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This paper examines the issues surrounding collection-building for comics collections in academic libraries. The small body of literature concerning librarianship related to comics is summarized, and strategies for the evaluation and acquisition of comics are discussed.

The prevailing ideologies concerning collection development in academic libraries are considered relative to a discussion of comics as a distinct medium. It is proposed that academic libraries should collect comics as a mode of representing the emerging visual culture of contemporary society.

Headings:

College and university libraries – Collection development

Comic books, strips, etc. – Evaluation

BUILDING A COMICS COLLECTION: A PLAN FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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INTRODUCTION

The study of popular culture is an increasingly common way for scholars and students to cultivate an understanding of contemporary society. Despite the growing interest in and the demand for popular culture materials, libraries have been slow to acquire collections. The conservative approach to collection-building, adopted by most academic librarians bound by shrinking acquisition budgets and collection development policies, is one of the roadblocks to developing any popular culture collection. Librarians are accustomed to selecting materials that are professionally accepted through favorable reviews; however, the study of popular culture assumes that a given society's values and beliefs are more accurately reflected in its popular artifacts than the "high art" of an elite culture. Such is the conflict between what library science professionals have been traditionally trained to select and the very nature of popular culture materials.

How can librarians incorporate comics, small press publications, zines, and other underground and ephemeral publications into their collections? More importantly, how can librarians, as caretakers of intellectual artifacts (popular and otherwise), modify prevailing ideologies to reflect an understanding of the importance of preserving these materials for the scholars of the future? This paper

will explore the possibilities inherent in popular culture collections for academic libraries through an examination of the issues surrounding collection-building for a specific genre of popular culture materials—comics. The ideological and technical obstacles to comics collections are often cited as reasons for neglect. Comics continue to be perceived as juvenile and "trashy" despite their increasing acceptance as an adult medium and the serious aesthetic concerns of a new generation of comic artists. There are further complications for libraries which collect comics—inherent difficulties in acquisition, cataloging, and preservation. Despite these concerns (most of which can be successfully dealt with), librarians should become advocates for the systematic collection, organization, and preservation of these materials.

It is ironic that the cultural institutions best suited to collect and make these materials available typically continue to ignore them. There are fewer than fifty research libraries in the world with substantial collections of comics-related materials. Furthermore, most of these collections, including the comprehensive Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University, are built on donations rather than active acquisition. This paper intends to examine how comics may be integrated into general collections at academic libraries in order to address curricular interests and foster the growth of popular culture scholarship.

SCOPE

As there is already a small body of literature concerning librarianship related to comics, most notably Randall W. Scott's book *Comics Librarianship: A Handbook*, this paper aims to synthesize the work already done in order to provide an introduction for collection development librarians in academic libraries to the issues involved in incorporating comics into their general collections. Added to this introduction and overview will be an examination of the medium of comics as a complex mode of expression and interpretation worthy of inclusion in our research collections. This will necessarily include a discussion of several key questions:

- What does it mean to collect beyond the rules of traditional librarianship?
- What are comics? Can we arrive at a working definition for librarians who are not already comics experts?
- What are the inherent assumptions of a comics collection in an academic library?
- How can librarians who wish to incorporate comics into their collections overcome the obstacles of evaluation and acquisition?

This paper calls for a renewed commitment to critical thinking on the part of librarians. Chris Atton has noted that there are "no canonical answers about finding information, about using information; no rules except 'think for yourselves'(1994/95b, 157)." This statement is particularly appropriate to our discussion as, with comics, we are dealing with a part of our culture which exists outside of the "canon." Further complicating this issue is the nature of the canon itself. John S. Baky has asserted that the canon is indeed an "imaginary" construct which "everyone seems to revere but to which no one can actually point (55)." Any further philosophical discussion of what the canon is and what it is not lies outside the scope of this paper, but it seems important to the notion that librarians are and should strive to be critical thinkers, willing to collect beyond conventional boundaries.

As designers of collections, librarians dictate what resources are readily accessible for scholars and students and are, therefore, highly influential in determining the kind of research and learning which takes place. In his essay "Comics and Libraries and the Scholarly World," Scott points out that "the work we do in assembling and organizing is a large part of most scholarship" and not merely some kind of "pre-scholarship" (1993, 82). What this means for librarians is that we need to become risk-takers, albeit *informed* risk-takers. This paper intends to serve as a roadmap to that information and as justification for risk-taking.

