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A Social History of Comics Art: Looking at Writers and Readers' *Capitalism for Beginners*

Abstract

This chapters builds on Chapter 4 by reassessing the significance of the social history of art to Comics Studies by tracking the development of concepts of style, class and ideology from the work of early Marxist art historians such as Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro to that of New Left art historians like T. J. Clark and O. K. Werckmeister. It goes on to examine subsequent work by art historians and theorists taking a Marxist art-historical approach to print, graphics and popular culture such as Adrian Rifkin, Frances Stracey and Esther Leslie, before sketching what a social history of comics might look like through an analysis of the Writers and Readers' … *for Beginners* series of 'documentary comic books', specifically *Capitalism for Beginners* by Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon.

Keywords: social history of art; Marxist Art History; ideology; *for Beginners*; Borin van Loon; applied comics.

Resituating David Kunzle's work within the renewal of a social history of art in the 1970s, begs the question of what Marxist Art History might continue to offer Comics Studies, and what a social history of comics art could look like.

There is not much comics scholarship explicitly situated as Marxist in methodology (e.g. Wysocki 2020), as compared to work that roots itself within anarchism or feminism for example, and less still from a Marxist art-historical perspective. However, an enduring impact of Marxist cultural and aesthetic theory on Comics Studies is borne out by frequent reference to figures like Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Mikhail Bakhtin, and concepts like hegemony, ideology and autonomy. This has come in large part via the significance of Cultural Studies, with its foundations in Frankfurt School critical theory and the 'culturalist' social history of figures like E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams, in opening up possibilities for comics research.

While questions of ideology, class, labour and capital fell by the wayside as Comics Studies gained a stronger foothold in more established academic disciplines, and class as a structural antagonism was side-lined in postmodernist theory, there has been an increasing interest in class and work within comics scholarship, including the representation of class identities and labour in comics (DiPaolo 2018), the character and organisation of work in the comics industry itself (Brienza and Johnston 2016), and the class composition of comics creators and audiences (stemming from ongoing debates about whether comics were or are a "working class medium" – see Nilsson 2019). Historical work on

comics has examined their use in labour movements, and in turn labour history and activism have been documented and communicated through comics (with both to be found, for instance, in Paul Buhle's output as historian and editor, e.g. 2001; 2005; 2006; 2016).

That Marxist Art History has been largely absent from these discussions and developments speaks to the double marginality of Art History in Comics Studies and Marxism in Art History. Yet significant attention has been given in Marxist Art History to cartooning, print culture and popular art, with collector, writer and publisher Eduard Fuchs at the beginning of the twentieth century an early theorist of the dialectical possibilities of caricature as a political weapon (Mandarino 2018). It is not possible to summarise here the development of Marxist Art History since then, in dialogue with multiple other disciplines and diverse political mobilisations, and subject to intense internal and external critique, or even talk of a singular Marxist art-historical method. This chapter will therefore describe how core questions of class, ideology and value have been applied to comics, cartooning, print and political graphics by Marxist art historians beyond Kunzle. This will provide the basis for an analysis of the Writers and Readers series of *…for Beginners* 'documentary comic books', specifically *Capitalism for Beginners* by Robert Lekachman and alternative cartoonist Borin Van Loon first published in 1981.

Marxist Art History and Comics

Kunzle's approach, and the Marxist vein of Art History it was shaped by, raises questions that idealist, formalist models of meaning making in comics struggle to answer: what do comics do socially and politically? What are their relationships to class and capital? What ideological role do they play (in articulating and modulating class conflict, as intermeshed with other axes of exploitation and oppression)? How are they shaped by the contingent historical and material circumstances of their making and use, and how do they resonate with contemporary political and social antagonisms?

From a Marxist perspective it is not possible to define a 'system of comics' removed from the economic, social and cultural nexus in which they are produced, distributed and consumed, and a wider totality of social relations. Comics cannot be extracted from definite historical and material conditions, and nor can comics scholarship. The social history of art equally asks (with implications for the establishment of Comics Studies as a discrete discipline): how is academic research shaped by the conditions of its production and consumption, and what is its role in the construction and circulation of value? We might consider, for example, the impact of the way comics scholarship has

defined authorship, creative practice and the cultural significance of the form on the structure of the comics industry and market (for example in embedding the category graphic novel), and how this might relate to the political economy of academia itself.

Very broadly speaking, Marxist Art History contends that art is shaped by concrete historical circumstances of production and consumption - individual works must therefore be situated within specific relations between artists, patrons, institutions and audiences, themselves framed by broader economic, social and cultural forces. Both artistic labour and the use and experience of artworks are sensuous and social processes, tied up under capitalism with the commodity form. The meaning of artworks is not internal but historically and socially determined, art is not transcendent but contingent, and ideological in content and form, refracting and reifying particular prevailing interests and values, as do discourses *about* art. However, - and despite dismissals of Marxist Art History as reduced to its cruder orthodox variants - art is not simply reflective of, or structurally overdetermined by, the dominant economic organisation of society, but complex and contradictory, a site of contestation and a source of cognitive value and/or a kind of truth. Its critical possibilities have been partly ascribed to its peculiar commodity status and relative autonomy (as outside the rationality of socially-necessary labour time), although debates over ideology and aesthetics have been acute.

Style, Ideology and Class

An initial elaboration of a social history of art emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, looking to a wider range of cultural artefacts as part of its challenge to the dominance of a narrow canon of 'great' works. This included caricature, prints and popular illustration – as in the work of Frederick Antal and Francis Klingender who both wrote on the work of William Hogarth. A major aspect of established Art History they contested was the primacy of style treated in terms of fixed successive categories evolving according to an immanent logic divorced from wider historical factors (van Dyke 2019). For Antal, this model could not explain the co-existence of divergent styles within the same period, such as in fifteenth century Florentine painting (1948), which he accounted for as expressing (in specific combinations of form and subject) the "outlook on life" of conflicting class fractions within early capitalism. Hogarth's work at a subsequent historical juncture gave form to the values and consciousness not just of the rising English middle class, but, particularly in his engravings, a broad cross-section of society – with different visual approaches related to different publics and different artistic needs (Antal 1962). As such, stylistic analysis had to be rooted in in-depth exploration of

wider social, economic and political history, as well as detailed evaluation of class relations between artists, patrons and consumers.

