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Working with Comics

Labour, Neoliberalism and Alternative Cartooning

Patrick James Johnston

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Philosophy**

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I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted, in whole or in part, to another University for the award of another degree.

Signed:

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEXPATRICK JAMES JOHNSTON – DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHYWORKING WITH COMICSLABOUR, NEOLIBERALISM AND ALTERNATIVE CARTOONINGSUMMARY

The 21st century has seen an unprecedented rise in the volume of comics and graphic novels being produced and consumed and in scholarly interest in the form, with the interdisciplinary field of Comics Studies rising to become a vibrant global community with a significant body of work and an established academic infrastructure. Alternative comics and graphic novels – those outside of the superhero genre-dominated corporate publishing structures of Marvel and DC – have driven this rise and the ensuing legitimization of the form.

What defines the specific nature of alternative comics and what they are is the particular work and labour of alternative cartoonists. This work is, in turn, characterized and defined by specific tensions between auteurism (driven by neoliberalism and late capitalism's veneration of the individual and the entrepreneur) and collective production (driven by the sociological perspective of works of art always being the product of many hands). This thesis is an attempt to present specific examples of where these tensions are exhibited and, as a result, to offer new accounts of the specific nature of comics work. It is also an attempt to move away from the formalism that has dominated the field of comics studies and to move towards an understanding of comics as cultural work, informed by an understanding of comics through their creators and an approach that allows comics practice to inform comics theory.

Each chapter of this thesis examines a specific aspect of the culture of working in contemporary comics, contextualised within neoliberal political economy and consistently bridging the gap between auteurism and collective production. These include the portrayal of art school and comics' engagement with institutions; the direct portrayal of work itself in alternative comics; the use of colour in comics, which here facilitates a reading of the effects of the technical conditions of production on the content and construction of comics; and finally, the effects of digital culture and new disruptive technologies on the production, distribution and consumption of comics, and how this contributes to a present and future understanding of the figure of the auteur cartoonist. Drawing these chapters together, the thesis concludes with a presentation of the auteur cartoonist as one who drives the contemporary culture of comics and graphic novels in the emerging dialectic of comics work. Comics work is thus situated as a political act and a site of resistance and rebellion through collective production.

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Figure 1.1: Paddy Johnston, 'Time To Draw' (2016)

Introduction

Draw Comics, Ruin Your Life

The comic on the previous page, written and drawn specifically to open this thesis, depicts the cartoonist – the creator of comics – as a lone, hunched, beleaguered, impoverished and overworked figure. Whilst this depiction is hyperbolic, exaggerated for the purposes of both comedy and for opening the argument of this thesis, it draws upon a trend in contemporary comics and graphic novels that has become a familiar trope. In the tradition of Anglo-American Alternative Comics (those produced outside of the superhero genre, and outside of the dominant corporate publishing empires of Marvel and DC; as defined in Hatfield 2005; Heer & Worcester 2007; Wolk 2009; Gravett 2005, 2013), their creators are fond not just of depicting themselves, but of depicting themselves in myriad negative ways. Their comics are shot through with anxiety, shame and general loserdom,¹ the tenets of which include submitting themselves more than willingly to punitive working conditions.

Chris Ware's ironic advertisement for a career in 'drawing cartoons' (Fig. 1.2) is just one of many prominent examples of this mood.² The comic mimics the aesthetics and language of advertising and Anglo-American consumerist mass culture, as does much of Ware's work for his ongoing *ACME Novelty Library* series. The advertisement offers an engaging thirteen-step programme for ruining one's life. The first of these lays out, in no uncertain terms, that cartooning *is* work, and work that must be attended to as a matter of urgency. In so doing, it brings cartooning closer to the traditional understanding of work and labour as activities that must be carried out under the

¹ The word 'loserdom' was coined by Daniel Worden in his essay on Chris Ware 'The Shameful Art' (2006).

² The version of this comic included here is necessarily scaled down for insertion into a word document. A full-size, zoomable version can be found at <http://bit.ly/ChrisWareRuin>.

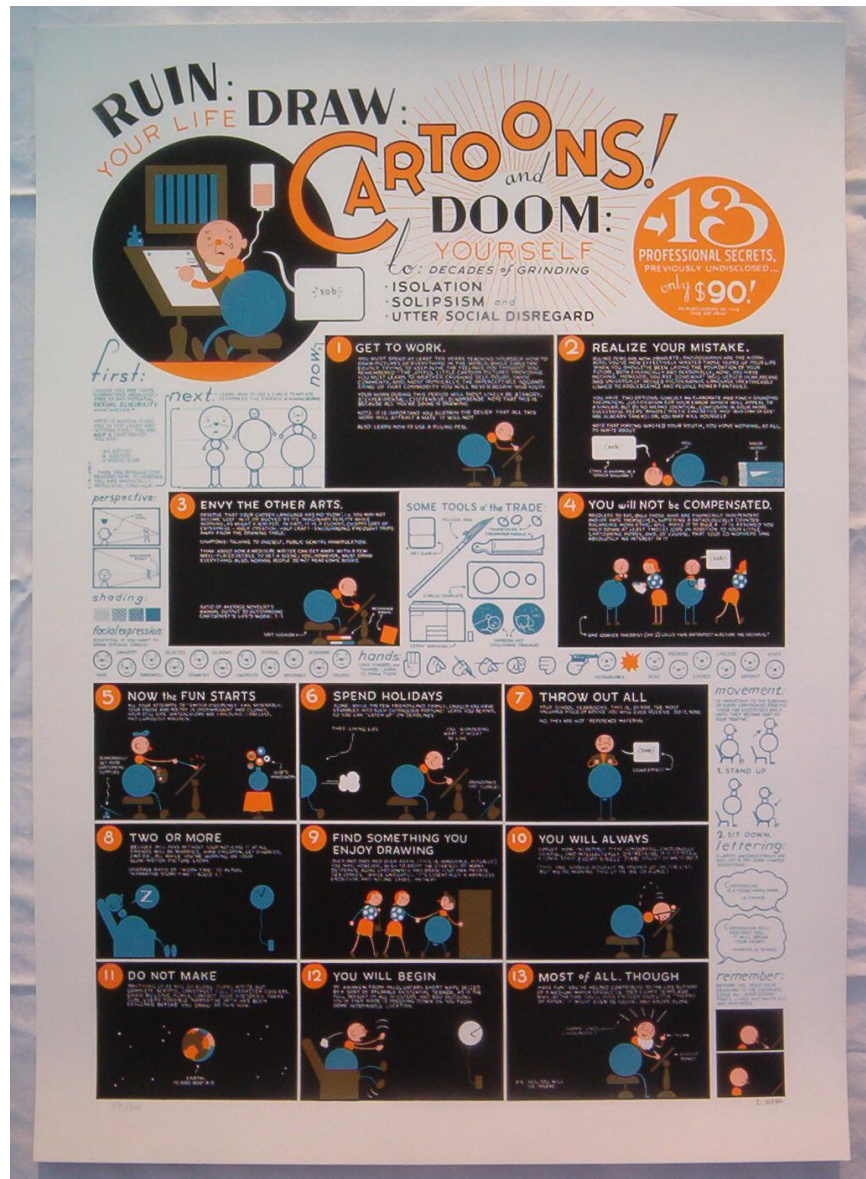
² The version of this comic included here is necessarily scaled down for insertion into a word document. A full-size, zoomable version can be found at <http://bit.ly/ChrisWareRuin>.

conditions of political economy, specifically (as Ware's cartoon is contemporised in 1998, the year of its creation) neoliberalism and late capitalism.³ Here, the worker's exaggeratedly hunched posture suggests a weight pushing down from above, the text contained in the panel here becoming an oppressor. The tension between text and image inherent in the art form of comics forces the cartoonist downward, towards his table, so that he becomes part of his comics, creating his art at the expense of everything else. The next stage invites cartoonists to 'realise their mistake,' swiftly conferring shame upon them, which continues throughout the thirteen steps as the cartoonist: envies other art forms for their cultural perceptions and their ratio of output to production time; becomes financially destitute; works on comics his entire life for no recognition; and eventually becomes a white-bearded octogenarian who has 'helped contribute to the life support of a medium which should've died eighty years ago,' (25) before 'dying insane' (25).

Ware's comic encapsulates the wider anxieties and cultural perceptions surrounding the art form, as framed by its creators as well as by its critics, consumers and scholars. It also exhibits a playful irony that would not be lost on even the most casual consumer of comics. A reader with little to no knowledge of the form (but, we can assume, literacy both textual and visual), recognises Ware's skill as a cartoonist in the absolute precision of his lines and letters, his compositions, his elegant aping of vintage styles to create a recognisable and influential iconic style of his own, and his formation of a coherent and engaging narrative in panels. Why then, if not for reasons of painful and self-conscious irony and rhetoric, would the successful cartoonist portray cartooning in such a manner? Why would even the most fulfilled and prominent cartoonist be willing to present work in comics as an unavoidable suffering imposed

³ 1998 was the year many of the neoliberal policies of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton were enacted under the guise of reformed left-wing political parties embracing change and modernisation.

from above? The answer to this question lies in the culture of comics, and specifically in the culture of alternative comics – in the culture of cartooning as a single author, or auteur,⁴ that has emerged with alternative comics and the rise of the graphic novel, and within the neoliberal political economy that has been the backdrop of these developments in comics since the 1970s.



⁴ The term 'auteur' is borrowed wholesale from film studies and cinema criticism, in which the 'auteur theory' of authorship in the production of film first emerged. First posited by French critic André Bazin (2004a, 2004b) in the 1940s, the auteur theory argues that the director can be viewed as the author and primary creative force behind a film. The resulting philosophical idea of auteurism, as used throughout this thesis, erases the idea of collective production in favour of a model of understanding works of art through a single author with a singular vision.

Figure 1.2: Chris Ware, 'Ruin Your Life: Draw Cartoons,' *The ACME Novelty Library* (2009, np)

Comics – the art form of combining pictures and words to create a narrative, encompassing comic books, graphic novels, zines, strips, webcomics, editorial cartoons and other imagetext forms (Mitchell 1995) – have never received so much attention, critically and culturally, as they do currently in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, the time of this thesis's conception and execution. There exists, now, more comic art of high quality in terms of production values, critical commendation, craftsmanship and storytelling, than there ever has been, and it is a burgeoning field of cultural production. Comics have won the Pulitzer Prize and other literary awards (<http://mausgraphicmemoir.blogspot.co.uk/> 2012); been honoured at numerous major fine art exhibitions (Ball & Kuhlman 2010); and have been auctioned as the rarest of cultural artifacts, fetching astronomical prices (Cain 2014). Any given bookshop in the Anglo-American sphere is likely to have a 'graphic novels' section, and in many cases that section is curated by knowledgeable and passionate staff with more than a passing interest in the form. Moreover, large mainstream publishers with rich literary histories (such as Penguin Random House, with their Jonathan Cape and Pantheon imprints) are likely to have a graphic novels list, or at least to have published one or two such books, and graphic novels have featured on numerous lists of the greatest works of literature ever created, compiled by prestigious literary magazines (Lacayo 2005).

However, as figure 1.1 makes clear, creators still experience significant anxiety around cartooning and comic art, and there are clearly major issues in the political economy of cartooning that are permeating through the culture of comics. While there have been some developments in the legitimization of comics in the years since figure 1.2 was published in Chris Ware's *ACME Novelty Library* series, it still remains a useful

and neat encapsulation of comics as a field of cultural production. It also indicates how significant and highly regarded creators are likely to view their chosen field and medium, even in the face of genuine success in terms of the accumulation of both economic and cultural capital. More recently, Bart Beaty has argued in his book *Comics Versus Art* that Ware has become ‘a synecdoche for the comics world as a whole, and particularly for the aspirations of the comics world relative to the art world’ (2012, 224). Although Beaty is describing the relationship of comics to the art world specifically, and excluding the related world of literature for the purpose of focus, his use of Chris Ware as a microcosm of the status of comics within both the academy and Western popular culture as a whole is here a significant one. Beaty concludes his book by suggesting that ‘if Chris Ware did not exist, the art world would have had to invent him’ (226), and Ware is thus useful as a figure who is regarded by comics scholars to encapsulate the anxious struggles for power and capital inherent in comics’ relationship to art and the broader cultural landscape.

Ware is undoubtedly one of the most successful artists working in the medium of comics today, if not *the* most successful, in terms of financial income, cultural capital, critical reception and scholarly commentary. He has won major literary awards, including The Guardian First Book Award (*The Guardian* 2001) for his first collected graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth*; is consistently published by Pantheon and Jonathan Cape; and in 2002 and subsequent years his work has been included in the Whitney Museum’s prestigious biennial show, for which he has also provided poster artwork. All these events happened before the publication of the above page in *The ACME Novelty Rainy Day Fun Book*,⁵ but still the above page was created and published, among other heavily ironic mock advertisements, news parodies and

⁵ Although it is a collection of comics from Ware’s ongoing *ACME Novelty Library* series, this large format book is known to many simply as *The ACME Novelty Library*.

reinventions of the vintage comic strip format, in an outsized, beautifully designed and bound hardback by Pantheon, sitting comfortably in its literary lists. And still, anxieties abound in the art form of comics, particularly in its institutional contexts, drawing a complex portrait of the cartoonist as an unfulfilled, aged and afflicted worker. It is this portrayal which this thesis focuses on, drawing from it and analysing it in various contexts to move towards a new understanding of cartooning as ‘comics work’ and the political economy of cartooning, characterised by anxiety as a defining aspect of the neoliberal⁶ condition (Aronowitz 1997; Brown 2009; Berlant 2011; Smith 2015). ‘Comics work’ (Brienza 2010, 2011, 2013; Johnston 2013, 2015) can be performed by anyone who is involved in the production, distribution and even the consumption of a comic book, but in this thesis it will be used as a term that focuses specifically on the act of cartooning, of creating a comic book, approached as labour.

The anxieties of cartooning appear initially to stem from wider cultural perceptions and cultural and institutional contexts, the history of which has allowed these anxieties to permeate through to the mindset of the contemporary alternative cartoonist. The effects of the neoliberal politics in which contemporary alternative comics have grown are not overt, but permeate through these cultural contexts. Ware’s contemporary, and similarly influential cartoonist of Generation X, Daniel Clowes, is more direct in his assessment of cartooning as a site of tensions. His illustrated essay ‘Modern Cartoonist,’ an anomalous manifesto for cartooning that first appeared as a

⁶ Concurrent with the rise of the graphic novel and auteurism in alternative comics, neoliberalism – in brief, the ideology and philosophy that champions aggressive free market economic policy and self-serving entrepreneurialism at the expense of all else – is generally agreed to have begun in earnest in Western politics with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, strengthened by the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 and continuing to grow in acceptance through to the present day (Harvey 2007; Saad-Filo & Johnson, eds. 2004). The arguments for free aggressive and all-consuming market policy made by the early neoliberals were based largely on the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. A greater discussion of specific economic policy around the birth of neoliberalism is outside the scope of this thesis – a thorough summary of the economic basis for the birth of neoliberalism can be found in Daniel Stedman Jones’ book *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (2012).

pamphlet attached to issue 18 of his *Eightball* comic in 1997, preceded and likely facilitated Ware's subsequent ironic portrayal of the cartoonist that recurs throughout *ACME Novelty Library* series.

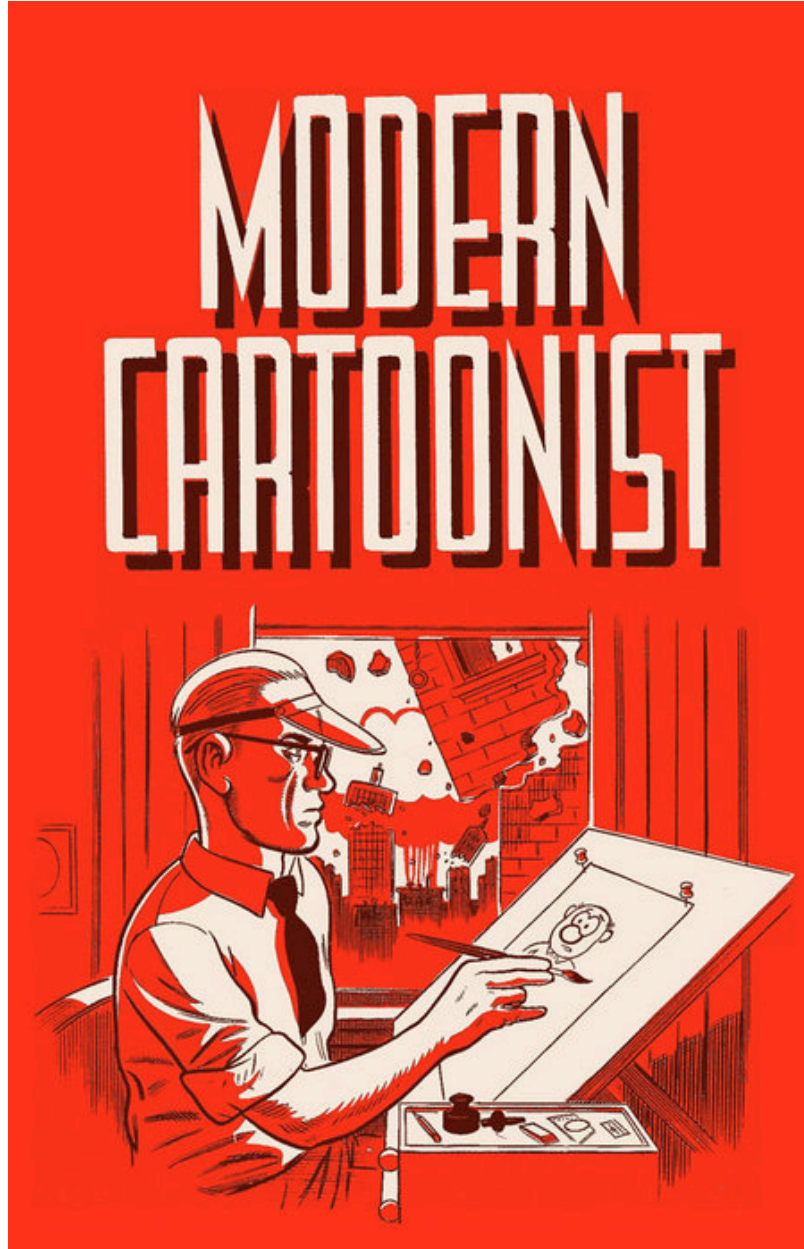


Figure 1.3: Cover of 'Modern Cartoonist' by Daniel Clowes (Parille 2013)

Comics scholar and foremost Clowes critic Ken Parille, in his introduction to the essay in the 2013 *Daniel Clowes Reader*,⁷ notes that 'with the obsessiveness of a devoted fetishist and the power of a demiurge, the cartoonist realizes a singular vision'

⁷ I reviewed *The Daniel Clowes Reader* for *The Comics Grid* in 2013 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/cg.ag>)

in Clowes' presentation (2013, 321). And the word *cartoonist*, for Clowes in 'Modern Cartoonist,' explicitly means a lone worker, free from corporate structures and other such systems. Although the essay was written in 1997, Clowes' description of what he terms 'the current situation' of comics is prescient, and not dissimilar to the situation facing cartoonists at the time of writing this thesis, with similar anxieties to those described and dissected by Clowes prevailing among contemporary comics creators. The cartoonist is drawn alone throughout the essay in its accompanying illustrations, which include a two-page centrefold depicting the cartoonist's thoughts at his drawing board, escaping from him in spectral, fluid thought bubbles. A brief story emerges in these thought bubbles of a cartoonist toiling in obscurity to create a crude caricature that goes unappreciated for most of his own lifetime, but later serves as a touchstone for human culture when the planet is invaded by aliens. This plotline exhibits a playful irony similar to that used by Chris Ware across the majority of his works when depicting cartooning, comics or cartoonists. Clowes' pages themselves are hand-lettered, a physical reminder of the materiality of comics and their lengthy, painstaking, precise creative process, also evoked here by the inclusion of pencil lettering guidelines,⁸ a drawing of an Ames lettering guide,⁹ and a light burnt orange colour scheme, used sparingly, which evokes fire, burnout, and sunsets, facilitating the imagery of the cartoonist burning himself out as a result of his labour in comics.

Clowes begins his essay by suggesting that the young cartoonist 'has a problem: how to assert his or her own voice in a field where so many unique voices exist already' (325). The field is small, according to Clowes, because comics continue to exist in obscurity as they always have done, evading a mainstream audience due to the insipid

⁸ Lines drawn in pencil, to guide hand lettering and ensure it is precise, similar to the techniques used by typographers.

⁹ A geometric tool, similar to a protractor, which allows such guidelines to be drawn precisely straight with minimal effort, once the technique of its use is learned. It is used by very few contemporary cartoonists, but does have something of a cult following among material purists in alternative comics.

content of the vast majority of its prominent examples. Clowes, however, sees this evasion as a blessing as he continues the essay, stating that comics have ‘an aura of truthfulness that...comes as a by-product of being thought of as unsophisticated and (culturally, financially) insignificant’ (330). For Clowes, the lone alternative cartoonist suffers in the same fashion as Ware’s, hunched, broken, economically beaten and culturally maligned, but there is no irony here – the cartoonist is instead able to turn this situation to his advantage, using it to create unique cultural objects and to forge works, and patterns of labour, which are unique fields of experimentation as a result of his history. The cartoonist becomes an entrepreneur, on his own terms – the realisation of a neoliberal ideal (Foucault 2010; Brown 1995, 2014; Mazzucato 2015).

Clowes then addresses ‘the young cartoonist’ directly, and at a point at which his discussion brings itself closer to Ware’s hyperbolic narrative of decades of gruelling, unrewarded hard work. He writes:

The sheer amount of craft for which the cartoonist is responsible (from drawing to acting to typography, etc, etc, etc) takes years for even the most gifted prodigy to assimilate; a process made all the more difficult by the woeful lack of satisfying examples to follow. Frustrated and bewildered, the cartoonist must study all sorts of disparate media and learn slowly and tentatively by trial and error. Therefore, the cartoonist (like the novelist, the painter, etc) should do his best work in his forties or fifties, after he’s had a chance to develop some confidence, but only a few determined souls are able to maintain their enthusiasm for that long without giving in to easy formulas (331).

The lack of Ware’s ironic humour makes for sobering reading as Clowes leaves aside the metacritical and playful critique of comics in comic form and does not depict the cartoonist himself other than as a straightforward illustration to accompany the text.

Instead, readers are invited to produce comic images themselves, relying upon their own imagination. Work as a cartoonist is once again described as a burden in terms of the necessary skills and disparate techniques learned from various media inherent in creating a hybrid art form, and one which suffers from a lack of available examples to follow because its content is generally unsatisfactory. Clowes' assessment of comics' content suggests that both alternative and mainstream comics are unremarkable, perhaps with the few notable exceptions of those that inspired Clowes himself (R. Crumb, Harvey Kurtzman, Peter Bagge). However, this assessment is quickly followed by the careful assertion that 'the comic book really is a perfect consumer item,' (332) due to its size, shape, price, disposability, durability and composition. Why, then, is such a commercially viable item, perfect for success in a competitive, neoliberal, free market economy, still sold in very small quantities, aside from a select number of mainstream superhero titles? And why do their creators suffer such anxieties in such an aesthetically open fashion?

These questions and the answers to them are implicit in the rest of Clowes' essay and in Ware's advertisement parody, and can, generally speaking, be attached to the culture of alternative comics, and thus to the culture of working as an alternative cartoonist with its various accompanying conditions. The contradiction between the apparent suitability of an object for success within a free market economy and its relative failure within such a system of late capitalism emphasises the contradictory nature of neoliberal ideology, and here arises a tension which provides a context for cartooning and allows for a move towards conceiving a dialectic of comics work. These economic, cultural and social conditions are, for Clowes and Ware (who here stand in, microcosmically, for the community of Anglo-American alternative cartoonists as a whole), both internal and external to comics, meaning both the subset of alternative

comics and the art form as a whole. Both cartoonists often speak, in their own assumptions and through the scholarly and critical commentary of others (Beaty 2012), for the entire form. Clowes addresses this condition by presciently sharing his thoughts on the coming digital revolution, which promises foolishly, in Clowes' opinion, to give more power to the reader. Whether this revolution in readership happens or not (and the final chapter of this thesis argues that, by now, it has), Clowes concludes his essay by purporting that comics may be affected, or may not. Either way, he writes, 'there will always be, at worst, a small but interested elite' (334).

A pattern emerges, therefore, within the self-perception of alternative cartoonists – a pattern that is clearly shaping the narrative, content and culture of alternative comics into a dialectic. This thesis addresses this self-perception in order to develop an informed study resulting in a definitive image of the alternative cartoonist as a worker, understood in the context of the prevailing neoliberal political economy. It asks the same questions raised by the prominent voices of Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware (who are the modern cartoonists, and how are we are to understand them?) and develops and complicates their answers by defining a dialectic of comics work.

Thesis Aims, Scope and Objectives

The aim of this thesis is, thereby, to present a comprehensive study of the working conditions, factors of technical production, materiality and political economy surrounding the cartoonists who, working alone in the vast majority of cases, create the alternative comics and graphic novels that have driven the recent and still ongoing legitimization and growth of comics and comic art both within the academy and in popular and literary culture. By attending to these constraints, this thesis aims to demonstrate that such conditions and external factors have had significant effects upon the creators of comics and thus upon the content, form and culture of comics and

comics work, against the backdrop of the rise of western neoliberalism. By including my own comics and some critical commentary on my own work as an alternative cartoonist in this thesis, I also aim to present an analytical and critical study that benefits significantly from practice-driven and practice-informed research.¹⁰ This offers a unique perspective on the field of comics studies and the art form of comics, informed by the burgeoning dialogue and synthesis between comics studies and the production of comics, and between cartoonists and comics scholars, who are often one and the same.

Each of this thesis's four chapters takes a specific aspect of these conditions and presents a detailed analysis of its effects upon the creator and their comics. In them, I use my own experience and that of other cartoonists to argue for a definition of comics work as dialectical. Chapter one discusses the idea of being 'a cartoonist,' the identity created therein by the culture of comics and by the framework of examining comics as labour. Auteurism and the 'singular creative vision' (Smith 2004, 1341) model of creative production is a common assessment of the production of comics, and I complicate and refute this in the following chapter. Drawing upon the idea of being a worker and the idea of auteurism, given prominence due to its usage within the comics-related fields of film studies and cultural studies and the broader study of popular culture, this chapter presents the alternative cartoonist, working alone, as an auteur, a creative and entrepreneurial individual. It suggests that the prominence of auteurism within comics was a significant factor in the birth of alternative comics in the underground comix of the 1960s and their continued development and rise throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In fact, it continues to be so in the present day – all the more so since the 1980s as neoliberalism, with its emphasis on the individual and the advancement of the self has come to dominate global political economy (Cunningham 2014). This

¹⁰ Practice-based doctoral students are common among the global community of comics scholars, and the integration of practice into comics studies is closer than in many other arts and humanities disciplines.

chapter introduces and embeds the ‘comics work’ approach, which draws on sociology, literary criticism and cultural studies, among other disciplines, using all their applications to comics to drive the thesis that the cartoonist can be understood as a *homo oeconomicus*, in Foucauldian terms (Foucault 2010). This analysis enlightens contemporary scholarship to the cartoonist’s individual condition whilst complicating this understanding by introducing the inclusive and expansive sociological approach to cultural work. This approach understands that all art works are works of co-operation and show ‘signs of this co-operation’ (Becker 2008, 1). As such, this chapter challenges the perception of graphic novels as being largely produced by a single creative genius – an auteur figure – and also concludes that comics work can be understood as a site of resistance to neoliberalism and free market commercial imperatives whilst also operating within such systems and being subjugated and dominated by them (Hebdige 1979, 1988; Hall 1988, 1997, 2006; Lyons 2010). Modifying Foucault’s phrase and conception, I use this chapter to advance the idea of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* – the economic man who produces comics as an entrepreneurial, neoliberal capitalist.

Chapter two examines the perhaps surprising predisposition of alternative cartoonists not only to depict art school and the experience of studying fine art in the academy as a cartoonist, but also to depict it almost unilaterally as a negative, oppressive and restrictive experience. Such depictions paradoxically characterise cartooning as both a mercenary form of work carried out only to gain financial capital and also as a worthless art form, incapable of providing monetary compensation or cultural capital and bringing little to its creators beyond derision and tension between comics and fine art as fields of cultural production. Looking closely at a number of comics that have portrayed the art school experience from Daniel Clowes, Chris Ware, Jeffrey Brown, Tom Humberstone and Jamie Coe, this chapter contextualises comics in

the wider history and culture of art and aesthetic education. It also examines the sociological and cultural factors which separate the ideas of art and labour and art and commerce and place them in opposition to each other culturally. It draws conclusions that comics and cartooning bring these ideas into a close and symbiotic relationship, particularly in light of the various forms of comics that have emerged throughout the medium's history due to the constraints imposed by technology, labour and political economy. Art school also becomes a synecdoche, here, for the relationship of comics with the various institutions which have contributed to their recent and ongoing cultural legitimisation, and for the conduits of neoliberalism that force an artist to view their creations in terms only of capital, creating tensions between production and consumption. This chapter's theoretical basis, beyond the immediate texts of comics studies and the emergent comics work approach as defined in chapter one, adds Pierre Bourdieu, Howard Becker and other theorists of culture, art, taste, class and shame and anxiety, to contextualise the cartoonist's condition as a tortured and maligned figure within the historical institution of the art school and the aesthetic education of man, brought under duress by neoliberalism.

Chapter three looks closely at an aesthetic and technical element of comics and their materiality, and one which has received comparatively little attention within comics studies at the time of writing: that of colour, the lack thereof, and the myriad approaches in between that are taken by contemporary cartoonists when creating their comics.¹¹ Examining the works of a number of alternative cartoonists, and looking to a

¹¹ Since I decided to write about colour there has been a growth in critical engagement with it within comics studies and comics criticism in the sphere of comics journalism. As with comics studies as a whole, this has been driven largely by practitioners, with colourists (those responsible only for colouring the comic and not for writing, pencilling, inking or other duties, when the labour of creating a comic is divided in the traditional way established by mainstream comics historically) being given prominent voices in analysis and discussion of the form. The best example of this can be found in *The Comics Journal's* recent colourists' roundtable (Fiamma 2016). Despite this increase in commentary, however, the chapter of this thesis on colour is still a major contribution towards the understanding of colour in comics from the point of view of labour and cultural work.

more contemporary body of authors including those who have worked primarily in webcomics and with digital technology to create their comics, this chapter proposes that colour is often completely inaccessible to alternative cartoonists, especially those working alone, at the beginning of their careers, for low or no pay under the precarious conditions of neoliberalism. This chapter exposes that this is in fact the majority of cartoonists, who work all hours writing and drawing in black and white and physically have little time for colour. They may also lack the resources or wherewithal to learn the skills – to *put in the work* – to learn how to colour comics. The aesthetic and technical aspects of comics are largely separate from those of the fundamentals of writing and drawing required to be able to combine text and image to create a comic, and there is no particularly insistent cultural expectation that a comic will necessarily be in colour to be defined as such. I examine historical considerations in this chapter to assess the inaccessibility of colour to the alternative cartoonist, including the history of underground comics and the growth of this and other countercultural movements that have shaped the usage of colour within Anglo-American comic art. This chapter's theoretical basis, beyond comics studies and the comics work approach, draws upon texts that examine aesthetic education, but it also draws upon art history and art theory, from early theorists of colour and drawing (Goethe 2015; Ruskin 1971, 2007, 2009) through to more contemporary scholarship on colour in art (Gage 1995, 2000, 2007). In so doing, I allow comics' parent art forms, fine art and visual art, to develop the prevalent analysis of comics studies and to push it beyond analysing comics as texts. Such an analysis is a predilection that prevails in comics studies due to the dominance of literary studies as a mode of criticism and a space into which comics studies has been welcomed within the academy. This chapter concludes that colour, for cartoonists, becomes a tool in the hands of the comics worker that can be used or discarded, to

various ends. This conclusion adds tensions around aesthetics to the dialectic of comics work as colouring or the lack thereof becomes precarious and marginalized labour, defined once more by tensions and oppositions.

Examining the immediate present and the future at the time of writing, chapter four focuses on the effects of digital technology on the cartoonist as a worker. This includes examinations of both production and consumption and the ensuing engagement with digital technology in both of these activities, contextualized within neoliberal political economy and the emerging theories of postcapitalism and post-work (Mason 2013, 2015; Williams & Srnicek 2015; Lovell 2012; Aronowitz 1998; Haque 2011; Sassower 2010; Frayne 2015).¹² Webcomics are the newest form of comics, and are now firmly established as a legitimate and vibrant art form in and of themselves, as well as a springboard for newer artists wishing to experiment with new ideas, to begin building an audience and, most significantly, to distribute their comics with little to no associated cost. However, the effects on comics (and indeed on all popular, widely consumed art forms) of widely distributed free digital content has also seen a loss of dependable and easily sought revenue and has consequently led to the emergence of new economic models (Allen 2014). Accepting and developing the assertion by fellow comics scholar Ernesto Priego that ‘the defining structural elements of the comic strip were the result of technical conditions of production’ (2014), this chapter examines digital technologies as the new technical conditions of production, and argues that the cartoonist in the digital age must become, fully, the *cartoonist oeconomicus* as a result of his circumstances and the wider context of neoliberalism and the present move towards an information economy from a previously industrial, material-based economy.

¹² The philosophical ideas of postcapitalism and post-work are defined fully in the introduction to chapter four, but in short: both encompass the conviction that capitalism is beginning to fail, or that it already has, and that the consequences for political economy require a rethinking of traditional paradigmatic ideas of work, labour and approaches to economics, industry and culture.

The exemplar in this chapter is web cartoonist John Allison, who gives away the content of all of his comics for free on his website, but still makes a living as a cartoonist because of his entrepreneurialism and willingness to engage with the economic conditions created by contemporary technology and culture. This chapter also considers other web cartoonists and returns to Chris Ware, whose iPad-only comic *Touch Sensitive* I analyse as a product of a particular technical process that exemplifies the potential for new readership and new forms of cartooning as labour, with an ever-changing and fluid culture of comics consumption and production that responds entrepreneurially to the continued disruption of the digital economy (Priego 2010; Mason 2015; Lovell 2014; Jenkins 2008, 2014; Aronowitz 1998; Piketty 2014; Haque 2011; Brouillette 2014; Ginsburgh 2013).

Finally, in conclusion I return to the exemplary cartoonists used throughout, with a focus on Chris Ware, and also consider more closely my own comics, working in my practice-informed approach to the study of comics and to the political economy of cartooning in greater detail. Rather than demonstrate ideas about comics through a practice-focused project, I instead use my own practice to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the medium of comics, its technical conditions and its culture. This knowledge informs my theories and scholarship and provides valuable insight into the two terms I advance in this thesis – comics work and the *cartoonist oeconomicus*. I have undertaken comics work myself, and have made some strides towards defining myself as a *cartoonist oeconomicus*, acknowledging my own position as a creator under neoliberalism, working within an information economy that is leaning into postcapitalism. The conclusion also provides a practice-informed reading of the exemplary cartoonists that advances my final argument – that comics work has emerged

as a complex dialectic,¹³ made up of numerous different tensions that define it (including those between word and image, between individuals and institutions, between perceptions of high and low cultures, between colour and greyscale, between work and leisure, between auteurism and collective production, between past and future economies), all centred around the nexus of the *cartoonist oeconomicus*, who embodies the sharp, fractious conflict between art and commerce.

Neoliberalism, Comics Work and the *Cartoonist Oeconomicus*

The term ‘comics work,’ used here to describe a particular approach and framework for the study of comics, is coined by myself and Casey Brienza in the introduction to our forthcoming edited collection *Cultures of Comics Work* (to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016). Building on Brienza’s repeated calls for a sociological perspective on comics (2010, 2011, 2013), the idea of ‘comics work’ draws significantly on the study of cultural work and media work, but crosses disciplines, institutions and departments to assess the hidden work behind the creation of comics and to bring it to the fore from a global perspective. Following Brienza’s writing and the ensuing debates and developments in sociological perspectives on comics (Locke 2012; Johnston 2013; Woo 2013, 2014; Miller 2013), an assessment of the constitution of comics work asks two simple questions: how are we to understand a work of comic art without any knowledge of the myriad varieties of work that went into its creation? And how can we better understand such works of comic art through this knowledge? This thesis aims to answer both questions by demonstrating the applications of such knowledge in the context of political economy and auteurism, and the comics work approach provides a

¹³ Roland Barthes saw images themselves as dialectical (1977, 2000). Setting a precedent for comics studies and its formalist focus, as well as for this thesis’ argument for a dialectic of comics work, he writes in *Image, Music, Text* that ‘the works of mass communications all combine, through diverse and diversely successful dialectics, the fascination of a nature, that of a story, diegesis, syntagm, and the intelligibility of a culture, withdrawn into a few discontinuous symbols’ (1977, 51).

solid foundation for these demonstrations, which are ‘signs of [the] cooperation’ of many rather than simply the work of a sole auteur (Becker 2008, 1).¹⁴

The Anglo-American comic book, looking back to its historical roots in illustrated satirical magazines and its burgeoning on American newsstands in the print cultures of the early 20th century, has traditionally involved the collective work of a large number of people (Priego 2010; Gardner 2011). When superhero and detective comics became popular and demand grew exponentially, along with similar growth in the fast-moving newspaper industry, the pressure to publish more increased, and weekly or even more frequent deadlines became the industry standard. Since comics are a physically demanding art form, and one requiring a great amount of time to create them, the labour was necessarily divided into some combination of the following, depending on the comic in question: writers, storyboarders, pencillers, inkers, letterers and colourists.¹⁵ Taking into account the changes in technology since the heyday of the superhero comic and the inclusiveness of the sociological roots of the approach in cultural work, as well as the wide range of people involved in the production process, comics work recognises a broader set of roles. In addition to the above list, these

¹⁴ The comics work approach has emerged in response to what Brienza terms a ‘narrow auteurist vision of production’ (2012), a way of approaching comics’ creation and authorship that has dominated comics scholarship as a result of its interdisciplinary emergence from various subjects in which the author and/or author-function (Foucault 1991) has permeated. Our call for papers listed a number of well-known and highly influential comics auteurs who are viewed as the sole creators of their work and who fulfil the author-function, including Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman and Osamu Tezuka. For this thesis’s purpose, I will add Chris Ware and Daniel Clowes to this list, along with all of the creators I will discuss in chapter one, which closely examines the idea of a ‘singular creative vision’ (Smith 2008) in comics and argues for exposing the work of others that this idea obscures. The comics work approach denies auteurism to a large extent and argues that comics are, by their very nature and definition, collaborative creations. Comics are works of art that involve many hands and many agents from their conception, through their production, ultimately ending in their consumption. The distribution and reception of comics then becomes part of the culture of comics work through conspicuous consumption and the feedback loops of social and digital media (Jenkins 2008), the effects of which are discussed in chapter four.

¹⁵ A detailed history of the divisions of labour among the early comics workers and how this grew through the mass culture of the first half of the twentieth century can be found in David Kunzle’s *History of the Comic Strip* (1973); Roger Sabin’s *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (2001) and Robert C. Harvey’s *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996).

include flatters,¹⁶ printers, distributors, designers, cover artists, editors, typesetters, publicist, retailers, business advisors, all staff at larger corporations such as Marvel and DC, and in some cases critics and scholars.¹⁷ The comics work approach is an exposition and foregrounding of these workers and their works in comics, in the same fashion as the studies of cultural and media work that it follows. Mark Deuze's *Media Work* (2008), Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton's *Contemporary Identities of Creativity and Creative Work* (2012), Angela McRobbie's *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (2014) and David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker's *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (2011) are four prominent examples of widely influential studies of the creative industries that have emerged in recent years, focusing on the industries of fashion, television production, journalism, music, fine art, advertising, theatre and freelance writing. The comics work approach adds to the assessments these books make of the creative economy and applies the same analysis to comics and comics culture.

The comics work approach, and the materialist components of my further refined approach in this thesis, is informed by Richard A. Peterson's production of culture perspective (1982). This perspective presents five constraints on the creation of cultural objects such as comics: law, technology, the market, organizational structure and occupational careers. These constraints can form a highly useful part of a comics scholar's methodological toolkit, and can help identify the areas of intrigue when studying the production of comics culture, as demonstrated by Casey Brienza's use of

¹⁶ A flatter separates and defines the areas of an inked page of comics that will be coloured and fills them in with temporary colours, so that the colourist can easily fill them in with their chosen colours.

¹⁷ The role of criticism, fandom and feedback is viewed by many scholars as becoming increasingly important in understanding cultural products. Chief among them is Henry Jenkins, who argues for a participatory culture, driven by the interaction of producer and fan-consumer. The scope of this thesis does not allow for deep discussion of participatory culture, but understands that participation in cultural creation through the new digital networks and an increasingly networked culture constitutes an opposition to auteurism. For further reading on participatory culture, see Jenkins (2006, 2008); Jenkins and Kelley (2013); Jenkins et al. (2013); and Delwiche and Henderson (2012).

the constraints in her article calling for a sociological perspective on comics studies (2010). However, comics work is a broad and inclusive approach that must necessarily be refined for the purposes of a doctoral thesis. As such, this thesis focuses specifically on Anglo-American comics work under the global political economy of contemporary neoliberalism. A concise definition of neoliberalism, although it lacks nuance, is Robert McChesney's description of it as 'capitalism with the gloves off' in his introduction to Noam Chomsky's *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and the Global Order* (1998). The book's title is also an acceptable working definition of the neoliberal approach to policymaking that cuts to the heart of how neoliberal political economy affects the arts and the production of culture. The defining features of neoliberalism (drawn here from Harvey 2007; Berlant 2011; Brown 2009, 2015; Mason 2010, 2013, 2015; Piketty 2014; Dumenil 2013; Srnicek & Williams 2015; Smith 2015; Howker 2010) are based on the belief that the only economy that can truly function and bring prosperity is one based on a free market. The features of such an economy are deregulation of business, low taxation, cuts to social security, the privatisation of government assets and a generally liberal (often called laissez-faire) approach to economics and government characterised by a small state and a defence and upholding of untrammelled and unfettered capitalism. Neoliberalism also places an emphasis on individualism rather than collectivism, praising and attaching significant value to the self and the individual and highlighting entrepreneurialism.¹⁸ This entrepreneurialism is facilitated by a free market

¹⁸ Many of neoliberalism's most fervent supporters and defenders are followers, in a somewhat cultish manner, of the novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand. Rand's works (1992; 2007; 2016) are not discussed in this thesis, as they do not form a significant theoretical or philosophical basis in and of themselves, but it is certainly worth noting their influence on politicians and economists such as Alan Greenspan, chairman of the US Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006. Rand believed unequivocally in individualism and the advancement of the self as the only logical philosophical drive that people should have, and that such an approach to political economy is best because it can produce innovation and raise technological and cultural standards as a result, even if severe inequality in income and material security (for example) remains or worsens. Whilst its content and context do not merit inclusion as an exemplary text in this thesis' discussion of alternative comics and the dialectic of comics work, Darryl Cunningham's graphic novel *Supercrash: How to Hijack the Global Economy* (2014) provides a highly useful and accessible

that does not place any undue constraints upon its producers and businesspeople, and is viewed as the most desirable quality for a person to have, because it will drive production and enterprise in an economy based on free trade.

David Harvey's survey of neoliberalism (2007) posits that it began in earnest in 1979 with the election of Margaret Thatcher and was strengthened throughout the 1980s as her relationship with Ronald Reagan grew into one of mutual cooperation based on shared belief in the dogma of the free market. This cooperation was to set the global tone for the 1990s and the 2000s, during which neoliberalism became the dominant ideology and became embedded in the Anglo-American political psyche and economic systems, confirmed in the subsequent governments of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, who both shifted their formerly left-wing parties to a neoliberal 'centre' ground and fortified the neoliberal consensus.

Neoliberalism is distinct from capitalism, and in particular from late capitalism, in that it is the ideology and philosophical thought brought to bear on the economy and enacted in the market and its agents – late capitalism, on the other hand, is the *system* in which the ideas of neoliberalism are carried out, under the auspices of postmodernity (Jameson 1991, 1997, 1998, 2004; Brooker 1992). In other words, neoliberalism informs and transforms late capitalism into a definable neoliberal political economy, and it is this that I examine, in relation to alternative comics and to comics work. Philosophically, neoliberalism constitutes the extension of the economic logic of investment and return (and the judgment of value always made in these terms) to all realms, or in Wendy Brown's words, 'neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity' (2015, 44). The systems and machinations of late capitalism enforce this through economic policy, but it is the philosophy of

summary of Rand's life and her influence on neoliberal thought, arguing for neoliberalism's foundation upon the fundamental idea of selfishness based on Rand's followers and their ensuing actions in American economic policy.

neoliberalism that constitutes the most fruitful ground for exploring the emergent dialectic of comics work, which itself submits to this economic cost-benefit logic, as does art as a whole under neoliberalism (Dickie 1997).

The effects of neoliberalism on culture and the creative industries are exposed in many of the aforementioned assessments of cultural work, which have taken case studies of media workers and established that the industries rest largely on a precariat – a newly emergent class who cannot find stable, long-term employment, but rather move from freelance job to freelance job, often accompanied by low hours, low pay and persistent insecurity, with the trade-off coming from personal fulfilment and the confirmation of personal worth as a neoliberal, self-serving entrepreneur ‘in control of their own destiny’ (Banks 2007, 55). Studies such as David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker’s ‘A Very Complicated Version of Freedom’ in the journal *Poetics* (2011) confirm this, with direct testimonials from workers in the industries of television production and newspaper journalism asserting that their conditions are challenging and consistently precarious, but that they accept that this is how their industry is, in a similar fashion to the neoliberal dogma that has pushed the consensus around free market economics as being the only rational economics. This thesis demonstrates that the creators of comics suffer under similar conditions, which are exaggerated in numerous ways due to the specific culture of working in comics and its materiality and constraints, creating a particular and definable ‘comics precariat’ (Woo 2015). The word ‘precariat’ is a useful one for understanding the conditions of work under neoliberalism, and is taken from Guy Standing’s book of the same name (2011). Along with the general concept of the precariat, Standing also coins the noun ‘precarity,’ used to describe the situation faced by members of the precariat (as exposed by Howker 2010; Ross 2010; Horning 2012; Duménil and Lévy, 2013; Johnson 2016). As such, I use this word

throughout to describe the situation of alternative cartoonists, the majority of whom can be described as members of the wider precariat as well as members of the comics precariat. Understanding them as members of the comics precariat, in Benjamin Woo's words, here exposes the specifically precarious nature of comics work under neoliberalism.

