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Lowbrow

Sean Guynes

In November 2018, centrist comedian Bill Maher sparked a furor among comics fans after penning a short piece claiming, “I don’t think it’s a huge stretch to suggest that Donald Trump could only get elected in a country that thinks comic books are important.” Even if sarcastic, the tone of the piece and its title, “Adulthood,” showcased Maher’s frustration with the idea of taking comic books—a children’s medium—seriously. He lamented that “some dumb people got to be professors” by writing theses about comics, a cultural shift that took place “some twenty years or so ago” when “adults decided they didn’t have to give up kid stuff.” Unsurprisingly, this outrage piece ignored both the substance of scholarship produced on comics and the historical shifts occurring in comics creation that, ironically, made them anything but a children’s medium in the eyes of most public commentators. In fact, every few months since the mid-1980s, a new opinion piece has claimed that comics are finally for grown-ups. They reference a growing awareness of “serious” graphic novels among literati, academics, and book reviewers and suggest like Maher that before the advent of (largely autobiographical) graphic novels, comics—whether the newspaper funnies, romance or superhero comic books, webcomics, or evangelical religious tracts—were simple entertainment for simple people: the usual suspects of popular culture consumption.

At stake in discussions of whether comics are for kids or adults—or whether there are some comics that are

decidedly “adult” on account of their narrative or artistic “seriousness”—is a question about comics’ cultural status. As Maher’s claim demonstrates, comics have long been considered *lowbrow*, belonging to a cultural status denoting intellectual or aesthetic inferiority in comparison to the supposedly more accomplished “art” of *highbrow* culture. As Lawrence W. Levine has noted, the concept of *lowbrow* originated in the United States in the early 1900s, roughly twenty years after *highbrow* came into popular usage. These terms labeled “types of culture” and pointed to quintessentially American concerns about producing American art that continued the supposedly superior artistic traditions of white European civilization (Levine 1988, 221). The *lowbrow* was distinguished from *highbrow* art, literature, and music by its mass popularity, its industrial production, its affordability to the lower classes, and (often) its production by poor and working-class whites. In addition to being classist ways of taxonomizing culture, the concept of *brow* was also racist, since the level of *brow* referenced by the concept referred to racist beliefs that the shape of the skull (notably the height, thickness, and prominence of the brow) determined traits associated in the eugenic and phrenological “sciences” with intellectual capacity and criminality (Levine 1988, 221–25).

In the United States, the *highbrow/lowbrow* divide determines much of the political landscape of culture. Although the *high-/lowbrow* hierarchy has constantly shifted across the past century, marking a series of ideological investments in the meaning and status of cultural works and practices, the categories themselves are significant for how they demarcate and contest beliefs about cultural value, our concerns about who makes and owns culture, and our constant preoccupation with who consumes it, why, and how. Unsurprisingly, much scholarship on popular culture, especially among cultural historians, has focused on it as the domain of

uneducated and working-class people (Denning 1987; Rabinowitz 2014), women (Enstad 1999; Radway 1984), people of color (Acham 2004; Lhamon 1998), and/or children (Kline 1993)—in other words, everyone *not* an educated, middle- to upper-class white man. In doing so, much popular culture scholarship has had to take on the widespread public (and academic) juxtaposition of popular culture's artistic quality and intellectual depth with that of art or literature proper; in many cases, scholars of popular culture have pointed to the shaky ground on which the high-/lowbrow distinction stands.

Like dime novels, pulps, and mass-market paperbacks, comics have long been understood as lowbrow. This cultural-artistic status has proved a significant barrier both to the average adult's ability to discuss comics in public without invoking the stereotype of *The Simpsons'* hyperbolically unattractive, sexless, and misogynist Comic Book Guy and to the development and acceptance of comics studies as a legitimate field of inquiry. Though comics scholarship emerged out of comics fandom and journalism in the 1980s at precisely the moment that the general public began to “take comics seriously,” the study of comics has been plagued by the medium's lowbrow association and was built on the (often strikingly defensive) premise that comics are in fact quite smart. Any account of *lowbrow* as a keyword for comics studies must necessarily deal with it as a problem in comics history, a social factor that must be understood in its specificity for each study of a given comics, and beyond that as a problem for the field itself. Lowbrow is dealt with—usually only in passing and almost never with direct reference to the word itself—in nearly every study of the subject and follows the seemingly necessary defense modeled in nearly all studies of popular culture (Fiske [1989] 2011; Freccero 1999; Gans 1999; Strinati 1995). In the past few years, comics scholars have become increasingly skeptical of

the need to “defend” comics as a worthwhile subject and have turned their attention to how conceptions of comics' status manifest in comics scholarship (Pizzino 2016; Singer 2019).

