GRAPHIC WRITING: VISUAL RHETORIC, STUDENT PRODUCTION, AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

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> "Comic books, in intent and effect, are demoralizing the morals of youth. They are sexually aggressive in an abnormal way. They make violence alluring and cruelty heroic. They are not educational but stultifying."
>
> – Dr. Fredric Wertham (from a 1948 *Collier's* article)

In a culture saturated with images, it seems odd to think of images still viewed as guilty pleasures, but within some contexts, images are still anathema. This article focuses on images within a context where they are still viewed as suspect, sordid, and decadent—the typical writing classroom in higher education. In an age with access to more images (and ways to combine them into something meaningful) than ever before, analyzing and constructing image-heavy texts is just as necessary within academia, and even more so as visual genres continue to evolve. Comics, once considered a hallmark of illiteracy and a gateway to juvenile delinquency—or worse, as demonstrated in the quote above—provide a good example of the evolution of images because they have spawned one of the most vital genres of current expression, the graphic novel. I will argue that deeply interrogating a graphic novel necessitates close readings of images based on visual rhetoric, and I will also argue that student production of graphic texts—instead of traditional print-based reading responses and essays—helps students

improve their ability to craft and analyze writing in contemporary digital writing contexts.

Background

The spur for this article dug into me at a national conference when I attended a panel on graphic novels. The presenters did an impressive job analyzing and discussing a range of comics and graphic novels, and, at the conclusion of the presentation, I asked the panel whether they encouraged students to create comics/graphic novels as reading-responses or assignments linked to their in-class discussions. The panel members kind of smiled at each other, then one said something to the effect of, "Oh no, *my* students have to do *real* writing in their classes." The rest of the panel nodded in agreement, as did much of the audience, thus making it plain that *real* writing meant *traditional* compositions consisting of only words on a printed page. However, the irony within that response was vexing to me—how could it be that the same people who had spent an hour and a half extolling the virtues of graphic novels and demonstrating the complexity of their construction also believed they were unworthy intellectual pursuits for students? Or perhaps the panelists taught in a traditional program with a traditional administration where such a notion is just simply not on the radar? In some ways, the panel's position against considering graphic novels as *real* writing was simply another manifestation of what some scholars have termed print bias (discussed in more detail later), but at the heart of their response was an untruth—if the same idea applied to "regular" literature, that is, if no complex thought was involved in selecting and arranging words on the part of the creator, certainly a masterwork of literature could not result. Or, if the panel's objection was more on the grounds that students' writings had to be of the same intellectual level of what they were reading, i.e., their writings had to reach the exacting standards of literature, professors might wait a long time to collect student work that resembled literature. On the whole, though, professors assign traditional essays because they obviously believe in the transference and importance of writing and ideas from/in alphabetic-based

literatures, so why not the transference and importance of writing and ideas in graphic novels, which have the ability to transform the writing abilities of students in an age of multimodal writing?

A Rationale for the Seemingly Irrational

While I do not want to spend too much space discussing a rationale for graphic novels as worthy objects of scholarly contemplation, a case must be made before going further because the same attitudes I encountered at the national conference are probably indicative of many others as well. For that reason, not to mention I want to give readers who want to continue working with graphic novels an arsenal for the anti-graphic novel naysayers in their midst, I will touch on the main objections and provide additional sources to consult regarding these arguments. The following are some of the main points to consider and could prove capable of making people re-consider their stance on graphic novels as guilty pleasures: 1) All texts are images, though we have been made to forget that. 2) It's more important now than ever to discuss, analyze, and produce imagistic texts such as graphic novels. 3) Graphic novels have a rich history, and readers benefit from applying visual rhetoric to their analysis and production.

1) All texts are images whether they include images or not.

As Vilèm Flusser points out:

> The alphanumeric code we have adopted for linear notation over the centuries is a mixture of various kinds of signs: letters (signs for sounds), numbers (signs for quantities), and an inexact number of signs for the rules of the writing game (e.g., stops, brackets, and quotation marks)… We are unaware of the mental leaps we are obliged to make when we read and write only because we meekly follow the apparently smooth lines. (23)

Take a long, hard look at your keyboard and revel in the images there, which include not only the odd images sharing space with the

number keys but also the visual symbols we call letters. So how exactly did we forget, or simply decide not to see, the visual aspects of writing? Lester Faigley attributes this dichotomy to what he called the grand narrative of alphabetic literacy, which, he argued, led to (and still tacitly supports, as my experience with the graphic novel panel at the conference suggests) print bias (see also Kress and Van Leeuwen 1-2). Rooted in scholarly and popular works alike, the grand narrative of alphabetic literacy posits that

> no less than the rise of science, the development of democracy, the celebration of the individual, the establishment of Protestantism, the codification of law, and the spread of capitalism were the result of a shift from an oral bias to a written bias for conveying information and ideas. This shift is claimed to have facilitated abstract thinking and deductive logic. (Faigley)

In short, the grand narrative lauds print for a host of significant cultural effects and, by extension, diminishes the effects and reputations of oral and visual literacy. As Flusser notes, "Only in the eighteenth century, after a three-thousand year struggle, did texts succeed in pushing images, with their magic and myth, into such corners as museums and the unconscious" (147). The role-reversal of privileging text was swift and stunning. One way this print bias was reinforced was by treating text as transparent—the widespread mechanization of printing and increased schooling of the young allowed text on a page to become naturalized. When a text is naturalized, readers do not look at the text so much as *through* it, as Richard Lanham argues; with regard to books, that would entail ignoring the interface of the book, i.e., its visual aspects, to see only the words as content. Faigley further elaborates on the effects of transparency:

> It took decades of critical and empirical studies to convince scholars that texts are not transparent and that reading and writing are situated acts, but the ideal of the transparent text

> still persists in perceptions of literacy held by much of the public. The ideal of the transparent text entails several other presuppositions, foremost that "true" literacy is limited to the abstract representation of sounds, thus placing syllabic and logographic writing systems at a lower level and banishing pictograms and images to the status of illiterate.

The assumption that seeing is simple, that people can gaze upon an image and immediately grasp it, has also driven the idea that images within literary contexts are for children, as evidenced by the use of picture books in the first stages of reading. After all, the ability to read words must be taught, but the ability to see is, at its essence, a simple physical process, as Donis Dondis writes: "Primarily, the act of seeing involves a response to light" (21). However, as Dondis also reminds us, "The complexity of the visual mode does not allow the narrow range of interpretation of language" (37). Even the complex nature of images has been perceived as a drawback—a messiness and sloppiness compared to the perceived precision of words. In short, we are terrified of images, and by extension imagistic texts, because of what Roland Barthes called their polysemous nature, i.e., the ability of a single image to signify a vast array of meanings to an audience.

