**Defining Comics**

Although there are hard cases, most comics are easily recognized as comics. Still, we might be interested in discovering what comics *really are*—perhaps in order to figure out what to say about those hard cases, perhaps because we think that figuring out what they really are will provide us with a more sophisticated sense of how to approach them (for example, how to interpret or evaluate them), or perhaps because we simply want to learn more about ourselves and our culture. If so, we might search for a definition of comics. But not in a dictionary—dictionaries typically provide only lexical or nominal definitions; that is, definitions that merely capture the way words are commonly used and which often provide just enough information so that users can understand a term (Gupta 2014). It seems then that what we want is something akin to what a philosopher would call a real definition of comics—an account of the defining features of the category of comics.

It is controversial whether any extant proposed definitions of comics are adequate. It is also controversial whether a definition of comics is even possible. And it is not always clear what the project of defining comics aims at. This chapter addresses these three controversies. The first section of the essay briefly discusses nine of those hard cases that I mentioned above. The second section explores various proposed definitions of comics as well as the challenges they face. The third section addresses scepticism about the possibility of a successful definition of comics. The final section briefly explores alternative conceptions of the project of defining comics.

**Hard Cases**

There are many easy cases. No one seriously doubts that *The Amazing Spider-Man #100* is a comic. The same is true about *Krazy Kat*, *Fun Home,* *Peanuts*, *Tintin in America*, *Asterix in Britain*, *Astro Boy, xkcd,* and so on. (I have met some benighted souls who think that *Fun Home* and *Maus* are graphic novels or graphic memoirs but not comics. Since graphic novels and graphic memoirs comprise proper subsets of comics this is an error and does not suggest that these cases are not easy ones.) But there are many hard cases too—cases where there is legitimate controversy about whether the item in question is a comic or not. Here are some of those hard cases—admittedly some are harder than others—which have been discussed in the literature:

1. **Single panel comics:** A number of theorists hold that a sequence of some kind is essential to comics. On an ordinary understanding of “sequence” this seems to preclude single panel cartoons from counting as comics. (The mathematical notion of a sequence allows for sequences of only one member.) So, for example, Scott McCloud famously claimed that single panel cartoons such as *The Family Circus*, *The Far Side*, and *Dennis the Menace* are cartoons but not comics because they are not sequential (McCloud 1993: 20-21). Others disagree with McCloud on this point (e.g., Harvey 2001: 76; Beaty 2012: 34).
2. **Abstract comics:** Andrei Molotiu’s 2009 anthology, *Abstract Comics: The Anthology: 1967-2009*, collects a wide range of cases of putative comics whose panels “contain little or no representational imagery” and often do not “cohere into a narrative or even a unified narrative space” (Molotiu 2009: introduction). Some theories of comics which place an emphasis on narrative (see, for example, Carrier 2000 and Hayman and Pratt 2005) appear committed to denying that these abstract illustrations are really comics.
3. **Comics without pictures:** Although *Batman #663* contained some pictures, it is, as Roy Cook puts it, “essentially a prose short story” with just a smattering of illustrations (Cook 2011: 289). Its existence suggests the possibility of an entirely pictureless comic book. So Cook, as well as Meskin (2007: 374), claim that there can be comics without pictures. But many theorists think pictures are an essential feature of comics (see, for example, McCloud 1993 and Hayman and Pratt 2005); hence, they would deny that a completely non-pictorial issue of *Batman* could count as a comic.
4. **Eighteenth century comics:** William Hogarth’s eighteenth century satirical print series such as *A Harlot’s Progress* and *A Rake’s Progress* are seen by many to be the forerunners of comics (see, for example, Sabin 1996: 11-15). However, some theorists have argued that Hogarth’s works are themselves comics (McCloud 1993: 16-17; Lopes 2010: 17).
5. **Ancient comics:** McCloud pushes the birth of comics far back before the eighteenth century—on his account, sixteenth century pre-Columbian picture manuscripts and Egyptian paintings from three millennia ago count as comics (McCloud 1993: 10-15). But many scholars (see, for example, Meskin 2007) who have written on the subject are resistant to characterizing these as comics since they seem to lack the appropriate historical connection to contemporary comics.
6. **Non-western comics**: It is standard to treat comics as a European invention, but Adam L. Kern suggests that *kibyōshi*, a late eighteenth/early nineteenth Japanese genre of mass-produced illustrated literature, are a species of comic books (Kern 2009: 242).
7. **Picture books:** The paradigmatic comic tells a story using a combination of words and sequence of pictures. But this is true of many children’s picture books. Some children’s picture books (e.g., Mo Willems’ *Pigeon* series) even use speech bubbles and employ a cartoon style. Are picture books a kind of comic? Or are comics a kind of picture book? Or do the two categories simply overlap? (For discussion, see Beaty 2012: 38-40.)
8. **Woodcut novels:** Some writers categorize the early twentieth century woodcut novels by authors like Frans Masereel and Lynd Ward as comics (McCloud 1993: 18-19), while others suggest they are simply “part of the same large family tree” (Spiegelman 2010).
9. **Site-specific comics:** There are a number of works which have been characterized by artists and curators as “site-specific comics”. (For an example, see <http://www.ordinarycomics.com/plantingcomics/>; for discussion see Meskin 2012: 36-37.) Those theorists who think comics are essentially “reproductive” (Kunzle 1973: 2; see also Moore 2006: x) would presumably resist treating these works as comics.