My use of neoliberalism as a context for analysing the culture of comics is not simply about the direct economic effects of policy, however. Many philosophers and literary critics have made assessments of neoliberalism that can aid a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the specific nature of the cartoonist as a worker. The most notable of these is Michel Foucault, whose 1978-9 lectures at the Collège de France addressed the emerging philosophy of neoliberalism, which some (*LA Review of Books* 2014) believe he developed a 'curious sympathy' for in his old age. He died shortly after these lectures and thus missed the true rise of neoliberalism, but his 1978-9 lectures (collected in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 2010) were highly prescient, and have been addressed by Wendy Brown and David Harvey. Most significantly, Foucault advanced the concept of the *homo oeconomicus* (2007, 226; also see Eagleton-Pierce, 2016). The economic man, Foucault argues, has become the dominant mode of existence in western late capitalism, driven by an assessment of his worth only in terms of value and economic capital, rather than social or cultural capital, the significance of which is eroded by neoliberalism and the *homo oeconomicus*. According to Wendy Brown (2015), the *homo oeconomicus* becomes a Marcusean one-dimensional man in Foucault's analysis, eroded down to an agent of investment and return and nothing else.¹⁹

¹⁹ Herbert Marcuse argued in his 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man* that capitalism reduces people to consumers, agents within the systems of capitalism with very little power beyond the ability to consume commodified items, which include those required to fulfil basic needs such as food and shelter. Neoliberalism's reduction of all things to economic logic is, of course, similarly one-dimensional.

This erosion is confirmed by the above listed scholars of cultural work and also by Marxist critics who wrote after Foucault under the rise of neoliberalism (Eagleton 2004, 2009, 2012, 2015; Hall 1988, 1997; Williams 2005; Anderson 1998), most notably Frederic Jameson, whose book *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) asserts that culture and the creative industries have been reduced to nothing more than another commercial object reduced to economic logic by the machinations of late capitalism. Literary critic Rachel Greenwald Smith, writing on post-9/11 novels, asserts that ‘Jameson argues that works of art should respond to the disorientations of contemporary life by offering readers attempts to locate themselves in world systems and therefore to claim agency in relation to them’ (2015, 28). Whether this agency is truly claimed and whether alternative comics manage to claim it will be explored throughout this thesis, but agency is key to the neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneur, reinventing himself as human capital each day. Greenwald Smith’s discussion of contemporary literature’s affective qualities based on neoliberal agency provides a valuable insight into how neoliberal logic permeates throughout literature and culture – an insight I will return to in all chapters of this thesis.

Foucault’s *homo oeconomicus* is the entrepreneurial ideal of both a producer and consumer operating successfully in a capitalist free market and generating capital. The *cartoonist oeconomicus*, therefore, is such a figure operating within comics as a field of cultural production, generating her own capital through the production of comics. Despite the numerous challenges presented by the neoliberal political economy, the *cartoonist oeconomicus* works within these constraints and precarious working conditions to produce her comics to the best of her ability, and any success she find can be attributed, in part if not in full, to her entrepreneurialism. This is not to say that

Marcuse advocated a ‘great refusal’ to this reduction, the push for which is felt strongly in contemporary opposition to neoliberalism and in the dialectic of comics work.

cartooning cannot be a site of absolute, passionate resistance to the neoliberal consensus (Cunningham 2014), nor that a successful *cartoonist oeconomicus* can be viewed as flourishing in all cases, nor that to become a *cartoonist oeconomicus* is to accept the philosophy of the neoliberal consensus in full, or even in part. Rather, I argue that the figure of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* simply works within the conditions of the neoliberal consensus because he or she has no choice – the alternative is not to make comics at all. Thus, to take on the characteristics of neoliberal oppression can, in fact, be seen as a site of resistance to it in the context of cultural production (Hebdige 1979, 1988). As Hebdige, drawing on Althusser (2006, 2015), asserts, subcultures and sites of resistance are defined by tensions between capital and labour – tensions that continue to become increasingly fraught as neoliberal ideology persistently redefines such relations in the context of the contemporary information economy (Ginsburgh 2013; Mason 2015).

I have advanced the idea of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* in my article ‘Bad Machinery and the Economics of Free Comics’ for the 2015 special issue of *Networking Knowledge* on digital comics. This thesis, however, is the first work to define and use the specific term. In the aforementioned article and in chapter four of this thesis I use the webcomic creator John Allison as a case study of the *homo oeconomicus*, outlining his economic model and concluding that, despite the challenging conditions of the market for comics, and especially webcomics that are free at the point of delivery and suffer from oversupply, Allison has had great success precisely because of his entrepreneurialism. Allison’s business model aligns broadly with Nicholas Lovell’s concept of ‘the curve’ – that is, if you offer the majority of your content (comics, prose, music, television, journalism) for free and charge for premium products, the vast majority of people who engage with your creation will only consume the free content,

but those that invest passionately in you and your content will pay enough for the premium products that your income will be the same as if you charged for your product at the point of entry as you might have done in an earlier economy that was not based on digital content (Lovell 2012, 2014).

I explore these models at length in chapter four – here, I include them to demonstrate the importance and significance of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* as a model for assessing comics as work, and as an example of the application of such a model to a contemporary cartoonist. This model will not work for all cartoonists and requires specific approaches and material and cultural contexts, but it does demonstrate that the neoliberal free market offers some opportunity for cartoonists, as well as perpetuating oppression and problematic issues of political economy such as income and wealth inequality, housing crises and rising personal and national debt, all of which become bound into the dialectic of comics work as defining tensions and examples of precarity. As Paul Mason asserts (confirmed by Srnicek and Williams 2015), again using Foucault as a springboard for defining the neoliberal man, ‘the most vital component of neoliberalism – the individualised worker and consumer, creating themselves anew as ‘human capital’ every morning and competing ferociously with each other – would have been impossible without network technology. Foucault’s prediction of what it would make us – ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ – looks all the more visionary because it was made when the only thing resembling the internet was a green-screen network, owned by the French state’ (2015, 24). Digital technology, therefore, is central to understanding the *cartoonist oeconomicus* and the dialectic of comics work under contemporary neoliberal political economy, and its effects resonate with the prescient philosophical works of Foucault on the emergence of neoliberalism.

The figure of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* also emerges in greater detail throughout the other chapters of this thesis, as each of them focuses on a specific aspect of comics, all of which are touched by neoliberalism and thus become an aspect of comics culture the cartoonist must work through as a *cartoonist oeconomicus*. The broader assertions of the contemporary study of cultural work and the creative industries about how to understand cultural autonomy (Rethman, Szeman and Coleman 2011) confirm the legitimacy of dialectical thinking in assessing creative work and creative workers. Sarah Brouillette, for example, in her assessments of contemporary British film, argues for the tensions inherent in cultural products made under neoliberalism as being insurmountable, and thus being definitive. The coda to Shane Meadows' short film *Somers Town*, she writes, is 'a moment of heightened ambivalence: an uninterpretable crux that highlights the similarly irresolvable nature of contradictions within contemporary creative work (wherein the social conditions of production themselves assign a privileged space to the asocial individual creator), and within the art-commerce relationship (wherein commercial value requires aesthetic value that only accumulates through disavowal of commerce, such that autonomy and market determination are an intimate dialectical pair)' (2009, 844). The following chapter of this thesis explores the works of Brouillette and those listed above in more detail, extrapolating the wider tension between labour and capital (Mephram 1972; Balibar et al. 2016) and applying it to comics, following its application to literature, film and various other art forms by scholars of creative work (Ginsburgh 2013; Deuze 2006). The layers of multiple tension identified here by Brouillette – between art and commerce but also between cultural autonomy and the free market determinism advanced by neoliberalism – find a place easily in the dialectic of comics

work and in an art form defined, formally, by the interplay between image and text (Barthes 1993; McCloud 1994; Harvey 1996).

The *Cartoonist Oeconomicus* and Comics Studies

The field of comics studies, itself an assemblage across disciplines and departments, finds its germ in formalist attempts to reduce comics to linguistic systems and thus to understand their structure.²⁰ This reduction has taken place in a number of historical surveys and accounts of the comic book in popular culture, written throughout the twentieth century and through to the present day. The field has also been shaped significantly by the input of cartoonists themselves, whose criticism, commentary and analysis of comics links closely with practice in a fashion that this thesis asserts is unique to the medium and is one of its defining characteristics. Scott McCloud's landmark book *Understanding Comics* (1993) has been highly influential on the field of comics studies for a number of reasons. Building upon Will Eisner's earlier *Comics and Sequential Art* (1986), also an influential text, McCloud attempted to write a history of the form and to create a book that would define the form of comics, in comics form. Although it was by no means the first book to provide analysis and criticism of the form in comics format, it was the first which was accessible to a broad audience beyond practitioners, the first to truly reach non-readers of comics (helped by the 'big three' transcendent literary graphic novels – *Watchmen*, *Maus* and *The Dark Knight Rises* – that had been released to great popularity in the preceding years), and the first to suggest a formalist way of breaking down comics into easily digestible linguistic units. McCloud's analysis in *Understanding Comics* makes excellent use of the visual and textual synergy of the comics form whilst also contextualising such an assessment within a concise overview of visual narrative and the history of visual and verbal

²⁰ Comics scholar and human geographer Jason Dittmer has also conceived of comics *as* an assemblage from a formalist perspective (2013), with works such as Chris Ware's *Building Stories* (2012) and setting the precedent for this.

communication. Thus, because of its popularity and relevance to anyone with the slightest interest in the comics form, *Understanding Comics* is something of a bedrock for comics studies, and has helped to ensure the field has maintained a close relationship and interplay with that which it criticises rather than maintaining a critical distance that might be more apparent for other related objects of study, such as literature and fine art. McCloud created his own system of six transitions between the panels of comics (1993, 74), the names of which are well-known by comics scholars and can provide an easy shorthand for describing the action of a comic where necessary, and also provide endless opportunities for comics formalists to debate the properties and narrative construction of comics. Also significantly, McCloud is responsible for the notion of ‘closure’ in comics, a term meaning the narrative effect of one panel’s image receiving and responding to the previous panel’s image, and for bringing the term ‘gutter’ – meaning the space between the panels in which much narrative takes place despite nothing being drawn or written there – to prominence.

Alongside McCloud’s innovation in Anglo-American criticism, comics formalism also emerged in the 1980s and 90s as an area of focus in Franco-Belgian comics criticism. The francophone criticism of comics is less preoccupied with literariness and institutional legitimation due to the Franco-Belgian tradition’s maintenance of the form as a celebrated tradition focused on multi-genre albums, books and magazines (*bandes dessinées*), rather than a mass-produced pulp object dominated by superheroes. Influential Belgian scholar Thierry Groensteen’s *The System of Comics* (2007)²¹ provided a forensic breakdown of comics into linguistic units and also coined a number of terms now used regularly by comics scholars, including the term ‘braiding,’ which is a similar term to McCloud’s ‘closure’ for defining what happens in one panel

²¹ Originally published in French as *Système de la bande dessinée* in 1999.

when it works to continue the narrative of the previous panel, a quality unique to comics' approach to narrative as it necessarily separates its story into panels, speech bubbles, thought bubbles, captions, frames, and other smaller units of narrative that leave gaps, or gutters, between them.

The definitions, terminology and systems of McCloud and Groensteen continue to be disputed and debated (Horrocks 2000; Cohn 2014), and there still exists a predilection towards discussing comics as language, or a linguistic system, or attempts to understand comics through primarily formalist means (Miodrag 2013; Carrier 2000; Saraceni 2003; Cohn 2014; Smolderen 2014; Postema 2013, etc). However, in the past decade at least, the field has necessarily begun to move away from formalism as it has grown in size and scope. This thesis makes a conscious effort to distance the study of comics from formalism whilst acknowledging that an understanding of the construction of comics as an art form and a broad knowledge of the inner workings of the visual narrative present in comics is of great use to all comics scholars and to anyone wishing to understand the medium. In other words, I do not feel the need to pursue any lines of inquiry into the formal construction of comics or to attempt to dispute any existing theories of comics and visual narrative as a system, as these are well-rehearsed debates within the field. Rather, I acknowledge that comics have a specific visual nature and that graphic narrative should be understood as a distinct art form, but pursuing my own analysis of the comics work dialectic and the *cartoonist oeconomicus* do not require such analyses as an integral informant. However, I would also acknowledge that, on a basic level, formalism has enlightened comics scholars to the high level of complexity involved in the conception and creation of comics, and this has informed my own conception of the comics work dialectic as a complex structure. Put simply, because visual narrative requires not just the creation of words and images but also a coherent

narrative synergy between these two elements, the creation of comics is necessarily a more difficult endeavor than creating fine art, prose writing, or illustration, on a basic material level, perhaps best understood through Peterson's production of culture perspective. Such an understanding of comics, therefore, does make a contribution to the understanding of the working conditions and culture of working in comics that I advance here, and is certainly a branch in the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) of the auteur *cartoonist oeconomicus* under neoliberalism.²²

Comics studies has been concerned, with good reason, about comics' legitimation and cultural status in and outside the academy, although this too has become less of a concern as the corpus of academic texts on comics has grown, providing a legitimation in and of itself (Dunning 2014; Stein and Thon 2015; Krusemark 2015). Books such as Paul Lopes' *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (2009) and Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey's *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (2014), have noted the importance of the term 'graphic novel' as a marker

²² Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome – in short, the post-structuralist idea of capitalist society and culture as having endless roots, branches and ruptures with which one can define and understand it – has proved useful throughout my research as I have attempted to conceive of a deep understanding of the character of comics work. However, once I arrived at the idea of defining comics work as a dialectic, the rhizome became something of an overcomplication, so it does not feature throughout as part of the argument of this thesis, but it is important and useful for understanding the field of comics work and the 'comics art world' (Beatty 2012). The rhizome is 'a map and not a tracing' and not 'a simple dualism' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 2). A dialectic could be read as such a dualism in that it requires an interplay between two concepts, but comics work can also be read as rhizomatic and such thinking can inform the idea of the dialectic of comics work. A project beyond the scope of my thesis – indeed, perhaps my own postdoctoral study – may pursue a more rhizomatic reading of comics work and make deeper investigations into understanding these roots and ruptures. For this thesis, auteurism and collective production loom the largest as two distinct philosophical factors in trying to understand, define and process the concept of comics work. However, it should be acknowledged that the distinct elements analysed throughout this thesis (art education, colour and aesthetics, physical labour, digital technology, capitalism, economics, etc) can be conceived of as a rhizome, with numerous ongoing roots, branches and ruptures such as the disruption to capitalism by digital technology and media convergence, and early in my research I conceived of comics work as rhizomatic before the dialectic emerged. I believe the dialectic is a more useful model for the argument of a doctoral thesis on alternative comics, because it ties in completely with Charles Hatfield's pivotal idea of comics as an "art of tensions" (2005) and the numerous tensions identified throughout this thesis. Dialectical thinking allows for the argument that comics work is *defined* by certain tensions; rhizomatic thinking does not, or at least not readily. However, it is certainly a useful informant, as is Deleuze's writing on Foucault (2006), his friend and contemporary. This book strengthens Foucault's significance as a philosopher whose work allows for a deep understanding of power relations and political economy and whose analyses of power significantly inform this thesis' reading of neoliberalism, as Deleuze's assessment of the Foucauldian self exposes him as a man of resistance and desire, two essential elements in the dialectic of comics work.

of comics' attempts to achieve literary status, which they have achieved through the graphic novel format (book-length comics).²³ However, many scholars see the term as euphemistic at best and an outright misnomer at worst. Most cartoonists (note that few creators of comics will ever choose to identify as a 'graphic novelist' themselves, whereas 'cartoonist' is a widely accepted and broad term for generalist comics creators who are not tied to a specific role in the production process as part of a division of labour) accept the term as a necessity of marketing for a comic that happens to be book-length, or which collects a number of issues of a previously published comic series or webcomic in a book, but do not invest much in it. However, to the consumer, there still exists a perception that 'comic' means lowbrow trash and 'graphic novel' means a comic that has managed to elevate itself to the literary and is thus exceptional. Bart Beaty has explored this well in all his books, most notably *Comics Versus Art* (2012), which examines comics' aspirations relative to both the literary world and the art world, concluding that such aspirations have moved comics towards a dialectic, and that the relationship of comics to other art forms and art worlds continues to be one of tensions (this is also explored in Heer & Worcester 2007; Williams & Lyons 2010; Sabin 2001, 2010; Chute 2011; Ball & Kuhlman 2010). I argue in this thesis that these tensions, frame and define the dialectic of comics work.

Charles Hatfield's landmark book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2006), after asserting that alternative comics have become a literary form as a result of the graphic novel boom since the 1980, takes this line of definition further and concludes that comics are 'an art of tensions' – between image and text, between producers and consumers, between art and commerce, between writers and artists, between literature and popular culture, between histories and political economies,

²³ Works that have contributed to the wider perception of the graphic novel as literary include Auster 2005; Moore & Gibbons 2014; Doucet 2011; Eisner 2005, 2008; Thompson 2003; Seth 2003, 2012; and Tomine 2008, 2009, 2012, 2015.

between language and literacy, between differing philosophical approaches (Meskin & Cook 2014). Comics studies, as a highly interdisciplinary field, dedicates itself to defining, unravelling and portraying these tensions, and seeking to understand comics through them. The *cartoonist oeconomicus*, under neoliberal political economy, is a site of all these tensions as they are found in the dialectic of comics work, and thus I aim to unite comics scholars in the study of the political economy of comics, drawing from the majority of their texts and concerns to create a work useful to the majority of them in this thesis. I hope that this thesis will aid their own analyses of, for example, colour in comics, or digital comics, which are also growing areas of concern. This thesis' conclusion, therefore, will aim to unify these tensions in an accessible dialectic with broad applications for comics scholars across departments and institutions.²⁴

Towards a Practice-Informed Comics Scholarship

The inclusion of my own creative practice in comics, as well as comics drawn specifically for inclusion in this thesis, serves to underpin a general philosophical commentary on the character of contemporary cartooning and on the quality of comics studies and comics scholars. I have found during the course of my studies and my numerous interactions around the world with the international comics studies community that most comics scholars are creative practitioners to some degree, and in many cases are as engaged in the creation of comics as the cartoonists they study and criticise, if not more so by virtue of being *both* a scholar and a practitioner. This close

²⁴ Although this thesis focuses on comics work specifically, it must be acknowledged here that comics studies has diversified into numerous different areas in the present decade, and there are now various subcategories of comics scholarship that make for a lively and eclectic field of study and prove that comics, as an art form, can have incredibly broad applications and theoretical assessments. These include Graphic Medicine (Williams 2014; Czerwec et al. 2015), Graphic Journalism (Chute 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2016), Graphic Justice (Giddens 2014) and Graphic Policy (graphicpolicy.com, 2016), among other fields of inquiry such as transnational perspectives (Stein et al 2014 and regionalised areas of study such as theories of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* (Beaty and Miller 2014). Comics work, as a way of understanding how comics are created, will intersect with all of these subsections of comics studies and provide relevant insight and analysis to comics scholars with any particular focus, as my book *Cultures of Comics Work* (2016) will also demonstrate.

engagement brings a specific and unique quality to comics scholarship as a result of this relationship. The annual comics studies conference Comics Forum in Leeds has run as part of the wider comics festival Thought Bubble since its inception in 2008, and the annual CSSC (Canadian Society for the Study of Comics) functions similarly as part of the world-renowned TCAF (Toronto Comic Art Festival). When putting together our book, *Cultures of Comics Work*, Casey Brienza and I received a number of submissions from practitioners and from scholars whose practice provided a focus for their academic work and their engagement with the field of comics studies. One such chapter, by Ahmed Jameel, directly engaged with his own collaborative work and the struggle for autonomy therein, drawing on the work of other practice-informed scholars such as Simon Grennan (2011) and major theories of authorship such as those of Roland Barthes (1977), Michel Foucault (1980) and Charles Green (2001). Similarly, Annick Pellegrin presented a first-hand account of her input as a cultural consultant into a recent *Spirou* album (Vehlmann and Yoann, 2012), allowing us as editors to understand the labours behind a work of comic art objectively and directly. As the study of the creative industries, and of comics in particular, begins to open itself to a closer dialogue between scholarship and creative practice as demonstrated by this, the inclusion of my own practice in this doctoral thesis becomes more useful, and is a significant indicator of this movement within the field. And indeed, returning to my earlier commentary on the field's genesis, two of the most influential works in the field (Eisner 1985, McCloud 1993) were created by authors who were cartoonists first, and academics and critics second. Similarly, books such as Ivan Brunetti's *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice* (2011) and *Aesthetics: A Memoir* (2013) provide instructional guides to cartooning from the cartoonist's perspective whilst also offering philosophical commentary on what it means to be a cartoonist and to identify as a cartoonist or comics worker. The field of

comics studies has been shaped by practitioners from the outset, and this thesis aims to continue this shaping.

The approach to comics set out here, refined from the introduction of *Cultures of Comics Work*, benefits significantly from the inclusion of practice as a contributor to a sociologically-informed approach. This is consistent with the often auteur-driven focus on creators and creative workers that has, of late, become a burgeoning area of focus within the humanities – broadly enough to have been referred to as a ‘labour turn’ by Benjamin Woo (2015) when contextualising comics in this movement and to have been discussed as an important concern for comics scholarship by Barbara Postema (2014). Such scholarship necessarily relies significantly upon sources such as interviews, first-hand accounts and data (such as the results of Woo’s 2014 survey of the comics industry), and the direct inclusion of the theory and philosophy of cartoonists and practitioners is thus a natural fit for such scholarship. For this thesis, the comics work approach is refined for a literary focus and underpinned by the contextualising of work in comics within neoliberalism, taking a narrower approach and one that relies on theory rather than fieldwork, which is not a component of this thesis and has not been a part of my research. The inclusion of practice is therefore not essential, but it provides a dimension consistent with the various disciplines drawn upon to create the refined comics work approach to analysing comics, and helps to draw the interdisciplinary sources of this thesis together in a unique and personalised fashion, aiding theory with contemporary situationism and historicism consistent with the informant sociological approaches. Thus, the inclusion of practice will become another layer of meaning in the comics work dialectic.

Working on Living Creators

It should be noted that comics scholarship is beginning to acknowledge that working on living creators is a scholarly endeavour which brings with it questions of practice, ethics, interpretation and what constitutes an academic source, as well as the insights we can gain from them. Comics Forum followed its themed month on cultural work (the content of which was the springboard for *Cultures of Comics Work*) with an article by Canadian comics scholar Barbara Postema discussing this issue in light of my own interpretations of the works of autobiographical cartoonists Jeffrey Brown and James Kochalka, in the context of their balance between their cartooning and their day jobs, as depicted in their autobiographical comics. Postema's conclusion, which I support and which many of the discussions in this thesis will support, was that the 'conditions can indeed open new doors for textual interpretation' (Postema 2014), but it can often be too personal an insight if the creator is asked directly or too explicitly about certain elements of academic analysis or about highly personal aspects of the production or content of their comics.

This tension is demonstrated by numerous interviews and panel discussions in which Alison Bechdel, although eloquent and insightful when discussing her work, has been reluctant to answer deeply personal questions about her autobiographical comics, despite their overt depictions of her various traumas (Bechdel 2013). As such, I use interviews in my research and I believe they provide invaluable insight into the conditions of the creator and the conception of the dialectic of comics work, the ultimate aim of this thesis. Interviews and other creators' insights such as personal blogs provide vital information about the commercial and cultural production which constitutes their cartooning and are used as such, but I always return them to the scholarly contexts in comics studies and literary criticism I have outlined.

Chapter One

‘A Singular Creative Vision’ – Work in Alternative Comics and the Comics Auteur under Neoliberalism

The rise of alternative comics, and the comic book's late transformation from a cheap, mass-produced object to a valuable, expensive one packaged as the graphic novel, is one driven by auteurs. A 'narrow auteurist vision of production' (Brienza 2013) persists, and is an assessment of comics that is likely to exclude crucial workers and ignore significant labours involved, such as those of the artist when working with a famous writer such as Alan Moore, or those of the letterer or colourist. There is a significant and powerful mythology surrounding the figures responsible for creating alternative comics (and in fact mainstream comics also), and who are credited with the advancement and development of the form. This narrative, the narrative of Robert Crumb (2012), of Chris Ware (2001, 2009, 2010, 2011), of Jeff Smith (2004, 2007), of Osamu Tezuka (2015), of Hergé (2015), of Charles Burns (2005), of Alison Bechdel (2006, 2008, 2013), of Marjane Satrapi (2008), of Daniel Clowes (2000, 2006, 2015) – to name but a handful of those to whom this mythology is attached – is more often than not one of a single author, a lone cartoonist, an artist with a vision all their own. The comics auteur has greater power than those auteurs mythologised by cinema studies, from which this term originates. Moreover, its application fits neatly not just with formalist readings of comics but also with many of the dominant analyses and ideas surrounding production in the literary study of comics thus far. The formalist assessments of Scott McCloud (1993), Will Eisner (1986), Neil Cohn (2013) and David Carrier (2000), for example, make use of terminology from film, while Jared Gardner makes a convincing case for comics and film being born together at the turn of the 20th

century in his book *Projections* (2011); elsewhere in comics studies, the readings of Charles Hatfield (2005), Robert C. Harvey (1996), Paul Lopes (2009) and Paul Gravett (2013) risk privileging an auteurist vision of comics production, and such a vision has disseminated into the wider field.

As such, there exists a significant precedent for the use of the term *auteur* in comics studies. However, in this chapter I wish to rethink and reframe this usage, on two different levels and in two different contexts. Firstly, there is a growing backlash among comics scholars at present against a perceived auteurist leaning in comics studies, which has traditionally dealt with writers such as Alan Moore²⁵ as the sole creative force behind a comic. In this prevalent reading a comic is viewed as a text in the same vein as a novel or other object of literary study by many of the significant contributions to the field thus far. This is a consequence of the legitimization of comics being driven by literature scholars, in turn a direct consequence of the rise of the graphic novel format which hit its peak with Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer win in 1992 for his unique, visceral and evocative holocaust memoir *Maus*. As the field of comics studies has grown, however, scholars from disciplines such as art history, media studies, illustration and fine art have begun to make contributions which attempt a refocus on the hybridity of comic art. This movement denies literary auteurism by its very nature, as it forces engagement with the aspects of a comic that cannot be created by a writer-

²⁵ Alan Moore is not discussed at length in this thesis, although he is an interesting figure within comics – he is perhaps the comics writer most canonised as an auteur by fans and critics. Whilst a discussion of Moore as fulfilling Foucault's author-function and pushing the auteurist narrative could make a valuable contribution to this thesis, my focus is on alternative comics specifically, as defined by Charles Hatfield (2006). This is because alternative comics, by definition, constitute acts of resistance and are thus easily applicable to dialectical thinking. There is also already an excess of scholarship and critical work on Moore (Man and Millidge 2003; Whitson 2006; Gray 2012; Green 2012; Parkin 2013), to which I do not wish to add to – instead, I wish to use alternative cartoonists whose work makes strong cases for the conception of the dialectic of comics work, but also cartoonists who have received comparatively little or no critical and/or scholarly attention.

auteur alone, such as the art, but also the various layers of comic production – pencils, inks, colours and letters, all of which may be created by a team of cultural workers.

Secondly, the auteur theory of comics production is antithetical to the notion of ‘cultural work,’ an inclusive term and one which I borrow here from sociologists and media scholars. These fields have developed and expanded upon the ideas of literary Marxism to ensure they apply to all those who are involved in the creative industries, resulting in a rethinking of production which is enlightening in relation to comics and comic art. This has resulted in the term ‘comics work,’ which I argue is a dialectic defined by many inherent tensions, the most significant tension being that between the auteurist vision of comics production and the collective nature of comics production, with its numerous agents.

In this chapter, building upon Comics Forum's series on cultural work, I will advance the application of these readings of comic art in order to explore in detail the gap, or gutter, between auteurism and collective production. This chapter's focus is on the lone cartoonist and how such a status engages with the notions of the cultural worker, the auteur, and the labourer in a traditionally Marxist sense, as well as on how alternative cartoonists resist and complicate these labels. Using the examples of contemporary cartoonists Michel Rabagliati, Jeff Smith and John Porcellino – all of whom are auteurs in alternative comics who have faced varying challenges under neoliberal political economy – I will continue with the use of the term *cartoonist oeconomicus* as a springboard for discussions of the auteur in the context of neoliberalism and will further explore its root in Foucault's idea of the *homo oeconomicus*. In my conclusion I present a further developed model of how to understand the lone cartoonist as a worker and the elements that can make up such an understanding, building these elements from literary criticism, comics scholarship and

media criticism. Consistent with comics studies' nature, I take an interdisciplinary approach appropriate to comics studies as a burgeoning field of scholarship, employing the theories of Foucault, augmented by those of Dick Hebdige, Wendy Brown, Paul Mason, Rachel Greenwald Smith, and other contemporary scholarship on cultural work, neoliberalism and postcapitalism.

Precarious cartooning in Québec: Michel Rabagliati's Complicated Version of Freedom

Michel Rabagliati is a Québécois cartoonist who grew up in Montreal, and worked for a number of years as a graphic designer and cartoonist before writing and drawing his first comic, *Paul à la Campagne*, published in 1999 by La Pâstèque.²⁶ His books have been published in English by Drawn & Quarterly and Conundrum Press, both significant and influential Canadian anglophone comics publishers, and Drawn & Quarterly are partly responsible for his move into comics at what most people tend to regard as a relatively late stage of his career.²⁷

Rabagliati's *Paul* stories are often described as 'semi-autobiographical,' though perhaps a more useful description is that by Craig Fischer in *The Comics Journal* of Paul as 'Rabagliati in all but name' (Fischer 2014). The *Paul* graphic novels are all self-contained stories which depict various episodes in the life of Paul, Rabagliati's avatar, such as a summer fishing trip as an early middle-aged man or a summer spent working at a scout camp having just left school. His depictions of growing up in Montreal, such as those depicted in Figure 2.1, are vivid, and are augmented by autobiographical detail to give charming, nuanced portraits of life in Québec with its various joys and relatable problems.

²⁶ La Pâstèque is a francophone small press which almost exclusively publishes Québécois comics.

²⁷ Rabagliati was inspired to become a cartoonist, after twenty years working in the related field of graphic design, when Drawn & Quarterly's publisher Chris Oliveros hired him to redesign their logo. Conversations with Oliveros, as well as with other Québécois publishers and artists including Jimmy Beaulieu and La Pâstèque (Marshall 2012), drove him to try his hand at cartooning when he was around forty years old, fulfilling his childhood dream of becoming a cartoonist like Hergé (McConnell 2013).

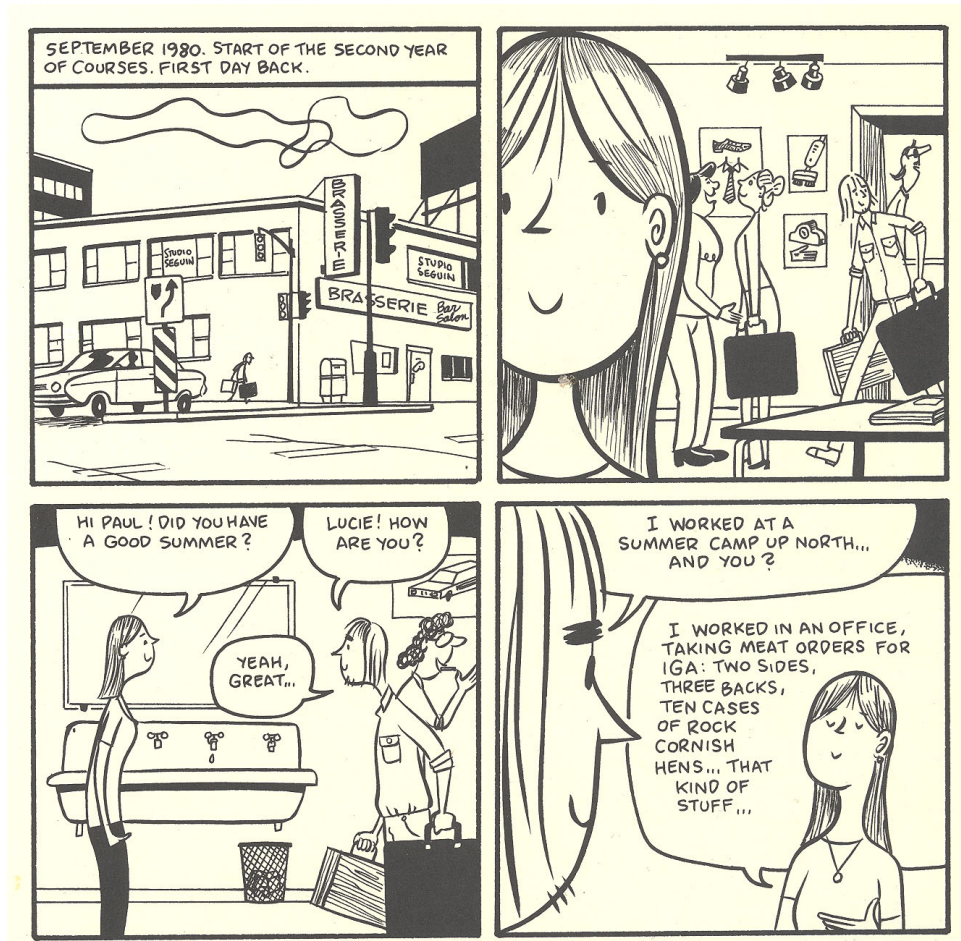


Figure 2.1. Michel Rabagliati, *Paul Moves Out* (2005, np)

In an interview with the Canadian newspaper *The Toronto Star* in 2008, Rabagliati explained the autobiographical details present in his books in the following terms: ‘Sometimes I put some fiction there, 5 to 10 per cent, to give it a snappier story and (make it) more interesting for the reader. Because at the end, I want a nice book that's captivating and interesting to read’ (Mudhar 2008). A character which is 95% made up of the creator's personal traits, and deliberately and specifically so as confirmed directly by the creator, is one we can read as the author's avatar, born of auteurism and personal self-expression.²⁸

²⁸ Autobiographical narratives dominate the contemporary graphic novel format and are common in alternative comics. I believe that this proliferation of autobiography is due to the rise of auteurism and the cultural and philosophical move towards individualism that stems from the rise of neoliberalism. A more detailed discussion of this theory is outside the scope of this thesis, but it should be noted that

In the same Toronto Star interview, Rabagliati stated:

‘I kind of forgot about comics for about 25 years...I started doing comics around when I turned 40 and stopped doing graphic design and illustration work. I'm that kind of guy and I do these kinds of moves in my life and they're pretty hazardous sometimes. Now it's paying off a little,’ he said. ‘I'm 47 years old, I'm not supposed to do that. I'm supposed to have RRSPs at the bank, because I have a family and a house, it's pretty perilous. It's a career change you don't usually do at that age’ (Mudhar 2008).

The language used here presents the foundation of the conditions of Rabagliati's cultural production, and by extension those of the lone cartoonist, the auteurist comics worker. The words ‘perilous’ and ‘hazardous’ are not ones traditionally associated with the desk-bound labour of cartooning, but they are indicative concepts which cartoonists use regularly and without hesitation, and ones that are common in discussions of the contemporary creative labour market in the west (Mason 2015; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Woo 2015; Beck 2002; Ross 2010; Florida 2014). Chris Ware, an exemplary auteur cartoonist, suggests in Figure 1.2 that drawing cartoons will ruin your life, leaving you physically broken, poor and useless. Ware’s depiction of the cartoonist (and in fact his own persona, both on and off the page) is, however, one of slow, grinding, inevitable negativity rather than one beset with the immediacy of peril and precarity. Either way, though Ware and Rabagliati’s works support the view that the life of the cartoonist is one of uncertainty and severe instability, and of little to no reward, generating no capital – economic or cultural.

examination of autobiographical comics lends itself easily to theories of auteurism and to my arguments in this thesis for the importance of neoliberal individualism to creative production. An in-depth analysis of the critical importance of autobiographical comics to the progress of the art form and to comics studies can be found in Elisabeth El-Refaie’s book *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (2014).

This picture of Rabagliati's work as unstable emerges in other interviews with him, including one he recorded for the comics podcast *Inkstuds* in February 2013 following the English language release of his book *Paul Joins The Scouts*.²⁹ The interview affirms his assertions about his work and career in the aforementioned *Toronto Star* interview, as well as other interviews on podcasts, in newspapers, and for blogs (Fischer 2010, Rabaglitai 2009). Rabagliati states on the podcast that his main reason for moving from graphic design and commercial illustration into comics was that he 'wanted to do something more creative' (2013). He also describes the transition into comics from commercial design as a 'back to basics' process associated with the materialism of ink and paper, in turn associating his mercenary client-based graphic design and illustration work with the computer. Rabagliati's earlier book *Paul Goes Fishing* (2008) explicitly depicts the effects of technological development on the labour force in Montreal and their subsequent economic conditions, as well as the physiological effects of being glued to a computer and the demands of the ever-expanding corporations that the workforce. In particular, those engaged in the character Paul's comics-related field of graphic design continue purchasing ever more expensive commodities from tech companies in the cyclical processes of commerce which are the bedrock of late capitalism. Echoing Ware's advert for cartooning, Rabagliati's worker is depicted as a grotesque figure, broken and deranged by endless hours working at his overpriced Apple Macintosh. The anticapitalist sentiment of Rabagliati's work and sense of resistance is explicit here: he ends this chapter of the book with a black screen, shutting down, a simple and effective image, accompanied by the text 'we really got screwed' (Figure 2.2).

²⁹ The original French edition is titled *Paul au Parc* (2011).

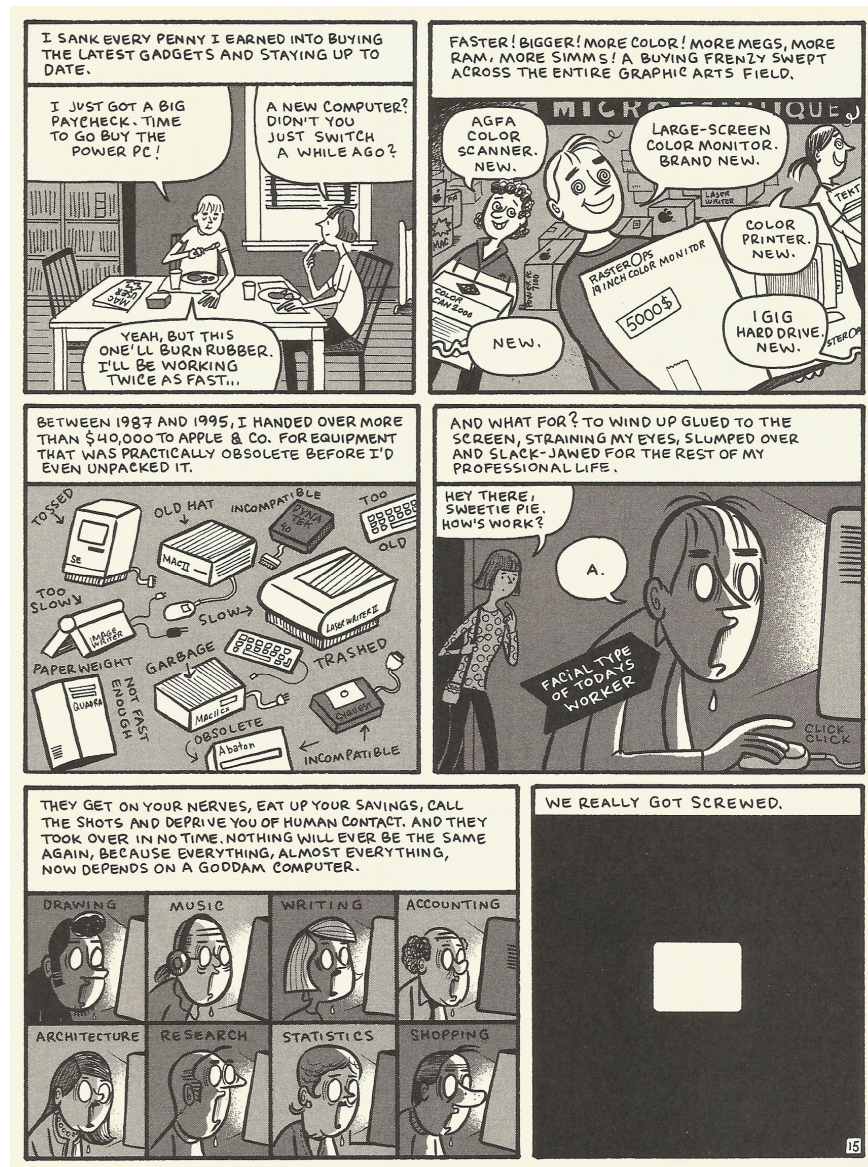


Figure 2.2. Michel Rabagliati, *Paul Goes Fishing* (2008, 15)

The worker 'getting screwed' is a familiar scenario (Figure 1.2). But despite being forced into a growing precariat (Woo 2015; Mason 2015; Smicek & Williams 2015), there are often trade-offs for the cartoonist as a worker. In my aforementioned article (Johnston 2013) on the working conditions of Brown and Kochalka, I concluded that both cartoonists were positive about having a day job to pay the bills, as long as your job 'doesn't want to make you vomit,' but both had to overcome the economic and practical concerns of the tension between labour and capital before they could become successful and effective cartoonists under neoliberalism. The preceding article in the

series by Benjamin Woo asserted, through Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997), that it is difficult to conceive of comics as labour because the labour of cartoonists is obscured by the capitalist systems which surround them and in which they are forced to operate.³⁰ Consequently, Woo asserts, when we do conceive of comics as labour, we find that they are jobs with 'precarious conditions and uneven rewards,' but jobs that come with autonomy (2013). This tension between autonomy and instability, creating the need for a 'trade-off' in the emergent condition of precarity, represents a layer in the dialectic of comics work that connects it explicitly to the material and economic conditions of production. Casey Brienza's conclusion to the themed month surveyed the articles and drew from them that there were myriad factors surrounding comics and cultural production, and that the surface of these is only just being scratched by comics scholars.

Dick Hebdige's landmark book *Subculture*, to which I return at various points in this thesis to assert the radicalism of comics work within its dialectical definition, provides telling reminders that the broader context of late capitalism and its mass commercialism creates such dialectics, not just in the world of art, but in workers in a broader context. 'The advent of the mass media,' Hebdige writes, 'changes in the constitution of the family, in the organization of school and work, shifts in the relative status of work and leisure, all served to fragment and polarize the working-class community, producing a series of marginal discourses' (1979, 74). Comics work is just such a marginal discourse – marginalized by the commercial imperative of late capitalism that it cannot fulfil, but must engage with on some level, as labour exists in this context and only in this context for comics workers.

³⁰ This assessment of cultural work is echoed in Adorno's *The Culture Industry* collection, edited by J.M. Bernstein (2001), and in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1981), as well as in recent journalistic assessments of the emergent post-work economy (Dominus 2016; Chakraborty 2016).

Brienza's introduction and conclusion to Comics Forum's themed month on cultural work made major reference to British media and communications scholars David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker. Hesmondhalgh and Baker's working definition of cultural work is useful here as an indicator of how sociological analysis can contribute to the interdisciplinary assemblage of comics studies, and here how we can understand Rabagliati's particular conditions as a comics worker, expressed through his avatar, Paul. Hesmondhalgh and Baker's definition features in their book *Creative Labour* (2011), and is an inclusive definition that asserts that anyone who works in a creative industry should be viewed as a cultural worker, as their labour makes a contribution to a cultural product – whether this is a comic book, a film, a television programme, a novel, a website, etc. We can assume from this definition that both Paul as a graphic designer and Rabagliati as a cartoonist are cultural workers – a particular type of broadly defined worker with its own sociological context in scholarship, but a worker nonetheless. This is a label which particularly suits the assessment of the working conditions of the lone cartoonist made by Rabagliati in his comics and by my own research. Thus, comics work can be read as a subset of cultural work, though it of course has its own specific character, defined by tensions.

In their article entitled 'A very complicated version of freedom' in the journal *Poetics* (2011) Hesmondhalgh and Baker survey a number of workers in the British industries of television production and journalism, and find through interviews and surveys that the pay is low, the hours long and the terms of employment precarious and insecure across the board – a now familiar story under neoliberal political economy. However, they find that autonomy is the trade-off, and they back this up by quoting fellow theorist of cultural work, Mark Banks. In his book *The Politics of Cultural Work* he writes 'To be (or to appear to be) in control of one's destiny is what encourages

workers to endorse the systems put in place to expedite flexible production' (2007, 55). This is another way of describing a life in cultural work as a complicated version of freedom. As alternative cartooning performed by a lone cartoonist, by its very nature is a work that exists purely within the structures of precarious freelance work and unstable self-employment, with a small number of exceptions. For what choice does an alternative cartoonist have but to submit to flexible production in the creation and distribution of their works? Re-casting this as autonomy and allowing for an element of choice ties in with Hebdige's idea that a resistance to the dominance of such structures of political economy is possible even whilst being subjugated by it, neatly surmised as 'artisan capitalism' (1979, 106; cf Lyons 2011, 114; Frank 1998; Sabin 2002; McGuigan 2009). Some characteristics of subjugation may be used to the advantage of the subjugated, and used to provide definition and identity. In the case of comics work, precarity is easily recast as autonomy and entrepreneurialism by the prevailing culture of neoliberalism (Ross 2010; Mazzucato 2015; Szeman 2015).

Hesmondhalgh and Baker, along with Banks, also bring to the fore the idea of 'self-exploitation,' an idea with a history within Marxist criticism and the study of labour (Williams 1977). Within the emergent dialectic, comics work can be viewed as exploitative in the traditional Marxist sense of capitalism being a societal system based on exploitation of workers (Marx 2008, Gramsci & Forgacs 2000, Fonseca 2016). Cartoonists, such as Rabagliati, Ware and Clowes, exploit themselves like other cultural workers, as Banks, Hesmondhalgh and Baker suggest, in exchange for creative fulfillment and autonomy in their work – if they can work and accrue economic capital as a cartoonist at all, and not have to fund it with surplus capital provided by a 'day job.' Brown and Kochalka were required to have day jobs when creating their collaborative comic *Conversation #2* (2005), in which they portray non-comics work by

turns as an unfortunate drudgery and as a positive facilitator of their art (Johnston 2013). Significantly, however, both have managed to quit their day jobs since the publication of that comic, and now make their livings as cartoonists and illustrators, submitting to the more precarious nature of this work for the trade-off of autonomy and self-fulfilment, which may be seen as self-exploitation, or perhaps a dialectical mode of existence – a trade-off, after all, is the realisation and acceptance of a tension.

Self-exploitation may also been seen, in Hebdige's terms, as an act of dialectical resistance similar to that of the subjugated punk whose aesthetic becomes a 'commodity form' (1979, 94). 'It is therefore difficult,' Hebdige continues, 'to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures' (95). Comics work thus constitutes a subculture, and such a constitution facilitates dialectical definition, a layer of which is self-exploitation. Rabagliati's situation, seen through the lens of his avatar, Paul, is similar to that of Brown and Kochalka, although there is only the smallest indication that Paul may become a cartoonist. Each *Paul* book is self-contained and they are not released in chronological order, so Paul could become a cartoonist in a later volume. But at present, there are only small snippets of this desire from which we can draw indications of Rabagliati's reasons for submitting to the conditions of comics work, which so far appear insecure, and at the sharp end of the mercy of the neoliberal free market. The only hints we have that Paul could become a comic artist are a conversation about future careers in *Paul Joins the Scouts*, in which Paul weakly suggests he might want to become a cartoonist before changing the subject. The end of the book shows each of the boys grown up and in their chosen careers, each displaying the tools of their trade, their characters defined by the outward manifestations of physical labour, with Paul

conspicuous by his absence. These single images provide neat shorthands for the hegemonies of labour in the free market (Hebdige 1979, 17), but also provide distance between comics work and other forms of work, enforcing the idea of comics work's precarity (Woo 2014, 2015).

