Keynote Address
Julia Round and Chris Murray
Transitions Third Annual Conference
3 November 2012, Birkbeck, London, UK

"Meanwhile, in the Batcave under The Ivory Towers..."

Comics Scholarship and the Academy

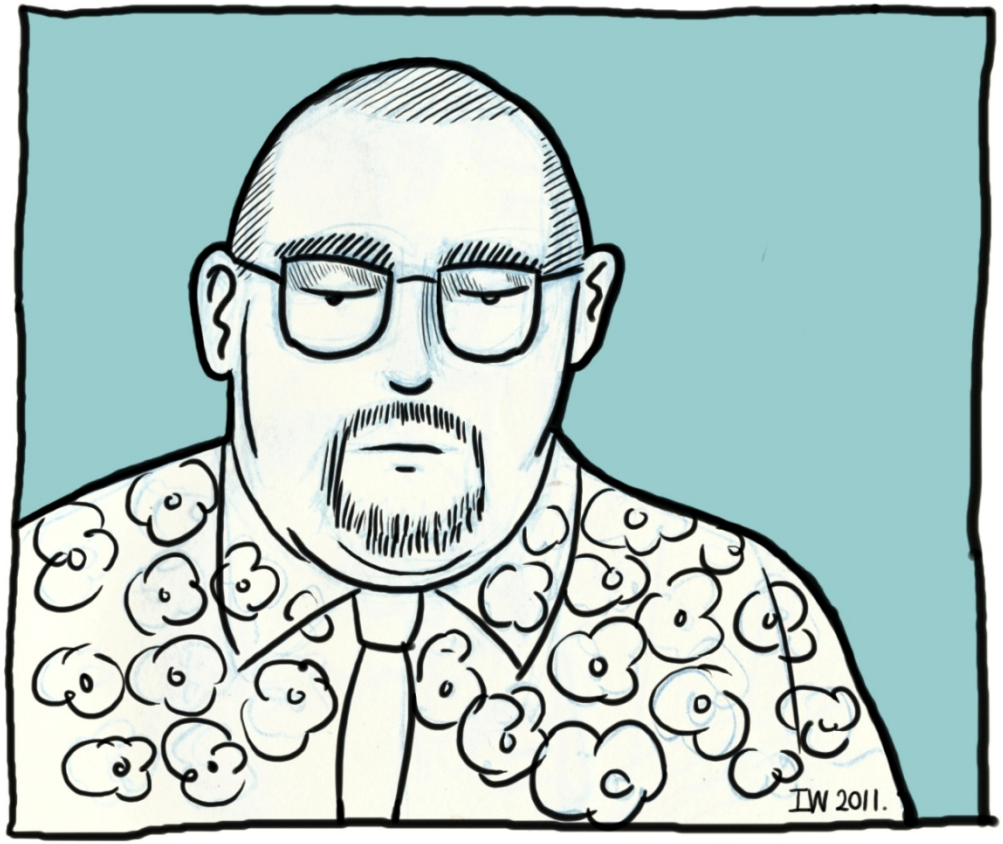
or…

Scott McCloud Ate my Hamster!

This talk will explore some of the challenges and opportunities that face comics scholars at the moment.

It will examine the issues that arise in teaching comics in relation to debates about disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity, the emergence of a critical canon, and the relationship of comics scholarship to the rest of the Academy.

Particular attention will be given to the experience of setting up and running a comics journal (Studies in Comics), and various international conferences, and to the issues that arise when responding to the imperatives of the REF and the AHRC, and other factors, such as networking, grant applications, and managing the media reaction to comics scholarship.



Dr Chris Murray is Head of Department in English and Film Studies, School of Humanities, at the University of Dundee. He teaches comics at undergraduate (Level 4) and postgraduate level (MLitt and PhD). He has also taught comics on courses at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design. Director of the Scottish Centre for Comics Studies, and co-editor of *Studies in Comics*.

He has been external examiner on comics PhDs and for several international journals and funded projects. He runs Dundee Comics Day, an annual comics events showcasing the work of comics creators, and is co-organiser of several annual conferences, including SWIG, Dundee PG Conf, D-Con, and the International Comics Conference. He is about to submit a comics research bid to the AHRC and has been involved in the University of Dundee's strategic planning in relation to AHRC BGP schemes and REF planning.

Dr Julia Round is senior lecturer in the Media School at Bournemouth University.

Co-editor of *Studies in Comics*.

External examiner for Comics Studies MLitt (University of Dundee).

She co-organises the annual International Comics Conference along with Dave Huxley, Chris Murray and Joan Ormrod.

She teaches comics on selected undergraduate units within BA Communication and Media and BA English at Bournemouth University.

Teaching Comics

Teaching Comics

Bournemouth: BA Communication and Media
BA English
MA Adaptation (forthcoming)
MA Literary Media (forthcoming)

Dundee: Level 4 comics module on Moore, Morrison and Gaiman, and comics dissertations, as part of MA in English and Film Studies
Level 3 comics module, DJCAD
Comics Studies MLitt, comprising modules on International Comics, Autobiographical Comics, Creating Comics, dissertation
Comics Theory
Comics and Film: From script to page to script to screen (forthcoming)
Comics and Film at DCA (forthcoming)
Contemporary Media Theory – team taught
Book History – team taught
Contemporary Literature – team taught

