

Comics Conferences

Over the last several decades there has been a steady rise in the number, size and frequency of scholarly comics conferences. The character and purpose of these gatherings has changed considerably during this time, in part due to the establishment of Comics Studies as an academic field, and partly due to their relationship with fan events, which have grown to huge proportions in recent years. This chapter will first set out a historical overview of the rise of scholarly comics conferences before offering a number of case studies of the key global events, with an emphasis on academic events, wider academic events with comics strands, and finally the emergence of scholarly comics strands within public and fan-based events. Surveying the history demonstrates that while the number of comics events has increased, this has come at the cost of some diversity and that the relationships between fans, practitioners and scholars are mutually beneficial but sometimes problematic.

In *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (2004) editors Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester demonstrate through a range of writing about comics by the likes of e.e. cummings, Gilbert Seldes, Dorothy Parker, Irving Howe, and Delmore Schwartz, that serious interest in the medium predates the formulation of Comics Studies, or even the formal academic study of popular culture. Such writings, many of them from the first half of the twentieth century, celebrated the mass appeal of comics, and sometimes their artistry, but few sought to understand the mechanics of the medium or its history. A similar point is made by John Lent (2010) in his article, “The Winding, Pot-holed Road of Comic Art Scholarship”, identifies the barriers that have existed in academia, and the fact that much of the early critical work happened outside of the academy, and much historical research was done by fans and collectors. Some of this appeared in fanzines, which were far from scholarly publications. Mark Evanier notes that the dictionary gives 1949 as the year of first usage for the term “fanzine”, but also argues that the year the science fiction first fanzine came out was probably 1932, which was, as he says, “the year two science fiction aficionados – Mort Weisinger and Julius Schwartz – published the first issue of *The Time Traveller*” (p.29). He concedes that dating the first comics fanzine is more difficult, but observes that “the EC comics of the early fifties spawned a number of homemade publications but they were preceded by other contenders for the honor – mostly science fiction zines whose fannish enthusiasms led them occasionally into the questionable realm of funnybooks” (p.31). The likely point at which comics fanzines appeared in America is in the mid-1940s, around the same time that collectors and fans were organising some of the first comic marts. Although the work done by fans and collectors was not scholarly, as such, they established a network

for advancing knowledge about the medium. Combined with the “literary masters” that Heer and Worcester identify, these fans and collectors, brought critical attention to comics long before Comics Studies existed. Indeed, it is only recently that a few established scholarly networks, fora and dedicated events have come into being. Therefore, in order to understand how comics conferences did start to emerge, it is necessary to appreciate the difficult journey Comics Studies has had, and the attitudes that have had to be challenged in order to make this possible.

The scholarly interest in comics, and indeed, in popular culture as a whole, started to emerge, albeit very slowly, in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Prior to this there had been an interest in mass culture, largely from the point of view of mass observation studies, and work that examined the presumed negative effect of mass culture on its intended audience (usually conceptualised as the lower classes), as opposed to the supposedly edifying effects of “high culture.” Work of this kind, which emphasized the dichotomy between what was regarded as high and low culture, was quite widespread, appearing in many countries, and occasionally comics were cited in such studies. Indeed, much of the early critical work on comics, such as that by Fredric Wertham in the 1950s, was negative and proceeded from the view that such material was damaging to its readers. The methodologies and assumptions of such studies were often flawed, and frequently tied to moral panics and censorious hysteria that looked to blame popular culture for social ills rather than seriously investigating these texts. Things started to change with the “cultural turn” in the arts, humanities and social sciences in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This posited a shift towards an appreciation of popular culture as art, and focused on the production of meanings, rather than supposing that pop culture was meaningless entertainment, the only interest in which could be the ways it satisfied the base needs of its lowbrow audience. Instead, popular culture started to be seen as relevant and interesting in its own right.

The roots of this “turn” were seen in the 1950s and 1960s, when some studies of popular culture appeared, such as the work of French philosopher Roland Barthes and Italian novelist and philosopher Umberto Eco. Barthes’ collection of essays, *Mythologies* (1957), adopted a semiotic approach to popular culture, which was a great leveller. Semiotics argued that everything was a mode of communication, and therefore contained codes and myths that we interpret as readers. This makes a magazine or a comic just as rich with meaning as a film or a novel, therefore invalidating prejudices between mediums and a sense of a high or a low culture. Eco wrote his 1972 essay “The Myth of Superman” also using a mode of semiological analysis. Comics were also sometimes mentioned by the likes of art historian Ernst Gombrich, and Marshall McLuhan, the father of media studies, both of whom were

positive about the potential of the medium. In 1960's *Art and Illusion* Gombrich stated that comics achieved a kind of iconic power through their use of basic cognitive skills to link narrative with visual shorthand. In *Understanding Media* (1964) McLuhan argued that comics were a "cool" medium, requiring active participation for the reader, whereas media such as film were "hot", allowing the viewer to be relatively passive. In works such as this comics started to enter academic discourse, but they were not yet seen as subject area in their own right, and there were no dedicated academic conferences as yet.