In addition to the uncertain horror that images provide because they can have multiple meanings instead of one fixed meaning, images are treated as intellectually suspicious because of ubiquity. Within capitalist societies, images are everywhere thanks to advertising. As Faigley put it: "No aspect of our culture is more thoroughly despised from the viewpoint of the academic humanities than advertising. Advertising is the discursive anti-Christ, doing everything that the tradition of academic literacy detests." Faigley also yokes part of the ill will toward advertising to its use of humor and parody, making it easy to see how comics could be caught up in the same ill will.

2) Why now? Why is it more important now than ever to discuss, analyze, and produce imagistic texts such as graphic novels?

Today, the perfect conditions for composing, consuming, and distributing imagistic texts have arrived with the continued penetration of the World Wide Web, where digital technologies give rise to texts that rely heavily on image and design no matter how many words are on the page. Thus, one factor for taking up graphic novels now is technology because increased access to technology facilitates increased possibilities for mixing meaning-making modes of communication.

Many scholars have challenged the monolithic notion of literacy as reading just words on a page over the years, but the New London Group's arguments, coupled with the increased number of networked people using systems that deliver image-heavy texts, has resonated most. A group of literacy scholars from the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia who came together in 1994 to discuss how technology was influencing literacy, the New London Group developed the concept of multiliteracies in 1994 because they noted "Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning" (5). Put another way, multiliteracies depends upon a multimodal work, which calls upon various symbol-producing systems to create meaning, with a system or mode being defined as "the resources that a culture makes available as the means for making representations and meaning—speech, writing, image, gesture, music, and others" (Kress and Jewitt 3-4). In making their argument for increased attention to multimodal works such as graphic novels, the New London Group implies society has already embraced mixed modes for creating meaning but educational institutions have not and must therefore keep up.

Further, the New London Group cited what they see as a fundamentally altered world, one where globalization and technology have fostered increased cultural and linguistic diversity that necessitates communicative flexibility. In looking deeper at the

reasons for expanding school literacy beyond text, the New London Group argues that the idea of multiliteracies, not simply alphabetic literacy in the sense of the grand narrative outlined above by Faigley, is critical for healthy citizenship in a globalized world of increased cultural and linguistic diversity: "When learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substantively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions" (15). The New London Group also argued that, in order to fully participate in the increasingly complex and diverse societies of a globalized world, students need to be versed in multiliteracies.

In a nutshell, this is why attending to visuals and text in graphic novels for students is so key, and this is why I posed the question at the national conference: We should hope students live a long, productive life after we encounter them as professors, and for students to do so now and in the future means they will need to understand how to analyze and produce images and compose image-heavy texts. Therefore, literacy practices need to expand beyond text to include other modes, and those modes each have specific uses according to their cultural role in society. Other scholars have seconded such arguments, citing the increased importance of understanding works in multiple modes because modern social, economic, and technological developments have shifted perceptions and composing practices. To that end, many of those scholars expound upon the stakes involved when embracing/ignoring multimodality and multiliteracies (see Kress; Kress and van Leeuwen; Kress and Jewett; Lanham; Lankshear and Knobel; Wysocki 2001, 2004, 2007; The WIDE Research Collective; Selfe and Hawisher; Yancey; and Selber).

With regard to the importance of comics, Joseph Witek argues that

> a critical analysis of the comic-book form is especially necessary now, when a growing number of contemporary American comic books are being written as literature aimed

> at a general readership of adults and concerned, not with the traditionally escapist themes of comics, but with issues such as the clash of cultures in American history, the burdens of guilt and suffering passed on within families, and the trials and small triumphs of the daily workaday world. (3)

Though Witek wrote the preceding passage more than 20 years ago, newer technologies have enabled new texts in the genre and grown new communities around them, further increasing their popularity. We connect to graphic novels because we connect to more than just one mode—we live in a multimodal world and these are multimodal works effective both in print and in digital versions created to take advantages of particular screens such as that of the iPad. Certainly some people will never believe that the genre that once featured violent villains and copious advertisements for Sea Monkeys and x-ray specs could spawn complex cousins worthy of serious study, but the impact technology has had on literacy practices and composing new texts should make naysayers reconsider that prejudice.

3) What exactly are graphic novels and why use visual rhetoric to study them?

While I have spent some time arguing for increased attention to highly imagistic texts, it is important to realize that graphic novels, while still a guilty pleasure, have indeed made inroads within certain academic contexts such as English departments. In fact, there are now multiple journals dedicated to comics studies (e.g., *ImageTexT*, started in 2004 and affiliated with the University of Florida, and *The International Journal of Comic Art*, published at Temple University since 1999). With respect to academia, though, as my conference example attests, people are still more accepting of reading and discussing graphic novels and comics in classes rather than approaching their production and relating it to contemporary writing skills. The works that have penetrated academia tend to be the classics of the genre, now almost 25 years old, from the late 1980s flowering of graphic novels—Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (first

collected and published in book form around that time) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. Some more recent works that have penetrated curricula are Allison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. Just mentioning these four works shows the difficulty of defining the graphic novel because of how large of a genre the term encompasses. Three of the four graphic novels (*Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun House*) are actually autobiography/memoirs (or "autographics," a term coined by Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti), while only one of the widespread four I mentioned could be looked at as including the traditional superhero genre (*Watchmen*).

As noted before, imagistic texts have long been part of human communication. The Lascoux cave drawings might be considered graphic novels by some, as could narratives composed in Native American petroglyphs and Egyptian hieroglyphics, as well as the visual narratives embedded in a Middle Ages stained glass window. Because of this longstanding image-narrative overlap, the exact origin of graphic novels is hard to pinpoint; moreover, many graphic novels consist of comics compilations, so it makes it difficult to configure that relationship as well, especially since some scholars (see Kunzle) trace comics as far back as European broadsheets from the 1400s.

However, in the American context, many trace the advent of the comic strip to "The Yellow Kid," first published in *The World* in 1895 (see Faigley), and the advent of the graphic novel to Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories*. Eisner admits he created the term "graphic novel" simply as a marketing tool. Taking an inclusive approach, Jessica Abel and Matt Madden provide a very loose definition: *comics* are a medium, a container for ideas (4). David Kunzle puts forth a more rigid definition: a *comic* contains "a sequence of separate images," includes "a preponderence of image over text," was published in a "mass medium," and relates a story that is "both moral and topical" (2). However, it is good to keep in mind that Kunzle's ideas center on his deep scholarship of early instances of comics, and many other scholars take issue with his claim that comics be moral. The distinction between comics and graphic novels is fraught with strife

in many quarters. Graphic novel is a slippery term, and I will not deign to define a genre that is still evolving and proliferating, except to say I view it as both fiction and non-fiction works where the narrative is aided and abetted by images and overt breaks in time and space. Scott McCloud, in attempting to differentiate comics from film, defines *comics* as "images juxtaposed in deliberate sequence in order to convey an idea and/or an aesthetic response" (7-9).