The next hint of Paul being a cartoonist comes later on in his life, in *Paul Goes Fishing*, where he's in his thirties, married, with a young daughter. He attempts a sketch and quickly dismisses himself, his work being 'not what you'd call a Renoir' (2008, 57). Clearly, his work as a cartoonist does not have the potential to earn significant capital – if he were to make it work as a career, he would have to self-exploit and submit to precarious working conditions to do so. Comics work seems, therefore, not to be a serious consideration for Paul in his early life despite his explicit and implicit desire to be a cartoonist and to emulate the artists he admires. But there are, of course, other opportunities, such as becoming a helicopter pilot – a dream similarly disconnected from the realities of submitting to the late capitalist economic systems, brought home in the gallery of workers at the end of the book. However, throughout the *Paul* books there are other depictions of labour which provide a counterpart to comics work and which strengthen the idea of both comics work and non-comics work being dialectical under neoliberalism.

The first example, chronologically, is Paul's first job, depicted in the opening of *Paul has a Summer Job*. On the first page of the book, we are shown a young Paul, eighteen years old, working in a print shop, a labour which is depicted as highly manual and physically demanding. He's sweating, and saying 'geez! I hope I'm not stuck here for 25 years' (2003, 3). On the following page he says, quite damningly, 'The life of a working stiff was more boring than I could have imagined. Eat, work, sleep. I was getting a glimpse of what it really means' (4). Does such a routine, however

exaggerated, leave any time for artistic endeavours, or for realizing Paul's boyhood dream of cartooning in any way? In this imagined world, there is no place for cartooning or for any work other than manual labour. Paul, and therefore Michel Rabagliati, sets himself up in his comics as against the daily grind of work, and he is later depicted as a freelance graphic designer in the books which narrate his adulthood.

Figure 2.2 depicts Paul's purchase of Apple technology for graphic design offering an escape from, in his words on the previous page, the 'drudgery' of manual work at the drawing board. Unsurprisingly, though, this comes at a significant price in terms of economic capital but also seemingly in terms of health, which may be understood as 'human capital' in the sense of Foucault's *homo oeconomicus*, described by Paul Mason as reinventing himself anew as human capital each day (2015, 24). A contradiction emerges, therefore, between neoliberalism's reinvention of bodies as human capital and neoliberalism's adverse effects on physical and mental health.³¹ Focusing on economic capital, Paul spends \$40,000 on Apple products, a huge amount of money for a freelance designer. Rabagliati depicts this modern worker as a stretched, monstrous, comically enlarged figure visually echoing the style of Robert Crumb and the sixties underground cartoonists who were the first to break away from the capitalist structures of mainstream comics. This depiction also provides a significant tension between the visual and textual narratives which reminds us of Charles Hatfield's description of comics as 'an art of tensions.' Paul concludes his Apple anecdote with a simple depiction of a computer screen shutting down, accompanied by the caption 'we really got screwed.' Screwed by Apple, a multinational and highly profitable corporation, who have in this depiction remade the working practice of graphic

³¹ This thesis does not cover in detail the burgeoning Graphic Medicine movement or the exponential growth of contemporary comics depicting and therapeutically analysing mental and physical health issues (graphicmedicine.org, 2016). However, an understanding of these is of use contextually, as neoliberalism is thought by many to be having an adverse effect on health, and mental health in particular (Teghtsoonian 2009; Filar 2014). For more information, see <http://www.graphicmedicine.org/>.

designers, and by extension other cultural workers, into an exploitation of the worker designed to extract more capital from them, a corporation acting as a *homo oeconomicus*. Within just two pages the narrative moves swiftly away from the drudgery of the drawing board to a greater drudgery associated with technology and with corporations, and therefore with exploitative capitalism. This depiction characterises not just the mainstream comics against which lone cartoonists are inevitably pitted in their endeavours, but also the work of freelancers in the cultural and creative industries. Exploitation and peril therefore occur across the board, in all the conceptions of work depicted in Rabagliati's comics. Comics work, therefore, although it has a specific character, shares the qualities of precariousness with all other types of work under neoliberalism, whilst simultaneously promising an escape from the drudgery of 'regular' non-creative work.

The insecure nature of comics work is confirmed by Rabagliati in the interviews cited above – especially in the *Inkstuds* interview, where he suggests that he 'wanted to do something more creative' and also describes his return to comics as a 'back to basics' process. In the context of the examples given above from the *Paul* graphic novels, we can now read this as a process of escape from the exploitations of work and, specifically, as a chance to gain the autonomy, control and freedom, however complex, that Hesmondhalgh, Baker and Banks theorise are central to the choice of dedicating oneself to cultural work and to the process of self-exploitation that characterizes comics work. Rabagliati's background and the biographical details he offers us in interviews, along with specific readings of his *Paul* comics and the avatar therein, show that comics are a particular form of cultural work which can offer fulfilment through cultural autonomy and material freedom. Rabagliati made this choice knowing full well that it was a risky one, engaging in self-exploitation. This exchange here begins to give a

sense of the unique character of comics work as a work defined by tensions and contradictions, between exchanges of rights and stabilities. The tensions inherent in Rabagliati's comics work suggests an acceptance of them and a complicity in self-exploitation, which constitutes a submission to the economic logic of neoliberalism and to the cultural logic of late capitalism. However, other cartoonists are less accepting of these conditions, and more exemplary of the acts of resistance within comics work that give it its specific subcultural, dialectical nature and thus its specific character.

Under the Radar: John Porcellino's *King-Cat* Comics, Autonomy and Self-Publishing

Root Hog or Die: The John Porcellino Story, a 2014 documentary, draws to its conclusion with a scene in which alternative cartoonist John Porcellino describes a conversation he once had with his father about cartooning. 'My dad eventually realized I'm a cartoonist,' a middle-aged Porcellino tells us, 'but his thing was...why can't you do *Luann*?³² Or...*Garfield* is funny, everyone loves it. You could do that! My dad would read [Porcellino's long-running self-published zine] *King-Cat*, and we would talk about it...he totally understood the whole thing, but he would say 'you could come up with your own *Garfield*,' because he wanted me to not be suffering' (Stafford 2014). The scene is introduced by a silent title frame, white, smooth sans serif text on black, using this phrase to preface Porcellino's description of his father, and his father's perception of his cartooning, ensuring a narrative payoff and the sting of irony when Porcellino repeats the phrase 'you could come up with your own *Garfield*!'

The inclusion of cats is, more or less, the only link between *Garfield* and Porcellino's *King-Cat Comics and Stories*, his ongoing life's work, which celebrated its 75th issue and 26th year in 2015. Although perhaps not a figure known well outside of

³² *Luann* is a syndicated comic strip by Greg Evans, running since 1985, set in a suburban American high school. It is not syndicated to any UK publications currently.

the community of alternative comics and creators, Porcellino's influence is felt far and wide throughout Anglo-American comics, and he is often referred to as one of the greatest living cartoonists (O'Neil and Salva 2014). Porcellino's ethos and approaches to work, craft, production, distribution and consumption helped to lay the foundations for the rise of the alternative cartoonist and the growth of the lone alternative cartoonist as a figure worthy of critical acclaim and cultural merit, as he laid the foundations of the contemporary self-publishing ethos in the 1980s. Despite this influence, however, Porcellino still flies largely under the radar, with a select and distinct audience, operating within a DIY culture far removed from *Garfield*, a syndicated strip cartoon read by millions of American households at the peak of its fame and a prime example of the commercialism with which the art form of comics is often associated. The choice of the Garfield quip as the title for the concluding section of *Root Hog or Die*, then, is self-aware, and the irony wrought by Porcellino's description of his father's perception is sharp. The largely relaxed but still nervous Porcellino, wearing a headband, hood and heavy checked jacket indoors, is casual here about the physical and mental effects he suffers as a result of his comics work, but for his father to notice he was suffering, these effects must have been severe. Why, then, when there exists the potential for him to create commercially successful syndicated strips, would Porcellino voluntarily submit to suffering and continue such a process indefinitely?

The answers to this question lie in the culture of working as an alternative cartoonist, and in particular as a cartoonist invested in zine culture and the ethos of DIY creation and production, as well as the impulse to archive and the desire to communicate the self through a visual medium (Dittmer 2013; El-Refaie 2014), which grips Porcellino and is depicted explicitly throughout the many issues of *King-Cat*. These answers are also extrapolations of the material culture of comics, and especially

alternative comics, understood here as those which grew from the underground comics (and/or comix) of the 1960s and 70s and began to undergo processes of legitimization, largely based on institutional contexts, cultural changes and material changes such as the graphic novel format in the 1980s through to the present day, concurrent with the rise of neoliberalism. Porcellino's comics provide a key insight into the culture of zine-influenced alternative comics and self-publishing, advancing the understanding of comics work and the ensuing dialectic with input from material cultures, self-publishing, and a cartoonist who never chose the safer option of non-comics work, and as such clearly undergoes suffering as a result.

Porcellino began self-publishing *King-Cat* in 1989, inspired by other zines and by the culture of DIY storytelling, centred around local venues and music scenes in his hometown of Hoffman Estates, Illinois. Beginning as a rambling avant-garde expression of the then 20-year-old Porcellino's angst and troubled mind, *King-Cat* has grown over its 75 issues³³ to become a regular series of resonant autobiographical stories and a pillar of the alternative comics community. In the words of Chris Ware, on whom Porcellino has been a great influence despite his rough style seeming antithetical to Ware's meticulous and clinical precision, 'John Porcellino's comics distill, in just a few lines and words, the feeling of simply being alive' (Porcellino 2007, dust jacket).³⁴ Whilst this statement is certainly true retroactively, and is helped in its realisation significantly by the comics in Porcellino's subsequent collections with Drawn and Quarterly, *King-Cat*'s format and content in its early years did not anticipate this assessment. The earlier zines, collected in *King-Cat Classix*, are mostly bizarre recountings of Porcellino's dreams, lists of his top 24 things that month or given period,

³³ At the time of writing.

³⁴ This quote appears on the dust jacket of Porcellino's first hardcover collection of works published by Drawn & Quarterly, *King-Cat Classix*, as well as on his website, www.king-cat.net, the basic design of which reflects the lo-fi aesthetic of his cartooning.

wacky stories in which crude anthropomorphic animals commit atrocious crimes, testosterone-driven sexual fantasies and simple, uncomplicated narratives of wholly autobiographical stories. His lines are ratty (Beaty 2012, 132), defying the visual paradigms of comic art mainstream, superhero-dominated comics. His letters are childish, sometimes italic, kerned irregularly, betraying an unsteady, unpractised and unfocused hand. His figures are simplified, driving the reader's connection with the characters towards Scott McCloud's idea of iconic simplification in comics.³⁵ Porcellino's grasp of anatomy is clearly underdeveloped, at least until a good number of years into his cartooning career. The stories are quotidian, and yet there is, as Ware asserts, an alchemical distillation of the essence of comic art and its narrative resonance inherent in Porcellino's work, and it is this which has brought him cult popularity and modest fame.

Image and text, in the early *King-Cat* comics, work together to emphasise minutiae, to focus on individual moments of thought and preoccupation, and to create a comic in which the expression of Porcellino's own mind and self is of the utmost importance, working at odds with the idea of developing craft (Kochalka 2005). Instead, Porcellino's works develop the idea of the self and self-expression, a key driver of the prevalent auteurism that grips comics work and the culture of alternative comics. In his own introduction to *King-Cat Classix*, after acknowledging the rawness and self-indulgent weirdness of his early work, Porcellino writes:

I wanted to publish something that I could make all on my own, that could contain whatever I wanted, that could reflect my whole life. Something that would be a direct personal statement from me to the world...if there was one

³⁵ McCloud asserts, in a passage much debated by comics formalists, that the more a drawn face is reduced to basic features, the easier it is for a reader to relate to visually and the more 'iconic' it becomes (1994, 31) – a nod to W.J.T. Mitchell (1987).

common thread that carried through those pages, it was this: that whatever it was, it was me trying to be true to myself at the time. Whether it was happy, sad, blissed out or desperate – whatever – it was okay...somewhere along the line, *King-Cat* went from being something I do for fun, to something I do, to what I do. *King-Cat* became my life. Or rather, I saw that *King-Cat* and my life were not two separate things (Porcellino 2007, 5).

The hardcover book's dust jacket confirms this, where it reads '*King-Cat Classix* presents an artist who has always known what he wanted to do' (2007, dust jacket). Porcellino's self-assessment above is little more than another *King-Cat* story – one reduced to its bare bones by virtue of not requiring the hybrid working of text and image, and thus frankly asserting Porcellino's self-driven approach to cartooning, confirmed throughout his expansive body of work.

This desire to 'do what he wanted to do' has led to the continuation of *King-Cat* as a self-publishing enterprise. Despite Porcellino's work with comic publishers Drawn and Quarterly and La Mano³⁶ and even a one-off graphic novel adaptation of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* for Hyperion Books (2008), his stories are generally always self-published in his zines first. In fact, with the exception of his standalone graphic novel *The Hospital Suite* (2014) and the aforementioned Thoreau adaptation, all of Porcellino's works that exist in book (rather than minicomic, pamphlet or zine) format are collections of his self-published *King-Cat* comics. These collections are either chronologically curated retrospectives or themed collections, including the slim coming-of-age memoir paperback *Perfect Example* (2005) and the labour and pest-control autobiography collection *Diary of a Mosquito Abatement Man* (2005).

³⁶ A small independent publisher run by fellow cartoonist and musician Zak Sally.

Despite there being over 20 years between the conception of *King-Cat* and the standalone publication of *The Hospital Suite*, the differences are largely small and subtle, and betray an artist who has been driven by the continuation and expansion of his vision for self-expression, rather than by attempts to master a craft or bring his visual representations of people closer to reality through visual verisimilitude, anatomical or otherwise. There is a progression visible in terms of the steadiness of hand, the straightness of the line, and the regularity of the lettering – all aspects of the craft which are likely to become more refined over such a length of time through force of habit and regular use of tools and techniques, perhaps more than any conscious attempt at artistic self-betterment. However, the essence of Porcellino's art, and of his visual storytelling, remains the same: sparse black and white lines, simply detailing moments from his life with particular emotional resonance, in keeping with his explicit desires in relation to *King-Cat's* production: that it should be an expression of his life. It has never become his own Garfield, and remains untouched by commercialism despite relative success in the challenging market of alternative comics, retaining the making of radical, subcultural art (Hebdige 1979) and embodying its many contradictions.

For such a specific, personal and principled ethos to be fully realised as part of a lengthy and successful career, Porcellino will have had to overcome various cultural challenges in terms of production, distribution and consumption. These are affected significantly by his commitment to self-publishing and independent, DIY distribution, which are activities that constitute comics work. Charles Hatfield's 2005 book *Alternative Comics*, although it overlooks Porcellino in favour of his more commercially successful contemporaries, hints at the importance of autonomy within the culture of alternative comics. Contextualising alternative comics as growing from the underground comix of the 1960s and 70s, with their 'pungent critique[s]' of

American consumerism' (12), Hatfield's book supports the ideas of autonomy and auteurism driving the movement of alternative comics, here exemplified by Porcellino. 'In essence,' Hatfield writes, 'comix made comic books safe for auteur theory: they established a poetic ethos of individual expression...Today the privileging of self-expression in alternative comic books is a very strong tendency – the rule rather than the exception – and alternative comics publishers favour the comic book as a 'solo' vehicle for the individual cartoonist' (2005, 17-18). Similarly, Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* describes the mainstream as being characterised by 'profit-driven escapism' (2001, 178), a phrase which is the very antithesis of Porcellino and of *King-Cat*, with its realism and emphasis on the minutiae of quotidian autobiography, and the elevation of such details into the realm of poetic expression through nuanced graphic narrative.

Hatfield's phrase 'alternative comics publishers' as applied to those who support and drive the elevation of self-expression is exemplified by Drawn and Quarterly, who, aside from publishing Porcellino's collections, are famed for publishing auteur and autobiographical cartoonists similar in ethos to Porcellino such as Julie Doucet, Adrian Tomine, Lynda Barry, Seth and Daniel Clowes, and many other such leading figures in the field of alternative comics. Equally, this phrase, and the weight of cultural assumption that it carries, could apply to Porcellino as a publisher, or rather as a self-publisher, privileging his own expression above all else and creating a publishing operation to sustain that idea as part of a wider comics landscape. With this assessment, supported by the wider reading of alternative comics as cultural work, Porcellino becomes a lone auteur, and retains the essence of autonomy (with its bourgeois and mercantile histories) and self-expression that characterises his life and work, whether he self-publishes or publishes with Drawn and Quarterly. Either way, the ethos and vision

remains intact – another indication of the clear differences between the cultures of mainstream and alternative comics, as exemplified by Porcellino.

Porcellino's choice to work, mostly, in autobiographical cartooning is also one that facilitates a reading of his cartooning as pure self-expression, as the genre of autobiography has been inextricably tied to the cultural legitimization of comics and is viewed as a marker of authenticity (El-Refaie 2014; Hatfield 2005; Wolk 2008; Beaty 2012; Williams & Lyons 2011). Authenticity is a necessary component of a successful and resonant self-expression such as the ongoing oeuvre of *King-Cat*. In his contribution to the 2007 *Comics Studies Reader*, Bart Beaty reminds us of alternative comics' focus on autonomy, and that autobiography carried a promise of legitimacy for comics as a result of auteur theory having been prevalent in film. This reminder of the focus on autonomy ties in with Charles Hatfield's assertion that alternative comics opened the art form to auteur theory using post-structuralist theory and Foucault's assertion that 'the author-function continued to exist to the extent that the concept upheld bourgeois sensibilities about art' (Beaty 2009, 229). In alternative comics, a majority of cartoonists work in autobiography because of these cultural promises, and Porcellino is no exception. In fact, his autobiographical stories foreground realism (in contrast to the formerly dominant traditions of fantasy in comics) and thus demand legitimacy and cultural acceptance through the author-function, though Porcellino's emphasis on self-expression does not betray an awareness of or an attempt to seek legitimization. Rather, the author-function is implicit, a cultural force beneath the surface, and one unquestioned, cast as logical in the same fashion as neoliberalism's prevailing market logic. The author-function and the *homo oeconomicus*, therefore, are two neoliberal ideals that come together in alternative comics, and both are elements of the

dialectic of comics work, confirming the importance of Foucault as a grounding theorist for the study of comics in this thesis and, I hope, in the wider field of comics studies.

Beaty's passage also reminds us of the reading of autonomy as bourgeois, and that autonomy is a pose more easily sought by those who are not othered by cultural and socioeconomic conditions, as many are under neoliberalism. Porcellino is, after all, a straight, white, middle-class educated male who grew up in Illinois in economically and socially stable conditions, evidenced by the quiet, green suburban scenes of his childhood and adult life in *Root Hog or Die*, a documentary which moves at a slow pace concurrent with its shooting in such suburban areas. The reminder here from Beaty of autonomy's inherent tension echoes Hesmondhalgh and Baker's reading of autonomy's ambivalent and contradictory nature (2011, 63), but has a direct application to comics through the tensions described in the dialectic of comics work. The lack of desire for legitimation can explain why Porcellino has not been canonised in the same manner as his contemporaries such as Ware, Clowes, and Bechdel, and has received little attention within the field of comics studies and within broader scholarship. Porcellino's vision of self-expression, although it sits contextually within alternative comics and within Beaty's assessment of autobiography as a genre that fulfils a promise of legitimacy through the author-function, is one free from concerns of institutions, the materiality of books and the graphic novel format (at least at the beginning of his career, and his primary outputs), and free mostly of any concern, in fact, except chronicling and emotionally archiving Porcellino's life through graphic narrative. In this sense, Porcellino is atypical, though by no means unique – there have of course been numerous other zine makers, creators of minicomics, and underground cartoonists whose vision was similar, and Porcellino's work could not have come about were it not for the comics of Robert Crumb (2012), Trina Robbins (2016), Harvey Pekar (2005) and Justin

Green (2009) in the preceding decades. What makes Porcellino a unique case study, then, is his significant contribution to alternative comics' legitimization (and thus exploitation of the wills of the neoliberal free market) whilst still retaining his DIY ethic and thus the spirit of resistance and radical art-making. Or, to put it another way, he is possibly the only cartoonist who has been consistently self-publishing a zine for over 25 years who has received the major publicity of a hagiographic quote from Chris Ware printed on the dust jackets of his book collections. And, it would seem, only a true auteur and bastion of self-expression in comics could manage this feat, this bourgeois pose.

By his own admission, Porcellino has found working with publishers – many of whom are some of the most significant contributors to the growth and legitimization of alternative comics, especially Drawn and Quarterly (Devlin 2015) – challenging, but has worked to achieve beneficial relationships with them. He has achieved this by viewing them as another outlet for his self-expression rather than as a necessity, or an institution from which he stands to gain the legitimacy that Beaty suggests can be conferred upon comics through bourgeois poses and institutional approvals. In an interview for the comics podcast *Make It Then Tell Everybody*, Porcellino discussed publishers with host and fellow cartoonist Dan Berry. 'It definitely took me a while to adjust [to working with a publisher],' he said, 'and I think I can diplomatically say that it took some of the publishers a little while to adjust to me' (Berry 2014a). The fact that this adjustment did happen, however, is an indication that Porcellino is not a self-saboteur, and does not deliberately allow the complexities of his version of freedom to stand between him and his expression. It seems that if working with Drawn and Quarterly will allow for a new avenue of fulfilling expression, retaining the auteurism inherent in his work and making differences largely to do with materiality and

publishing formats, Porcellino's cultural work is largely uncompromised. Thus, his publisher affirms his autonomy and its bourgeois associations, legitimating his individualism and allowing it connect with its mercantile history (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011, 63) to sell books. In other words, no auteurist vision or idea of self-expression is absolute, and such a vision must engage with market conditions in order to be realised, creating a dialectical relationship between self-expression and the market.

Porcellino is quick to assure Berry, on the podcast, that *Drawn and Quarterly* are easy to work with, saying 'you can't ask for a more artist-friendly publisher than D&Q...they have suggestions but...they don't say 'you can't publish this' or do 'you can't do that' (Berry 2014). The phrase 'artist-friendly' is the most significant here, assuring us that Porcellino's number one concern is always his own autonomy and his welfare, implying that other publishers are not artist-friendly and thus that they are corporate and commercially-driven, in opposition to Porcellino's vision. The podcast interview also makes Porcellino's suspicion of commercialism and profit motives clear, as he concluded the discussion of publishing thus: 'Just by the nature of the way these things [zines vs books] are presented, they're going to reach different people. And my goal as an artist is to reach the people who need to be reached. The books give me the opportunity to do that on kind of a different scale but in a different market, almost...if I can use such a crass word' (Berry 2014). The conception of the word 'market' as a crass word is one that holds weight for the producers of alternative comics and, as demonstrated by the 'very complicated version of freedom' idea, within the study of cultural work. However, in the wider context of commercialism and the neoliberal political economy in which Porcellino's publishers operate, the concept of a 'market' is an essential one that cannot be ignored, and one that presents itself to every agent within it as an unquestionable logical truth. Porcellino is aware of this, but his engagement

with it, like his engagement with publishers, distributors and readers – every person involved in a comic in the long chain from production to consumption – *is* on his own terms, though it is tempered by the bourgeois pose of his autonomy and his admission that even a radical such as himself cannot escape market logic. He can afford, where so many other cartoonists cannot, to dismiss the idea of a market as a crass one, because his ‘artist-friendly’ publishers allow him to do so, as does his success in self-expression and singularity of visions. It is this quality – the uniqueness of both the content of his comics and his approach to their culture – that makes Porcellino a compelling case study in comics work.

It is clear, therefore, that Porcellino can be understood as a cultural worker operating under the guise of a ‘very complicated version of freedom,’ but one who manages to achieve a level of simplicity in his self-expression that makes his comics, as cultural works, unique objects in the field of alternative comics. In Porcellino’s case, the phrase ‘narrow auteurist vision’ to which I return to describe alternative comics’ cultural standards is one which *can* certainly be applied to his own vision of the creation of his comics. Such a vision is unlikely to be detrimental to an understanding of the creation of his comic art, as it may be in the case of mainstream comics, which are made by teams of comics workers under specific divisions of labour. Despite the assumption that mainstream comics are responsible for the auteurist readings that dominate critical assessments of comics (such as the canonisation of Alan Moore, Stan Lee, Neil Gaiman and other writers over their collaborators), auteurism appears to be a more useful idea when applied to alternative comics, where autonomy is of great importance, as it connects with the neoliberal ideal of the entrepreneur and thus enlightens us as to the specific nature of the *cartoonist oeconomicus*. The idea of ‘a very complicated version of freedom’ is complex due to the tension between the desire for the freedom to realise

a singular creative vision and the necessity of supporting oneself materially in a society beset by neoliberalism and the ensuing exploitation of labour. However, in the case of Porcellino, his freedom is almost absolute, and as such is not as complicated a reading of alternative comics as cultural work's tenets may render them. Through dedication, drive and vision, Porcellino produces his art, and it stands for his own self-expression, though Beaty reminds us that such visions must be situated within the reading of autonomy and individualism as bourgeois, here echoing Hesmondhalgh and Baker's assessments and connecting with the top-down assertions of power from the neoliberal establishment.

The distinction between comics work and non-comics work is shown to complicate the production of Porcellino's *King-Cat* comics, however – most notably in the collection *Diary of a Mosquito Abatement Man*. Throughout the book, the labour itself – the long hours pumping chemicals into Midwestern swamps, silently killing mosquitoes en masse – is portrayed as meaningful and engaging, given the same visual poetics as any other aspect of Porcellino's life as expressed in his comics. In the majority of stories that portray Porcellino's work in pest control, with which he had a teenage fascination, the work itself is a fact of life, an aspect of his being as natural and immovable as driving or gazing at the stars or taking his dog for a walk. However, the penultimate and climactic anecdote in the book, 'Mountain Song,' demonstrates that, for all his plaudits, and his ability to build a career in comics from his own singular creative vision, Porcellino is not immune to the concerns of everyday, straightforward labour, and cannot fully escape the concerns of non-cultural work, despite the bourgeois promises of his autonomy. At the end of 'Mountain Song,' Porcellino quits his job as a mosquito man, ostensibly because he can't keep killing mosquitoes with a clear conscience. Porcellino is seen, in his mosquito man hat, thinking over the dilemma,

saying to himself, ‘this is a good job...I make good money...I get four months off a year’ (2005, np), in a panel replicated in numerous other *King-Cat* anecdotes about work, in which the tension between labour’s necessity and its effects on cultural production is an occasional theme. The story concludes with Porcellino telling his boss, as he quits, that he ‘want[s] to try to earn a living as an artist’ (2005, np), before he drives into the sunset, the story ending abruptly with no indication as to whether this particular economic dream ever became a reality. As such, the anecdote ends with a tension hanging between the lines of its final panel, a tension between cultural work and non-cultural work, between forms of capital, between art and market-driven commerce, encapsulated elegantly by Porcellino’s straightforward cartooning.

In an interview for the Domino Books blog, however, Porcellino’s idea for dealing with the exploitative commercial monopoly on distribution held by Diamond³⁷ is shown to be, like his cartooning and his approach to the complex pressures of being a cultural worker, straightforward and free from the apparent complications betrayed in *Diary of a Mosquito Abatement Man*. ‘As someone who comes from a DIY background,’ he tells interviewer Austin Robertson English, ‘the answer is clear...you make your own system’ (English 2011). Porcellino has made his own system with his own one-man distribution operation, Spit and a Half, but has also been true to this statement throughout his approach to cartooning and self-publishing, rendering this statement a truly confident one, his confidence backed up by the bourgeois pose of autonomy and the spirit of the ‘entrepreneur of the self’ (Foucault 2010, 278).

Alternative cartoonists have been making their own systems since the 1960s, and have

³⁷ Diamond Comic Distributors, founded in 1982, has had a stranglehold on the distribution of comics into comic shops and retail outlets for decades. For some time it was incredibly difficult to get a comic book into a shop if it wasn’t listed in the Diamond previews catalogue, and although the market and the avenues of distribution have diversified considerably post-2000 in the new information economy this is still somewhat true at the time of writing for Anglo-American comics shops with a focus on mainstream comics. A conscious attempt to exist outside this system of distribution therefore constitutes an act of resistance in and of itself.

driven the expansion of their field of cultural production on the creation through their own systems, whether these are systems of distribution, production or consumption. Despite the inherent complexity of the creation of these systems wrought by commercial, economic and cultural pressures – those that create the ‘very complicated version of freedom’ – the simple solutions, such as Porcellino setting up a distribution network based entirely from his own home that now stocks up to 1,000 titles, rely on singular visions and individualised drive and thought, upholding the ideal of *the homo oeconomicus*. Therefore, when alternative comics are cast as cultural work, the narrow auteurist vision of production can’t be avoided – at least not in the case of Porcellino, whose auteurist, individualist vision of himself and his life’s work informs the production and content of his comics at every level.

However, this example of comics work exposes a contradiction at the heart of neoliberalism’s emphasis on the self, and on pursuing one’s own path. Often this path will not necessarily be that which brings the greatest reward in terms of financial capital, and entrepreneurialism can and should be applied to other forms of capital, as neoliberalism’s pervasive nature insists upon. In particular, comics creators are likely to be richer in cultural and social capital as a result of their autonomous paths through their chosen field, which is not one taken by those in search of financial capital apart from, perhaps, in a very small number of cases in mainstream, deadline-driven, superhero comics published by the corporate, profit-driven publishers of the comics mainstream. The *cartoonist oeconomicus*, therefore, is an autonomous figure, seeking his capital in various forms, aware of the contradictions that accompany such activities. Autonomy is, of course, complex and often ambivalent – Porcellino proves this³⁸ – and can easily

³⁸ Noah Van Sciver, a contemporary of Porcellino, wrote a blog post about comics work and ‘making it’ in comics entitled ‘There Is No Short Cut’ (2015). There are numerous similar blog posts from alternative cartoonists, but Van Sciver’s addresses the issue of audience and autonomy the most directly, and in

create an image of an auteur and downplay its inherent contradictions. It is a promise contained in the culture of alternative comics that contributes significantly to the dominance of auteurism in comics and comics studies. However, such a promise is often predicated on the work of others who stand behind the auteur and whose labour is obscured.

Jeff Smith's *Bone* and the Neoliberal Auteur

Jeff Smith's comic fantasy *Bone* is well known as a weighty 1,300 page graphic novel, the winner of several Eisner and Harvey awards,³⁹ but it was in fact self-published in 55 single issues, beginning in 1991 and ending in 2004 having been generally published bi-monthly. The collected trade paperback edition is also self-published, under the banner of Smith's own company, Cartoon Books. Smith founded Cartoon Books after drawing a newspaper strip for a number of years in Columbus, Ohio and subsequently founding his own animation company, with which he had some success but found the drive of its largely corporate client base to be distasteful. The corporate clients' demands often forced the company's staff of three to work around the clock to meet their deadlines, whilst not paying enough for them to hire extra staff to allow for a more favourable division of labour (Groth 1994). Having experienced this, Smith wanted to publish *Bone* on his own terms and to seek autonomy, in the same way as both John Porcellino and Michel Rabagliati. Smith also, in a highly entrepreneurial move that seems antithetical

doing so reinforces my reading of Porcellino as an auteur unconcerned with commercial success and yet suffering due to the lack thereof. Van Sciver's blog post concludes thus: 'This has been said a million times already by every artist including myself. But I'll say it again. This isn't a career. John Porcellino once told me that every "professional" comic artist has a secret of some kind. Something like their grandparents died and left them money, or their spouse has a great job and supports them. Comics are a very, very, very small art form for a small, tiny audience of people. You say you wanna make a living off of your comics? Forget it. Still wanna draw comics anyway? You do? Congratulations! You're a real cartoonist! Welcome!' (2015). This damning phrasing echoes Chris Ware's ironic language in his parodic advertisements, and adds to the list of cartoonists' work and commentary that makes suffering as a result of comics work explicit.

³⁹ The Eisner and Harvey Awards are the two most prestigious annual awards in comics, covering a broad range of comics in various formats across mainstream and alternative titles.

to the ethos of alternative comics that has been exhibited thus far in this thesis, financed the creation of Cartoon Books and the initial publishing of *Bone* with a bank loan, the business plan for which so impressed his bank manager that he was offered twice the sum he asked for, while the US economy was in recession in the early 1990s (Piskor 2013).

Smith always approached *Bone* as a business whilst being sure that he was making the art that he wanted to make, showing the entrepreneurial leaning towards autonomy and an ability to make his own capital, to reinvent himself anew as human capital each day. As he told Paul Williams, interviewed for the book *The Rise of the American Comics Artist*, 'I started out on two tracks: to create the art and to get people interested in the story, but to finish it I had to make sure I made money. I did not try to get rich but I did want to make enough money to get to the end of the story!' (2010, 52). Cultural capital, for Smith, is the most important capital, but of course it cannot exist without financial capital, such is the intrusion of neoliberal free market capitalist ideology into all spheres of being (Brown 2010, Harvey 2007). Smith's acknowledgment of this, in contrast to Porcellino's denial and Rabagliati's cautiousness, shows the complications of cartoonists attempting to deal with the conditions of neoliberalism and the need for entrepreneurialism, tempered again by the concerns of autonomy and by the surrounding capitals that must be sought in order to convey upon oneself the cultural capital of comics through comics work.

Of all the cartoonists referred to in this thesis so far, Smith is clearly already emerging as the model *cartoonist oeconomicus* and the cartoonist to have found the greatest success under the economic conditions of neoliberalism. However, there are significant complications owing to his perceived auteurism and the foundations of his working patterns and the political economy that allowed him to make such bold moves

and to continue self-publishing *Bone* outside of the secure corporate publishers that took on the comics of his peers. Returning to the aspects of comics work borrowed from the growing concern of comics and cultural work within comics studies, it must be acknowledged that all works of comics are collaborative and the work of a number of hands (Becker 2008; Johnston 2015; Brienza 2015). Even though Smith wrote, drew and published *Bone* himself, there were other hands, whose labours have been obscured by the production and consumption of *Bone* as well as by the culture of auteurism within comics and comics scholarship. The existence of these unseen hands offers a complication and contradiction to the apparent auteurism that seems necessary to drive success as a *cartoonist oeconomicus*.

The acknowledgments tucked away at the back of the collected *Bone* graphic novel illuminates this.

I have many people to thank on a project that took this long to complete, but first and foremost is Vijaya Iyer, my wife and partner. Vijaya not only handled the nuts and bolts of printing, distributing and licensing *Bone* all over the world, but more importantly sustained a singular creative vision with me for over twelve years. I could not have done it without her (Smith 2004, 1342).

The tension between the phrase ‘singular creative vision’ and the credit given to Vijaya Iyer for her works – printing, distribution and licensing are certainly all categories of comics work and undoubtedly are demanding and time-consuming labours – is clear. This tension betrays the fact that a singular creative vision can, in fact, never be so in comics, as to achieve the appearance of such a thing, to genuinely posit the creation of a text by an auteur, the creative vision must be shared and must utilise the labours of many. The production of comics written, drawn and conceived by one person, even on a bi-monthly schedule, cannot become an activity that reaches consumers and exists

within the wider culture of comics without the labours of others. Even John Porcellino, whose works reach his readers directly from him in a significant number of cases, requires physical shops, conventions, webstores and other elements of the infrastructure of comics distribution for his vision to be realised – and this infrastructure cannot exist without the work of many hands. Indeed, comics retail itself has been analysed as cultural work by Canadian comics scholar and former comics shop manager Tom Miller, who argues for the significance of comics retail in shaping the culture of comics (2013). Vijaya Iyer's labours, however, are more apparent and more integral than the labours of a retailer. As a business partner, she handled Cartoon Books' accounts and liaised with their distribution and retail partners, without whom there could have been no commercial success for *Bone* (Piskor 2013). However, her labours are obscured in much the same fashion as those of the retailer, hidden behind the idea of the writer-artist auteur fulfilling the author-function. It is Jeff Smith's name that appears on the covers, Jeff Smith who is interviewed for publicity, Jeff Smith who appears at conventions, signs books, gets fan mail, and embodies all the labour with which *Bone* was created, as it was *his* vision.

As Smith told Paul Williams in the aforementioned interview, 'from the beginning I saw *Bone* as a 1,300-page novel' (47). Smith's vision was clear from the outset, and clearer than that of Rabagliati, Porcellino, and many of his other contemporaries in alternative comics. The realization of this vision (and particularly its rare financial success) seems, in the context of the *homo oeconomicus*, to be a neoliberal triumph and proof of the logic of the entrepreneur. However, it is clear that without bank loans, a business partnership with his wife, and willing distribution partners, Smith would not have been able to realize his vision, especially not at the scale he envisaged. In fact, the scale is significant, as there is a greater amount of obscured

labour in proportion to the scale of the creative vision (Woo 2015). Porcellino's vision, by contrast, obscures very little labour since it is an uncompromising one that does not extend far beyond self-publishing and self-expression. The later collections of his *King-Cat* comics are facilitated by comics publishers, whereas Smith decided to be his own publisher, and to do so on a huge and unprecedented scale, publishing numerous collected editions as well as the single issues of *Bone*. The only self-published comic to have reached a comparably large audience in the early 1990s was Dave Sim's *Cerebus*, a huge influence on Smith's vision but a comic without the universal, all-ages appeal of *Bone* and one which certainly did not court commercial success (Hoffman and Grace 2013). Porcellino's scale did not require extra labour, but Smith's clearly did, exhibiting a tension between labour and capital inherent in the neoliberal auteur and echoed in Althusser, Balibar et al (2016).

As well as exemplifying the complications of the auteurist vision of comics in its contextual factors, *Bone* also demonstrates neoliberalism's permeation throughout texts themselves, and its effects on the content of literature, as delineated by Rachel Greenwald Smith in her 2015 book *Affect and American Literature*.⁴⁰ This book argues that affect – in literary studies and in short, the concept of literature provoking an emotional response in the reader – has become subject to a cost-benefit analysis under neoliberalism and is subjugated to the logic of the market, like all other things and all

⁴⁰ Before having read Greenwald Smith's book, I gave two papers on *Bone* and neoliberalism at international comics studies conferences, the first of which examined content and the second of which examined context, in response to a challenge to do so from Paul Williams after he witnessed the first paper. Whilst the characters and plots of comics texts may not be as significant an aspect of the dialectic of comics work as the others examined at length in this thesis, I believe that a demonstration of neoliberal characteristics within the content of texts adds to the dialectic by indicating just how prevalent neoliberalism is as an ideology, and how far its roots have sunk themselves into culture. This in turn contributes to an understanding of why and how neoliberalism's logic presents itself as incontrovertible, as if there are no alternatives to the whims of the free market and the cost-benefit analysis, which occurs throughout fictional narratives as part of the natural landscape and backdrop as well as within the plot and characterisations of numerous examples of contemporary fiction.

forms of capital. As such, contemporary literature offers a direct return on emotional investment, and through this subconscious change in political economy and culture, neoliberalism permeates throughout texts, its qualities defining characters and plots such as those of Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

To summarise my analysis of the content of *Bone*, the three protagonists – the cousins Fone Bone, Phoney Bone and Smiley Bone – each embody different contradictions within neoliberal ideology, expressed through characterization and plot throughout the narrative arc of *Bone*. Phoney Bone is cunning, scheming and driven by money, always coming up with some scheme to gain it and working with his situations to benefit himself, and himself above all, such as fixing a cow race. He is the entrepreneur, the *homo oeconomicus*, driven by selfish desire to produce his own capital. Smiley Bone, the easy-going worker, always happily labouring in service to Phoney Bone and his schemes, demonstrates neoliberalism's subjugation of the ordinary worker to the entrepreneur. And Fone Bone, the most notable of the three protagonists and the true main character of the book, represents the antithesis of neoliberalism. Everything he does throughout *Bone*, his various heroic deeds and quests, is for others and not for the accumulation of capital for himself – his ultimate aim is to bring peace to the valley and to save his love Thorn, ultimately driven by his desire to fulfil Smiley and Phoney's desire to return safely to their home town of Boneville. And ultimately, they do – thanks to Fone Bone's marshalling of collective labour and bringing the people of the valley together to fight against the dark forces that threaten them. As his worldview ultimately triumphs, and Phoney Bone's schemes always fail, it is clear that selfishness – a quality readily and easily associated with neoliberal entrepreneurialism and individualism (Cunningham 2014) – does not

ultimately provide capital as neoliberal logic suggests it should. Collectivism, along the lines of cultural work as set out in the beginning of this chapter, is clearly the model for gaining capital. However, Fone Bone needs Phoney Bone's schemes and Smiley Bone's labour to bring peace to the valley, so their entrepreneurial qualities are of use and do facilitate labour and capital gains. This demonstrates, again, that neoliberalism significantly complicates the concept of cultural work to create the specific character of the dialectic of comics work.

Rachel Greenwald Smith argues that neoliberalism's economic logic has become 'hegemonic as a mode of discourse' (2015, 5), and the entrepreneurial ideal created by this hegemony is clearly visible in the comics of Rabagliati, Porcellino and Smith, as well as in the contemporary novels analysed in Greenwald Smith's works on neoliberalism and contemporary literature. Although their comics work is entrepreneurial in nature, and though they all pursue their own 'singular creative visions,' there are always other factors, other people, and other forms of capital that complicate the entrepreneurial ideal of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* that all three of these exemplary creators uphold. As Dick Hebdige writes in *Subculture*, 'the symbiosis in which ideology and social order, production and reproduction, are linked is neither fixed nor guaranteed' (1979, 16). Neoliberalism is an ideology and as such exists in symbiosis, another word that is useful when conceiving of the dialectic of comics work, as it contains within it a symbiotic relationship between the entrepreneur and collective production.

Rabagliati, in waiting for many years to become a full-time cartoonist and not doing so until he had amassed significant economic and cultural capital, demonstrates the importance of all forms of capital, and that entrepreneurialism can mean acknowledging and working with risk. This also demonstrates that the neoliberal

insistence on meritocracy for the entrepreneurial figure is complicated by pre-existing conditions of political economy (Foucault 2010; Brown 2015; Harvey 1991, 2007). Foucault describes his *homo oeconomicus* as ‘an island of rationality’ (2010, 282) and ‘someone who accepts reality’ (2010, 270), and Rabagliati’s assessment of his own career presents these qualities. Porcellino’s comics are indicative of the huge importance of autonomy for comics work, whilst simultaneously indicating the bourgeois nature of such a pose and also demonstrating that the auteurist approach to comics is not without precarity and literal, often physical, suffering. Jeff Smith, the most commercially successful cartoonist of these three, lends us the term ‘singular creative vision’ to describe his work on *Bone* whilst simultaneously erasing the work of his wife and business partner, providing a reminder that the neoliberal entrepreneur is not an absolute, incontrovertible, lone figure, despite what the pervasive entrepreneurial ideology of neoliberalism suggests (Foucault 2010; Harvey 2007). This is demonstrated in particular by comics work as a collaborative, many-layered form of cultural work, done by many hands in all instances. However, Smith also demonstrates that the auteurist ideal is an incredibly powerful one, and it is for this reason that I choose to continue with the idea of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* as a definitive vision of those who undertake comics work.

The word ‘vision’ within the phrase ‘singular creative vision’ is significant too.

Paul Mason states that:

Neoliberalism was designed and implemented by visionary politicians: Pinochet in Chile; Thatcher and her ultra-conservative circle in Britain; Reagan and the Cold Warriors who brought him to power. They’d faced massive resistance from organised labour and they’d had enough. In response, these pioneers of neoliberalism drew a conclusion that has shaped our age: that a modern

economy cannot coexist with an organised working class. Consequently, they resolved to smash labour's collective bargaining power, traditions and social cohesion completely (2015, 91).

Neoliberalism, therefore, is highly compatible with the idea of the visionary, which all three of the cartoonists analysed in this chapter are. Their struggles with capital and the tensions between its various forms, culminating in precarious, backbreaking labour, further the tension between labour and capital desired by the architects of neoliberalism. This tension finds a home in the dialectic of comics work, in which it is a central factor.

Comics work, therefore, is a form of cultural work whose character is defined by neoliberal political economy, and by the struggle for autonomy by individuals with singular visions. These individuals are the essence of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* – autonomous, free, self-driven, and yet burdened with the conditions of political economy and the collaborative, collective nature of comics work, as well as by the challenging conditions of the free market. This chapter, therefore, lays this foundation for understanding the dialectic of comics work and the tensions that define it. The chapters that follow turn to more specific areas of comics work and specific elements of cartooning, to further demonstrate their dialectical nature, and how the contemporary *cartoonist oeconomicus* approaches them to make comic art.

Chapter Two

Comics Versus Art School: Art, Pedagogy, Institutions and

Subordination in Comics Work

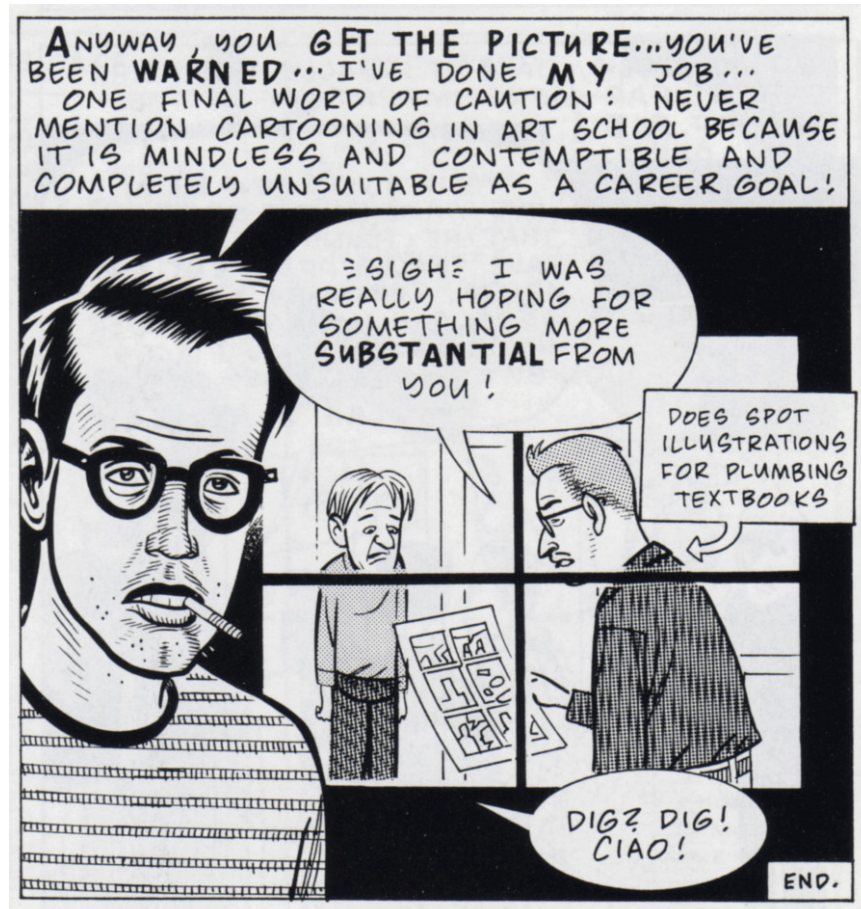


Figure 3.1: Panel from 'Art School Confidential' by Daniel Clowes (in *Twentieth Century Eightball*, 2002, np)

Daniel Clowes' *Art School Confidential*, a four-page comic he created hastily to fulfil a page count requirement, has become one of his most popular and influential works. He created it as an in-joke, aimed at an insular group of friends, to meet a deadline, not imagining that it would resonate with the majority of his readership and a subsequent generation of cartoonists. 'As it turned out,' he told *Wired* magazine in 2006, when the strip had just been adapted into a major film, 'every single one of my readers was either in art school or had some affiliation with it' (Silverman 2006). The comic is based on

Clowes' own attendance at the Pratt Institute in New York from 1980 to 1984, from which he did graduate but during which time he claims to have learned little, and certainly to have gained no skill or craft that had a positive effect on his cartooning career. 'I learned not to trust anybody who claimed to be an artist' (Parille 2013, 290), he said, when interviewed about the comic, and the brief introduction to the comic in the authoritative collection *The Daniel Clowes Reader* by comics scholar Ken Parille informs us that 'cartooning, the medium [Clowes] had loved since he was a young child, was constantly belittled' (290). Figure 3.1, the last panel from the comic, is explicit in its portrayal of this highly personal experience, the boldness of the word 'substantial' highlighting a perceived divide between comics and art, with the former being deficient, lacking in the qualities that make a work of art worthy of attention and validation by the institution of art pedagogy, and thus by the art world as a whole (Beaty 2012, 224).