It has been proposed that one reason comics have been neglected by so many for so long, is their inherent complexity. The surrealism of newspaper comic strips must have been intimidating to a generation that learned to read before their advent and, therefore, didn't know what to make of the new medium, didn't know the "rules" of how to interpret it (Scott 1990, 13). Comics, as a medium, have continued to be misunderstood and discounted through comparison to other genres. However, media studies and McLuhanesque methods of analysis have provided a means through which to examine comics on their own terms, the medium being the message (Hoffmann 162). This paper hopes to arrive at a working definition of "comics" through an examination of them as "sequential art narratives" (Dardess 214), complex combinations of image and text which, as an avant-garde medium, expand our cognitive repertoire.

The discussions in this paper will exclude newspaper comic strips and retrospective material, instead focusing on contemporary publications including:[1]

- *American Comics* which are usually 32 pages with a paper cover, the most popular genre being super-hero
- *Trade Paperbacks* which are collections of reprinted stories and are the format most common to libraries; usually have heavy paper covers and perfect bindings.
- *Graphic Novels* which are self contained stories

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[1] These definitions have been taken from Jane K. Griffin's "A Brief Glossary of Comic Book Terminology" *Serials Review* 24(1) Spring 1998, pp. 71-76.

- *Reprints* which are comics that have been reissued in a new printing and make retrospective material more readily available and affordable
- *Independent Comics (Indies)* which are issued by any company not affiliated with the "Big Three" publishers (DC, Marvel, and Image Comics)
- *Alternative Comics* which "explore topics or themes outside of mainstream comics genres, which utilize non-traditional formats, narrative techniques, or artistic styles"

Through examining the medium of comics we will arrive at a definition that librarians who are not already comics experts may use when considering materials for their collections. This definition will speak to the unique features of the medium.

Despite the fact that "the mechanics of librarianship…become second nature and secondary to the cognitive processes of examination, reflection and criticism" (Atton 1994/95b, 157), it will be necessary to consider the specific collection development concerns surrounding a comics collection, including problems of evaluation and acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will provide the background necessary to establish justification for the existence of comics collections in academic libraries.

Since the focus of this paper is collection development for a particular genre of materials, it is necessary to first consider the general issues confronting today's collection development librarians. Richard K. Gardner's *Library Collections: Their Origin, Selection, and Development* and the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* were consulted for general information on the basics of collection development policies.

Gardner points out that a collection development policy should be both a "planning tool and a communications device" (221). The policy requires input from both the library staff at all levels and the library's patrons if it is to be of use. In her article "Collections Development Policies: A Cunning Plan" (1994), Peggy Johnson argues that not only should the policy take into account library patrons but it should also be to meaningful to them (5), serving as an educational tool. Furthermore, the *Intellectual Freedom Manual* asserts the "absolute need for the firm foundation that a selection statement provides" (199).

The guidelines set forth in a collection development policy should provide for both adding to and strengthening a library's collection. According to the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, the difference between the present collection and the collection specifications will determine the current selection needs (203). These specifications should be established for every subject or area of interest. Gardner provides three points to consider when examining each subject. These include: the current strengths of the collection; the current level of collecting; and "the desirable level of collecting to meet adequately the program needs of the institution" (Gardner 224). This third point will be the most cogent for our discussion.

Johnson asserts that "even a library with written policy statements suffers if those statements are not reviewed, revised, and updated regularly" (3). Again, this requires that librarians be advocates for change within their organizations and be practicing critical thinkers. Collection policy reviews are required in order to keep collections current. As disciplines evolve, materials change form, cultures change, a librarian's questions, processes, and foci must change also. Any academic library which wishes to incorporate comics into its collections but does not presently include comics in its collection development policies will need such a review and re-assessment to find or develop a place for these materials.

Several articles specifically address collection development policies and popular culture materials. These include Barbara B. Moran's "Going Against the

Grain: A Rationale for the Collection of Popular Culture Materials in Academic Libraries" (1992), John S. Baky's "Truthful Lies: Popular Culture and Special Collections" (1993), and Doug Highsmith's "Developing a 'Focused' Comic Book Collection in an Academic Library" (1992).

Moran notes that "academic libraries have confined their collection-building to a traditionally defined, microscopic view of culture" dictated by reviews in "professionally accepted literature" (4). She advocates the collection of popular culture materials based on the fact that an ever-increasing number of universities are teaching popular culture courses. Baky also notes that "popular culture has become entrenched as a contributing academic value to curricula in literary criticism, modern historiography, and communications" and that, therefore popular culture collections are "easily justified across the curriculum" (53). Despite this fact, however, there are very few libraries which collect popular culture materials. Moran also emphasizes that the collection of popular culture materials is a daunting task due to the sheer quantity of materials. This requires that libraries institute inter-institutional cooperative programs or a narrowly-defined focus for their popular culture collections.

