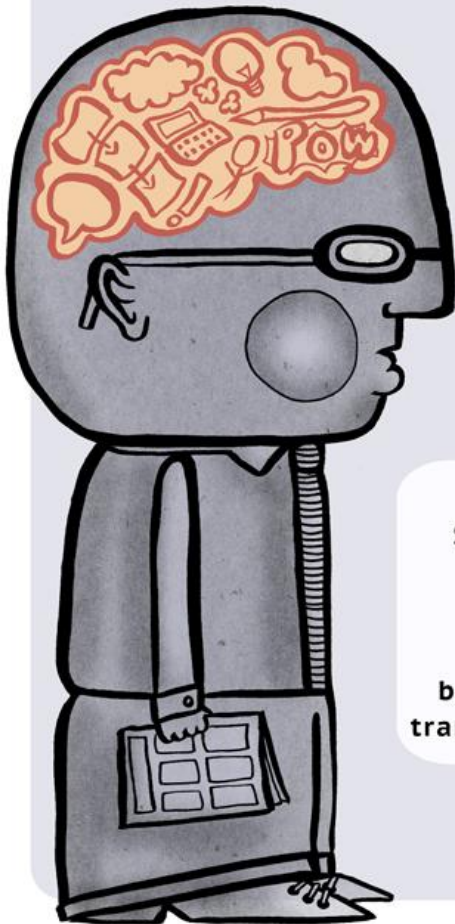COMICA SYMPOSIUM 2012

TRANSITIONS 3

MAPPING NEW DIRECTIONS IN COMICS STUDIES

A one-day symposium promoting new research on comics/comix/ manga/bandes dessinées and other forms of sequential art .

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:
Dr. Julia Round
(Bournemouth University)
and Dr. Chris Murray
(University of Dundee),
editors of Studies in Comics

RESPONDENT:
Dr. Roger Sabin
(University of the Arts, London)

WHEN?
Saturday November 3rd 2012
WHERE?
Birkbeck College, London
FREE to attend,
but please register by emailing
transitions.symposium@gmail.com

UEA
University of East Anglia

Birkbeck
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Transitions 3 is part of Comica 2012, the London International Comics Festival, and organised in association with Birkbeck, University of London, the School of Film and Television Studies and the School of American Studies at the University of East Anglia, Studies in Comics, European Comic Art, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, the Contemporary Fiction Seminar and The Comics Grid.

TRANSITIONS 3 PROGRAMME

0930-1000   **REGISTRATION**

1000-1015   **WELCOME (Room B.36)**

1015-1115   <u>**KEYNOTE LECTURE**</u> **– Room B.36**
Dr. Julia Round (Bournemouth University) and Dr. Chris Murray (University of Dundee), editors of *Studies in Comics*: "'Meanwhile, in the Batcave Under the Ivory Towers': Comics Scholarship and the Academy; or, Scott McCloud Ate My Hamster"

This talk will explore some of the challenges and opportunities that face comic scholars at the moment. Drawing on the keynotes' experiences, it will examine the challenges of teaching comics in relation to debates about disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, the emergence of a critical canon, the implications of this, and the relationship of comics scholarship to the rest of the Academy. Particular attention will be given to the experience of setting up and running a comics journal (Studies in Comics) and various international conferences, and to the issues that arise when responding to the imperatives of the REF and the AHRC. Other factors, such as networking, grant applications, and managing the media reaction to comics scholarship, will be discussed.

1115-1125   **BREAK**

1125-1240   <u>**PANEL 1**</u>: Image & Narrative (Chair: Ann Miller) – **Room B.36**

John Miers (Central St. Martin's, University of the Arts London): "Comics Authorship and the Relations Between Visual Form and Narrative Content"

Paul Davies (University of Sussex): "'Animating' the Narrative in Abstract Comics"

Federico Pagello (King's College London): "The Cinematic Superhero: Comic Book Imagination and the Aesthetic Regime"

1240-1330   **LUNCH** (*own arrangements*)

1330-1450   PARALLEL PANELS

PANEL 2: Contextual Convergences (Chair: Ernesto Priego) – **Room B.36**

Paul Williams (University of Exeter): "Art Spiegelman and J. B. Rund: The Making and Marketing of 'Adult Comics' in the 1970s"

Caroline Dahl (University of Oxford): "Based on a true story: Adopting Sequential Art for Science and Technology Communication"

