Spring 2-2022

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Chase Gregory
Bucknell University, cpg008@bucknell.edu

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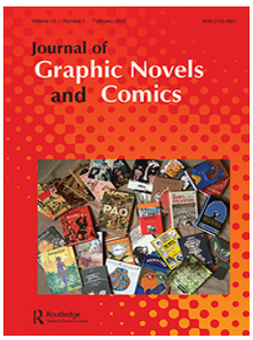

Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcom20

Comics and the body: drawing, reading, and vulnerability. Studies in comics and cartoons

by Szép, Eszter, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-8142-5772-2.

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To cite this article: Chase Gregory (2022): Comics and the body: drawing, reading, and vulnerability. Studies in comics and cartoons, Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2022.2032232

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2022.2032232

Published online: 27 Jan 2022.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

Comics and the body: drawing, reading, and vulnerability. Studies in comics and cartoons, by Szép, Eszter, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-8142-5772-2.

Eszter Szép's debut monograph *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability* (2020) offers a sparkling and insightful intervention into the field of comics studies. Carving out a new space for theorists working at the intersection of phenomenology, reader response, and formal analysis, Szép argues that reading and drawing comics is an embodied narrative encounter, one that makes both author and reader experience vulnerability in politically generative ways.

To that end, her book focuses on the drawn line – an aspect of comics that remains undertheorized – as the thing that precipitates this vulnerable intimacy. Chapter one takes a close look at Lynda Barry's pedagogic comics *What It Is* (2008) and *Syllabus* (2014), to introduce her readers to the ways in which the drawn line relates to embodiment. Chapter two analyzes Ken Dahl's illness memoir, *Monsters* (2009), as a way of exploring how a comics writer might perform monstrosity and vulnerability. Chapter three focuses on style, taking up Joe Sacco's detailed and compassionate hatch marks in *Safe Area Goražde* (2000) and *The Fixer* (2003). In chapters four and five, Szép pivots her attention to the reader, exploring the readerly effects of the line in the work of Miriam Katin's post-holocaust memoirs *We are on Our Own* (2006) and *Letting it Go* (2013), and of the physical book object in Katie Green's *Lighter Than My Shadow* (2013) and Sacco's *The Great War* (2013).

Pivoting away from such over-trod subjects as the gutter and frame, Szép's singular attention to the line in comics makes possible her largely phenomenological approach. One side effect of Szép's unconventional focus is that the medium under investigation in her book, comics, remains largely undefined: while she is otherwise diligent in providing readers with helpful and well-articulated glosses of the various concepts she employs and explores (among them vulnerability, trauma, allo-identification, and pictoral embodiment) and the specific genres in which she is most interested (reportage; memoir), Szép avoids giving her readers a specific working definition of graphic literature – assuming, perhaps rightly, that her audience knows it when they see it. This is likely because many definitions of comics place an emphasis on aspects of the medium in which her text has little stake. Formal qualities such as the gutter, the frame, sequential narrative, or the word bubble take a backseat to her book's focus on line. Comics, for Szép, are characterised by drawn lines, physicality, and author-reader collaboration.

As such, *Comics and the Body* lays the foundation for an exciting new path for comics studies, a path that fully plumbs two related aspects of graphic literature that have long been remarked upon, but never thoroughly explored. The first is a new take on the materiality of the medium. While there has been a significant amount of materialist scholarship on comics most of it tends to focus on graphic narrative's shift from the originally cheap, easily distributable 'comic book' to the more gatekept and less accessible longform 'graphic novel.' By contrast, Szép discussions of the materiality of comics focus on its intimate, haptic qualities: the drawn line emphasises that both the reader's *and* the drawer's hand have touched the images on the page. The second is

comics' highly collaborative narrative mechanics. Most comics scholarship locates this mechanism in the closure that takes place in the gutter between panels, but Szép's focus on the line allows her to theorise other aspects of comics that contribute to the medium's uncanny ability to catalyse readerly participation – aspects that, for her, lead to embodied vulnerability, even empathy.

While she takes pains to remark that comics are not unique in this regard (she borrows portions of her argument, for example, from theories of film, visual art, and literature) Szép still posits that there is something special about comics when it comes to the shared, embodied relational project between reader and author. This raises a question of the intended specificity and scope of her argument. Making a specific form-based argument, but still acknowledging that this specific form doesn't lay sole claim to the narrative processes she describes, Szép can have her media studies cake and eat it too. This isn't necessarily a flaw: on the contrary, one of the most exciting parts of *Comics and the Body* is the fact that it's the questions it raises have implications outside of comics studies. At times, though, one is left to wonder to what extend the content and genre of her objects influences the broader claims she makes about the comics form, and, even more generally, about creative production and consumption at large. Her objects are all non-fiction, auteur, book-bound comics published at the start of the millennium. Does it matter that the texts she takes up are all either memoirs of historical or personal trauma? That they are all long-form, contemporary, single-author, and in black-and-white?

More than once, Szép does note that the texts covered in *Comics and the Body* share more than just their comic-ness, especially when it comes to their substance. She spends time remarking on how the formal performative qualities upon which her book focuses are often mirrored in the plots and narrative content of her objects: she remarks, for example, on the various ways the dynamics of Self and Other play out in the stories these comics depict. Here, Szép's attention to difference – and, importantly, its relation to power – is laudable. Though she does take care to note that power plays out differently depending on readerly subject position, there are moments when 'the reader' is theorised as a somewhat non-specific entity. The book is perhaps weakest at these moments of unproblematized universalism. While she pays attention to writerly difference (noting, for example, how Ken Dahl's position as a white-het-cis man is key to the subversive power of *Monsters*), readerly difference is less fleshed out. Does it matter if the reader is a woman? Is gay? Is non-white? Is a parent, child, or teacher? As the first-person plural proliferates in the chapters devoted to readerly response, I find myself wondering to whom Szép's 'we' refers, and if all readers have the same relationship to vulnerability.

This book will be of interest to comics scholars who are interested in theories of form that go beyond the gutter, frame, and panel, as well as to scholars who in the past have been frustrated by theories of form that exclude the reader from their analysis. *Comics and the Body* is accessible and clear; Szép writes not only with nuance and precision, but also with a love of and appreciation for her objects – a personal, infectiously enthusiastic style that performs the same readerly involvement she theorises. This marriage of textual form and argumentative substance comes to a zenith in the Conclusion, when Szép playfully introduces us to her own line in the form of a hand-drawn comic. The result of this experiment is an accurate reflection of Szép's work as a whole: though it takes a form that departs from the rest of the monograph, her concluding comic rings with the same clarity, insight, and occasional light-heartedness that characterises the entirety of *Comics and the Body*. This book constitutes an important and necessary addition to comics scholarship, urging us to account for bodies, feeling, difference, and the mutual vulnerabilities that emerge in the project of reading and writing graphic literature.

Notes on contributor

Chase Gregory is an Assistant Professor of English and C. Graydon & Mary E. Rogers Faculty Fellow at Bucknell University, where they write about and teach courses on gender and sexuality; identity and popular culture; and twentieth-century US literature. Chase is the author of multiple peer-reviewed articles tackling various topics, all of which find common ground in their queer and feminist commitments and methodology. Their articles have appeared in *GLQ, differences, Diacritics, Studies in Comics, Feminist Spaces*, and *Polygraph*.

Chase Gregory
Department of English, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA, USA,Vaughn Literature Bldg, Room 112, Bucknell University, Lewisburg PA 17837
chase.gregory@bucknell.edu

https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2022.2032232