Baky and Highsmith both speak to this sense of "focus" in popular culture collections. Baky contends that planning is the fundamental process which makes a good collection. He holds that "design and concept assure a collection's

distinction and significance" (53). Highsmith gets at the same issue when he asks, "Is there some point at which mere 'holdings' becomes a true 'collection?'" (60).

Both Baky and Highsmith thoroughly address subject specification and the need to articulate (in collection development policies and elsewhere) the "relevance" of popular culture materials. It is ironic that, despite the heightened profile of popular culture studies, this may be increasingly difficult to do in the face of continually shrinking budgets. Baky emphasizes that subjects/areas considered for "curricular integration" into both special collections and general, circulating collections should allow for "flexible curricular application" in that they "possess a potential for student use in at least three separate humanities concentrations" as well as a "serious subject focus that requires a user to exercise analytical vision" (58). Speaking specifically of comics, Highsmith urges that librarians be able to "enunciate clearly both the value of comic books to academic libraries in general and the unique value, scope, and purpose of their collections in particular" (60-61). He also notes the importance of finding a "middle ground" when developing collection policies. He states that "criteria should be sufficiently precise so that it is possible to determine whether a particular comic book should be included…[but] not so narrow that it is impossible to successfully build a collection of any size or significance" (Highsmith 64).

The second group of texts consulted addressed comics as a unique medium with specific characteristics and applications. A trio of monographs by two comic

artists serve as a most useful introduction to comics as a medium. These include Will Eisner's *Comics & Sequential Art* and *Graphic Storytelling* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.

Eisner, who taught a course in Sequential Art at the School of Visual Arts in New York and is the author of several graphic novels including the influential *A Contract With God*, begins *Comics & Sequential Art* by stating that the work is "intended to consider and examine the unique aesthetics of Sequential Art as a means of creative expression, as a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea" (1985, 5). Eisner discusses the elements/conventions of sequential art including "imagery,' "timing," "the frame," "expressive anatomy," and "writing and sequential art." In *Graphic Storytelling*, Eisner contends that the story is the most critical element in comics and describes the concentration of the book as being on "a basic understanding of narration with graphics" (1996, 2).

By building on Eisner's work in *Comics & Sequential Art*, *Understanding Comics* by McCloud deconstructs the conventions of comics by using the language of comics to do it. His voice has unique authority, even given the complex issues he tackles, since his treatise is itself in the form of a comic. In his review essay "Bringing Comic Books to Class" (1995), Richard Dardess describes McCloud as a "prophet leading us into an irresistibly attractive promised land"

where words and pictures, rendered separate by the invention of printing, will be brought together once more (220).

Other important works which consider comics as a medium include a compilation of essays entitled *Comics and Visual Culture: Research Studies from Ten Countries*, Ronald Schmitt's essay "Deconstructive Comics" (1992), and Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History* and "From Genre to Medium: Comics and Contemporary American Culture" (1992). Taking cues from literary criticism, especially semiotics, these works examine the significance of comics in contemporary culture.

The third group of texts consulted addressed the specifics of both existing and hypothetical comics collections. The issues explored in these texts will be more fully explored in the rest of this paper; however, a summary of key points will be provided here. Randall W. Scott's aforementioned work *Comics Librarianship* is of course a key text, especially since it is the product of actual practice; Scott is librarian of the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State University. Particularly pertinent to this paper are the chapters on "Comics Librarianship as a Specialty," "Acquiring Comic Books and Strips," and "Becoming the Comics Expert."

An equally useful (and more recent) resource is the 3-part series "Comic Books and Libraries" appearing in *Serials Review*. Scott has contributed an article which updates his book, "A Practicing Comic-Book Librarian Surveys His

Collection and His Craft" (1998). Other highly relevant articles in the series include David S. Serchay's "Comic-Book Collectors: The Serials Librarians of the Home" (1998) and Micheal R. Lavin's "Comic Books and Graphic Novels for Libraries: What To Buy" (1998). Additionally, Frank Hoffmann's "Comic Books in Libraries, Archives, and Media Centers" (1989) is a useful introduction.