PANEL 3: Politics & Representation (Chair: Tony Venezia) – **Room B.30**

Louisa Buck (Brighton University): "The Boulder of Sisyphus in British Political Cartoons"

Harriet Earle (Keele University): "Traumatic Representation and 9/11 in *American Widow*"

Jonathan W. Gray (The City University of New York): "Representing Revolt in Graphic Media: Magdy El Shafee, Martin Luther King, Jr and the Arab Spring"

1450-1520   BREAK (Tea & Coffee) – **Room B.02**

1520-1700   PANEL 4: Imagined Communities: Culture & Identity (Chair: Jason Dittmer) – **Room B.36**

Adam Sherif (University of Lincoln) – "The Duality of 1940s Wonder Woman Comics: The War Heroine in Whose Culture Men Do Not Feature"

Daniel Marrone (Central St. Martins, University of the Arts London): "Seth's Historiographic Metafiction: Forging Canadian Histories"

Simon Turner (Birkbeck, University of London): "Japan Online: Ethnic Identity, Culture and Race in *Yaoi* Manga Fan Websites"

1700-1800   RESPONDENT'S REMARKS / ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION – **Room B.36**

Roger Sabin(UAL), Chris Murray & Julia Round(StiC), Paul Gravett (Comica), Ian Hague (Comics Forum), Ernest Priego (Comics Grid), Tony Venezia (Transitions, The Contemporary Fiction Seminar)

1800-1900   WINE RECEPTION – Room B.02

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Louisa Buck (Brighton University) – "The Boulder of Sisyphus in British Political Cartoons"

Considering ideas of Intertextuality and Theories of Parody (L Hutcheon 2000), this paper will look at the utilization of classical adaptation in British political cartoons with a case study of the Myth of Sisyphus. The myth was chosen because the image can be understood without any

previous knowledge, thus making it more accessible to a contemporary audience. However, acknowledging the demographics these cartoons are directed at, sited within the British broadsheet papers, (*The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent* and the *Financial Times*), any assumptions made by the commissioning editors and cartoonists would assume a certain cultural background and education and would therefore expect different levels of understanding, connotations and interpretations to be derived from the image/text. The practice element of my research is exploring how images can be adapted to change meaning whilst remaining true to the core ideas. As a denotation the image suggests 'burden'.

Circumstances and the perceived materiality of the subject: The size and weight of the boulder, the gradient of the slope, the age of Sisyphus and the weather, all contribute to the extent of the burden. What the boulders becomes, what it weighs and even the sex of Sisyphus, (the suffragettes adapted the myth to illustrate their struggle), all change the nature of the burden and indicate the problem being addressed.

The text: surrounding news stories, (recent financial events in Greece for example), and eventual outcomes all contribute to the nature of Sisyphus's burden and the extent of its futility.

Readers familiar with Camus, "Myth of Sisyphus' may be aware of the opportunities Camus explored in regard to hope and respite and man's absurd cycle within the context of the narrative. Embracing the futility of life and the moments of reflection offered when the boulder topples over the tip of the mountain, whether Sisyphus strolls down after it, runs to keep up, or momentarily rests, refers to acts of respite and contemplation.

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A. Caroline E. Dahl (University of Oxford) – "Based on a true story: Adopting Sequential Art for Science and Technology Communication"

"*What men are poets who can speak of Jupiter if he were like a man, but if he is an immense spinning sphere of methane and ammonia must be silent?*" –Richard Feynman

Science is not traditionally thought of as closely associated with art. In fact, many scientists would go a long way to draw a line between scientific and artistic disciplines. Yet most scientific research has components that require pictorial abstraction. In fact, today's scientific journals employ design teams to give research articles an artistic edge, and authors compete with their artistic renditions for the covers of respectable magazines such as *Science* and *EMBO*. The prospect of depicting scientific ideas and technology using a sequence of artistic abstractions is therefore not improbable, and is in fact already realised.

This paper looks at the present-day use of comics to communicate science to both scientists and the general public. The last decade has seen several prominent examples of sequential art in science, both peer-reviewed and underground. *Nature*, one of the most respectable science journals, took the ground-breaking decision to publish an introduction to synthetic biology in comics format (Endy *et al*., 2005). In the same decade, the critically acclaimed *Logicomix* traced

the life of Bertrand Russell and the foundations of mathematics (Doxiadis *et al*., 2009). More recent still is *Science Tales* by Darryl Cunningham (2012). I will also discuss less-known venues for comics adaptations of science and technology, such as the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry's student cartoon competition and the University of Oxford science magazine, for which I draw the Research Comic in close collaboration with other local researchers. As a scientist rather than a comics scholar, I will give a scientist's view of such recent developments, and of my own experience with adapting cutting-edge research for sequential arts.

