

# Disciplining Comics:

The Transdisciplinary Mellon Workshop at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Adam L. Kern

I'm grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today, not on my research field of manga, but on the related field of comics studies. Specifically, I was asked that I share my experiences as the chief architect of a comics studies program at a major U.S. university, with the role of artists in our research and teaching. The program, simply called Comics Studies, emanated from a two-long year workshop, or series of talks, conferences, and events, funded by the A.W. Mellon Foundation, and held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, one of the top ten public universities in the U.S. My four major goals were first to assess the state of the local comics studies community, which is to say, to see if anyone on campus was interested in comics in their teaching or research, second, to gauge interest in building a comics studies program, and third, assuming there was enough interest, to figure out how to build a comics studies program when the field of comics studies is only now beginning to emerge, for there is little agreement on what comics is. How, in other words, can one discipline comics? And fourth, I wanted to figure out how manga would fit into comics studies.

As an academic, for me, I always assumed that the key players in building a comics studies program on campus would be fellow academics—not businessmen, regular joes, former guests on the David Letterman show, or preschool aged kids. But today, I'd like to offer an embarrassingly pragmatic answer to the question of how one builds a comics studies program: one simply goes with the local talent—even if that talent includes non-academics—and let them decide in conversation with each other about what shape Comics Studies should take.

Now that that's settled: let me describe how I reached that conclusion at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where the hope is that Comics Studies will take off. Simply put, to the extent that the Mellon Comics Workshop has been successful, it's been because of what I call transdisciplinarity. Explaining how transdisciplinarity is different than interdisciplinarity or cross-disciplinarity, and explaining transdisciplinarity at Madison, are my two goals today.

## Background

In 2009 I left my post teaching Japanese literature at Harvard University to take up a professorship at UW-Madison, where I was also to head the Center for Visual Cultures, with approximately 100 affiliated faculty in association with the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. Importantly, the Center had

no obvious connection to comics. Comics of course appeal to people everywhere. But the U.S. comics industry is located in New York and San Francisco. I had no expectation I would find anyone on campus interested in comics, let alone some key figures in the comics industry, in the middle of nowhere: Madison doesn't even figure on this map of the New Yorker's view of the world.

Indeed, no faculty members at the center were interested in comics. In fact, on the face of it, there seemed to be little hope of building a comics studies program at Madison. The university libraries held few comics and no manga to speak of. We certainly could not compete with the likes of the Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum at The Ohio State University, with its over 300,000 original cartoons, 45,000 books, and 67,000 serials. In terms of manga, the Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum has a great collection. Maureen Donovan—who just retired last spring—started building a manga collection in the 1980s, far ahead of the curve at just about any other library outside of Japan. The result is the largest collection of manga in the Western world, with over 20,000 items. Yet even this of course doesn't compare with the Kyoto International Manga Museum, which houses over 300,000 items.

And it appeared to me that even outside the Center for Visual Cultures there were few if any faculty members at Madison interested in comics. When I looked at the course offerings, there were only two comics-related courses: Robin Valenza's large course in English on graphic novels, and Mary Layoun's course in comparative literature on world graphic novels. Both of these adopted a literary approach to comics, which underlines one problem with comics studies programs in the US. Most comics studies programs in the US are either studio arts programs, teaching students how to draw comics, or else culture studies programs, build primarily on literary plus film studies, one notable exception being Neil Cohn's work. I immediately added my own course on manga, but still, the prospects for building a bona fide comics studies program were dismal.

Worse for me, the prospects of generating interest in manga, beyond the hundreds of students in my manga course, seemed even more remote. Wisconsin has no connection business connection with Japan. There are many places where one doesn't need to justify studying Japan, such as Hawaii, California, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Cambridge, Mass. In Madison, Wisconsin, however, there is little if any cultural context. The only major Japanese company is Kikkoman, makers of soy sauce, located outside Milwaukee. They were gracious enough to provide some nominal financial support, but it is clear that they're more interested in microbial culture than Japanese culture.

With little if any interest in manga or comics among faculty members, no library holdings, and no business connections to Japan, my strategy, in building one of the major comics studies programs in the US, has been to turn these weaknesses into strengths, and to be open to going where the talent is.

## The Mellon Comics Workshop

The Mellon Comics workshop was held from September 2013-June 2015, graciously funded by the A.W. Mellon Foundation, one of the leading philanthropic organizations in the U.S. Our theme was disciplining comics—how to forge a comics studies program when comics are emerging, keeping our understanding of comics broad enough to anticipate future comics while being clear enough to attract students. The Mission Statement reads as follows:

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1 <http://library.osu.edu/blogs/cartoons/2015/05/29/maureen-donovan-and-osuls-manga-collection-history/>

