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## Reviews

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### Book Reviews

**Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon**, eds, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative* (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2013). 416 pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-028181-1 (hardback, €99.95, \$140.00)

*From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* is the thirty-seventh instalment in German publisher De Gruyter's Narratologia series, and the first to be wholly dedicated to comics and graphic novels. The book comprises sixteen essays by an internationally distributed selection of authors, along with an introduction by editors Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon. The articles are broken down into four sections: 'Graphic Narrative and Narratological Concepts'; 'Graphic Narrative Beyond the "Single Work"'; 'Genre and Format Histories of Graphic Narrative'; and 'Graphic Narrative across Cultures'. In their introduction, Stein and Thon establish both the context and the aims of the book thus:

[A]s Jared Gardner and David Herman write in their introduction to a recent special issue of *SubStance*, we can detect 'emerging connections between comics studies and narrative theory' that may eventually converge into a 'new, hybridized field of study'. . . . Gardner and Herman christen this field-to-be 'graphic narrative theory', and the aim of the present volume is to explore new ways of thinking about the narrativity of comics from this theoretically as well as methodologically refined vantage point. (2)

Importantly, the book's aim is emphatically not to grapple solely with the narrativity of comics or of graphic novels in their limited forms, but to deal with *graphic narrative*, a term that the editors describe as 'much

more inclusive', being 'capable of encompassing different forms, formats, genres and storytelling traditions across cultures and from around the world' (5). A second stated aim is to follow Gardner and Herman in striving towards a medium-specific narratology of these graphic narratives, rather than falling into the "alliances . . . with fields such as autobiography studies, sexuality studies, postcolonial studies etc.", which have in some cases 'endorsed a medially unspecific and narratologically questionable literary approach to graphic narrative' (3).

The first of these aims, the consideration of graphic narrative, is achieved extremely effectively within the book. Rather than ignoring the more restrictive forms of comics and graphic narratives, some of the best essays in the volume look in detail at the distinctions between graphic narrative as a broad concept and more specific formats or traditions in order to assess the value that specificity might bring or the challenges it might pose. Greg M. Smith, for example, looks in his essay 'Comics in the Intersecting Histories of the Window, the Frame and the Panel' at the historical tradition of presenting views in windows and images in frames and panels. Smith argues eloquently for a rehabilitation of the window and frame as means for understanding the image in comics, suggesting that while the window and the frame have 'dominated our understanding of how pictorial media narratively present space and time', it is the panel that has been at the forefront of our understanding of comics. 'Examining comics as the *other* modern arrangement of the intersecting logics of window, frame, and panel', he goes on to say, 'helps provide theoretical alternatives to the cinematic tradition of realistic image capture that dates back to the Renaissance' (220). The subsequent discussion of the relationships and histories of windows, frames and panels does not fall into the trap of talking through precursors to comics as if they were comics, or were consciously directed towards the development of comics; rather, it provides an overview of the historical traditions of graphic narratives that includes (but is not limited to) comics and related forms. The value of comics as a vital and advanced mode of graphic narrative is made clear here, and Smith makes a strong case for the understanding of comics as a significant but often overlooked element of the expression of modernity that came under the scrutiny of thinkers such as Deleuze and Benjamin in their considerations of the cinematic image. The article represents a valuable addition to the work undertaken by Jared Gardner in his excellent book *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling*. Gardner himself follows Smith in this volume with

an article entitled 'A History of the Narrative Comic Strip', which also expands further on elements of that text.

Jaqueline Berndt's article 'Ghostly: "Asian Graphic Narratives", *Nonnonba*, and Manga' is also effective in its articulation of the problem of 'graphic narrative' as a general term in contrast with more specific traditions of production, in this case Japanese manga. While it is tempting to think that the study of graphic narrative enables one to speak broadly about a wide range of examples, Berndt makes clear in her article that this is not always the case, and that it is important to be wary of speaking too widely when we discuss or criticize works: '[A]ny attempt to generalize "Asian" comics reveals itself to be a projection', she writes, 'a ghost haunting contemporary criticism in the wake of Western orientalism' (364). Berndt marks up the problem of employing texts such as Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* in a Japanese context, given that it focuses largely upon works that are unavailable to Japanese readers and that it is reliant upon 'assumptions derived from a fundamentally different comics culture' (364). It is worth noting here that this problem also arises, albeit with different implications, in relation to the employment of Groensteen's work in the Anglo-American context. Berndt then considers in some detail the example of Mizuki Shigeru's manga *Nonnonba* and the discussions that surrounded it when it won the Grand Prix for Best Album at Angoulême in 2007. Berndt's article is challenging but important. More than simply a rebuke against generalization, in her argument that '[t]he real challenge [manga presents] is to equilibrate apparent universals and particularities' and that manga culture 'calls for [a] revisiting [of] evaluative criteria based on modern notions of authorship, work, and aesthetic sophistication' (367) it provides a practical framework for addressing the problem, a framework that she begins to flesh out in the discussion of *Nonnonba* that takes up the majority of the article. This combination of theoretical sophistication with practicable suggestions for future developments means the article is highly recommended.