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Paul Davies (University of Sussex) – "'Animating' the Narrative in Abstract Comics"

How can one *read* an abstract graphic narrative? Under what conditions do we cease to view a set of images as static representations, or as marks on paper existing for their own sake, and begin to read them as the *story* of a changing world in motion, or even invest them with impetus, emotions and desires?

In this paper I will explore the ways in which readers can make sense of abstract comics. The notion of an *abstract* graphic narrative seems to be a contradiction in terms: how can something be non-representational, and also be a *narrative*, a category which seems to presuppose representations of characters, settings and events? When confronted with these visual texts, readers will have to seek out and create such 'actants' and 'existents' from the material abstract comics offer, if the text is to warrant its status as narrative.

The paper will use a number of exemplar stories from Andrei Molotiu's 2009 collection *Abstract Comics* to explore the process of reading these image texts. It will use ideas from narratology and philosophy of consciousness to help outline some of the ways we can 'animate' the static images we see across the sequence of panels, in which we recognise and reconstitute persistent entities, bringing a narrative life to the apparently inert marks on the comics page. I will explore the limits of readers' ability to apply this process and comment on its relevance to more mainstream graphic narrative in general.

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Harriet EH Earle (Keele University) – "Traumatic Representation and 9/11 in *American Widow*"

This paper will look at Alissa Torres' 2009 comic *American Widow*. Torres' book traces the story of her experiences as a pregnant widow in the aftermath of 9/11, her husband being killed in the towers' collapse.

Psychiatrist Judith Herman writes that traumatic memories 'lack verbal narrative and are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images'. Because of this, comics is a particularly interesting form for representing traumatic events. It is my contention that comics is developing

its own series of methods for representing the traumatic, as literature has done, that mimic the traumatic experience and use the symptoms of trauma as their basis. Though this cannot be a regimented series of techniques – the nature of trauma itself precludes this – there are some recognisable methods at play in comics that depict traumatic events that I wish to define as techniques of 'traumatic representation'.

This paper will be a close reading of *American Widow*'s fourth chapter, the section of the comic that deals specifically with the Towers' collapse, which the author witnesses firsthand. How does Torres use the comics form to recreate an event that is both personally and nationally affecting? Furthermore, how does Torres interweave the symptoms of a traumatised mind with the comics form in her retelling of the event? Finally, what place does *American Widow* occupy in the greater arena comics and traumatic representation?

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Jonathan W. Gray (The City University of New York) – "Representing Revolt in Graphic Media: Magdy El Shafee, Martin Luther King, Jr and the Arab Spring"

This talk seeks to analyze the United States' valorization of the role that comics have played in the recent anti-authoritarian uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa known as the Arab Spring. The discussion focuses on twin publishing events in Cairo in 2008: Egyptian activist Dalia Zaida's Arabic translation of the 1958 comic book "Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story" and popular cartoonist Magdy El Shafee's graphic novel *Metro.* The dissemination of the Montgomery story, an account of King's leadership and the pacifistic tactics of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, has been widely reported in the American press as central to instructing a younger generation of Egyptians about the efficacy of non-violent protest. I argue that El Shafee's *Metro*, though less heralded in the West, offered a sterner challenge to the Mubarak regime. *Metro*, a frank depiction of the day-to-day frustrations of life in Mubarak's Egypt, led to El Shafee's incarceration. Indeed, though editions are now available in Italian and English, *Metro* is still banned in Egypt. El Shafee's arrest and trail attracted widespread interest both within Egypt and abroad. Relying on the scholarship of Mary Dudziak, Edward Said and others I argue that it is telling that the United States seeks to valorize the dissemination of an obscure fifty-year old American cultural artifact over that of a book that dramatizes the abuse that decades of American military and financial support made possible.