Debates about the relationship between style, ideology and class were deeply tied to left politics of the 1930s and 1940s, and had played out in intense debates about realism and modernism within the cultural and political organisations of the anti-fascist Popular Front. Klingender, in a book based on the 1943 exhibition Hogarth and English Caricature organised with the Artists' International Association, took the orthodox Marxist view that it was Hogarth's realism that enabled him to reach beyond his own "middle station" and express "the moods and aspirations … of the broad masses of people", displaying "the different circumstances and relations of life, not abstractly, but as they actually are" (Klingender 1944, pp. xiii, viii). Hogarth was therefore a model of a socially engaged artist addressing the experiences of "a less sophisticated public" by tapping into the blunt realism of a popular lineage of visual satire from medieval miniatures through seventeenth century chapbooks. Antal, who rejected Soviet avowals of realism as transhistorically progressive, identified greater complexity in Hogarth's work, with various styles (baroque, classicist, realist, expressionist) intermingling within it, mediating differing ideological currents and the complexity of its "social and artistic background" (1962, p. 57).

American Marxist art historian Meyer Schapiro, like Klingender, endorsed popular graphics as a model for revolutionary art (albeit from a different political perspective sympathetic to Trotskyism). He advocated the political value of newspaper cartoons, posters and print series and argued "the good revolutionary picture… should have the legibility and pointedness of a cartoon, and like the cartoon it should reach great masses of workers at little expense" (Schapiro quoted in Hemingway 1994, p. 16). Rejecting ideas of style as homogenous and discrete as inflected by nationalism and racism, like Antal he saw the co-presence of different styles as articulating conflicting social interests and perspectives in periods of political, economic and cultural transformation (Schapiro 1939), positioning stylistic categories as mutable and provisional, rooted in definite but dynamic historical circumstances.

This was a view shared by Hungarian art historian Arnold Hauser, who, despite the allegations of critics like Gombrich, rejected a crude reflective sociology of art, conceiving styles as a broad shifting patterns of collective cultural forms shaped in complex ways by economic, political and technological developments, and interacting with psychological and social factors in producing individual artworks. Art is "eminently social… a product of social forces and source of social effect" (Hauser 1963, p. 276), but examining its ideological dimension was not a simple matter – "the formation of ideologies is a long, complicated, gradual process… full of interruptions and

contradictions" (p. 11), and "art's dependence upon society can take the most varied forms", art "can express the structure of a given society either positively or negatively, can assent to it or reject it, promote some features and oppose others, serve as a propaganda weapon, defence mechanism, or safety valve" (p. 268). For Hauser, art also has a cognitive and communicative dimension beyond its instrumental uses, in which style is among the material, intellectual and technical resources worked by artists (Gelfert 2012).

Schapiro scrutinised how art-historical analysis was framed by the political context and social position of the art historian, and was scathing about the role of "bourgeois art-study" as "ultimately tied to the market interest in pictures", "usually servile, precious, pessimistic and in its larger views of history, human nature and contemporary life, thoroughly reactionary" (quoted in Hills 1994 p. 35). Likewise Hauser attacked the ideological alliances of mainstream Art History, arguing that "requiring the spiritual to be preserved from all contact with the material frequently turns out to be a way of defending a position of privilege" (Hauser 1963, p. 4).

Style fell from use as a category in both Marxist Art History and Art History in general from the 1970s, displaced by a focus on representation informed by semiotics and structuralism, and the wider influence of Althusserianism on cultural theory (as in Nicos Hadjinicolaou's 1973 reconceptualisation of it as "visual ideology").[1] Nevertheless, the early social historians of art laid important groundwork in insisting on the politics of the treatment of material and visual form in combination with iconography or represented content, taken up by the Marxist Art History of the New Left as it further interrogated the ideological dimensions of art. The critique of the art historian as servant of the market intensified in New Left social history of art, and accounts of comics, cartooning and popular print were similarly indicative of its key concerns and fissures.

Ideology and Autonomy

As noted in Chapter 4, New Left art historians called for a return to fundamental historical, political and philosophical questions, advocating rigorous materialist analysis of the conditions and relations of artistic production to unpick relationships of art and ideology. For T. J. Clark, this included "blindness as much as vision" (1973, p.15), not just what is enabled to be seen and depicted but what is occluded, and moreover the *mode* of seeing, emphasising the need to examine "what kind of visibility a certain symbolic system [makes] possible" (pp. 16-7). Critical of earlier Marxist Art History for drawing what he deemed too generalised correlations of styles and ideological outlooks across wide stretches of time, Clark explored "connecting links between artistic form, the available systems

of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes and more general historical structures and processes" within more precise conjunctures (1973, p.12). This included examining the work of French Realist painter Gustave Courbet in the 1840s as means to explore how art in certain historical moments could actively participate in social revolution and counter-hegemonic disruption, "how art during moments of social upheaval can become disputed, even effective, part of the historical process and … work against the grain of dominant regimes of power" (Clark 1973, p.10), with an important focus on reception and the relationship to, and construction of, publics. A key element of Courbet's work was how it appropriated motifs, techniques and the "repetitive forms" of popular woodcuts "for the purpose of putting history painting … at the disposal of workers and peasants" (Eisenman 2013, p. 52), articulating a modernist flatness thereby cast as a mode of seeing rooted in radical social movements.

The idea of art's autonomy (often defined in contradistinction to commodified mass culture determined by exchange value), and claims made on that basis for the aesthetic as a specific kind of truth were sharply contested within Marxist Art History in the 1970s and 1980s. O. K. Werckmeister in particular challenged such assertions as themselves an ideological abstraction, whereby the aesthetic provides a utopian surrogate for actual political transformation (1991a, p. 87). Werckmeister argued the turn to the Frankfurt School by the New Left, and Adorno's aesthetic theory in particular, marked a retreat from a full-blown materialist emancipation of Art History directed at political activism. Rejecting art's supposed autonomy and the modernist canon Clark reinscribed (a criticism also made by Marxist-feminists like Griselda Pollock), Werckmeister's own ideology critique has incorporated a broader array of creative media. This has included analysis of comics and manga - notably Enki Bilal's work on the Nikopol trilogy and *The Hunting Party* (written by Pierre Christin). For Werckmeister, Bilal's comics spoke more profoundly of the contradictions of 1980s neoliberalism and its neurotic, brutalising "Citadel Culture", which neutralises political consciousness by staging a spectacle of its own self-critique as "radiant pessimism" and "empty subversion", than work found in galleries (Werckmeister 1991b, p. 18). In a situation of blurred distinctions between elite and popular culture, and market expansion across cultural borderlines, adult comics that drew on the "dynamic pictorial forms of film and television", adopted new technologies of colour printing, and experimentally exploited "the license of the comic strip to manipulate text, space and time", had greater historical relevance and critical purchase (pp. 48, 55).[2]