In the 1970s the academic study of popular culture became firmly established, and it was not long before scholars turned their attention to comics. However, this was still not without risk to their reputations and prospects. British historian David Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip* (1973) was attacked by his fellow art historians (Lent, p.10) and by the mid-1980s important academic works were emerging and routes to publishing had been established by pioneers such as Donald Ault, Arthur Asa Berger and M. Thomas Inge, but there was little in the way of formal support in terms of conferences and academic fora.

M. Thomas Inge reflects that, at the first few years of the Popular Culture Association conference (which began in 1971 at Michigan State University in East Lansing), "no one was talking about comics [...] (television was all the rage)." But in 1973, at the PCA's third meeting, he proposed a panel on "Comics as Culture" with presentations on comics as art, as literature, and as drama, which "got things rolling." That was the same year was Berkeley Con 1973 (also known as the Underground Comix Con), which featured an early presentation by Donald Ault, who gave a presentation on Carl Barks and wrote an essay on Barks for the program book. In addition to Ault's contributions there were panels on "Sex and Sexism in the Comics" and Women's Comics." In December of 1978 Inge organized the first panel on the subject of comics to be held at a meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York, which featured comics creators Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman – foreshadowing the increasing involvement of practitioners in comics scholarship. The following year Inge edited a special issue of the *Journal of Popular Culture* (Vol 12), another first of its kind, and which included Robert C. Harvey's influential essay "The Aesthetics of the Comic Strip." Later scholars acknowledge Inge's key role in creating "the first sense of Comics Studies as a field and the first sense of community among comics scholars [which] developed at the PCA conferences in the 1980s" (Duncan 2015). It is also worthwhile noting that some of the first academic papers published on comics were presented at library science conferences, so this network was also key to the early formation of Comics Studies.

There was also increasingly a space for comics scholars (of which there were only a few) at fan organised public events like comics conventions. Roger Sabin recalls the situation in the UK:

There were some forerunners to the academic comics conference per se. First you had academics giving “serious” talks at fan conventions, in the late 1980s. UKCAC (UK Comic Art Convention), for example, would always have space in its timetable for this, and the “small press” conventions would follow suit, e.g. Caption, a little later (from 1992). The speakers would inevitably be Martin Barker, Dave Huxley, and then myself. Martin was always a star at those events, because he was a natural performer and talked about censorship - the fans loved him.

Despite the fact that there were scholars of comics and scholarly works on comics emerging in the 1970s and 1980s, and even though popular culture studies were thriving across many disciplines, notably in social sciences and humanities, the resistance to comics in academia persisted into the 1990s. This hindered the development of fully-fledged comics conferences, although there were certainly panels and papers on comics at conferences on popular culture, and in other areas. This led to the “academicization” of comics, and the beginnings of comics papers and panels appearing on conference programmes. By the mid-1990s several academic comics conferences started to appear. This was driven by the fact that certain comics scholars who had been laboring in what Lent calls “Sisyphean conditions” (2010: 8) for many years, were reaching a time of influence and seniority in their careers, just as a new generation was entering academia who felt unhindered by the prejudices of old. These two factors combined. It felt like Comics Studies had a history and an old-guard, as well as in infusion of new blood. Roger Sabin’s recollection of the change in attitude in the UK reveals that there were many who were pushing for change:

The origin point for academic comics conferences was the mid-late 1990s, on the back of interest in the “graphic novel.” The background had to do with the gradual acceptance of comics in academia. For example, in the 1970s, there were lots of accounts of student comics projects being “allowed” as submissions for BA and MA courses at art colleges (Brian Bolland did his first strip this way), so clearly there were some progressive tutors. Then, in the 1980s academics like Martin Barker in Bristol and Dave Huxley in Manchester started incorporating comics into the curriculum. (Dave was teaching a history of comics course from 1981, and got his Ph.D. in comics studies in c.1988 - a first of its kind in the UK - and Martin's book *A Haunt of Fears* came out in 1984.) There were other lecturers, their efforts now forgotten, who had an interest in certain aspects of comics, who incorporated them - for example, Barry Curtis, in London, who taught classes about Robert Crumb in the early 1980s; Hugh Starkey, based at Leicester University, who published an important essay about BD in 1987; and Paul Dawson, at Manchester University, who incorporated graphic novels onto his literature courses, again in the late 1980s. No

doubt there were others. I think this phase had a lot to do with the rise of Cultural Studies and the idea that “everything was culture”, and that pop culture, especially, was worth studying.

