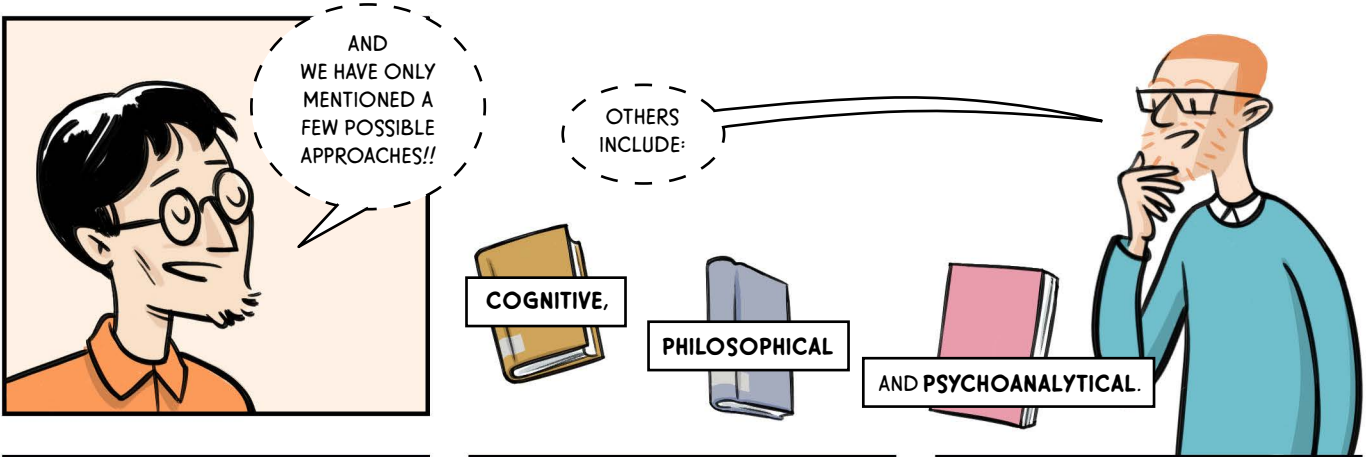
THROUGH VISUAL AND TEXTUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF...





SILENCE PLEASE









# FURTHER READING

## Comics or graphic novels?

Baetens, J. & Frey, H. (2015). *The Graphic Novel. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, P. (2020). *Dreaming the Graphic Novel. The Novelization of Comics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

## On the form

Groensteen, T. (2007). *The System of Comics*. Translation by Beaty, B. & Nguyen, N. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Lefèvre, P. (2000). "The Importance of Being Published. A Comparative Study of Different Comics Formats". In Magnussen, A. & Christiansen, H.-C. (Eds.), *Comics & Culture. Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, pp. 91-106. Aarhus: Museum Tusulanum Press/University of Copenhagen.

## Words and Images

Cohn, N. (2013). "Beyond speech balloons and thought bubbles: The integration of text and image". *Semiotica* 2013; 197: 35–63.

Sousanis, N. (2015). *Unflattening*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

## Production

Garner, J. (2012). *Projections. Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.

Spencer Millidge, G. (2009). *Comic Book Design*. Lewes: Ilex.

### **Comics traditions**

Berndt, J. (ed.) (2010). *Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale*. International Manga Research Center, Kyoto Seika University.

Mazur, D. & Danner, A. (2014). *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to the Present*. London: Thames & Hudson.

### **Distribution methods: print, digital, impact, etc.**

Brienza, C. & Johnston, P. (2016). *Cultures of Comics Work*. London: Palgrave.

Kashtan, A. (2018). *Between Pen and Pixel. Comics, Materiality, and the Book of the Future*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.

### **Approaches to studying comics: formal, cognitive, historical, gender, etc.**

Chute, H. L. (2010). *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Czerwiec, MK., Williams, I., Merrill Squier, S., Green, M. J., Myers, K. R., & Smith, S. T. (2015). *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*. University Park: Penn State University Press.

Giddens, T. (ed.) (2020). *Critical Directions in Comics Studies*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Goodrum, M. (2016). *Superheroes and American Self Image. From War to Watergate*. London: Routledge.