Clark's reinforcement of a narrow canon of culturally consecrated objects and (male) artists, was equally criticised by Adrian Rifkin, as merely disputing the interpretation of "one series of valued objects whose culturally ascribed value demands that they have their own history", rather than challenging that system of values (2018 p. 52). Rifkin saw the eschewal of fine art 'masterpieces' in

favour of popular culture as part of dismantling Art History, writing on a range of forms including prints, cartoons, posters, songbooks, popular magazines, film, entertainment venues and topographies of gay sex, in dialogue with currents in social history, art and design theory, Film Studies, Cultural Studies, feminist and queer theory. Rifkin also focused on France and the nineteenth century, but instead looked at mass print culture and cartooning, like that of the Paris Commune, not just as background source material or “decorative fringe to the ‘real’ fabric of social conflict” (2018 p. 217) but “itself a field of struggle and of the emergence of various forms of consciousness” (p. 487). Cartoons were part of the “autonomous culture of the working class” (Edwards 2018, p. 12), as well as means by which the middle classes expressed their hatred and fear of them.

Rifkin approached popular art as just as comprehensive, “semantically dense and polysemic” and demanding of detailed thematic, discursive and historical analysis as easel painting (Edwards 2018, p. 20). Cartoons and caricature mediated in complex ways wider social conditions and institutions (notably legal), and experiences and spaces of everyday life, in dialogue with other forms of creative production as part of a wider cultural economy. However, Rifkin resisted arguing for their quality or significance on terms that reproduced problematic cultural hierarchies and normative values, whereby cartoons by certain figures, like Daumier, are elevated on the basis of aesthetic criteria detached from historically specific meaning. Rifkin looked at work by amateur, unknown, ‘run of the mill’ illustrators and printmakers, and refused to sentimentalise the popular art of or about the Parisian working class or make apologies for its crudeness, obscenity and violence, but, particularly in attending to censorship and surveillance, identified its instances of militancy, dissent and transgression. Artists searched for imagery, forms and methods that embodied the political demands, experiences and enmities of the moment, reworking and adapting existing symbolism and techniques to produce new meanings, that, while “concentrating complicated relations into a form through which they can be realised and fought over” (Rifkin 2018, p. 215), were not fixed, stable or one-dimensional, but many-shaded, and shifting in processes of reception and use.

Affect, Materiality, and Ways of Reading and Seeing

In the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of the ‘recuperation’ of a watered-down social history of art into mainstream Art History, as one of a mix of methods and theoretical perspectives that provided it with a sheen of academic radicalism, many Marxists decamped for Cultural or Film Studies (Roberts 2013). Nevertheless, Marxist art historians and theorists have proceeded to work on cartooning and comics as well as wider forms of popular visual culture and political graphics in ways

that continue to flesh out a provocative model for Comics Studies.[3] To take just one publication, *Renew Marxist Art History* (Carter, Schwartz, Haran 2013) included chapters on cartoons in the communist-aligned U.S. paper *New Masses*, and José Guadalupe Posada's calaveras imagery in a range of newspapers, chapbooks and single-sheet prints, as well as Rockwell Kent's illustrations of *Moby Dick*, Louis Lozowick's lithographs of Soviet Tajikistan, and William Morris's printed textile designs. Among the most relevant to Comics Studies is Frances Stracey's chapter on Situationist détournement of images culled from women's and pornographic magazines using comics devices like speech balloons, part of wider research into their artistic and political output, including Asger Jorn and Guy Debord's books and Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio's industrial painting (Stracey 2014).

Stracey draws attention to the Situationists' tactical use of media based on specific visual and material affordances - the montage, splicing, drawing over and resituating of photographic imagery a key part of its counter-hegemonic recoding and the group's broader playful disruption of the fabric of alienated everyday life. Détournement, as an act of "determinate misplacement or disjunctive conjuncture", challenged "the conventional meaning and role of […] images" operative in a concrete historical context and wider cultural economy in which the image of femininity was in flux (Stracey 2013, p. 420). Pictures of women pillaged from advertising and pop-porn bore meanings tightly related to women's changing role in post-war labour markets and patterns of consumption, whereby "commodity aesthetics used women as a privileged site of desire" (Stracey 2013, p. 442). Their destabilising recontextualisation exposed (while remaining complicit in) how the "commodity aesthetic of late 50s and early 60s was hegemonically coded as feminine", ridiculing the sexual semblance of the commodity-spectacle and its "coercive and dissimulating drives" projected through "fantasy images of the proper way to look, act, cook", and the fractured semi-naked female body (Stracey 2013, p. 442, 425).

Thus not only images as representations, but the techniques of producing, manipulating and presenting them, have ideological inflections and particular material affects related to the socialising roles they play at a particular historical juncture in producing models of subjectivity. Stracey draws us towards the politics of affect as connected to precise material practices - how Situationist graffiti, for example, embodied in its palimpsestic ephemerality and mutability a "refusal of definitive language regimes" (2014, p. 81). Avowing instead a liquidation of language, this was part of a wider sensuous and eroticised poetics of "fluidity, promiscuity, *jouissance*, impropriety, contamination and insubordination", found equally in Situationist writing *about* images and contemporary capitalism, and the "photo-graffiti" of Situationist graphic design (Stracey 2014, p. 86). In its cropping, reframing and re-siting of "ready-made photojournalistic images" in ambiguous disjunctures of text and picture, "*détournement* of the photograph puts pressure on fixed meaning by making its framing

borders porous … open to contamination… subject to leakage…. the meaning of the image is both within it, but also constituted by what lies outside … starting with the pages of the book" (Stracey 2014, p. 88).