Alongside the broadening of the study of popular culture, with interests in Television Studies and computer games, comics no longer seemed quite so exposed and exceptional. As Kent Worcester points out “the field [...] benefited from the construction of a scholarly infrastructure, as exemplified by the founding of the Comic Art and Comics area of the Popular Culture Association in 1992; the establishment of the International Comics Art Forum in 1995; and the launching of *The International Journal of Comic Art* in 1999” (p. 111). Roger Sabin notes that “in the late 1990s and 2000s and there were academic events going on in London, Manchester, and Leeds, not to mention the burgeoning scene in the US [...] and what was happening in Europe (Jan Baetens' conference on 'The Graphic Novel' in Leuven in 2000 was an important one, as was Anne Magnussen and Hans Christian Christiansen's conference 'Comics Culture' in Copenhagen in 1998). Later, conferences in Japan came into the picture, where European (and a few American) academics started to “talk to” Japanese critics - conferences tended to be organised by Jaqueline Berndt at the University of Kyoto.”

With these developments came a growing number of dedicated comics conferences, and the associated apparatus of comics courses, research grant applications, collections of comics and artwork in University collections, and ultimately, dedicated peer-reviewed journals and special issues of respectable journals that helped to form purely academic events. However, perhaps due to the fact that comics scholarship initially emerged under the umbrella of fan events, there is still a strong academic presence at many such events. This mixed economy of purely academic events and academic strands within public events has become a boon for Comics Studies, especially as academic work steers increasingly towards public engagement as a key metric of success and impact. It is not unusual to see a major comics convention accompanied by a satellite academic event, or to have creators and industry professionals participating in academic events. Indeed, in recent years the popularity of fan events such as San Diego Comic-Con International has exploded, partly due to cross-promotion of film, television and computer games at these events; the nature of the comics fan community, which is vocal and passionate about what they like, making such events key in the marketing of popular culture. Comics scholars have therefore found themselves having strands at huge events, and potentially reaching difference audiences, sometimes in much larger numbers than would attend a traditional academic conference. The potential for public engagement and bringing academic work out into a wider community is therefore

considerable, especially with widespread coverage of such events on the internet through the comics industry press.

This article now proceeds to a discussion and case studies of key global events, focusing on dedicated academic events, wider academic events with comics strands, and finally the emergence of academic comics strands within public and fan-based events. Of course, it would be impossible to give a comprehensive account of all the comics events occurring internationally, so the selection below is chosen to give a flavour of the variety and diversity of activities.

Case Studies: Academia

The development of Comics Studies as a field is still ongoing. There are research centres, networks, and even dedicated degree programmes, but as yet there are no departments of Comics Studies, much less an established presence in the University curriculum. What exists is often ad hoc or the exception rather than the norm, but this is slowly changing. As suggested above, what has come to unite comics scholars, across a range of disciplines, is their participation in an international network of scholarly forums and events. Dedicated comics conferences are an important part of this.

There are now a number of academic events dedicated to comics, taking many forms. There are multiple one-off events that take place in many countries around the world, often on a very small scale (around 25 participants or less), and are hosted by universities or other institutions. These are really too numerous to count; however, larger recurring events are emerging, in many cases from these small-scale events. In South America, Buenos Aires hosts *Viñetas Serias* (“Serious Comics”) at the department of Social Sciences in the Universidad de Buenos Aires, which has been held biennially since 2010. Approximately 80-100 papers are presented to an audience 3 or 4 times that size, alongside book presentations, multimedia performances and a comic book fair. *Viñetas Serias* grew from a public event (*Viñetas Sueltas*) whose aim was to connect the European and Argentine comics industries. In North America examples of large-scale academic events include the MSU Comics Forum (Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI) aimed at academics and practitioners; Page 23 Lit Con (Denver, CO), aimed at academics, aca-fans and fans; and the International Comic Art Forum (ICAF) Conference, which takes place in multiple locations and aims to be annual (although has only held two meetings this decade). The University of Florida has, since 2002, held an annual conference on comics. This started as a symposium on Will Eisner and has become a consistent presence in the comics studies calendar, bringing together artists and scholars to discuss a different theme each year.