The comic is typical of Clowes and his contemporaries such as Ware, who fill their comics with painfully ironic depictions of the cartoonist as a grotesque figure, as seen in figure 1.2 and elsewhere. This is a tradition passed on from the masculine self-flagellating prevalent in the underground comics of Robert Crumb (2012) and others in the sixties and seventies to the present tradition of alternative comics, revived by Joe Matt (2007), Chester Brown (2011) and others in contemporary alternative comics. *Art School Confidential* gives some insight into the root of Clowes' insecurity in his identity as a cartoonist and his own feelings towards powerful institutions – the specificity of, for example, students submitting tampons in teacups or their trashed dorm rooms as their final project, implies personal experience in its sharp detail.

The film adaptation of *Art School Confidential*, despite possessing an all-star cast including John Malkovich and Jim Broadbent, was a critical and financial failure,

faring less well than the adaptation of Clowes' more influential graphic novel *Ghost World* (Thurschwell 2013). Its failure in the commercial marketplace of film, however, seems fitting in the context of the comic's content, and is a worthy synecdoche for the place of comics in the world of art education and the neoliberal political economy that defines this relationship. The commodification of art and art education and the intrusion of economic logic into all spheres and particularly the university (Brown 2009; Greenwald Smith 2015), is apparent from the first few panels of *Art School Confidential*, as the reader is invited in a mock-advert to see 'rich guys who draw worse than your seven-year-old sister' and told in narration that 'anyone with a trust fund can excel' at art school (Clowes 2008, np). Finally, the art student implores the reader not to mention cartooning in art school. The choice of the word 'cartooning' is a significant one, as although it is used as a term for creators of comics by the majority of creators of contemporary comics, it evokes the childish world of animated cartoons and the perceived vulgar act of caricature (Carrier 2007). It thereby draws a clear line between art and comics and separating them, somewhat unnecessarily, into the products of different cultural traditions and furthering the valid but often misplaced association of all comic art with childhood. Comics are not cartoons as the noun would have it,⁴¹ but the physical *act* of cartooning is what creates them, and their creators identify themselves as cartoonists as a result of this labour. This delineation places comics firmly in the subordinate position, subjugated by dominant institutions in a seemingly parent-child model of engagement (Hebdige 1979). Following this, with the art teacher registering his disapproval of a student for turning in comics in the panel's background, comics are established as a form steeped in failure and one born under the scornful gaze

⁴¹ The noun 'cartoon' can refer to animated motion pictures or the pre-painting sketches of historical painters, or to single-panel cartoons in the tradition of editorial and political cartooning.

of the art academy as it sells itself to plumbing manuals for nothing but pure commercial gain in the capitalist free market.

David M. Ball, in the recent anthology *The Rise of the American Comics Artist* (2010), and throughout his contributions to *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (2010), which he co-edited, supports this reading of Ware's work, referring consistently to Ware's comics as being exemplary of a 'rhetoric of failure' present throughout alternative comics (2010, 120). This is certainly the case with Clowes, whose protagonists are, in the majority of cases, lonely and disillusioned individuals beset by significant tensions. Robert Crumb's canonical comics are full to bursting with graphic portrayals of sexual shortcomings and shameful bodily distortions,⁴² as are those of Joe Matt and Chester Brown, and Jeffrey Brown's failures are apparent not just from the visual distortions of his comics but from the very titles of his books: *Clumsy*, *Unlikely*, *Feeble Attempts*, *Every Girl is the End of the World for Me* and *Funny Misshapen Body*. Comics' reliance on the self-conscious exploration and candid portrayal of their own failure has become a tradition and, it can be argued, a tired trope in the past ten to fifteen years.⁴³ This is most notable in American alternative comics, of which the comics artists examined in this chapter are the unlikely figureheads.

The legitimization of the graphic novel form, since *Maus*' Pulitzer win in 1992, has largely been the product of critical discussion of comics as literature and of their literary qualities, spurred by a number of exceptional graphic novels (*The Dark Knight Rises*, *Watchmen*) and by the early scholarly writers on comics (Barker 1989; Groensteen 1994; Kunzle 1973; Eisner 2008; Witek 1989). Comics, under the cloak of the legitimizing 'graphic novel' description, are now accepted by all but the most

⁴² The majority of which are widely viewed as racist and misogynistic.

⁴³ Cartoonist Mike Dawson has witheringly satirised this trope's tiredness with his Tumblr drawings depicting an archetypal male autobiographical cartoonist called 'Sad Man' or 'Sad Boy' (2013).

conservative critics as works of literature, worthy of inclusion on almost any English Literature course, where relevant. Comics scholarship has also seen, in the words of David M. Ball, a ‘precipitous and remarkable’ rise in recent years (Ball 2010, 103). Comics scholarship has, at the time of writing, addressed comics’ literary aspirations and qualities, the text-image relationship and modernism and postmodernism in comics, along with trauma, gender, and race (Chute 2010, 2014; Williams 2014). However, examination of comics’ relation to art (and to the institutions of art pedagogy, including the neoliberal university) is only now emerging as a serious concern for comics scholars, alongside comics as work, and this chapter draws together these two relations by examining the dialectic of comics work in the context of art institutions and art pedagogy.

This is not to say that that comics’ relationship to art and art pedagogy has not been examined. Rather, the emerging field of comics studies largely accepts comics as art without question and seeks value in understanding comics as a legitimate art form of its own with a specific and unique character and definition. There is, of course, huge value in such an approach and it has no doubt shaped the field of comics studies for the better – but it does mean that deep conversations about the ‘comics art world’ (Beatty 2012) and the nature of comics in art institutions have yet to take place. Will Eisner’s idea of comics as ‘Sequential Art’ is one that provides a solid foundation for comics’ creators, consumers and scholarly critics to approach the medium as a distinct art form and one that has a rich history of interdisciplinarity with traditional notions of art. It is significant, however, that Scott McCloud’s formalist definition in *Understanding Comics* – ‘Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence’ (1993, 4) – drops the word ‘art’ altogether, though his seminal metacritical examination of the form does much of its work through the visual representation of art history and comics’

integration with it. McCloud's terminology is that of visual studies and art criticism, concerning itself with iconography and iconology, referring to 'images' rather than 'art' when describing the components of comics and appropriately dealing with comics as visual art and not as literature.

The aforementioned *The Rise of the American Comics Artist*, an anthology edited by Paul Williams and James Lyons (2010), and *Comics Versus Art* by Bart Beaty (2012) are two recent books which have examined at length the relationship between the comics art world and the fine art world. Beaty, in particular, addresses the concerns of defining comics as art and of comics in the art world (Becker 2008; Danto 2014) head on, but does not draw a definitive conclusion as to whether comics *are* art or not. Instead the book's exploratory essays establish that this is most likely a question which can only lead to oversimplification of the art form of comics, with essays on comics and animated cartoons, the entertainment industry, the postmodern mixing of lowbrow and highbrow art, comics in galleries and exhibitions, collectability and Roy Lichtenstein's appropriation of the form for gallery art. Beaty offers a number of thorough insights into what a 'comics art world' might be, again allowing comics to stand as its own art form. These examples of comics studies' engagement with the relationship between comics and the institutions of art, along with the initial examples I have provided of portrayals of a tension existing between art school and comics in alternative comics, show that this relationship is one which demands exploration as another tension to add to the list of those that create the unique character of comics work. Despite operating in what Beaty calls 'an increasingly postmodern world in which the distinction between high and low culture is often assumed to have been eroded' (2012, 7), the cultural perception of comics as a form that might be art, or could be art if it tried harder and was less childish, simplistic and vulgar, persists despite erosion, and extends to comics'

subordination to the didactic critiques of art professors, as exposed by Clowes and his contemporaries.

This chapter then examines the portrayal of art school and art education specifically in alternative comics with the aim of ascertaining whether the works of these cartoonists would be at home in the art world Clowes created in *Art School Confidential*, driven by the hostility of the art professors and the students who subscribe to their associated ideals, with comics work being portrayed as a lowly and maligned form of work from all sides. As well as engaging with recent texts from comics scholars, I will also examine the philosophical history of art and art pedagogy, with the aim of establishing why the cultural perception of comics as subordinate to fine art was established and persists under neoliberalism. In particular, I aim to read closely the negative portrayals of art pedagogy in alternative comics, and extract from these depictions the economy of the wider tensions between comics and the art world. I will explore the ideas of comics as art and comics as literature and, through examination of this and its intersection with the history of fine art and art education, I will then use this framework to analyse examples of these portrayals and to draw conclusions on the relationship between art school and alternative comics from this analysis, bringing fine art and art pedagogy into the emerging dialectic of comics work.

Comics as Kitsch: Fine Art, Comics Work and Mass Production

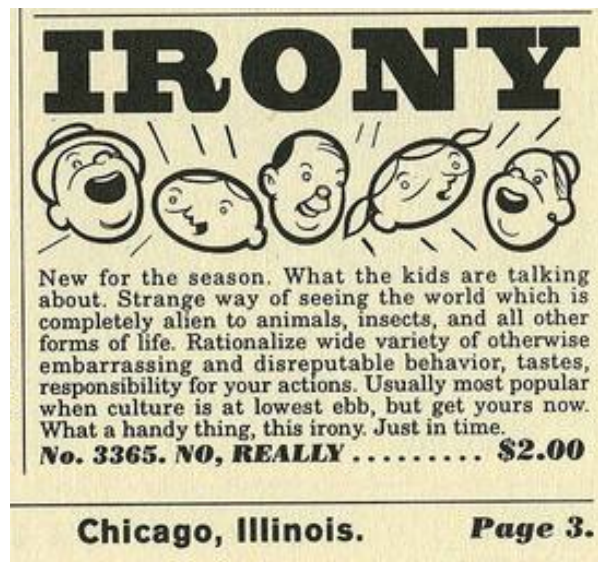


Figure 3.2: Panel from *The ACME Novelty Annual Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday*

Afternoon Fun Book by Chris Ware (2005, 3)

Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay *The Avant-Garde and Kitsch* is an appropriate text with which to open a discussion of the historic subordination of comics to fine art, the wider art world and the academy. Rare for art criticism or scholarship at the time, Greenberg does mention comics, though only in passing and only as part of wider list of cultural objects and media to be defined as kitsch, in contrast to the prevailing and superior avant-garde of visual art. 'Simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde,' he writes, 'a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc. For some reason this gigantic apparition has always been taken for granted. It is time we looked into its whys and wherefores' (1986, 11).

This short passage gives multiple indications of the perceptions of comics among artists and cultural critics that persisted throughout the twentieth century and which continue to persist to the present day despite significant erosion by the growth of

comics studies and the acceptance of comics (generally in the graphic novel format following the aforementioned eighties boom) by literary institutions and somewhat by art institutions. Firstly, in conflating art and literature as cultural media equally capable of producing kitsch, and following this with a mention of comics buried in a long list of mass cultural objects, Greenberg inadvertently marries the two forms and gives them equal importance, acknowledging implicitly that comics can be read as objects of either or both fields of cultural production and not separating them from literature. This defies the idea of the ‘sanctity of literature’ that Hebdige suggests prevailed throughout the twentieth century and defined subcultures such as comics as a result of its prevalence (1979, 28). Greenberg’s conflation can thus be read as a preface to comics studies and many of the texts listed throughout this thesis which examine comics as literature (Versaci 2008; Lopes 2009) and as art (Beaty 2012; Gravett 2013; Meskin & Cook 2014), and texts which acknowledge that comics are a complex combination of images and words and are defined by the resulting interplay – in W.J.T. Mitchell’s terms, an *imagetext* (Mitchell 1995, 2006; Harvey 1996; McCloud 1993; Cohn 2013). Secondly, by placing comics in the same cultural field as pulp fiction, movies and popular music, Greenberg situates them firmly within the field of objects not traditionally studied or traditionally granted prominence and reverence within the academy, but which are now studied as a result of the growth of cultural studies in the latter part of the twentieth century, and which are more traditionally associated with having mass commercial value in contrast to artistic value in an oft-perpetuated and largely false dichotomy. Such dichotomies are always, however, fluid, and Hebdige offers reminders throughout his works that subcultures and parent cultures – in this case, fine art is the parent and kitsch is the child – have ‘shared ideological ground’ (1979, 86) and are subject to a

moving equilibrium⁴⁴ that changed significantly throughout the twentieth century as comics matured as an art form.

The status of comics studies within the wider context of the humanities and social sciences is currently similar to that of film studies in the 1970s, with a coalescence of texts and an ongoing establishment of courses, critical frameworks and a debatable canon. In conflating comics and film under the umbrella of kitsch, Greenberg again prefaces the emergence of comics studies – if film can emerge from this list of kitsch objects and become a distinct object of study, then the potential must therefore exist for comics or any other kitsch object to do the same, though this will not have been Greenberg's aim. Thirdly, by asserting that the avant-garde and kitsch emerged simultaneously and with a somewhat symbiotic relationship, Greenberg acknowledges the possibility of a relationship between comics and the tenets of modernism, whilst also delineating the high and low art forms in a fashion that demands to be broken by postmodernism, as comics have done throughout the 20th century (Ball 2011). And fourthly, Greenberg's offhand comment that 'for some reason' the attention of critics has not been trained on the objects of kitsch can be read as an admission that the objects of popular culture are worthy of study and of close examination by scholarly criticism, once scholars get around to doing so (which, of course, they have done with great aplomb since Greenberg's time).

However, despite these prefaces to the vibrancy of the study of popular culture and, by extension, comics studies, the fundamental thrust of Greenberg's criticism makes a significant contribution to the dominant cultural paradigm of comics and the

⁴⁴ Hebdige's idea (1979, 26) of moving equilibrium is based on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (1989, 2000; see also Fonseca 2016) – the idea of the dominant social group creating moral and intellectual order through ideological subjugation. Hebdige argues that this must be continually won by the dominant group (1979, 26), thus moving the idea towards dialectical or symbiotic thinking. The constant movement of social equilibrium in response to political economy is also echoed by Earl Gammon, who writes of 'shifting frontiers of shame' occurring throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in response to neoliberalism and its movement from crisis to crisis (2013, 513).

other objects labelled as kitsch being subordinate to fine art and highbrow forms of culture. This contributes to the established idea of comics as loserdom, a shameful art form, a base medium. A closer analysis of Greenberg's definitions is needed here, to examine the complex relationship between the avant-garde and kitsch as he expresses it. Greenberg opens his essay with the question of how a culture can produce both the high and low – the example given is a comparison of the poems of T.S. Eliot and Tin Pan Alley music – and is quick to suggest that the answer ‘involves more than an investigation in aesthetics’ (1992, 6). This is in contrast to other influential theories and practices in the education of fine art, such as the earlier essays of Friedrich Schiller, which privilege aesthetic education and exclude the objects of popular culture as worthy of study. Greenberg, of course, was progressive for his time, and helped art criticism on its journey to the idea of the posthistorical ‘end of art’ later asserted by Arthur C. Danto (2014).⁴⁵

Comics have traditionally been excluded from aesthetic education, apart from as objects to be examined as commercial products and thus as objects which carry an aesthetic to be associated with non-cultural work and pure economic gain in contrast to the expressionism of the avant-garde and of fine art. Thus, a dichotomy emerges between art and commerce that aligns comics closely with neoliberalism’s utilitarian emphasis on financial capital and thus distances them from art further. This distance becomes the dialectic of comics work in which the tension between art and commerce is a defining characteristic. In asking his reader to look beyond aesthetics, Greenberg implies that a wider education of man is in order: one which would take in all forms of culture and consider all media. This drive towards broader aesthetic consideration

⁴⁵ Danto wrote in his essay ‘The End of Art’ that the linear path of art developing as committed to mimesis ended with the birth of conceptual art, specifically with Warhol’s Brillo Boxes in 1964. His theory asks, if anything can be art, then where does art have to go in terms of future development? In this context, it doesn’t matter whether comics are legitimised as art or not, as anything can be art if it is conceived of as such (2014).

simultaneously raises comics to the status of a cultural object worthy of study and acknowledges that they have existed, historically, outside the aesthetic education which has informed the development of art schools such as those in which Daniel Clowes experienced derision and subjugation for his interest in comics (expressed in Figure 3.1). In this panel the student's comics are ironically dismissed as 'insubstantial' by a tutor who provides illustrations for plumbing textbooks – a commercial enterprise entirely removed from aesthetic education, an entirely utilitarian undertaking and an example of definitively non-cultural work, nothing more than exchange taking place in the neoliberal free market economy.

Greenberg, in analysing the process and approaches of the avant-garde artists of his time (Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Klee, Matisse), also unintentionally brings comics closer to avant-garde art in a fashion that resonates with the formalist scholars whose works dominate comics studies, moving the equilibrium once again. 'The excitement of their art,' he writes, 'seems to lie most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colours, etc, to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors' (1992, 9). Comics can certainly be read in these terms, even though the definition of comics is stretched and contextualised by formalist scholars to become the idea of 'sequential art.' A note of comparison can be made here with *Score and Script*, a comics anthology which includes comics and analysis, compiled by cartoonist and comics scholar John Miers. For the book, Miers reduced a comic to a 'score' comprised of its essential visual elements – represented as a series of shapes and colours – and asked each artist to draw a comic using the score as a template. Reduced to this essential arrangement, Miers argues that the 'score' still constitutes a comic and suggests that 'any template created with this [reduction to score] in mind could never be neutral' (Miers 2013, 3), that is to say it could never be

without narrative content and thus without the excitement which Greenberg attributes to the formal properties of visual objects, a broad category into which comics fit neatly.

Similarly, the abstract comics movement, largely curated by cartoonist and scholar Andrei Molotiu, offers a contemporary suggestion that a relationship exists between comics and avant-garde art. The following chapter of this thesis contains a more thorough analysis of abstract comics, so I will not discuss this here in great detail. However, on a basic level, Molotiu's comics⁴⁶ are as similar visually to a Mondrian painting as to be able to exist in both the art world and the comic art world (Beaty 2012). Were one of Molotiu's comics to be hung in a gallery alongside a Mondrian or Klee painting there would likely be no objections from the surrounding institutions of the art world nor any criticism, and a Mondrian painting certainly meets Molotiu's very loose criteria for an abstract comic, the only real essential component of which is some form of narrative sequentiality, again supporting the 'sequential art' definition. There is, therefore, a solid case for the complexity of comics within the avant-garde/kitsch dichotomy which echoes the complexity of comics' position within the art academy in the present day and thus adds another level to the multi-dimensional dialectic of comics work.

Thus, the essence of comics' relationship to the art world and its institutions, which include the art schools that offer both practical and aesthetic training for artists, physical and mental work, aesthetic and material development, is dialectical. The material history of comics is a significant factor in complicating the relationship of comics to the art world, since comics' growth as an art form is inextricably linked with the twentieth century political economy that centred around the rise of the printing press, newsstands, and the newspaper corporations which founded the mass market for

⁴⁶ Exhibited on the Abstract Comics Blog (<http://abstractcomics.blogspot.co.uk/>) and BlotComics (<http://blotcomics.blogspot.co.uk/>)

printed ephemera in the economic conditions of emergent capitalism. Greenberg's conception of kitsch could certainly be applied to comics as printed ephemera and the economic conditions that facilitate such cultural objects – what Walter Benjamin calls, influentially, the age of mechanical reproduction. Greenberg writes ‘because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be, except accidentally’ (1992, 13). Comics have historically been ‘turned out mechanically’ as an object of commerce, made by many hands to a commercial deadline, though of course the sole creator has been a significant force in the comics art world since Robert Crumb began self-publishing in the sixties. This again is a contributing factor to the complication that exists between comics and the institutions of the art world and between the most important of all defining tensions in the dialectic of comics work: between the individual and the collective and between the neoliberal self-made entrepreneur and the collective production of cultural work.

Despite creators such as Crumb, Ware, Bechdel and Clowes working alone to create highly non-commercial and often anti-commercial works, the perception of comics as mechanical, mass-produced ephemera created for commercial gain persists. This perception has of course existed since Greenberg's time, as he wrote of kitsch as generating ‘enormous profits’ in all his examples (1992, 13). It is for this reason that Bart Beaty titled a chapter of *Comics Versus Art* ‘Searching for Artists in the Entertainment Empire’ – however much a cartoonist can become an *artist*, they must become one within the sphere of comics' history as a commercial product, as kitsch, with its associated industrial, mechanical and commercial connotations. Therefore, cartoonists must engage with financial capital, and they are forced to accept the intrusion of neoliberal dogma into even their most personal of expressions – into their

art. This intrusion is complicated by the persistent perceptions of comics as a lowbrow art form or, to use the terminology of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2010), one which remains ‘unconsecrated’ – that is, lacking in having been fully legitimised by the institutions of the art world and being seen as commercial, industrial hackwork as in the depictions of Ware and Clowes’ fictional art schools and the interactions therein.

Bourdieu’s *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* exposes implications of the high and low, and the associated cultural capital of fine art in contrast to working-class art forms such as ‘kitsch and popular photography’ (1984, 3). These are forms, he writes, that exhibit the ‘subordination of form to function,’ and promote ‘vulgar enjoyment [of the] popular aesthetic’ (1984, 4). Comics have certainly suffered from the requirement to subordinate form to function throughout their history, and indeed it is the deliberate resistance to this necessity which defines ‘alternative comics’ in contrast to ‘mainstream comics’ (Wolk 2007; Hatfield 2005). This is the act of resistance that defines alternative comics as subculture in contrast to a definitive parent culture (Hebdige 1979, 73). Mainstream comics are made on a neo-Fordist production line, to a deadline, to strict house guidelines, as a commercial product with a clear and all-consuming profit motive. This mode of production has barely changed since the establishment of the first superhero comics in the twenties and thirties, despite significant shifts in the equilibrium of the field of comics work. Even the comic panel, the unit of expression agreed upon as a near-essential property of comics by the comics formalists (McCloud 1994; Saraceni 2003), can be read as the subordination of form to function, a reduction of expression in favour of an easily packaged art form for consumption by masses and the establishment of an easily accessible popular aesthetic, commercial and utilitarian.

Unsurprisingly, Bourdieu does not consider comics at all, and mentions them only once or twice in passing when listing vulgar objects, despite writing forty years on from Greenberg and in a time when alternative comics had begun their transformation and were reaching consciously and loudly for literary status (Hatfield 2005; Marsden 2015). By Bourdieu's time comics had a greater tradition and a richer history in the mainstream, but had also established the underground and shifted paradigms in both production and consumption. The direct market of comics shops had emerged from the sixties countercultural distribution through 'head shops' and the tradition of alternative cartooning reaching a true maturity for the first time, spearheaded by Robert Crumb, Trina Robbins, Aline Kominsky, Gilbert Shelton and a young Art Spiegelman, borrowing from Harvey Kurtzman's long-running *MAD* magazine and soon to establish his own comics magazine *RAW*. However, comics were still very much below the critical and cultural radar, where they still remain despite the exponential growth of comics studies.⁴⁷ Even W.J.T. Mitchell, whose works in the field of visual culture have more recently given comics more precedence as objects worthy of significant study, mentions comics only once and describes them as a 'vernacular composite form' in his highly influential 1994 book *Picture Theory* (93). And, despite the emergence of comics studies and a small number of graphic novels achieving critical and scholarly acclaim, it seems comics continue to exist outside the majority of institutions and considerations which provide legitimation, most notably the art school and the broader landscape of higher education.

Bourdieu includes a number of tables and diagrams throughout *Distinctions* which provide an empirical basis for his statements about class divisions through data on the reading habits, eating habits and general cultural activities of various people

⁴⁷ A majority of the comics studies conferences I have attended form a consensus among attendees that there is a high risk of the field, like the art form itself in many ways, becoming dangerously insular – if it has not done so already.

surveyed, mostly from the strata which Bourdieu calls ‘the dominant class’ (1984, 119). One in particular can here be read as a microcosm of the view we have seen among the institutions of high culture (and thus of art and, by extension, art school, which are conflated by cartoonists as we will see in the examples in the following passage) that comics are not a concern for the art world. If they are to be considered, comics are to be considered as a commercial, mercenary alternative to the aesthetic expression of true art as taught in art schools, a product made to make money, exploiting the machinations of late capitalism and the power of culture to advance commercial gain in such contexts (Swartz 1998). Bourdieu’s table (Figure 3.3) outlines which professions prefer certain types and genres of books, and of course, comics are nowhere to be seen. Other tables drawn by Bourdieu show music, theatre, and numerous other popular cultural activities, with comics nowhere in sight.

Table 8 Types of books preferred by different fractions of the dominant class (%), 1966.^a

Type of book	Teachers (higher and secondary)	Public- sector execs.	Professions	Engineers	Private- sector execs.	Industrial employers	Commercial employers
Detective stories	25 (6)	29 (1)	27 (4)	28 (3)	29 (1)	27 (4)	25 (6)
Adventure stories	17 (7)	20 (3)	18 (6)	24 (1)	22 (2)	19 (4)	19 (4)
Historical	44 (4)	47 (2)	49 (1)	47 (2)	44 (4)	36 (6)	27 (7)
Illustrated art books	28 (2)	20 (3)	31 (1)	19 (5)	20 (3)	17 (6)	14 (7)
Novels	64 (2)	68 (1)	59 (5)	62 (3)	62 (3)	45 (6)	42 (7)
Philosophy	20 (1)	13 (3)	12 (5)	13 (3)	15 (2)	10 (7)	12 (5)
Politics	15 (1)	12 (2)	9 (4)	7 (5)	10 (3)	5 (6)	4 (7)
Economics	10 (1)	8 (3)	5 (6)	7 (5)	9 (2)	8 (3)	5 (6)
Science	15 (3)	14 (4)	18 (2)	21 (1)	9 (7)	10 (6)	11 (5)

Source: C.S. V (1966).

a. The figures in a given row show the percentage of each category of respondents who included that type of book among their favourite types (italic figures indicate the strongest tendency in the row). The figures in parentheses show the rank of each class fraction in that row. Books

on economics and science are set apart on the grounds that interest in these types of reading-matter depends on secondary factors, in one case occupational activity (hence the rank of the private-sector executives and employers) and in the other, academic training (hence the rank of the engineers).

Figure 3.3: Table from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984, 119).

Therefore, it appears comics have historically been excluded from art institutions, viewed as vulgar and commercial. They have been ignored and derided in more recent portrayals of this relationship, the established lowbrow perception of comics remaining stable throughout the twentieth century even as alternative comics rose and change the art form beyond recognition while political economy shifted into

neoliberal, ideologically-driven exploitative late capitalism. Greenberg's inclusion of comics in his list of ephemeral, mass-produced, cheap kitsch, conjoined with Bourdieu's notions of taste and class as applied to art and literature (1977, 1984, 1993, 1996) establish here that comics are an art form for the masses, for the working class, an argument which Ware has always upheld and frequently states in interviews and editorials (Irving 2012). It is pertinent, therefore, to turn here to Ware's work and to analyse its portrayals of art and the art world, following the threads of Greenberg and Bourdieu through the work of the most prominent and critically acclaimed alternative cartoonist, who has become 'a synecdoche for the comics world as a whole, and particularly for the aspirations of the comics world relative to the art world' according to Bart Beaty (2012, 224). Throughout this thesis, Ware recurs as the best and most prominent example of the tensions inherent in the dialectic of comics work, and despite his huge commercial success and critical acclaim, he too upholds the animosity, shame and resentment felt towards art school by alternative comics.

‘This is a good direction, Cindy’: Chris Ware and the price of art

ART DEALER



No artist can possibly ever make it in the “real world” without his or her own “art dealer.” This is the hard-working, sleep-deprived, tireless proponent of your personal “ethos,” ready and willing to make any sacrifice for the success of your “work” in the financial and commercial world. This saintly soul will take projects and pictures that you’ve taken weeks/months/years to produce and spend just a few hours pounding them into the walls of his or her “space,” invite lots of people with extra cash to come in and buy them, and then take half of the money. He or she might even charge you a modest “gallery fee” for the use of “their space,” as a courtesy. As well, this generous guy or gal takes care of all of those annoying jobs like travelling to european countries and hobnobbing with other “buyers” and “sellers,” spending agonizing nights at expensive restaurants, and suffering interminable social circumstances with the rich upper classes simply to so you can replace your pictures and projects with cash and “recognition.” Many even gracefully absorb the seventy-five buck printing cost of making “postcards” for all of your other artist friends to take home and hang on their refrigerators. But hey, these fellas and girls are all taking a big risk, gambling on your little projects and craft ideas, so give them a break. You can’t just sell your stuff yourself, right?

No. 1541. FRIENDLY PAL . . . Market Price.

ART CRITIC



If you’ve spent all of your time and money trying to “make it” in the “art world” and are sick and tired of the struggle, then here’s the job for you. Attach yourself like a leech to someone who’s actually doing something interesting, and “vent” all of that bitterness and hatred you feel towards your inability to create something of value yourself. Vanquish your foes with the stroke of the pen, or with the turn of an inchoate and ungrammatical phrase. It’s easy. Everyone wants to know what to think, and you can help them. Read lots of impenetrable French gobbledegook and keep it “at the ready” when someone comes along with something that’s actually sort of fun to look at for a few minutes. You’ll crush them in seconds. Amaze yourself at the ridiculous connections and asinine conclusions you can come to that people will swallow without so much as a blink. “Focus” on a particular set of aesthetic “problematics,” and get anxious looks from eager “artists” hoping you’ll work your “magic” on them in your next “article.” What a gas! It’s more pathetic and valueless than working in fast food. Do it now!

No. 1543. BARNACLE 6¢/word.

ART

Dangerous if handled incorrectly. Harmless. Completely unnecessary. Indispensable. Priceless. Worthless. Weird! Who knows what it is, this mysterious substance that everyone seems to be so worried about identifying. Whatever – get some now.

No. 1540. STUFF \$10/b.

ART MAGAZINE



Just the thing to get for the anyone who wants to be “in the know” -- a subscription to one of the snazzy new art magazines. Thick, square, full-color, and full of neat puzzles and games, these exciting publications set the cultural standard for “high style” and the season’s intellectual fashions. A bible for everyone in art school or for those thinking about running their own “gallery”, these little numbers sure do look swell on a large glass table. Helps you puzzle out what’s going on with “site-specific installations”, or keep track of the latest innovations in creative syntax. And imagine the envious snorts and jealous shuffles if something on your wall is pictured on the cover of this month’s issue. Wow! Subscribe to ‘em all!

No. 1547. PRAYER BOOK \$35/yr.

Shit Powder



It’s the berries. Just sprinkle a little bit of this substance into your victim’s soup, sandwich, or snack, wait an hour or two for it to work its “magic,” and then stand back. Good lord! It’s incredible. They won’t be able to get to the toilet fast enough. A real embarrassment for everyone involved. No one will know what happened. Lots of laffs on holidays, weddings, car trips, etc. **10c, 3 for 25c.**

No. 8903. SHIT POWDER 10c

Figure 3.4: Panel from *The ACME Novelty Annual Report to Shareholders and Rainy Day Saturday*

Afternoon Fun Book by Chris Ware (2005, 69)

Chris Ware’s *ACME Novelty Library* series, known for its cutting parody advertisements alongside its serialized stories and acerbic self-contained strips, features numerous negative portrayals of the art world and its institutions. The above images are collected in the outsized hardback omnibus *The ACME Novelty Library and Rainy Day Saturday Afternoon Fun Book*, and invite the reader to purchase the various institutions of the art world – the dealer, the magazine, the gallery, and even art itself, advertised as

‘Dangerous if handled incorrectly. Harmless. Completely unnecessary. Indispensable. Priceless. Worthless. Weird! Who knows what it is, this mysterious substance that everyone seems to be so worried about identifying. Whatever – get some now’ (2011, 69). The largest space in the art section, however, is given to the art teacher, who is available for a modest \$35,000/yr, the most expensive of all the facets of the art world on offer and a cruel reminder of neoliberalism’s commodification of art, education and of pedagogy as a whole. While the other objects are slightly mystified and fetishized, the art teacher is a clear-cut commercial prospect, measured by his monetary worth, consistent with neoliberalism’s insistence on the application of economic logic to all things. As Rachel Greenwald Smith asserts, ‘unlike previous iterations of *homo oeconomicus* in which an economic rationality was brought to bear only on situations with possible economic outcomes, the neoliberal subject is entrepreneurial in most spheres of life, taking on activities seemingly divorced from economic transactions as modes of enterprise’ (2015, 37). One such activity, clearly, is the decision to seek art tuition, which may of course have economic outcomes – such is the intention under neoliberalism – but also may not. Remembering Schiller and the traditional idea of the aesthetic education that would be the primary association and reason for attending an art school, it is clear that a neoliberal cost/benefit analysis, when brought to bear upon art pedagogy, is a relatively new application to aesthetic education as it is to all things.

The art teacher’s advertising copy describes the experiences the buyer could be treated to in detail. This suggests it may be drawn closely from Ware’s own experience at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where the majority of his teachers ‘discouraged him from doing comics,’ and a small number ‘openly mocked him, at least until he dropped out’ (Raeburn 2004, 12). The majority of the products on offer in this advertising spread is a somewhat tangential and repetitive description of a work of art

based around placing a tin of spaghetti on the floor, but the art teacher can also show you how to unlock your creativity, which is also for sale on the opposite page for the bargain price of \$1. Its copy invites the readers to ‘express themselves’ with sarcasm and ludic yet cynical irony evident through the use of inverted commas. Inverted commas also trap the words ‘skill,’ ‘work,’ and ‘talent’ in the art teacher’s ad copy, making Ware’s conflict with art education and its essential tenets apparent, ironizing the promises of work and success in neoliberal terms inherent in these words. This point is hammered home with the item’s catalogue label, ‘Big Scam,’ an unremarkable number 1542 slotting it mundanely into the sharp, sarcastic roster of pseudo-commodified art that is a significant part of the visual lexicon of Ware’s *ACME Novelty Library* series. This lexicon works to ironize such commodifications and to parody and mock neoliberalism’s insistence on economic logic and entrepreneurial approach, which here does not result in success or capital gains – neither cultural nor financial.

The conclusion of Bart Beaty’s *Comics Versus Art*, which he acknowledges is an insubstantial closure to his book, opens with a discussion of these ads, stating that they ‘place the institution of art training under attack’ and ‘offer a way to come to terms with the relationship that exists between the comics world and the art world, and the structural subordination of the former to the latter’ (212). This subordination is evident from the art criticism of Greenberg and the sociological analyses of Bourdieu and Hebdige, which here provide the ‘structure’ to which Beaty refers. Ware’s cynicism towards the art world is clear, from the adverts, and the structural subordination Beaty highlights is felt keenly upon a close reading of the advert, which tells us that ‘drawing is only a ‘skill’ a moron could learn’ (Ware 2011, 69), skill being a word used frequently in neoliberal analyses of labour and its potential within the free market economy.

Taking his portrayal of art education beyond simple mockery, however, Ware focuses one of his *Rusty Brown* strips on an unscrupulous middle school art teacher called, self-consciously, Mr. Ware. Mr. Ware spends the majority of his time drawing cruel and vulgar caricatures of the other teachers, including eponymous middle grade student and comics enthusiast Rusty Brown's father. These caricatures emphasise the art world's cruel and mocking side, even when its shortcomings are painfully obvious and even when, dialectically and in an ironic reversal of Hebdige's parent-child dynamic, the tools with which the world of fine art asserts its superiority over comics are those of comics themselves. The rest of Mr. Ware's time is spent using modelling opportunities to peer up the skirts of his pupils. Katherine Roder, in her essay 'Chris Ware and the Burden of Art History' examines this scene and its complex depiction of art and art education in detail. 'A close reading of the classroom scene in which Mr. Ware comically models for his drawing class,' she writes, 'suggests both Ware's mockery of art pedagogy as well as his knowledge of art historical precedents' (2010, 66). This makes apparent the 'structural subordination' suggested by Beaty, but also complicates it. Ware's work as a cartoonist is not simply excluded from the academy, but is engaged with by the art world as a structure of subordination is created, establishing the dialectical tension between comics and art which we have seen in Clowes and Ware's comics. Although Ware's mocking of art pedagogy in his ineffective art teacher character betrays discomfort with the art academy and bitterness toward the institutions of the art world, in calling the teacher 'Mr. Ware' he ultimately directs this criticism towards himself, which adds a complication to the relationship between comics and art which we have seen in the Clowes' comics and which Bart Beaty characterizes as Nietzschean *ressentiment*⁴⁸ – a relationship involving not just a

⁴⁸ Beaty explains this idea with the following quote from Nietzsche: 'We should remember that the emotion of contempt, of looking down, provided that it falsifies at all, is as nothing compared with the

cycle of subordination, but one of shame, and self-conscious failure. Ware failed to be accepted in art school, just as his art teacher fails to be an effective art institution, reduced to drawing vulgar caricatures of his fellow teachers to express himself, left only with the tools of a mechanical and commercial form to amass capital.

In his introduction to the comics issue of the experimental literary journal *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, which he edited with Dave Eggers, Ware writes candidly about his art school experience between lengthy descriptions of the pain and torture of creating comics shared by all the artists whose work is featured in the issue. These include Daniel Clowes, Jeffrey Brown, Robert Crumb, Lynda Barry, Julie Doucet, Joe Matt and many other luminaries of alternative comics with a similar predilection for eviscerating self-deprecation and whose work appears elsewhere in this thesis. 'In art school,' Ware writes, 'I was frequently criticized because many of my instructors simply didn't understand why I was drawing comics. It was hard to explain that no one was telling me to do it, that I wasn't fulfilling any editorial requirement, and that I wasn't doing it as a commercial 'gig' (as one of them implied)' (2004, 11). As if the physical act of drawing comics along with the culture of comics work under emergent neoliberalism wasn't hard enough for Ware and his contemporaries, the derision of comics by the art world here appears to further feed the negative, insular portrayal of comics as a shameful art by cartoonists. The juxtaposition of the faceless, nameless art teacher's utterly misplaced idea of alternative comics being a viable, even profitable, commercial undertaking is quite intentional. There is certainly no irony lost in the positioning of this passage on commodification, subordinate on the far side of the page, accompanying a series of strips in which the artists throughout history to whom comics can be traced (with some application and knowledge of art history) are all

falsification which suppressed hatred, impotent vindictiveness, effects upon its opponent, though only in effigy' (2012, 52).

exploited for commercial gain. This serves to remind the cartoonist that such qualities are not unique to comics work and that commercialism was also complicating the art world for centuries, even before the true emergence of capitalism. The art world's subjugation of comics and the teachers in art schools mocking of comics for their commercialism therefore betrays an anxiety on their own part, projecting their own worry about the nexus between art and commerce under neoliberalism onto comics – an easy target due to their association with childhood and early literacy, again evoking Hebdige's parent-child dialectic as it finds continued resonance with neoliberalism and the neoliberal policymaker as parent (Gammon 2013).

Ware's apparent experience echoes that of Clowes as satirised in *Art School Confidential*, and also subtly evokes the economic and commercial factors surrounding comics themselves within art school. Ware's instructors were implicitly putting him down for producing lowbrow art for payment, an association much more close to the mainstream comics producers (Marvel and DC) than to alternative comics, whose creators are frequently portrayed as penniless and suffering for their art. The art teacher whose critiques frame the background narrative of *Art School Confidential* is revealed to be an artist for plumbing textbooks, an ironic twist that betrays his own status as art commodified and made to perform mundane tasks in the service of capital in the neoliberal free market. Yet, even with the art teacher's abilities reduced to making a living from the most practical and quotidian of drawings, his perception – standing in for the art world as a whole – is still that comics are an even more base product than plumbing manuals, and thus comics work is seen as beneath non-comics work. Even if they are practical and without beauty or craft, the plumbing illustrations are not 'mindless and contemptible' as comics are, and they can be seen as a career path of sorts offering a structure and reward that comics work cannot (Clowes 2008, np). The

art teacher is doing them while holding down his teaching job, while the student is made to feel small with his disappointing, insubstantial, unambitious comics, which do not make money or serve any purpose within the art world.

Chris Ware has explored the career path of a cartoonist and its commercial potential with wit and self-deprecation, many examples of which occur throughout this thesis, exhibiting the prominence of the complex relationship cartoonists have to their work. Advertising a thirteen-step program with which the readers can ruin their lives by drawing cartoons, we are invited in this mock advertisement to share in Ware's professional secrets for the bargain price of \$90 (Figure 1.2). After the first step of 'getting to work,' emphasizing the physicality and materiality of comics work, the second step is to 'realize your mistake,' evoking failure and shame very on in the program as Ware's *McSweeney's* editorial also does. Most significantly, however, steps three and four are 'envy the other arts' and 'you will not be compensated,' proving to us that despite comics existing in Greenberg's category of popular, commercial kitsch in contrast to the avant-garde, Greenberg's assertion that kitsch has 'enormous profits' accompanying it is not true for alternative comics. From the steps in Ware's program, and the accompanying hunched, balding, proletarian slave-cartoonist chained to his desk, it is not hard to see why comics would be derided by Ware's tutors at art school. An art form that requires intense physical labour for little to no compensation is clearly of very low value, or as Clowes' art student would have it, 'completely unsuitable as a career choice' (Clowes 2008, np). Cartooning thus fails under the criteria of neoliberal success, proving the extent of the neoliberalisation of art and aesthetic education, fully overcome by higher education's ongoing corporatization, moving towards fixed-term or zero-hours contracts, lower pay and higher fees, as neoliberalism pushes privatization into all spheres (Chomsky 1998, 2010; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000).

To pursue an art form and a form of cultural work that consciously and deliberately seeks out envy and failure at the expense of compensation or recognition is clearly a fallacy, yet Ware has managed to make a career from exaggerating these aspects of comics and building an elaborate canon of works around them. David M. Ball's notion of the 'rhetoric of failure' is one which is valuable to this reading of Ware and which he uses to explain the curious paradox at play in Ware's work, and contemporary comics in general, at least if Ware as a synecdoche for the comics world as a whole as Bart Beaty allows him to do.⁴⁹ It seems that in his failure and his consistent, relentless self-deprecation and mocking of the form and his own work within it, Ware is succeeding, and succeeding more than any other cartoonist working today both inside the art world and outside it. Comics work's success, contextualized within the art world, therefore seems to be found in failure, pushing irony and dialectical definition. Even if Ware has endured 'decades of isolation, solipsism and utter social disregard' as the striking full-page advert suggests, those decades are certainly in his past, and certainly he cannot claim disregard in any fashion since the *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid On Earth* won The Guardian First Book Award in 2001. Ware only partly acknowledged the significance of this institutional approval and the cultural capital it conferred upon him at the time, of course, telling *The Guardian* that 'as a cartoonist, one isn't used to being taken seriously' (Guardian 2001). Since then he has become one of the few cartoonists to have a solo exhibition at an art gallery, and his originals have fetched high prices at auctions at Sotheby's and Christies, among other examples of institutional approval. The art world provides these great measures of success and confers cultural capital upon him, yet still Ware persists with the rhetoric of failure. Perhaps it is all he knows how to do – it is, after all, his winning formula and

⁴⁹ The final chapter of *Comics Versus Art* states, boldly, that 'if Chris Ware didn't exist, the comics art world would have had to invent him' (226).

has been a consistent feature in his storytelling since his earliest works (Ball & Kuhlman, 2010). Douglas Wolk, in his comprehensive survey of alternative comics and the graphic novel format *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*, dismisses Ware's work as having 'an emotional range of one note' and called his drawing style 'mechanical' and 'dead' (2007, 236). However, even though his essay on Ware is entitled 'Why does Chris Ware hate fun?' Wolk in fact highlights, along with the other scholars of Ware's work, that it is the seemingly lowbrow and quotidian aspects of his work which bring about his success, even if the endless parade of characters beset with loneliness, ennui and ugliness become wearisome with critical and close readings.

Ware's work is not the only cartoonist's oeuvre to regard itself and its creator with suspicion, scorn and derision, and these approaches persist in alternative comics. Daniel Clowes' characters, as we have seen, are all suffering in dark colour schemes, and as the following section asserts, Jeffrey Brown's comics are brutal in their portrayal of the author's seemingly innumerable failings. Wolk summarises this phenomenon and its persistence thus:

Perhaps the comics world has spent so long hating itself that it can't imagine it's not still an underdog. But demanding (or wishing for) a place at the table of high culture is an admission that you don't have one; the way you get a place at the table of high culture is to pull up a chair and say something interesting. (2007, 64)

And this is exactly what Ware has done, and continues to do. Even though his place at the table of high culture (one side of which is, undoubtedly, the institution of art pedagogy) is persistently undermined by his own rhetoric, Ware earns it outright by pulling up his chair – a canon of beautiful, intricate, expertly crafted, bitingly satirical

and aesthetically sublime – and continuing to earn the interest of the academy and the world of fine art, all the while satirizing neoliberalism’s commercial, exploitative focus whilst acknowledging his existence within it. While the tragic, hangdog cartoonist is ruining his life living the dream of comics, he cannot do so without *all* of the thirteen steps in the \$90 program, and thus cannot do so without envying the other arts and coming to terms with the lack of adequate remuneration and financial capital. Comics’ subordination to traditional art is part of their DNA, but one which is being diluted as newer cartoonists emerge and comics find their way into new corners of the academy each year. It thus remains a significant part of their history and thus a defining tension.

‘It just took me a while to figure it out’: Jeffrey Brown and the Misshapen Body of the Cartoonist



Figure 3.5: Panels from *Funny Misshapen Body* by Jeffrey Brown (2009, 4).

Jeffrey Brown is well-known among cartoonists and readers of alternative comics for his painstakingly honest autobiographical comics and graphic novels, which are filled with uncomfortable personal details and intimate sexual, physical and emotional moments from his life, rendered in simple black pen drawings. *Funny Misshapen Body* collects a number of short stories about Brown’s time in art school, his history with comics, art and drawing, and living with Crohn’s disease. It follows his previous

‘girlfriend’ trilogy, three books about his past relationships that have earned him minor critical acclaim. His drawing style, as detailed in Figure 3.5, is not expansive or exhaustive in detail, nor is it precise, elegant or indicative of significant skill as a draughtsman. Visually, he is almost the opposite of Chris Ware, yet his work sits quite comfortably alongside Ware’s on shelves in bookshops and in anthologies, including the comics issue of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* (2004).