The Situationists didn't believe either photography or graffiti were essentially radical forms, but attention to their affective and sensuous affordances in particular historical moments, and specific material contexts of design and reproduction, opens up questions of the disruptive and revolutionary possibilities of comics' form. Marxist cultural and aesthetic theorist Esther Leslie has similarly attended to the political affordances of comics on the basis of materiality and aesthetics, as part of an expansive body of work covering animation, illustration, fine art, fashion, film, technology and science.

For Leslie, treatments of form and material – the aesthetics of the cartoon line, the organisation of a page's surface, the use (and chemistry) of colour, techniques of facture and processes of reproduction – make political meaning and "perpetrate a philosophy" (2006). Thus in an article for *ImageText* on William Blake she examines how his spiralling line ideologically confronted the blank, rational line of instrumentalist empiricism that classifies and fixes meaning and exchange values, and his "infernal" corrosive printing method appropriated metal for expression and imagination at a time when it was "ever more tightly bound to trade and finance", while stripping away "the veil of obscurity" to demystify and profane creative production (Leslie 2006). Blake's treatment of the page's surface invites a particular embodied way of seeing, with relations darting across it as a deep and full space, confounding any reader "who wishes to glide from line to line, in one direction only" (Leslie 2006). The visceral pleasures and "libidinal gratification" of reading comics like *The Beano*, with its "animosity to civilisation in favour of jokes, chaos and transformation" (in the vein of Dada iconoclasm and the "debunking satire" of *Tristram Shandy*), embodies a similar protest against mechanical reason and rationalised structures of language (Leslie and Watson 2002).

Drawn line and marked space have the potential to map new worlds, as well as describe the world as it is, both critical and speculative possibilities. For Leslie, reviewing Kate Evans' graphic biography of Rosa Luxemburg, *Red Rosa*, comics' "dialectical and intersectional nature", their "capacity to mesh subjective and objective worlds", exploit tensions between word and image, and "shift register and tone abruptly", prompt "new ways of reading and seeing" with possibilities for activism and political education (2016, p. 278).

Writers and Readers ...*for Beginners* comic books

Drawing on the implications of Marxist Art History, a social history of comics would attend to the politics of form and design as a site of struggle, the ideological valences of the kinds of looking and sensuous engagement comics invoke, and the meanings produced and publics constructed through material processes, media affordances and graphic style. This must be grasped in relation to the contingent historical circumstances and social relations of comics' production and consumption as commodities within a wider cultural economy and larger structural class antagonisms. Marxist Art History's critique of the canon suggests comics scholarship should look beyond established 'great works', sceptical of criteria used to judge 'quality'. This invites consideration of a much broader body of material beyond the graphic novels and comic book series put out by major publishers or newspaper strips with widespread syndication, including less well-known vernacular, local, provincial material appearing in a range of different digital and print formats. It also prompts attention to work across a wider range of genres, including non-fictional educational comics whose long history, as Aaron Humphrey (2014) argues, has been obscured by the ascendance and literary legitimation of the graphic novel, such as the*...for Beginners* books published by Writers and Readers.

Writers and Readers was founded in London in 1974 as a small press cooperative by Glenn Thompson, his wife translator Sian Williams, and writers Lisa and Richard Appignanesi, with the support of playwright and arts campaigner Arnold Wesker, anti-racist activist and teacher Chris Searle, and the art critic John Berger.[4] Thompson, born in Harlem and raised in Brooklyn, had come to the U.K. in 1968 and settled in Hackney, east London, working first as a social worker and then for the publisher Penguin's educational wing. Drawing on his experience of the Beat and Civil Rights movements, he was pivotal in setting up community cafe and bookshop Centerprise, the only bookshop in the borough when it opened in 1971 against the prevailing opinion that "a bookshop would never work in the East End because East Enders didn't read" (Simpson 2013). Alongside seeing a "good, wide-ranging general bookshop as a 'cultural right'" for the local multiracial working class population (Centerprise 1977) and providing a space for community organising and activism, adult literacy and the democratisation of publishing were important priorities for Centerprise, which held regular reading and writing classes. After a children's book, *Hackney Half-term Adventure*, and a book of poetry by Vivian Usherwood (aged 12 at the time) were published and sold well in the bookshop, Thompson set up the Centerprise Publishing Project to put out poetry, stories and autobiography by local writers, as well as local history books by the Hackney branch of the Workers' Educational Association (Centerprise 1977).

Writers and Readers was similarly initiated with a commitment to community-based, democratised publishing, literacy and popular education. Among their range of fiction and non-fiction was a series of ...*for Beginners* 'documentary comic books' which, encompassing politics, economics, science,

psychology, philosophy, art, music and literature, aimed to make these subjects accessible and relevant using the comics form.[5] Their breakout title was a 1976 English edition of Mexican cartoonist Rius' *Marx para principiantes*, translated by Richard Appignanesi as *Marx for Beginners*.[6] Its instant success established the viability of a series using Rius' model of educational comics to introduce lay readers to the ideas of figures like Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Freud, Einstein and Darwin, and the histories of Ireland, Nicaragua, food, medicine, nuclear power, etc., as Berger (2001) put it, "not in an arduous, condescending manner, but with a certain streetwise insolence".

Relations of Production, Distribution and Consumption

The cooperative organisation of Writers and Readers is significant and shaped the approach taken to the comics' design and visual and material form. As at Centerprise, it was intended that work would be distributed on an equitable basis with members receiving equal pay and rotating tasks so they could learn all aspects of publishing, as opposed to a hierarchical division of labour. Run on a not-for-profit basis, with some grants for specific publications from the Arts Council, surpluses from more successful titles were fed into others and kept their range of books in print and available. The commitment to the democratisation and socialisation of printing and publishing on a non-commercial basis connects Writers and Readers to the wider community and alternative publishing movements in the U.K. in the 1970s and 1980s, which included community printshops, poster workshops and the alternative press.[7] A further connection was evident in the fact at least one title in the series was typeset at the alternative printshop Range Left. The aims of this movement were to create access for local working class communities and marginalised groups to resources of media and cultural production monopolised by the middle and upper classes. Similar motivations, and the same independent infrastructure and networks of production and distribution, were shared by the early alternative comics movement (see Gray 2020).