The Bande Dessinee conference started by Billy Grove in Glasgow from 1999 also started small but laid the groundwork for the IBDS (International Bande Dessinee Society). The IBDS conference is a bilingual event and this is another challenge facing comics conferences in a global context. However, such liaisons can produce spectacular results: one organizer, Maaheen Ahmed, cites this as one of the greatest strengths of comics events “since Anglophone and Francophone scholars do not mingle much.” Translation delays have had an impact on comics studies and contributed to the Anglo-American bias that has dogged the medium. Bilingual conferences have the potential to break down such divisions and further enable a global dialogue between critical theory traditions. An additional bilingual event is the Canadian Society for the Study of Comics Annual Conference (CSSC), which has been running annually since 2012, and typically attracts around 40-45 presenters. Some years after its inauguration, the CSSC began to hold regular meetings as part of the annual New Narrative Conference organized by Andrew Lesk, which coincided with the weekend that the Toronto Comic Arts Festival was held in Toronto, ultimately taking over the established relationship between the two events when New Narrative ceased. Although a separate academic event, as organizer Barbara Postema notes, the connection with TCAF “adds interest and potential for joint guests. Some people who would not travel to Toronto for only the CSSC come because they can combine it with attendance of an excellent small press expo.” As seen in Leeds Thought Bubble (discussed below) such strategies are becoming increasingly common as targeting the cross-over audience of academics, fans and professionals is a particularly attractive one. This also reflects the aforementioned long-standing relationship between fan/public events and academic ones.

It is notable that many of these dedicated events have a public side. The ICAF began in 1995 as a one-off festival in Washington D.C., founded and initially chaired by Guy Spielmann of the Georgetown University French Department. ICAF first focused mainly on comics professionals, but it has expanded its scope in subsequent years, taking place over multiple venues and bringing together a combination of academic presentations, and a more general public day on Saturday. A similar arrangement is apparent in the UK - the Thought Bubble festival (which takes place in Leeds as part of the annual Leeds Film Festival in November) is preceded by Comics Forum: a two-day academic event launched in 2009. Taking place in the run-up to the main Thought Bubble festival, Comics Forum is more academically focused than an academic programming strand within the main event might be expected to be. It has been held at a number of public locations (rather than within the University) such as Leeds Town Hall and the public library, and is open to all. The event is just one facet of the larger Comics Forum project, which includes a network and website.

Organizer Ian Hague notes the biggest challenge is to be as globally inclusive as possible while working with a volunteer staff, and parallels can be seen here with the origins, host locations and aims of *Viñetas Serias* (connecting international comics industries, and taking place at public and academic locations such as the National Library of Argentina).

In Europe, large-scale academic events are also on the rise, again, often based around a network of researchers, but frequently with a public-facing element. Harmsen (2013) explains that in Germany academic research into comics is a very recent development, which gained much of its momentum from *Comic-Kunst* (“comic art”), an exhibition of work from over 130 comics artists and illustrators organised by Dietrich Grünewald in 2004. This was followed by an initial conference that led to the founding of *Gesellschaft für Comicforschung* (ComFor) in 2005. Devised as a means to connect with other scholars, the network organises an annual conference hosted by various universities (beginning in 2006, with a first volume of conference proceeds published in 2010). Similarly, the Nordic Network for Comics Research (NNCORE) was founded in 2011 with a two-year grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research and, since hosting its first conference at the University of Helsinki in Finland (2013) has continued as an independent association, with a second conference in June 2015 at which the election of officers went forward. NNCORE has also been involved in individual conferences, for instance “Aesthetics in Comics” at the University of Aarhus in 2011 and a seminar on comics and didactics in Malmö in 2012.

Another membership organisation that runs along similar lines is the International Bande Dessinée Society (who also produce the scholarly journal *European Comic Art*, published by Berghahn and edited by Laurence Grove, Ann Miller, and Mark McKinney) who host a biennial conference, that began in 1999. Since 2011 the IBDS conference runs jointly with the International Conference for Graphic Novels and Comics, which is organized collaboratively by the editors of *Studies in Comics* (edited by Julia Round and Chris Murray and published by Intellect Books, and the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (edited by Joan Ormond and David Huxley and published by Routledge). First held at Manchester Metropolitan University in 2010, and always with input and support from Roger Sabin of Central St Martins College of Art, the IGNCC is transnational and mobile – it has since been held at Bournemouth, Glasgow, Dundee, the British Library in London, and Paris. These examples show that support from ongoing networks or publications such as academic journals often underpin recurring events, and that collaboration and consolidation are key factors in keeping them going.

There are also many conferences that, while not in and of themselves comics

conferences, have long been sympathetic to comics and have featured panels on this topic. Examples include the International Association of Word and Images Studies (IAWIS) triennial conference that has been running since 1987, and the Scottish Word and Image Group (SWIG), which started in Aberdeen (1994 - 2003) but moved to Dundee (2004 - present). These events focus on the relationship between word and images, and have routinely featured sessions on comics. Dundee is also the home of Dundee Comics Day, which is part of Dundee Literary Festival and organized by Chris Murray and Phil Vaughan, who are based in the School of Humanities and Duncan and Jordanstone Art College, respectively. Held in October, this event brings the public, comics scholars and students at the University of Dundee together in discussion with top comics creators and industry professionals. This has been partly a response to academic imperatives like public engagement and the support of practice-based learning, but “the event also serves to provide access to the insights of professionals in an academic setting, though with the informality of a talk at a fan event. The result is a dialogue with creators that is informed by scholarly concerns, in which the public, scholars and students contribute equally, combining the best of both worlds,” says host Chris Murray.