**Definitions**

Our primary focus is on the definition of comics. Some theorists have attempted to define other categories. David Kunzle, for example, defines the comic strip in the following way:

1/There must be a sequence of separate images; 2/There must be a preponderance of image over text; 3/ The medium in which the strip appears and for which it was originally intended must be reproductive, that is, in printed form, a mass medium; 4/The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical (Kunzle 1973: 2).

Although Kunzle is often treated as offering a definition of comics (see Meskin 2007: 369-370 and Beaty 2012: 32), this appears to be a mistake since comic strips plausibly comprise a proper subset of comics. After all, Grant Morrison’s *The Invisibles* is a comic but not a comic strip. Hence, critics of Kunzle, who accuse him of not capturing the essential features of comics, are arguably misguided since he is properly understood as aiming at a definition of a narrower category. That being said, there appear to be problems with Kunzle’s account even if we restrict our view to comic strips. For example, although what is meant by “preponderance” is not clear, it seems that a preponderance of image over text is not required for something to be a comic strip. (For discussion see Meskin 2009: 228-229). M. Thomas Inge also proposed a definition of the comic strip (Inge 1990: xi) which, since it makes essential reference to publication in newspapers, seems to have been falsified by the development of web-comics.

What about comics? I distinguish four broad strategies for defining the category: formalist definitions, anti-formalist narrative definitions, institutional definitions and historical definitions. The first two of these categories encompass a wide range of extant definition; the third is, to my knowledge, only exemplified by one extant proposal; the final approach has merely been suggested as a possibility.

Artistic form is typically understood as being distinct from content and, although this way of looking at things has been challenged by philosophers of art, we shall treat it that way for the sake of this essay. So formalist approaches to defining comics eschew reference to any specific representational or semantic features and focus on significant relationships between the elements of the medium. The most common formalist approach to comics locates their essence in sequentiality. For example, Will Eisner is often characterized as proposing that comics can be defined as “sequential art” (Beaty 2012: 34). But it is worth noting that Eisner (2005: 147) clearly treats comics as merely a species of sequential art so this cannot be treated as a complete definition. On the other hand, Scott McCloud (1993: 9) defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” The advantage of such a formalist definition is its broadness. As McCloud himself puts it, “the secret is not what the definition says but in what it doesn’t say!” (McCloud 1993: 21). So, as he emphasizes, no genres or media are excluded. Nevertheless, many scholars think that such definitions are overly broad and anachronistic since they count, among other things, those pre-Columbian manuscripts and Hogarth print series mentioned above as comics (Harvey 2001: 75; Meskin 2007: 373-374). And, as hinted at above, there is a dimension along which such definitions seem too narrow since they typically exclude some things that some other theorists count as comics (viz., single panel cartoons and pictureless comics).

Thierry Groensteen’s recent account of comics also excludes single panel cartoons from the category of comics (Groensteen 2007: 17-20). Groensteen does not offer a complete definition of comics—the title of the section in which his discussion of these issues appears is “The Impossible Definition”—but he does propose a necessary (but not sufficient) condition: *iconic solidarity*.

If one wishes to provide the basis of a reasonable definition for the totality of historical manifestation of the medium…one must recognize the relational play of a plurality of interdependent images as the unique foundation of comics….the central element of comics, the first criteria in the foundational order, is iconic solidarity. I define this as interdependent images that, participating in a series, present the double characteristic of being separated…and which are plastically and semantically over-determined by the fact of their coexistence *in praesentia*.