Hatfield, C. & Beaty, B. (eds). (2020). *Comic Studies: A Guidebook*. New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press.

Kukkonen, K. (2013). *Studying Comics and Graphic Novels*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Woo, B. (2019). "What Kind of Studies Is Comics Studies?", in F. L. Aldama (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH NICK SOUSANIS

We speak with Nick Sousanis (San Francisco State University), author of *Unflattening* (2015), a groundbreaking work on comics and the relationship between images and words.

## Why did you choose the comics form for *Unflattening*?

I was a comics maker as a kid, printed and sold my own superhero/parody comic *Lockerman* from 8<sup>th</sup> grade till my senior year in high school. My comics-making took a bit of a pause through undergrad and my time on the tennis court after college. You couldn't study comics at university, and I wouldn't even have thought to do so. I wanted to do intellectual things and comics certainly weren't considered that – so I studied mathematics. That's the ironic thing I suppose about doing a dissertation in comics form all those years later – being able to do what's the highest level of intellectual scholarship in this form so long dismissed as anything but. I never stopped making comics (and certainly never stopped reading them), so I have a lot of partially finished projects from college and the next several years. I ran an arts magazine in Detroit, and during the 2004 presidential election in the U.S. I was asked to participate in a political art show. I only had a few days to do it so I made a comic. I was pretty geeked about how it came out and excited about the possibilities of making an essay in comics rather than more straightforward storytelling. I ended up doing a second one for a follow-up show right after the election. This piece, "Show of Hands", about voting, really kicked off the direction I would go with my comics-making from that point forward. If my first political comic

a few weeks earlier riffed off Scott McCloud (to whom I owe an enormous debt of inspiration and opening this pathway of working), with my avatar explaining things in the comic, this second comic instead drew some inspiration from Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's "This is Information," from a 9/11 tribute comic, and like theirs, I worked through my narrative entirely using visual and verbal metaphors, in this case, every image showing or having something to do with hands playing off my title. Soon after that, I co-organized an exhibition of art and games in Detroit, and a friend of mine suggested I do the essay for it as a comic. This was a longer piece, where I continued to use the metaphorical non-narrative approach, weaving in pop cultural references (including an entire page of well-known fictional rabbits arranged in a Fibonacci sequence of panels), to explore what games are, their history, and ultimately offering a philosophical look at how we might apply what we learn from games to our lives.

When I decided to go to graduate school for my doctorate, it was these recent comics that I used as part of my application. I had begun to see all the different things I'd been doing in my life – from my comics to running an arts-magazine to my tennis coaching to the public speaking and writing courses I taught at the university – as a way of educating at their core (even if most of them were far from traditional educational settings), and so I ended up applying to Teachers College at Columbia University. Because I'd been out of academia for a while, I didn't see working in comics as a particularly big deal. Like, *Maus* had won a Pulitzer, *Watchmen*, *Persepolis*, and so many more had had universal critical reception – comics were

already accepted in classrooms. I approached it as “Why not?” This was impressively naïve on my part, as it would turn out. But I was admitted with the very clear understanding that I planned to work in comics so if someone was going to stop me, their best chance was before they let me in. Once I arrived, I immediately began making comics for my classwork, including a comic about my professor Maxine Greene, then 90-year old professor of aesthetic education, a legendary figure. Rather than drawing her representationally, I continued my exploration of the metaphorical and depicted her as a top – a dynamo of energy making brilliant connections as she spun. I had a research class that term as well with my advisor, Ruth Vinz, who was in English education, and there she had us choose a researcher to “shadow,” and learn from. I chose Alan Moore and read everything he’d written along with a ton of comics theory (most of which was all new to me). So while I was making comics in some classes, I was making my argument for why I was working in comics in this class – laying the foundation for what would become *Unflattening*. In my third year at school, I convinced them to let me teach a comics and education course, and many of the ideas explored in *Unflattening* also came out of my time teaching, as so much of my teaching has and continues to feed my creative work.