There have also been several academic conferences at which the work of a single creator has been explored, such as the “Magus” conference at Northampton in 2010 which invited papers on the work of Alan Moore, and “Grant Morrison and the Superhero Renaissance” in Trinity College, Dublin, in 2012, which focused on the work of Grant Morrison. Interestingly, Moore attended the Northampton conference, after the formal academic papers had been delivered, and participated in an interview, chaired by comics impresario Paul Gravett. Being separate from the delivery of the formal papers this was something closer to a fan event in some ways, and is another demonstration of the ways in which the two types of activity can blend together. The Trinity conference on Morrison was not attended by the creator himself, but the fact that it took place in the prestigious Trinity Quad gave the conference a certain visibility and prestige that would have been unthinkable a couple of decades earlier.

Given that there are now so many academic events and huge public/fan events, it is notable that some smaller, more focused events are starting to reappear. Occasionally the larger events are so crowded with parallel sessions and headline guests that there can be little time for detailed discussion, planning, and even just socializing. Perhaps in response to this a number of activities and meetings have emerged that offer a less hectic schedule, focus on shared interests and enterprises, and offer time for detailed discussion of issues. Good examples of this are Laydeez do Comics, Graphic Brighton, and a number of so-called

“unconferences”. All offer spaces for sharing ideas and providing mutual support for a growing number of comics research students and young academics, as well as practitioners, readers, and others interested in advancing comics studies in ways that do not fit into the traditional format of academic conferences. Damon Herd, one of the organizers of the 2015 Comics Unconference in Glasgow says that the aim was to

provide a forum for those interested in engaging seriously with comics to debate and share experiences in a format that was similar to, but outside of, the formal structure of a traditional academic conference. There was no timetable or schedule decided in advance, but rather a running order of moderated talks, events and happenings decided in collaboration with the participants at the start of the day in a democratic fashion.

Slightly more focused but providing a similar function are small reading groups, like The British Consortium of Comics Scholars (BCCS), which started in 2012 as a reading group at the University of Sussex, led by Ph.D. student Paul Davies, which quickly expanded to include research students interested in comics theory from the University of Sussex; University of Brighton; University of the Arts London, Central Saint Martins; Open University and Loughborough University. These kinds of grassroots comics studies events are very important, as they are often student-led. Comics Studies, being a relatively young area of study, and one that (happily) draws on a convergence (or collision) of methodologies and disciplinary perspectives, needs to remain attentive to the complex needs of the next generation of comics scholars, and they in turn need to have a hand in shaping the subject area through events that they organize.

Moving further East, the Israeli Museum for Comics and Cartooning (founded in 2007) has an annual conference (June/July) that is purely academic and has partnered with various universities, research institutes, think-tanks and so forth. In Singapore, the International Scholarly Conference (currently held at ITB Bandung) has taken place since 2009. By contrast, India is described by Debarghya Singh as having a “sheer dearth” of comics events, instead relying primarily on small one-off department specific lectures, or single sessions on comics in a larger umbrella conference, or most commonly, one or two papers in a particular session. Some larger annual conferences may have a year themed around comics, such as the annual English department conference, Metaphor, at Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, for which the 2013 theme was “Superheroes: The Masking and the Unmasking.”

The challenges facing these academic events within the bigger landscape of congresses, conventions and festivals are many. Speaking about the CSCC, Barbara Postema comments that it is difficult to build the required social media presence (which would keep members connected and involved throughout the year, rather than just at the conference) when all involved are teaching academics or graduate students. Similarly, funding is also always a concern: how much can be charged and what kinds of costs are necessary (for example, should scholarly events be paying for website design, logos and so forth). Finally, there are calls and pressures to make such events more professional, for example the CSSC is considering joining the Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences (a Canadian group that organizes Congress every year, where all the annual conferences are held) which would have the benefit of making the CSSC and comics studies in general more established within the academy, but on the other hand would remove the connection to TCAF and some of the society's independence.

Based on this very brief survey, it seems that for academic comics conferences to survive they must carefully consider notions of ownership and support, with many taking place under the aegis of wider societies, journals or other bodies. Those that do not are typically one-off events. The success of those that can obtain some funding demonstrates that there is certainly a demand for regular, recurring academic events, and an emotional reaction to their lack: Spanish scholar Roberto Bartual described it as a “wasteland” with one-offs dominating the academic landscape. Sustaining academic-only conferences seems primarily reliant on cost and commitment. Finance is the dominant issue, with very few free events taking place. A notable exception to this is Transitions, held annually at Birkbeck, London since October 2010. Initial organizer Tony Venezia attributes this success to “connivance and goodwill” as the conference relies on the institution providing free rooms and a little money to cover refreshments, and on its supporters and the academic community to volunteer their services for free poster design, keynote talks and so forth. He thus stresses that the conference is “not as settled as it looks” and also that it has become increasingly difficult over the past few years “as universities quantify everything.”