So is a single panel cartoon a comic or not? Groensteen and McCloud say “no”, but many others say “yes”. One might worry here that we are confronted with nothing more than conflicting intuitions about what things count as comics. If so, it might seem hard to decide who is right. But we needn’t just appeal to intuitions. Consider the question of ancient comics. Practice, especially critical practice, suggests that comics are not part of the relevant contrast class for pre-Columbian manuscripts and vice versa (see Meskin 2011). That is, when we evaluate a comic as a comic, we do not evaluate it by reference to those pre-Columbian manuscripts; when we evaluate those manuscripts as manuscripts we do not compare them to comics. The same is true with Hogarth’s prints. This provides some support for the claim that they are not comics. It is not quite clear what to say about single panel cartoons—though it does seem to me that they belong to some relevant contrast class which includes multi-panel comics. This does not settle the issue against the formalists because practice does not have the last word (after all, our practices might be misguided) and because it is not at all clear what sort of definition the formalists are interested in providing. More about this latter issue in the final section of this chapter.

Non-formalist approaches appeal to at least one semantic or representational feature in defining comics. The dominant approach of this sort focuses on story or narrative as a putatively necessary condition for being a comic. (To identify something as a story or a narrative is to say something about what it represents; that is, it is to say something about its content rather than simply saying something about its form.) So, for example, the fourth condition in Kunzle’s definition of the comic strip—the alleged necessity of a moral and topical story—entails that his account of comic strips is non-formalist. David Carrier expresses a similar commitment to the necessity of narrative in his account of the three putatively essential conditions of comics, “the speech balloon, the closely linked narrative, and the book-size scale” (Carrier 2000: 74). And the definition proposed by Greg Hayman and Henry Pratt, “a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text” (Hayman and Pratt 2005: 423), adds a narrative condition to something very much like McCloud’s formalist account.

Again, one worry is that these narrative accounts are too narrow. To start with, there are comics that don’t have *closely linked* narratives—at least not ones which are closely linked temporally. Consider, for example, Richard McGuire’s *Here*, which tells the disjointed story of a particular point in space across millennia. Moreover, just as there are non-narrative examples of other traditionally narrative art forms (e.g., non-narrative works of cinema), it seems reasonable to think that non-narrative comics are possible (Meskin 2007: 371-372). As mentioned above, Molotiu’s book, *Abstract Comics*, seems to provide extant examples of such. In this face of such counterexamples, Pratt seems to back off from the narrative condition in a later essay (Pratt 2011: 369).

Many narrative accounts also seem to be too inclusive. After all, the pre-modern counterexamples to McCloud mentioned above (e.g., the Bayeux Tapestry) are all narrative. So Hayman and Pratt face an almost identical challenge from both intuition and critical practice as do the formalists—they seem to count things as comics which neither ordinary readers nor critics treat as such.

As mentioned above, Kunzle holds that comic strips must be “reproductive…a mass medium” (Kunzle 1973: 2). Anne Elizabeth Moore claims, in her preface to *The Best American Comics 2006*, that comics are “created to be mechanically reproduced, either in print or on the Web” (Moore 2006: x). One apparent virtue of proposing such a condition is that it would preclude some of the difficult cases described above from counting as comics. Pre-Columbian picture manuscripts are not reproductive. The Bayeux Tapestry was not created to be mechanically reproduced. Contemporary pop art paintings which are influenced by (or represent) comics would also appear be excluded by this condition. So there would be no worry about mistakenly including Roy Lichtenstein’s *As I Opened Fire!* (which is based on panels from an issue of DC’s *All-American Men of War*) in the categories of comics. For this reason, both formalists and anti-formalist narrative theorists might be tempted to add some sort of reproductive condition to their accounts. Nevertheless, mechanical reproduction is not an essential feature of comics. There are avant-garde comics which reject use of the ordinary media in which comics are made such as Mark Staff Brandl’s “gallery comics”, and there are comics drawn by non-professionals (both adults and children) which are in no way designed for mechanical reproduction or realized in some mass medium. A homemade one-off comic is still a comic. (For further discussion, see Meskin 2012: 32-36.)

Some philosophical aestheticians have developed a very different sort of approach to deal with artistic developments in the twentieth century. Rather than holding that art is defined by some distinctive function or functions (e.g., representation, expression, the provision of aesthetic experience), institutionalists hold that art can only be defined by reference to a certain social institution. George Dickie, the best known institutionalist, has modified his view over a number of decades but his most well-known account holds that a work of art is “(1) an artifact (2) a set of aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)” (Dickie 1974: 34). Just as someone counts as having a PhD in virtue of having undergone some sort of status conferral, so too—according to Dickie—is it with works of art.