There is a remarkable difference between the art of *Funny Misshapen Body* and that of his debut, *Clumsy*, which was submitted as his MFA thesis and which he subsequently self-published. Following this, indie publisher Top Shelf, known for publishing the collected editions of James’s wacky diary comic *American Elf* (2004), added Brown to their roster. The creation and submission of this is chronicled in *Funny Misshapen Body*, providing a climax and summation of Brown’s frustration with himself, art school and his uncomfortable position on his MFA course as a student attempting to figure out what art he should best be making, denying that his greatest skill and passion lies in the creation of comics. The book opens with a short retrospective strip, placing Brown’s recently attained position as a full-time artist, having quit his day job at a Barnes & Noble bookstore prior to the publication of *Funny Misshapen Body*, in the context of the fragmented narrative journey he is about to lead the reader on. After walking us through his interests in high school (comics, fantasy and sci-fi), college (poetry), post-college (painting and galleries) and art school (sighing at paintings), he concludes the introduction with Figure 3.5, telling us that he is living his boyhood dream. However, he is shown with a look of deliberate concern and concentration which undermines the dream from within the very same panel, as does the qualifying word ‘essentially.’ He sets the tone of the book and its portrayal of the realization of himself as a comics artist as one still fundamentally flawed and indicative

of some sort of failure on the part of comics, again evoking Ball's notion of the 'rhetoric of failure.' It is only in retrospect that Brown's work as a comics artist makes sense to him, and only in consideration of its jostling with the other, more recognizably highbrow art forms of poetry and painting in the context of art school, a tension that gives Brown's cartoon face the same look of concern as comics does when he is depicted creating them.

The book's narrative is fragmented, somewhat linear but with tangents including a chapter on Brown's living with Crohn's disease, chronicling his body's failure as well as his failures in comics, art school and in self-control as he drinks and smokes his way through college, leaning towards *ressentiment*. He wins the battle with Crohn's, but cannot end the story with optimism. It finishes with a simple drawing of a locked bathroom door, illustrated with the single word 'usually,' used to undermine the pivotal statement that his system is 'fine these days' (2009, 106). His failure may be behind the bathroom door, hidden from view, but in showing it in hiding he is also exposing it, as art school does to comics – they are shameful and base, to be euphemized and hidden. However, like Brown's disease, they are unavoidable and are a significant part of art history and the art world. Another chapter in the book is entitled 'The Critique' and depicts Brown receiving a grilling from a number of art tutors, who tell him 'this work doesn't look like the work of a graduate student...it looks like the work of someone who doesn't know what they want to do, or how to do it' (2009, 106). Brown replies, arms raised in comically exaggerated indignation, that he came to the institute to find those things out, reminding the reader that he is still yet to realise his calling in comics at this moment in time. Even though the reader is shown numerous images of the child, teenage and early twenties Jeff devouring comics and drawing on his own all night after

physically demanding shifts at multiple day jobs, he still feels something is missing and that he must aspire to something higher, be it painting or poetry.

The pages that depict Brown's flirtations with performing poetry are filled with smiling faces, and these diversions are rarely treated with the agonizing critical depiction given to Brown's attempts to make visual art of any kind, be it comics or painting. In a scene characteristic of Brown's sentimentality, we see him shedding tears at the cinema while watching the film *Il Postino*, being so moved by the titular postman's poetic exploits because they are nothing but pure self-expression, without 'skill or virtuosity or genius' (2009, 172). These are words that have been historically and culturally applied with gusto to the world of fine art but rarely, if at all, to the world of comics, though there are notable exceptions. Chris Ware has of course earned these platitudes from the world of fine art as well as the world of literature and literary criticism, and as asserted in the previous chapter, auteurism prevails in alternative comics and uses the myths of genius and virtuosity to privilege self-expression, as in the case of Jeff Smith. These are not words we would expect to be applied to the objects which Greenberg categorises as kitsch, or to the art forms Bourdieu associates with the working class, such as popular music, detective fiction and folk dance. Comics fits both of these delineations and are easily defined as lowbrow. Poetry, on the other hand, is not.

Inspired by the film and by his poetry class, Brown put together a book of his poems entitled *Straightjacket* in his final year as an undergraduate art major. Its imagery chimes with the stringent economic conditions perpetuated by the rise of neoliberalism. Significantly, Brown chose to illustrate the book, fearing it would be viewed as derivative and unoriginal if it were just a straightforward poetry book. The illustrated book charms students and professors at his final year show, and he even sells a couple

of paintings. The chapter of *Funny Misshapen Body* that chronicles his undergraduate years concludes with his mailing the book out to publishers and receiving numerous rejections, returning once more to the rhetoric of failure and to the unacceptability and lack of understanding shown toward the hybrid, difficult, seemingly unknowable work Brown has created. The publishers offer a ‘glimmer of hope’ (2009, 178) in the form of a letter which shows, upon close inspection of the small panel, that the publisher enjoyed reading the book. However, if the reader looks closer (which some may not, hinting at comics’ narrative failure being more conspicuous, as in Ware’s diagrammatic and intricately fragmented comics), the text of the letter reveals that the publisher ‘rarely publishes illustrated books’ (2009, 178). This detail once again highlights the almost-success of Brown’s illustrated work and thus the almost-success of comics. Knocking on the door of the literary world, Brown finds it is opened with the chain kept on as the owner of the house hands the vagrant at the door a dollar and bids him be on his way. There is no place for *Straightjacket* in the literary world, but its positive reception at the final year exhibition offers some hope for it in the art world. However, this is not where Brown felt it to belong, and it has since never seen the light of day, having proved itself to have no value – whether this be in cultural capital, social capital or financial capital.

Another chapter in the book is dedicated to Brown’s day job during and after college, working in a shop that sells Dutch-inspired wooden gifts to tourists, where he creates the designs on shoes, bowls and other paraphernalia. As with the other chapters, he concludes that ‘this isn’t the art I should spend my time making’ (2009, 197) and quits the job despite being offered the possibility of a raise and health insurance. Thus he forsakes the chance to earn money and to gain a certain level of stability – which is increasingly difficult under neoliberalism (Mason 2015; Berlant 2011) – from art, in

favour of discovering what art he *should* be doing, which turns out to be comics. Similar to Daniel Clowes' unfavourable portrayal of the art teacher's skill being used for plumbing textbooks, Brown finds the commercial use of his talents personally distasteful. However, since Ware's tutors thought he was interested in comics purely as a commercial 'gig,' comics cannot win either way at art school. Whether they are commercially viable or not they are regarded as inferior, proving once again the highly contradictory nature of comics work in the context of the art school and the neoliberal university (Gammon 2013; Slaughter & Rhoades 2000).

The same chapter includes a conversation about art with Brown's boss at the wooden shoe factory (Figure 3.6). Both of them agree that the carvings they make on the wooden objects are *not* art, and it is clear that they have given the issue much thought over their numerous carvings and etchings. They discuss commercial imperatives, with Brown initially suggesting that if somebody is paying you it's not art, but he hadn't considered being paid to do *what he wanted* to do, as he would later do in his other works that reflect on art and commerce (Johnston 2013). The concern throughout the book is that what Brown really wants to do is comics, although he doesn't recognise this until it becomes a reality (as evidenced by the final panel of Figure 3.6). He is clearly perplexed by his boss' idea of being paid to do what you want to do – he hadn't even considered that making a living from comics was even possible, that such a lowbrow art form which he loved as a child would be one he could gain credibility from and earn a living from. Comics, even to a committed comics artist, are persistently viewed as incapable of conferring any form of capital at all on their creators. Even as it occurs to Brown, he hesitates, seeing the potential for failure in comics writ large behind the potential for the greatest success in art, that of the painter, the poet, the master of self-expression. Not only are comics visually and materially

crude and lacking in ambition, but they are also cheap, a mass produced object far removed from an expensive painting, hanging in isolation on the wall of a gallery.



Figure 3.6: Page from *Funny Misshapen Body* by Jeffrey Brown (2009, 190).

Perhaps the most enlightening moment in *Funny Misshapen Body* is a visit from Ware, who drops by Brown's studio to see his works after some phone and mail correspondence. Ware praises Brown for his 'being revealing and forthcoming personally' and tells him that this is 'the most important thing an artist can do' (261),

echoing the importance placed on self-expression by Jeff Smith and the prevalence of auteurism in comics. Significantly, Ware immediately assumes that what Brown is doing is art, and that he is an artist, with no deliberation. To Ware's mind in this comic, comics are art, but art is also of little to no concern to cartoonists. His final appearance in the book depicts him telling Brown that 'life's too short to worry about all that art stuff' (261). This is a neat encapsulation of the emergent comics art world – its artists *are* artists, but they need not be concerned with fine art. Rather, they are expressing something human and personal, and thus something riddled with mistakes and failures, building an art form upon the rhetoric of failure and defining it by its tensions with other art forms. When Brown first meets Ware and tells him he's attending the School of the Art Institute, Ware asks him if it's made him want to jump out of the window yet. Brown hasn't yet jumped out of the window, of course, but Ware's question tells us it's only a matter of time until he does so – until he leaves the confines of art school unceremoniously to create comics in the freedom of the outside world, where institutional approval does not hold value for comics.

Funny Misshapen Body concludes with Brown's completion of *Clumsy* and its self-publication – another failure indicative of comics' relationship to art and literature and of its failure to make it past gatekeepers (Lefèvre 2015). It couldn't find a home with publishers, but Brown published it himself nonetheless, stuffing thousands of copies into his car, collected from the parcel depot to save on shipping costs, draining himself of financial capital in the process. He also copied each page and exhibited them in sequence in his studio for his final exam, which flummoxed his tutors, but they passed him with the acknowledgement that 'it seems like you know what you're doing' (298). Again, whilst they do not allow his comics to be art or praise them as such, they award him an MFA for his graphic novel, acknowledging that some part of comics is art

and that there may be some place within the art world for them. Institutional approval can be denied to comics no longer, but the rhetoric of failure persists nonetheless.

Throughout Brown's book the relationship between comics and art is portrayed as one of discord and struggle, with comics emerging consistently as the loser and subsequently being subjugated, but persistently returning to the ring of the art world (the 'table of high culture') and claiming its place within it. Comics are depicted as battling through shame and 'structural subjugation' to develop a tense, but undeniable, relationship with the art world, which itself has a strained relationship with commerce due to the financial pressures of neoliberalism upon culture and education. The book's conclusion shows Brown as a full-time comics artist finished with his MFA, so he can certainly be viewed as an entrepreneurial *cartoonist oeconomicus* who succeeds under neoliberalism. But we still do not know whether he believes that comics are art or if he believes it is possible to delineate the comics art world from the fine art world. Even though he has figured out that he should be creating comics, there is still implicit doubt, stemming from his attempts at painting and the critical grilling he received at the hands of his art school tutors and his desire to show the reader his history with painting and poetry. His almost-mentor, Ware, both adds to the idea of the comics artist (and thus brings the comics art world closer to the fine art world through the idea of the artist) and takes away from it. What is left is a continuing discord and a circle of symbiosis and tension that binds comics to art, and to art school, in a dialectical relationship.

Conclusion: Shame, Spaceships and Scum

The examples given throughout this chapter reveal that the precedents for the negative portrayals of art school in alternative comics are threefold and can be effectively contextualized within neoliberalism and the dialectic of comics work. Firstly, in the context of the distinctions between high and low culture set out by Bourdieu and

affirmed by Greenberg, comics as an art form (especially those labelled ‘alternative’ in contrast to ‘mainstream’ by Hatfield, Wolk and the majority of cartoonists and comics scholars) are considered low culture or lowbrow. This perception persists in the institutions of the art world despite the postmodern merging of high and low cultures across forms and the move towards a ‘middlebrow’ aesthetic exemplified by Ware’s comics (Singer 2010). Secondly, accompanying the perception of comics as a ‘low’ art form are the associations of comics (whether mainstream or alternative) with commercial production and cheap, labour-intensive mass-produced goods. Comics are made not for a purpose that fulfils any of the ideals that theorists of aesthetic education such as Schiller might, in their proto-capitalist era, have considered a part of the aesthetic education of man. Instead they are made to sell, to mine the ‘enormous profits’ of kitsch for nothing but financial capital, from which the art world still claims to distance itself, a distance which is perpetuated by the figures of authority in art pedagogy depicted in alternative comics.

Thirdly, comics have been historically excluded from art pedagogy almost entirely, as shown by the historical and philosophical scholarship existing on the subject, despite the recent movement in art pedagogy and wider scholarship towards inclusion of other media, the inclusion of and engagement with popular culture, and the growing interdisciplinarity of the study of art. Brown, at the time of writing, is no longer best-known for autobiography, but instead for a growing number of Star Wars books including the humorous picture book *Darth Vader and Son* (2012). The book is a reimagining of the *Star Wars* universe with antagonist Darth Vader being present as father throughout protagonist Luke Skywalker’s childhood, with all of the accompanying issues of intergalactic single fatherhood – tantrums, difficult questions, throwing food, time-outs. Each panel in the book occupies an entire page, and it is

Brown's first book in full, brightly rendered colour. It was Brown's first book to make the *New York Times* bestseller list, and was reviewed favourably by the art and literary presses. The book's success is undeniably owed largely to the *Star Wars* franchise, but Lucasfilm and Disney's⁵⁰ involvement with and support of the Brown's ongoing contributions to the franchise are an indictment of both Brown's prior success in comics and of his talent as both an artist and a storyteller.

Vader's attempts to control his son's life in *Darth Vader and Son* are not unlike those of Brown's tutors in their less than favourable critique, or the misunderstandings of Ware's tutors – Vader steers the child Luke away from the supposedly tacky, vulgar Jar Jar Binks⁵¹ toy in the same manner in which Ware's tutors derided comics for their commercialism, or the way in which Clowes' fictional tutor registered his disappointment with the comics produced by an art student. Vader concludes the book by offering praise for the child's artwork. The child Luke's skills, of course, are not complete yet, but they are as complete as they can be within the framework of his childhood. This scene echoes Brown's final MFA show, and his tutors passing him without acknowledging his work as fine art.

These tensions are discussed by Bart Beaty at length in his chapter on Roy Lichtenstein and pop art's appropriation of comic book images, relating it to *ressentiment*. Lichtenstein appropriated comics work for his own art because it was vulgar, subordinate and authorless, and in doing so lifted it from the gutter whilst ensuring that it was *his* act of doing so that earned it its place on the gallery wall.

⁵⁰ Lucasfilm was set up by *Star Wars* creator George Lucas to manage the successful sci-fi franchise and to control its intellectual properties. In 2012 the company was sold to Disney for a reported \$4.05 billion (Smith 2012).

⁵¹ Jar Jar Binks was a character in *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (1999), which is widely regarded as the worst film of the *Star Wars* franchise as it was the first of the prequels, having failed to live up to the expectations of the franchise's fanbase. Jar Jar in particular did not do well with fans, as a childish and clownish character, and stands up easily as a microcosm for the artistic failures of the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy.

Comics artists were, and continue to be,⁵² contemptuous of Lichtenstein because his appropriation of the form and the critical reception of his art served only to reinforce the idea that he was lifting comics art from its mass media gutter, where it should stay (Beaty 2012, 52). This tension can be seen throughout *Funny Misshapen Body* and *The ACME Novelty Report to Shareholders*. Beaty's book concludes, appropriately, with his thoughts on Chris Ware's comics about art. He refers to Ware thus:

...he so perfectly occupies the space allotted to a cartoonist in the art world at this particular moment in time – innovatively cutting edge in formal terms, technically brilliant as a designer and draftsman, but viciously self-deprecating in his willingness to occupy a diminished position in the field, strongly masculinist in his thematic concerns and aesthetic interests, and willfully ironic about the relationship between comics and art in a way that serves to mockingly reinforce, rather than challenge, existing power inequities (2012, 226).

The idea of 'mocking reinforcement' is key to conceiving of the dialectic of comics work and how cartoonists approach the dynamics within. Whilst comics do owe a debt to the art world and are aware of the ongoing struggle they face for legitimisation, they are not ready to reach the plateau of mainstream art acceptance just yet, and in all likelihood they never will be as long as they continue to mock, rather than truly challenge, the existing 'power inequities' which place them at the feet of fine art as it holds on to capital of all forms under neoliberalism. Neoliberalism's facilitation of extreme wealth has been a significant factor in the growth of fine art and the maintenance of the art world as a powerful and rich institution and cultural field – the works of Damien Hirst and the YBAs, for example, were facilitated by wealthy proponents of the free market such as Charles Saatchi. However, as evidenced by

⁵² See *The Guardian's* interview with cartoonist Marc Ellerby on the subject, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2013/mar/04/comic-artist-view-roy-lichtenstein?INTCMP=SRCH> [accessed 29th April, 2016]

Brown's failure and subsequent, seemingly entrepreneurial self-made success as a cartoonist and Ware's succinct dismissal of 'all that art stuff,' alternative cartoonists are happy with this distance. Or, at least, they remain optimistic about their position and are somewhat comfortable with it, allowing for a spirited denial of the intrusion of neoliberalism into their personal spaces even whilst succeeding in their comics careers through self-reflexive entrepreneurialism (Foucault 2010; Gammon 2013).

This 'space allotted to cartoonists at the present time' that Beaty imagines has art school at its borders, shaping the divide and looming over comics, inspiring shame and resentment. For Brown, Ware and Clowes their time at art school was a rite of passage which has indubitably defined and shaped their work as cartoonists, and shaped it into a dialectic. The same can be said for many other cartoonists, especially those appearing in the comics issue of *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*. Daniel Worden's essay on this space, published in the graphic narrative special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, refers to comics as 'the shameful art,' and discusses their self-portrayal as shameful objects, akin to pornography in that they bring 'shame on both artist and reader' (2006, 891). Ware's work, certainly, is full to the brim with shame – his characters are depicted crying behind locked doors with alarming frequency, and the multitude of products advertised to us by the fictional *ACME* corporation offer ways to hide the shame of our families, our health, and our assumed proletarian lives which can only be enriched by corporate consumerism. Brown's shame leaps from the page as he is drawn losing his virginity in a tearful embrace, farting his way through high school due to Crohn's disease, and being mocked by his tutors at art school for his shameful lack of large paintings and aesthetically ambitious work. The same exhibitions of shame are also exhibited in the work of Daniel Clowes and the other authors collected in *McSweeney's* 13, such as Robert Crumb, Adrian Tomine, Charles Burns, Lynda Barry,

Seth, Joe Matt, Julie Doucet and Aline Kominsky-Crumb, all of whose works featured in *McSweeney's* are filled with uncompromising and graphic depictions of sexual failure, racial tension and gender melancholy, all of which are symptoms of the broader oppression of the neoliberal neurosis.

'Neoliberal neurosis' is a term used by Earl Gammon in his examination of the socio- and psychogenesis of neoliberalism (2013), to which he asserts that shame is key, drawing on Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille and Norbert Elias, whose idea of the *homo clausus* suggests an explanation for neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism (1988). The *homo clausus*, the individual in society, acting independently whilst still existing within a collective society, can also provide a model for comics work and for understanding the alternative cartoonist. I would suggest that a dialectic can emerge between the *cartoonist oeconomicus* and the *cartoonist clausus*, the economic cartoonist pursuing an individualist course of action for economic gain, but always within the restrictions of political economy and the requirements of collective production. Shame ensues from this dialectic, because such selfhood can never be obtained. As Gammon writes, '...unable to attain the idealized selfhood, the neoliberal subject is prone to an internalized tormenting anger, and projects onto others the blame for its own shortcomings' (2013, 524). Such internalized emotion and blame are key characteristics of alternative comics, as evidenced by those cartoonists examined in this thesis so far – in their negative portrayals of themselves and their bodies, but also in relation to art school, which projects back their apparent shortcomings and thus inspires shame, stemming from the neoliberal neurosis. Similarly, neoliberal neurosis is shown by Stephen Ball to be present throughout the British education system, which he argues can be understood through Foucault's works on power and governmentality (Ball 2013). Foucault's *homo oeconomicus* provides a template for man, and when such an ideal is

not met by students for a given reason – in this case the tension between art and commerce created by neoliberalism’s devaluing of the cultural products in the setting of free market capitalism – shame is conferred directly upon them by the institutions of education, and thus by the system of education itself.

Shame is not in short supply in alternative comics, and certainly not in those in which art school is portrayed as a domineering force, shaming its students for creating unambitious, vulgar comics instead of the fine art the school should like them to create. Worden reminds us, however, that comics’ relationship with art is far from straightforward. ‘The feeling of shame the book [Chris Ware’s *ACME Novelty Library*] strongly associates with comics,’ he writes, ‘is Janus-faced. On the other side of isolation and loserdom is intimate belonging’ (896). It is in their shame that comics find their identity, and if art school mocks them, derides them and misunderstands them, so much the better for the formation of their identity, in opposition to neoliberalism, claiming the shame it confers on them as their own, modelling themselves as a subculture, resisting the establishment along the same lines as the punk movement (Hebdige 1979; Sabin 2002). David Carrier, in his book *The Aesthetics of Comics*, concludes that comics are a ‘posthistorical’ art form after some formalist and historical analysis, extracting this from Arthur C. Danto’s notion of our era being a posthistorical one culturally, with art having become conceptual due to the huge influence of works such as Warhol’s simulacral Brillo Boxes (Danto and Goehr, 2014). Carrier, along with comics historians Roger Sabin and David Kunzle, ties the establishment and development of the art form of comics to the establishment of mass audiences for newspapers and the newly capitalist operations which provided the papers to these audiences. This is, ultimately, a move to tie comics to populism and commercialized

mass culture (his previous chapter calls comics a ‘populist’ art form) in contrast to fine art.

...why was it only in the early twentieth century that the comic strip was developed, when the techniques of balloons and image sequences had long been available? That question is easy to answer. Only when newspapers needed to attract a newly literate mass audience was there reason to make these images.

(2000, 108)

Carrier continues to push the idea of the posthistorical by suggesting that the comics art form has not developed since the time of George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*, which is true on a formalist level in that the basic elements of *Krazy Kat* (panels, frames, speech etc) will be no different to the latest Chris Ware graphic novel when viewed alongside it. Fine art, meanwhile, has numerous movements (cubism, surrealism, minimalism, abstract expressionism, the YBAs, to name but a few of those listed by Carrier) that must be understood and which defy the idea of the posthistorical. A similar analysis of the history of comic art is largely one of social history and material concerns, despite the innovations of alternative comics in terms of narrative and literary content, of which the example given by Carrier is, perhaps predictably, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Carrier also invokes Schiller and his exemplification of the German philosophical tradition associating the end of conflict (and thus the end of art history in which we now exist, according to Danto) with play. Thus, he associates comics with the traditional recurring biases against them (such as their associations with childhood, early literacy, play and lowbrow aesthetics in contrast to adult fine art and literature) and finds a grounding for this in historic German philosophy. ‘Perhaps comics are thought marginal because in art we expect progress,’ writes Carrier (102), and this lack of apparent progress fits the portrayals of shame and low aspiration we have seen attached to comics in this chapter,

echoing the tutors in the works of Clowes, Brown and Ware who ‘expected better’ of their students. While the world of fine art has managed to grow through the neoliberal era and its neuroses, the comics art world has apparently stagnated, subjugated as it is by the fine art world.

The space that comics occupy, one built on shame, exclusion and derision resulting from the conditions of neoliberal political economy, acknowledges their shameful history and, though they are required to envy the other arts by Ware’s thirteen-step program, this envy becomes an essential part of their identity, as does their shame. The space creates a welcoming if insular world for alternative cartoonists, who can gain admission through rebellion, through contributing to the definition of alternative comics and comics work as a subculture, or by literally jumping out of the window of the Art Institute. When Ware asked Brown if he would be jumping out of the window as he had done, he assumed it was only a matter of time before this happened, and even though Brown finished his MFA and Ware did not, he did so with a calculated act of resistance that baffled the tutors in submitting *Clumsy* as his thesis. This move which defined him as a cartoonist and which exemplifies comics work’s dialectical relationship to the art world.

Though they may protest and resist as expected from an agent within a dialectic, alternative comics need art, and they need art school. Not all alternative cartoonists receive formal training or have the same experiences as Brown, Ware and Clowes, of course, but the politics of shame (Gammon 2013) which characterize the comics in *McSweeney’s* and the broader field of alternative comics is exemplified by the frequent portrayal of art school as a site of tensions. Art school gives comics a comfort in their vulgarity, a home in their shame, and a confidence in their hybridity and the difficulty of the form rarely seen in other art forms. This in turn allows cartoonists to own and

engage with the tensions that characterize comics. Comics occupy a unique and ever-expanding space, jostling for position among art, literature and other popular commercial media such as film, television and photography, and art school allows for an understanding of this whilst perpetuating its own neoliberal dominance.

Art school has helped shape this position and continues to do so for newer generations of alternative cartoonists, the best example being British cartoonist Tom Humberstone, who studied art at Goldsmiths University, London, and now works full time as a cartoonist (*oeconomicus*) and illustrator with a regular slot in left-leaning news magazine *The New Statesman*. While studying (around 2008-2009) he produced a regular comic called *Art School Scum*, which he encouraged his friends and fellow art students to post around the art college on notice boards, a subversive practice in line with comics' outsider status within the art academy which spread to other art colleges as the popularity of the comic grew. The comic creates caricatures of professors and students in a similar fashion to Clowes' *Art School Confidential*, and similarly leaves any mention of comics or cartooning until its conclusion. Its final character is 'the bitter vindictive cartoonist,' given a splash page (Figure 3.7 below) that portrays the cartoonist as a villainous, shadowy figure, borrowing the visual language of b-movie posters for its lettering and shading and looking not unlike Darth Vader. The cartoonist we see here is a plagiarist, a hack made bitter by the art school experience but one ultimately shameful in himself, because as a cartoonist he can only rip off other cartoonists. This is the same shameful relationship we see in Ware's 'Mr. Ware,' and one which continues to appear in alternative comics. Despite some acceptance of comics in the art academy and the fine art world, the relationship between the two worlds is still one of 'structural subjugation,' and it seems it will continue to be so, as

long as cartoonists attend art schools and as long as art schools are part of the wider landscape of neoliberal higher education (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2000).



Figure 3.7: Page from *Art School Scum* by Tom Humberstone (2009, 10).

A more recent graphic novel, *Art Schooled*, fictionalizes cartoonist Jamie Coe's time at art school and his experience of it turning him to comics in the same way Brown's time did (2014, np). Though the focus is more on the ensemble cast of art school figures, building on the previous caricatures of Humberstone and Clowes, the subjugation of comics to fine art in the context of art school is once again highly apparent, as is the

continued effects of neoliberalism on the prevailing political economy. When asked what they think of art school in hindsight, the characters focus on the lack of money and prospects they have, casting their experience as a failure. When the characters finally read the comic itself, in the final few panels, most are accepting of it and complain ironically about their portrayals, but one student – the most pretentious, snobbish and neurotic of them all – dismisses it as being for children. Alongside his peers' discussion of the content of the book and not its form, this proclamation seems childish, but it also seems consistent with the neuroses of the neoliberal art school and the power dynamics it perpetuates. However much the equilibrium of comics' relationship to art school moves (Hebdige 1979; Gramsci 1989, 2000), it is always ultimately defined by subjugation. Or, to put it another way, there will always be one who perpetuates the parent-child dynamic when assessing comics and art, and thus it is this tension that continues to define comics work, inside and outside of the academy.

Chapter Three

Colouring Comics: Economics, Aesthetics and Divisions of Labour

Despite a general lack of critical and close attention having been paid to colour in comics studies, Will Eisner's introduction to *Comics and Sequential Art* provides a hint at how colour is conceived of as an element of comics by its creators. 'As the form's potential has become more apparent,' he writes, 'better quality and more expensive production have been introduced. This, in turn, has resulted in slick full-colour publications that appeal to a more sophisticated audience, while black-and-white comic books printed on good paper have found their own constituency' (1986, 7). While there is in this claim an implicit hierarchy and almost a ghettoisation of black and white comics, all comics are included in Eisner's statement of the expansion of the potential of the form, whatever their approach to the use of colour. When he continues by stating 'comics continue to grow as a valid form of reading' (7), a statement echoed by Charles Hatfield's description of alternative comics as 'an emerging literature' (2006, 7), it is clear that all comics are part of this growth regardless of how colour has been used in their construction.

The mainstream publications of Marvel, DC and other large publishers that continue to dominate wider perceptions of the form are largely bright full-colour publications with a few notable exceptions such as Image Comics' *The Walking Dead*. Figure 4.1, below, depicts a typical scene from *The Walking Dead*, a nuanced drama with highly developed characterisation often miscast as simple genre-driven horror. These panels make considered use of the full range of the greyscale palette, carefully managing and engaging with the complex interplay between black and white that gives varying greys, but nonetheless these panels are an exception to the rule within the landscape of mainstream comics. Image Comics, though focused on creators' rights and

significantly less corporately structured than Marvel or DC, may still be understood as a ‘mainstream’ comics publisher in terms of the dichotomy established by Douglas Wolk and other, that is of ‘mainstream’ comics existing in opposition to ‘art comics’ (Wolk 2007; Beaty 2012; Hatfield 20016). This dichotomy establishes, in oversimplified terms, that art comics privilege auteurism, while mainstream comics produce artefacts of popular entertainment under constant deadline pressure and the neoliberal free market’s profit motive. *The Walking Dead* sits alongside these comics on the shelves of comics shops as a product of the mainstream, and from its colour covers nothing would seem amiss were it to be placed alongside the latest issue of *Superman*. Its exceptions to the rule of the colour mainstream are, of course, beneath the covers.

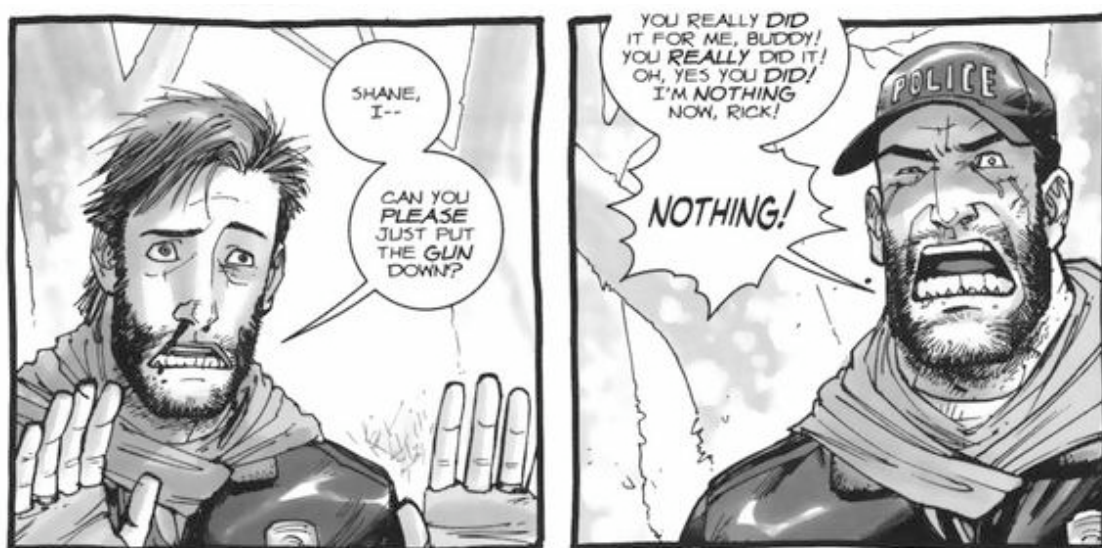


Figure 4.1: Panels from *The Walking Dead Compendium 1* by Robert Kirkman (2009, 134)

Looking beyond the mainstream, however, and into the broader landscape of comics, comix and graphic novels (the title of Roger Sabin’s 1996 history of the form, but also three terms that fit under the wide umbrella of ‘art comics’ by Wolk’s definition),⁵³ the picture is quite different. Walk into a Waterstone’s or Foyles bookshop, find the graphic novel section and pick a book at random, and it is likely that you’ll find a comic which

⁵³ The word ‘comix’ was used largely in the 1960s and 1970s by the early creators of underground comics, such as Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton, to distinguish their satirical work from the perceived vapidness of the superhero-dominated mainstream.

uses a select colour palette, a greyscale palette similar to that of *The Walking Dead*, or no colour at all, working only in black lines on white paper with little made of the interplay between black and white and the resulting grey textures. Many of the most successful comics to have received recognition in the graphic novel format, such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003), are entirely in black and white, making extensive use of shading, gradient and texture in the composition of the image. Others, such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), use just one or two colours – in Bechdel's case, a mixture of bilious greens and ominous greys that give the book its funereal tone as they combine with her candid personal narrative. Many other comics, however, such as the works of Chris Ware, are rendered in bright primary colours with flat design, a staple of the Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* tradition as seen in *Tintin*, *Spirou*, *Astérix* and *Lucky Luke*.

These prominent examples reveal, on a basic structural level, that there are clearly a great number of ways in which experiments with different approaches to colour have formed part of the overall vision of cartoonists throughout the history of comics. The field of comics studies, however, currently offers little in the way of analysis of comics' use of colour despite the opportunities for such analyses offered by the field's interdisciplinary nature. Although comics scholarship is moving in new directions to focus on broader contextualizing concerns such as multisensory approaches (Hague 2014), cultural work and global cultural development (Brienza 2015), theories of 'the typical' (Beaty 2015) and graphic medicine (Czerwicz et al 2015), the field is still dominated by literary and text-focused analyses (Versaci 2008) and dense formalist close-readings of the form (Groensteen 2007, 2014; Cohn 2013, 2016). Even a book entitled *The Aesthetics of Comics* (Carrier, 2000) contains no direct examination of colour, but rather extends the existing formalist readings into a reading

of comics in the context of art history, popular culture and Arthur C. Danto's notion of a 'posthistorical' landscape of art. Comics fall naturally into this landscape as mass produced ephemera, as demonstrated in the previous chapter's discussion of comics' relationship to art institutions. Carrier's reading, however, along with Bart Beaty's (2012), does provide a useful springboard for examining colour in comics as a phenomenon presaged by art history and the wider development of art and visual culture in the 19th and 20th centuries. Carrier reminds us that 'perhaps comics are thought marginal because in art we expect progress' (114), whilst also theorizing that 'once Richard Outcault learned how to ink in the colour for his *Yellow Kid*,⁵⁴ all the essential technology required for comics existed' (113). Carrier also contends that Outcault was the first cartoonist to introduce the speech balloon as a regular feature and thus responsible for establishing it as a formal property of comics. But perhaps his introduction of colour, as both a visual and verbal concern, should be acknowledged as significant too. If the art form of comics truly has not developed formally as other art forms apparently have since Outcault's work over a century ago, then perhaps colour is just one element of comics that has not been granted precedence or growth within the form. As comics remain marginal and continue to be viewed as a subculture, so does colour remain a marginal concern within the art form for artists, critics and theorists. Comics have developed significantly and have their own rich and vibrant history as an isolated art form, so of course to deny them historical development beyond Outcault is fallacy; however, we can understand from this idea that colour in comics is, perhaps, part of a larger formal structure and just one of many devices, rather than a message (in Marshall McLuhan's terms) in and of itself as it has been in other related art forms.

⁵⁴ The character known as The Yellow Kid first appeared in the strip Hogan's Alley in 1895. It is disputed among comics scholars as to whether the Kid's first appearance can be called the true birth of comics. Ernesto Priego summarized the arguments in a blog post for Graphixia (2014).

In this chapter I examine the meaning of colour in comics, drawing upon comics studies and its related disciplines, most significantly Art History. Contextualising colour within this thesis' established framework of comics work and the *cartoonist oeconomicus*, an emergent figure who has an unsurprisingly fraught relationship with colour that is characterized by its tensions, I make close readings of a number of comics that use full colour, select colour and no colour at all. From this and in the context of their material properties, their relation to labour and the readings of colour within comics studies, visual culture and art history, I will demonstrate that there have been coherent movements towards specific uses of colour within different areas of cartooning, but that all movements have been relative to political economy, especially in relation to contemporary cartoonists' use of colour under neoliberalism. I will also discuss my own use of colour as a cartoonist and a practitioner in alternative comics, bringing to this thesis the unique insight of my established practice-informed approach. This chapter, therefore, will demonstrate the importance of colour and of visual culture and aesthetic history to the dialectic of comics work, by analyzing further tensions inherent in the formal and aesthetic properties of alternative comics and contextualizing them within the broader tension between auteurism and collective production that defines alternative comics.

The Beginnings of Colour in Comics: From *The Yellow Kid* to the four-colour Superheroes

In general, not accounting for differing reading speeds, one page of a comic can be consumed, or read, in a matter of seconds. A short glance will give the reader a conception of the panels and basic actions of the characters, with a slightly longer reading time required to fully experience the narrative created by both the text and images and their interplay. However, a single comic page can take many hours or even

days to produce, depending on the specific process employed by the cartoonist and the material and technical concerns of the specific comics. The early comics studios were thus quick to employ the production line techniques of mass production exemplified by Henry Ford, the use of which has continued into contemporary mainstream traditions in the operating processes of corporate comics publishers (Waugh 1947; Barker 1989; Kunzle 1973). There is, however, much more attention paid to creators' rights and wages and to fair employment practice in today's corporate publishing structures, though in the context of the earlier chapters of this thesis this must be seen as relative, as large comics publishers are equally responsible for perpetuating the neoliberal precarity that defines contemporary political economy as other corporations. In employing an average of four to six people to work on one comic (as can be seen in the inside credits page of a typical issue of *The Walking Dead*), the early studios were able to produce new titles weekly, and to flood the newsstands with them, allowing the form to develop into one with true mass appeal and popular credibility (Waugh 1947). Thus, the team of numerous workers were responsible, as a unit, for the establishment of comics culture and the traditions that followed, and one of these workers was the colourist.

Conceiving of colour in comics as an aspect of the work of a cartoonist in a field of cultural production is inevitably tied to the economic concerns of the creation of the object we think of as a comic and thus to its materiality. We have seen the example of Richard F. Outcault's character The Yellow Kid, viewed by David Carrier as the birth of contemporary comics due to the introduction of the specific element of the speech balloon. Outcault's injection of colour (as well as his pioneering utilization of the speech balloon), whether it was the first in comics or not, appears as a material and economic decision first and foremost and, in the words of Ernesto Priego, a 'nearly

accidental' one (2010, 177). Priego's thesis discusses the conflicting theories of whether Outcault's *Hogan's Alley* (the series of cartoons in which The Yellow Kid appeared from 1896) was truly as pioneering as some critics (Carrier 2000; Waugh 1947) would have us believe, but the discussion reminds us that until Outcault, colour was scarce in art and printed matter as a whole due to material and economic concerns and a lack of access to resources (Priego 2010, 176). 'The particular setting of late 19th century and early 20th century capitalism,' Priego writes, 'allowed the birth of a popular art form that would only be paralleled and eventually succeeded in its mass appeal by film and television' (180). It was against this new capitalist backdrop that colour was injected into comics. Outcault's strips helped to truly popularize 'the funnies' as it was syndicated and widely circulated due to the growth of newspapers and newsstands. The popularity and mass circulation of Outcault's strips thus established colour as a key element of sequential art – one which can be subtracted, divided and ignored altogether should the artist make such a decision. Nonetheless, colour is an element of comics that is taken into consideration by the reader along with the line quality, composition of the images, text placement within word balloons, and various other formal elements. After all, it was readers who gave The Yellow Kid his name and not Outcault himself, in what might be read as a protean example of convergence culture (Jenkins 2008). Cartoonists must therefore consider colour as an essential part of their comic or, if colour is not utilized, derive specific meaning from the absence of colour.

Colour also played a significant part in establishing the now dominant superhero genre, again for reasons related to political economy. Comics historian R.C. Harvey ties the advent of American superhero comics, in the late 1930s, to the Second World War. 'Although aimed at younger readers,' he writes, 'these four-colour⁵⁵ magazines proved

⁵⁵ 'Four-colour' refers to the now standard printing process that uses combinations of four standard colours (Black, Cyan, Magenta, Yellow) to achieve the desired colours on the page.

to be effective morale boosters for the older brothers of their intended audience' (1996, 16). As with the majority of major texts in the field of comics studies, Harvey's 1996 book (subtitled 'An Aesthetic History') does not discuss colour in great depth, but one of his offhand comments about the launch of Detective Comics⁵⁶ in 1937 provides another hint at colour's importance in establishing the superhero genre and thus the paradigms of the art form. According to Harvey, 'None of Nicholson's⁵⁷ magazines sold very well, however – perhaps because their interiors were in staid black-and-white instead of lively colour' (1996, 17). Even against the backdrop of the majority of mass-produced entertainment and products sold on newsstands being produced in black and white, therefore, it seems colour was always aspired to and that 'lively' verisimilitude was always the aim and would lead to success. And, as Harvey's historical survey (along with those of Sabin, Barker, Kunzle and Gravett) makes clear, as more comics were published in colour in the 1940s and 50s, the more popular the medium became and the more established the superhero genre became. Colour is therefore tied to the rise of the superhero and genre and to the ensuing, still prevalent, conflation of genre and medium and of form and content. Thus, alternative comics' relationship to colour is strained and complex. As well as there being a historical precedent for this assessment of colour in the field of comics studies, there also exists a formalist precedent for this, most notably in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994).

Understanding Colour: Scott McCloud's Cursory Glance

Despite being a seminal book on comics for cartoonists, critics and scholars, only one chapter of *Understanding Comics* makes use of colour beyond black and white, and it is the book's shortest chapter at only seven pages. However, it is usefully titled 'A Word on Colour' and is McCloud's own assessment of comics' use of colour, intended to

⁵⁶ Detective Comics was later abbreviated to DC Comics, becoming the corporate 'big two' publisher familiar to contemporary comics fans.

⁵⁷ Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson, a former cavalry officer who published comics in the 1930s and 40s.

provide an understanding of colour as an element of comics in the same way as panels, composition and transitions. Will Eisner's more instructional *Comics and Sequential Art*, seen by the majority of scholars and cartoonists as the precursor to *Understanding Comics*, does not instruct the budding cartoonist in the use of colour and is in black and white. Eisner does, however, state that 'artwork is rendered in response to the method of its reproduction' (165), a testament to the merit of materialist readings of comics that ties them to the 'technical conditions of production' (Priego 2010) and thus to their labour and the divisions therein.

Both Eisner and McCloud give brief materialist histories of comics, with McCloud giving it significant weight in his discussion of colour. In fact, he boils the relationship down to two words: commerce and technology (1994, 189). These two words have of course affected comics in many more ways than just their use of colour, and are essential considerations for readings which account for material concerns and those of work. Commerce and technology are also two major factors in the rise of neoliberalism and two of the factors that provide agency and power within the systems of late capitalism (Harvey 2007; Haque 2011) and thus in the systems of comics work. Technology will be discussed at length in the following chapter of this thesis, with this chapter laying the groundwork for these discussions by tying colour to technology in comics. McCloud's pages on colour supports the assertion that colour is tied inextricably to material and economy concerns, his drawn avatar stating that 'money has a tremendous effect on what is and isn't seen' (186). Without giving dates or specific details, McCloud tells us, with selective use of colour as seen below in figure 4.2, that colour hit comics and the industry of newsstands, 'like an atomic bomb' (187).

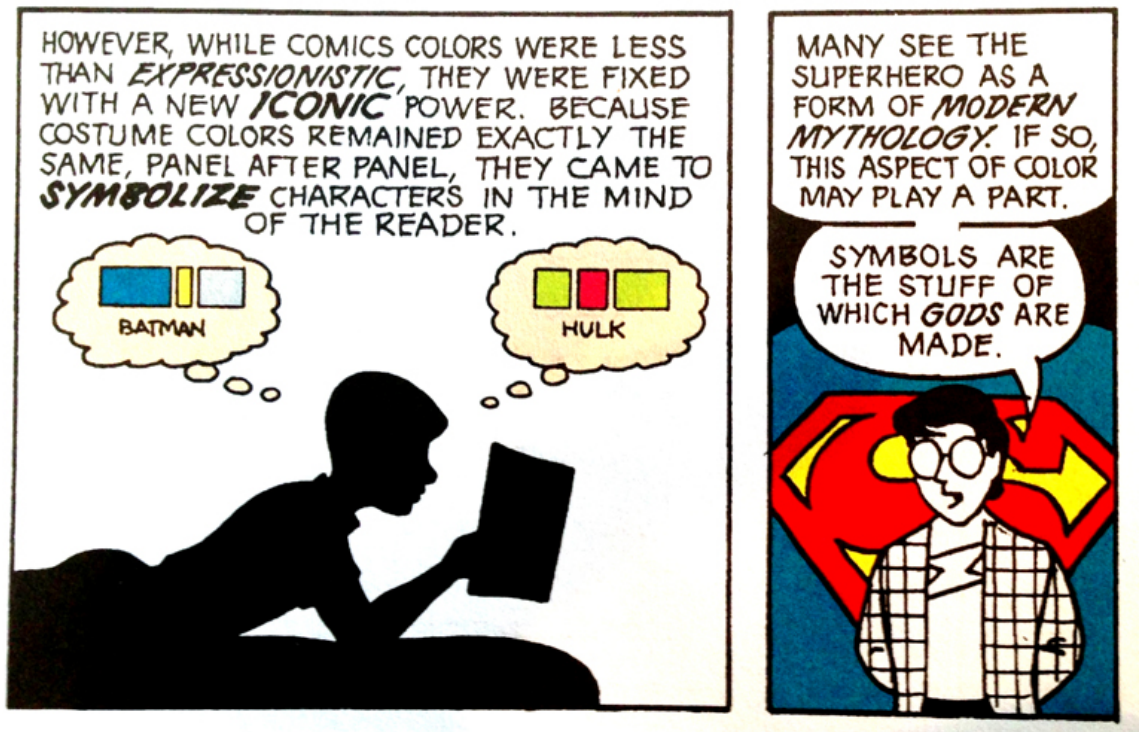


Figure 4.2: Panels from *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (1994, 189)

When colour was introduced to comics and newspapers, sales were raised significantly, but production costs were still kept to a minimum, in an early example of capitalist exploitation of comics workers (Harvey 1994). As such, the four-colour process became the standard, and the most effective way to print comics with minimal costs and labour. The growth of superhero comics saw a rise in bright, primary colours in an attempt to make the numerous titles stand out among the cheap newsprint that filled the newsstands and that consumers had become used to by the 1930s. McCloud asserts, as seen above, that this gave superheroes an iconic power, a word he uses throughout *Understanding Comics* and one that evokes the language and theories of W.J.T. Mitchell in *Iconology*. Mitchell writes that ‘the commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language’ (2009, 8), a view which certainly chimes with comics studies’ proliferation of formalist analyses. It is also with McCloud’s reduction of comics to formal elements that can be understood

as a linguistic system, an analysis also undertaken by the comics formalists (Saraceni 2003; Cohn 2013, 2016; Miodrag 2013; Groensteen 2007, 2013).

For McCloud (and the other formalists), there is a direct link between the iconic power of images and the mastery of form and composition, of which he gives Winsor McCay, Jack Kirby and Hergé as specific canonical examples. As print technology has advanced, so too has the use of colour in comics; McCloud reminds us, however, that colour is still a relatively expensive option. This is despite the fact that it is no longer constrained to flatness or to four-colour palettes, and that comics are no longer ghettoized as bright, unsubtly iconic superhero trash – at least not to the degree that they were before the establishment of the graphic novel form and its push for legitimization (Lopes 2009). Despite the ease of publishing in colour now compared to the early days of comics, a black and white zine is always going to be cheaper unless we experience a revolution in print technology. On a basic level, therefore, colour is closely linked to print technology and its associated costs, and although comics are no longer tied essentially to print technology (which will be discussed in the following chapter) they are still consumed largely in print and the costs of this will continue to be a factor in their conception and production, and thus in the conception of comics work.

