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Digital Comics and the Evolution of a Medium Keynote Analysis

Almost everything around us can be considered media. Prior to taking Literature and Media Studies, I had never really thought of that. Only a few weeks into the class, I began thinking about how I interact with the various forms of media I consume in my day-to-day life, whether that be the podcast I listen to walking around on campus, the video game I play on the weekends, or the MCAT books that have seemingly taken me hostage. As a result, Marshall McLuhan's concept of "hot" and "cold" media grabbed my attention as it manages to categorize media sources based on the level of interaction they require from their audience. McLuhan defines a cool medium as "high in participation or completion by the audience," and a hot medium as one that is "therefore, low in participation" (31). The concept of a medium demanding a certain level of effort from the audience is one that I remember hearing constantly in my Comics and Graphic Narratives class almost a year ago. Since then, I have become a moderate consumer of comic books and have purchased and read many of these books in a digital format. Having spent minimal time talking about digital comics in ENGL 4896, I decided to analyze their impact on the comics medium as a whole and how they vary in the level of reader participation they demand in comparison to their print counterparts.

In order to compare and contrast the temperatures of print and digital comics, it is important to first define a comic and understand the elements that contribute to the temperature. In his comics-format book, *Understanding Comics*, comics scholar Scott McCloud defines

comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in viewer” (9). McCloud explains that this very specific definition is necessary as it separates the comics format from other media that share similarities such as animation, which is also comprised of images in deliberate sequence. A standard comic is composed of numerous panels, the individual frames of the work. These panels are typically viewed from left to right and top and bottom. The space in between each panel has been referred to as the “gutter.” The “line” is what comics scholars refer to as the stroke of an artist. This may include the style with which they draw their art, their lettering style, the shape of their speech bubbles, etc. The line varies in order to evoke specific response in the reader. A soft, curvy line, for example, may evoke a more whimsical scene than one that is sharp and heavy. Finally, speech bubbles serve the function of thought and/or sound (McCloud 63).

The elements of a comic all work synergistically with the reader to develop a unique experience. The comics format operates on a concept known as closure: readers are seeing parts but perceiving the whole (McCloud 63). Because comics consist of a number of static panels, there is not motion, time or sound for the human mind and eye to take in. We must look at a speech bubble and imagine sound. We must look at two panels and fill in the motion happening in the gutter and the time passing from one panel to the next. Perceiving the whole, requires a significant amount of reader participation, which is why McLuhan defines comics as a cool medium: “The modern comic strip and comic book, provide very little data about any particular moment in time, or aspect in space of an object. The viewer or reader is compelled to participate in completing and interpreting the few hints provided by the bounding lines” (178). Thinking back to all the comics that I have read, art style and varying panel transitions certainly lead to a range of coolness, but comics are no doubt a cool medium.

Reflecting on my own experiences, I believe that outside of reading the actual comic, the process of finding and purchasing a print comic also demands a high level of reader participation. It is not out of the ordinary for one to go to a comic book shop, become overwhelmed with the amount of choices, ask for help from an employee and then finally decide on a purchase thirty minutes after they start looking. Comic books, especially the super-hero genre which is composed of numerous overlapping story arcs and characters, can be incredibly confusing for the first-time reader.

Digital comics, in favor of convenience, have sought to remove some of the complexity that comes with finding and reading comics. In doing so, however, they have warmed up the medium by removing some of the reader participation demanded from printed works. As the internet has become a larger part of our human experience, digital comics have taken a large share of the market from their print counterparts. Digital comic distribution comes in many forms: “Netflix” style models such as Marvel Unlimited and Comixology Unlimited, online marketplaces such as the Marvel Digital Comic Shop and Comixology Marketplace, self-published on social media such as Instagram, and self-published webcomics such as “Cyanide and Happiness.” These formats have allowed comic readership to grow as it is now easier than ever to pick up and read a comic strip or comic book.

The effort to make comics accessible has resulted in e-readers including what is called a “guided view.” In order to make comics readable on small smart phone screens and tablets, the “guided view” chooses to zoom in on individual panels and even portions of panels in order to focus the reader’s attention on one thing at a time. While this has made comics easier to consume for beginners and those who choose to read on a small device, the “guided view” has warmed up the medium by deemphasizing the space between the panels. By removing the gutter from the

reader's view, the comic no longer demands the reader to fill in this empty space. This results in a completely different reading experience with less of a focus on the unseen motion occurring on the page. This phenomena of removing the gutter can also be seen by some comics artists who self-publish their work on Instagram. Accommodating to small devices, creators will publish their panels in a slideshow format so the reader can focus on one image at a time.

In displays more extreme than the guided view, technology has resulted in the evolution of comics to the point where they no longer fit McCloud's definition of a comic. The internet is full of innovations, some of which are very entertaining, such as the insertion of moving images, the insertion of sound and comics that have been animated. While these may not be called comics anymore because they are not static images, they still come from the result of heating up the comics medium. These works are stripped away of the closure that defines the comics format.

Outside of the actual reading experience, the process of finding and purchasing a digital comic is typically much less demanding on the reader than its print counterpart. Online comics platforms allow comics to be sorted based on a number of factors such as genre, price, rating, etc. These websites can also make recommendations based on prior purchases and allow readers to be notified when a new work is released. In the unique case of a comic being published on a platform such as Instagram, a comic can be effortlessly placed in the reader's social media feed if they choose to follow the comics creator.

The ease of accessibility of comics has also increased substantially in the wake of the rising popularity of streaming services such as Netflix and Hulu. Comics distributors have also chosen to adopt this model in order to bring a higher volume of readers. By allowing readers to pay a flat price for a huge library instead of having to purchase individual issues or volumes, the

distributor offers the reader significant monetary savings. The comics on these platforms, like most digital works are then available to view on almost all of the reader's devices. This, alongside the other quality of life issues present in the digital format allow the reader to enjoy comics without having to do a lot of the work that normally comes with consuming the medium.

Regardless of whether it is in the print or digital format, any work that fits the definition of a comic results in the experience of a cool medium. While the digital format is warmer due to possibly less reader involvement when finding, purchasing and reading the comic, even a digital comic requires readers to perceive the whole despite only seeing parts. Ultimately, a person's choice between print and digital comics comes down to whether they desire authenticity or convenience. I, personally, consume both for the pros that come with each. Print comics come with a sense of value and satisfaction upon collecting. The amazing artwork in these books is best appreciated when it is physically printed. Dr. Pizzino will tell you that the required coordination between the pages and our eyes results in a much richer experience. Most importantly, aside from these points, is that comics shops are important businesses that should be supported. Alternatively, warmer digital comics are cheaper, purchased more easily, and read on many devices. The popularity of digital media has certainly led to the evolution of comics and it is exciting to think about where it will go next.

Works Cited

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. William Morrow, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. Routledge, 2001.