Inspired by Dickie, Bart Beaty (2012) has recently proposed a broadly institutional theory of comics. In fact, Beaty seems to offer two distinct institutional accounts. He first suggests that comics can be defined as “objects recognized by the comics world as comics” (ibid., 37). Although the idea of an institutional theory of comics is an attractive one, this particular account is implausible. Perhaps the central problem is that the account fails to make sense of the possibility that the comics world—“the collection of individuals necessary for the production of works that the world defines as comics” (ibid.)—could make a mistake. That is, it is at least possible that there could be comics that the comics world fails to recognize as such, and it is similarly possible that there are things which the comics world recognizes as comics which do not belong to that category. (Note that Dickie’s aforementioned definition of art does not face this objection. For example, it is consistent with his definition of art that the artworld fails to recognize something as a work of art which, because it has the relevant status conferred upon it, is in fact a work of art.) Moreover, this account does not, at least as formulated, make sense of the existence of comics that are simply unknown to the comics world. But just as there are likely to be artworks unknown to the current artworld, it seems there could be comics unknown to the comics world. And there are hard questions about what this account should say when there is no consensus within the comics world about whether or not a particular object is a comic.

A page later, Beaty suggests that comics are “those objects presented to a comics world as comics” (ibid., 38). This account does not suffer the problem of precluding error in the comics world since, for example, the comics world may fail to recognize something as a comic that has been presented to it as comic, but it still appears to face a problem concerning certain unknown comics. Dickie is explicit that, on his 1997 institutional account of art, it is not the case that something must have been actually presented to an artwork public in order to be art (1997, 80-81). This allows for art that is destroyed by its creator before she shows it to anyone. But Beaty’s commitment to the presentation condition in his second definition makes it impossible to make sense of a comic that is destroyed by its creator before she presents it to anyone—an object does not count as a comic on this view until it is presented to the comics world. Both definitions also face traditional challenges that the institutional theory of art faces; for example, they have trouble making sense of comics made by an isolated artist and they suffer from a potentially uninformative circularity. (For a slightly different suggestion of how the institutional account of comics might be developed see Meskin 2007: 375. For discussion of various objections to institutional approaches to defining art see Davies 1991: 84-114.)

An alternative approach, inspired by Jerrold Levinson’s “intentional-historical” definition of art (Levinson 1979 and 1989), might seek to define comics by reference to historical relations. Levinson proposes that a work of art is a thing that “has been seriously intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art—i.e., regard in any way pre-existing artworks are or were correctly regarded.” Recently, Anna Ribeiro (2007) has adapted this sort of account in an attempt to define poetry—on her account something is a poem if and only if it is “a verbal object intended by its writer or discoverer for membership in the poetic tradition or, in other words, in the category ‘poetry’” (190). So why not define comics as objects which are seriously intended in any way pre-existing comics are or were correctly regarded (Meskin 2007: 375)? One immediate worry is that such an account fails to make sense of the first comics. For related reasons, Levinson allow that the minimal definition mentioned above has to be amended to allow that there is some class of original artworks (ur-arts) which he simply stipulates to be art (Levinson 1979: 243-244). Perhaps an intentional-historical definition of comics would make a similar move. A more serious worry is that intentional accounts such as Levinson’s are overly inclusive in that they fail to mark an important distinction between successful attempts to make art and failed attempts (Mag Uidhir 2013: 28-33). This problem would seem to affect an intentional-historical account of comics. After all, if intending to make something a certain way is all I need to do to make a comic it is difficult to see how I could fail. But it does seem possible to fail to make a comic. For example, one might intend to make a comic and end up producing a picture book.

**Against definition**

Among philosophers, the project of defining art and its various sub-categories such as comics is a controversial one. Influenced by Wittgenstein’s discussion of games, Morris Weitz famously argued that neither art nor any of its ordinary sub-concepts (e.g., painting, theater) could be defined (Weitz 1956). And although Weitz’s specific arguments are widely considered unpersuasive (Davies 1991: 9-22), the view that it is not possible to define art continues to find support (Dean 2003; Gaut 2000).