McCloud asserts that colour will always look more ‘real’ (192) and thus that works in colour are likely to be more attractive to potential readers, at least on the surface. On a basic level, this can certainly be applied to Wolk’s divide between ‘mainstream’ and ‘art’ comics – the mainstream comics of Marvel and DC could be said to attract a much wider readership because their (mostly) bright, full-colour productions are not visually demanding, and do not demand a significant deciphering of lines, intricate shading and cross-hatching and other visual techniques employed by alternative comics such as those of Michel Rabagliati examined in this thesis’ first

chapter. Black and white comics are, of course, an abstraction when ‘we live in a world of colours’ (192). This is McCloud’s conclusion to the chapter, and despite their oversimplified nature, his assertions are clear and concise, and there is a historical precedent for verisimilitude being a desirable quality in art along with mimesis (Bell 2011; Crary 1992; Danto 2014). The idea of colour comics being easier to read is one which is also echoed in McCloud’s idea of levels of abstraction (Figure 4.3).

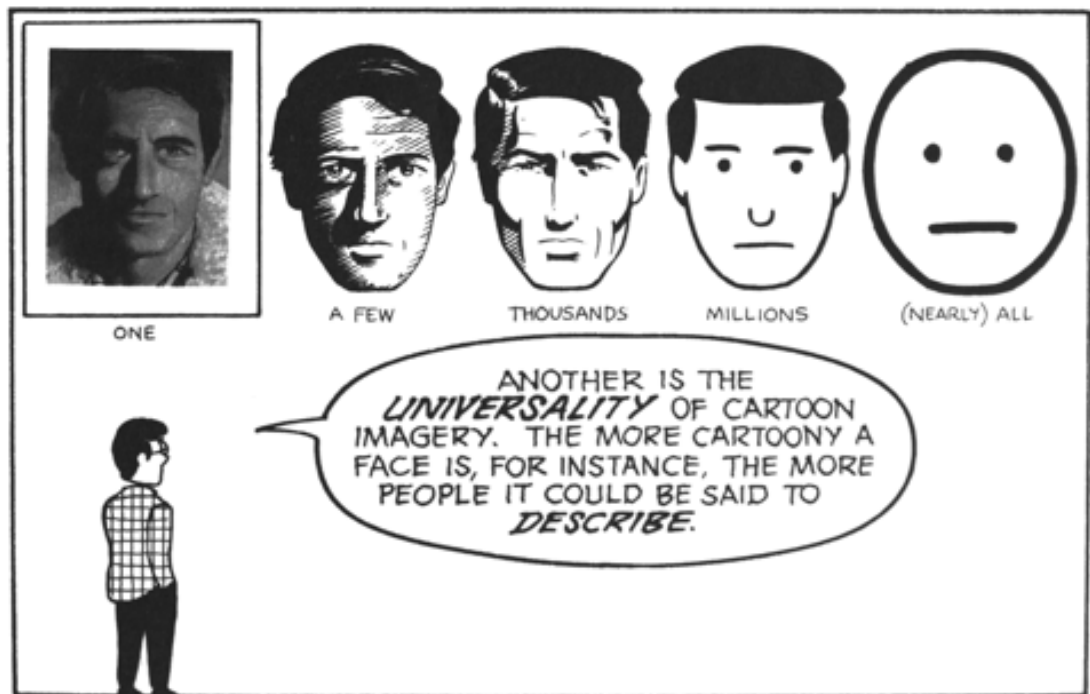


Figure 4.3: Panel from *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (2001, 30)

McCloud is here using the idea of abstraction to argue for a ‘universality’ of the cartoon face, in asserting obliquely that the reduction shown in figure 4.3 is a scale of abstraction. However, he implies that the more colour is removed from the image, the more abstracted it is. A comic book in full colour would no doubt fit into his scale somewhere between ‘one’ and ‘a few’ in terms of its individuality, and thus would be easier for the recipient to identify with and therefore to read. In their greater level of abstraction, black and white comics can therefore be read as more difficult to engage with visually and harder to extrapolate a narrative from. Perhaps, therefore, there is

some truth in R.C. Harvey's passing assertion that the early comic books published by Major Nicholson did not sell as well as their successors because of their lack of colour. A more brief and concise exploration of colour, and one with more direct application to the cartoonist as a worker, can be found in cartoonist Ivan Brunetti's instructional book *Cartooning: Philosophy and Practice*. The book offers a course outline which is lifted from Brunetti's own college teaching, and instructs the budding cartoonist in line work, writing, composition and design. It works in black and white throughout apart from one short chapter, a pattern of chapter structure more than coincidentally similar to McCloud's. Colour is left until week nine of Brunetti's ten-week course and given just three pages. However, Brunetti goes further than McCloud in discussing the effects of colour on images in terms that can be applied to the narrative inherent in the images which combine with text to make up comics. 'As an integral part of the whole,' he writes, 'colour can solidify spaces, harmonize compositions, or strike necessary discordant notes; it is yet another expressive tool at the cartoonist's disposal' (2011, 62). With this commentary, Brunetti reduces colour to a workman's tool whilst simultaneously acknowledging that it has major aesthetic significance. Reducing colour to a tool in fact allows it to be easily understood as an aspect of comics work and to something that can be understood in terms of the neoliberal *cartoonist oeconomicus* – in a neoliberal free market, the entrepreneurial cartoonist has tools he can purchase and make use of or not purchase and not make use of depending on her available capital. Colour is but one of these in Brunetti's reading.

Brunetti also reminds his students, assuming they have followed the course whilst reading his book, that they have been working in colour all along because black and white are colours. This assertion is a welcome complication of the emergent division between comics in black and white and comics in colour that can be drawn

from McCloud's chapter, and which may also be extended to the divide between mainstream and alternative comics. Brunetti also points out that the interplay between black and white forms grey, and that this interplay is one which comics creators must master to become proficient cartoonists. These greys and the interplay between black and white are used and explored and manipulated extensively by cartoonists, and in particular those who have created the recent successes in the graphic novel format and in alternative comics (see Figure 4.1 and *The Walking Dead* series). These cartoonists use this interplay and its subsequent greys to create resonance and depth or, as Brunetti calls it, 'emotional tone' (2011, 61).

There are many examples of comics in which the interplay between black and white has subtly created an emotional resonance that has brought their comic to life and given weight to both its image and text and how they combine to create a unique narrative object. All of the cartoonists named so far in this thesis have used such a technique to produce an effective narrative in their works, especially Michel Rabagliati, John Porcellino, Jeffrey Brown and Daniel Clowes. Extending Brunetti's tool metaphor further, colour can perhaps be seen as a set of screwdrivers, varying significantly in size, cost and availability within the hypothetical neoliberal free market. Some must be used consistently for every job, while others are reserved only for bigger jobs and others can be substituted or used sparingly depending on the dimensions and design of the task at hand. Paul Gravett, in his 2013 book *Comics Art*, points to one such example in David Mazzuchelli's *Asterios Polyp*, a graphic novel in which each character is comprised of different shapes of varying colours and each character's dialogue is given its own distinct typeface, each of these used as a device to signify something of the character's traits. 'Asterios,' he writes, 'comes in cool cobalt and is made up of cylinders, spheres and other Aristotoleian outlines, while Hana in warm magenta

appears like a carved statuette in textured volume' (113). Earlier in the same chapter, Gravett describes the art of Woodrow Phoenix's 2008 graphic novel *Rumble Strip* as 'cool and diagrammatic' (112), in part because of its lack of colour. Both examples are of comics in which colour is just one tool in the cartoonist's drawer, used for various different non-uniform ends, holding the same status as a signifier as typography and line composition. Gravett's phrases 'cool cobalt' and 'warm magenta' also hint at ideas of colour association that have pervaded and been debated throughout the history of art. These will be explored later in this chapter, but I now turn to the history of black and white representation in visual culture and the effects of photography, as comics exist within visual culture and must be understood in this context (Mitchell 1995).

Comics and Photography: The Birth of the Monochrome World

Though we have already heard the case for Richard Fenton Outcault's creation of *The Yellow Kid*, the precise origin of what we understand to be comics has not been reduced by scholars to a single definitive event or work. Such a reduction is not strictly necessary, but can facilitate an understanding of the significance of certain elements of comics, such as colour. Will Eisner's 'Sequential Art' definition allows us to go as far as hieroglyphics and cave paintings and to trace comics and visual culture from these proto-narrative origins. There are a number of formalist works that, drawing upon Scott McCloud, follow this line of thought and explore this lineage (Cohn 2013; Saraceni 2003). A majority of scholars and cartoonists, however, agree broadly that the inventor of what we understand to be comics today was the nineteenth century Swiss painter, poet and caricaturist Rodolphe Töpffer.⁵⁸ Chris Ware, who calls him 'the kindly old

⁵⁸ Töpffer was a painter and caricaturist who worked as a schoolteacher in Geneva and drew illustrated stories largely for his own amusement, working from around 1830 until his death in 1846. His works are collected in English language editions by comics historian David Kunzle (2007, 2013). Töpffer was not the first caricaturist, nor the first artist to combine image with text. Many (McCloud 1994; Harvey 1996; Waugh 1947) point to the sequential paintings of William Hogarth as being crucial in the development of

Swiss guy who invented comics,’ includes him briefly in a series of strips entitled *Comics: A Short History* which accompanied the introduction to the comics special issue of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* (2004, 5).

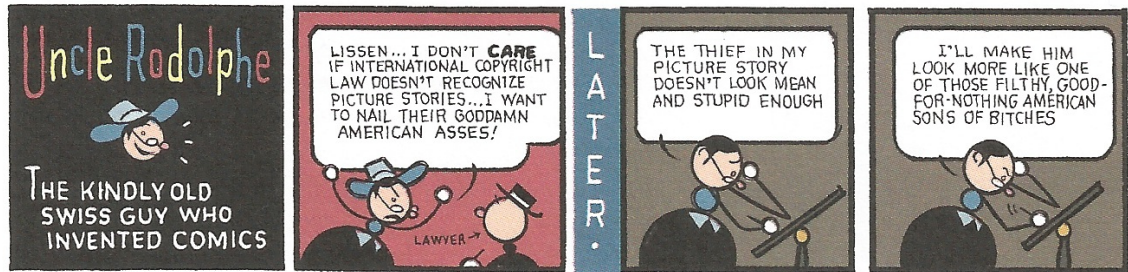


Figure 4.4: Panels from *Comics: A Short History* by Chris Ware (Eggers & Ware eds. 2004, 5)

Töpffer’s work is the earliest to include the elements of comics established by formalist comics scholars, from McCloud to Eisner, Groensteen, Saraceni and others – that is, panels, gutters, captions, and word/thought balloons/bubbles. It is worth noting, however, that Töpffer did not use speech balloons, which is why Carrier deliberately places more of an emphasis on Outcault. He introduced them gradually to his *Hogan’s Alley* strips from 1897 and they had become a permanent fixture in comics by the 1930s, just as the superhero genre was entering its first period of major popularity and as the four-colour process was beginning to boom in comics printing and to become the standard for colour printing processes in the reproduction of graphic art. At the same time, comic strips were being published in colour with varying degrees of success, and vibrant colour strips such as Frank King’s *Gasoline Alley* were growing in popularity (Harvey 2013).

Töpffer’s illustrated stories were all in black and white, which is of course understandable considering his material and economic conditions and the prevalent aesthetic cultures of the time. He never attempted to use colour or to move beyond the world of representation using only the interplay between black and white on a blank

the ‘imagetext,’ and in the development of sequential art. Töpffer’s innovation was to use this medium to tell longer stories – to create a narrative that could be *read*, in the form we now recognize as comics.

page, as such an interplay allowed him to tell his stories with text and image and to combine them to create a unique narrative – such is the essence of comics. Until Töpffer began to use it for stories and sustained narratives, black and white drawing had been largely used for sketching, and was also associated with printmaking. Caricaturing was, however, developing into satirical cartooning in the nineteenth century, a movement for which Töpffer may assume some credit – *Le Charivari*⁵⁹ began publishing political cartoons in 1832, the same year Töpffer was persuaded by his friend Goethe to publish his illustrated stories (Kunzle 2007).

Figure 4.5 below is an example of Töpffer's work from 1845. It is striking in its similarity to the comics of Jeffrey Brown examined in the previous chapter, particularly Brown's early graphic novel *Clumsy* (2003). Töpffer perhaps displays a greater command of the representation of anatomy, and draws his figures with greater attention to their physical details, but the same basic technique is used to create the images. They are laid out in panels in both instances and use only clear black lines, with occasional shading to create texture and little variation in line thickness. With this through line, Töpffer's work has helped create a monochromatic world for comics which persists and permeates throughout the contemporary art form.

⁵⁹ *Le Charivari*, which in English means *The Caricature*, was a French satirical magazine published from 1832 until 1937. Heidelberg University has digitized every issue on their website: <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/Englisch/helios/fachinfo/www/kunst/digilit/artjournals/charivari.html> (accessed 21st June, 2016).



Figure 4.5: Panels from a Rodolphe Töpffer illustrated story, 1845

(<http://www.comicforschung.de/platinum/steckelbein.html>)

The middle of the nineteenth century also saw the invention and popularization of photography, which created a world of monochromatic representation that was to shake visual culture to its core. Photography, with its new world of greyscales and black and white simulacra, created representation that drew directly and unequivocally from the world seen by the human eye, but one which abstracted and distorted the image in a fashion that was anathema to the worlds of painting and poetry. As Lindsay Smith writes, ‘Victorian viewers of photographs...registered the absence of colour as a shortfall on the part of a medium otherwise miraculous in its verisimilitude’ (2002, 56). Smith draws upon Ruskin’s art criticism to remind us that the nature of pictorial representation was being called into question by artists and critics in the nineteenth century, and that verisimilitude consequently became a subconscious aim of visual cultural products. Photography highlighted ‘that larger and fundamental gap between

representation and reality' (57), identified by Baudelaire and Gombrich and explored in conceptual art in the latter half of the twentieth century (Danto 2014; Carrier 2000).

This questioning of representation also represents a foundation of W.J.T. Mitchell's 'Pictorial Turn,' a genesis of 'the realization that while the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us, it presses inescapably now' (1995, 16). This shift is also identified by Jonathan Crary in *Techniques of the Observer*, in which he points to a movement of rupture and discontinuity in visual culture that was 'well under way by 1820' (1992, 21) and became a major point of dialectical discord in the twentieth century with the pictorial turn identified by Mitchell (1995; see also McLuhan 2001). Comics emerged from this rupture along with photography and both art forms were born in striking, unsatisfying, abstract monochrome. Comics' initial inability to move beyond their monochromatic compositions can be read as a symptom of this rupture, and thus a signifier of it. Smith reminds us that 'photography was that form of representation from nature rendered abstract by its lack of colour – that incomplete, or intermediate stage of representation which can but suggest *mimesis* even with its glaring lack of coloration' (2002, 62). She reminds us that Ruskin and other art critics privileged colour as 'the principal index of form' (62), thus allowing the lack of colour to be seen as an abstraction, a challenge to a conception of form in works of art.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ruskin also wrote extensively on political economy, most notably in his essays *The Political Economy of Art* and *Unto This Last* (1991, 2007, 2009). Although not well received when they were first published in the 1860s, Ruskin's essays provide a historical precedent for addressing political economy in the context of its treatment of artists, artisans and craftsmen, which was his chief concern in these writings. He also referred, some time before Foucault, to the idea of the 'economic man,' the concept of which had emerged with the growth of mercantile capitalism in the late nineteenth century (Henderson 2014; May 2010). Significantly, Ruskin's writings sought to refute the idea that the economic man would be responsible for the positive growth of society and of an inclusive and secure political economy. The comics work approach similarly rejects the dogma of the economic man and, like Ruskin's assessment of the political economy of his time, 'is grounded in a rejection of a narrow conception of material interests, and rests on the argument that a fuller assessment of market society must encompass a wider range of factors' (May 2010, 190). This wide range of factors, in this thesis, becomes both a Deleuzian rhizome and a dialectic. For more on Ruskin, see Smith 2008.

The early comics, the works of Töpffer and the pages of *Punch* magazine, could not escape this level of abstraction, which in part explains the numerous misconceptions of comics as an inferior, lowbrow and hybrid art form. Being neither art (which aims valiantly for verisimilitude) or literature (with its long and rich tradition of greater established representation and mimesis) but a perceived hybrid of the two, comics are misunderstood by both consumers and critics as an art form which falls short on its mastery of either text, image or both. This shortfall evokes, again, David M. Ball's notion of the 'rhetoric of failure' (2010) and alternative comics' ensuing and conspicuous lack of success in the neoliberal free market. The analysis of alternative comics' aesthetic failure due to a lack of colour adds a new dimension to the dialectic of comics work. This thesis has demonstrated so far that the specific character of comics work is defined by tensions relating to fine art, art institutions, working conditions and political economy; however, an assessment of colour adds a definition based on aesthetic history and visual culture.

Mainstream comics, to return to Douglas Wolk's dichotomy, appear to aim for verisimilitude as best they can within the comics art world whilst still working within the conditions of comics as a distinct mass medium. By contrast, alternative or art comics' emphasis on black and white linework and on the art of drawing, sketching and shading (with colour as a nonessential, an afterthought where it can be afforded) is one which can be read as an attempt by the cartoonist to uphold the form of comics as an art form in its own right. Rather than being a hybrid form that blends two distinct media without success, art comics are instead an imagetext created by an auteur. This is consistent with the *cartoonist oeconomicus*' predilection towards the complex 'singular creative vision' of comics. Notably, Jeff Smith's *Bone* – the self-reflexive commentary on which provided the phrase 'singular creative vision' – was initially published in

black and white, but has since been published in colour. It was only after *Bone* had become a bestselling title and established itself in the canon of alternative comics that colour was considered. *Bone* did not require colour to find success in alternative comics and to be legitimated as a graphic novel once collected (Lopes 2009), and yet once there existed the economic and material circumstances for it to be reproduced in colour, this was done quickly and expansively. The implication of this materialism is, again, that colour is always to be aspired to and can confer capital of all types upon the creators of comics.

Lindsay Smith's writing on photography and art criticism provides a foundation for the trends of comics studies, as she reminds us that colour is 'the most enigmatic element of a painting, the element least reducible to language' (2002, 63). The formalist foundation of comics studies suggests that colour in comics is similarly enigmatic. This would certainly explain why comics studies began with a formalist leaning that has continued to dominate its discourse until more recently, but also why the comics formalists have struggled to assess colour as a definitive linguistic unit in the same fashion as panels, speech balloons, captions and gutters. The works of the comics formalists have, as previously mentioned, become the essential texts of comics studies. This means that comics scholarship requires a development to reach a theory of comics work that can encompass a close reading and an understanding of formal elements such as colour. As such, colour provides an element that anchors comics work in formalism and aesthetic history whilst also unveiling tensions, adding to the dialectic of comics work through associations with the pervasive rhetoric of failure under neoliberalism.

Deconstructing the permeation of neoliberalism through Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in the wider context of neoliberalism and American Literature, Rachel Greenwald Smith discusses the book's use of specific colour schemes as presented in

McCarthy's descriptions. The limited nature of the colours described in *The Road*, and in McCarthy's famously sparse narration, can be said to create a palette in the same way that a colourist might for a comic book. 'The monochromatic colour palette of the novel,' writes Smith, 'allows for the plausibility that someone 'as burntlooking as the country' might literally fade into the environment' (2015, 45). If the neoliberal free market is seen this way, black and white comics risk fading into the landscape, and thus realising the rhetoric of failure and becoming defined by this as a tension. There are more tensions, however, to be found in comics' relationship to fine art.

Colour versus Art

Fine Art has had a more complex relationship with colour throughout its history than have comics' other sister arts, photography, film and literature. Photography, once it passed its initial stage of monochrome process, became commonly found in colour as it aspired to faithful representation and verisimilitude, and film followed suit (Gardner 2011). The level and depth of experimentation with colour in art is widespread, great and unparalleled. However, there are still many debates and lines of thought on colour's precise meaning, use and philosophical definition. In fact, the history of colour in art and the landscape of art's engagement with colour indicates that a precise understanding of colour's meaning might be an impossible task, but attempts to understand it occur nonetheless. Here, such attempts contribute to an understanding of comics as work and the specific nature of comics work.

John Gage's book *Colour In Art* draws threads between movements and thoughts on colour among artists, architects and sculptors. Gage manages to do this with numerous illustrations and reproductions of some of the most significant works in colour in the history of fine art. However, he reaches no definitive philosophical conclusion about colour, ending his book only with the assertion that 'colour in art is no

less a cultural phenomenon than in any other branch of human activity' (2007, 215). Applied to comics studies and the understanding of comics and comics work as a cultural phenomenon, this lends weight to the material and contextual concerns of the medium discussed by Scott McCloud, Will Eisner and R.C. Harvey in their histories of comics. 'All colour practices,' Gage writes, 'have their specific contexts and their specific rationale, so that colour must be at last not simply a branch – and a minor one – of formal analysis, but must be fully integrated into the history of art' (215). The same can, of course, be said of comics – it is clear from the existing landscape of comics criticism and the lack of engagement with colour in the influential texts of comics studies that a full integration of colour is necessary and that colour must be understood as a contributor to the specific nature of individual comics and their character. Gage's book therefore offers a useful model for the examination of colour in comics in its necessitating of engagement and integration. He achieves this through a thorough contextualizing of the artists who have most engaged with colour in their work, from the Renaissance to the end of the twentieth century (Gage 1995, 2000, 2007).

Gage reminds us that many of the most influential painters and art critics of the last 200 years have written their own treatises on colour or produced significant critical works outlining their own engagement with and philosophy of colour and its meaning. It was customary until the 20th century for a painter to produce their own colour wheel,⁶¹ and thus to explain the interplay of colours on their own terms. This is an indicator that no consensus on colour's minutiae exists among artists and that such a consensus would be difficult to achieve. Rodolphe Töpffer's friend and mentor Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, produced his own colour wheel (figure 4.6 below) and also

⁶¹ A colour wheel is an illustration that displays hues in a circle, organising them to show relations between them.

wrote a lengthy treatise on colour. Goethe's book⁶² indicates that it was of significant importance for both art *and* literature, and a driver of the aforementioned period of rupture described by Jonathan Crary.

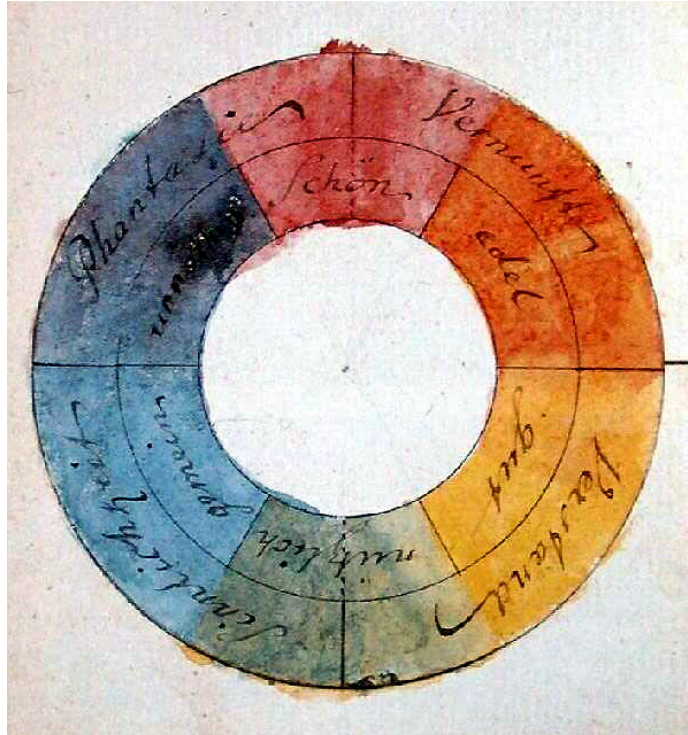


Figure 4.6: Goethe's Colour Wheel (openculture.com 2013)

Gage's book contains many examples of experimentation with colour in visual art, from the exploratory studies of Picasso to the abstract strokes of Kandinsky, who was also an influential theorist who discussed colour in his book *Concerning The Spiritual In Art* in 1914. The modernist tendency towards abstraction, breakdown and fragmentation is one that many scholars believe comics have inherited and espouse due to the nature of their hybridity (Ball 2010; Williams & Lyons 2011; Bechdel 2006), and here the inheritance can be seen once more. Kandinsky's influence on the abstract in painting is one that has been echoed similarly in the development of comics, in which there exists a movement

⁶² Goethe's *Theory of Colours* was published in German in 1810, and in English in 1840. It discusses at length the perceptions of colour by humans in various situations and circumstances, distinct from the idea of the optical spectrum established by Isaac Newton.

of cartoonists who conspicuously identify their own work as abstract, and a blog and book entitled *Abstract Comics*, curated by Molotiu (2009).



Figure 4.7: *incident 4:30* by Rosaire Appel (<http://abstractcomics.blogspot.co.uk/2013/11/incident-430-by-rosaire-appel.html>)

Figure 4.7 is one such abstract comic by Rosaire Appel, which was featured on the *Abstract Comics* blog. The image shown above is clearly a comic, and could be defined as such by any of the comics formalists' definitions without complication. It is a sequential narrative arranged into a grid of panels, but there are no recognizable figures, speech bubbles or text, and no interplay between text and image. Abstract comics therefore appear to lack the dialectical tension between text and image. However, the recurrence of the small red shapes is reminiscent of the construction and composition of text in a comic, or the 'score' (Miers 2013); if replaced with words and speech bubbles it is likely a more coherent and potentially linear narrative could be formed without difficulty and that it could be transformed into a 'non-abstract' comic with relative ease.

In the context of comics work and alternative comics, therefore, colour flourishes as a prominent element in abstract comics because the physical labour required to create an abstract comic is likely to be less than the stringent, time-consuming, divided labour of a more traditional comic. When comics are viewed as

abstract, fragmented modernist expression, and where this approach is taken to them, colour naturally becomes an element, proving the modernist inheritance argued for by Ball (2010). However, when alternative comics – those created with an auteurist bent without the power of the collective labour of the mainstream comics publishers – wish to be non-abstract and to realise a ‘singular creative vision’ with complex narrative and storytelling, colour often remains out of reach, as in the case of Jeff Smith’s *Bone*. Colour thus has as complex a history within comics as without, and the abstract comics movement proves the need for aesthetic analysis and individual contextualising of uses of colour.

Jeffrey Brown, Small Towns and Rough Lines

In my own work as a cartoonist I have never used full colour, and have only begun to consider colouring (that is, working with colour as a separate process after the completion of black and white line work) relatively recently. My first graphic novel, *Small Town Heroes*, was drawn entirely in black and white lines, with simulacral colour-like effects created largely by cross-hatching and shading techniques and the ensuing interplay between black and white that creates greyscale textures. I taught myself these techniques hastily through an art foundation book entitled *The Fundamentals of Drawing* (Barber 2009) and by observing and copying the cartoonists I most admired and who had inspired me to attempt cartooning myself. The most notable of these is Jeffrey Brown, whose techniques and career I emulated both consciously and subconsciously.

Brown’s first graphic novel *Clumsy* (2003) is entirely hand-drawn, straight into black pen, with no use of rulers, colour or any of the standard computer techniques used by contemporary cartoonists beyond the basic processes of scanning and reproduction. This much is obvious when looking at any given page from the book in isolation: the

quality of the drawing is raw, unrefined and understated, suggesting youth, naivety and inexperience. But, thanks to its strong narrative and clear engagement with the conventions and form of alternative comics, the comic's visual narrative still succeeds. *Funny Misshapen Body* was released the year I began my MA in Creative Writing, and as such its resonance was incredibly profound for me. I was not struggling with tutors who wished to criticize and question my every move as an artist, as Brown portrays his experience, but only one of two tutors was supportive of my wish to pursue cartooning. The other shared the opinion of Brown's tutors that cartooning is a lesser art form and was dismissive of the growth of graphic novel and comics studies within the English department. Brown knew he was painting when he should have been drawing; I knew I was writing lengthy, overindulgent passages of literary fiction when I should have been cartooning, and through this connection with Brown I encouraged myself to pursue cartooning for its own sake – for the love of the craft inherent in the choice to pursue cultural work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). However, having had no formal art training since some lessons in high school in which I paid little attention, I was almost learning the craft anew and was very short on time. Similarly, Brown was short on time due to his course being focused on painting and his undertaking it whilst working full-time at Barnes and Noble. As such, for both of us, colour was out of the question and was not part of our initial decision to engage with comics work.

Having learned how to draw in black and white, at least to a level with which I could create a satisfactory graphic narrative, I felt that this was enough skill to create alternative comics and to pursue comics work. My other significant influence at this time was Chris Ware, whose meticulously coloured works of great complexity and depth were things to be aspired to, but also a stark reminder of how much time and space I would need to work with colour. Beyond thoughts that works like Ware's were

far beyond my skill level or available time and resources, even far into the future, it did not occur to me to attempt to work in colour as it did not occur to Brown. Extrapolating this further, I would extend my own experience to that of the majority of alternative cartoonists – certainly the most influential have worked largely in black and white for the majority of their careers. Robert Crumb's early work served its initial purpose (to be a shocking and explosive contribution to the sixties counterculture of San Francisco) in black and white perfectly; Art Spiegelman managed to create a harrowing and powerful award-winning holocaust memoir in *Maus* with only his black pen and his innumerable variations in line thickness. The prominent examples of Crumb and Spiegelman are proof that alternative comics have succeeded in many instances without colour, though of course they stand along artists such as Ware, whose work would not be as effective without its use of colour.

Brown, however, released his first graphic novel in full colour in 2013, a decade after the publication of *Clumsy*. Entitled *A Matter of Life*, it chronicles his relationship with religion and with his father, who was a Presbyterian minister, as well as his relationship with own son Oscar, aged five at the time of his writing. The book's narrative is much more coherent, structured and accomplished than those of his earlier works, and is altogether more mature. As such, the step up to full colour feels entirely appropriate, representing a progression from raw, rough lines to more defined, clear lines with vibrant colouring that is seen in the career trajectory of the majority of alternative cartoonists.

In my own work I am currently on this trajectory, or perhaps at a point on the learning curve which is implicit in this career trajectory. Similar to Jeffrey Brown, a comparison between Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9 shows an increase in technical skill and improvement in narrative depth which is certainly due, at least in part, to the use of

colouring as a distinct, separate process followed after that of the initial line work, even though I have only filled in some parts of the comic in varying, expressive shades of grey, all of which I did in Photoshop.



Figure 4.8: Page from *Small Town Heroes* by Paddy Johnston (2010)



Figure 4.9: Page from *One Thing To Declare* by Paddy Johnston (2013)

One Thing To Declare is one of my more recent works in comics, a four-page fiction story I produced as an entry for the highly competitive annual Cape/Observer/Comica Graphic Short Story Prize, for which I was unsuccessful. I have since added the story to a comics collection I am curating on the new blogging and digital content platform Medium.com, on which comics are beginning to become a

prominent feature (Sturm 2014). Indeed, the collection, which I co-edit with Ottawa-based cartoonist Dan Minor, is only the second collection on the site to be focused exclusively on comics. Colour has not factored into our decisions to include comics, or to accept or reject submissions to our collection, nor has it been necessary at any point for us to discuss a policy on colour; rather, we have curated comics based on their command of visual storytelling, and of the interplay between text and image. This does not mean, of course, that colour is not a consideration for cartoonists, and it still must be considered as part of the cartoonist's process. What can be read from this, however, is that colour can be absent entirely, and the end result of a comic – an imagetext, a visual narrative combining images and words – will be conceived as such nonetheless.

Colour is still, however, part of my material and physical process of cartooning. My process now involves penciling with non-photo-blue pencils,⁶³ inking, scanning and then colouring in Photoshop, a much more refined and industrious production-line-type process than that with which I created *Small Town Heroes*. The process for this comic was to draw straight onto paper in black ink, then scan, with no further manipulation on the computer beyond collecting the images together into a PDF file for reproduction and distribution. In 2014 I started a web comic called *Best Intentions*, and a print comic series called *Long Divisions*, which I am now working on the third issue of. As I stated in the introduction to this chapter and will iterate throughout this thesis, comics have perhaps the worst ratio of production to consumption time of any art form – a single page could take hours or an entire day to produce, but is read, generally speaking, in a number of seconds, with the more discerning and visually literate reader likely to spend more time ‘reading’ the visual elements on the page, with a heightened awareness of performing the ‘closure’ (McCloud 2001) of creating a narrative from the panels,

⁶³ Blue pencils which do not show up when scanned into the computer, allowing for inking over without the necessity of erasing the layer of pencil.

speech balloons, images and text. An average page of *Best Intentions* or *Long Divisions* (such as Figure 4.10, below) will take me at least three to four hours of physical labour – often time spread between early mornings before work and late evenings after work. With a process involving pencilling, followed by inking, followed by scanning, followed by retouching and adding greys and other tone patterns on Photoshop, there are numerous stages to be observed and numerous divisions of labour inherent in my own comics work. Were I to attempt to render these comics in full colour, I would need more time than I currently have available to me, or I would need the labour of others in addition to my own. I am already doing the work of four people as a sole alternative cartoonist, so an attempt to increase this to the work of five or six people would be physically impossible without a major increase in financial capital and available time.



Figure 4.10: *Best Intentions* #4, Paddy Johnston (2013)

I have always worked on the assumption that I will *eventually* produce comics in full colour, but that this will most likely take some years to achieve due to the technical,

economical and craft factors required for one cartoonist to produce colour comics. Indeed, it took even Chris Ware some time to reach this stage of his career (Ball & Kuhlman 2010). My current process, at the digital stage, certainly has scope to expand to use different colour. Currently, I add numerous layers of grey, dotted tones and crosshatched patterns to create texture, and it would only take one or two clicks to render these as layers of colour as opposed to layers of black, white and grey. However, an attempt to add full colour would mean significant philosophical consideration, as well as a greater conception of colour schemes and an understanding of the visual impacts of certain colours and schemes than I have at present, having not yet learned these skills through creating comics in colour in significant quantity or for significant time. Very few, if any, cartoonists never produce any work in colour at all, and the impression from many cartoonists is that colour is valuable, to the extent that they would work in colour consistently if they could but are forced to limit it due to practical considerations. These practical considerations are those of comics work, of economics, of auteurism, of collective production, and of neoliberalism – and thus, of the tensions inherent in comics work and the wider landscape of cultural work explored in this thesis and by me in my own creative work as a comics scholar and practitioner.

The End of the Production Line

In the words of Clive Bell, ‘The forms of art are inexhaustible; but all lead by the same road of aesthetic emotion to the same world of aesthetic ecstasy’ (2011, np). Similarly, the forms of colour in comics are inexhaustible, but all lead to the same ‘aesthetic ecstasy’ – that is, engagement with a narrative comprised of images and text, despite the assertions by many above that monochromatic imagery is somehow inherently deficient in its representations due to its lack of verisimilitude, as well as being more difficult to read and to extrapolate narrative from due to its greater level of abstraction from reality. The many

examples of commercially and critically successful black and white comics such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* are, of course, a testament to these statements' shortcomings, as are the examples and complications I have given above. Colour in comics has been affected by the philosophical histories of visual art, photography and related art forms, as has been demonstrated above. However, these remain concerns which have not fully permeated the comics art world – instead, colour has been used in various experimental and symbolic ways as part of the cartoonist's toolkit. This is evidenced by David Mazzuchelli's use of colour as a signifier of personality and emotion in *Asterios Polyp* and the use of colour as a replacement for textual narrative in many of the comics in the Abstract Comics movement.

Far more significant to the cartoonist are the conditions of cultural and technical production and the associated labour and economic conditions for creating comics in colour. If the alternative cartoonist decides to use colour, this is a conscious decision that is taken towards the end of the process of conception of a comic rather than an immediate assumption. Historian of neoliberalism David Harvey wrote of Fordism's 'socialization of the worker to long hours of purely routinized labour' finding a new realization through neoliberal capitalism (1991, 128), and these long, routine hours have become a staple of the cartoonist's identity, as Ware makes clear in his '13 Professional Secrets' (Figure 1.2) and is echoed elsewhere in relation to colour specifically (Bellaire 2013; Fiamma 2016). In a page that stretches Ware's hyperbolic portrayals to a point almost beyond satire and into the realms of utter ridiculousness, the imagined cartoonist works not just antisocial hours but gives up his holidays too. The cartoonist is permanently hunched over the drawing desk, his substitute for Ford's production line, for which he acts as both Ford and his workers, minus the commitment to five dollars and eight hours a day. Under these punitive conditions, performing the work of three to six workers, colour is not seen as an essential step for any cartoonist or comic creator working outside of the Marvel-DC production-line

structure of corporate-owned, profit-driven labour. Comics work thus does not engage with colour unless the comics work is being done by a colourist who works only on colouring comics, in the context of a properly and adequately divided labour but in which there is still often precarity, as the work is largely freelance (O'Shea 2013).

The commercial success of *The Walking Dead* is perhaps, therefore, an anomaly, in that six to seven people are credited as creators, depending on the particular issue in question. Taking issue #117, two of these seven are technically colourists, adding colour as part of the production line – Cliff Rathburn on 'Gray Tones,' Dave Stewart on 'Cover Colours.' Toning – working with the interplay between black and white to create layers of greys and patterns which enhance a comic's visual narrative and depth whilst still remaining in the monochromatic world established in visual culture by the advent of photography – is a process which is engaged with often by auteur-cartoonists as well as those working for a studio's production line. Although, as I have shown, there is an expectation that mainstream comics will be in full colour, there is no absolute requirement for them to be, from the perspective of the culture and history of visual narrative and the expectations of readers. Whilst no mainstream comics without colour are as commercially and critically successful as *The Walking Dead*, we can still draw from its success that monochrome comics have the potential to succeed in all areas that a comic wants to fulfil, if I might personify comics and ask briefly 'what do comics want?' as Mitchell might ask of them if he were to follow up asking what it is that pictures want. What comics want is to combine text and image to communicate a visual narrative – with or without colour.

For cartoonists working alone, colour beyond the interplay between black and white remains a secondary concern. It is a concern that can be worked towards and engaged with at almost any stage of their career, should the political economy and the

conditions of comics work in which they operate allow them the opportunity to do so, but a secondary one nonetheless. Much more important, as we have seen, is the engagement with the spaces between black and white, and a mastery of the tones and shades therein, an essential aspect of comics work. My own work in comics continues to be dedicated to the development of skill in this area, as does that of all the lone cartoonists I have cited along with those working on a Fordist-model comic such as *The Walking Dead*. A further example of a lone alternative cartoonist who exemplifies the position of colour as an element of comics, conforming to the ideas I have expressed – that colour is a non-essential addition to a cartoonist’s skillset and a labour-intensive process and craft engaged with by many as a singular skill, while others avoid it due to prevailing economic, material and philosophical constraints – is Meredith Gran, here an exemplary *cartoonist oeconomicus*.

Gran is best known for her ongoing webcomic series *Octopus Pie*, a slice-of-life, sitcom-esque drama about the lives of a small number of young women living in Brooklyn, which she has been writing and drawing since 2007. She has also been making a living from comics and related freelance illustration and teaching for roughly the same length of time, exemplifying the ‘complicated version of freedom’ that characterizes the wider Bourdieusian field of cultural work and its power relations (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2010; Swartz 1998). *Octopus Pie* has been black and white for the majority of its run, with numerous layers of greys and halftone patterns which exhibit a high level of skill with tone, as seen in figure 4.11 below. Gran has also written and drawn a series of comics for the vastly popular all-ages comedy-fantasy series *Adventure Time*,⁶⁴ for which she handed over colouring duties to a colourist, most

⁶⁴ *Adventure Time* is a franchise which regularly features independent and alternative cartoonists and has been a significant milestone in the growing commercial successes of many of them, such as Danielle Corsetto, James Kochalka, Faith Erin Hicks and Michael DeForge, who works as a storyboard artist for

likely due to the schedule of the comic's publisher, Boom! Studios, which publishes a number of titles to tight deadlines and aligns with the corporate model of divided labour, though it allows for creator ownership.

In 2014 Gran created a page on the crowdfunding website Patreon,⁶⁵ an alternative to the established project-based crowdfunding sites (such as Kickstarter and IndieGoGo) that offers creators the chance to fund ongoing work rather than a single larger work. Through the site, patrons can support her work with agreed monthly donations ranging from \$1 to \$5, which can be cancelled at any time. As a \$5 patron I have access to Gran's online sketchbook and a stream of exclusive content related to *Octopus Pie*, as well as access to ebooks of the collected editions of the comic which once existed as print books but have sold out of their original print runs without a significant economic incentive for Gran to produce them again.



Figure 4.11: *Octopus Pie* #205 by Meredith Gran <http://www.comic-rocket.com/read/octopus-pie/205>

the cartoon show. Since *Adventure Time* started hiring alternative cartoonists, similar all-ages cartoons have followed suit. These include *Rick and Morty*, *Gravity Falls* and *Steven Universe*.

⁶⁵ <http://www.patreon.com/octopuspie>

The following chapter of this thesis covers crowdfunding and new economic models in relation to comics work in detail. What should be noted here, however, is that the site offers ‘milestones’ – that is, when a creator’s monthly total reaches a certain amount, they may offer extra rewards or changes to their creative works to reflect the significant increase in their earnings. Gran’s highest milestone when she set up the page was an ambitious \$3,000 a month, with the promised reward for the total reaching \$3,000 reading thus: ‘If we go this high, I will start posting Octopus Pie pages, 3 times a week, in FULL COLOR [sic] – for the first time ever. Can you image? I can’t...just yet’ (Gran 2014).

Whilst Gran’s statement that she cannot imagine doing regular colour pages for *Octopus Pie*, a comic highly successful by the standards of auteur-produced alternative comics, is hyperbolic for comic effect, there is a microcosmic truth to it. For cartoonists working alone, the conditions of cultural production of comics will only allow for full colour if there is significant income and time available to the cartoonist. Producing full-colour comics to a schedule is a process which requires a neo-Fordist approach to division of labour which is likely to be impossible for a cartoonist acting alone unless they can work to their own schedule and have amassed certain capital. In this case, Gran offered three pages a week in colour as a stretch goal, which is Octopus Pie’s current schedule for its black and white pages. We can assume, therefore, that she is supplementing the creation of these with paid freelance work and royalties from other creative works, and that \$3,000 a month is the perceived income at which she would be able to devote all her available time and resources to the creation of *Octopus Pie* in full colour. This is a reasonable income for a resident of New York, in consideration of the current state minimum wage of \$8 an hour,⁶⁶ which would equate to an annual income of roughly \$15,000 or \$1,250 a month.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ As of 31/12/2013, according to the New York State Department of Labor.

<https://labor.ny.gov/workerprotection/laborstandards/workprot/minwage.shtm>

⁶⁷ My own calculation based on an assumed working week of 35 hours. $35 \times 8 = 280$, $280 \times 52 = 14,560$ which I rounded up to 15,000 for the sake of round numbers.

To create three pages in colour would, we can assume from this, require an entire week of work by a lone cartoonist, for pages that would be read in a matter of seconds. If colour in comics is such a labour that it must be supported by a significant income or produced by a lone, skilled colourist as part of a production line, it will remain a non-essential formal property of comics which may or may not be included as part of a comic's conception and production, depending on the particular wishes and circumstances of the cartoonist or cartoonists working on the comic in question. Thus, working in colour is a labour above and beyond the minimum standards of cultural production in comics and a labour that can be avoided by a cartoonist should they choose to do so. However, it seems from the structure of Gran's crowdfunding economics that she still wants to make comics in colour, despite having already become a successful cartoonist and having managed to create 700 pages of *Octopus Pie* which exemplify comics' combination of visual textual narrative to create a coherent whole without using colour. Gran's success with black and white cartooning lends some credibility to the previously complicated arguments seen in this chapter for the deficiency of monochromatic art, as it would seem Gran would aim for the greater verisimilitude provided by colour (and the greater reader engagement therein in her comics) in an ideal world, or at least in a world in which her income is at least \$3,000 per month.

Gran eventually reached her goal of \$3,000 a month and *Octopus Pie* is now publishing in colour. Returning to the root of the idea of the *cartoonist oeconomicus*, it is clear that Gran's use of the best available tools and her manipulation of culture and the market are entrepreneurial activities, and she is certainly a '[wo]man of enterprise and production,' in Foucault's terms (2010, 178). However, Gran has not chosen to colour *Octopus Pie* herself, despite having the skills and, newly, the capital to do so. She has instead hired colourists (Sloane Leong and Valerie Halla), diversifying and dividing the

labour required to produce *Octopus Pie* in a fashion that befits comics work's collective nature but that is a move that can still be interpreted as entrepreneurial. Rather than doing all the work herself, Gran has chosen to pay somebody else to do it, using her newly acquired capital to better manage her own time. This, we can assume, will give her time to focus on other projects that will continue to generate even more capital – and the growth of capital is, of course, the goal of the neoliberal auteur and thus the goal of the *cartoonist oeconomicus*, whether this capital is generated by one hand or by multiple hands in collaboration, one or more of which may or may not be that of a colourist. The creation of comics in colour can therefore be achieved through neoliberal entrepreneurialism and an engagement with such activity and acceptance of the constraints of such a political economy, but of course most cartoonists do not have the means to achieve this, despite also being entrepreneurial themselves. Therefore, colour is another aspect of comics that proves that it is an art of tensions and exposes the inherent contradiction that make up its political economy.

Conclusion: Flattening and Dividing Labour

This chapter has demonstrated that colour can only be attained by comics artists through engagement with one of two opposing methods and ideals. On the one hand, when collective production is fully embraced in a Fordist model that appears increasingly outdated as the global economy moves towards postcapitalism (Mason 2015), comics are easily developed into full-colour productions and into products that fulfil numerous commercial imperatives and attainments as the labour of comics is divided among many hands. On the other hand, when a *cartoonist oeconomicus* working alone attains a certain level of financial capital through their entrepreneurial activities, as in the case of Meredith Gran, this capital can be used to purchase the significant time and space required to create comics in full colour, likely through exercising capital's power over labour, which has

grown exponentially under neoliberalism (Harvey 2007). Thus, rather than offering another site of unresolved tensions that produce a dialectic through which comics work can be understood, colour instead offers a divergence and a departure from these tensions – colour can only be achieved through the accumulation of significant capital.

There are still, however, numerous tensions surrounding the creation of comics in colour, and these are indicative of the dialectical nature of comics work's specific character in the same fashion as the other aspects of comics discussed thus far. Notably, there are unequal divisions of labour between colourists and other comics workers, the perception of comics without colours as being underdeveloped, the historical issues surrounding colour in art and visual culture and the problems of verisimilitude and representation. The problematic divisions of labour and cultural issues surrounding colour are particularly apparent among those who work specifically as colourists – comics workers who encapsulate the tensions of colour and who provide a place at which to conclude this chapter.