While it’s expected that I must’ve run into some serious road blocks in creating a dissertation in comics, that really wasn’t the case for me. I think it’s in part due to my not knowing any better, it’s partly attributed to me being driven and willing to just do my own thing because it’s important to me. It certainly helped that my advisors were all being quite senior faculty,

which might lead people to believe that they’d be more conservative, but I think it was actually the opposite, they were eager to see something different and their seniority meant they weren’t at risk either. I likely hit a really sweet spot in history when interest in comics and visual communication was exploding, and there I happened to be ready to do this thing, with enough skills and enough self-determination to make it happen. And finally, as I said, I entered this naïvely, I didn’t see the radical nature of it before coming to school. But once I was there, I became aware of how different this was, and that it was far more of a political act than I’d ever anticipated. Once I realized that, I fully embraced it and realized that the work would have to be an argument for itself and for the existence of other things like it. I ended up speaking at a ton of conferences – I applied to anything I thought might be interested in what I was doing and kept getting in – and I went around proselytizing for comics in academia. People were really receptive. And all of these conversations I was fortunate to have helped shape my work and where I would end up going with it.

### **What were the biggest challenges of the creative process of *Unflattening*?**

As for my creative process itself – the biggest challenge for me is that since my earliest political comics, I’ve developed an approach that moves far away from illustration. That is, I don’t write a bunch of text and come up with images to support it. Rather, I have some kernel of an idea I want to explore on each page (or longer sequence), and I need to come

up with metaphors that allow me to get at it. I have to think of imagery that carries it, and I am deeply concerned with how the reader experiences the page – I want to find ways to embody the idea on the page and in the way a reader moves through it. As is apparent, I have no characters, no avatar of myself walking the reader through the content, and no story – so each page presents this challenge to invent anew. In addition to these constraints, I also decided early on to strip out all technical and discipline-specific language and keep everything in metaphorical terms. I want to thread a needle where I’m saying something quite precise and specific if you happen to know the particular thing I’m talking about, but also completely accessible and understandable if you don’t already have access to those things. When asked if I come up with words or pictures first, I always respond “yes.” I make these super loose sketch maps, and put a lot of ideas down as drawings and words, and then start making connections. The additional constraint is that of the page – its dimensions and the way we read. So I’ve set myself all these rules, and I feel like my job is to put things down and start playing with them and continue to iterate in my sketches until something starts to emerge that gets me excited and starts to feel like it’s saying the thing I now understand that I want to say. The beauty of this is that it’s *always* a surprise. I usually know what I want to explore, but I never know where it’s going until I start to play. (And I can’t stress enough that this is play – it’s not easy but it is play and the kind of play I want my students of all levels of experience to experience as well.) It makes for a constant challenge, but I find that I’m always rewarded by what I discover along the way.

### **What are the main differences between conceiving an article/book in comics form and one exclusively in prose?**

Well, there are the obvious things – you need to know the page size of the publication you are creating this for along with the length from the start. It’s not like you can simply flow text onto a next page or trim a bit here, you have to be acting as a designer from the start. As I said above, I am trying to embody the work on the page rather than illustrate it, so that presents all these challenges about how the page will be constructed, what kind of imagery I’ll be using. Of course, it goes without saying that you’ll have to draw (or work with someone) – which can certainly present a larger time challenge. Though obviously that varies and to say that isn’t to diminish the challenge of writing prose in the least. I think I can actually say more in comics in less space than I can in prose. The origin of the term “unflattening” comes from some of those early papers I wrote on comics talking about how a comics page could hold more information in a single flat sheet of paper than was possible in a typically formatted page of words. The ability to use images, their juxtaposition with each other and resonance with the text, how you can layer ideas over each other – all of these sorts of affordances that comics allow, can actually present you with a greater density of information than you might do with text. Each comes with its strengths and I think the key to making good comics of a research sort is to really understand what you can do with comics and find ways to use them to your greatest advantage, so you’re not simply illustrating those words, but really using the comics form to do things that can only be done in comics.

