

Review of Jeff McLaughlin's *Graphic Novels as Philosophy*
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Find a description of comics studies. In the first few sentences, you'll likely encounter a list of disciplines that contribute to this interdisciplinary field. While literature, art history, and media studies are standardly included, it's exceptionally rare for philosophy to make the cut. The simplest explanation (and the best) is that there's been relatively little work on comics by philosophers. The overwhelming majority has been found in non-academic, popular volumes like *X-Men and Philosophy*, which are often largely indifferent to the nature of the medium. It is to Jeff McLaughlin's credit that, in 2007, *Comics as Philosophy* appeared and offered a glimpse at what sustained philosophical inquiry into individual comics might look like. The present volume, appearing ten years later, is a kindred spirit in format. It's also a natural opportunity to see how philosophy has been doing in its efforts to contribute to comics studies. So how exactly have we been doing as philosophers? If the present volume is our lone guide, the news is mixed: things don't seem to have changed all that much, but there still remains cause for optimism.

Where McLaughlin's previous volume placed no limits on which comics might be included, *Graphic Novels as Philosophy* advertises itself as narrower in scope, zeroing in solely on "graphic novels." So presented, you might expect a distinctive account of what it means for a comic to be a graphic novel or, given understandable skepticism about the term, perhaps for the comics under discussion to be an especially unified bunch. As it turns out, however, McLaughlin's introduction mostly shrugs off the historical and political issues that swirl around the terminology and, in the same spirit, the volume eschews a clear thread that ties its essays together. They differ radically in style, initial publication format, and genre, ranging from *Asterix* to Joe Sacco to *Lost Girls*. If there is an organizing principle at work, it's seems to be that these are relatively well-known comics presently available in longer format collections. (Fair warning: the volume includes no reproductions from any of the works discussed, but it does feature a very snazzy David Mack cover.)

McLaughlin's lively introduction doesn't speak to the current state of philosophy's relation to comics studies. Instead, it defends the value of philosophical inquiry into and through graphic novels on the grounds that comics of a certain sort are especially well-suited to communicating and exploring the inner mental lives of others. Notice, however, that such an argument has an important limitation. Whether or not broadly biographical or non-fiction comics serve this communicative function and whether or not that's what makes them philosophically interesting, such an argument does nothing to motivate the exploration of comics that slide into the fantastical, abstract, or cartoonish. Put a bit differently: if graphic novels are philosophically interesting in virtue of being renderings of our private experiences, then why should philosophers care about the comics of Yuichi Yokoyama, Jim Woodring's *Frank*, and countless others not apparently aimed at a kind of autobiographical self-disclosure? This is, I think, grounds for doubting that McLaughlin has identified something about the nature of the comics medium itself rather than specific works that underwrites comics' philosophical interest.

The highpoint of the volume and the clearest evidence of philosophy's promise for comics studies is Manuel Cabrera's piece on temporality in Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*. Working through *kairoitic* notions of time and action, Cabrera sheds interesting light on interactions between character and medium without giving short shrift to philosophical nuance. In the hunt for a model of medium-sensitive, philosophically rich engagement, it's hard to ask for much better than Cabrera's efforts. Another strong contribution comes in the form of Maria Botero's essay, which takes up questions of autonomy and childhood by working through the intimately rendered emotional life of Lester, the lead character in Jeff Lemire's *Essex County*. Those interested in Will Eisner's work are likely to appreciate Jarkko Tuusvuori's admirably researched piece. Alfonso Munoz-Corcuera's discussion of *Lost Girls* and the nature of reader identification with characters stands out as arguably the most novel contribution in this volume. That said, the theoretical machinery needed to properly articulate what's at stake for competing theories of fictive imagination isn't especially well developed nor are the motivations for focusing on *Lost Girls* especially compelling.

Other essays in the volume tackle familiar terrain in comics studies. David Leichter discusses some normative and political aspects of memory in concert with an overview of Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*. Corry Shores wheels out some of Deleuze and Guattari's remarks in order to comment upon Spiegelman's *Maus*. Ian MacRae takes up Bechdel's *Fun Home*. These contributions stand out for their limited engagement with the growing body of critical work on these texts that has emerged from comics studies. For that reason, it's likely that comics scholars will be frustrated at the apparent willingness of these authors to reinvent the critical wheel. There's also the odd fact that, while the contributions throughout this volume discuss a variety of philosophers in pursuit of context and perspective, the chapters are so singularly focused on their target work that there's almost no parallel discussion of related or relevant comics. An instructive moral from comics studies is that, when examining a comic, a creator's corpus as well as their predecessors and imitators can shed valuable light on their influences and innovations. This moral extends, I think, to the matter of comics' philosophical significance where diving deeper into the traditions from which a specific comic emerges or departs often provides us with an important tool for sounding out their philosophical themes.

In contrast with contributions like Cabrera's, two essays exhibit the methodology all-too-familiar from pop culture and philosophy volumes: a philosopher offers an abbreviated or oversimplified presentation of a philosophical issue or theory, singles out a comic that is given a cursory and largely context-free description, and then the author tidily concludes that the comic somehow exemplifies, typifies, or embodies the former. In Eric Bain-Selbo's contribution on *V for Vendetta*, Moore and Lloyd's names are barely mentioned in the article. And, for the purposes of Bain-Selbo's sketchy presentation of Martha Nussbaum's views on the role of love in the social contract, the paper might just as well be talking about the film adaption of the comic. Jeremy Barris says explicitly that he could perfectly well substitute his discussion of *Asterix at the Olympic Games* with any other *Asterix* story. But, upon reading the essay on sense and nonsense, it seems that pretty much any humorous comic could be grafted in here, given the supplementary attention to *Asterix* and the extended attention Barris affords his own book.

Given the uneven quality of the essays, readers are likely to wonder about the target audience for the volume. Given the limited engagement with comics studies—for instance, Tuusvuori’s essay is the lone contribution to cite anything from a comic studies journal—the presumptive audience is philosophers, but several of the essays here would be hard-pressed to function as standalone philosophical discussions. This isn’t because they’re somehow badly mistaken or riddled with fallacies, but because, by ordinary philosophical standards, their ambitions are quite limited. In his contribution on Sacco’s *Footnotes in Gaza*, Leichter says: “The basic claim I will be exploring in what follows is that memory does not merely transmit information; it is also a medium through which the past of others can be heard and for which we are responsible.” That’s surely true. But, if taken as the thesis of a philosophy article, it would be incumbent on Leichter to show that some have explicitly argued against such claims and to substantively address these arguments. That work doesn’t happen in this essay. Instead, Sacco’s work is used as a springboard for a fairly loose philosophical engagement with the normative dimensions of memory. That’s fine as far as it goes, but, for most philosophers, it isn’t far enough to warrant much interest absent an abiding curiosity with Sacco or comics journalism.

McLaughlin’s editorial efforts in this volume are commendable. There’s recurring evidence of efforts to steer contributors toward considering questions about the comics medium and, as a result, there is sporadic engagement with figures like Eisner and McCloud. Despite this, there’s a persistent concern that bears upon the prospects of philosophy’s continued engagement with comics studies. The last ten years have seen the emergence of stimulating work on the philosophy of comics undertaken by Aaron Meskin, Roy Cook, and a handful of others. Indeed, the essays in Meskin and Cook’s *The Art of Comics* serve as our best available model for how philosophical methods can inform our engagements with comics. Sadly, that body of work is entirely ignored in the present volume. This omission leaves us with a worrisome question: if philosophers aren’t interested in what *other* philosophers say about comics, why should *non*-philosophers be interested in what *any* philosophers are saying about comics?