Comics Scholarship and the Academy

Comics Scholarship and the Academy

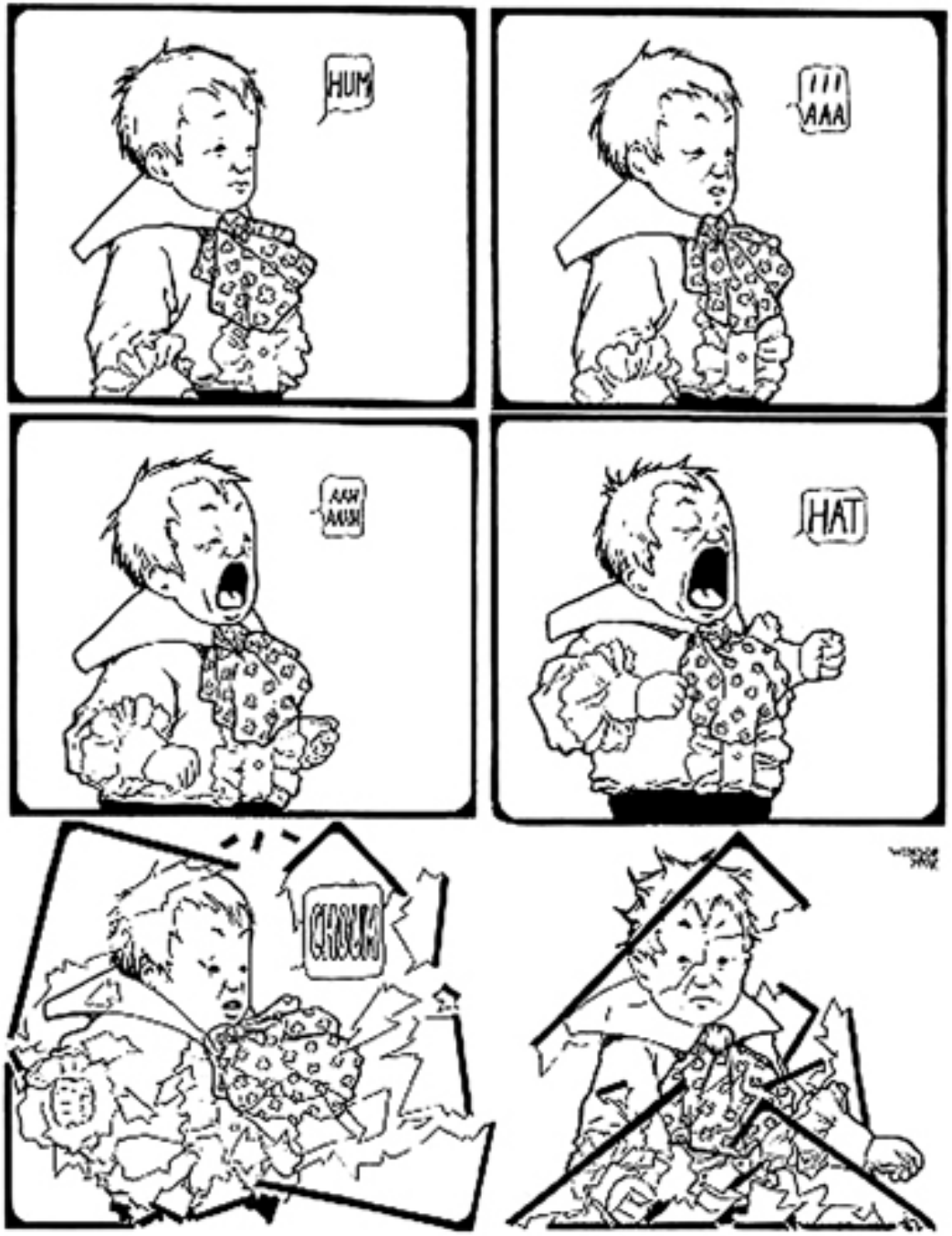
So, what is the current status of Comics Studies?

Compare to the origin story of Film Studies and Television Studies

Considerations:

- Loaded terminology - Comics? Narrative strip? Picture story? Sequential art? Graphic novel?
- Loaded attitudes: can we escape the “pow, zap, bam!” associations?
- Implications: funding (internal/external), acceptance, credibility, location of our lair
- Consequences for collaboration, status in REF?
- Formative field: so terminology, core debates, genres, paradigms, methodologies and so forth are all up for grabs! But this can also have a downside…

Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity
or
Discipline and Punish



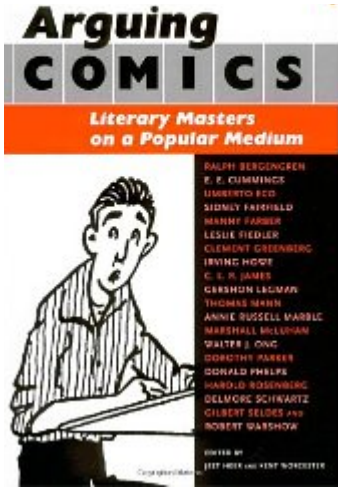
Disciplinarity and Interdisciplinarity

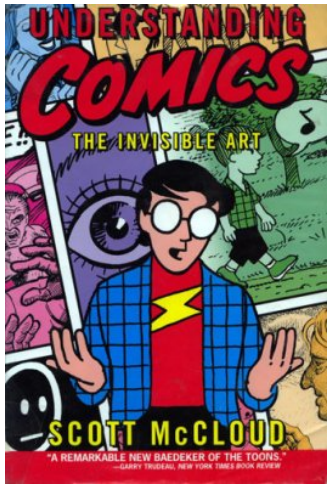
Some key issues:

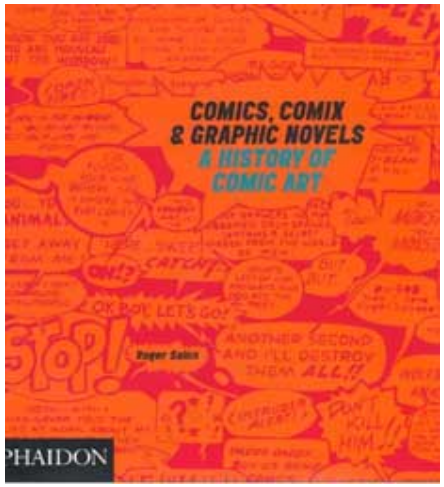
- Location within schools and departments
- Interdisciplinarity as "strategic" alignment
- Value of shared terminology? Danger of jargon
- Value of shared methodology?
- Pressure to cohere around research themes/trends rather than disciplines or subjects