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Daniel Marrone (Central St. Martins, University of the Arts London) – "Seth's Historiographic Metafiction: Forging Canadian Histories"

Canadian cartoonist Seth often engages in 'historiographic metafiction' – a term coined by Linda Hutcheon, which she defines as 'fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities'. In his first book-length work, *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996), Seth-as-protagonist tracks down the forgotten work of an obscure cartoonist, reproductions of which appear at the end of book. Of course, this story is not quite what it appears to be: the cartoonist is not an actual historical figure and the entirely plausible

'reproductions' have been drawn by Seth. *It's a Good Life* constitutes an intervention into both the history of cartooning and the autobiographical mode that has become so familiar in contemporary comics.

Seth's historical inventions/interventions are substantiated not only by his distinctive drawing style, but also by his compelling portrayal of imagined communities, to borrow the phrase developed by Benedict Anderson in his book on nationalism. In *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (2011), the community imagined by Seth serves as a stage for a particularly ironic nationalism, and *George Sprott* (2009) undercuts its status as a Canadian epic (on the scale of, for instance, Chester Brown's comic book biography *Louis Riel*) with an apologetic, not-quite-omniscient narrator. Indeed, the "Canadian-ness" of Seth's work tends to be quite modest, at times even covert, included for the benefit of an imagined community of knowing readers.

Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction 'questions the nature and validity of the entire human process of writing – of both history and fiction. Its aim in so doing is to study how we know the past, how we *make* sense of it.' Her emphasis on the making of the past resonates strongly with the practices of both Seth and his characters.

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John Miers (Central St. Martin's, University of the Arts London) – "'Score and Script': I Knew It Wasn't Possible, So I Thought I'd Try It"

Although the individually-produced comic or graphic novel has become the dominant model of authorship in the contemporary renaissance of the form, the historically standard model has been of collective production, involving as a necessary part the production of prototexts including artists' sketches and, primarily, the comic script.

This paper will present preliminary findings from a collectively-produced project that uses the practice of cartooning to analyse the relationship between composition and narrative content, and the nature of comics authorship, by retrospectively creating prototexts from an existing comic.

After creating a single-page comic, I then produced two descriptions of that comic, responding to Nelson Goodman's definitions of "score" and "script". The score provides, in diagrammatic form, the dimensions, location and central axis of the comic's narrative actors, but no information regarding the events depicted. Conversely, the script describes the comic's fabula, without specifying the appearance of any actors, or any information regarding my production of that narrative as a comic. No panel breakdown or dialogue is specified in either version. Cartoonists were then asked to create a new single-page comic using one of the two prototexts.

Following Christy Mad Uidhir's claim that authorship is work-description relative, I will argue that my claim to authorship of the comics produced in response to the score is greater than in the case of those produced following the script, as panel breakdown, though not specified, is implied by the grouping of visual forms. Any work following the notation of the score will

contain constitutive features of a comic. Finally, I will assess the extent to which the enforced and artificial separation of visual and narrative content illuminates the relationship between the two, through comparison of the participants' responses.

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Federico Pagello (King's College London) – "The Cinematic Superhero: Comic Book Imagination and the Aesthetic Regime"

The proliferation of film adaptations based on superhero comics during the last decade has naturally attracted the attention of both film and comics scholars. Nevertheless, while comprehensive discussion of the technological, cultural and narrative characteristics of this phenomenon (Jenkins), as well as stimulating critical analyses of its cinematographic and ideological features (Bordwell, Žižek) are available, a convincing theoretical examination of the aesthetic qualities of these productions is still missing. Interestingly, Scott Bukatman, who in his previous works on the topic has brilliantly celebrated the deep connections between the superhero genre and the cinema as a whole, may have overlooked some aspects on this issue in his (highly critical) contribution on this issue.

In my paper, after briefly discussing the writings of the aforementioned authors, I will draw on Jacques Rancière's theories on cinema as the paradigmatic expression of what he labels the "aesthetic regime." I will argue that the ontology of the modern arts proposed by the French philosopher can help us to better understand superhero comics, and, therefore, their cinematographic adaptations. The inherent tension between the "mimetic" and the "aesthetic" that in his view distinguishes the art of film is in fact also at the core of the superhero imagination. By using Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* as a case study, I will show that Rancière's conception of "film fables" as "thwarted fables" is a useful theoretical framework to look at the dialectical relationship between the narrative and the visual in superhero fiction.