A recent online roundtable discussion of colour by cartoonists on *The Comics Journal* website effectively highlighted these issues (Fiamma 2016). The colourists involved crossed alternative, mainstream, Anglo-American and European comics, and spanned some decades and included canonical works such as *Watchmen* (whose colourist John Higgins was not credited on the cover). However, their concerns are largely shared, and the roundtable exhibits a consensus on many of the major issues of colour in comics work. They all agree that colourists are often made to 'pick up the slack' from writers and artists who miss their deadlines, as colouring is the last step in the production line, which makes for uneven and excessive labour and an imbalance of labour and capital. They also all reaffirm the 'complicated version of freedom' model of comics work, as their work is freelance unless they wish to work for Marvel and DC and not receive rights to their work

and to cede much of the creative control afforded to colourists (Fiamma 2016). Italian colourist Lorenzo de Felici bemoans the lack of critical attention paid to colour in reviews and scholarship, stating polemically that there is usually ‘no intellectual analysis whatsoever’ of colour in criticism (2016). This affirms my earlier assertion that colour is not well understood or prominently discussed in comics scholarship. Matthew Wilson (colourist on *Phonogram*, *The Wicked* + *The Divine* and *Young Avengers*) suggests that the reason for this is that ‘the industry didn’t make much of an effort to celebrate colourists until recently,’ though it is beginning to do so now and this will in turn allow for colour to take prominence in commentary and criticism. *The Comics Journal*’s Andrea Fiamma, the moderator of the roundtable, reinforces the auteurist bent of comics criticism by comparing the role of the colourist to that of the director of photography on a film, and the colourists largely agree with this analogy. They also agree with her ensuing assertion that nobody sets out to be the DP or even knows what the DP does,⁶⁸ but wants instead to be the director, whose role is obvious and clear. The director is, of course, the neoliberal auteur and the filmic equivalent of the auteur cartoonist.

So far, so neoliberal. But the most revealing insight offered by this roundtable is the colourists’ discussion of the role of the flatter. Flatting is another role assumed by a comics worker in the chain of divided comics work, and a component of colouring that has emerged with digital technology in the past two decades as this technology has facilitated the move of colourists to working entirely digitally in the majority of cases. Matthew Wilson estimates that employing a flatter – not unlike Meredith Gran’s employment of a colourist, working back to the artist – can save him anywhere from ‘45 minutes to 2 hours per page’ (2016). The colourists agree, significantly, that flatting is definitely *not* ‘creative’ work, as the flatter does not choose the colours, but simply lays out the areas where they

⁶⁸ For the avoidance of doubt here, dictionary.com defines a director of photography as ‘the person who is responsible for all operations concerning camera work and lighting during the production of a film’ (dictionary.com 2016).

will be on the page. Their opinions differ as to whether the flatter deserves a credit for their work. Some allow for flatters to receive credit and others reject it, but they all agree that a flatter's work is definitely not creative, as their choices do not impact the final product in terms of aesthetics or narrative. This draws a line between creative and non-creative work and touches upon the importance of creativity and cultural prestige to comics work, and aligns colour and colouring with a reading of colour as a significant aspect of comics work. Once again, a tension between forms of work emerges, and labours are erased and hidden. Whether they are the labours of the flatter or the colourist, there is always the potential for erasure. Flatters do, however, contribute to the final product and are part of the many-handed collective production model. Neoliberal, self-focused auteurism and individualism erases them, Beckerian-Bourdieuian collective production recognises them – and thus, colouring and flattening become another layer in the dialectic of comics work.

Despite its prominence across the comics industry and the culture of comics work, the tension exhibited in this chapter is not one that is easily reduced down to this thesis' core argument that alternative comics are defined by the tension between neoliberal auteurism and the collective production of cultural work. Instead, by allowing each of these two opposing forces an equal chance to demonstrate their worth in relation to colour in comics, this chapter complicates the dialectic of comics work. However, even though colour in comics can be reached through either side of the dialectic, the end result for the cartoonist is the same, and the challenges of neoliberalism remain inherent whichever method of facilitating the time and space to create comics in colour is chosen. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates the inescapable and pervasive nature of neoliberalism and its particular pervasiveness in creating the conditions for comics work. The *cartoonist oeconomicus*, as has been demonstrated in each of my chapters so far, submits to 'precarious conditions and uneven rewards' (Woo 2014, 2015) in order to pursue their

auteurist ends. A colourist working only as a colourist, meanwhile, still relies on freelance work and its fluctuating income, as demonstrated by Woo's comics survey (2014) and by many interviews with colourists (Morris 2012; Brothers 2010; Robinson 2014). Although the collective labour of a multi-worker comic such as *The Walking Dead* can allow for colour to be fully utilised and for a colour comic to be made with ease, the working conditions of those involved – and thus the character of comics work – remains the same as long as the workers are freelance. With unstable contracts and insecure employment, colourists are often exemplars of the exponential growth of the 'sharing economy' or 'gig economy' in which technology, asset rental and service companies have furthered employment relations that have existed in comics work for some time.

Chapter Four

Cartooning in the Age of Digital Reproduction: Comics Work in the Information Economy

So far in this thesis we have seen the lone cartoonist flourishing under the challenging economic conditions of neoliberalism. I have demonstrated these circumstances through explorations of art institutions, the treatment of colour, and the identity of cartoonists as auteurs and authors undertaking comics work largely autonomously, with numerous accompanying complications. All of these aspects of cartooning, and of the culture surrounding the creation of comics, have been affected in no small measure by the digital revolution of the 21st century, with the creation and distribution of all art forms having been expanded and disrupted by the advent of the internet and many associated digital technologies. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Meredith Gran achieved her goal of uploading three pages a month in colour through direct support from her fans on crowdfunding website Patreon. This is just one example of the many new economic models which now exist in light of the digital revolution and which have been identified by scholars such as Nicholas Lovell, whose book *The Curve* (2012) suggests the major significance of new economic models based on crowdfunding.

Both the technological developments and the new economic models provided by the digital culture of the internet age are aids and contributing factors to the conception of the *cartoonist oeconomicus*. Foucault's term *homo oeconomicus*, which he in turn borrows from classical theory and from Herbert Marcuse, defines man as rational, self-interested, as both a producer and consumer with no tension between the two activities. The *homo oeconomicus* is also unavoidably connected to the rise of neoliberalism globally, the timing of which, as stated by David Harvey and identified in my early chapters, is roughly concurrent with the rise of alternative comics and the birth of the

graphic novel form (Hatfield 2006). In this chapter I relate and reconcile the *homo oeconomicus* with the man of technology and the man of digital culture, drawing upon recent examples of comics which have made extensive use of digital technology and responded to digital change. Despite the significant changes to cartooning and to all art forms wrought by the rise of digital culture and network culture (Jenkins 2008), the thread of auteur cartooning and creators identifying as cartoonists can still be pursued. This chapter will expose, through the continued drawing of this thread and its application to comics as objects of digital culture, the importance and high relevance of a Marxist-materialist reading of comics and its foregrounding of creators' individual experiences. As Raymond Williams writes in *Marxism and Literature*, creation '...was radically extended by Marxism to the basic work processes and thence to a deeply (creatively) altered physical world and a self-created humanity' (1977, 206). Digital culture has, in turn, facilitated an altered physical world and offered new and unparalleled opportunities to express, through art forms and the worlds built therein, self-created humanities such as those created by cartoonists, and particularly cartoonists working in the digital realm.

However, as comics scholar and editor of *The Comics Grid* journal Ernesto Priego writes in his thesis (2010), the effects of digital culture on cartoonists and on the art form of comics are not the only such changes to have radically altered the form and its culture. The underground comix movement and the developments in alternative comics which followed them, bringing the auteur cartoonist to true prominence and realizing its potential, were a standard break – a break from the punitive and sanitizing restrictions of the Comics Code, as well as a standard break from the corporate structures of both the publishers of mainstream comic books and the corporate syndicates which distributed strip cartoons. The mainstream publishers continued,

throughout the fifties and sixties, to hire numerous workers in a Fordist production line model, working in cubicles or at small desks in studios not dissimilar to a contemporary call centre. Credit was often given only to the writer, which somewhat ironically laid the foundations of auteurism as a concept in comics that would later thrive under alternative comics. Similarly, although most syndicated strips were produced with the help of assistants, only the auteur was ever credited. The underground comix movement offered freedom from these constraints, and began to form a pattern of revolution for cartoonists that has been, in part, repeated by webcomics and the changes inherent in digital culture.

The birth of webcomics was a standard break that had a similar impact, as the first webcomic artists differed as auteur cartoonists from their predecessors in alternative comics in terms of methods, approaches and the context of political economy. This has in turn created a new culture of comics work in tandem with the new economic models offered to all creative artists and businesses with the rise of free digital content. Lovell's conclusion, supported by the success of artists across media and platforms and by the work of other media scholars, is that downward pressure on the price of all 'content' (a word that can describe all products of artists and cultural workers in the 21st century) has resulted in an expectation of free content, which relates largely to digital distribution but which has affected physical media too. To counteract this, Lovell offers 'The Curve' as a new economic model, which is a simple line graph representing a small number of 'superfans' providing the vast majority of an artist's income while the majority of consumers receive content for free or at minimal cost.

Webcomics were one of the earliest examples of this model, immediately being posted for free in their entirety. This was largely out of necessity due to the restrictions of the early internet technologies, in a further example of comics art being restricted by

the tools and cultures of production and work. A significant number of webcomic artists, including John Allison, on whom a section of this chapter is focused, have managed to fully realize Lovell's model, or at least a version of it specific to the production and distribution of comics. Many of them post new comics online weekly or even daily, and then make their living through collecting the comics into physical books and by merchandising, as well as using their free comics to drive paid illustration work and website advertising revenue, and sales of other comics which exist only in print, or only through paid-for digital channels. Lovell's model will be dissected and tested in comics in this chapter, with varied and piecemeal results and with Allison as the focal example.

As well as webcomics, the rise of social media and instant digital publishing platforms (such as Tumblr and Medium) have also had a significant impact on cartoonists – particularly on lone cartoonists, but in fact on all cultural workers in comics, as the opportunity to cultivate personality online exaggerates certain characteristics. For example, the comics writer Matt Fraction (*Hawkeye*, *Sex Criminals*) is well known for his presence on Twitter, and thus he has gained more of a reputation as an auteur as his fans are offered opportunities to gain insights into his comics process. More significant, however, is the opportunity to grow and cultivate audiences for comics through new digital channels in conjunction with the sharing of free comic content.

Digital technology and the emerging landscape of postcapitalism offer new opportunities to understand the tension between auteurism and collective production, in the wider context of individualism and collectivism and their places in contemporary political economy. The exponential rise of smartphone technology and social media, for example, along with the global interconnectedness provided by the rapid expansion of

the internet since the 1990s, has created networks that have never existed before. People are connected now in ways that were previously unimaginable, and the consequences have been many and far-reaching. Collaboration and collective production are thus much easier to realize, and fruitful collaborations are expanding in comics and broader popular culture, which has become ‘participatory’ (Jenkins 2006, 2008, 2013). However, this rise in participatory culture has taken place against the backdrop of the expansion of neoliberalism and free market dogma, the philosophical thrust of which is the advancement of the self and the drive for individualism. An understanding of how the advancement of the self fits in to the new collectivism of digital and social networks is key to understanding comics work, and such an understanding is the aim of this chapter. The following passages on John Allison, Jillian Tamaki, Chris Ware and my own cartooning practice will build this understanding in the dialectic of comics work, contextualizing it within the framework of postcapitalism and ensuring relevance to the contemporary present culture.

Turning Bad Machinery into Good Machinery – John Allison, Webcomics and the *homo oeconomicus*

John Allison is one of the most prolific cartoonists working in the UK today, and was one of the first popular British webcomic artists. His first comic, *Bobbins*, debuted in September 1998, when webcomics had existed for at least five years, but were still a new and relatively undiscovered form of comic art. *The Comics Journal*’s brief *History of Webcomics* (Garritty 2011) places this year in the midst of an explosion, with the ‘online population’ reaching a critical mass. *Bobbins*, appearing within this event, can be seen as a contributor to the establishment of the webcomic format as we now understand it: a popular format for comics online with daily, weekly or more sporadic

updates. Allison has been drawing and posting around three to five pages of comics, often more, almost every week since he started in 1998.

Bobbins ran almost daily from 1998 to 2002. In that time Allison's artwork went from a rough, MS Paint-driven,⁶⁹ somewhat crude style to a more refined, straightforward and clear line style, which after four years began to represent a unique voice and recognizable visual idiosyncrasy for Allison as an artist. *Bobbins*, like all of Allison's comics, was set in the fictional West Yorkshire town of Tackleford. The town continues to be the backdrop for an ongoing exercise in world-building that has continued throughout his different comics as he has developed as both an artist and a writer. The initial comic strip format of *Bobbins*, drawing upon the tropes of classic newspaper strips, lent itself well to the sitcom-esque feel which characterized it, with the characters developing in a similar fashion to a televised ensemble, eventually outgrowing the strip format and becoming more like a traditional newsstand comic book in its layout. After he called time on *Bobbins*, Allison started work on a new comic called *Scary Go Round*, (Allison 2002) which was one of the most notable webcomics in the mid-to-late-2000s, among others as noted by Shaenon Garrity's 'History of Webcomics' in *The Comics Journal* (2011). It retained some of the characters from *Bobbins*, most notably Shelley Winters, the protagonist of many of the storylines.

As he did during the run of *Bobbins*, Allison experimented on various levels during the run of *Scary Go Round*, trying various visual styles, tools and processes and varying his methods of production and distribution (though always distributing digitally in the first instance of each comic). He eventually settled on a recognisable clear line, flat-coloured style, which he stuck to until 2009 when he stopped *Scary Go Round* and

⁶⁹ Microsoft Paint, as a standard application that has come with Windows computers since 1995, holds a culturally significant place as an application that can be used to draw or sketch badly with a computer mouse. Some have produced brilliant artworks in Microsoft Paint (see *Jim'll Paint It* on Twitter and Facebook), but for the most part it remains a touchstone of blocky, badly executed computer art with no aim for verisimilitude.

started his next series, *Bad Machinery*. *Scary Go Round* departed from *Bobbins* by introducing light horror and mystery themes and leaning towards black comedy. *Bad Machinery* similarly departed from *Scary Go Round* by focusing on a group of teenagers, becoming less horror-focused and more wholesome, with light, fun mysteries aimed more at children and teens whilst still satisfying his existing adult readership. *Bad Machinery* has been his most commercially successful venture, and US independent comics publisher Oni Press has been collecting *Bad Machinery*'s web stories into physical books since 2012. At the time of writing, Allison has recently called time on *Bad Machinery* (Allison 2014), has finished a two-issue spin-off titled *Expecting To Fly* (Allison 2014, Figure 5.1 below), and has returned to *Bobbins* (which he has done off and on in recent years, between working on other projects).

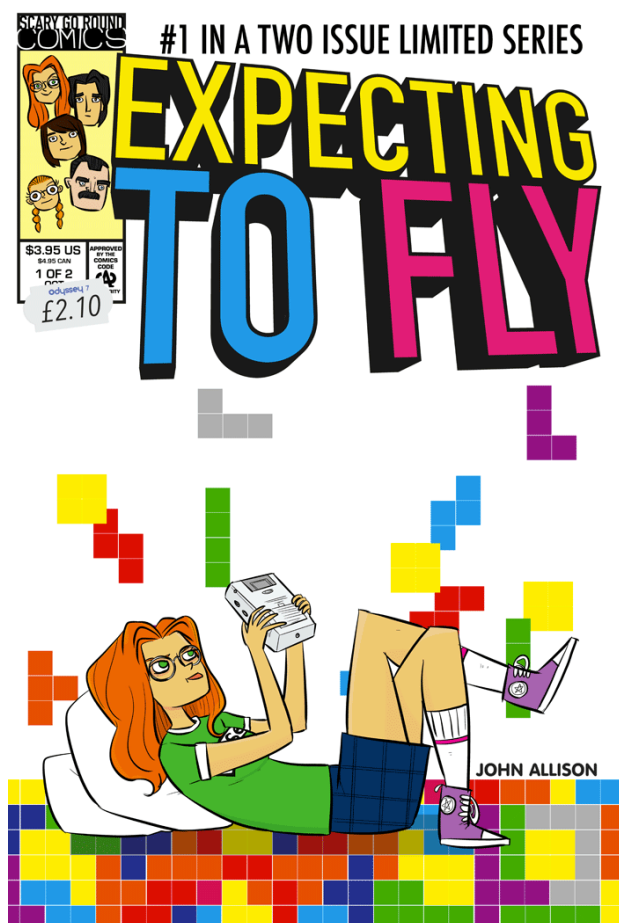


Figure 5.1: Front cover of *Expecting to Fly* #1 by John Allison (Self-published, 2015)

Allison has been publishing comics for over fifteen years and almost every comic he has created has been posted page by page online in its initial form. While these are later collected into physical comic pamphlets and books, all of Allison's comics remain free *at the point of entry* online. This means that he essentially gives away all of his content digitally, as do the majority of web cartoonists and webcomic artists working today. Allison's economic model is one that must therefore be examined on various levels in order to establish how comics can be conceived of as labour, both in this context and as part of a digital age in which content is easily distributed with little to no barriers to entry, financial or otherwise.

The inside back cover of the first issue of Allison's *Scary Go Round* spin-off comic *Giant Days* informs us in no uncertain terms that, despite giving all his content away for free as an initial digital offering, Allison does make a living from comics. This is often not the case for a lone cartoonist and it is a status which has significant impact on the conception of cartooning as labour and the cartoonist as a worker. The short creator biography reads:

John Allison is the creator of the comics *Scary Go Round* and *Bad Machinery*. Since 1998 he has essayed a series of stories, while making absolutely no attempt to deny that he 'made them up.' Perhaps it is this grotesque lack of shame that has allowed him to chisel out a living since 2003 doing just that (Allison 2013, 35).

This of course raises the question of how Allison makes a living from giving away his content digitally and the new economic models he exemplifies in this regard. The answer to this question, in the context of the field of comics studies, can be found in an interdisciplinary reading of comics as labour and of the theoretical context of the ideas of cultural work and of the economic process of converting content into revenue.

Comics journalist and business professor Todd Allen has been writing on the subject of webcomics and their financial reward for some time. His 2007 book *The Economics of Web Comics* examines the income of a number of web cartoonists with quantitative data-driven analysis and commentary from web cartoonists themselves as well as from publishers and distributors. Since 2007 the technology facilitating webcomics has changed significantly. Most notable is the cost of bandwidth and hosting, which has become so nominal as to be insignificant, and the concept of micropayments. The idea of micropayments was that a minimal charge – anything from one cent through to a dollar – could be made for a correspondingly small amount of content, such as a page of comics. More recently this concept has however been superseded by the prevalence of subscription and project-based crowdfunding. An updated edition of Allen's book has been funded recently with the help of a successful Kickstarter campaign; however, at the time of writing this edition is not commercially available. Briefly summarized, Allen's assessment is that content is converted into revenue through merchandising, advertising and other diversified streams of revenue, which he breaks down for various exemplary strips, including *Penny Arcade* (Holkins and Krahulik, 1998), whose revenue streams are quoted thus:

- Advertising
- Merchandising (including their publishing efforts)
- Commissioned work (often specialty comic strips for other sites or games)
- Brand Consulting
- PAX – The Penny Arcade eXpo

(Allen 2007, 95)

Penny Arcade is a popular strip that largely comments humorously on video games and video game culture. It was one of the first webcomics to develop a highly successful model based on giving away content for free at the point of entry with this content directing consumers to other streams of revenue. Taking the same approach Allen takes above and using it to examine John Allison's works and publications, I have identified a series of streams of revenue which are similar to those listed above, whilst also tailored to his own comic and the content therein.

The first of these is advertising on John Allison's website. Without access to his site analytics it would be impossible to know his revenue from these, but with his significant readership there will be a regular payment from this, probably monthly or quarterly depending on the plan in place with *Google* or *Project Wonderful*, the two dominant providers of advertising on webcomic sites.⁷⁰

The next is selling physical editions of his works – these are mostly collections of his online comics into comics pamphlets and books. Although specific sales data is here not available, Allison's online stores are often sold out of his various books, and his blog reveals that he has significant success with selling physical books and single-issue comics at conventions. Allen's analysis allows for the selling of physical editions to be seen as merchandising, a distinction which makes sense here in the understanding of Allison's revenue streams and his overall economic model.

Allison also produces a large amount of other merchandise, using his characters and his recognizable visual style to create fun and desirable products, including prints, t-shirts, mugs, tote bags and tea towels. His merchandise is sold through US site *TopatoCo* and his UK-based store on *BigCartel*, through which he also sells custom

⁷⁰ Project Wonderful was created with the specific aim of advertising webcomics and relevant content, and works slightly differently to standard online advertising. Website owners such as John Allison and Kate Beaton can offer the space on their website, and this is then auctioned off to other artists.

artwork and commissions, which is a familiar strategy for cartoonists who pursue freelance illustration work in addition to creating comics.

Finally, Allison also offers users of his site the opportunity to ‘subscribe’ to Bad Machinery: to pay a small amount each year in return for being able to read his comics for free. This is an idea that has gained significant traction this year thanks to crowdfunding site *Patreon*, but Allison launched this in 2012, a full year before *Patreon* was founded. He received £4,000 worth of pledges within the first week, and wrote on his blog:

This will make a huge difference later this year when a glut of book work for the above collection will make it difficult to do commissions, freelance or prepare special items for conventions. It will buy me a two or three month holiday from near-constant anxiety (Allison 2012).

Allison has not blogged or tweeted about the subscription page since, and is clear about it having been an experiment, but it can still be acknowledged as a revenue stream and one which continues to gain traction online. The prominence of crowdfunding in the current decade is examined in *The Curve* (2014a), a business-focused title similar to Todd Allen’s book in its ultimate aim of advising creators of content on the best way to convert their content into revenue. Lovell is a journalist and consultant, largely to the video games industry but also to others in the wake of his book, who advises companies and individuals on how to ‘harness the transformative power of the internet’ (Lovell 2014b). His essential argument is that the digital economy pushes the price of everything, even expensive luxury goods and essential commodities, towards being free. This has particular consequences for artists, writers and anyone who creates content. The Curve is a simple graph depicting revenue against consumption. Lovell proposes the theory that the majority of consumers of content given away will be, in his

terminology, ‘freeloaders,’ who never pay, while the ‘superfans’ at the top of the graph will be responsible for the vast majority of money that a creator receives from selling his or her content. He suggests that all industries must adapt to giving away content for free, because this does in fact translate to sales in other associated areas of products, content or related services. This, as we have seen, is a part of John Allison’s economic model and that of other content creators including Todd Allen, whose reissue of his book on webcomics addresses crowdfunding as a new and burgeoning stream of revenue, as well as being crowdfunded itself (Asselin 2014).

Crowdfunding has also been acknowledged as a significant revenue stream for cartoonists and a contributor to the rise of digital comics by Scott McCloud in conjunction with Henry Jenkins at a recent panel discussion (Jenkins 2014). The pair identified it as a facilitator of their shared vision of digital comics creating a diverse and vibrant landscape which benefits both producer and consumer in terms of their own freedom. In Jenkins’ words as he assessed McCloud’s 2000 treatise on digital comics, *Reinventing Comics*, this would be:

a world where independent comic artists sell their product directly to the consumer without confronting any middle men or gatekeepers, where more diverse comics content can find audiences well beyond the hard-core comics readers who rule the local comic shops, and where the formal vocabulary of comics can expand, freed from the limitations of the printed page (Jenkins 2002).

This vision is clearly based on freedom and autonomy and crowdfunding has become a very important part of this vision as we see it realised today. Allison therefore makes his living, like the majority of freelancers and the majority of comics workers, from varied, piecemeal, disparate work and comparatively unreliable and precarious streams of

income, in a state of constant anxiety. It is significant that even in the context of essentially being given £4,000 for free by his readership, he immediately places this in the context of the insecure nature of his work, which echoes Hesmondhalgh and Baker's idea of 'a complicated version of freedom' (2010, 4). Allison is free to derive his income from his art and from its various associated streams of revenue, but this brings a level of complexity and insecurity not present in other conceptions of labour.

Allison has written about his work and these issues, as well as discussing these aspects of his work in numerous interviews, including one on the British comics podcast *Make It Then Tell Everybody*, hosted by cartoonist and comics educator Dan Berry. As well as light-hearted humorous discussion, the podcast's conversations discuss such issues as process, publishing, production and distribution. Allison has appeared as a guest on it twice, once in 2012 and once in 2014. On the 2012 podcast Allison discusses how his making money from free content frustrates him, and its limitations. However, shortly after this conversation, Allison and Berry discuss autonomy and control, and both concur that these factors are of the utmost importance to them as cartoonists working alone. Allison compared the cartoonist to a filmmaker, saying:

You're in charge [of telling the story]. You're the boss. It's like you're making a movie and you're in charge of everything. You're like the sound man. You're holding the boom. You're picking the shots. You can tell whatever story you want to. If you want you can produce the film. You own the cinema, if you want you can just sell it off your website. You can do it all. It's the ultimate egomaniac's format (Berry 2012).

This echoes the earlier ideas of the theorists of cultural work who assert the complication of the trade-off between autonomy and stability inherent in cultural work, and especially in comics when conceived of as comics work. The evocation of

egomania also chimes with the assertions of Brown (2010) and Berlant (2011) about neoliberalism and its exercising of individual power, the assertion of the self. The *cartoonist oeconomicus*, therefore, is driven not just by entrepreneurial spirit, but by their own ego.

Allison also posted a ‘manifesto for indie comics’ on his own blog in 2010, a post which was shared widely online and in the British comics community at the time of its publication. The post begins, ‘Over the 12 years I’ve been active in UK indie comics, I’ve been constantly impressed by the standard of skill within our comics community, and horrified by the way people eventually disappear, unable to sustain themselves or their work’ (Allison 2010). Again, this echoes the perilous nature of cartooning, and in fact takes this conception to its logical conclusion – ultimate submission to the peril created by cartooning, resulting in quitting cartooning altogether.

The ten-point manifesto continues in a similar vein, but gives instruction on how to combat this precariousness by seeing comics as work and as a business, and by being entrepreneurial. In other words by conceiving of comics as work, cultural or otherwise, and by working to convert content into revenue through all available streams. The most significant points in Alison’s manifesto are numbers four and five:

4. Forget what you learned at art school and read some business books

You need entrepreneurial chops to make a living from your art, or the help of someone who has them. It's not that hard. You copy someone who has already succeeded. It usually works.

5. Making money from art is not vulgar

Art is a commodity. It makes people feel something. It raises the greater sum of human happiness. It increases the gaiety of the nation. It has a value (2010).

These points express the still somewhat controversial idea that making money from art is something you *should* do, and exemplify the entrepreneurial spirit which Allison upholds. It is this that allows him to make money from various sources, which facilitates his freedom in making his comics, despite this seemingly capitalist ethos being at odds with the anti-capitalist sentiments of alternative comics that have developed during their history of opposition to the corporate mainstream. However, the changes to the landscape of comics facilitated by the growth of digital technologies have significantly complicated and eroded this opposition. Allison's ideas around the requirement of a cartoonist to be entrepreneurial are proof that webcomics and digital technologies have created new opportunities for cartoonists to gain revenue and to publish with creative freedom in a newly networked market.

The implication in Allison's introduction to his manifesto is that where some of his peers have stopped cartooning, Allison has been able to continue because he has conceived of comics as work, of art as commerce and of himself as a businessman; a true and self-defined capitalist, facilitating his own production and distribution on his own terms and retaining the autonomy which is central to comics work. It seems therefore that the key to dealing with the precarious nature of comics work is to blur the boundary between cultural work and other types of work – to resist such delineations and to see cartooning as work and as a business within a wider entrepreneurial activity. Allison has managed to conceive of comics as work and to identify and exploit his potential revenue streams, and subsequently has been successful and effective as a cartoonist. His manifesto also suggests that he does not believe this to be a difficult thing to do. Allison continued this thread of his personal philosophy in the aforementioned podcast interview.

You have to be everything. You have to be *Barnum and Bailey*. You have to be *Marks and Spencer*. You have to understand stock control and things like that. You have to understand so many different areas. And it's fun. There's a certain amount of risk. I'm quite risk averse, and when you print thousands of things it's expensive. And then what are you going to do, are you going to spend all that money when you make it back? You have to keep some of it so you can print your next book. And because I was cautious I was able to continue. Because I was cautious I was able to take these risks at a comfortable level and to keep going. I've made mistakes along the way, but thankfully they didn't take me out (Berry 2012).

Allison here emphasizes the individual effort of the web cartoonist and implies, in suggesting that a cartoonist must be '*Marks and Spencer*,' that to succeed a lone cartoonist must become a one-person corporation (an organization, in the cultural and creative industries, made up of numerous cultural workers). In effect one cartoonist must do the work of numerous people to be a successful cartoonist, a similar model to the successful corporate mainstream in which many cultural workers divide the labour required to create a comic. Thus they produce a comic with relative ease, while their counterparts in the alternative comics sphere, particularly web cartoonists whose comics are free at the point of entry, fail.

Allison's model of the comics worker is one which echoes, in no short measure, the idea of the *homo oeconomicus* established by Foucault and my own subsequent conception of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* – the creator of comics working as an auteur but within a complex network of collective production. Foucault is significant here not just for the reasons established in the previous chapters, but also because of a growing reassessment of his ideas in the context of digital culture and contemporary

entrepreneurialism (Ball 2013; Baptista & Leitão 2015; Amaral, Baptista & Lima 2015; Marti & Cabrita 2012; Mazzucato 2015). In a broad sense, Foucault's work has had a significant influence on literary criticism, from which comics studies still draws many of its basic ideas, but Foucault is also being granted renewed attention by scholars of various disciplines at present, due in part to the recent posthumous publication of works previously denied publication by his literary estate, and in part due to an emerging intersection between Foucault's conceptions of power, biopolitics and governmentality and the tenets of contemporary neoliberalism. A 2014 conference keynoted by Judith Butler at Yale, *Foucault after 1984*, confirmed this, with a write-up in the *LA Review of Books* reiterating Foucault's exposition of the neoliberal ideology in which the things that would seem most incommensurate with economic rationality 'are judged increasingly by economic standards' (Morrow, Racuglia & Schectman 2014). The example given in the conference review is that of the neoliberal university, but it echoes Allison's earlier grapple with the idea that making money from art is not vulgar (Allison 2010). For Allison, it is perfectly acceptable to judge art as a commodity, commensurate with the neoliberal consensus. Foucault's *homo oeconomicus* is 'an island of rationality' (282) and 'someone who accepts reality' (270). The use of the term entrepreneur is one which is used in the same way by John Allison in his manifesto for indie comics, suggesting the successful cartoonist should treat himself as an entrepreneur. Similarly, his manifesto accepts reality and presents a truly rational assessment of the web cartoonist, encouraging rational behaviour and acknowledgment of the economic conditions of producing and consuming art, all the while viewing the cartoonist as a figure operating alone – *Barnum and Bailey*; *Marks and Spencer*; the one-man corporation.

Allison's suggestion, empirical as it is, that he has seen many of his peers fail at cartooning because of their refusal or inability to engage with this conception of cartooning as work and of the cartoonist as a rational, economic man, is proof of his status as a true and realised *homo oeconomicus*. He rationally exploits the opportunities offered by technological change and digital culture, specifically webcomics and the associated economic model of converting digital content into revenue through content-related merchandising. Allison's own success as a cartoonist, one who earns a living through giving away his content for free, is also proof of this. He may not explicitly or consciously think in these terms, but he undoubtedly provides a contemporary example of Foucault's economic man, which is an analysis it is possible to present here without endorsing the ideology of neoliberalism and without reducing a work of comic art to nothing beyond a commodity. Allison's comics have developed through various visual approaches to arrive at a unique, distinctive clear line style and become elegantly written stories with a significant and enthusiastic readership. Through this Foucauldian reading I wish to demonstrate that these significant aesthetic developments in Allison's comics would not have been possible without the facilitation of his economic activity as it engaged with digital culture, the exposition of which allows for a new understanding of his prolific nature and thus the narrative structure of his works.

Allison's work in comics and his own commentary on the subject allow for a conception of comics as cultural work and offers insights into the working conditions of web cartoonists through this conception. They allow for an understanding of web cartooning as an economic endeavour, as well as presenting a model for success in the sphere of webcomics in financial terms. However, Allison's financial success is also indicative of his success in creating, growing and maintaining a large and responsive readership, all of which has been facilitated by the changes in technology that have

allowed digital comics and webcomics to flourish and become a vibrant art form in their own right. Allison is of course just one example of a successful web cartoonist, but one against which others can be measured.

The *cartoonist oeconomicus* and Postcapitalism

Neoliberalism's aggressive advancement of individualist auteurism is clearly of significant benefit to cartoonists in certain circumstances. The prevailing philosophical logic of neoliberalism legitimizes and facilitates the culture contemporary alternative comics in particular to a large degree, ratifying the choices made by alternative cartoonists who work alone in a majority of cases. However, there are significant tensions that arise from neoliberalism, most notably in the prevailing economic conditions that ensue from its driving of the systems of late capitalism and extension of market logic to all spheres of existence. Digital technology has allowed for this extension to continue, with abstract concepts and previously immeasurable factors now measurable with data.

As political scientist and prominent critic of neoliberalism Wendy Brown notes in her most recent exploration of the prevailing market dogma, *Undoing the Demos*, 'whether through social media 'followers', 'likes', and 'retweets', through rankings and ratings for every activity and domain, or through more directly monetized practices, the pursuit of education, training, leisure, reproduction, consumption, and more are increasingly configured as strategic decisions and practices related to enhancing the self's future value' (2015, 34). Although Allison's own commentary on his career and the economic circumstances of the alternative cartoonist reinforce my reading of him as a *cartoonist oeconomicus*, this reading is nonetheless a reconfiguring, to use Brown's term. Reconfiguring a cartoonist's work as strategy, as a series of objects born purely economic decisions driven by capital, allows for an understanding of them in neoliberal

terms. The ease of such a reconfiguration is a testament to neoliberalism's power, but also, significantly, a testament to the importance of digital technology and the rapid rise of what has been dubbed both the 'sharing economy' and the 'knowledge economy' when viewed in terms of its different aspects (McChesney 2013, 2015). Both aspects, however, are major factors in the requirement of neoliberal actors to understand all actions in terms of their potential enhancement of the self's value, and both have had major impacts on alternative cartooning in the contemporary sphere.

The 'sharing economy' refers to services such as Uber, AirBnB, Deliveroo, TaskRabbit and Fiverr – websites and apps that connect people who need taxis with drivers, allow people to rent out their spare rooms, and connect workers with opportunities to work. In other words, these new services connect labour with capital, and do so in such a fashion that ensures that capital continues to exercise power and dominance over labour through constant measurement and surveillance. Thus, there is a tension between labour and capital that is becoming more pronounced as the neoliberal machine continues into the latter part of the decade. This in turn is reinforcing more localized and specific tensions such as those between auteurism and collective production in comics, in which the labour of the alternative cartoonist rarely generates significant capital. Similarly, the worker who takes full advantage of the 'sharing economy' and is thus recast as an entrepreneur, enters into a cycle of precarity similar to that of the freelance cultural worker (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Standing 2014; Lobato and Thomas 2015).

The precarious nature of employment in the 'sharing economy' or 'gig economy' is well documented (Bliss 2015; Howker 2010; Mason 2015; Srnicek & Williams 2015; Schor 2014), with Uber in particular coming under heavy fire for its unabashed exploitation of its drivers (Asher-Schapiro 2014). As they aren't defined as

workers, having no contract of employment with Uber, they have no opportunity to unionise or be part of any collective movement, and precious little job security. Similarly, an employment contract is incredibly rare in comics work, and only likely to be a fixture for a small number of creatives who work for the major corporate publishers. Though the situation of the cartoonist is not as pronounced as that of the Uber driver (cartoonists are not given ratings by the recipient of each comic that could physically bar them from cartooning), both are victims of enforced precarity born of neoliberalism, and both lack the means to access resistant collectivism to a meaningful extent. Both also suffer from downward pressure on wages and capital as a result of the neoliberal drive towards undercutting and so-called efficiency. This drive, according to economists and political scientists, is moving towards a crisis point.⁷¹

Postcapitalism, according to Paul Mason's 2015 book of the same name, can have multiple meanings, but refers in essence to the current and future movements of the economy in relation to labour and technology, which Raphael Sassower argues must be decoupled from ideology and the current paradigms of political thought (2010). Postcapitalism is both the current movement towards a hypothetical crisis of political economy and the changed landscape of political economy that will follow it, but could also be a conception of the economy that prevents this crisis – Mason and his contemporaries (Srnicek & Williams, Asher-Schapiro, Piketty, Sassower) do offer practical advice in their books on the subject. 'Postcapitalism,' Mason writes, 'could take many different forms. We'll know it's happened if a large number of goods

⁷¹ Economists who are critical of capitalist systems and the current policies of austerity are generally critical of neoliberalism as the philosophy driving these systems – the psychological dogmatic belief in the entrepreneurial free market is, of course, behind the politics of austerity. However, such critiques often focus on the capitalist machinations and minutiae of economic systems, rather than the philosophical drive behind them. This chapter's commentary focuses on the philosophical, as is appropriate for a doctoral thesis arguing for the abstract concept of a dialectic, but it should be noted that there are numerous critiques of late capitalist policy by prominent economists, including Ha-Joon Chang (2008, 2011), Thomas Piketty (2014, 2015), Yanis Varoufakis (2015), Mark Blyth (2015), Joseph Stiglitz (2013, 2016), Paul Krugman (2008, 2013). Roundtables of journalists discussing the death of capitalism are also beginning to appear with regularity (Mason et al. 2015).

become cheap or free, but people go on producing them irrespective of market forces. We'll know it's underway once the blurred relationship between work and leisure, between hours and wages, becomes institutionalised' (2015, 144). Both of these things have already happened in comics work and in the broader field of cultural work, and movement in this direction continues to intensify. Comics have been cheap since their inception, but the movement towards free comics has intensified in the information economy as artwork has become content. As demonstrated by Allison and the wider context of Lovell's concept of 'The Curve,' it is almost standard practice for an artist to give the majority of their work away for free, with the aim of driving sales towards premium products. This is not entirely divorced from market forces, so Mason's vision is still a futuristic and hypothetical one – however, the potential for crowdfunding or to earn such financial capital is often surplus. As I demonstrated in my discussion of cartoonists and 'day jobs,' (Johnston 2013), a majority of alternative cartoonists hold down day jobs so that they can produce comics outside of the need to sustain oneself with financial capital. They still trade their comics in the marketplace where possible, so a hybrid and dialectical model of comics work still emerges, but the move towards postcapitalism is visible in comics work.

The blurring of the lines between work and leisure complicates the understanding of comics work as moving towards independence from market forces, however. As demonstrated by the current scholarship on cultural work and the creative industries (Beck 2002; Florida 2010, 2014; Brouillette 2009, 2014; Ross 2010; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Banks, Gill & Taylor 2013; Ginsburgh 2013), such work tends to be freelance in nature and thus to be precarious, which forces the blurring of work and leisure as projects are highly likely to demand what would be the cartoonist's delineated leisure time if they were working a regular 9-to-5 'day job.' Those who

retain their day jobs dedicate their leisure time to comics work – which is, as this thesis has demonstrated throughout, undeniably a form of work. Comics is also an art form that requires the investment of more time and energy than other art forms due to the major imbalance between the time spent creating a comic and the time spent consuming it. Thus, cartoonists are unlikely to be able to make a significant investment in comics work as *either* a leisure *or* a work activity, and it is never delineated as such. Comics work is both work and leisure, and it is the complex relationship between these two conceptions of human activity that forms the specific dialectic that defines its nature. Thus, comics work can be thought of as a form of work that is leading the conception of postcapitalism and is entwined with its development and the development of scholarship in this area.

Inventing The Future, another leading book on postcapitalism by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015), presents a more vocal take on the failures of neoliberalism and how they might be addressed in a postcapitalist economy, looking at the broader philosophical meaning of work and how such meaning interplays with technological progress and the perceived ongoing decline of the effectiveness of neoliberal policy.⁷² Sharing the views of Stanley Aronowitz (1997, 2000, 2005), Srnicek and Williams argue for a move towards a post-work society, achieved through a number of strategies that may or may not include a Universal Basic Income (UBI).⁷³ UBI is also a growing

⁷² As well as being critical of the machinations of late capitalism, at the time of writing more and more economists (Chakraborty 2016) and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (2016) are predicting the end of neoliberalism and normalising the idea that it is in decline – even the governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney (2016).

⁷³ Stanley Aronowitz and Jonathan Cutler's edited collection *Post-Work: The Wages of Cybernation* (1997) predicted the neoliberal malaise of the 21st century with some accuracy, whilst also providing a template for resistance to it in the form of the "Post-Work Manifesto." Similarly, Molly Scott Cato's 1996 book *Seven Myths About Work* helped to lay the foundations of the contemporary postcapitalist movement, with its asking of larger questions about the nature of work itself rather than questions of factors of political economy such as wages, unemployment, austerity and precarity. A number of other texts and resources based on resistance to and questioning of work itself can be found at whywork.org, and books about resisting work entirely are also beginning to emerge (Frayne 2016), perhaps indicating that comics and cultural products in a broader sense have the potential to become major sites of resistance

concern among scholars and economists, and an idea that is being taken ever more seriously by mainstream politics,⁷⁴ scholarship and journalism (Haque 2011a, 2011b), with new books emerging on the subject in the year of writing this thesis (Bregman 2016), building upon the precedent for post-work and postcapitalist thought set by Aronowitz (1997) and Peter Drucker (1994). According to Srnicek and Williams, a movement towards postcapitalism ‘potentiates the conditions for a broader transformation from the selfish individuals formed by capitalism to communal and creative forms of social expression liberated by the end of work’ (176). This, along with Mason’s descriptions of the originators of neoliberalism throughout his book, furthers the dichotomy and tension between neoliberal capitalist individualism and (it would seem) postcapitalist collectivism. For comics work, therefore, a shift towards postcapitalism could mean a move away from auteurism and would facilitate collaboration and collective production to a great degree. However, if work were to come to an end, comics work would be changed significantly. A marketplace would still exist, and the physical labours of creating comics would be unchanged, along with their materiality – all elements of the dialectic of comics work. But a cartoonist with a guaranteed living income paid automatically by the state would be able to realise their own aims without the difficulty born of neoliberal precarity in the present political economy (Howker 2010). Thus, auteurism may well flourish – with hypothetically infinite time and resource, a cartoonist would have no need of collective production. However, the specialist skills required to create certain elements of comics (such as colour), or to print them, for example, would likely be maintained. As such, a sea

to the very concept of work itself in the emergent dialectic I have identified with reference to Dick Hebdige (1979).

⁷⁴ At the time of writing this footnote, Switzerland has just held a referendum on the introduction of a UBI, the proposal for which was widely rejected. The idea is still gaining traction (see Bregman 2016; Jones 2016) and does have a historical precedent (Bell 2011), but is still very much an emergent philosophical idea like the broader concept of postcapitalism.

change in political economy with a shift towards postcapitalism would change the character of comics work significantly, but would likely still serve to reinforce the dialectical tension between auteurism and collective production.

Postcapitalism must therefore be understood as an idea that suggests the direction that political economy may take in the coming years in response to the well-documented crises of neoliberalism and late capitalism, leaning into post-industrialism (Mason 2010, 2013, 2015; Harvey 2007; Sassower 2010; Brown 2015; Teghtsoonian 2009; Breitbart 2013; McChesney 2013, 2015). The current move towards postcapitalism is based on the expansion of the information and knowledge economy, and the growth of networks – of people, places, objects and cultures (Marti and Cabrita 2012). Postcapitalism presents new ways of understanding how individuals as workers fit in to these networks, as does comics work in its current engagement with the digital landscape. Comics have been at the forefront of media convergence as identified by Henry Jenkins, and comics work has created much of this convergence within the industry and culture of comics. Ernesto Priego views the elements of this convergence, ‘the comic book in its different formats, as well as more recent manifestations like webcomics and comics made for mobile phones and ‘tablet’ digital devices’ as ‘part of the same intricate network of mutually affecting forces, in which the recognizable-yet-flexible system of comics and the demands of audiences, publishers, authors and manufacturers of technology all play a part’ (2010, 130). ‘Mutually affecting forces’ here describes media convergence and materialism, with Priego drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s idea of the aura of art being lost or diluted through mechanical reproduction (2008),⁷⁵ but it can also describe a rhizome or dialectic, here providing a reminder of the

⁷⁵ Benjamin’s concept of the aura as applied to comics is discussed further by Priego and Moore (2001) and also in *The Art of Comics* (ed. Meskin and Cook, 2014). The aura of an original art work such as a painting, according to Benjamin, decays with every reproduction. However, as Priego writes in his thesis, a paradox is created by this conception as each reproduction increases the value – often expressed in both

importance of the idea of the network to the philosophical background of conceiving of comics work.

Significantly, media convergence and new networks have also opened up new avenues for publishing, and for the connection between creator and consumer. ‘Whatever its motivations,’ writes Jenkins, ‘convergence is changing the ways in which media industries operate and the ways average people think about their relation to the media. We are in a critical moment of transition during which the old rules are open to change and companies may be forced to renegotiate their relationship to consumers’ (2008, 243). The so-called ‘old rules’ in comics work may refer to the traditional need for publishers, distributors and retailers that has been superseded by digital technology and the emerging networks. However, as postcapitalism’s assessment of the potential of networks shows us, these old rules may yet remain in place – whilst new rules emerge alongside them. Comics work is currently writing these rules whilst upholding the old ones, in dialectical fashion. Rather than the old rules being replaced, a new hybrid model of production and consumption is emerging, and this hybridity is key to understanding comics work in the postcapitalist landscape. There are numerous cartoonists who exhibit this hybridity and exemplify how comics work is becoming increasingly a networked action. John Allison is one, but an even greater exemplar of the hybrid model of comics work in the digital landscape is Jillian Tamaki.

Jillian Tamaki and the Infinite Canvas

Jillian Tamaki is a successful Canadian cartoonist and illustrator, who often works alone to create comics, but also collaborates with her cousin, the young adult author and writer Mariko Tamaki. They have collaborated on two full-length graphic novels, *Skim*

economic and cultural capital – of the original object. This concept has implications for understanding the form of comics, but is outside the scope of this thesis as it does not contribute directly to an understanding of the dialectic of comics work. For further discussion of the concept of the aura and some discussion of how it applies to digital reproduction, see Ferris 2014; Benjamin 2011; Eagleton 2009; and Betancourt 2006.

(2010) and *This One Summer* (2014), both of which have won or been shortlisted for numerous literary awards including the prestigious Governor General's Award (Volmers 2014). Both books deal with the experience of being a teenage girl, exploring sexuality, race and gender and their resulting confusions and complexities. Tamaki's next most well-known work is *Supermutant Magic Academy*, a webcomic originally hosted on social networking/blogging site Tumblr that was collected into a book by Drawn & Quarterly in 2015. Sketchier in its style, drawn entirely in black and white and composed of one-page vignettes, *Supermutant Magic Academy* is a humorous and original take on the popular *Harry Potter*-esque magic school setting. It provides emotionally resonant portrayals of teenage life that land with surprising effectiveness due to the extra level of abstraction inherent in the characters' various mutant features and issues with love, sex and desire. As well as freelance and commercial illustration work, textiles and embroidery, book cover design for literary publishers, storyboarding for the popular all ages cartoon *Adventure Time* and teaching at the New York City School of Visual Arts, Tamaki has also created numerous one-shot comics and contributed to anthologies and small press series, most notably the *Frontier* series for small indie publisher Youth In Decline. Her comic for this series, *SexCoven* (2015), traces the growth of online file sharing with a fictional sound shared across networks that comes to dominate culture, be assimilated by the mainstream and eventually commodified in the familiar process of parent cultures absorbing child cultures for economic gain (Hebdige 1979; Frank 1998). Tamaki clearly, therefore, has a highly varied portfolio of comics work (and non-comics work) and is in touch with contemporary digital culture and the new network experience of the information economy, which might be thought of as being in its own teenage years.