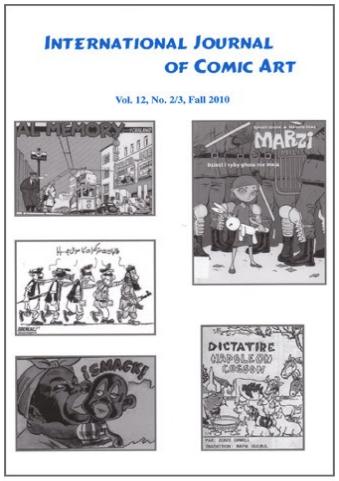
A Critical Canon for Comics

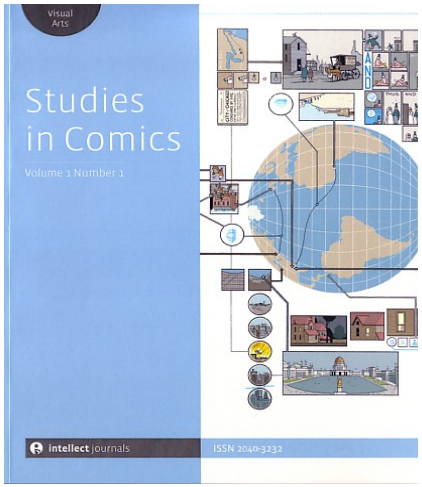
A Critical Canon for Comics

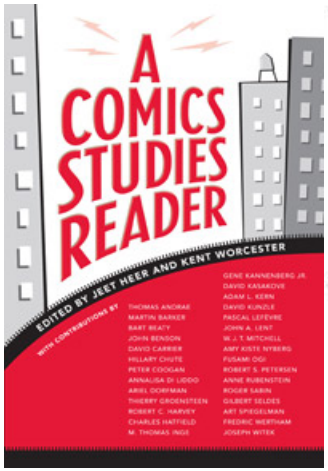


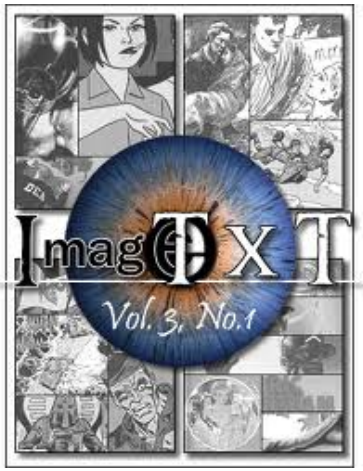


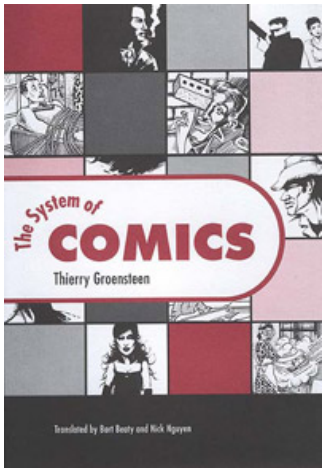


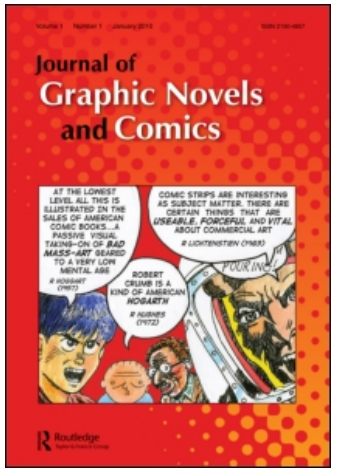








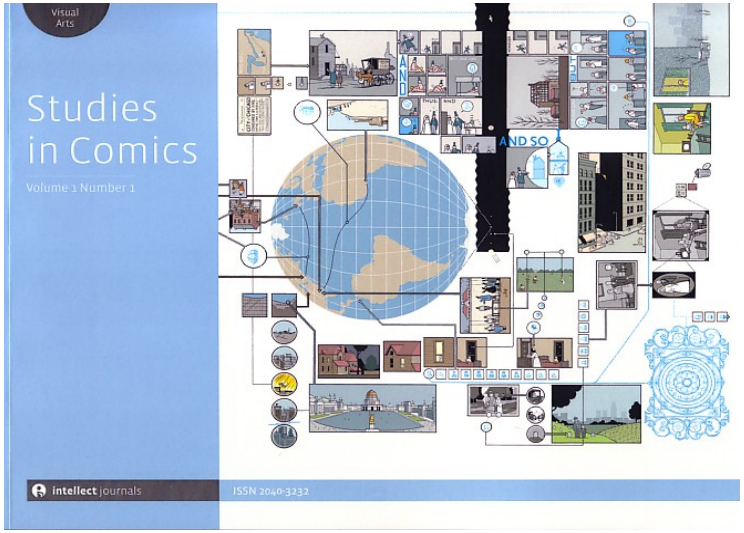


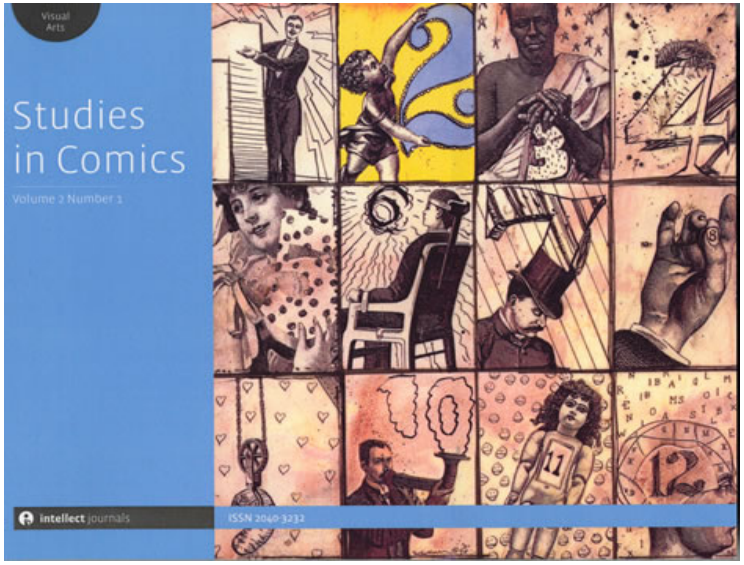


What is the value of a critical canon? Is it desirable? Is there still an Anglo centricity in this emerging canon? Do distinct traditions (e.g. manga) need distinct critical