While McCloud focuses on the deliberation of sequence, it is equally clear that all elements of a panel, just as all elements of a sentence, are deliberate to some degree. When something is deliberate, rhetorical analysis can often be applied as an analytical tool, and the idea of a text is no different. As Anne Frances Wysocki argues: "All page- and screen-based texts are [...] visual and their visual elements and arrangements can be analyzed" ("Opening New Media"). This is where visual rhetoric comes in. To see whether it applies to a written text formerly deemed "transparent," here's a good test: think of the most dour, boring book you ever read—now picture (what is most likely) its serif, traditional font and page after page of words disappearing and its font being replaced by Comic Sans, or each full page replaced by one that includes only an individual sentence written in giant letters. Is that truly the same book? Though the words are exactly the same, their presentation has changed so much as to alter the entire act of reading and making meaning. Visual rhetoric provides a means to question how design affects materiality and meaning, so it is a helpful and adaptable lens to view many types of works (see Arnheim; Dickinson and Maugh; Ehses; Elkins; Foss; Handa; Kasper; Rose; Kress; Kress and van Leeuwen; Tufte, 2006a, 2006b; Wysocki, 2001, 2007).

Comics, just as a written text, are as simple (or complex) as we want to make them. If you read only for plot, you get plot. When reading as literature opens up to cultural readings and all manner of additional elements, ideas mushroom from there. Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik, for example, wrote "How to Read Nancy," arguing that a comic that many view as a horrifyingly simple comic (when, of course, viewed through the lens of print bias and perhaps

even more so than other comics since it often relies on few words, if any) is only deceptively simple: "Like architect Mies Van Der Rohe, the simplicity [of Nancy] is a carefully designed function of a complex amalgam of formal rules laid out by the designer" (1). In the next section, I'll examine some of the ways visual rhetoric allows readers to access some of those formal rules and enhance readings, which ultimately grows their writing and multimodal composing toolkits.

Visual Rhetoric and Graphic Novel Analysis

A deep interrogation of a graphic novel is a daunting prospect, especially since just analyzing textual elements has provided enough to ponder since the advent of modern English departments in the late 1800s. Yet graphic novels also provide images that include not just the representation of specific peoples, places, or things, but the shapes of panels and borders, the renderings of the words, and emanata, those squiggles of emotion drawn near a character's face to portray thoughts and feelings. All of these are choices on the part of the text's creator and reach an audience; therefore, they have the ability to be analyzed in terms of rhetoric because they are meant to connect with an audience and have an intended effect.

Take, for example, the issue of speech balloons, which carry a welter of meaning beyond the words they contain. Visual rhetoric provides a window into how genre, design, culture, and history contribute to meaning in graphic novels, and this can be illustrated with the examples of speech balloons. In an imagistic mode aware of its own materiality, every line and every mark can hold a potential meaning, so it is the reader's duty to unlock that. The speech bubble includes a genre expectation, built up over more than a hundred years—it contains inter- or intra-character communication, a signifier much like how quotation marks (or interior monologue italics) are used in traditional books. However, as Nate Piekos intimates, there are formal rules even for these well-established comic features: "[A] balloon tail should point to a character's mouth as if an invisible line continued on past the end of the tail to their face. Pointing it in the general area of the character (their hand, leg,

etc.) is never appropriate. A tail should terminate at roughly 50-60% of the distance between the balloon and the character's head." Such balloon tails often use smooth borders, nothing out of the ordinary, but what happens if the same border were jagged? Piekos explains some of the effects other borders can have: "Burst Balloons are used when someone is screaming their dialogue. They tend to be more irregular and chaotic…with a heavier stroke"; similarly, wavy lines surrounding the balloon denote a "weak balloon" used "when a character is in physical distress." In addition, there are three different ways to represent whispering, suggesting a need for readers to go beyond genre to grasp some of the conventions that are evolving: "Traditionally, whispered dialogue is indicated by a balloon with a dashed stroke. More recently accepted options are a balloon and dialogue in a muted tone (grayed-out), or with a lowercase font in conjunction with small dialogue/big balloon" (Piekos). Again, this is not to say that a written text could not approximate any of these techniques, but if we approach graphic novels by only privileging the text in the same way traditional literature is approached—simply viewing images as extraneous to the text or as background to supplement and ornament the words—we leave a lot of rich meaning on the table. Getting students to craft their own works in the graphic genre will allow them to discover that even the simple act of composing how speech balloons are rendered, and not just the words themselves, are deliberate choices that take on greater meaning.

Another key example of using visual rhetoric to aid analysis and production actually occurs in examining what amounts to white spaces—the gutter of the pages and the spaces in between panels. There is content within those spaces that readers must fill in, however subconsciously, almost as if whole paragraphs were contained within the blank spaces between the period and the capital letter of the next sentence of a written work. One way to start analyzing graphic novels, then, is to literally read between the lines, read inside the spatial transitions between panels. McCloud (1994, 2006) has published a series of books on understanding and making comics that are excellent resources for analyzing and

producing comics (see also Duncan and Smith; Wolk). McCloud draws his treatises as comic books, and he breaks down comic strategies that allow for rich classroom discussion and comics production. In one famous segment of *Understanding Comics*, McCloud, discussing the role of an active reader in the medium, points out how readers can become murderers by showing two panels: The first panel shows a person being chased by another holding an axe, and the second panel shows the outside of a building and a blood-curdling scream of "Eeyaa!!" echoing in the night. McCloud wrote: "I may have drawn an axe being raised in this example, but I'm not the one who let it drop or decided how hard the blow, or who screamed, or why. That, Dear Reader, was your special crime, each of you committing it in your own style." (68). Though some scholars take issue with this example, it helps to consider the panel and de-naturalize the reading practice of comics. In recalling the definitions of graphic novels from earlier, McCloud (*Understanding Comics*) makes an important distinction between comics and film that suggests the importance of interrogating these in-between spaces: "Each successive frame of a movie is projected on exactly the same space—the screen—while each frame of comics must occupy a different space. Space does for comics what time does for film!" (7).