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Adam Sherif (University of Lincoln) – "The Duality of 1940s Wonder Woman Comics: The War Heroine in Whose Culture Men Do Not Feature"

In examining the earliest adventures of Diana Prince, Amazon princess and Wonder Woman, from 1942, the question of purpose yields a curious duality. The comic book is used by William Moulton Marston apparently to exert wildly different, possibly incongruous political and social influence. Concerning the political, the comic reflects a pro-war line and may even have held the intention of converting those US citizens still in favour of a national policy of isolationism. This is rendered through the dialogue between Diana and her fellow Amazons who are hesitant to permit her involvement in the Allied war effort. With the social aspect, however, the very creation and depiction of the society of Paradise Island by Marston, free as it is from the influence of men, can be argued to serve the presentation of something of a radical, even subversive attitude towards gender roles and interaction. These apparent cross-purposes are particularly engaging when integrated with concrete historical context and this paper will also

make an attempt to examine the wartime conduct of the Amazon alongside more conventional evidence on the roles played by US women during the war.

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Simon Turner (Birkbeck, University of London) – "Japan Online: Ethnic Identity, Culture and Race in *Yaoi* Manga Fan Websites"

The purpose of my research is to investigate how Japaneseness is created in online *yaoi* manga fan communities. I demonstrate that Japanese ethnicity and community can be discursively created through the actions of their members. In the course of my research I hope to problematize Japaneseness in an attempt to uncover what we actually mean by concepts such as Japanese race, Japanese ethnicity and 'being' Japanese.

Previous research on *yaoi* has given priority to issues of gender and sexuality, and why heterosexual women create and consume texts depicting male homosexual themes. However, the *yaoi* fans are further unified by a common interest in Japan as a country and its culture. I believe that yaoi manga acts as an available cultural model representing Japaneseness. In my research I investigate the users of *yaoi* fan websites and show that they are able to perform Japanese ethnicity using the manga as the base for their information as well as participating and debating Japaneseness as a defined group. I will show that neither do the manga simply provide a hard fast blueprint for the users to follow and in chase of authenticity, but nor does their Japaneseness spring from the ground as something radically new. By showing how race and ethnicity can be articulated my on-going research will be beneficial in providing an alternative to the binaries of particularism and universalism when considering broader issues that I hope to tackle such as community, affinity spaces and immaterial and affective labour. I aim to show that there can be a theoretical model situated between the real Japan and the virtual, the real Japanese race and ethnicity and the virtual thus successfully transgress essentialism. The distinction between the virtual and the real that is often supported in terms of race and ethnicity may be purely semantic.

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Paul Williams (University of Exeter) – "Art Spiegelman and J. B. Rund: The Making and Marketing of 'Adult Comics' in the 1970s"

American underground comix of the late 1960s and 1970s were continually invoking their status as sequential art texts for adult readers, often marking out that intended audience on the front covers (e.g. "For Adult Intellectuals Only"). Many comix creators did this to promote a perception of comix as formally sophisticated and dealing with issues of political importance and morally complexity. However, the content of the comix points to another interpretation of the phrase 'adult comics', i.e. that they were pornographic. Following the 1973 Supreme Court ruling that allowed local communities to decide which material could be considered obscene, the sellers of underground comix were increasing vulnerable to prosecution (Rosenkranz 186).

This paper focuses on the deluxe comic collections published by J. B. Rund, the New York-based proprietor of the Bélier Press: R. Crumb's *Carload O'Comics* (1976) and *The Complete Fritz the Cat* (1978), and Art Spiegelman's *Breakdowns* (1978). The Bélier Press's reputation was for publishing lavish books of erotic material, and Rund went about promoting these comics through pornographic magazines and in conjunction with reprinted collections of Tijuana Bibles. Rund's marketing campaign reflects a keen sense of the ambivalence in the phrase 'adult comics', playing up to their status as a source of sexual titillation while simultaneously appealing to consumers willing to pay high prices for luxurious art objects. Where other comix creators responded to the doubleness of 'adult comics' by joking about it (Bill Griffith in *Young Lust* #6) or by insisting that it did not *have* to mean sex comics (Denis Kitchen in *Comix Book* #1), Spiegelman interwove sexually arousing images into strips like "Little Signs of Passion" as a meditation on pornographic comics' irrevocable embeddedness in the history of American comics.

This paper, then, considers how Spiegelman and Rund negotiated the possibilities and pitfalls of 'adult comics'. This work is based on recent research conducted in the archive of the Bélier Press and it aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the collusion between comix creators and erotic publishers in the second half of the 1970s. It will also demonstrate the important role played by J. B. Rund in disseminating underground comics as deluxe collections for adult readers.