approaches, or is there a need to subsume them within an inclusibe theory of comics? AIs there still an art vs narrative divide?

We need more comics research, and an ongoing series of funded research projects, to expand access to a diverse range of critical material on comics, and we need to develop research resources (archives) to support this research.

Case Study #1
Studies in Comics





The Uncanny Origin Story of SIC (STIC)

Aims and strategies

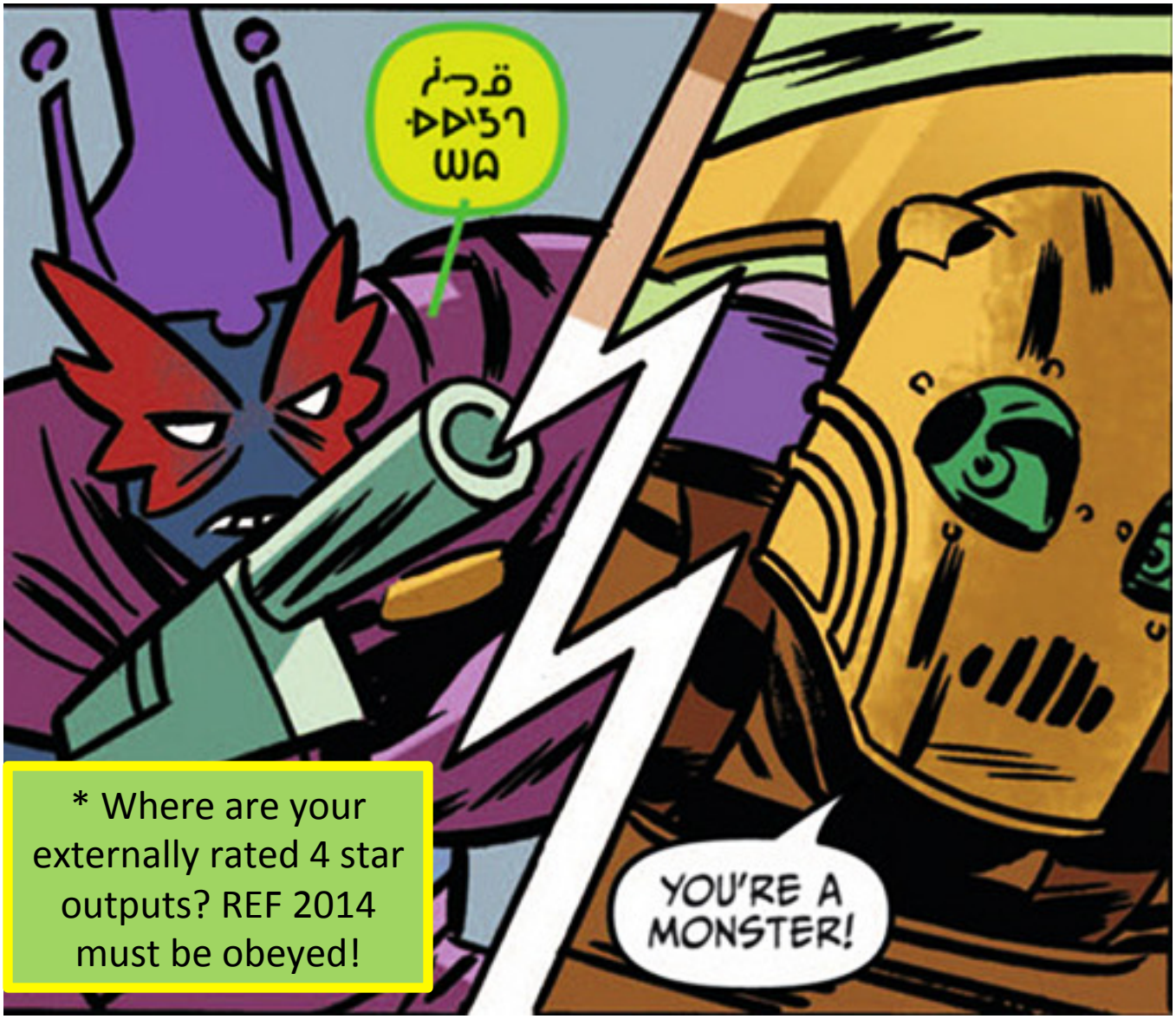
The value of peer review

Working collaboratively (or, ‘We have an evil plan’)