Given these issues and the changing academic landscape, it is not surprising that comics now also have an entrenched place within larger academic conferences and congresses. In North America, comics strands appear in events such as the MLA (and its various subsidiaries, like NEMLA, or SMLA), and the annual Popular Culture Association conference. The latter features around 27 separate programming tracks of which comics and graphic novels are one, but in addition to this comics and comics adaptations appear in multiple various tracks (adaptation, fan studies, queer studies and so forth). Comics strands

also come into play within different disciplines, such as the SCMS (Society for Cinema and Media Studies), the SLSA (Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts), the ASA (American Studies Association) and so forth. The extent to which comics appear is growing exponentially – as Kathleen McClancey comments: “comics are so hot right now, every conference is trying to do at least a panel or two on comics.”

Case Studies: Conventions

In spite of the huge rise in comics conferences the most visible comics events (due to size, scope and publicity) remain the fan conventions. A convention is an event at which a number of comics dealers, creators, and publishers meet with fans and collectors. The emphasis is usually commercial. The creators are usually there to promote new work, and may give talks, which attracts fans. Dealers sell everything from back issues to original artwork and merchandise. Cosplay is a common feature of many conventions, with fans dressing as their favourite characters. The first conventions were likely in the late 1940s in America, and were largely a place for collectors and enthusiasts to meet and buy and sell comics. They were organised by these same fans and collectors. Later these events became much larger and reached a huge size. Many of conventions are run by professional businesses and include a much wider range of attractions, with an emphasis on blockbuster films, television, and computer games. Many countries have at least one large-scale annual event devoted to comics and popular culture and aimed primarily at the general public. As noted above, many such events started out as quite small fan gatherings which have grown to massive proportions, whereas many others have sprung up in recent years due to the considerable profits that can be made. Increasingly these are run by professional companies, rather than fans, and academic strands are perhaps less welcome at these professionally run events, where the emphasis is on making every available square foot pay for itself in terms of exhibitor/commercial space or a high profile guest. Nonetheless, the Institute for Comics Studies was, for a time, very active in negotiating for academic tracks at major conventions such as Dragon Con, the New York ComicCon, and so forth. Despite the drive for profit, it currently seems that there is enough diversity in the kinds of events that are being run that there is still space for academic strands in many events, especially the larger ones.

The largest of the fan/public events is Comiket held biannually (as NatsuComi and FuyuComi) in Tokyo, Japan since 1975. Each lasts around three days and attracts over half a million attendees (an estimate since no registration is required). Comiket is a grassroots event selling self-published works from individual booths. In Europe, Lucca Comics and Games (Tuscany, Italy) is held every October, grown from the launch of the Salone Internazionale de Comics in 1965, with an attendance of 240,000 by 2014. Angoulême International Comics

Festival is the third-largest event in the world, held annually in Angoulême, France, every January since 1974, attracting over 200,000 guests each year. Of these, Angoulême has a more formal academic focus than the rest, with prestigious prizes for cartooning awarded. The challenges of such events are, of course, hosting and security. Angoulême takes place over an entire region; Lucca has been moved in and out of the city centre; and Comiket has begun introducing strict rules for early arrival (although these are not always followed).

In North America, large-scale annual events such as San Diego Comic-Con International (CCI), New York Comic Con (New York City), C2E2 (Chicago), Wizard World (multiple events every year held all over North America), DragonCon (Atlanta), and numerous other Comic-Cons spread across multiple cities (Denver, San Antonio, and so on) dominate the convention circuit. As noted above, many of these have an academic track, such as the Comic Arts Conference (CAC), which is held twice yearly, taking place within San Diego CCI (July) and WonderCon (Anaheim, April). According to co-organiser Peter Coogan, the CAC is “the largest and longest running academic conference on comics in the states,” featuring around 100 presenters across four days and drawing in an audience of anywhere between 40 and 500 (their room capacity) per panel.

The 1970 founding of the event that would become Comic-Con International by Shel Dorf, Ken Krueger and Richard Alf (amongst others) is well-known (see www.comic-con.org/about for details). The CAC was founded in 1992 by Peter Coogan and Randy Duncan, who recognized how much comics scholarship was in dialogue with the creators themselves, and so thought an actual comic book convention would be a good place to have a conference. They first held the CAC in the hotel nearby, with CCI’s blessing, but the original plan was to move the conference around the country alongside multiple conventions. The CAC had been held at Chicago Comicon and were negotiating with DragonCon in Atlanta when CCI offered a partnership and made the CAC into an official programming track. Finance was a key issue here as the organisers had been subsidizing the event from their own pockets.