2 <http://www.kyotomm.jp/english/collection/>

The Mellon Comics Workshop provides the community of students, scholars, artists, and other interested parties at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and beyond with a shared intellectual space to explore questions about comics broadly defined—bande dessinée, comix, comic books, comic strips, educational comics, graphic narrative, graphic novels, infographics, manga, manhwa, manwha, political and editorial cartoons, underground comix, web comics, picture books, photo essays, and myriad other forms of visual-verbal narrative by whatever name. The primary goal of the workshop is to engage this expanded community in a meaningful dialogue about the intellectual, institutional, and disciplinary challenges confronting the emerging field of Comics Studies in order to evaluate the exciting possibility of launching such a program at UW-Madison. The central questions for the workshop thus revolve around the challenge of how Comics Studies might best be disciplined: How might Comics Studies avoid the pitfalls encountered by other genre- or media-specific fields in their early stages? How might interconnections with animation, film, literature, and computer games be explored and stimulated? How have such interconnections—particularly in the age of web comics—changed the very notion of comics? Does it make any difference how comics are defined and by whom? How can we map a disciplinary field that is emerging only now? How do comics work within, apart from, and against established literary and artistic canons and academic disciplines? How can the real pedagogical potential of comics (not unlike computer games) be more fully realized? How might educational comics, infographics, and the like be used to communicate with a general audience, to reach at-risk youths, to disseminate important information about public health and safety? How can creating one's own comics not only provide an expressive voice but augment an intellectual understanding of these issues?

We have a Facebook page, with currently over 200 members that include major comics studies scholars from around the US and beyond. Our workshop hosted various speakers from around the world, including Hillary Chute, Bob Mankoff, the cartoon editor at the *New Yorker* magazine, who spoke to us about crowd-sourcing in his cartoon captioning contest, Asian-American women artists, like Julia Kuo and Helen Jo and many others, including leading comics scholars Kent Worcester, Roy Cook, Carol Tilly, and Ben Saunders, who heads the comics studies program out at Portland, Oregon. Over the course of these two years, I was able to identify many people interested in comics. To my complete shock, I realized that Wisconsin actually has its fair share of folks involved in the comics industry, though most of these folks were not faculty members per se. Denis Kitchen, for example, who is the publisher of Kitchen Sink Press, the major publisher of underground comics in the U.S., lives out of Milwaukee, which is located only an hour away from Madison. Denis has published all of the greats of underground comics, including Robert Crumb, Harvey Pekar, and Art Spiegelman, who also came to Madison to speak. Then there are comics gurus like Milton Griepp. Originally a *New Yorker*, Griepp splits his time among his offices in San Francisco and New York, and his home in Madison. His is *ICv2*, the largest industry info magazine, doing something like \$150 million annually, or about 18 billion ¥. Yet another group are scholars interested in comics unbeknownst to them, such as Paula Niedenthal, whose work on facial micro-expressions has been the basis for the TV show *Lie to Me*. Paula and *New Yorker* cartoon editor Bob Mankoff are working together on studying micro-expressions in comics, using a large data set of cartoon images being developed at Madison. Finally we have artists, like Mike Konopacki, the syndicated labor cartoonist, and Paul Buhle, who taught history at Brown University, but retired to Madison, and did work with Konopacki on the graphic novel version of Howard Zinn's bestselling book, but has also done dozens of other books, John Porcellino from Racine, WI. *Hospital Suite*, a huge bestseller in the US, got him exposure on National Public Radio, the *New York Times*, and other places, and Lynda Barry, award winning graphic novelist, best friends with Matt Groening of the Simpsons, and frequent guest on the erstwhile

David Letterman Show. Lynda published a lot of great comics, such as *What it is*, *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, *What is an Image*, which for my money is one of the best meditations on image studies done by anyone, including academics, and *100 Demons*, which is one of my all-time favourite graphic novels, if it can be called such.

In short, it turns out that other than Los Angeles or Portland, Oregon, Wisconsin has one of the most important comics studies bases outside New York or San Francisco, but not among academics.

Actually, before making my concluding remarks, I'd like to speak a little about my friend and the comics celebrity Lynda Barry, for a couple of reasons. First, because I was asked to discuss the role of artists in scholarship and research. Second, as director of the Center for Visual Cultures, I was instrumental in setting up an academic position for Lynda—she's now an assistant professor at Madison in the department of Art and at our Discovery Center. Lynda has drummed up a great deal of publicity for our comics studies program by speaking around the country and publishing widely. She recently just published *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*, through the University of Wisconsin Press, detailing her course on making comics. But Lynda also has masterminded *Drawbridge*, on the admittedly whacky but completely brilliant pairing of graduate students in various academic disciplines with pre-Kindergarten kids on shared research projects that use comics as a kind of cognitive map or tool. She's offered other seminars and mini-courses and so on.

## Conclusions

The experience of the Mellon Comics Workshop has led me away from trying to define comics purely in terms of academic disciplines, such as media studies, literary studies, art history, visual culture studies, etc. Simply put, I've moved from an interdisciplinary model to a transdisciplinary model. I would differentiate between transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary as follows: While interdisciplinary refers to drawing from or being characterized by participation of two or more fields of study, transdisciplinary means drawing from or being characterized by participation of not just two or more fields of study within the university, but by those outside the university—artists, policy makers, kids; i.e. it transcends the academic or disciplinary framework by engaging non-academic players, members of the community at large.

*How to Discipline Comics* is an intellectual and artistic question, but also an administrative, even political, question. I'm not sure it's possible to answer the question of what are comics without getting outside the university. At least the answer we get is turning out to be vastly different than what I had ever imagined. Our answer for Comics Studies at Madison is to be flexible enough to include things like flip-book animation, big data, and educational infographics. Finally, since Wisconsin has not very manga to speak of, we're actively pursuing online options, one with Nippon Foundation. Stay tuned.