

Comics from a Philosophical Perspective

Henry John Pratt. 2023. *The Philosophy of Comics. What They Are, How They Work, and Why They Matter*. New York: Oxford University Press. 200 pp. ISBN 978-019-084-543-8.

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The Philosophy of Comics examines comics as an art form, analysing their features through the lens of various aestheticians, philosophers, and historians of both comics and art in general. The book can be seen as an extensive analysis of the elements of comics presented in a debate format. The author references the claims of other theorists, philosophers, or historians, critically analyses them, and then presents his own arguments to support agreement or disagreement with these claims. The book's subtitle highlights the author's main intentions: to define comics, explain how they function, and outline methods for their evaluation. At the outset, the author clarifies that the book is not concerned with the conventional history of comics but rather with aspects that conventional history overlooks. Across seven chapters, the author explores categories of comics, formal definitions, the medium itself, narrative, time and space, film adaptations, evaluation, and the social and moral issues associated with comics. Some chapters include material the author previously presented at conferences.

Although it does not focus on the standard history of comics, the book begins with a brief overview of comic history and its types. This historical overview identifies various genres and subgenres of comics, supported by numerous examples. It starts with early newspaper comics, which quickly diversified based on content into subgenres such as gag, adventure, fantasy (e.g., *Flash Gordon*), and crime (e.g., *Dick Tracy*). The paper shortage during World War II led to the emergence of comics outside newspapers. For example, in 1933, Maxwell published the first comic book, a collection of reprinted newspaper comics. In this pre-television era, comic sales and readership soared, particularly among children, marking the Golden Age of superheroes. The Silver Age began in the 1950s, while the 1960s saw Marvel focusing on human drama and relationships. The late 1960s brought the rise of underground comics, which defied prevailing norms and values. By the 1980s, the superhero genre experienced a decline. The book also references alternative comics, graphic novels, web comics, and mobile apps for reading comics.

However, as noted, the author, a philosopher by profession, is more interested in what lies beyond standard comic history. He wonders whether this history is selective and if it creates inaccuracies. He also asks whether meticulous historians have managed to correct these misconceptions. For example, the author cites the "Columbus Principle" – Columbus was not the first to discover America, but his influence led to all credit being given to him. Similarly, Superman was not the first superhero, yet he is considered the first. Standard comic history is also selective, often ignoring works outside the US (e.g., Tintin, Astro Boy, and manga), raising doubts about its reliability.

The author discusses comics as a style and category, clarifying the distinction between comics and cartoons. Although they emerged simultaneously, their roots differ. Editorial

or political drawings in newspapers, typically single panels, are cartoons, while sequential works with titles and speech bubbles are comics. Comics gained popularity in humour magazines and then in newspapers, which adopted the term “comics”, despite the content not always being humorous. Differentiating cartoons from comics is challenging. The author argues that distinguishing them solely by the number of panels is incorrect since they belong to different categories. Why, then, has the cartoon style become so dominant in comics, with creators often (wrongly) labelled as cartoonists? The author offers two reasons. Comic artists faced high production demands and tight deadlines, necessitating the simplicity offered by cartoons. For instance, Charles Schultz created an average of one comic strip daily for over 50 years, while Jack Kirby produced 8–10 comic pages daily between 1956 and 1970. Secondly, comics are printed in small formats, and the cartoon style ensures readability. Simplified visuals and exaggerated characteristics make it easier for readers to grasp visual humour and satire. This is exemplified by a publisher’s statement: “Don’t give me a Rembrandt; give me production!”

The book also delves into philosophical questions about comics: are comics art? Comics, composed of drawing and storytelling, share similarities with well-established art forms like painting and literature. But to what extent do these overlaps exist? The author further explores this idea by asking which comics qualify as modern artistic works. Drawing an analogy with wrestling matches, the author concludes that just because something is classified as art does not mean it is “good” art, and something not considered “good” art can still have value. The author also highlights the ethnocentrism of Western art classifications, emphasising that global concepts of art vary.

The book is a significant contribution to comics research from a philosophical perspective, questioning all its aspects and existing definitions. By posing numerous rhetorical questions, it encourages readers to reflect and seek their own answers. This philosophical exploration enhances the understanding of comics’ unique characteristics and fosters greater appreciation for the diversity within the medium. Titled *The Philosophy of Comics*, the book’s name implies a definitive philosophy, but the author acknowledges a more suitable title might be *A Philosophy of Comics*, reflecting its less authoritative stance. The author admits that his views are controversial and likely flawed in some areas. Nevertheless, he expresses optimism about comics’ present and future. Comics are now of higher quality than they were 20 years ago, and their increasing prestige attracts talented creators. Serious writers and artists, having honed their skills in other fields, are now choosing to work in comics. This book stands as a testament to the growing importance, influence, and exceptional quality of the comics medium.

Philosophy and Picturebooks in Childhood

Thomas E. Wartenberg. 2022. *Thinking Through Stories: Children, Philosophy, and Picture Books*. New York: Routledge. 138 pp. ISBN 978-1-003-25745-5.

Enikő Nagy-Kolozsvári, Anikó Beregszászi

In today’s educational environment, there is growing recognition of the importance of fostering critical thinking, philosophical inquiry, and emotional intelligence in young