A varied portfolio of comics work and non-comics work, or related work such as commercial illustration, is by now a familiar picture of the *cartoonist oeconomicus*, seeking every available opportunity to amass capital in support of comics work and utilising their entrepreneurialism to put their skills to work as best they can. In Tamaki's own words: 'I do many types of work' (Cills 2015). She is also aware of the differences between collective work within the structure of a day job, and the auteurist work of a freelancer in comics and illustration. Discussing her previous job at video games studio BioWare in the aforementioned interview, she said 'I still sort of miss that environment where you're all working as a team for years towards a big goal, and then when that goal is accomplished it's like a triumph for everybody. It's such a different kind of work from what I do now, which is very solitary. Isolating' (2015). The choice of the words 'solitary' and 'isolating' to describe comics work are negative descriptors of auteurism, and betray the problems of the singular creative vision, painting it as a way of working that is ultimately lacking in effectiveness and is not whole. This choice of words also ties in with the negative effects of neoliberalism, which is an alienating philosophy and a divisive, negative logic to anyone but those who profit from its implication in the mechanisms of late capitalism (Brown 2015; Berlant 2011; Gammon 2013). This description seems, therefore, at odds with the positive descriptors used by Allison, who pushes neoliberal auteurism and the logic of business-minded economic approaches in his commentary on comics. Tamaki's commentary, by contrast, is a reminder that the neoliberal drive of self-interest can create great things, but is an alienating force.

The phrase 'infinite canvas,' which titles this section, is a familiar concept to comics scholars that is taken from Scott McCloud's 2000 book *Reinventing Comics*. The concept of the infinite canvas is used by McCloud and others generally to describe the potential for comics and graphic narrative to break free from the constraints of its

print materiality through the technology of screens and digital content delivery. However, I wish to take the idea a step further and to use it to refer to the landscape of work available to the *cartoonist oeconomicus*, and to the broader idea of a newly networked culture, the global reach of which is finite but is vast enough to seem infinite to the individuals within it. The infinite canvas, therefore, refers in this chapter to the ‘technologies and capital flows’ (Brown 2015, 188) that hold together the newly networked economy. Wendy Brown believes that these technologies and capital flows, the building blocks of neoliberalism and the facilitators of the emergent postcapitalism, are replacing ‘a recognition of ourselves as held together by literatures, images, religions, histories, myths, ideas, forms of reason, grammars, figures and languages’ (188). Should this process of replacement be completed, Brown believes that ‘humanity will have entered its darkest chapter ever’ (188), which is hyperbolic, but does support my reading of the alienating factors of neoliberalism that Tamaki’s commentary suggests. The infinite canvas, therefore, is a canvas of alienation, but as a network and a collective of infinite people, it also offers the potential to directly address alienation and loneliness, hitting the heart of the dialectic of comics work, which may be understood itself as an infinite canvas.



Figure 5.2: Panel from ‘TruBunny’ by Jillian Tamaki (2014, <http://jilliantamaki.com/short-comics/trubunny/>)

Tamaki's awareness of and direct engagement with the tension of the newly networked culture is striking, illustrated well in the short comic 'TruBunny,' which she produced for Drawn and Quarterly's 25th anniversary anthology and also shared for free on her website. The comic depicts, ironically, an intern at D&Q who is fired after getting caught writing a scathing anonymous blog about the experience. This already highlights the power dynamics of neoliberalism, under which unpaid internships have flourished, but the comic addresses the complications of the newly networked culture in which creative workers operate on numerous levels. Trudy, the protagonist, becomes famous after her blog (a product of the new network) is picked up by an online magazine (a similar product) and widely shared, amassing cultural capital that can then be converted into financial capital. There follows a book deal, a film deal, commercial and financial success and an eventual meltdown, the only solution to which is a complete disengagement with the digital network. The comic ends, shortly after the above panel, with Trudy's partner erasing all trace of her online presence, a bold move that seems impossible and unconscionable in today's networked and engaged culture, which depends on this technology to generate its capitals. Linking all problems back to the blog and thus to the new network, Tamaki uses this brief but elegant character piece to highlight the complexities of the collectivism provided by digital technology and the changes it has brought to bear on cultural work. It can provide almost infinite opportunity for the auteur to flourish and realize their singular creative vision, but can also destroy these visions through its collectivism. Both the content and context of Tamaki's comics work demonstrate that the network's positive and negative qualities have a relationship of tensions, and therefore that the dialectic of comics work continues to find the nature of its specific character under the emergent landscape of digital postcapitalism as it scrapes its way out of neoliberalism.

A Handful of Digital Patrons: My Experiments in Crowdfunding

Whilst working on this chapter of my PhD and researching the opportunities available to cartoonists through crowdfunding platforms, I thought I might try and crowdfund my own work – focusing on comics, but also on my other cultural products, which include songs, poems and short fiction. The success of my early paper discussing John Allison as a *homo oeconomicus*, presented at the British Library at the International Conference of Comics and Graphic Novels in 2014, crystallised this desire, and shortly after this event I set up my own page on Patreon. I offered patrons a chance to pledge \$1, \$2, \$5 or \$10⁷⁶ per month, with more exclusive content being made available the more money was pledged. The campaign lasted less than three months before I decided to call time on it. This was largely because of failure to amass a significant number of patrons – I was making less than \$30 a month at the peak of my subscribers – but also because of the work involved in maintaining the content. I was already producing comics and music on a regular basis and I continue to do so, so I had assumed I would be able to transfer these into the Patreon programme, but I found I did not have the time or resources to create enough exclusive content to drive interest and thus to amass significant financial or cultural capital.

It was only in retrospect – and after reading Henry Jenkins' *Convergence Culture*, among the other texts cited in this chapter – that I realized that crowdfunding's ability to generate financial capital depends on an existing network being in place. This is most likely to take the form of existing cultural capital, measured in the familiar neoliberal fashion by numbers of followers on social media. Financial capital, therefore, seems largely dependent on cultural capital, and this can only be achieved with significant physical labour and hard, demoralizing comics work that recalls the

⁷⁶ The site works in American dollars regardless of where the creator is based.

caricature of Ware's 'Ruin Your Life' strip (2009). There is, however, a new element of comics work inherent in the building of networks, which are the new facilitators of cultural capital under the emergent political economy of postcapitalism and the new landscape of media convergence. Comics work now incorporates this building, which serves to continue the blurring of the lines between work and leisure and between fan and creator as this is done through activities that are cast as new forms of leisure such as interaction on social media. At the time of writing, I have almost 2,000 followers on Twitter, which is my main platform for social networking and digital interaction in this context. This could seem a wildly high number or a tragically low number depending on the context in which it is placed, though it is ten times the average (Ahmad 2015). However, this network alone is clearly not enough to drive significant financial capital for a comics project in the new landscape of entrepreneurial crowdfunding, and the extended reach provided by email mailing lists and a handful of other social platforms was not enough either.

My failed experiment in crowdfunding here illustrates the tension between auteurism and collective production and how it is recast against the backdrop of a newly networked political economy. I have a significant predilection towards auteurism, despite having fruitfully collaborated with other artists and comics workers on numerous projects. This predilection led me to believe that the strength of my work alone – my 'singular creative vision' (Smith 2004, 1342) – was enough to carry comics work alone. However, without the cultural work of others and the collective production inherent in a network of fans, patrons and consumers, I found myself bereft. This experience served to reinforce the later realisations I had around how auteurism obscures labour and my conviction that all works of art show 'signs of cooperation' (Becker 2008, 1) that are embedded into the earlier chapter of this thesis on cultural

work. However, moving on from this failure was not difficult, as the newly networked economy does provide an incredibly broad set of opportunities for comics workers to develop, and I now readily discuss the story of my failure with others as I am doing here. This could perhaps be seen as trading on Chris Ware's 'rhetoric of failure' (Ball 2010) and an entrepreneurial recasting of failure as a commodity that can be traded for capital in the comics marketplace. But significantly, I found a renewed sense of purpose in using networks, collaboration and collective production to further my own auteurist ends in comics. A year later I founded my own small press, 'Good Comics,'⁷⁷ a joint venture that will publish its first full slate of titles in November 2016. The emergent landscape of postcapitalism, whilst furthering the neoliberal drive towards self-enrichment, has moved my own comics work towards becoming newly networked and will no doubt continue to strengthen the power of this network as it has done in the cases of John Allison, Jillian Tamaki, Chris Ware and all the cartoonists examined in this thesis.

Conclusion: (Net)working with Comics

The present neoliberal political economy, at least in the Anglo-American sphere, is one based on a networked culture, driven by an almost inconceivably large amount of data and knowledge being shared. The act of sharing this knowledge can be classed as either production, consumption or both, and the two acts are less distinguishable now than in the previous capitalist economies of mercantile exchange from the which the *homo oeconomicus* (and thus the *cartoonist oeconomicus*) emerged. As identified by Jenkins and confirmed by McCloud (2014), this is due to convergence of media, but also convergence of thought, convergence of cultures, and convergence of economic models. Jenkins writes in *Convergence Culture* of 'consumption as a networked practice' (2008,

⁷⁷ Our slogan is 'our comics are good.'

234), with ‘convergence culture...enabling new forms of participation and collaboration’ (245). This chapter has demonstrated the new forms of participation and collaboration available to cartoonists, which have become central to the culture of alternative cartooning and to comics work in the contemporary present. However, I have also demonstrated the new opportunities offered by digital media, convergence and the emerging postcapitalist economy for the advancement of the self. Alternative cartoonists, still driven by auteurism even when relentlessly networked and provided with a wide range of opportunities and new revenue streams, exploit this new convergence for their own gain as the *cartoonist oeconomicus* is wont to do. Therefore, both individualist auteurism and networked collective production continue to work together as intertwining, dialectic elements of cultural work despite the upheavals of the new economy that offer ways to untangle them. Both have their place in the landscape of digital postcapitalism, and one continues to influence and drive the other.

Contemporary scholars of postcapitalism assert the brokenness and failure of neoliberalism, predicting its inevitable collapse and calling for destruction and revolution. They follow the earlier critical works of Noam Chomsky (1998), Robert McChesney (1997, 2013, 2015) and David Harvey (1991, 2007), whose surveys of neoliberalism and the political-economic landscape are unrelenting in their criticism. Jenkins, in his conclusion to *Convergence Culture*, sets himself apart from this mode of thinking by referring to Chomsky and McChesney as ‘critical pessimists’ (2008, 247) and himself as a ‘critical utopian’ in the same manner as Pierre Lévy (Jenkins 2008, 246; see also Lévy 1998). Critical pessimists, writes Jenkins, resist the opportunities offered by technological and material change, which have been facilitated by neoliberalism’s drive towards entrepreneurial individualism despite the negative economic factors that have also resulted from this dominant philosophical logic.

Jenkins, meanwhile, as a critical utopian, believes that technology offers answers and solutions to the problems of political economy. My own reasoning falls between the two, as does the contemporary *cartoonist oeconomicus*. This is exemplified here by Ware, Tamaki, O'Malley and the cartoonists analysed in the prior chapters. Critical pessimism and critical utopianism can both provide drive towards cultural change and towards the shaping of the field of alternative comics and the wider landscape, and my aim in this thesis is to understand the interplay between the two in comics, and how this affects their content and culture as exhibited in comics on digital platforms and in digital culture. The content and culture is shaped most significantly by neoliberalism and technology into a new understanding of the individual within the network, the image of which is key to the dialectic of comics work.

The individual within a network defines himself through participation, and the emergent networks of comics culture are built upon participatory culture (Jenkins 2007; Deuze 2006; Delwiche & Henderson 2013). The impact of participation and the inherent collectivism of the network is powerful, and sways the dialectic of comics work and its engagement with neoliberal commercialism. 'The power of participation,' writes Jenkins, 'comes not from destroying commercial culture but from writing over it, modding it, amending it, expanding it, adding greater diversity of perspective, and the recirculating it back into the mainstream media' (257). The postcapitalist movement spearheaded by Mason, Srnicek & Williams, Aronowitz and Sassower often leans towards disengaging with commercialism entirely through radical economic changes such as a drive for a universal basic income. There is much value in this drive, and resistance to commercialism and capitalism has been key to comics and to art and culture as a whole since the early twentieth century and through to the present day. The influence of Dick Hebdige's assessment of dominant parent cultures assimilating and

exploiting the resistance of their child cultures for commercial gain is a testament to the frequency and endurance of commercial exploitation of participation (Hebdige 1979, 1989). I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that comics work is built upon individual acts of resistance in various contexts and through various elements of the construction of comics, and the networks created by digital technology and the postcapitalist landscape are facilitators of resistance. However, they also perpetuate commercialism and the assimilation of resistance. Production and consumption are not redefined entirely by the infinite canvas of the network, but instead consumption is recast ‘as a networked practice’ (Jenkins 2008, 244). Consumption, an essential element of comics work and part of the nexus of collective production that opposes auteurism in the dialectic, thus becomes an act of individualism and upholds the neoliberal advancement of the self, despite it being part of an apparently opposing collective act of resistance.

The advancement of the self through action with the network is also a concern in contemporary literature, and thus fits into the legitimized graphic novel form’s neoliberal tendencies. ‘To be a loner,’ writes Rachel Greenwald Smith, ‘is no longer understood as the height of individual achievement. One wants to be connected, but connected in such a way that serves one’s own interests. In this model, emotion is not sublimated in favour of economic rationality [as is the case in the prevailing narratives of contemporary literature]; it is recast as a product of exchange’ (2015, 41-2). Neoliberalism, it seems, can therefore assimilate anything it wishes to and reanimate it as something subject to economic logic, the primary function of which is to advance the self through mercantile interaction and the benefits borne of human exchange and enterprise. The networks created by digital technology and its movement of the prevailing political economy into postcapitalism are subject to this as much as any other

victim of neoliberal hegemony – perhaps more so, given the prevalence of neoliberalism in the contemporary political order (Harvey 2007). Therefore, within the tension between individualism and collective production, the *homo oeconomicus* can use his entrepreneurialism to bend collective production towards individualism for personal gain.

The *cartoonist oeconomicus*, of course, exemplifies this use of the collective network for individual, auteurist gain, as this chapter's examples have demonstrated. John Allison's network consists of a significant number of social media followers, but also of consumers of merchandise, producers of fan art, editors and publishers of his collected works, and advertisers who buy space on his website, among other agents. All of them work collectively, in the sense understood by the advancing study of the culture of comics work (Johnston & Brienza 2016), to create Allison's *Bad Machinery* and *Giant Days* comics, from production through to consumption and cultural reception. However, every agent working within this collective is working for John Allison's personal gain, and he as the exemplary cartoonist *oeconomicus* exploits them in a neoliberal fashion, openly and forcefully making money from his art. Digital technology and the emerging postcapitalist economy have created the conditions for this exploitation – most notable in the new economic models available through digital crowdfunding, the newly global audience for webcomics and the potential for merchandise sales, which are newly necessary in light of digital culture's shifting of art towards content, the majority of which is expected to be consumed for free (Ginsburgh 2013). The character of the agents of Allison's network and their actions is thus uniquely postcapitalist, as the shift from art to content and the ensuing changes in production and consumption are new and unique tenets of the decline of late capitalism,

but ultimately neoliberalism and the economic man continue to exercise hegemonic dominance.



Figure 5.3: Display of *Building Stories* by Chris Ware (photo: Amazon.com)

Chris Ware's status as a *cartoonist oeconomicus* exploiting the digital landscape offers welcome complications. His work and the earlier analysis of it in this chapter tempers what might seem an embrace on my part of neoliberalism and its values, of which I remain critical without wishing to become a critical pessimist. My own struggles with comics and digital technology and resistance to the neoliberal digital networks have been noted, but ultimately I still participate and embed my comics practice within these networks in the same fashion as John Allison and Jillian Tamaki. Ware is noted, less so of late than in the earlier part of the decade, for being resistant to digital culture and for being a champion of the importance of materiality, physicality and print culture to comics and graphic novels (Irving 2012; Ball & Kuhlman 2010; Heer 2014). *Touch Sensitive* was seen as his one foray into digital comics until he ran the strip *The Last Saturday* in *The Guardian* in 2014, and he expressed in interview his assertion that comics are an 'inert' medium (Irving 2012). Inertia, stasis or non-

movement is the antithesis of the *homo oeconomicus*, who is always moving and acting in the free market economy to further their own ends. Ware's desire for inertia thus reads as a desire for comics to resist neoliberal exploitation and digital capitalism, as does his desire to remain wedded almost entirely to print cultures. However, remaining wedded to print culture and to the physical materiality of comics and graphic novels does not mean that Ware can succeed under neoliberal hegemony and in the late capitalist economy without taking on at least some of the characteristics of the *homo oeconomicus*. The economic model suggested by Nicholas Lovell (2012) and confirmed by John Allison's approach can equally apply to Ware, or indeed to any artist or content producer who uses the contemporary digital network to drive sales of a particular product and support their own economic ends. Whether the product is a physical or digital product is almost immaterial, as either way it is the digital network and the entrepreneurial exploitation of it that drives the sale of the product and thus its reception and connection with readers as consumers (Deresiewicz 2015).

Ware's box of differently-sized, interlinking comics, books, maps and pamphlets, *Building Stories* (2012), is widely regarded as his masterpiece (Worden 2012). The status of this object (shown in figure 5.3 above) as his masterpiece confirms that what compels audiences to engage with Ware's work is its physical beauty and unique materiality, as well as its compelling narrative, intricate storylines and precise, complex cartooning and visual command. Ware's engagement with digital in *Touch Sensitive* and *The Last Saturday* are therefore attempts to connect with the digital network, and they were well received in their own right as their own art objects, but the ultimate aim is to drive sales of his physical objects and to allow him to accrue both cultural and financial capital. Ware's now familiar 'rhetoric of failure' (Ball 2011) is, of course, ever-present and occurs throughout *Touch Sensitive* and *The Last Saturday*,

whose characters find themselves in perpetual states of conspicuous failure (figure 5.4, below). Similarly, Ware's lack of engagement with digital technology (he has never used social media, for example) can be read as a failure to keep up with the times and to demonstrate relevance. However, as Ball's analysis reminds us, the rhetoric of failure is a selling point, and one of the reasons for Ware's success. The rhetoric of failure, along with the digital network, engaged with or not engaged with, is therefore just another aspect of comics work that can be assimilated by neoliberalism and made to perform under economic logic. Digital culture, contemporary technology and the landscape of postcapitalism, therefore, serve to enforce individualist neoliberal hegemony, but also provide significant opportunities for resistance to it. In facilitating both of these aspects of comics work, digital culture and postcapitalism enforce the reading of comics work as dialectical, and as an exemplar of the power relations Foucault saw in fields on knowledge.

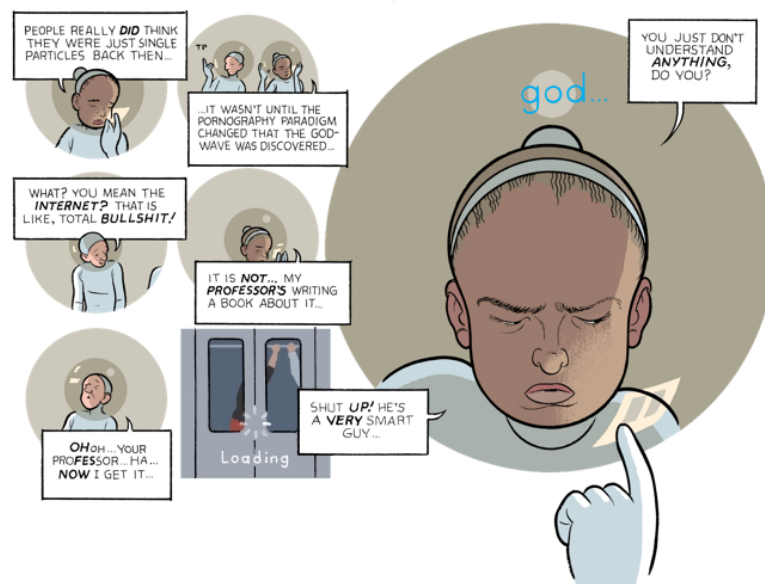


Figure 5.4: Page from 'Touch Sensitive' by Chris Ware (McSweeney's, 2011)

Conclusion

Sponsorship and Shameful Work

The Nib, an online publication collecting engaging and often politically-charged short comics run by cartoonist Matt Bors, became one of the most popular threads on blogging site Medium.com in the time it was hosted there, before it moved to a new home with online news network First Look Media in early 2016. Making great use of the immediacy of social networks and the power of the information economy (as examined in the preceding chapter), many of *The Nib*'s comics went viral and transcended the traditional audience for comics and graphic novels as they were shared across Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr. Others provoked lengthy comment, heated debate and sometimes outrage amongst the online community of cartoonists and comics critics (McDonald 2014; Spurgeon 2014). Chief among such comics was a brief one entitled *The Sponsor* by cartoonist and Centre for Cartoon Studies founder James Sturm (2014).

Following the almost-established tradition of cartoonists depicting cartoonists that has emerged throughout this thesis, *The Sponsor* depicts a young cartoonist meeting with an older one, his sponsor, searching for encouragement and help during an apparently tough time. The scene, in a generic grimy diner late at night, sees Casey, the young cartoonist, complaining about the success of a 21-year-old cartoonist, Tessa, who has amassed the cultural capital that he seems incapable of amassing himself, and who is succeeding in the new neoliberal age of measuring everything with data (in this case website traffic) in the information economy. Lines for her signings are out the door and down the street. Her next book is being published by prestigious publisher Drawn and Quarterly, she's being profiled in national newspapers and, most significantly, she has managed to secure \$350,000 in just three days of a crowdfunding campaign. All of these successes are successes within the neoliberal marketplace. Financial capital

remains the most significant, and the method of acquiring it in this case displays the entrepreneurial bent of the *homo oeconomicus*, as well as the movements of the digital postcapitalist economy of art. However, the elements of cultural capital are also significant, and are, of course, displays of the various elements of the dialectic of comics work, and here serve to create another tension – one between the success of one cartoonist and the failure of another, driven by the neoliberal cost/benefit analysis being applied to all things.

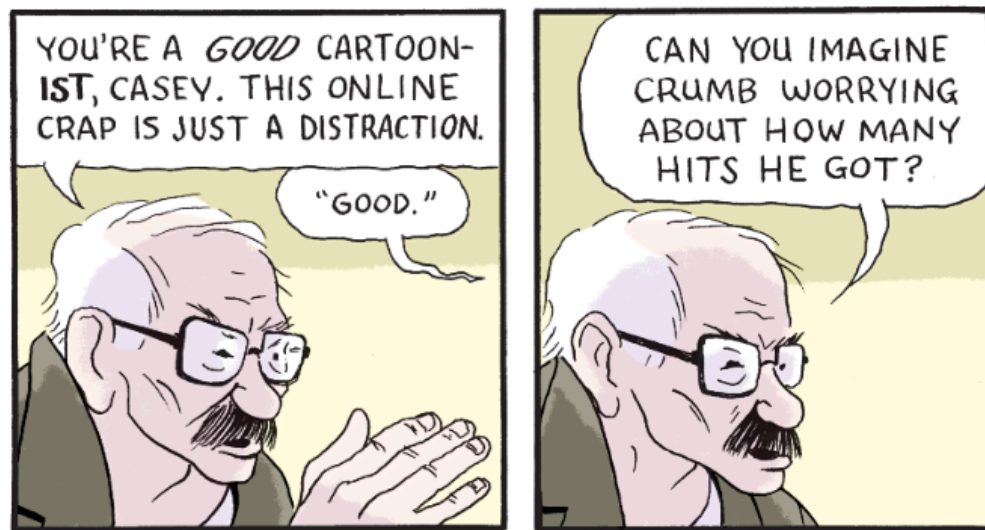


Figure 6.1. Sturm, James. 'The Sponsor.' *The Nib*, 3rd Nov 2014.

This scenario is apparent in the above exchange, in which the haggard old sponsor dismisses the digital world as 'crap' in a way that echoes the resistance to digital from some cartoonists such as Chris Ware, whose work is tied to particular materialities of print (Priego 2010). He then asks, 'can you imagine [Robert] Crumb worrying about how many hits he got?' The contrast between Crumb, the progenitor of alternative comics and the linchpin of the 1960s underground comics movement, and today's alternative cartoonists, is striking, but it here serves to make Crumb, and the fictional sponsor character, appear dated and out of touch, consistent with the dogged, wearied, haggard look Sturm has given to the sponsor character. As a result, the idea of

not caring about hits, of measuring cultural capital without concrete data, appears outmoded, and is swiftly brushed aside as the discussion turns to crowdfunding. The capital amassed by crowdfunding dwarfs all other concerns, as silence descends upon the two maligned cartoonists, defeated in numerous ways by the neoliberal free market economy in which they cannot amass capital themselves. This creates a tension that has been shown as more than commonplace in contemporary alternative comics throughout this thesis, in particular in the introduction and first chapter on comics as work, but also in the previous chapter's discussion of the extension of economic logic to all spheres (Brown 2015).

Exiting, Casey suggests his next move will be to apply for 'grad school.' Having failed to amass his desired amount of cultural and financial capital through his own comics work and despite the help of Scott McCloud, his next step is to seek institutional approval. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, however, the promises of institutional approval are likely to deliver further and greater tensions, arising from the particular character of comics work and the specific cultural space that comics and graphic novels occupy. This space is continuously shifting in its dialectical relationships with institutions and with political economy, in response to these shifts, such as crowdfunding. Similarly, the use of McCloud as a figure of importance is a significant one. Before the digital diversification and moves towards an information economy laid out in the previous chapter, an endorsement from McCloud would have been highly likely to provide enough cultural capital in and of itself to facilitate significant development in a cartoonist's career. Indeed, it may be a contributing factor to, for example, a publisher's choice to take on a debut graphic novel. It would not, of course, have been enough on its own to have changed a cartoonist like Casey's fortunes in one single sweep, but it is clear that it counts for very little in today's economic climate, as

portrayed in *The Sponsor*. The best that a highly successful cartoonist who gained much in the preceding decades' political economy (and from the genus of comics studies) can offer a young, struggling cartoonist is a little extra web traffic, and despite this seeming like a boon, the ensuing drop off in traffic after McCloud's endorsement is forgotten serves only to disappoint when it becomes part of the neoliberal cost/benefit analysis, subconsciously applied to all things. This neoliberal application is encapsulated in one panel, reduced to Casey's fraught, childlike, petulant expression as he complains about his lack of web traffic over cheap coffee in a run-down diner while his apparent rival runs a sold-out event around the corner. McCloud, along with Crumb, thereby becomes part of the old guard, and part of the portrayal of the old economics of alternative comics as being hopelessly outdated. The sponsor programme therefore becomes a sham, portraying the previous world of alternative comics as one ruined by neoliberalism and one that has moved these figures into obsolescence in the new information economy.

Thus, Casey's only chance is to seek capital in institutions, but these are part of the same nexus of slow obsolescence. If his sponsor, McCloud and his work ethic (portrayed in the comic as a hard one with regular practice and tried and tested methods) can't help Casey with his entrepreneurialism, it is unlikely that 'grad school' will either. But still, it seems to offer a chance to gain capital, so the process of obsolescence is clearly ongoing. Although neoliberalism has become hegemonic in the 21st century and dominates contemporary political, economic and cultural thought (Brown 2015; Harvey 2007; Chomsky 1998; Mason 2015), it is still a 'moving equilibrium' and hegemony must still be won (Hebdige 1979, 26).

The comic ends with Alan, the sponsor, calling his own sponsor, hunched over (recalling the familiar posture of cartoonists in self-portrayals that has recurred in the

examples used throughout this thesis) in the corner of the diner, apologizing for calling so late, but saying that he ‘need[ed] to talk to someone’ (Sturm 2014). Again, while Casey leaves to look forward, taking the initiative, looking for opportunities and being entrepreneurial at the end of the comic, Alan regresses into the outdated and failing sponsor programme, again appearing out of date and out of touch and serving to build the importance of the neoliberal entrepreneur and the engagement with the logic of the free market. This ending recalls David M. Ball’s assertion that the comics of Chris Ware, standing in for alternative comics as a whole, are beset with a conscious ‘rhetoric of failure,’ the reward of which for the reader is ‘the ability to perceive his work as an extension of a long literary tradition and as a theorization of that tradition’s ambivalences and anxieties’ (Ball 2010, 58). Ambivalence and anxiety are, as this thesis has demonstrated, defining characteristics of comics work, and although they are here associated with dying traditions (the literary tradition that influences Ware functioning in a similar fashion), they are not entirely shaken off by the meritocratic entrepreneurial freedom promised by the neoliberal future.

The Sponsor stirred up heated debate around Sturm’s intentions, generational differences, economics and gender in the online comics community (Bors 2014). Most agreed that the piece was not endorsing a jealous, malignant approach to other cartoonists, and that there was an element of satire to it (Spurgeon 2014). Many were rightly concerned about the implications of sexism in the gendered characterization (McDonald 2014). A conversation between two self-conscious, bitter male cartoonists about how a young female cartoonist has become successful cannot avoid the facts in comics history that the labour of female workers (such as Vijaya Iyer) has been erased and obscured throughout it (Chute 2010; Robbins 2013). This major imbalance is now finally being redressed through the opportunities of the information economy and

digital democratization of production, distribution and consumption (Priego 2010; Mason 2015), but misogyny and gender tensions do persist in both mainstream and alternative comics.⁷⁸ Despite the conversation almost reaching a consensus around the comic's hyperbolic and satirical nature, many respondents noted that the bitterness and frustration of Casey's character was, for all his poison, easily relatable for almost any cartoonist working today outside of the corporate bullpens of Marvel and DC.

As comics work is driven, at least in part, by neoliberalism's promise that reward will come of being an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Foucault 2010, 278), when one cartoonist who is working hard and being entrepreneurial sees another receiving the apparent reward for similar or less entrepreneurial work, bitterness will arise. This emotion is a natural product of the tensions that neoliberalism here creates, symptomatic of the wider tensions inherent in the dialectic of comics work and in the art form of comics as a whole – the now-familiar idea of the 'art of tensions' once again defining cartoonists and the culture of alternative comics (Hatfield 2006). Neoliberalism, therefore, creates yet another tension here. It is a tension between various cartoonists as some succeed in the free market and others fail, according to the nature of the machinations of late capitalism (Mason 2015; Williams 1977), which also perpetuates the idea that failure is the fault of the individual, hence Casey's particular dismay at his own lack of capital and Tessa's apparently unfair accumulation of that which should be his. Comics work is here, therefore, defined by a tension arising from the deep unfairness of the machinations of late capitalism and the empty promises of the free market economy, the hegemony of which asserts its own logic. Failure, therefore, is illogical and shameful, and thus cartooning – with its rhetoric of failure – becomes a

⁷⁸ The intersection between comics studies and gender studies is also a burgeoning area of study and offers further understanding of how neoliberalism permeates all spheres of existences and all spaces. A discussion of gender, neoliberalism and the dialectic of comics work was beyond the scope of this thesis, but I intend to address it in future works.

shameful act or, in the words of Daniel Worden, a ‘shameful art’ (2006). In *The Sponsor* and the ensuing online commentary from the comics community, therefore, comics work becomes shameful work, even whilst being something to be aspired to in the mode of other forms of cultural work.

James Sturm did not respond directly to the criticism and appraisal of *The Sponsor*, but instead told Tom Spurgeon he wanted the work to ‘speak for itself’ (Spurgeon 2014). However, Sturm did address it in his own unique way by providing an expanded version of the comic, without commentary, for Drawn and Quarterly’s 25th Anniversary anthology book (Devlin 2015), an 800-page collection of D&Q’s most significant cartoonists’ works interspersed with nostalgic prose about the company’s history and critical takes on the comics within, along with general commentary on the culture of alternative comics since D&Q’s inception in 1990. The expanded version of *The Sponsor* follows Casey through various depressing Chris Ware-esque failures, not just in his cartooning but in his life. The second episode is ironically titled ‘let’s keep trying,’ which refers to Casey’s cartooning career but also to his marriage, which is breaking down as he hits his mid-thirties, his face already lined with age. Significantly, in the conversation with the marriage counsellor, Casey says ‘my work is who I am’ (Devlin 2015, 183), which echoes James Kochalka’s self-driven ethos as outlined in my first chapter.

In the next episode, Casey finds that Tessa has drawn inspiration from himself and Alan, his sponsor, for her highly successful fictional graphic novel *The Second Mouse gets the Cheese*, Casey’s assessment of which is ‘this is so fucking good I am going to cry’ (Devlin 2015, 184). His jealousy, begotten of the neoliberal free market, clearly shows no signs of abating, even despite his subsequent appearance on a packed comics panel at the convention SPX, at which he deliberately avoids a question about

Tessa's portrayal of him, his shame getting the better of him. So far, so contemporary, so familiar. Indeed, the dialectic of comics work we have come to know through this thesis again makes itself apparent. The comic concludes with a look into the future in a fashion that confirms some of the conjectures made about comics, innovation, digital technology and postcapitalism in my previous chapter.

Twelve years after the previous episode, we find Casey visibly aged, around fifty years old, working with his hands up and his body bent on holographic touch screens of bright, flat colours that recall the works of David Mazzuchelli and the others highlighted in my third chapter, in which colour stands in for elements of the narrative. In this case, panel borders are lost and flat colours abound to signify the sharp starkness of the future of cartooning, which is no longer cartooning but 'narrative architecture.' Casey answers his phone 'Casey Fordsman, narrative architect' (Devlin 2015, 186), an unfamiliar but entirely believable term that associates more readily with manual labour and with physical work than the term 'cartoonist,' emphasizing the utilitarian nature of the neoliberal free market, allowed free rein to exert its hegemony even more as the future decades play out. Hearing the news that Alan has died, Casey decides not to go to the memorial service because 'he would have wanted me to keep working' (186). This is a somewhat bleak and striking reminder that comics work is work, and that Alan, despite his antiquity, pushed the neoliberal idea of the *cartoonist oeconomicus* onto Casey so hard that it stuck, and resulted in his apparent career as a narrative architect, not without taking a physical and emotional toll on him as comics work is wont to do.

Finally, seven years after Alan's memorial, we find Casey dealing with a tedious corporate client. It is a scenario in which comics work is thus reduced to mercenary, shackled, un-entrepreneurial regular labour, the *homo oeconomicus* controlled and restrained by corporate capitalism even as such a system promises individual reward

(Chomsky 1998). The comic ends, ironically and self-consciously, with a call from Drawn and Quarterly, asking Casey to contribute to a 30th anniversary anthology celebrating Tessa's graphic novel, the proceeds of which will go towards her medical expenses – clearly, even 40 years into the future healthcare is still a commodity to be traded on the free market and a major factor in the precarity of cultural work (Brienza 2013). In the final panel, an almost-smiling Casey looks at his work and remarks 'I'm finally going to be published by Drawn and Quarterly' (Devlin 2015, 188). This one panel encapsulates the dialectic of comics work and allows us a glimpse into the future it creates and the promises it offers. The institutional approval Casey sought so long ago is finally his, but only after years of backbreaking, lonely labour and numerous struggles and failures in the neoliberal marketplace. And after all, being published by D&Q at the late stage of his career will not change his work as a narrative architect, which is what comics work will become as it is taken over fully by the insistence of the neoliberal free market and its pervasive logic. This technological and cultural change forces the comics worker to keep working, for an eventually small reward that comes not of their own entrepreneurial qualities but from the work of others and thus from collective production – in this case, the collective work of D&Q and a number of cartoonists on a hypothetical anthology. The only way Casey's individualist dreams can come true is through D&Q publishing him in an anthology, and therein lies the central defining tension of the dialectic of comics work – between the individual and the collective.

Good Comics and the Power of the Small Press

In 2015 I co-founded ‘Good Comics’⁷⁹ with my friend and comics collaborator Samuel C. Williams, agreeing to bring ‘Good Comics’ into existence as a joint venture without having ever met Sam in person. We connected over Twitter, mutually appreciating each other’s comics and shared interests, and thought that working together on collective comics work would be more beneficial than continuing to self-publish alone under our own names. What Good Comics aims to be, and what it currently is, is somewhat amorphous. If we had significant financial backing and were publishing comics regularly, we would perhaps call ourselves a publisher, as publishing is our aim and our chief activity. However, I usually describe Good Comics loosely as a collective, as there are numerous other such groups in British comics that variously publish comics, foster collaborative work, organize events and publish anthologies, such as Team Girl Comic, Comic Book Slumber Party, Great Beast,⁸⁰ Off Life, Dirty Rotten Comics, Laydeez do Comics, Treehouse and Do Gooder Comics.

Whatever the core activity, groups such as these are carrying out comics work in the broad sense of inclusive cultural work defined in Chapter 1, and cultural capital increases (in British alternative comics, at least) as a result, as contributions are made to the growth of comics as an art form. However, we do wish to reach a point at which we will be able to describe ‘Good Comics’ as a small press and/or a publisher, by definition of publishing being our main activity and our output moving beyond just comics by Sam and I (and our *Dead Singers Society* anthology zines). Similar comics publishers

⁷⁹ The name ‘Good Comics’ is something of an in-joke. While we were trying to think of a name I told Sam about a time I’d heard someone shout out the bizarre heckle ‘your band is good’ at a concert, and he immediately responded with ‘Good Comics. That’s our name.’ I liked it immediately, and it has stuck. In a way, it suggests the dialectic of comics work – the neoliberal push of the self tempered by collective modesty and the reality of the free market in which the self operates. Our aspirations, or so it seems, are to make good comics – not great comics, not astounding comics, not exceptional comics – because this is the best we can do in the conditions of the challenging political economy in which we exist.

⁸⁰ Sadly now defunct.

include Avery Hill and Koyama Press, who publish selectively and emphasise curation and artist mentorship, fostering collaboration within the art form of comics and emphasizing the nature of these kind of relationships as cultural work. This reinforces the idea of comics work as a particularly collaboration-oriented form of cultural work and pushing the importance of collective production in contrast to the entrepreneurial model. The *cartoonist oeconomicus* can undertake numerous activities that constitute comics work on their own, with the neoliberal information economy providing significant opportunities to gain capital. However, throughout this thesis the entrepreneurial worker's ability to create and accrue capital has been shown to be severely limited by other factors, tied up in the emergent dialectic of comics work. All examples of cartoonists given in thesis, however entrepreneurial they have been shown to be, have been unable to get far without the advancement offered by collective production and co-operation (Becker 2008).

Unsurprisingly, I have found that my own work as a cartoonist and my own attempts to carry out fulfilling and valuable comics work have come up against the same challenges and restrictions. Since founding Good Comics I have found much greater success in my comics publishing, measurable in various ways and with various data, consistent with the neoliberal cost/benefit analysis and extension of economic logic to all spheres. Having exhibited previously at small events such as zine fairs, markets and local comic conventions and never having sold enough comics to cover my own modest costs of exhibiting or been able to exhibit at the larger fairs, as part of Good Comics I was able to exhibit as Good Comics, together with Sam, at Thought Bubble in November 2015, the largest and most popular comic convention in the UK (Akhtar 2015). Over the course of the two days of comics sales we took over £200, which covered the cost of our exhibit (transport, sustenance and exhibiting fees) as well

as the cost of two of our short print runs (50 copies each of a 28-page comic). Many other exhibitors were also collectives with similar approaches, and the benefits of a collective approach to exhibiting – still, even despite the opportunities available to digital entrepreneurs explored in the fourth chapter of this thesis, a key part of the infrastructure of the political economy of alternative comics – are clear. Two or more people allow for a greater network of connections to people, spaces, technologies and different forms of capital, and the network has been proven to be incredibly important to the entrepreneurial pursuit of capital under neoliberalism (Jenkins 2015; Greenwald Smith 2015; Lovell 2014).

Therefore, Good Comics' activity as an entity is collective, mutually beneficial cultural work, but it is done for auteurist, individualist, neoliberal ends. Ultimately, Sam and I both approach Good Comics as a vehicle for our own art, the ultimate aim of which is to publish works under our own names and to gain the ensuing cultural capital in the sphere of alternative comics. Our conscious approach to publishing expresses well the dialectic of comics work, and from my own perspective, adds value to the definition of the dialectic. The inclusion of my own practice and experience in this thesis, therefore, ties in to the argument and overall assessment of alternative comics. In conversation with fellow scholars whose theses on comics have been practice-based their assessments of their own work have also reached similar conclusions about the dialectical nature of comics work: that we work within the constraints of neoliberal political economy, often engaging in collective production, to create alternative comics with a specific character. As such, my inclusion of practice here comes full circle to demonstrate the significance of the neoliberal individual and to acknowledge that the *cartoonist oeconomicus*' definition extends beyond cartoonists to include scholars,

critics and all working within comics to any degree – which is, of course, the inclusive definition of cultural work advanced by Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011).

Good Comics is, however, looking to expand and to become a larger scale publishing operation with various cartoonists' work being printed and distributed under the Good Comics name. To this end, we added a third member, Pete Hindle, in the spring of 2016. We have assembled a roster of cartoonists and are currently seeking funding and carrying out research into publishing strategies, based on our current knowledge of the infrastructure of alternative comics, as laid out in this thesis. Whatever becomes of these attempts, we are engaging in significant comics work and our labour will prove its dialectical nature. Good Comics is both a vehicle for our self-interest and entrepreneurial desire to amass capital, and a collective attempt to encourage other cartoonists to do the same. The knowledge of alternative comics I have gained from working on this thesis has made a significant contribution to this, and vice versa, and thus, comics scholarship is shown to be comics work.

I am still, however, not using colour in my own comics, apart from on covers and promotional materials. This, therefore, reinforces the assertion I make in my third chapter that colour is an elemental tool inaccessible to many alternative cartoonists, but one to be aspired to and to be sought by entrepreneurial means. Should we sell a great number of comics and amass some financial capital through our publishing activity under the Good Comics banner, my intention is to use this capital to buy some time in which to create comics of my own in full colour. However, working with Sam has given me the opportunity to do some work in colour and to make further strides in this area, roughly in line with the idea of progression in colour for alternative cartoonists as theorised in my third chapter. The process for our forthcoming comic *Ordinary Folk* is a written script passed back and forth, followed by a panel breakdown passed back and

forth until agreed upon, followed by pencils and inks by Sam, followed by touching up, digital colours and final adjustments made by me. The complexity of this division of labour exemplifies the collaborative nature of comics work and how, even when collaborative, it can still fulfil the auteurist author-function (Green 2001; Brienza and Johnston 2016). The cover of the comic will simply read ‘Johnston & Williams,’ leaving the actual division of labour obscured as the labour behind the other comics examined in this thesis has been, exemplifying the dialectic of comics work and reinforcing these aspects of collective production that drive the growth of cultural capital in alternative comics.

Thus, my own practice as a cartoonist (and indeed, a *cartoonist oeconomicus*) here demonstrates the importance of practice to comics scholars and exemplifies the unique relationship shared between comics practice and comics scholarship. Comics scholars’ cultural work is a significant part of the dialectic of comics work, and makes a significant contribution to the recent ongoing growth in comics. It is my hope that, following this thesis and similar academic works in which practice is reflected in scholarship without a fully practice-based approach being taken (Brienza and Johnston 2016; Miller 2014), the future of comics scholarship will see an even closer link between practice and scholarship, as the mutual benefits to both the medium of comics and the growing field of comics studies are clear.

One small step for Chris Ware

Despite having suggested in 2012 that he had very little desire to continue working with digital formats after producing his iPad-only comic *Touch Sensitive* (nycgraphicnovelists.com, 2012), Chris Ware returned to a digital format of sorts in 2014 with a graphic novella entitled *The Last Saturday*. The 54-page comic was published in instalments on the *Guardian* website, as well as being featured as a

centerfold spread in the *Observer's* Sunday magazine. Fulfilling his earlier promise that any of his work in digital would make specific use of the platform in question, Ware's pages of *The Last Saturday* published online allowed zooming in to a high resolution by hovering the mouse over the comic, bringing a small element of interactivity whilst retaining what he describes as the essential 'inertia' of the medium (nycgraphicnovelists.com, 2012) that makes it comics and not something else entirely.

As I have shown throughout, and as demonstrated by Beaty (2012, 224), Ball and Kuhlman (2010, xviii) and others, Ware is undoubtedly one of the most successful cartoonists working today and he has amassed a large amount of capital, both economic and cultural. As such, it is more than appropriate to end this thesis as it opened – with a brief examination of one of Ware's exemplary comics. In terms of the various areas examined in this thesis that complicate and define the dialectical nature of comics work – approaching comics as work; art institutions and legitimization; the use of or lack of colour; and the entrepreneurial use of digital technology and engagement with the global economy's moves towards postcapitalism – Ware manages to use all such elements to his advantage. Despite this success and apparent transcending of the dialectic, however, Ware seems to be unable to resist portraying cartooning as a low and maligned art form in the same fashion as he has done throughout his career.

The Last Saturday follows ten-year-old science-lover and cosmicist Putnam Gray as he navigates the challenges of school and childhood friendships, wondering all the while how to escape the planet and rocket into space. Nothing about the content or the story betrays anxiety about cartooning or comics as an art form, and this element of Ware's earlier work is noticeably absent from his more recent works at the time of

writing.⁸¹ However, there is one panel (Figure 6.2, below) that sneaks in the seemingly irresistible joke about cartooning. Putnam spends several panels imagining his magnum opus and the format it might take. Hidden away, seen only through the asterisk, the idea of his work being delivered in comic strip format runs along the bottom of the panel, swimming in the comic's gutter. Interestingly, however, the double asterisk leads to a second note at the bottom of the page which reads 'I don't believe in God' (2014, 4).



Figure 6.2. Ware, Chris. 'The Last Saturday.' *Guardian.com*, 25th Sept 2014. Page 4.

The joke, therefore, is slightly tempered by Ware's characteristic nihilism and by Putnam's cosmicism and provokes dialectical thinking. How, after all, can Putnam ask for help from God to stop his work being made as comics when he doesn't believe in God? This ensuing thought is a small and yet significant reminder of the dialectical nature of comics work, and the persistence of the elements of the dialectic which complicate and confine the capital ensuing from comics as an art form, even whilst facilitating and contributing to comics' exponential growth in size, profile and

⁸¹ Ware's forthcoming graphic novel collecting the ongoing narrative of his Rusty Brown character, who has featured heavily in the ongoing *ACME Novelty Library* series, is likely to contradict this to some degree as Rusty Brown is a comic collector. His portrayal deals with the stereotypes surrounding collectors.

legitimacy concurrent with the decades of the neoliberal era. The political and economic constraints of neoliberalism, therefore, create the conditions for comics to rise and for stars like Ware to shine, and produce the particular character or ‘specificity’ (Hebdige 1979, 80) of comics work that I have advanced throughout this thesis. It seems comics will, at least for the foreseeable neoliberal future, always remain an art of tensions (Hatfield 2006), and even the most successful of cartoonists will find themselves tempered by them. As a consequence, the alternative cartoonist is likely to be unable, for some time at least, to fully break away from that idea and from the image of the cartoonist as a broken figure, bent over his drawing table, exhibiting backbreaking and unfulfilling comics work, the comics themselves becoming tensions, drawn.

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