This anti-hierarchical, democratic and participatory way of organising production resonated with Writers and Readers' aims in terms of relations to audiences and modes of consumption. As with the publisher's output at large, the *...for Beginners* series was intended to open up knowledge sequestered and gatekept by academia, hoping to appeal to young readers, non-readers and those who wanted to educate themselves without going to university. Thompson was influenced by the pedagogic theories of Paolo Friere and Ivan Illich, both of whose works Writers and Readers published among a range of texts on education and literacy, viewing books as "weapons of liberation" (Coates 2001). According to Berger, for Thompson "literacy was more than the capacity to read, it was the capacity to lay claim to a legitimate inheritance" (2001). This was evident in his

earlier work with Centerprise Publishing which was driven by the sense that nonreaders would read if they had access to books that addressed their concerns (Centerprise 1977), yet books on politics and sociology were being written about working class people that were expensive and difficult to get hold of. Centerprise members felt strongly "that people have a right to read what other people, invariably from a different class, are writing about them" and it wasn't a question of working class people lacking interest in education, but the "active suppression of working class people becoming too interested in politics and literature" (Centerprise 1977).

Rius was similarly influenced by the postcolonial education theory of Friere and Latin American pedagogical traditions of critical consciousness raising (Priego 2002). From this perspective, comics were a widely-read popular mass medium ideal for "the dissemination of ideas that lay at the heart of revolutionary self-emancipation" (Leslie 2016, p. 274). They allowed for graphic thinking and visual literacy, the reconsideration of the norms of writing and publishing practices (Humphrey 2015 p. 4), and the evocation of connections "in concrete graspable situations" through image sequencing, enabling "complex, abstruse thinking... to be hauled down to earth with raucous humour" (Leslie 2016, p. 274). With roots in workers publishing, independent radical media and traditions of popular political education, similar ideas of how cartooning could make theory entertaining, concrete, resonant and open, constructing a reading public that actively educated itself rather than one into which knowledge remote from everyday life is deposited, underpinned the *...for Beginners* series of comics.

Style, materiality and the politics of form

One of the major differences between Rius' work and the comics that followed in the series was that, rather than being the work of a single creator, *...for Beginners* paired writers with illustrators (Humphrey 2014, p. 77). Several of the cartoonists involved are well-known to the history of British and American comics, notably Oscar Zarate who illustrated several titles, but also Melinda Gebbie, William Ranking and Leonard Rifas,[8] yet these comics have received relatively scant attention in Comics Studies (Humphrey 2014; 2015; Brunner 2014). Borin Van Loon is another British comics artist who has produced several titles in the series, including *Capitalism for Beginners* (1981), *Darwin for Beginners* (1982) and *DNA for Beginners* (1983) as well as later books on genetics, maths, statistics, philosophy, sociology, critical theory, Cultural Studies and Media Studies. Van Loon's roots were in the alternative press, providing strips featuring his ex-hippie character Bof to South London alternative papers *Lower Down* and *South Circular* in the 1970s. These comics featured images of

urban alienation, including repeated images of tube tunnels and escalators, and played with ambiguous, elliptical narratives, silent storytelling and experimental layouts.[9] Van Loon also notably contributed one of his 'Intellectual Bull' strips to the women-led anthology *Heroïne* published in 1978 by the cooperative Birmingham Arts Lab Press' Ar:Zak imprint.

< INSERT FIG. 9.1 HERE >

Figure 9.1. Louise Fili, cover design for Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners.* Writers and Readers.

The design of the *...for Beginners* series suggests how the relations constructed between those involved in the production process, and between authors and readers, was conveyed visually and materially. Like the Centerprise publications, the aim appears to have been "to produce the comics as cheaply as possible whilst keeping them as attractive as their commercial counterparts" (Centerprise 1977). The books were paperback (with some hardbacks produced for libraries), perfect-bound and printed on low grade paper, but A5 digest sized which, larger than most paperback fiction, better showcased the imagery. The covers, designed by Louise Fili, combined a geometric slab serif typeface in red for the main title, sans serif Kabel typeface with a distinctive tilted e for other text, and a prominent cartoon illustration, printed on textured card. Overall, the visual aspect was emphasised and design was simple and stylish, conveying a reading experience that was pleasurable and dynamic and a book that made itself felt, but was functional and relatable rather than precious or solemn (Figure 9.1).

Van Loon's approach as an illustrator was highly significant in terms of design, materiality and their affective qualities, making substantial use of collage and photomontage in combination with dip pen/brush and ink drawings. Van Loon had first developed 'collage comix' and a process of cutting up, combining and re-scripting a range of found imagery in his work for alternative comics, notably his strips in Ar:Zak's *Streetcomix* and *Heroine* that appropriated images from boys adventure and romance comics. He became increasingly drawn towards the idea of producing a comic wholly made up of pre-existing images. For Van Loon (2003), collage has a subversive appeal and he cites the influence of Surrealism, specifically Max Ernst's "revolutionary collage novels" (as well as Terry Gilliam's Surrealist-inspired collage animation), alongside Situationist "agitprop collage" and the underground and alternative comics it influenced, like Martin Sharp's photomontage comics and Chris Garratt and Mick Kidd's *Biff* strip which featured in hippie papers *Oz* and *IT*. As discussed further in Chapter 11, collage as a process, particularly as it was developed in modernist movements

like Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, calls attention to the materiality of the page as a fractured and constructed surface and the physical, sensuous acts of making and manipulating material - cutting up, sticking down, drawing and writing over. In *Capitalism for Beginners* it also drew attention to the design process and Van Loon's hands-on paste up and layout of text and image for each page more generally. At the same time, in Stracey's terms, it highlighted the book's porousness, its contamination by a constitutive outside, and the dialogue it had within a wider economy of everyday visual and material culture consumed by the reader.

Van Loon's list of influences attests to the way the visual and material affordances of collage and photomontage, as applied in comics form, and the mode of seeing invoked, had been tactically deployed in the 1960s and 1970s by Situationist and pro-Situ groups.[10] Steef Davidson's (1982) *Penguin Book of Political Comics* documents extensive use of cut up, recombined and reworded imagery culled from superhero, adventure, romance and funny animal comics (often in combination with photographic material from newspapers, magazines and adverts) by left-wing activist groups and the alternative press across Europe as well as in the U.S.A. and New Zealand. A key catalyst was the four-page comic *The Return of the Durutti Column* fly-posted around Strasbourg University in 1966 by the "the friends of Marx and Ravachol" and distributed as a "comics preface" to Mustapha Khayati's pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* (Paylor 2021, p. 1016), which détourned romance and western comics, film stills, adverts and cartoons with radical slogans and extracts from Khayati's text. Others included the comics produced by the Council for the Maintenance of Occupations (CMDO) during student and worker activism in Paris in May 1968 (see Figure 9.2).