Scott provides a convincing argument for comics and other popular culture materials collections when he observes that "librarianship is the appropriate technology for collecting printed materials, and most collectors and dealers can't come close to the results we [as librarians] routinely produce in terms of storage and retrieval" (1998, 51). In the same article he notes that because libraries are not museums, it is completely acceptable for them to collect quality reprint collections, color microfilm, and digital files (Scott 1998, 52).

Hoffmann describes the resounding success of the comic book medium in the 20th century and proposes that the "greatest potential for understanding comic books lies in the study of the primary materials themselves" (169). He also notes the importance of including secondary sources which will allow representative material to "play a larger role within the overall scheme of library services and the educational process" (Hoffmann 169).

In his introduction to the "Comic Books and Libraries" series, Lavin addresses the special collection versus the general collection. He notes that for general collections, "the preferred solution is to purchase trade paperbacks and

graphic novels" (1998b, 36). Additionally, in his article "Comic Books and Graphic Novels for Libraries: What to Buy," he points out that "ever-better quality" is ensured in contemporary comics as sturdier formats and more sophisticated printing and coloring techniques are being employed by publishers small and large, marking comics as "suitable for any library collection" with hundreds of titles being published each year (1998a, 36, 1998b, 32).

Serchay's article is especially useful as it describes how the comic book collector deals with his or her collection and in turn provides helpful advice for the librarian contemplating a similar task. He provides a glossary of terms which describe categories of comics as well as terms related to methods of acquisition and collection development.

Both Serchay and Scott address the importance of cataloging, classification, and arrangement of comics collections in order to provide adequate access. Cataloging in itself is a complex process, but this complexity increases substantially when dealing with comics. Scott begins by discussing the difference between serials and monographic cataloging, noting that in order for cataloging of serial titles to be complete from the users point of view, it must include either analytic cataloging or thorough indexing (1998, 52). Scott then explains that subject indexing for comic books should be at the level of individual issues, including broad themes. Serchay also advocates categorization by subject or genre but notes that this can become complicated when considering multiple characters,

plot lines, or genres which may be present in a single comic book (67). Other idiosyncrasies common to comics are described by Serchay, including: cessations to begin new volume numbering; inter-company cross-overs; the appearance of new imprints; unusual numbering (0, ½, and -1 issues); and variant issues (covers and/or content). Serchay also describes the "Three B's" of comics storage and preservation—bags (mylar bags), boards (acid-free cardboard backing), and boxes.

COMICS AS A MEDIUM: FINDING A DEFINITION

Comics, when considered at all, have traditionally been viewed as popular culture materials. In his essay "The Study of Popular Culture" for the *Handbook of Popular Culture*, Michael J. Bell distinguishes between popular, elite, and folk culture (1460). Popular culture creations seek to please as many as possible while offending as few as possible. These materials are not intended to be complex or profound, their audience seeking to be entertained and have their experiences validated. Products of an elite culture are consciously aesthetic and seek out complexity. Folk culture productions are personal artifacts of everyday experience. Creators and audience within a folk culture are immediately aware of one another.

Contemporary comics seem to be not merely "pop culture" but an amalgamation of popular, elite, and folk culture. Today's comics are not mass produced; in fact, this is one of the major problems facing libraries who wish to collect them. Contemporary comic artists are acutely aware of the complexity of the medium in which they work, and the work they produce is increasingly about the mundane and the everyday. Witek notes that comics are less concerned with traditional escapist themes involving superheroes and talking animals and are

instead placing special emphasis on "issues such as the clash of cultures in American history, the burden of guilt and suffering passed on within families, and the trials and small triumphs of the daily workaday world" (1989, 3).

Perhaps comics linger somewhere between these distinct cultures because they are a "'low' culture for which there is no corresponding 'high'" (Scott,1993, 83). Comics ought to be viewed as innovations—a unique mode of communication and expression with its own language and set of signs. Schmitt refers to comics as "distinct alternative visions" which are not inferior to high art but rather capable of "reveal[ing] *more* about the fears, neuroses and power struggles of the populous" (155). Comics should play a greater role within the humanities, as they are an important perceptual and conceptual innovation.

The first step in changing the perception of comics within academia is to arrive at an accurate definition of the medium so that a meaningful dialogue may be conducted. The terms "comic book" and "comics" have unavoidable negative connotations—they continue to be viewed as juvenile and escapist despite the continued increase in the quality and quantity of work in the medium. Comic book historian Les Daniels attributes this negative connotation to comics' status as an innovation. He proposes that because comics are not the result of the technological achievement of a famous inventor, like radio or motion pictures, they are viewed as inferior (Hoffmann 167).