Scott Kaufman provides an excellent example of visual rhetoric and the importance of the transitional spaces of graphic novels in his analysis of a page from *The Walking Dead*. The page in question consists of only five panels, and each panel only uses images. After fighting through the zombie madness that has engulfed his world, Rick is reunited with his family, and this page concerns Rick waking up in the tent after their first night together again. On the surface, not much happens, especially when viewing the page logocentrically—through the lens of print bias, some readers might simply skip along until the so-called important words come along, their eyes just barely grazing the page as they read with an eye to words only and not images. As Kaufman writes, "On the one hand, panels without textual components read more quickly…On the other hand, panels without textual components encourage readers

to linger on the images." A summation of the page might go something like this: Rick is sleeping with his son and wife, and Rick wakes up and smiles, happy to be back together with his family instead of cleaving zombies in the head with found objects out on the streets. However, a close reading of images yields more nuance and meaning for the work at hand. Unless lingering on the images, readers might think the first two panels are exactly the same: Rick's eyes are closed and they gradually open. However, upon closer inspection, while sleeping, Rick now has a furrowed brow. As Kaufman notes: "While brow-furrowing may not seem significant in and of itself, when combined with what the reader knows about what Rick went through to return to them—having to fight through hordes of zombies to escape Atlanta—the reader can infer, if not the precise content, at least the character of the nightmare that causes Rick's sleeping brow to furrow." We can only see one of Rick's eyes because he is sleeping on his side; the other eye is mashed into the pillow. In the next panel, the only change from the furrowed brow is an open eye, and the important take-away is to see where the gaze is directed—not at the wife and child next to him but where the reader can assume the opening of the tent must be. As Kaufman notes:

> Having been living and sleeping alone in a terrible world has taught him to sleep, as the saying goes, with one eye open. If something akin to what he was facing in his dreams is closing on him—if, that is, his unconscious mind was alerting to him to a present threat—he might catch it with a glance out of the door. He is sleeping the light sleep of the perpetually threatened.

That's a lot of character nuance being conveyed outside the realm of text. Further, Kaufman points out, "And only when he combines his realization that, on this occasion, his nightmare was only a dream with the fact that he is sleeping next to his wife and child in panel four can he experience the emotion displayed in panel five." Panel five shows Rick flashing a tight-lipped, woozy smile as he touches

his wife's arm. As Kaufman writes, "In narrative terms, it would have been more efficient to jump from panel one to panel five like so," using just panel one, Rick asleep, then panel five, Rick awake and happy to be with his family—but readers would not get Rick's character as richly.

In short, it's the same reason Cliff's Notes or SparkNotes aren't as satisfying as the real works they summarize. Kaufman argues the following would be lost if skipping from panel one to panel five: "the reader doesn't acquire the same knowledge of Rick's *attitude* to these events…what would be lost is the sense of interiority that the reader can acquire via a close study of a character's actions. A moment-to-moment sequence of word-free panels, then, can have the effect of pulling the reader into closer sympathy with the characters." Thus, this example shows how just harnessing the rhetorical power of images can make an argument about Rick's character and extend the overall meaning of the work: the point of the story is not to glorify the gore of massacring zombies but to peer into the psyches of regular people and see how they adjust to the changed reality a zombie outbreak entails. The central question of the graphic novel—how do you remain a real person, literally and figuratively, in such an atmosphere?—is pointed to in these panels. Rick is not an emotionless automaton who can switch between loving, protective family man and tense zombie killer in an instant. His safety in the present does not eclipse the horror he has experienced, and this sequence of images points to his being scared and vulnerable, which helps Rick's character connect with readers, most of whom would likely react in the same way. Simply skipping through this page while thinking, *Okay, now Rick's sleeping and he's happy to be back with the family*, then quickly searching for the next wordy part where it is assumed the next "important" exposition and story dynamism will occur (again, abetted by print bias), detracts from the reading experience and thus the richness of the work on the whole. Breaking down a sequence like this allows students to see what goes on between the panels is just as important as what is portrayed within them.

The Use of Visual Tropes and Figures in Visual Analysis

Another way to use visual rhetoric is to examine how other forms of rhetoric are remediated within the visual form. For example, the tropes and figures of rhetoric have a long history that originated in oral forms, and many of them proved to be equally as effective in writing and other forms such as visuals (see Corbett and Connors; Ehses). Additionally, many of these tropes and figures were used to amplify meaning, and thus they can find good usage within visuals in the context of comics, where amplification is used so frequently to carry meaning. As McCloud (*Understanding Comics*) states, comics are all about "amplification through simplification" (30). A good rule of thumb to figure out where tropes or figures might be employed—rather than having to memorize longs lists of Greek terms such as *prosopopoeia*—is to take notice where repetition is occurring because where there's a repetition of visuals, there's a fire of meaning. Again, if a reader does not attend to addressing the importance of visuals to the overall construction of the narrative, visual repetition might simply be seen as laziness on the part of the author and/or artist when viewed through the lens of print bias and ignored as a meaning-making element rather than seen as aiding it.

In this section, I'll discuss two examples of antanaclasis used in graphic novels to deepen the meaning. A great site for students to use for discerning the use of figures and tropes is *Silva Rhetoricae* (The Forest of Rhetoric), which defines *antanaclasis* as "The repetition of a word or phrase whose meaning changes in the second instance." A famous example they provide is Benjamin Franklin saying, "Your argument is sound…all sound," which relies on the twist of "sound" from compliment to put-down. The first use of visual antanaclasis is from Ed Piskor's *Wizzywig: Portrait of a Serial Hacker*, a graphic novel compiled from a series of strips about the criminal evolution of Kevin "Boingthump" Phenicle from childhood phone-phreaker to infamous computer hacker. The graphic novel skips around in time and space, but even early on, amidst strips that center on Phenicle's childhood antics, the reader knows that the

adult Phenicle has been caught and is awaiting sentencing. Pages 9-10 of *Wizzywig*, Figure 1, feature the first of a recurring segment, "Off the Rocker with your host Winston Smith | WABCD 108.3 on Your FM Dial," which focuses on the talk radio show of one of the childhood friends of Phenicle, Winston Smith.