Guest editors

Upcoming issues and future themes

Trajectory



The REF and the AHRC

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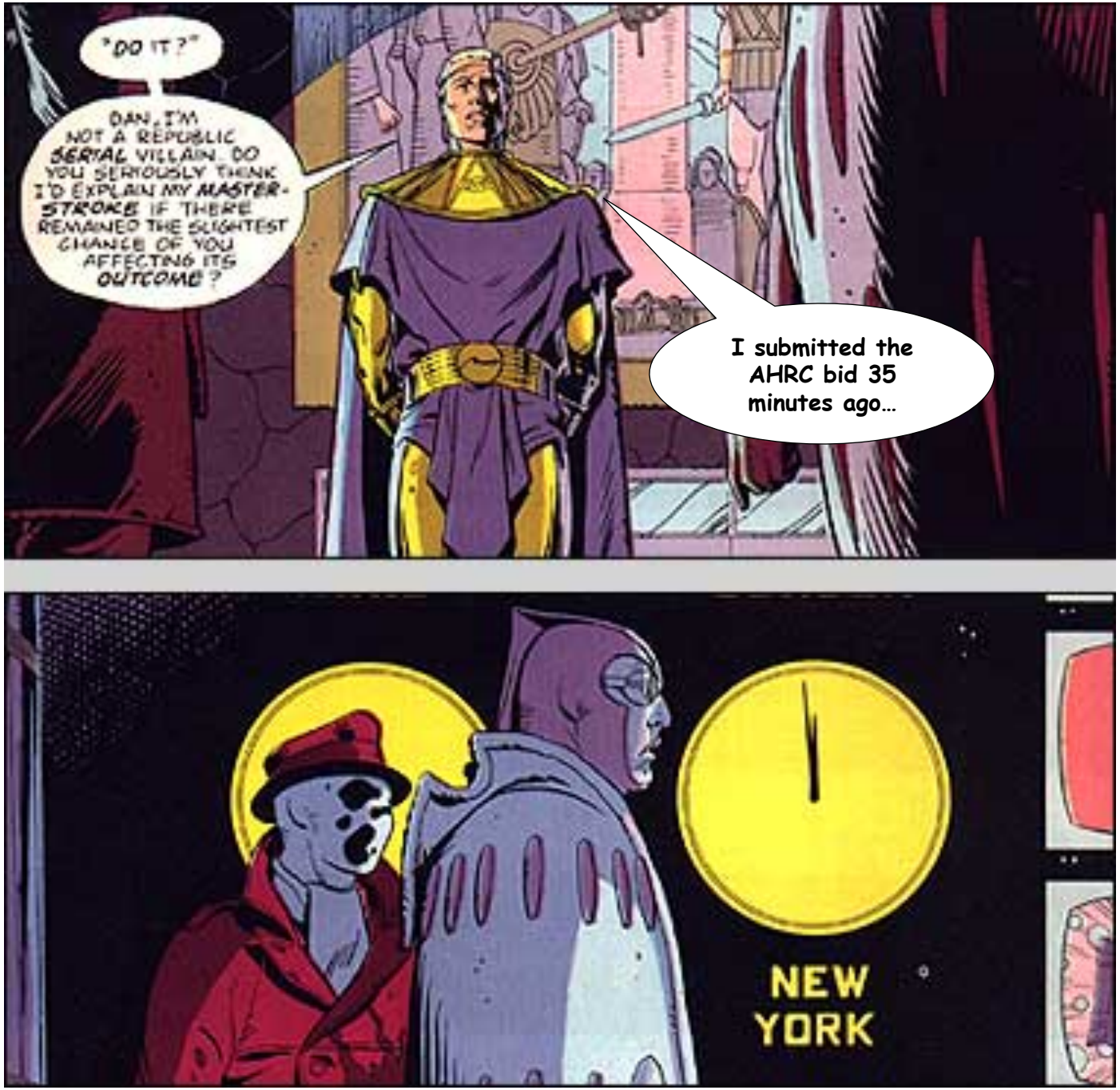
The REF and the AHRC

REF

- Departmental themes and strategic investment
- Relationship between REF and funding
- Assessing our discipline: difficulties and advantages
- What will be supported by your institution?
- Publications and timings
- How the REF has influenced the type of research we do
- Impact Case Studies

AHRC

- Current research themes and considerations – opportunities or continually changing goalposts?
- ‘What do you want from me?!’
- Writing funding bids for comics
- Writing wider bids incorporating comics
- Collaboration, industry support, impact, outputs
- Networks


"DO IT?"
DAN, I'M NOT A REPUBLIC SERIAL VILLAIN. DO YOU SERIOUSLY THINK I'D EXPLAIN MY MASTER-STROKE IF THERE REMAINED THE SLIGHTEST CHANCE OF YOU AFFECTING ITS OUTCOME?
I submitted the AHRC bid 35 minutes ago…
NEW YORK

Case Study #2
Organising Comics Conferences

Small and focused / large and inclusive – advantages and disadvantages

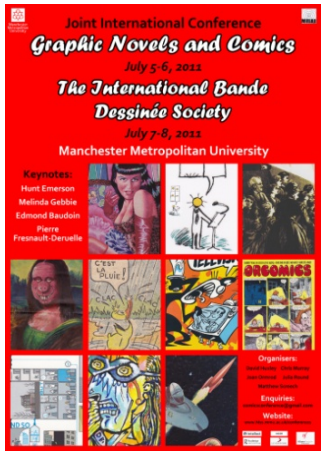
Focus around what? Writers? Genres? Medium? Methodologies? Uses?