Comics are different from other print media in that words and image are equally important, distinguishing them from illustrated books. Dardess compares comics, graphic novels in particular, to opera, theater and film in that each employs two or more mediums simultaneously, the feature which distinguishes the comic from the others being its lack of respect (214). However, with this definition we are still stuck at the level of an illustrated book. Schmitt does equate the comic strip with the illustrated book since large blocks of text are positioned above or below pictures and the action of characters chiefly involves talking (158). Comic books are different in that they are more complex.

Rolf T. Wigand's definition is still too simplistic although he does note the importance of the act of reading. In his essay "Toward a More Visual Culture Through Comics" (1986), he defines comics as "a form of cartooning in which a cast of characters enacts a story in a sequence of closely related drawings designed to educate or entertain the reader…comics consist of continuing story situations in which reading plays an important role" (29). Eisner, too, notes the importance of the reading process when considering comics, and he conceives of comics as a storytelling medium, emphasizing the "conveyance of ideas and information" (1996, 6).

Dardess appropriates Eisner's term "sequential art," which Eisner uses to denote the mode of narrative employed by both comic strips and comic books, but Dardess finds it necessary to expand the term to "sequential art narrative." I find

this to be unsatisfactory, not for the term itself, but because he argues that a sequential art narrative is "a serious story…told in comics form" which is "no longer a comic book, even though it employs many techniques used in comic book art" (Dardess 214). Dardess seems overly concerned with making a good impression with other academics.

Schmitt employs the language of semiotics when defining comic books. He asserts that the words in comics "violate the traditional roles in signification and are employed in ways which challenge the boundaries of the printed word" (158). The framed image is chopped up by the text when speech balloons are placed asymmetrically, and word and image interact, no longer separate.

Perhaps the most satisfying definition of comics comes from McCloud who describes comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). I find this definition satisfying because it hits all of the major points in a single concise statement. The notion of combining words and images and the resulting complexity is described since "other images" can refer to words and "juxtaposition" implies complexity; the notion of sequence is included; and the act of reading is emphasized as both a means of acquiring information and as a mode for aesthetic experience.

Now that we are equipped with a working definition of "comics," we can proceed with the technical issues surrounding a comics collection.

STRATEGIES FOR EVALUATION

Librarians require tools in order to assess materials for their collections. It has often been noted that alternative publications such as comics have not traditionally been included in research collections because there are no adequate tools for evaluating them. This assertion is false; it just happens that the tools themselves tend to be alternative publications of which librarians are unaware.

What does a librarian consider to be an "alternative" publication? Perhaps it is most useful to begin with what an alternative publication is not—that is, a "mainstream" publication. We are all familiar with mainstream publications, and this is one of their defining characteristics. Mainstream publications come from major publishing houses who may be generalist publishers across a wide range of topics and who have reputations for quality and authority. The familiarity of these publications is due in part to the advertising budgets of their publishing houses which allow for mailshots and newspaper, magazine, television, and radio coverage. Mainstream publications are afforded a high profile in the marketplace which allows them to become an integral part of the everyday life of librarians and library patrons alike (Atton,1994/95a, 162).

Alternative publications, on the other hand, are marginalized due to the fact that they cannot afford to compete in the marketplace of conglomerate publishers. Such is the economic definition of alternative publications, but they tend to also differ in content from mainstream publications. Atton asserts that another defining characteristic of alternative publications is that they are ultimately more concerned with the "free flow of ideas" than with profit, and therefore remain "answerable not to accountants but to their writers and readers" (1994/95a, 162). Wouldn't this characteristic make them ideal candidates for libraries?

Offering library patrons alternative viewpoints and interpretations should be a major component of librarianship. Otherwise we, as librarians, allow ourselves to become slaves to an intellectual status quo (imposed by the most powerful publishing houses) by restricting access to these materials either willingly or through continued ignorance.

Atton describes how the mass media, including mass publishing, "determine, select, shape, control, and restrict" content (1994/95a, 162)—effectively removing these important components of collection development from the realm of librarianship. The mass media has become so powerful because it has become the primary body which selects topics, provides emphasis, frames issues, filters information, and constructs boundaries for debates (Atton, 1994/95a, 161). Librarians can take back some of the responsibility for these important societal

functions by consciously seeking out alternative publications to counterbalance those produced by mainstream publishers.

To return to the issue of evaluative tools, Atton writes in his essay "Critical Thinking and Critical Librarianship," that we need "alternative bibliographic tools to encourage our thinking; to encourage the thinking of colleagues; to encourage our readers, students, users" (1994/95b, 158). Traditionally, a characteristic of alternative publications has been that there is not adequate bibliographic information or control available, but Lavin notes that bibliographic control of comic book literature has never been better (1998a, 33).