In the realm of comics studies, a number of scholars have, like Weitz, appealed to Wittgenstein’s notion of a family resemblance and rejected the possibility of a traditional definition of comics (Freedman 2011: 32-33; Varnum and Gibbons 2001: xvi-xvii). One problem with such views is that resemblance on its own seems like too blunt a tool to underwrite the category of comics (after all, as logicians like to say, everything resembles everything else in some way), but full-fledged family resemblance seems to bring necessary conditions back into the picture in a way that seems inconsistent with the Wittgensteinian and Weitzian picture. (True family resemblances depend on ancestry.) A deeper worry is that the unsuccessful nature of Weitz’s arguments for the indefinability of art raise a question about what the argument for the indefinability of comics might be. Varnum and Gibbons, for example, seem to offer no argument at all for the family resemblance view, while Freedman primarily appeals to Thierry Groensteen’s alleged claim that definitions of comics are doomed to failure. In fact, Groensteen does not argue precisely what Freedman claims he argues—Groensteen states that “any comic only actualizes certain potentialities of the medium” (Groensteen 2007: 12) not, as Freedman claims, that “each definition” actualizes such (Freedman 2011: 32). And since, as discussed above, Groensteen offers an account which appeals to one allegedly necessary feature of comics—iconic solidarity—it is a mistake to treat him as holding a Wittgensteinian anti-essentialist view. Freedman also suggests that what we see when we examine the category of comics is simply a Wittgensteinian network of similarities, but this is clearly not enough to establish that there can be no definition of comics since there may be some defining features (e.g., a hidden essence) which underwrite that network. So is there any good reason for thinking a definition of comics is impossible? The inductive argument –“every attempt at defining comics up until this point has been unsuccessful, therefore every future attempt to define comics will be unsuccessful”—does not seem especially persuasive and, at best, only provides evidence for the probability of the conclusion. Another possible route to the no-definition view is via contemporary theories of concepts which suggest that no (or very few) concepts of any kind are definable (Dean 2003).

Meskin (2007) argues against a wide variety of proposed definitions of comics, but he does not argue that definition is impossible. Rather, he argues that we do not need a definition in order to identify, evaluate and interpret comics (ibid., 375-376). When it comes to identification, something like Noël Carroll’s historical narrative might suffice (Carroll 1993). Carroll argues that we typically identify contested works of art as art by telling true narratives which connect their production to some antecedently accepted art making practices—perhaps something similar would suffice for identifying objects whose status as comics is contested. And contra Carrier, who claimed that evaluating and interpreting comics requires knowing the essence of the form (Carrier 2000: 7, 95), Meskin has argued that although warranted evaluation and interpretation of comics require knowledge of the form, this knowledge need not amount to knowledge of a definition or of their essence (Meskin 2007: 375-376).

**What are we doing when we are defining comics?**

Some definitions of comics do not seem to be in the business of capturing our ordinary notion of the category but, rather, seem to be aiming at carving out a category that will be of theoretical interest. Consider, for example, John Holbo’s ingenious defense of McCloud’s definition of comics (Holbo 2012). As he puts it, his goal is to “articulate how a definition of ‘comics’ that seems doomed to die the death of a thousand flyspecks—counter-examples, that is—can be a source of essential insight” (ibid., 6). Ultimately, Holbo argues that McCloud’s definition should be understood as marking out the extremely wide category of “graphic design” which includes single panel cartoons, paintings, illustrated manuscripts and, perhaps, even novels. Of course such a definition does not accord with ordinary thinking about comics. But so what? Not every definitional project is focused on capturing our ordinary folk concept. Consider Sally Haslanger’s distinction, developed in a very different context, between conceptual inquiries, descriptive inquiries and analytic inquiries (Haslanger 2012: 222-225). Conceptual inquiries seek to uncover the nature of our ordinary concepts (e.g., the folk conception of comics; that is, how we ordinarily think about comics), while descriptive inquiries aim at uncovering that underlying nature of the categories we think about. Since descriptive projects are most appropriate in the realm of natural phenomenon, it is unclear whether they well-suited for the study of comics. But it may be instructive to consider some comics scholarship as engaged in the final sort of inquiry, analytic inquiry, which starts by asking “what work we want these concepts to do for us” (ibid., 224) and then constructs a theory (which must be “responsive to some aspects of ordinary usage”) in order to achieve those goals.

For example, Holbo’s defense of McCloud, and McCloud’s definition itself, might be most charitably understood as in the revisionary business of analytic inquiry. After all, McCloud’s definition—along with Holbo’s defense of it—do not seem aimed at tracking the folk conception of comics. Ordinary folk do not treat the Bayeux Tapestry as a comic. Rather, McCloud might be seen as primarily aiming at developing a conception of comics that will serve to validate the artistic and cultural status of comics. Similarly, Robert Harvey’s suggestion that comics can only be defined by appealing to a “blend” of visual and verbal content (Harvey 1994: 9) seems primarily aimed to establish a basis for evaluating comics. If this is right, then when evaluating such definitional projects we need to consider both the goals which underlie those projects and the extent to which the proposed definitions are effective means of achieving those goals.

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**Related Topics**

Avant-garde/abstract comics, Early Comics and Proto-Comics, Manga, Silent Comics

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**Further Reading**

C. Hatfield, “Indiscipline, or, The Condition of Comics Studies,” *Transatlantica* 1 2010, (URL : http://transatlantica.revues.org/4933) includes a good discussion of attempts to define comics in the context of comics studies.