### **What sort of possibilities can comics offer in education?**

In terms of the connections between comics and education, I think first, there needs to be wide open acceptance of comics in educational settings. I've always been a big believer of comics for early literacy from my own experience, and now I've seen it with my own kid who was a super early reader, something I attribute strongly to our reading comics together from a very young age. As I've explained to fellow parents from her preschool and kindergarten class, comics make you pay attention more – each detail matters. I can't simply read and have her tune out, she's keeping track of speech balloons, sound effects, all the little details, and even before she could read, she would point out when I'd skipped over something. And yes, comics are in some sense easier to read than word books – less words, pictures to make the meaning even if you can't read the words, but the specific nature of the words actually tends to represent an increase in vocabulary and no filler like "he said," or all the kinds of placeholders that word books need that comics can handle visually. So that's for young readers and comics as a gateway to literacy more generally. But I'm actually a proponent even more strongly of comics as comics for their own unique strengths. As I wrote above, the static nature of comics means they can hold more information through juxtapositions of images, words, and the way we encounter an entire page. We can get at ideas, get at our very thinking in ways that we can't do in another form. So in primary school settings, I think we should be seeing a lot more of comics (it's happening anyhow, students are eating up Raina Telgemeier's books and others) on all

sorts of situations, and a lot more emphasis on making them. Again, not as simple versions of what they could be writing, but as something perhaps more complex. As I respond to these questions, I'm starting to wonder what would happen if we made comics an integral part of elementary curriculum, perhaps the pattern of children stopping drawing around age 7 might not be so severe. Maybe art would be seen as less specialized, but as a way for all to do their thinking. In terms of textbooks, we can certainly see the impact of the John Lewis memoir trilogy *March*, dealing with extremely serious and important subject matter – but still remaining accessible and highly engaging. I know we are already seeing more of that and I expect that will only increase going forward. Students of all ages get excited about this kind of material, they engage with it, and not only learn a lot from it, but think about how stories of their own lives can be seen in this form.

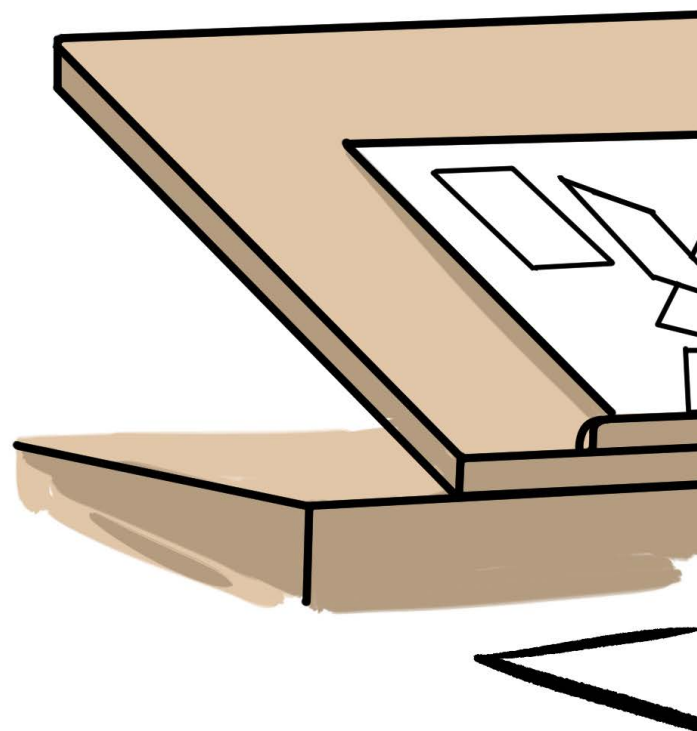
### **Where do you think Comics Studies is heading? And non-fiction/research comics in particular?**

It is hard to say. It's such a broad and diverse field, scholars come at it from so many different disciplines and different interests. That's all a good thing but it may be confusing for the short term. At my university, we now have a Comics Studies minor that I started and run (we are housed in an interdisciplinary unit comprised of Humanities & Liberal Studies), and it is quite reflective of my own interests. We study comics broadly as a form of communication and making is integrated into most of the courses (all of the ones that I teach). I used to make this joke in

my early comics courses that you could write “understanding comics” on the board, but if you wrote “understanding books” – you’d be laughed out of class. The task would be seen as clearly too big. Well, I think we are most certainly in that place with comics as well. It’s too big. Again, this isn’t a problem, it presents a need to have more courses and more programs. Courses on theory, courses on making, courses on specific genres, Cultural Studies, Graphic Medicine, and so much more. This conversation just came up with a colleague at my university – we need to think of having comics courses perhaps as a general literacy course across the school in the way that a writing requirement would be. I think frequently of something Graphic Medicine leader professor Susan Squier said: “All graduate students should have a course in making comics!” It’s a given that everyone needs to write. Obviously it’s somewhat less of a given that everyone needs to know how to make comics. I like the idea of exploring ways to leverage comics as a way to communicate our ideas across all fields.

