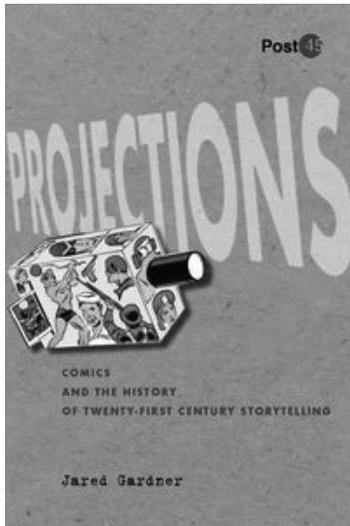


Amber Rae Bowyer

## Book Review: Jared Gardner, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling*



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Academic inquiry at the intersection of comics, film, and new media is presently in a frantic state resembling nothing so much as a gold rush. The economic security of the passive brand awareness strategy has led the entertainment industry to the aggressive mining and refining of comics images, fairy tales and other familiar cultural substrates onto which the most rudimentary narratives may be attached. The increased valuation of comics properties by the film industry has set comics at center stage in visual culture, assigning new levels of cultural importance to its catalog, its aesthetic, and the medium as a whole. The comics convention, once like a humble trading post, has become an entertainment industry of its own, amalgamating the fantasies of the theme park with the overt commercialism of a shopping mall and the formalized consumer/manufacturer interactivity of a focus group. Meanwhile, the formal state of the medium is in flux as graphic novels and online comics vie for status in the changing market, and scholars are awakening to the necessity of understanding the comics mode

of communication in its current and historical contexts.

Comics' recent meteoric rise to prominence in visual culture creates excitement but also anxiety, since many critics view the trend as a cultural nosedive. This clash between high and low culture is only the latest in a historical pattern revisited upon comics, as Jared Gardner's book, *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling*, explains. Not only does Gardner ground and historicize formal developments in comics with their manias and panics, he also connects these paradigmatic shifts together in an overarching narrative that demonstrates the recursivity of comics with participatory culture, never losing sight of the threat participatory media poses to the status quo. Gardner's history avoids a presentist approach, but by extrapolating from his complex set of historical evidence we can reevaluate the contemporary comics mania, better understanding how some of its practices and particularities may be informed engagements with contemporary cultural concerns. That this

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unwritten chapter presents itself to the reader is a testament to the utility and stability of the logics that Gardner's synthesis of formal analysis and media archaeology produces.

In an inspired metaphor early in the book, Gardner pauses to note that margins will forever define comics. Many other historians have relished the pun about comics and their (cultural or structural) gutter. But a gutter is a margin, Gardner adds, and good readers know that the margin is where they can make their own notes. This is Gardner's approach to discovering the ontological relationship between comics and the cultures that develop around them. He locates these points of ingress in many places. First is the mental suture comics require the reader to perform in order to create continuity between static images.<sup>1</sup> Second is the right the reader retains in comics of dwelling on any part of an image or page, producing a different focus or duration for their story experience.<sup>2</sup> Next, Gardner also explains the relevance of comics' various uses of sequentiality and seriality. He argues, for example, that the interruptions intrinsic to a serial publication style produced, as in the case of Dickens, a community of interested fans yearning to bridge these gaps with conversation and creation of their own. In this example, Gardner exposes a clear correlation with contemporary studies in fandom and the role of seriality.

The inherent potential of comics to produce complex, sophisticated, and intellectually invigorating reading experiences is something Gardner takes care to set up against the old canards that comics are base, only for children, improper for children, or simply not real reading. He places a selection of recognized scholarly interventions in visual culture in conversation with historical examples of comics' influential, experimental, and savvy readership. These contribute to a strong case that developments in comics served to instructively and demonstrably flout the "New Criticism" approach to culture promoted by Clement Greenberg et al, which undertook to fix artistic quality and divest it from the effects of the "affective fallacy."

The examples of active readership Gardner excavates are impressive in their historical range, formal diversity and thematic resonances. The

ragtime era popularity of para and meta-textuality that he presents in Chapter 2, "Serial Pleasures," is particularly fascinating. He describes how the universal popularity and topical content of *Mutt and Jeff* contributed to a playful erasure of the lines between factual and fictional media content. While "Mutt and Jeff" became household names and recognized icons used in all types of extratextual products, their personae were likewise adopted intertextually. When the Mutt and Jeff strip, for example, features the two going off to adventure in the Mexican War, daily reports on the war progress could include an assurance of Mutt and Jeff's continued safety in the fracas. The forebears of enriched media and interactivity that Gardner locates in the newspaper press of the early comic strip era are eye-opening contributions to the history of participatory culture.

In a few short moves, Gardner is able to navigate his theoretically solid central argument about comics' perennial rebuke of New Criticism across a great amount of territory. On one such route, Mutt and Jeff's metatextual roaming connects speedily via Gardner's curation of images and evidence to the emergence of radical autobiography in comics in the 1970s. In another, the critically beloved post-structural and database-inspired comic style of contemporary graphic novelists such as Kim Deitch, Ben Katchor and Chris Ware, connects not only to the earliest comics' experiments with layout and address (as Ware's work famously does,) but also to the anxieties Frederic Wertham popularized with *Seduction of the Innocent* in the 1950s. In one of the most surprising contributions in the book, Gardner critically reassesses Wertham, comics' infamous bogeyman, and recuperates dimensionality in his work, placing him in illuminating conversation with no less than Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and portraying all three as alike in intemperance as well as insight.

To begin and end the journey, Gardner loops the beginning and the present day of comics together with the other "sequential art," cinema. His observations about the correspondence between these sibling forms are thankfully novel and helpful in the ongoing project of bridging visual disciplines.

The expansive range of examples and the intriguing dalliances with theorists compose a

strong book, though the central argument and themes would not suffer from further explication and emphasis. Gardner seems to often bury the lede without leaving much of a map. Not every path Gardner carves leads the reader through a garden of fascinations, either, and it is perhaps unsurprising that his middle chapter, focusing on the well-worn territory of the Golden and Silver Ages of comics, is the dullest. Gardner is a top-notch curator, and while he has interesting insights to lend this era, his theoretical strengths in elucidation are better applied to more disruptive moments in comics history. Aside from a brief but woeful analogy between comics' neurotic autographic authors and the enslaved men in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, whose chains also serve as their mode of communication, Gardner's writing is weightless and delightful, adeptly surveying a huge field in a flash. Storytelling qua storytelling seems not to be the real focus of the book. Rather,

its study examines the comics structures that potentiate narrative flexibility, such as seriality and interactivity. Further engagement with narratology and perhaps the pressure of ludological arguments upon it could have been brought to this work with interesting results. Instead, an address of any extraordinary or landmark narrative accomplishments that comics' affordances have produced is left for the reader's supplementation in the margins.

*Projections* is not the only text readers will need in order to come up to speed on comics history, theory, or to understand the state of the art, but because of its intersectional strengths, concise attack, and interwoven thematic concerns, it could work miracles as a supportive text, as a whole or in selection. It is a terrific example of applied practice in visual studies or media archaeology, and will be appreciated by media scholars of many stripes. Foremost, of course, *Projections* deserves high priority in any review of the comics field.

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#### Notes

1 Gardner cites Chris Ware's self-referential "How To Read This Book" section of *Jimmy Corrigan*, which challenges the reader to justify the connections they are comfortable making from frame to frame.

2 For incisive theoretical exploration of these functions, arthology and iconic solidarity, see Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*.