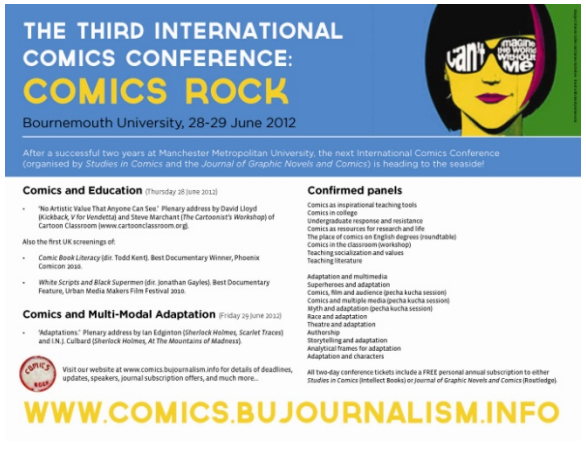
Creating supportive and constructive atmospheres

Networking

Teamwork

The minutiae (or: ‘Don’t forget the coffee’)

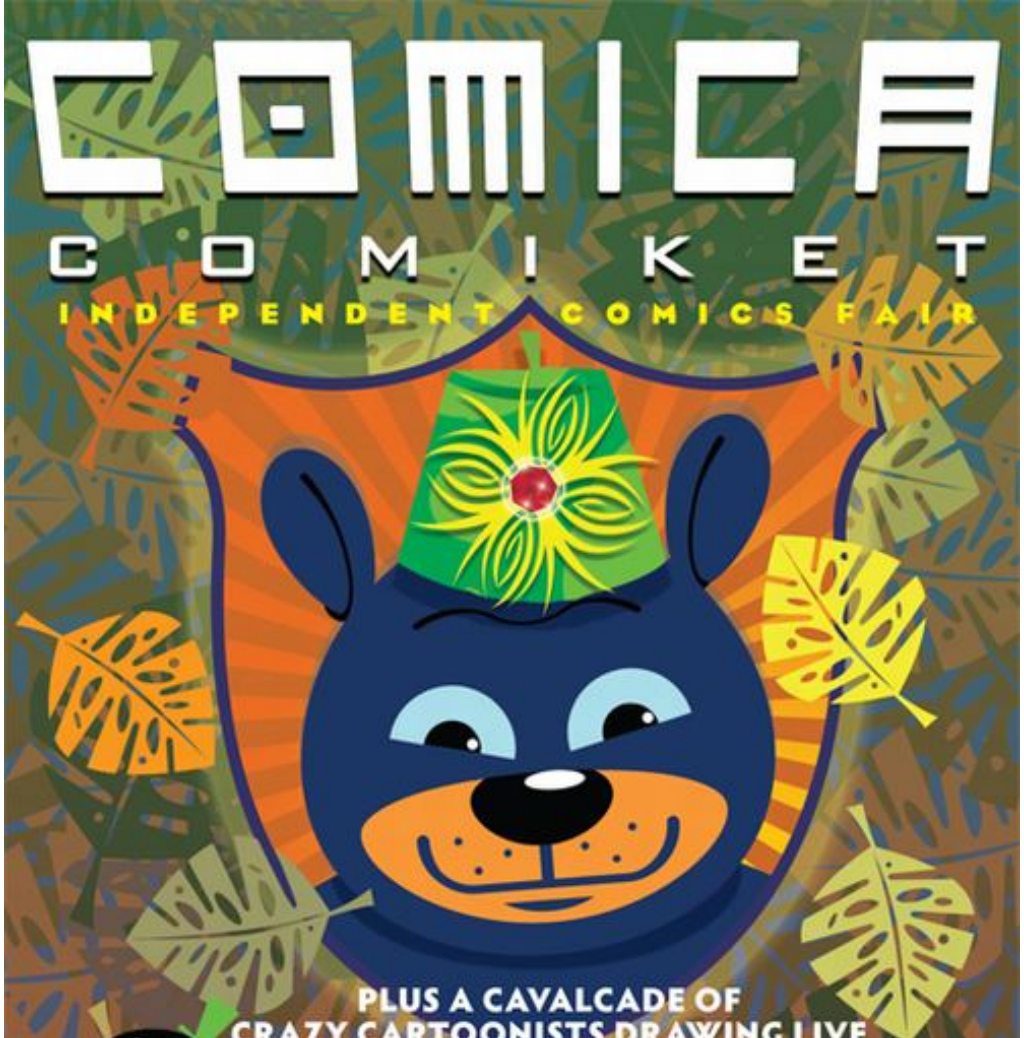




COMICA

COMIKET

INDEPENDENT COMICS FAIR



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ABOUT | GUESTS | PROGRAM | FAQ | VENUE | TICKETS

Music from: AKIRA THE DOG

Invisible Symmetries: The Comics of Grant Morrison

Sunday 28th October 2012 /// Tower Building, University of Dundee
www.literarydundee.co.uk

CREATING COMICS WORKSHOP

FEATURING LEGENDARY CO-CREATOR OF WATCHMEN DAVE GIBBONS

2.00PM

SATURDAY 27th OCTOBER

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University of Dundee

PART OF DUNDEE COMICS DAY
SEE WWW.LITERARYDUNDEE.CO.UK/
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DUNDEE COMICS DAY!