The book's second aim, that of developing a medium-specific narrativity that does not rely upon alliances with other fields or upon a literary approach to graphic narratives, proves more challenging in those articles that do address it explicitly. Jan-Noël Thon is one author who approaches this problem head on in an article entitled 'Who's Telling the Tale? Authors and Narrators in Graphic Narrative'. Following an overview of narratological studies of film and literature that pay particular attention to the concept of the narrator, Thon outlines three types of narration that he feels can be identified in comics:

[F]irst, *narratorial representation* as referring to the kind of verbal narration attributable to a more or less explicitly represented (usually fictional) narrator-as-narrating character that is distinct from the author, second, *authorial representation* as referring to the kind of verbal narration attributable not to such a narrator but rather to an authoring character that functions ‘as narrator’, and, third, *non-narratorial representation* as referring, for example, to the kind of verbal-pictorial representation in panels or sequences of panels, which is evidently also the result of a process of creation but whose ‘source’ is usually not – or at least not explicitly – represented and whose multimodal configuration prevents us from attributing it to a ‘speaker’ as readily as is the case with exclusively verbal forms of narration. (70–71)

Thon goes on to consider Philippe Marion’s concept of graphiation as one possibility for addressing the third of these categories, but his emphasis is upon the first, and he draws upon examples that include *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, *The Sandman* and *Habibi* in discussing this aspect of graphic narrative. Importantly, though, this is only an *aspect* of the broader subject, and it would be difficult to argue that the first and second of the three categories Thon presents are specific to graphic narratives. Thon gets around this by considering how graphic narratives employ them in specific ways, but the core problem remains and is magnified if we consider the third category, which, unless I am misreading Thon’s argument, implies that the sequences of panels (and in fact images in general) in graphic narratives either do not narrate, or do narrate but do not have a narrator/narrating instance. Instead, it would seem that the burden of narration is placed squarely upon the shoulders of the text, which is problematic for at least two reasons: (1) if this arrangement is indeed viable, then the concept of graphic narrative is surely redundant since graphics, according to the author, cannot narrate, and (2) it assumes that text and images are separable in graphic narratives. These problems are not unique to Thon’s article, and other chapters of the book that aim to address the medium-specific narratology of comics, such as Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter’s ‘Intermediality, Transmediality and Graphic Narrative’, also indicate the role of text as the driver of narrative within graphic narratives at the expense of the image. Yet as recent scholarship such as Charles Hatfield’s *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* has emphasized, graphics may indeed serve narrative functions in comics (Hatfield describes Kirby’s art as a ‘narrative drawing’).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, while the idea that text and image are separable in comics (or at least

1 Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 66–68.

can be analyzed separately) is a commonly accepted one, ideas such as Thierry Groensteen's assertion that it is the panel, not the smaller components that sit within the panel (such as individual units of text), that should be taken as the minimal narrative unit in comics would seem at least to complicate, if not wholly to overturn, this notion.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Thor's article, while useful on its own terms, does not fully address the complicated notion of who narrates graphic narratives. Instead, it embodies some of the central complexities that arise when we attempt to establish a medium-specific narratology for graphic narratives. That these complexities are not totally resolved in any of the sixteen essays in the volume is perhaps somewhat to be expected given the length of each individual chapter and the scale of the task at hand. Nevertheless, the book does serve as an excellent contribution to the field of graphic narrative theory precisely because it begins to map some of the connections between narrative theory and graphic narratives. Not all of the essays here do explicitly address the notion of a medium-specific narratology for graphic narratives, but it is nonetheless a strong collection of articles that will enhance even the most expert of scholars' understandings of narrative in comics. In addition to the articles already discussed, there are valuable contributions from writers including Karin Kukkonen, Kai Mikkonen, Daniel Stein, Henry Jenkins and others, which I do not have space to discuss here. I commend the editors for pulling together such a useful and worthwhile book and recommend it to readers.

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**Barbara Postema**, *Making Sense of Fragments: Narrative Structure in Comics* (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2013). 188 pp. with colour illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-9333-6095-9 (paperback, \$29.95)

With *Making Sense of Fragments*, Postema joins other comics theorists who have spent time on the importance of the gap for the reading of comics. Adopting an approach inspired by narratology and semiotics, she traces the importance of the gap at all levels of signification, from the panel to the page layout, from the sequence and series to the inter-

2 Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3–7.