< INSERT FIG. 9.2 HERE >

Figure 9.2. 1968 CMDO comic, reproduced in Steef Davidson (1982) *The Penguin Book of Political Comics*, p. 142.

As a strategy, détournement had roots in the aesthetics of shock and chance developed in avant-garde modern art movements like Dada and Surrealism, but - in line with Situationist criticism of the ineffectuality and cooptation of such groups - was aimed directly at the radical critique and overthrow of contemporary capitalism and the function of images within it. The idea was to disrupt an economic system organised, in the context of post-war modernisation of manufacturing, expansion of the service sector, liberalisation of trade, diversification of media and extension of advertising, around an intensified, alienating commodity-spectacle. Détournement, meaning diversion but also embezzlement and corruption, disrupted and subverted elements of a social life

reduced to the level of appearance, through appropriation and juxtaposition. By putting things together in incongruous combinations, familiar fragments of text and image are organised into a new ensemble with a different effect, destabilising the commodity image through parody, exaggeration and violence.

The motivation for hijacking the imagery and format of comics was connected to this idea of corruption, profaning and deflating banal, affirmative bourgeois culture by appropriating comics as a lowbrow working class medium with an “ambivalent reputation” - associated with consumerism, Americanisation and youth in the context of the post-war anti-comics crusade, while receiving increasing attention from intellectuals (Paylor 2021, p. 1013). The CMDO comic in Figure 9.2 summarises the rationale – subverting the comic strip (“the graphic form of proletarian expression, means the bypassing of bourgeois art”), while self-reflexively mocking its own pretensions (“all they do is change the bubbles.... we’re just too lazy to draw our own pictures”). This echoed the description of Situationist comics as “making shame more shameful still” through repurposing “the only truly popular literature of our century” by adding elements or rewording speech balloons (Viénet 1967). This was seen in opposition to Pop Art as restoring to comics their potency as a political weapon, but not by making them serious. Détourned images were deliberately ambiguous and nonsensical – the point was to create a dissonant recoding that readers had to grapple with rather than a clear prescriptive message or simple pastiche, attesting to the possibilities of actively rewriting (and re-picturing) the world.

In the U.K. this approach was adopted by pro-Situ groups like King Mob, and in the work of cartoonists such as Peter Kirkham, Ray Lowry, Garratt and Kidd in the underground, alternative and music press, including grass-roots local papers like *Mole Express* and *Grass Eye* (Dickinson 1997, pp. 50-54), as well as in punk graphics of figures like Linder, Gee Vaucher and Jamie Reid (Reid having been part of Croydon alternative print collective Suburban Press). Van Loon’s collage cartooning operates in a similar way, establishing an important relationship to Lekachman’s words in *Capitalism for Beginners,* puncturing the authority of the typeset text, bringing the ideas presented down to earth, destabilising and multiplying meaning, and profaning both economic theory and Art History in the process. As Markus Brunner argues, Rius’ works are the only “real” comics in the series in the sense of consistently using panels (2014 p. 107), although the others still operate as image sequences on the basis of seriality and repetition. *Capitalism for Beginners* has an inconsistent, even erratic visual structure and unstable image-text ratios. Images interrupt and impinge on typeset words, spreading across the spine and pushing columns awkwardly towards the edges of pages

(Figure 9.3), while figures spring up from and disappear into margins. As hybrids of line drawing, pieces of photographs and artworks, and redrawn pre-existing imagery, in which cartooned characters traverse paintings and prints like landscapes, and figures culled from one work of art appear in another, this splicing effect is intensified.

< INSERT FIG. 9.3 HERE >

Figure 9.3. Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners.* Writers and Readers. pp. 18-19.

Characters are often the key theorists referred to in Lekachman's script, such as Adam Smith and Milton Friedman caricatured visually and verbally as 'Smiff' and 'Milt'. A similarly irreverent and iconoclastic approach is taken to the treatment of canonical artists and illustrators like Rembrandt, Albrecht Dürer, Giorgio de Chirico, Aubrey Beardsley, Gustave Doré and William Hogarth, whose works are cut up, rearranged, written and drawn over. Both art and theory are thereby dethroned, humbled and made handy. The interplay of images and text is used to underscore and clarify the analysis and history of capitalism presented, with braiding of repeated imagery establishing links between sections of the book. Dürer's work, for instance, is used to connect the opening discussion of crises as endemic to capitalism, in which his 1498 *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* are topically labelled unemployment, inflation, recession and energy crisis, and the introduction some 130 pages later of Margaret Thatcher's role in the monetarist toppling of the Keynesian social democratic consensus, in the form of his *Knight, Death and the Devil* of 1513.

Van Loon notably used imagery from medical illustration to delineate Lekachman's "anatomy of capitalism", particularly Andreas Versalius' Renaissance textbook *On the Fabric of the Human Body*, alongside representations of dissections from paintings and prints such as Rembrandt's 1632 *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* and Hogarth's 'The Anatomy Lesson' from the 1751 series *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (itself a pastiche of the title page of Versalius' book). Hogarth's print is reproduced repeatedly with varying visual additions to convey interconnected ideas (Figure 9.4): Smith's economic theory (with the dissected Tom Nero tortured by the invisible hand of the market); Smith's own objections to wage suppression and price fixing (in which the physicians' faces are drawn over with skulls); John Maynard Keynes' converse theory of aggregate demand (in which the cartoon Keynes must wind a screw to manipulate the invisible hand); and finally the dismissal of Keynesian ideas of redistribution and social control of investment in favour of a focus on monetary and fiscal policy (in which Keynes himself becomes the anatomised figure).

< INSERT FIG. 9.4 HERE >

Figure 9.4. Braiding of collaged imagery Hogarth's 'The Anatomy Lesson' in Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners.* Writers and Readers. pp. 28-9, 47, 88, 106.