There is a journal for every discipline or area of scholarship, and comics are no exception. The *Comics Journal* has been published since the early 1970's. Its principle concern is the criticism of current comic books, but it includes a substantial review section of new titles and interviews with artists and writers. Atton reminds us that the perusal of a single issue of a journal may "open up a whole network of contacts, each one branching off and interconnecting at some later stage" (1994/95a, 166), and an examination of the *Comics Journal* can yield such results.

The most useful reviews will come from such sources, although library science journals are beginning to include graphic novels in their review sections. Atton, however, asserts that mainstream reviewers often treat alternative literatures as the domain of the specialist or fanatic (1994/95a, 160). With library

science literature the bigger problem is simply lack of inclusion. To this, Scott contends that if library publications were to review comics and graphic novels *regularly*, "every comic publisher would be studying the reviews to discover what librarians want, and library editions may begin to appear" (1984, 25). Other sources for reviews include *Wizard*, *Staros Report*, and *Indy Magazine*.

A collaboration between libraries and the publishers and collectors of comics is an excellent way to eliminate many of the problems surrounding evaluation and acquisition. Comic book publishers, like other publishing houses, produce catalogs and maintain websites—even many of the independents. Most of these publishers offer extensive lines of library-friendly book-length comics. *Serials Review* has published extensive guides to the publications of the four largest comic book publishers in the United States--DC, Marvel, Image Comics, and Dark Horse Comics—in conjunction with its 1998 series "Comic Books and Libraries."

The fan press, the publications produced by collectors, is also a fruitful resource for collection-builders. The fan press provides checklists, summaries, and interviews. Two extensive projects that fit into this category which may be especially useful to librarians include the Amateur Press Alliance for Indexing (APA-I) and the Grand Comic-Book Database (GCD).

The APA-I includes details about the contents of a given comic book title Since 1977 this group of indexers have been compiling data on comics. Articles

are collected by a central mailer who compiles them and sends out photocopies of the finished product to subscribers.

The GCD (www.comics.org) is a non-commercial venture also made up of volunteer indexers, comic book hobbyists, who contribute information to an electronic database. The goal of the GCD is to "catalog key story information, creator information, and other information which is useful to readers, fans, hobbyists, researchers." The organizers of the project intend to include "all comics ever published." As of July 1999, after two years of operation, the GCD has indexed just over 30,000 comic books which they estimate is around 25% of the US comic book output. Currently, only contributors have access to the data files, with limited access planned for the public at large through the World Wide Web. Should librarians express an interest in the project, perhaps special access to the data files could be arranged.

Price guides such as *The Official Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide* which has been described as the "most complete index for comic books (or anything resembling a comic book) published in the US since 1900" (Savage 86) and trade publications will also be indispensable resources for comics collection-building. *The Comics Buyer's Guide* is the weekly industry trade magazine and includes news of current developments in the industry, a letters column, articles, and advertisements. *Previews*, published by Diamond Comics Distributors, the

largest comic book wholesaler in the United States, is a monthly catalog which includes forth-coming comic books and comics-related publications.

There are also a growing number of academic books devoted to the study of comic book and comic art. This trend in itself should garner the attention of collection builders. It has been noted, however, that many of the histories of the medium are “popular” rather than “academic,” and as alternative publications themselves, “contain no known documentary apparatus to support them” (Savage 87).

Collection development librarians can also look to the reference desk for points of departure when building a comics collection. Scott advocates the reference desk as a vantage point for spotting trends in academic research and notes that utilizing past research topics as predictors for future collections use is an effective way to set priorities for collection-building (1998, 52-53). However, reference librarians should be kept abreast of amendments to collection development policies so that patrons may benefit from the inclusion of new resources. Scott contends that “nobody has ever played the game of comics research with a full deck and very few people doing other kinds of research have been reminded of relevant comics material by their librarians” (1993, 10). Furthermore, in his introduction to the second volume of *Alternative Library Literature*, Jim Danky asserts that “the meaning of alternatives lies in their being read, not in the titillation of their covers or titles” (viii). If this is to occur,

reference librarians will need to be included in any dialogue concerning the place of comics in an academic library if these resources are to realize their full potential.