As this overview suggests, and as the essays in Smith and Duncan (2017) attest, for decades the key barrier to studying comics was their historical imbrication in and emergence from the popular culture scene. Although the genealogy of comics *can* be drawn to a range of art-historical accomplishments such as the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Bayeux Tapestry, and the early nineteenth-century cartoons and caricatures of Rodolphe Töpffer (Kunzle 2007)—most of which, at present accounting, can hardly be considered lowbrow—comics' history over the past one hundred years was closely aligned with mass publishing and the media industries. Because of preferences within the academy for singular works of art, intellect, and cultural brilliance—for example, in the tradition of the Great American Novel (Buell 2014)—comics were denigrated for decades in the public and academic eye. Some of this preference was zeitgeist-driven reactionism to moral panics in nations such as the United States, Britain, Australia, and Sweden, where comics were associated with childhood delinquency and sexual deviancy (Beaty 2005; Hajdu 2009; Nyberg 1998). And while the success of creators like Art Spiegelman, Marjane Satrapi, and Alison Bechdel has brought comics to a wider audience and into the classroom, the past two decades have also seen comics dragged in popular (and scholarly) writing as a result of the medium's increasing synonymy with the superhero genre, thanks to a massive transmedia adaptation industry driven by Marvel and DC Comics.

Early work in comics studies was in much the same position as early film studies or science fiction studies, having to justify the artistic quality and intellectual depth of the medium and defend comics' worth as

objects of study. Often, this was accomplished by pointing to the artistic genius of individual comics creators and to specific works of comics art, particularly those collected in or originally conceived of as *graphic novels*. The term *graphic novel* (Baetens and Frey 2015) is typically applied in order to add the artistic weight of *graphic* and literary seriousness of *novel* to the otherwise undignified *comic* (too synonymous with humorous newspaper strips), *comic book* (closely linked with superheroes), or *comix* (with links to countercultural vulgarity and underground indie-chic alike). Take, for example, Witek's (1989) book on comics as historical narratives, in which his chapters focus on a single great work by a single comics luminary produced outside of the mainstream comics industry and the superhero / science fiction / horror genres (e.g., Spiegelman's *Maus*, Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*). As Beaty and Woo (2016, 5) have noted, comics studies established a canon of "plausible texts" around which the field developed; these texts—particularly Spiegelman's *Maus*, Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Satrapi's *Persepolis*, a handful of work by cult-status alternative comics creators like Chris Ware and Charles Burns, and two narratively contained, genre-deconstructing superhero comics (Moore and Gibbons's *Watchmen* and Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*)—became the center of a growing field of study by the mid-2000s.

Although the growth of comics studies confronted the problem of comics' lowbrow cultural status, particularly in the US and British contexts (the Franco-Belgian and Japanese traditions are considerably different), and ensured that comics were now widely taught, the lowbrow problem remained in the form of the separation of those comics worthy of scholarship from those that failed to make easily plausible texts—for the most part, serialized mainstream genre comics. For example, despite the historical significance and artistic

and narrative complexity of DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths* limited series (written by Marv Wolfman with art by George Pérez), it has remained out of the scope of most comics research because the intelligibility of the comic relies on decades of prior story lines involving hundreds of characters; as a result, it is also virtually unteachable. Other comics that have been historically influential, such as Frank Miller and Klaus Janson's run on *Daredevil* in the late 1970s and early 1980s (a mainstream superhero comic) or Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo* (an indie samurai / funny animal comic), to take two examples, occupy complex production histories with regard to the interrelation of the series to a larger comic book universe—the distribution across multiple publishers and likely dozens of individual comics—or are otherwise difficult to access (because of either the cost of collected editions or the difficulty of access to original copies).

In contrast to serialized genre comics, texts like *Maus* and *Persepolis* could arguably be saved from the biases of popular culture and its mass appeal by referring to them instead as singular works of artistic greatness. Moreover, the need for plausible texts gives primacy to comics that can be taken as singular texts (either stand-alone graphic novels or complete story lines no longer than a few issues of a comic book series) in regularly available editions that can be cited by a groundswell of scholars. It is unsurprising, then, that much of the transformation with regard to the cultural status of comics has come in the form of our terms of reference for the medium. What comics are called has become an especially important signifier for brow level and the medium's acceptance in literary criticism. The deployment of the terms *graphic novel* and *graphic narrative* and their use as legitimizing technologies in the fight against the medium's lowbrow associations are symptomatic of what Beaty and Woo (2016, 5) describe as comics' "poorly developed critical

infrastructure,” a situation that has led to comics scholars developing a vocabulary drawn from film, literary, and art theory that “ennoble[s] the comic book by stealing fire from the better-established art form.” Despite all the good that this new vocabulary and growing institutional acceptance of comics has wrought, the old ties between the medium and its cultural status, as well as an increasing awareness of comics’ narrative complexities, have posted comics at the boundaries of literary, film, media, and cultural studies (Pizzino 2016)—not yet fully accepted but enticing scholars who have typically immersed themselves in the discourses of highbrow art to dabble with the lowbrow.