However, as well as elucidating and accentuating Lekachman's narrative, the images also add different dimensions and alternative emphases. The anatomical imagery Van Loon appropriates makes its own argument about the effect of capitalism on human bodies and everyday lived experience. An early section setting out Milt and Smiff's ideal of the free market utopia of "Libertyville" is dominated by images of Versalius' flayed and dissevered (yet classically posed) bodies wandering through de Chirico's desolate cityscapes, carrying baskets, sipping cocktails and catching dismembered bats while opining on the rationality of buying and selling, supply and demand in competitive markets (Figure 9.5). Pages before Lekachman's text arrives at criticisms of the 'free' market, and discusses the rise of multinational corporations, pollution, inequality, instability and overproduction, Van Loon illuminates the alienating, dehumanising and violent material effects of capitalism (as well as the brutalising eye of economists). This continues with imagery of human bodies minced and pressed as part of the extraction of surplus value from labour, and rent apart by consumption, alongside further images of environmental distortion - emphasised by discordant perspectives in which giant Coke bottles, tins of junk food and smoke stacks loom over deserted, apocalyptic landscapes. The materiality of collage, the way the physical gestures of cutting, pasting, copying and inscribing are enacted on a body of visual material, combine here with the way the *...for Beginner's* comics used, in Brunner's analysis, "presentative symbols" with unfixed subjective, emotional and associative connotations to "catch up with something that escapes the theoretical text: the reader's world of experience" (2014, pp. 103-4).

< INSERT FIG. 9.5 HERE >

Figure 9.5. Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners.* Writers and Readers. pp. 20-21.

This emphasis on the impact of capitalism on the human body as materially entwined with its environment reaches an apex in a section on Keynesianism and the post-war economic boom which Van Loon illustrated with collaged imagery from Doré's illustrated editions of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1854 and 1873), combined with work of other illustrators like J. J. Grandville. Lekachman's text expresses some sympathy for Keynesian state intervention and reformed capitalism (while acknowledging its demise in the wake of the 1973 oil crisis and stagflation, and ending with a call for democratic socialism). But Van Loon's images, although captioned with hand-

written extracts from the typeset text, double down on the sense that post-war growth and affluence was bought at the price of the bodies of migrant workers and people in the Global South at the sharp end of neocolonial violence and the military-industrial complex, with an image of Gargantua eating a pilgrim spliced with a landscape littered with corpses (Figure 9.6). The choice of Doré's work underscores the obsolescence of Keynesianism at the time of neoliberalism's entrenchment and the ascendance of the New Right, and in the subsequent section Keynes is pictured violently and repeatedly tortured by Friedman and F. W. Hayek as noir gangsters who spell out their monetarist economics in blood.[11] Lekachman argues monetarism isn't "old-fashioned" capitalism but a return to its fundamentals that Keynesianism remained rooted within. Van Loon's selection of imagery, recalling the prints Rius' included in *Marx for Beginners* which opens with an image from Doré's 1872 *London: A Pilgrimage*, pre-empts that point visually earlier on, meaning lines of textual and pictorial argumentation are not neatly parallel.

< INSERT FIG. 9.6 HERE >

Figure 9.6. collaged imagery from Doré's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in Robert Lekachman and Borin Van Loon (1981) *Capitalism for Beginners.* Writers and Readers. p. 110.

Ways of reading and looking

Using Doré's illustrations of Rabelais' novels in particular highlights some the productive disjunctures between Lekachman's writing and Van Loon's visual style. Van Loon's approach to collage comics as détournement aligns with Rabelais' grotesque realism (as described by Bakhtin), ridiculing and debasing ennobled and abstract theory, which contrasts with Lekachman's more patronising attempts to render complex ideas accessible via references to Led Zeppelin and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Van Loon frequently uses visual gags and visual-verbal wordplay to undermine the earnestness of the text and its expositional tone. In a visualisation of the 1929 Wall Street crash, in which the city cracks and the image itself is a mash-up of wonky photographic fragments, the thought bubble of a figure falling from a building states "Talk about falling prophets". A graph showing "instability, crisis and business cycles" is disrupted by the tandem of Smith, Marx, Sombart, Keynes and Freedman cycling across it. A photo of Marx with cartoon eyes and manic grin tears through the corner of yet another anatomy lesson artwork urging the reader to "turn the page guys". Like Rius' work, the book features a chorus of interjections, observations and asides, either through speech and thought balloons imposed on artworks, or coming from drawn or cut out figures. Some of these are referenced theorists, whereas others - including Groucho Marx, an irate

sheep, sunglasses-wearing statues and Van Loon's own Bof character - are not. As Brunner argues, the use of humour plays with expectations of 'serious' educational texts and theory, lowering inhibitions and increasing reading pleasure (2014, p. 131). This chorus of characters establishes a dialogue with the reader that invites similar commentary, comebacks, disagreements and disobedience, while also drawing out the absurdities of capitalism and the gulf between the claims of its acolytes and the reality of people's lives. Combined with the way collage encourages the viewer to approach visual material as something to cut up, draw over and rewrite, this shifts the relationship between creators and audience, destabilising the work's discreteness, and opening it up to appropriation in turn.

As in Humphrey's (2015) analysis of multimodal authorship in *...for Beginners* books, the interplay of the text, image and layout in *Capitalism for Beginners*, particularly because of the way their relationships shift and how collage highlights processes of material facture, draws out the overlooked visual and spatial modalities of writing. Emphasis on the linguistic has "elevated the myth of authorial voice agency and authority" of the writer, while "subjugating or ignoring the roles of other actors" (Humphrey 2015, p. 2). Contrastingly, Van Loon's participation in shaping meaning as illustrator and designer is evident, but at the same time in these works with multiple creators modalities "are merged together, creating meanings... which cannot be separated cleanly as the work of "just" the writer, "just" the artist or "just" the designer" (Humphrey 2015, p. 7). Despite having referred to 'Lekachman's text' and 'Van Loon's images' in the above, it is really not that clear cut. *Capitalism for Beginners* comprises multiple voices. Lekachman quotes from the writings of economists, and Van Loon visually cites paintings, prints, illustrations, sculptures, photographs and films, or fragments of them. Sometimes quotes from written sources are identified by quotation marks, or appear in drawn speech bubbles, rendered visually distinct from asides and interjections by being typeset and in square balloons, rather than handwritten and in round balloons. It might be assumed that these quotes appeared in Lekachman's script, to be assigned to specific characters, and the asides and interjections were added by Van Loon. However, this is unclear due to inconsistencies. Certain asides and throwaway comments also appear in typeset text and square balloons, and are sometimes assigned to named theorists. At other times, quotes from sources, and other parts of Lekachman's script, appear in speech balloons connected to random figures from collaged imagery, such as Versalius' flayed and skeletal bodies, policemen engaged in violent assault, or an ape in a suit. Alongside the superimposition and intercutting of images and text, this ambiguous polyphony undermines any sense of privileged authority or polite erudite neutrality, emphasising the work's constructedness and positioning it as open to contestation, overriding and interruption. Van Loon's use of collage, partly dictated by chance - with images found through