In terms of specific criteria librarians should use when selecting contemporary comics, Hoffmann has provided a brief list. He includes: quality of artwork (including drawing, coloring, and lettering); "literacy" and "dramatic impact" of scripting; and the current popularity of the title (Hoffmann 174). These are excellent criteria, however, they are extraordinarily difficult to evaluate without an in-depth knowledge of the medium and a thorough examination of the content of each and every item.

Popularity is an especially difficult criterion to deal with since comics have traditionally been a disposable medium, even from a retailer's point of view. Issues are *meant* to be sold out, and once sold out they are essentially dead. Backordering is a very cumbersome process even for comic book retailers, much less libraries. By the time most librarians figure out that a given title is popular, it may be too late to acquire a complete run, not to mention the first issue, at a reasonable cost.

Rather than relying on such vague, subjective criteria, collection-builders need to return to Highsmith's notion of a "focused" collection and Baky's criteria that selected materials be applicable in at least three separate humanities concentrations.

Even with these criteria there is still the problem of expertise, as it can be difficult to assess the “subject” of comics, but the solution may lie within your own staff. If collection development librarians do not have the time (or inclination) to become a “comics expert,” there may be staff (librarians or paraprofessionals) who are already experts because they are collectors. This valuable resource should not be underestimated. Similarly, a good working relationship with the local comic shop is a great way to benefit from another’s expert knowledge. A comic shop manager knows the industry and can supply you with information about publishers, review sources and periodicals, and award-winning or popular titles. Local comic shops can be located by calling 1-888-COMIC BOOK.

STRATEGIES FOR ACQUISITION

Once the difficult process of selection is complete, the next step is to actually acquire the titles. Acquisition is an extremely bureaucratic function in academic libraries, requiring purchase orders, budget lines, and departmental approvals. This is yet another hindrance to the inclusion of alternative publications which do not exist in mainstream publishing channels. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that however well publishers, distributors, or reviews represent materials, it is ultimately the responsibility of the librarian to *acquire* them (1994/95b, 153).

There are several viable methods of acquiring comics for academic collections, including: mail order through direct subscription; mail order from a specialty service; or purchase directly from retailers.

A little background is necessary here. In the 1970's, the advent of the comics specialty store gave rise to the development of a direct market distribution system (Serchay 60) whereby individual publishers signed exclusive deals with distributors. The direct distribution system does not require the approval of the Comics Code Authority, the comic book industry's self-censoring body.

Established in 1954 the Comics Code established rigid guidelines for the content of comics which prohibited

> displays of corrupt authority, successful crimes, happy criminals, the triumph of evil over good, violence, concealed weapons, the death of a policeman, sensual females, divorce, illicit sexual relations, narcotics or drug addiction, physical afflictions, poor grammar, and the use of the words "crime," "horror," and "terror" in the title of a magazine or story (Witek 48).

Out from under the restrictions of the Code, publishers can now deal with topics formerly deemed "inappropriate."

Continued expansion of specialty retailers in the 1980's saw the industry grow 300-500 percent from the 1980's to the early 1990's, fueled primarily by an influx of comic book speculators who left the market in droves by 1993 (Lavin, 1998a, 34). Today, the rise of the small, independent publisher is a distinguishing feature of the industry, with Lavin estimating that between 500-600 titles are released per year (1998a, 34). Currently, Diamond Comic Distributors controls the direct market and is the primary wholesaler which stocks comic shops.

With direct subscription, titles are purchased directly from the publisher. This is a mode of acquisition familiar to librarians, however, only certain titles are offered by subscription and many independent publishers do not handle direct subscription at all (Lavin, 1998a, 42).

Subscription services specializing in comics are available. These types of operations are probably most familiar to librarians as they operate like regular book jobbers. Advantages to subscription services include availability of almost

any title, discounts, and guaranteed delivery. A potential drawback for collectors is that with subscription services they may not receive titles until several weeks after retail stores, but this is not a problem for libraries. One subscription service, Mile High Comics, has handled library accounts in the past (Lavin, 1998a, 42). Other subscription services include Westfield 's Comics and At Your Service Subscriptions.

If an acceptable system can be arranged with your acquisitions department, dealing directly with your local comic shop may be the most desirable way to acquire titles. The selection advantages related to the comic shop and its proprietor have already been mentioned, but advantages related to acquisition of comics using this method include: the opportunity to physically examine material before it is purchased; new material will be available on a weekly basis; stock will include journals, magazines, and books about comics (including out-of-print titles); in-house subscription services pull books for regular customers and hold them for pick-up; most maintain a file of back issues; and despite the fact that graphic novels tend to go out of print quickly, specialty shops will usually maintain an adequate stock to meet the demand for several years. Even though comics retailers are only able to keep a small fraction of the actual titles in stock, most will special order titles for regular customers.