The Comic Arts Conference focuses exclusively on comics (comic books, strips, graphic novels, sequential art, digital/web comics) and rejects panels that only deal with film or television adaptations without a discussion of comics. As Coogan notes, its remit is to “bring together scholars and professionals to engage in a discussion of comics with the public [...] we reach beyond the typical academic audience and spread research findings to the convention audience (fans, general audience, and aca-fans [those who consider themselves both scholars and fans of comics]) and spread the idea that studying comics is legitimate”.

The CAC is open to all convention attendees, although the audience self-selects towards aca-fans – or those just wanting a quiet place to sit down amidst the melee (attendance of San Diego CCI has risen to over 130,000 in recent years). Co-organizer Kathleen McClancey describes the event as “Basically a subset of Comic-Con at large, with a slight bias towards the more academically inclined.”

As McClancey notes, CAC has a specific mission: “to bring together academics with pros and the public” and the resulting “cross pollination between academics, pros, and the general public” is one of the event’s greatest strengths and ‘allows for a variety of opinions and viewpoints that don’t come into contact with each other nearly enough.” However, the situation also comes with its own set of challenges; for example, McClancey points out that “it can be difficult for presenters who have been acculturated by academia to remember to leave the jargon at home and remember that they are speaking to a more diverse audience than all Ph.D.s.” McClancey and Coogan say that the biggest challenges of organizing such an event are logistical, with around double the required amount of proposals received, and more being submitted every year. McClancey points out that while receiving too many proposals “is actually pretty nice, as far as challenges go,” due to Comic-Con International’s rising popularity the CAC now also receives a large number of proposals “that are less worthy, from people who just want to go to Comic-Con, and don’t actually care about the CAC at all, which can be hard to identify.”

These logistical struggles have their roots in cultural shifts and it is interesting that, as part of a wider event, the CAC’s main struggles are identical to the things that CCI more broadly is struggling with: recent explosion in popularity in “geek culture” has made it enormous and hard for attendees to get tickets, accommodation, and so forth (badges sell out in seconds and the race for San Diego hotels is just as frantic). However, the “comics-only” focus of the conference sits at odds with the rest of the event and indicates a growing ideological distance between the two.

Similar set-ups are apparent worldwide. In Canada, the Calgary Comics and Entertainment Expo and the Edmonton Comics and Entertainment Expo have a similar academic track, launched in 2011 by Ofer Berenstein based on his experiences with similar tracks at conventions in both Europe and Israel. A key challenge with these events is attracting an organizational team: Berenstein notes that, except for a “core team,” everyone involved in the Canadian events is a volunteer. Contributing to these bigger events is yet another academic labor of love. However, due to sitting within larger events that have comics as just a small fraction of their focus, a widely varied audience is possible, and this variety

enables inter-disciplinarity. Berenstein points out that it becomes impossible to distinguish between the general public/fan/academic/aca-fan: “Geologists in oil and gas companies are academics when sitting in a ‘The Geoscience of *Star Trek*’ talk, but total general public when listening to a talk about manga culture, for example.” This variety can also be used to enable further research – Matthew J. Smith runs an ethnographic research class at Comic-Con International where undergraduate students conduct small-scale research projects using the attendees (e.g., focusing on the disabled experience of Comic-Con, cosplay, etc). The Canadian Expos go a step further and offer a “social lab” track in which researchers are assigned a room to conduct focus groups or circulate surveys to attendees on pop culture-related research.

In Europe, the various comics festivals also often have a panel/an academic day, for example Helsinki Comics Festival, Tampere Comics Festival and Kemi Comics Festival (Finland); Raptus Festival, Bergen, OCX: Oslo Comics Expo, Malmö seriefestival, SPX: Stockholm Comics Festival (Norway); and Copenhagen Comics Festival, Art Bubble Festival, Horsens (Denmark). This might take the form of a single programming strand, or a whole academic day (for example, the Copenhagen comics festival has a biennial academic day, e.g. 2012 discussed comics and teaching and 2015 focuses on documentary comics). A similar arrangement is used by GRAF, a semi-annual congress/fair held in Madrid in December and Barcelona in May, which is structured around one day of presentations and debates, and another day of fanzine, comics and illustration market, and described by Roberto Bartual as the “Best thing related to comics in Spain. Ever.”

In Israel, I-Con festival for Sci-Fi and Fantasy has been running since 1998 and covers everything sci-fi/fantasy related (including comics, role playing, gaming, cosplay, fringe theatre, and so forth) and includes general tracks (aca-fans and fans) and an academic track. A similar, smaller event named The Olamot (“worlds” in Hebrew) takes place in the spring, and there are numerous other creator-driven events year-round, such as the Israeli Comics Animation and Cartooning festival (August), which, as Berenstein notes, revolves around lectures, workshops, Q&A panels with creator guests and so on, delivered by aca-fans, professionals and scholars.