The panel begins with what the readers can assume is Winston's voice beaming out on the airwaves to an audience that has grown because of his recently publicized ties to the apprehended hacker Phenicle. The words of Smith's voice appear in white on a black background at the top of each panel, and, unlike the smooth black border readers might expect to form the bottom of the black space, the bottom line is jagged and wavy; coupled with the fact readers know Smith's voice is spreading to the world on FM radio, it is quite natural to assume the jagged edge suggests radio waves as a way to further add this disembodied dimension to Smith's voice. However, one aspect of applying visual rhetorical analysis can relate to the actual physiological responses to images. Molly Bang suggests "we see pictures as extensions of the real world" (41) and thus we carry our embodied, real-life associations with particular shapes into the meanings of images. In the *Wizzywig* example, the contrast of the jagged line to the smooth sky and its rounded clouds is jarring. Bang argues this jarring feel results because "We feel more scared looking at pointed shapes; we feel more secure or comforted looking at rounded shapes or curves" (70). Sharp objects can tear flesh, which is something we've internalized. In the context of *Wizzywig*, though, why would radio waves be portrayed so ominously? Is it because that is simply their realistic shape? If so, the waves would probably be more rounded. As Smith's broadcast continues, a reason suggests itself as it builds to the end, and the jagged edge acquires a different meaning from the radio waves. After a series of images of "the public" living their lives while Smith's broadcast waves penetrate their realities, the jagged line continues until the penultimate panel featuring an old man drinking coffee beneath a crucifix. The old man is apparently in his living room and listening to Smith on an old radio. The segment ends on Kevin "Boingthump" Phenicle in a dark jail cell, his visage silhouetted in


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THE COUNTRY IS BREATHING AN UNNECESSARY SIGH OF RELIEF DUE TO THE CAPTURE OF A FUGITIVE
COMPUTER HACKER.

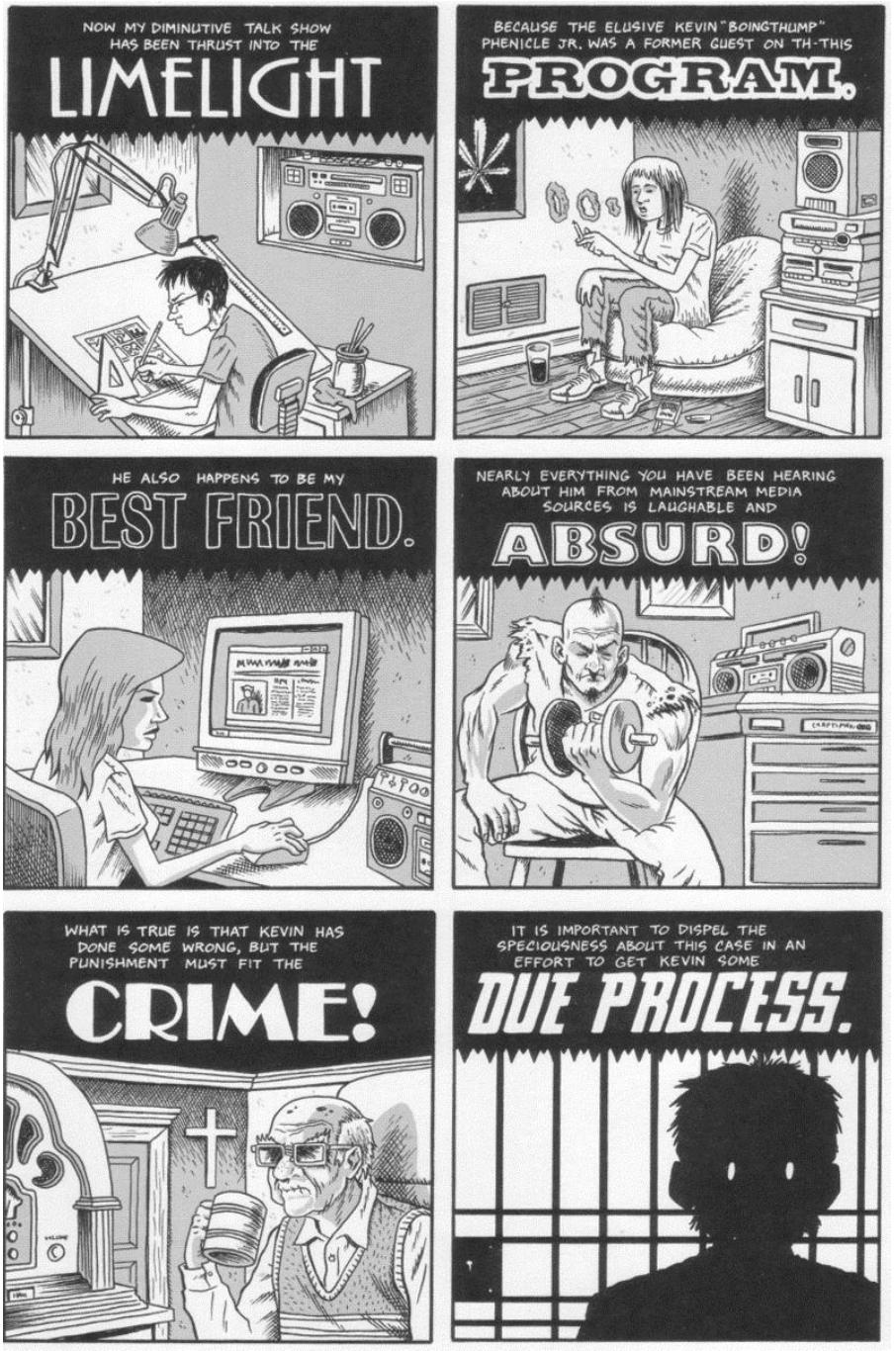

Figure 1: A section of Ed Piskor's *Wizzywig*

black, unlike the other panels where the public is illuminated in white. The jagged edge of the caption background now provides a different meaning from radio waves. In this context, the jagged edges can be seen as a hacksaw, which also alludes to the concept of hacking—the means by which Phenicle ended up in jail.

Moreover, the hacksaw suggests a possible means of escape based on his treacherous nature demonstrated so far—the sneaky, behind-the-scenes assaults perpetrated by hackers fit with the canard of escaping jail by uncovering a hacksaw blade hidden in a baked cake instead of a direct frontal assault on guards and such. Given the wild skills already attributed to him at this moment in the graphic novel—such as whistling into phones to start wars—there's nothing the reader would put past Phenicle, and the hacksaw edge also represents the craft powers he possesses, powers he might use at any moment to spring himself. The re-considered meaning of the jagged edge, from radio wave to hacksaw, provides visual antanaclasis that helps us to shed more light on both Smith and Phenicle, and thereby the graphic novel as a whole. The hacksaw aspect also helps us to re-conceptualize Smith's broadcast. He is, as he says, hoping to go against the grain of mainstream media reports about his best friend. Simply looking upon the edge of the caption background as a slight deviation for only artistic or ornamental purposes belies the richness of the passage. Even so, a close visual rhetoric reading of this segment would require much more work, since that would entail, among other things, analyzing the different fonts being used and the changing scale that highlights certain words similarly. I have focused on only one aspect of classical rhetoric being employed in visual terms in this segment.