Acquiring books from a local comic shop does require the implementation of special arrangements. The necessary first step is establishing a good working

relationship with the proprietor. Many retailers may be wary of dealing with an academic institution based on the assumption (usually correct) of an overly bureaucratic system required for receiving payment. This relationship can best be initiated by the resident “comics expert” on staff who may already be a regular customer. These arrangement will also necessarily include weekly or monthly visits to pick up materials. Again, the resident comics expert may be the most likely candidate for such duty.

Scott recommends that an agreement about invoicing and payment be reached early on in the relationship between librarian and comics shop. He suggests that the easiest arrangement may be for the person who picks up the material to deliver it along with an invoice from the retailer to the receiving section of the library. Preorder searching to detect duplicates can be completed at this point or the retailer’s invoice may be searched while materials are held at the shop. (Scott, 1990, 29-30). Obviously, such an arrangement requires a great deal of trust between library and retailer.

For filling collection gaps, there are several options. For example there are many collections of comic book reprints available. Examples noted by Savage include *The Great Comic Book Heroes* compiled by Jules Feiffer and *A Smithsonian Book of Comic-Book Comics* compiled by Michael Barrier and Martin Williams (88). Additionally, DC Comics has published “archive editions” of popular titles such as *Batman*, *Superman*, *Wonder Woman*, and *Justice League*

of America, among others. As noted above, comic shops are one source for finding back issues, but comic conventions are another option. Conventions, or "cons," are an opportunity to make "spot purchases" (Hoffmann 174) as well as gain more expertise by talking with artists, collectors, and publishers.

Several authors have noted even more novel approaches to the acquisition of comics and other alternative publications. In 1994 the Collections Policy Office (CPO) of the Library of Congress initiated a project to compare the library's holdings with titles listed in various catalogs published by Small Press Distribution, a book jobber specializing in literary small presses. The Library worked with Sandford Berman, a librarian and proponent of making alternative press titles more accessible. Berman sent the CPO lists of alternative press titles for which he did not find any LC copy cataloging and catalogs and other publications related to alternative press titles. Ultimately, this system of identifying collection gaps was determined to be ineffective (Schenck 475), but Berman and other librarians with expertise in alternative press titles have agreed to continue to send catalogs to the Library. The CPO does, however, meet regularly with selectors and acquisitions staff to discuss alternative press publishing. Academic libraries should consider a similar arrangement as a springboard to incorporating comics and other alternative materials into their collections.

And what about getting titles for free? Scott notes that his collection has "been on and off the complimentary mailing lists of most American [comics]

publishers" (1998, 51). This may first require active acquisition and a demonstrated desire to develop a collection, but once the library community begins collecting these materials, the comics industry will certainly take notice (Scott, 1984, 25). Finally, your resident comics experts may be able to come through for you yet again by donating titles they subscribe to when they are finished reading them.

CONCLUSION

We live in an increasingly visual culture, television and computers are an integral part of nearly everyone's daily lives. We are continually bombarded by the surreal in the form of advertising. As librarians, we are constantly reminded, through the ever-growing number of electronic resources, that the primacy of the page of printed text as a mode of transferring and expressing ideas about the world and ourselves is being called into question. Current technologies as well as developing ones demand that the problem of connecting words and images become a vital cultural concern. The inclusion of comics in our collections is but one way to address these issues.

Schmitt describes comics as the "deconstructive seeds of a revolution in perception, likely to leave no stone of traditional educative practice unturned" (154). And, indeed, comics do represent a kind of literacy distinct from that of the standard printed text. Word and image coexist, working together to express the author's truths.

Scholars who have considered comics as a viable mode of communication and expression predict that they will become increasingly important elements of

our culture. As librarians, it is our duty to recognize this and make these materials available for our patrons. Alphons Silbermann reminds us that:

> permanent, temporary and ephemeral art expressions are in the first place expressions of the activities of culture; in the second place, mobile cultural changes; third, up-to-date circles of cultural effects, that, fourth, lead in their totality to the worthwhile objective of making the individual…become a member of smaller or bigger groups of society through the binding power of the arts (16).

In this paper we have examined comics as a single mode. The strategies discussed here may be and should be applied to other visual and popular culture materials. With this in mind, the richness librarians have the opportunity to develop in our collections becomes a staggering possibility. When we employ critical thinking in our collection-building, the possibilities for new connections, new literacies, will only grow.

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