The crossover between professional and scholar is becoming more apparent in many countries, largely due to initiatives such as 24 Hour Comics Day (launched by Scott McCloud in 1990 as a personal challenge to himself and Steve Bissette: to draw a complete comic--24 pages, or 100 panels--in 24 hours). In 2004 Nat Gertler organized the first public event, which has since spread all over the globe. Cheng Tju Lim organized the first Singapore event in

2010, and the numbers involved have grown to the hundreds ever since the event was tied up with La Salle College of the Arts in 2013. Lim describes its biggest strength as motivational – “getting artists and writers off their ass [...] Some of them have talked about their great concept for years. At most, they have done some character design or cover art/splash page. But no actual comics. This event forces them to take that step in doing a complete story.” Here event and practice combine and produce amazing results; however, Lim notes that the main challenge is still the quality of work: “We need editorial processes.” Perhaps the answer is that critical analysis could become part of these events in the future, bringing academia and practice still closer together.

Other large-scale events in the East seem less inclined to engage with academia. The Singapore Toy, Game and Comic Convention used to have an academic strand (2010) but this has been excised in recent years. Malaysia’s Comic Fiesta; Indonesia’s Pop Con, and the Philippines’ Komikon are all large-scale events aimed at fans without academic tracks. India recently inaugurated Comic Con India, held annually at New Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Bangalore, but this has a strong popular culture focus that goes well beyond comics, and no academic track.

Conclusion

The vastly increased crossover between fan conventions and academic study is probably one of the most distinctive elements of Comics Studies. While academics have frequently been participants at such public events, chairing interviews or panels, or delivering keynote talks, Berenstein (2014) notes that a formal approach (from the academic side) is generally needed to produce serious crossover, such as a dedicated academic track, citing examples such as the Canadian Expos and Christopher Harrison’s involvement with Oz-Con in Perth. However, the reverse also holds true; for example, in the UK the Lakes International Comic Art Festival has recently been reaching out to academics to create and sustain an academic track. Berenstein argues that one possible explanation for this increased liaison is the pressure on academia to engage more with ideas of impact and outreach. Economic imperatives have also been already noted as another factor: countries with smaller fan and academic communities seek to bolster numbers by combining the two. However, the liaison is not always easy: Berenstein comments on the need for an “academic initiator” to mediate between the fan convention and academia, and who must be committed to “fans, academic standards and the practicalities of the convention” as well as having “a good social-network that supplies good contents.” As Roger Sabin notes, “currently there are comics conferences everywhere. It is typical for comics creators to be invited as keynotes - which is a reversal of the days when academics were invited to the fan events, so that’s a neat twist. And now we are seeing niche conferences

- manga studies split away a while back, but now we are seeing specialised conferences about digital comics, comics and medicine, comics and the law, etc.” Sabin also argues that in some ways the development of comics studies has resulted in a loss of inter-disciplinarity:

In the mid to late 1990s, even when comics started to be named in conference titles, other topics were included. There would always be somebody talking about William Blake's poems, for example; the kind of stuff that we wouldn't now include on a comics programme, but which at the time felt quite natural and connected. (Also, there simply wouldn't have been enough academics working in comics studies to fill, say, a two-day event, so help had to come from somewhere.) I have to say, I enjoyed the broad mix of those early conferences - which mashed-up Superman, zines, manga, Hogarth, hieroglyphics, etc. In other words, you had a situation with speakers talking about all aspects of word-image interaction, which arguably we're losing in the 21st century as comics studies fractures into niche interests.

As argued above, the health and growth of Comics Studies is inextricably tied to the continued health and vitality of the academic fora and the networks and events that support it. Fortunately, there are now more dedicated comics events than ever before, but as Sabin notes, that has come at the cost of some diversity. Moreover, the relationship between fandom and comics scholarship is a strong one, as evidenced by the ongoing presence of academic strands at high profile fan events worldwide. This has a long tradition in comics scholarship, and the relationship is one that often proves mutually beneficial, but could be made more so. The benefit to academics who are increasingly required to show the wider impact of their research and to demonstrate public engagement is clear. The increase in the professionalization of such events does present something of a risk to the place of academic strands, but this is perhaps balanced by the continuing involvement of practitioners in academia, and the moves to embrace practice-based Ph.D.s, and that fact that comics professionals are increasingly moving between both audiences, pointing to the close relationship between the creation and reception of comics and the academic analysis of the medium. There are risks that the pressure from much bigger, commercially driven events could swamp academic events, or could distort them into something they are not designed to be, but there are also opportunities to develop a healthy relationship between the two, and comics scholars are well-placed to rise to these challenges.

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