Recent years have seen a tentative shift away from disciplinary constraints that once either made the study of comics impossible or required scholars to perform contortions in defense of their texts. The number of academic journals and university presses devoting space to comics has exploded as our cultural moment militantly erodes highbrow/lowbrow distinctions and as popular culture becomes an increasingly fruitful area of inquiry. The defenses of comics in the introduction to monographs have become shorter or disappeared altogether in the past five years alone. Meanwhile, the longtime distinction between comics and art (Beaty 2012), though still a productive space for historical and aesthetic concern, has slowly withered. It’s worth noting, of course, that this situation is context specific. The cultural status of comics has been a more significant concern in US and British scholarship as a result of the heavy influence in those countries of the Marxist tradition of cultural studies through the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools and their protégés in the US. In Francophone scholarship, however, the cultural status of comics has played little role in comics studies, which has tended to focus on the formal functions of comics art, in part because comics enjoy higher cultural regard

in France and Belgium than they do in the US and UK. Comics are not considered of equal artistic/cultural value everywhere, and as such, the various linguistic and national traditions have their own stories to tell about comics’ relation to art.

This discussion of the keyword *lowbrow* and its relevance to comics studies also invokes the growing description of *middlebrow* (Radway 1997; Rubin 1992) as a concept that mitigates the binary historical tension between high and low. Middlebrow arose to describe the culture of a growing middle class at the turn of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, when new levels of consumption created a shared sense of cultural and class values in the form of upmarket paperback fiction, quality television shows, and intelligent (but not “art”) cinema. A term like *middlebrow*—or Peter Swirski’s (2005) *nobrow*, which denotes the seemingly dissolution of brow categories in some spaces of cultural production and reception—better describes the changing historical dynamics of culture, industry, and consumption in the wake of the emergence of more complex economic strata, especially the upper-middle class in postwar America. Alternatives to high-/lowbrow are of increasing importance to comics studies, since following the growing recognition of comics as (sometimes, provisionally) “adult,” the medium has become a more significant touchpoint for broader studies of culture, such that comics are now easily found alongside literature and film in certain studies—for example, those of periods or issues in cultural history (e.g., Barzilai 2016, 145–85; Chute and DeKoven 2012; Strub 2011, 15–21). The growth of newspaper and upmarket magazine sections devoted to comics reviews and criticism, the inclusion of scenes from *Maus* in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and the longlisting of a comic for the Man Booker Prize in 2018 are all signs of cultural shifts in the status of comics that have led nearly all to

utilize the term *graphic novel* and that have marked comics as intended reading material for the fantasy of the college-educated middle-class American.

We might consider lowbrow the field-defining problematic for comics studies, especially in the US and British contexts. At stake in the status of comics as a lowbrow (or not) form is whether comics can be studied—in other words, whether comics studies can exist within the present institutional terrain of the humanities—since it seems not to be a question worrying those using comics in many other fields, like communications, education, and medicine, and if so, how it should persist in its interstitial relationship to more well-established areas of inquiry. This volume and others like it (e.g., Aldama 2018) suggest that comics studies is alive and well, though some still turn their noses up at anything but the middlebrow-sanctioned graphic novel. Lowbrow status remains a significant issue for us in comics studies, but it is also an opportunity. If the field turns its attention to how the discursive terrain of brow levels and especially to scholars' fear of being connected with the lowest of lowbrow cultural forms—that is, with the basest of mainstream comics, with the romance boom of the 1950s, with the franchise comics that have kept companies like Dark Horse and IDW afloat, with the mega-best-selling superhero melodramas of the 1990s, with the outrageously ostentatious “event” comics that enforce crossover reading of Marvel and DC series, with the evangelical tracts of Jack Chick—our field stands to gain a lot. Recognition of lowbrow status at the level of methodology—that is, taking account of the ways in which the cultural status of our objects of study impact our selection of and approach to texts—will create a comics studies open to the generic vastness, artistic inventiveness, industrial depths, awesome capacity, and more holistic history of our subject.

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Manga

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Reports of the death of manga are greatly exaggerated.

True, physical sales of what is universally (though problematically) defined as “Japanese comics” have dropped alarmingly in recent years, at least in Japan. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, total annual sales of manga books and magazines decreased roughly from over 500 billion yen (\$4.5 billion) to about 300 billion yen (\$2.7 billion). This is not surprising, given that manga has become somewhat overshadowed by other media, particularly animated film (anime) and digital gaming.

Yet slumping sales of manga belie the fact that interest in manga may actually be on the upswing. Until recently, works were produced and consumed in what might be described as the “manga pyramid,” consisting of (1) a base of amateur fare, a fraction of which was submitted directly to publishers, though most of which consisted of self-published minicomics or “zines” (*dōjinshi*) circulated among acquaintances or at comics conventions (*komikon*); (2) a middle strata of works that, while crafted primarily by professional artists, were test-driven in a slew of manga magazines, or *mangashi* (e.g., Kōdansha's *Young Magazine* launched the now-classic series *xxxHolic*, *Be-Bop High School*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Akira*); and (3) an apex of works that, having come up through the ranks, were collected into dedicated paperbacks (*tankōbon*), as with *Sailor Moon*, *Naruto*, and *One Piece*. The logic of this pyramid no doubt projected manga into the wider pop culture industry as