A section of Daryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales*, Figure 2, demonstrates another use of antanaclasis that enriches the meaning of the work and is uncovered by attending to the visual rhetoric of the page. The example Cunningham used occurs in the section called "People with Mental Illness Enrich our Lives" and concerns Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys (57-59). Cunningham capitalizes on the images of the Beach Boys that have resided in our cultural consciousness for some time: surfboards, smiles, and matching

clothing, especially their striped shirts, which this segment actually hinges upon for meaning. The sequence starts with background on Wilson and images from his current time period, then moves to historical views of the Beach Boys (not shown).

Panel three of the section shows a medium shot of the Beach Boys playing a concert, smiles on their faces as usual, but the

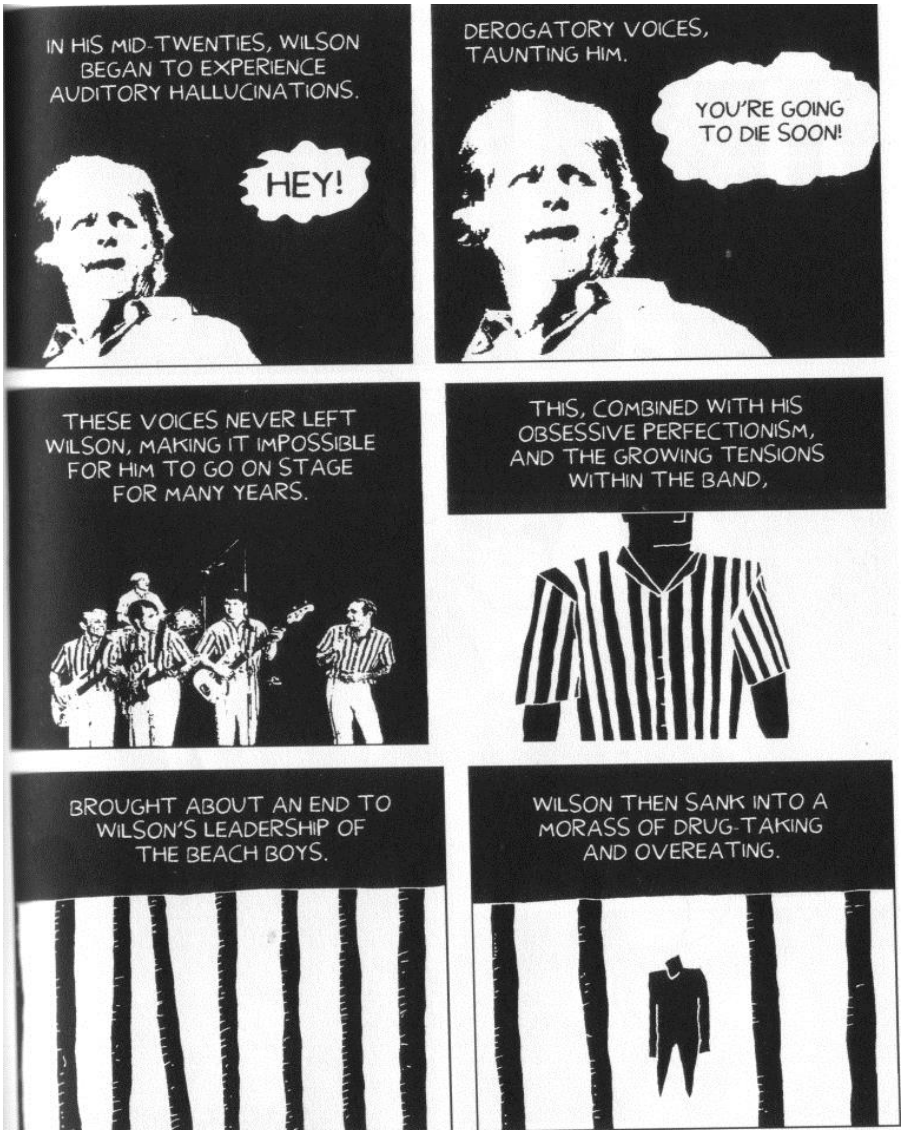

Figure 2: A section of Daryl Cunningham's *Psychiatric Tales*

caption above the band feels more ominous because we have just been given two panels that show how Wilson was tormented by auditory hallucinations; now the caption seems to float above the band like a disembodied voice. In this segment, the differences in

drawing style are important. The picture of the band playing is very realistic in style, almost as if it were a real picture that had been slightly tweaked in Photoshop. The panel caption says that Wilson's voices never left him, which made it impossible for him to perform for many years. Panel four moves to an isolated shot of a more "ragged" Wilson when compared to the realistic style of the photo of the band playing, as well as the other images of the older Wilson that have preceded the band. The words on the black background are superimposed on his head and blot out most of his facial features (most pronounced is the flat emotion of his mouth, which is antithetical to the image of the smiling Beach Boys in the preceding panel), and Wilson stands alone in the famous striped shirt while the caption relates how the voices and his obsessive perfectionism led to tensions within the band. In panel five, the focus on what we surmise is the striped shirt is now much closer, and the caption reads, "Brought about an end to Wilson's leadership of the Beach Boys." In the close-up view, we now see the stripes are not as solid as they appeared in the shots of the band performing from a distance. The edges are now torn and frayed, looking both fragile and jagged at the same time. Panel six focuses even closer, zooming in from the seven stripes shown in panel eight down to four. The caption states, "Wilson then sank into a morass of drug-taking and overeating," and an image of a headless body dressed in black appears within the stripes. This panel, in effect, portrays Wilson sinking into himself, collapsing under his problems, and even the depth of space makes it clear that the stripes of the infamous Beach Boys shirt now resemble the bars of a prison as well. Thus, in the space of a few panels, we see visual antanaclasis being employed as the meaning of the shirt changes from youthful exuberance and the marker of success and happiness into the cold, fragile, metallic bars of the prison cell of the mind.

This is driven home even further in the next panel by the caption "Reportedly spending weeks or months in bed" and the image of the four "bars" remains, now corralling a more representative drawing of an older Wilson's profile rather than the stick figure caricature we last saw (although the flat affect is the same). Additionally, the

black bars have now switched to white. The next page's caption reads, "A prisoner of his own tormented mind"; the bars are now gone, but the side visage remains. These panels help to illustrate the passage of time, which is demonstrated in the caption of panel seven, "Reportedly spending weeks or months in bed," and—to recall Bang—rendered in the actual switching of light and dark that physically recalls the cycles of night and day. Also, the reversal extends the antanaclasis of the shirt to show that light (freedom) was always at hand, but Wilson remained a prisoner inside himself due to mental illness. In the last panel, the bars are gone because they were never really there in the first place. He is free to do anything at any point, and we can now see his inability to do so from his point of view instead of ours. This segment of visuals depicts the struggles of Wilson in a way that the words can only hint at, and its effect is achieved in part through antanaclasis. The shirt that represents the happy-go-lucky surf band is also a jailer, the demands of fame and perfection helping to imprison Wilson alongside the auditory hallucinations.

