

Seeing the visible book: How graphic novels resist reading.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Seeing the Visible Book: How Graphic Novels Resist Reading

Michael Joseph (bio)

While comics and picture books share morphological and semiological similarities, their respective frames of cultural reference and social use are distinct. Picture books serve a pedagogical function¹; besides being commercial and artistic enterprises, they exist to impart to children a coherent notion of the world, teach basic concepts of decoding, and cultivate reading skills. They introduce prospective readers to books, and to the idea that books can bring canny readers pleasure and power. Although they are not limited to didactic utility—indeed, most writers about picture books concentrate on expressive and conceptual qualities—the *raison d'être* of picture books remains educational and thus wedds them inseparably (if loosely) to cultural notions of childhood. At the cusp of adolescence, when children have gained intermediary reading competence, many will tend to reject picture books precisely because the genre symbolizes a stage of development, or a childish identity, they feel they have outgrown. Rejecting picture books has become a rite of passage.

Comics are burdened by no such expectations (Hatfield, *Alternative* 32-33). While they serve incidental pedagogical ends, comics have until recently had no institutionalized role in the developmental model of reading comprehension. While the state of play has changed radically in recent times as educators have seen a heretofore-overlooked pedagogical potential in them,² comics have traditionally been expectation-free. Alternative comics in particular remain self-consciously expectation-free; they have constellated around, and knowingly celebrate, scholastic inutility. Alternative comics do not transmit a set of reading operations, or relate actual and notional objects to linguistic signs to regulate the development of abstract thinking skills. They undermine ostension and reobjectify signs; they rematerialize abstraction. Whereas an alphabet picture **[End Page 454]** book might depict a cow beside the letter "C," to illustrate the links among the letter "C," the sound one makes when vocalizing the "c" at the beginning of the word "cow," and the subfamily of *Bos* to which the word "cow" may

politely apply, a graphic novel might depict a sweet, sad-eyed cow on the front and back boards of a book to remind readers that fine bindings were once made from the skin of a cow. In what follows, I will suggest why I think a complete understanding of alternative comics, in particular graphic novels,³ must include how alternative comics resist reading as a socially constructed practice.

Ken Parille points out that in *David Boring* (2000), Daniel Clowes "includes a handful of color panels that imitate the bold, chunky art of second-rate mid-sixties super-hero comics" (142). In Adrian Tomine's *Summer Blonde* (2002), panels consist of small dots that recall Ben Day dots, the hallmark of the graphic process of printing comics during the 1950s and 1960s. Tomine's dots serve as a modulation throughout his narratives: a prompt that speaks to the object in hand. Clowes and Tomine are reminding readers that they are looking at pictures and are engaged in an intellectual process involving inference, abstraction, conceptualization, recollection, understanding, and pleasure; they are renegotiating a medium with a social history; they are holding a (book) object; and perhaps even that they, themselves, are a material reality. To use Beatrice Warde's distinction, these modulations force readers to look *at* rather than *into* the book in hand, and when one looks *at* something, one is not reading.

Simulating advertisements in bygone comics and printed ephemera, Chris Ware and Ben Katchor ([figure 1](#)) similarly invoke the sociohistorical context of comics, disrupting reading and disturbing the conventional boundary between text and paratext. If paratexts "ensur[e] the text's presence in the world . . . and [its] consumption in the form . . . of a book" (Genette, *Paratexts* 1), gestures like these appear to mock the prestige that accrues to their work as books—as *graphic novels*—and claim indeterminacy, a phenomenological in-betweenness commensurate with the fauvist phase of any artistic movement, and with adolescence.

Perhaps such liminalizing gestures—and here I use "liminal" in Victor Turner's sense: something "in between" that disturbs, or slips or falls between, established social structures—are inherent in the comic

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Michael Joseph is a rare book librarian at Rutgers University, and a frequent contributor to the discourse on children's literature. He is also the author of *Lost Light* (Hansimus, 2011), in collaboration with the composer Herbert Rothgarber and the artist Barbara Henry, and *Useless Tools: For Every Anxious Occasion*, in collaboration with the artist Sarah Stengle (Hunterdon Art Museum, 2011).



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