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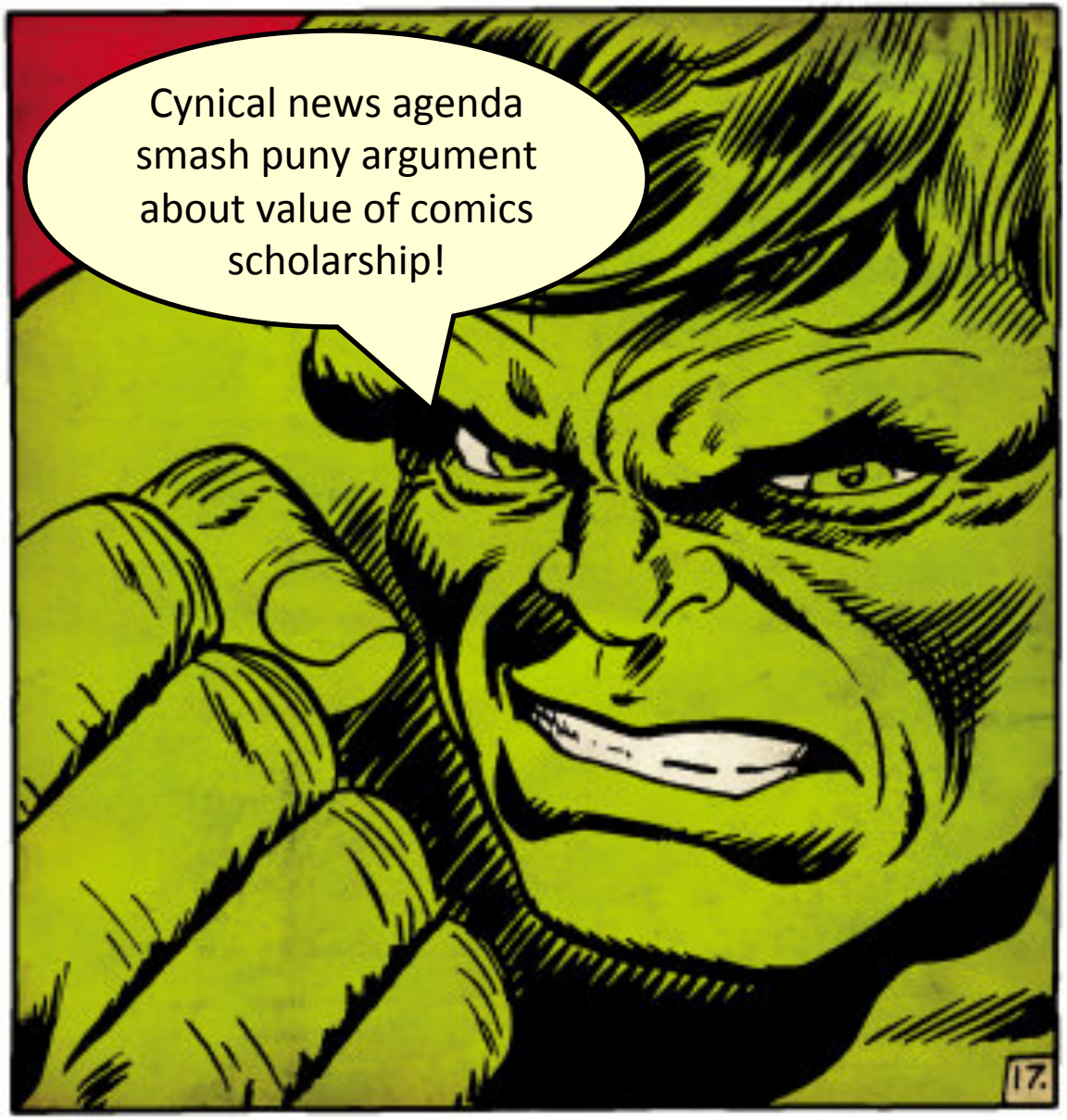
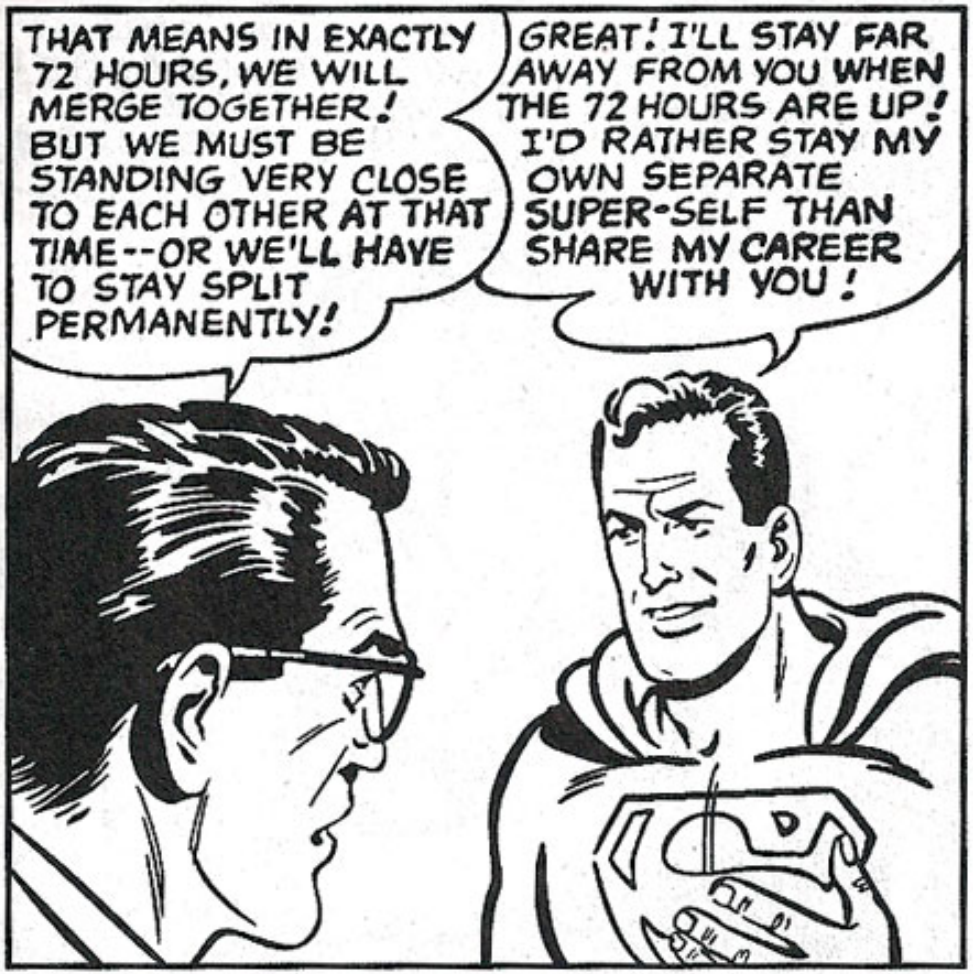
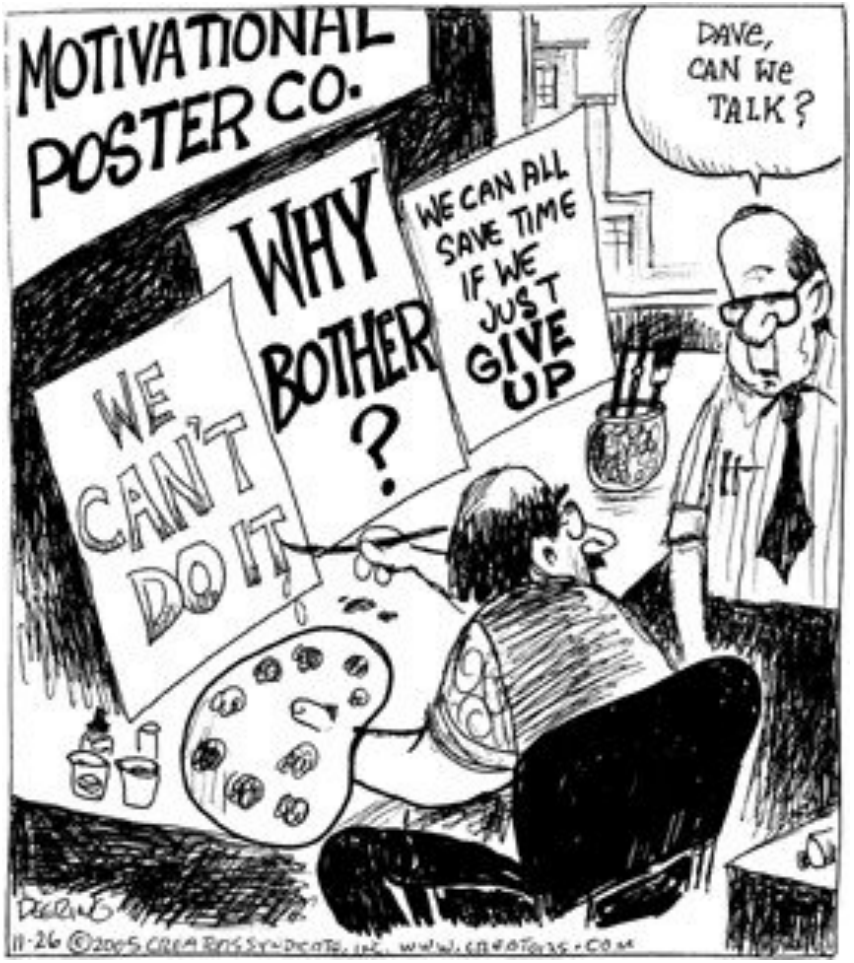