The Grammar of Images

Joe Sacco provides another example of how visual rhetoric can benefit the analysis of graphic novels and aid writing skills. Sacco is, for lack of a better term, a graphic journalist who has submitted comics dispatches from strife-filled areas of the globe for almost twenty years. However, some have objected to Sacco using what they see as a non-serious genre to report on some of the most serious humanitarian crises of our time. Nonetheless, Sacco's comics provide an interesting test for applying visual rhetoric because, as journalism, they have an ostensible guide in the guise of journalist objectivity that other graphic novels, particularly those of fiction, do not have to answer to. If, for example, Sacco is just relaying exactly how something happened and nothing else, visual rhetoric would still be at work, but its use to unlock deeper meanings of the work might be mitigated. However, using visual rhetoric to examine Sacco's work reveals that strict objectivity is not adhered to—and

that is a good thing in the context of the narrative and the deeper meaning of his works.

His 2012 book *Journalism* is a compendium of journalistic comics. When viewed all together, it is clear that a particular point of view, a particular pattern of visual representation, is followed throughout his comics over the years. In this section, I'll go beyond the classical tropes and figures to include culturally determined ways of seeing articulated by other scholars. In their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen argue that people are enculturated to view images in particular ways based on their societies. For example, people in societies that read from left to right tend to approach images that way and therefore privilege images and icons on the left of the page. In Sacco's work, what stands out is a preponderance of drawings that feature straight-on headshots, much like the talking heads that populate many news reports and documentaries. Unlike news reporters and the subjects of many documentaries, the people in Sacco's work who are directing their gaze at the viewers are often the weakest, most overlooked members of society, and, in many cases, their situation is precarious, populated more by the prospect of hopelessness rather than hope. In short, the situations of these subjects are not going to change without intermediation by another source, most likely an outside source. As Kress and van Leeuwen write in their grammar of visual design, whenever contact is established between an image and the viewer, no matter how imaginary the contact, it sets up "a visual form of address" that addresses viewers as a "visual you" and "constitutes an 'image act'" (117). Recalling Halliday, Kress and van Leeuwen refer to such an image as a "demand": by demanding the viewer's gaze, it also "demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relations with him or her" (118). Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that the actions and facial features of the image indicate the relationship that is intended to occur between viewer and object, i.e., the role the viewer is supposed to inhabit. However, in Sacco's work, the people are often simply talking—the viewer, by looking, is ironically asked to become something most of these people do

not have—a listener. This direct, face-on representation breaks bread between viewer and subject who, most likely, hail from inordinately different places.

The proximity of the people to the viewer is important as well because the spatial distance of personal depiction carries meaning. Kress and van Leeuwen (*Reading Images*) suggest, again using Western cultural standards that inform our reading of images, that the closer and the more direct the gaze, the more the image subject is considered as someone the viewer *could* have an imaginary social relation with, someone they could engage with as an equal. By contrast, exposure to a subject from far away and only sometimes directly suggests that the people are not social equals or someone with whom they could—or should—associate. Such people are depicted as "objects of contemplation" (120), not someone viewers could entertain having a meaningful social relationship with. Sacco's depictions demand that we look at his subjects as equals, and when we see them as equals, we realize that such injustices being perpetrated against us or others we consider equals would not be tolerated, so we should act on their behalf.

Sacco, by his choice of genre, repudiates the "tit-for-tat reporting [he'd] learned in journalism school" (26), which, at that time, was centered on print paradigms. As demonstrated by the visual rhetoric analysis of his panels, Sacco corroborated this when he wrote, "I chiefly concern myself with those who seldom get a hearing, and I don't feel it is incumbent on me to balance their voices with the well-crafted apologetics of the powerful" (27). Looking at specific pieces of *Journalism*, this idea is evident in his depiction of Chechen women vis-à-vis the Russians (Figure 3). We hear the story of one Chechen woman and her experiences in the war there, as well as in refugee camps. Her head is constantly at what readers could assume is their eye level. By contrast, Sacco ends the page on a long shot of the Sputnik refugee camp, relating that an outside organization has estimated the number of displaced persons as 110,000, whereas the Russian government has "frozen its tally" because "Russia pretends that people are no longer fleeing its 'anti-terrorist war' in Chechnya." Obviously the linguistic message is not

objective, but the choice of the long shot is not, either. Instead of providing a distant, objectifying look at the displaced persons, the long shot provides an argument as to the scale of what the Russians are ignoring. Sacco attempts to have readers empathize with the Chechen position by employing visual rhetoric.