One thing I tell my Making Comics students is that all of my publications have come from publishers that have otherwise never published comics. And what that means is while the opportunity to work for a big time superhero publisher or some such is quite slim, if you learn these skills, publishers of all sorts (and really a growing number of institutions, period) are hungry to get their ideas out in comics. Sure, some of it is cynical, recognizing the financial opportunity in dipping into comics, but a lot of it is recognizing that this is a legitimate and effective way to make sure our message is heard. And this means non-fiction

and research comics quite certainly. I think more comics scholars are embracing making – even if not for their publishing, as a way of documenting (as both comics and sketchnotes) and doing them with their students. Certainly Lynda Barry’s teaching books have contributed greatly to that – which may not apply directly to scholarship but certainly to people being more comfortable and more willing to try their hand at such things. As the stigma against comics slowly fades and we see more prominent examples of what comics can do in all sorts of fields, I think it will inspire more people to take them up, and take them up in ways we can’t necessarily imagine today. When I was making *Unflattening* as a dissertation, I was less concerned with its firstness, and more determined that it wouldn’t be the last. That is, I wanted to create something that





would leave a strong enough mark that it would help open the door to more coming after. And I think the thing that most excites me about the conversations I've gotten to have with students of all levels since its publication, is that they are trying their hand at scholarship of a new sort (some comics, some in other modalities) and seeing ways that they can put their entire selves into their work. And that's really thrilling and promising for what's to come.



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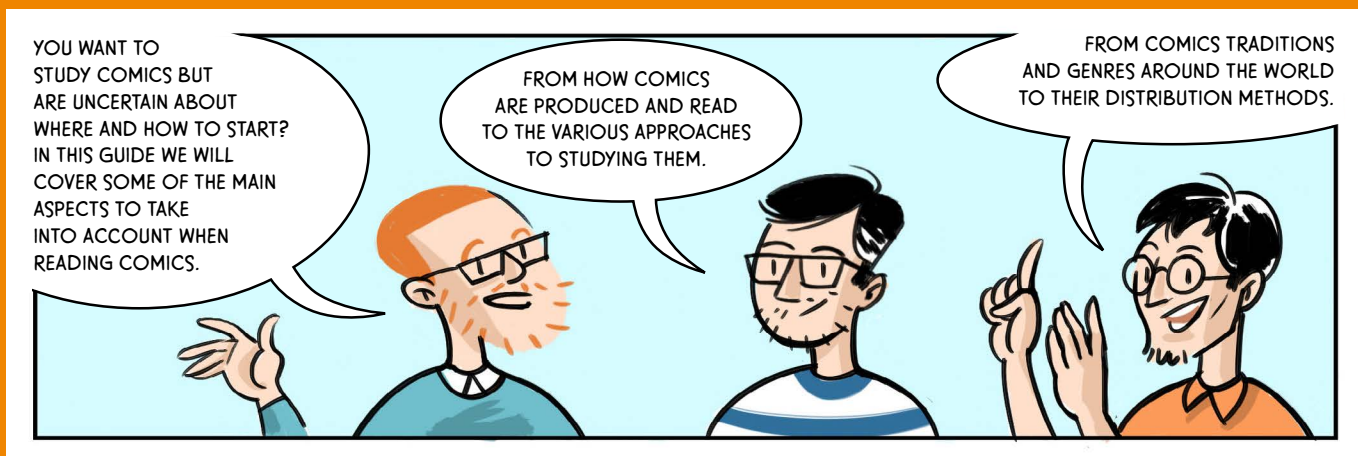
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**This guide in comics form, written and drawn by members of the Oxford Comics Network and published by TORCH, The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, covers the main aspects related to the study of comics and graphic novels.**