Comics Scholarship and the Media



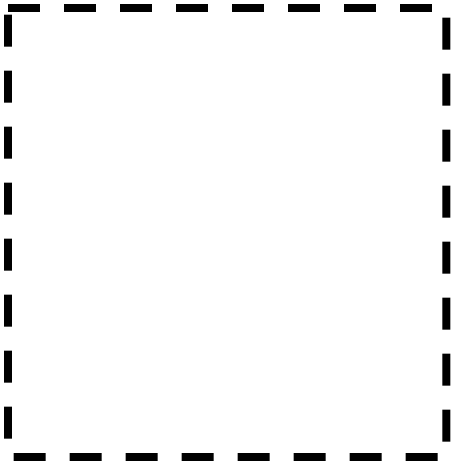


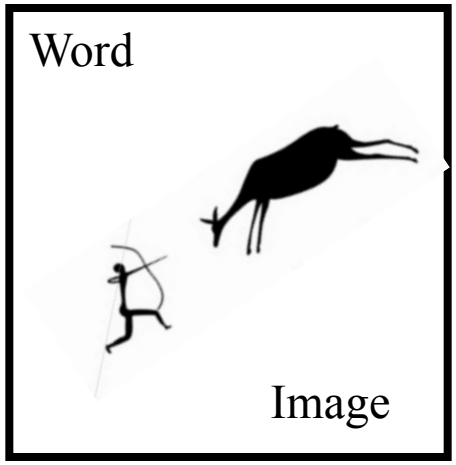
So, this is where “Scott McCloud ate My Hamster” comes in – the news media has an investment in sensationalising everything. Most of the time the angle or spin that will be placed on any comics story is predictably awash with mock incredulity that comics are a subject or scholarship, or just out to grab a good pun.

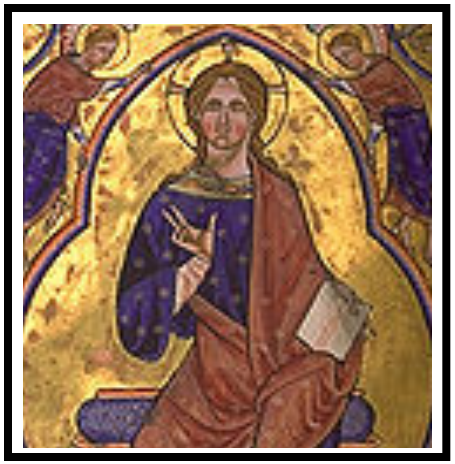
This can be extremely frustrating…

This battle has been going on for a long time and is driven by a rather cynical view about what the public thinks. At its worst this kind of reporting can make all your efforts, from teaching to research to organising conferences, seem like a joke.

Don’t be disheartened though.







As the Transitions CFP states “Comics studies occupy a unique multi-disciplinary middle-space, one that encourages cross-disciplinary pollination and a convergence of distinct knowledges: literary and cultural studies, visual arts and media, modern languages, sociology, geography and more”. Indeed, was are at a point of transition, and we all have responsibility for it.

In the end we are all in this for the same reason – we want to advance the medium of comics and increase understanding of it.

So, it's all worth it in the final analysis!