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Comic Strips Rock! By Nick Dodds

Note: The following article was written in response to a workshop presented by the author at Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle (on the 15th April 2013) to accompany the *Air Guitar - Art Reconsidering Rock Music* exhibition which ran from the 22nd March - 18th May 2003.

For the impassioned supporters of sequential art there is a case to be made for promoting the educational value of comic books and graphic novels. The common misconception applied to comic books is that they are consumed intuitively and digested easily - like cerebral confectionary. The implication being that intellectually they just don't compare with other narrative art forms. However, look closely at the sequence of panels that make up a comic page and you will find a complex schematic logic which allows them to resonate as both a visual and literary medium simultaneously. As such, comic strips command their own unique station located somewhere on the line between print and film. It's the hybrid nature of comics that makes them such a fascinating artform and deserving of greater critical attention. Furthermore, they have developed with their own set of conventions, their own signs and syntax. There is more than enough in the pages of almost any comic book to keep the Roland Barthes school of structural analysis busy. Comic strips can help to teach us important things about how we perceive and interpret images and text and how we relate this to the experience of the wider world.

At all levels of art education, in the classroom or studio, comic strips can be used as a stimulus to engage students not just with visual storytelling but also some of the practical issues that arise when drawing and painting. Specifically, experimenting with pictorial devices including composition or controlling the order in which individual elements on a canvas or page are viewed, different perspectives, the expressive power of line and tone, use of light and shade, working with figures and so on. Alternatively, comics can open up debates on more theoretical matters such as iconography or semiotics.

Last year I was invited by the Tullie House Gallery in Carlisle to organize and present a full day workshop on comics aimed at a largely teenage audience. The intention was that the workshop tied in with the touring exhibition in the main gallery. The exhibition *Air Guitar - Art Reconsidering Rock Music* explored the relationship between youth culture and pop

music, pulling together a group of artists working in different mediums but united in a common theme. Hence the title of the workshop - *Comic Strips Rock!*

The main objective of the workshop was to create a piece of artwork that would hang at the entrance of the exhibition. However, it was also important to give some insight into the weird and wonderful world of comics and talk through some of the contextual issues mentioned briefly above. The morning session started out with a brief look at the vocabulary of comic book narrative; panels, meta-panels, speech bubbles, narrative boxes, sound effects, gutters etc. In discussing the actual mechanics of creating comic strip narratives, both Scott McCloud (*Understanding Comics & Reinventing Comics*) and Will Eisner (*Comics & Sequential Art*) are pretty indispensable, especially when explaining the dynamics of panel transitions and the concept of time and movement. To date *Understanding Comics* is the closest thing we have to a textbook and, partly because it is drawn like a graphic novel the techniques McCloud writes about are immediately recognisable to the reader. His arguments on why gutters play a vital interactive role in a strip are persuasive and certainly got my young audience at the workshop thinking.

To illustrate, I showed them the two panels from the chapter entitled *Blood In The Gutter*, one of which shows a close-up of a figure brandishing an axe looming towards another figure and the subsequent panel which shows the silhouette of a city skyline at night with the letters EEYAA!! scrawled across it. This drew thoughtful and humorous responses in equal measure. Conclusions made tended to support the view that the gutter is the designated space in the story where the reader grabs the reins. We went on to discuss how McCloud expands upon theories on the gutter to establish the various panel transitions. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to explore fully the way in which he categorises different panel to panel transitions, including the controversial - non sequitur - but we did look briefly at 'moment to moment' and 'action to action' transitions in reference to a story by Will Eisner. Where *Understanding Comics* aims at a wide range of theoretical targets *Comics & Sequential Art* sticks pretty much to the construction of panel narrative. The approach taken by Eisner is much more hands on, a major difference being that he uses his back catalogue (mainly *Spirit* stories dating from the 40's and 50's) to illustrate key points.

In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner devotes a whole chapter to the tricky notion of timing which he illustrates with a Spirit story called *Foul Play*. This sequence is extremely useful in getting across the seemingly abstract notion of time in comics and how it can be controlled in order to build dramatic tension into a storyline. In *Foul Play* Eisner constantly refers to visual markers - a dripping tap, the ringing of a telephone, the lighting of matches - to suggest the slow passage of time.

At Tullie House the basic idea behind the final artwork was to take the small, concise and portable medium of the comic page and enlarge it to fill a gallery wall. On reflection a comic strip on that scale poses interesting questions about how it is viewed - do you treat it like a painting and take in the whole or focus in on a part of the image or do you read it as a pattern of images in sequence? In keeping with the retro musical theme of the main exhibition I designed a black and white strip that played on the performance and interaction between a fictional rock band and audience. Some elements in the strip were lifted and collaged from a variety of sources including photographs of rock bands, panels and covers from 1970's counterculture magazines (including *Punk* and *Rock n' Roll Comix*). Also, in preparation I went back and reread some of Peter Bagge's well observed yet gloriously unhinged Hate stories which had a discernible influence on the overall look of the artwork. Throughout the day each participant in the workshop worked solidly on a single panel or a section of the larger design. Although the overall layout was pretty much preordained there was enough scope for embellishment in the adding of pattern, shading and crosshatching, facial expressions and assorted rock star paraphernalia for each young artist to put their own individual stamp on the finished artwork.

At the end of the afternoon session, each piece was duly signed and joined together 'jigsaw' style with other pieces to create one gigantic comic page. As some were adding the finishing touches to the final artwork, others were drawing bold caricatures of their own fantasy rock band characters. All in all a busy yet rewarding day.

Events like this obviously help to increase an awareness of the comic book form and in some small way increase the potential of bringing young people into an exciting field of artistic expression. Responses to the workshop were very positive. To the relatively young, one of

the definite plus points about comics is that they come in a form that is accessible and non-patronising. Arguably, part of this is that they also come free of some of the historical and revisionist baggage that is attached to a lot of contemporary art. However, comics do have a rich cultural legacy that is not widely known about. As I have already mentioned, one of the problems inherent in teaching a formalist approach to comics is the paucity of critical texts that deal with the form. *Understanding Comics*, great as it is, dates from the early 90's and was intended in McCloud's words to initiate 'the great debate'. Despite the erstwhile efforts of McCloud and others perhaps we could do with a little more 'baggage' in this area. Even in this technology driven image saturated age, comics can still inspire, enthrall and be debated. So reach for the ink and strike up the power chords - comic strips rock!

(January 2003)

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