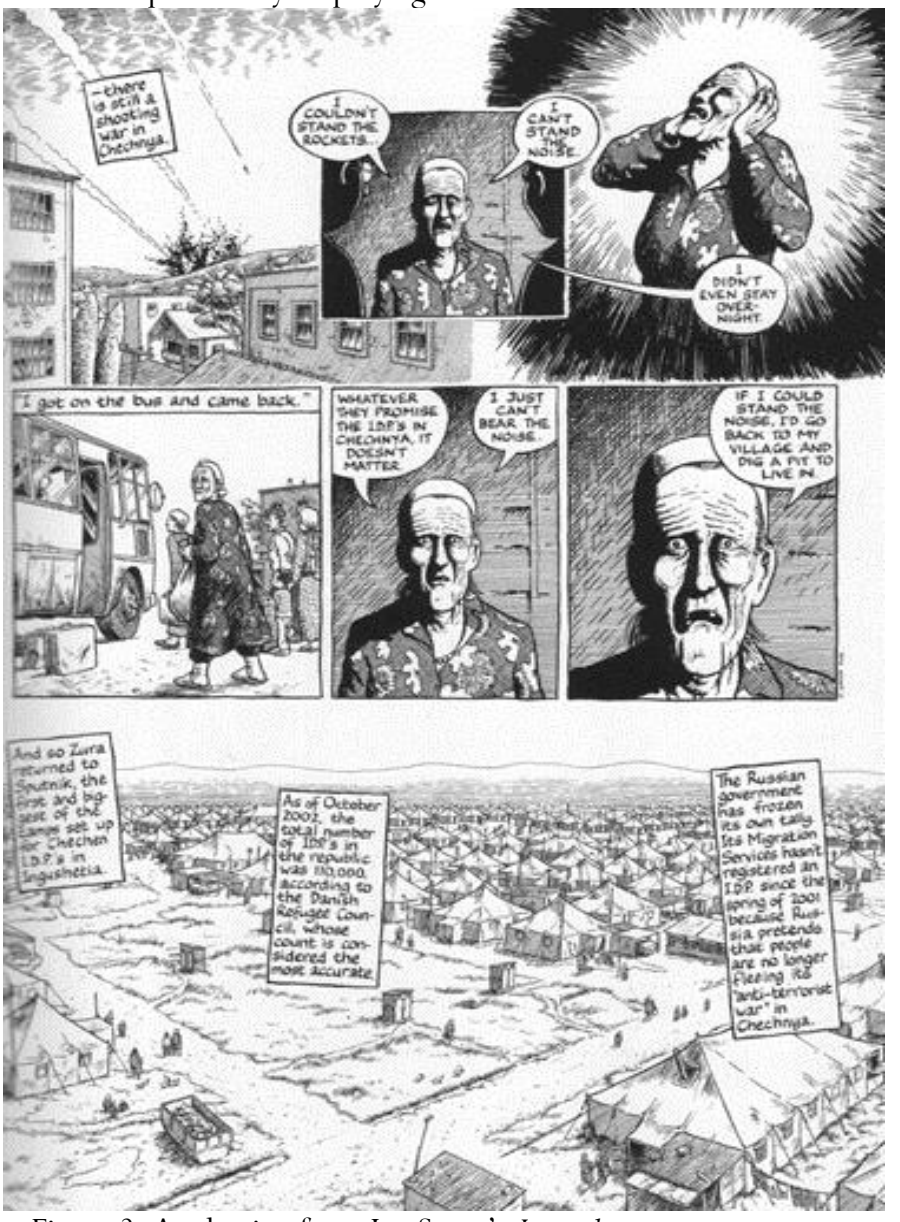

Figure 3: A selection from Joe Sacco's *Journalism*

Producing Graphic Novels in the Classroom

In bringing this article to a close, my hope is to provide helpful contexts for readers who may wish to teach graphic novels in a variety of classes in the future. Expertise is not groomed by remote viewing; instead, it is cultivated by deliberate practice (Ericsson et al.) in the field you are hoping to enter. In the case of analyzing graphic novels, the different circumstances of their production and the different realities of their spatial natures require a different approach from the more one-to-one relationship of using written text to comment on solely alphabetic literatures. The point of producing graphic novels in writing classes is not to produce a master artistic work that rivals the works of famous comic artists, but to gain a better understanding of the genre, its strategies, and its available choices in order to aid the analysis of works, which also reinforces further image-text production in other classes and the students' lifeworlds beyond academia as well. With such analysis and production centered on flexible rhetorical frameworks, students are able to summon a host of critical thinking abilities and deploy them in various, and increasingly multimodal, writing contexts.

To that end, I offer some brief notes on getting started in producing comics in the classroom. One thing to stress is flexibility. If, for example, you can draw well, that doesn't mean you need to make your students draw; conversely, if you're good with computer programs, don't ban students from hand-drawing comics. There's also no need to force students to use one program just because you know it. Students need to work through the process of selecting the type of production that will work based on their own drawing abilities and access to computer software. The subject matter (unless a topic is tied to a reading, obviously) should be flexible as well, meaning the topic could stem from fiction or non-fiction sources, not to mention images could emanate from the minds of the students or from found objects such as photographs.

In dealing with the hand-drawn dilemma, here are a few things to consider. Just as with writing, many people doubt their ability to write because error has always been pointed out instead of any

goodness within it, and the same goes with drawing—they see the mistakes and how their works don't stack up to those of famous artists just like their writing doesn't stack up to famous authors they encounter in their education. Second, it's important to stress that the idea is not to groom potential artists but to build better thinkers, creators, and analyzers. The point is thinking through narrative construction, literature, writing, and rhetoric, and connecting with an audience, not mimicking something in real life with a pen. As Abel and Madden put it, "The realism or flashiness of a drawing is nowhere near as important as its ability to convey information" (9). Using books (or even excerpts) from McCloud, Eisner, and Abel and Madden can help in providing terminology and techniques. Regardless of the final product, the act of producing comics and graphic novels allows students to see the choices that go into making such imagistic texts connect with readers, and a better understanding of that process allows us to analyze and deploy those rhetorical elements in the ever-growing range of contemporary multimodal texts. To that end, I provide a brief overview of a few digital programs that can be used for comic creation (keep in mind there are scores of programs, but I chose a few that would be easy to use and are free or very affordable).

Comic Life (http://comiclife.com/)

A robust platform for making quality comics, Comic Life is software that provides a wealth of options and effects to achieve professional-looking results. Because of that, the learning curve is steeper than some other programs, but many students would prefer to invest the time into something that's versatile and professional enough to be used again and again. The program costs $29.99, but a free trial is available (they offer much cheaper apps as well). Importantly, the program works with uploaded images and can handle long works, which is important for students doing any sort of memoir or argumentative writing. It offers tons of comic options and effects that students like to experiment with.

Pixton (http://www.pixton.com/)

A free program that resides in the cloud. It offers a very user-friendly interface that centers on drag-n-drop elements, and there are special features for educators, including the ability to make a private network where students and teachers can share and comment on all work. Educators can assess work (and make rubrics) directly inside Pixton. A great feature Pixton offers is the ability to pull from crowdsourced content, e.g., objects and props made by other people that can be used in your comic if people have elected to share them. The strips live online and can be shared as a link.

Bitstrips (http://www.bitstrips.com/)

Another free program that resides in the cloud. The program offers tons of options and pre-made objects, as well as a very easy-to-use and customizable interface. Although the site is free to use and share comics, the educator version costs $9.95 a month.

Conclusion

Though a range of writing and literature courses increasingly engage with graphic novels, many still do so primarily through the lens of traditional book-based practices, thus cutting students off from important interpretive, critical, and productive techniques derived from other modes of meaning-making such as the image. Graphic novels are not simply honey to use in order to make the vinegar of "real literacy" go down; they are an important source for discovering a range of analytical and writing techniques that can be applied to various contemporary digital writing contexts. Digital texts often rely on images, and as such texts increasingly form a dominant part of our students' professional, civic, and social worlds, writing teachers must grapple with the challenges that image-heavy texts provide in order to help students develop the slew of skills needed for contemporary invention and composing. Analyzing and producing graphic novels provide students an important range of skills that makes them more flexible, and thus more potent, twenty-first century writers.

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