“serendipity” or what he happens to recall from his files (2003) - similarly challenges ideas of artistic originality and a specialised aesthetic sensibility. With a lack of referencing of written or visual sources, this aligns with Situationist ideas of expropriation and refusal of copyright and intellectual property, as well as Thompson’s insistence on laying claim to knowledge, literature, and by extension art, as something dispossessed.

Combining these multiple modalities and voices, the book invokes a different kind of reading and looking. As Brunner notes of Zarate’s *Freud for Beginners*, “the pictures teem with details that want to be discovered” which “break through the narrative structure of the text” (2014, p. 111, authors translation). The unresolved ambiguities of authorship and argument, shifting relationships of images to text, and conflicting verbal, visual and spatial registers (earnest and ribald, lucid and dense, orderly and chaotic), invite a meandering, ragged and disrupted form of reading, zooming in and out, panning across spreads, and looping between handwritten and typeset text, found and made imagery. The collage process reiterates this, requiring the viewer to navigate inconsonant visual styles, discrepant perspectives and irreconcilable planes, including details of prints blown up to near abstraction, as well as fragments of Van Loon’s own imagery repeated at different scales. The same images appear in multiple forms, collaged and redrawn, in black outline and in greyscale. Characters constantly reappear in different guises (Friedman shifting from medical student to barber to cabaret dancer to gangster to the Statue of Liberty to a scarecrow), and pop up in different bits of images and locations on the page. All together the book is visually dynamic and mutable, distorting space and time, and foregrounds the embodied act of reading. As in Situationist détournement, the reader must infer meaning from different, sometimes contradictory, elements, with “fractures and irritations” inviting doubts about what is represented (Brunner 2014, p.127) and furthermore the apparent transparency and ubiquity, sheen and seamlessness of the commodity aesthetics that saturates the world of everyday experience.

The restless, mercurial absurdity of the visual world in *Capitalism for Beginners* stages the way that the lived reality of the reader is socially constructed, reflexively highlighting, partly through collage, how reality is made and remade. *Capitalism for Beginners* is full of theatrical images: circus impresarios, faceless barbershop quartets, pantomime horses, ballet dancing and cabaret performances, alongside lectures, demonstrations, slideshows and sermons by the featured economists. Photographs and paintings often feel like background stage sets from which characters address the reader. This again emphasises the contingency of meaning, eschewing the stiff, definitive language and rationalised structures of conventional academic texts in favour of “fluidity, promiscuity, *jouissance*, impropriety, contamination and insubordination” (Stracey 2014, p. 86). The

emphasis is on readers' active interpretation – with the back cover stating "no sermons are preached. Readers must consider for themselves the dilemma that confronts us all: the future of capitalism and its effect on the world". In alignment with Writers and Readers' interest in a radical pedagogy and literacy grounded in working class agency, this set up an alternative orientation of reader to book than that experienced in the education system, defined by collective self-education rather than deference to a paternalistic pedagogic authority, and the positioning of knowledge as something graspable and manipulable, rather than transcendent and removed. In Friere's terms, this can be part of conscientization, as an active process enabling people "to see themselves as both the products and potential changers of their social circumstances" (Carleton 2014, p. 161).

However, the foundational ethos of Writers and Readers wasn't sustained. It dissolved as a cooperative in 1984, with Thompson and Richard Appignanesi setting up rival publishers, Writers and Readers Inc. and Icon respectively, in the 1990s.[12] Brunner argues Icon books became more standardised in format and rigid and text-heavy in layouts, which restricted visual design, taking themselves more seriously and aiming more at a student audience. There is a further question of how far the strategies of détournement, collage and photomontage appropriating the visual language of advertising had themselves been defanged as a mode of persuasion by the early 1980s. Brunner additionally raises important issues with the way *...for Beginners* books' use of associative and affective presentative images pulls on stereotypical representations and pictorial traditions rooted in racism, anti-Semitism and sexism. Nilsson (2018) also discusses the use of simplification and stereotypes and how making abstract concepts concrete can fix them in unproductive and problematic ways. Van Loon deploys stereotypical images of nationalities in a section on multinationals, and racial stereotypes in passages on colonialism, immigration and racism. He also uses stereotypical markers of capitalist and worker – the top hat and flat cap. As Nilsson notes, this risks "pushing petrified *historical* manifestations of class to the foreground" and thereby obscuring "*structural* relations between labor and capital" (2018, p. 12), at a time of their dramatic reorganisation through globalisation and deregulation, and a few years before a brutal attack on what was left of industrial working class culture (in the form of the 1984-5 Miner's Strike) by the forces described in *Capitalism for Beginners*.

A study of the representation of class as structural antagonism and subjectivity in this context would need to look at more than one book, and more deeply at their production and audience. The limitations of the above analysis mean it inevitably reproduces a problematic emphasis on the individual work and creator. Drawing on Marxist Art History and its critique of the discipline's role in

the art market, and applying ideas of the politics of form, style, materiality, ways of seeing and the construction of meanings and publics to educational comics, leaves questions for Comics Studies. Creator Bambos Georgiou, involved with publishing co-op Acme, has argued that comics have become dominated by middle class publishers dealing with middle class creators (the only ones with the financial security to make comics), who "in turn produce works aimed at a middle class audience" (Johnston 2020). We might ask what role academic Comics Studies plays in this, in conferring value on, and canonising, a limited set of comics through the material selected for analysis and the mobilisation of categories and evaluations of quality. But we might equally ask how the manner in which we write and present research, often in what Rifkin called the "archaic essayistic form" (2018, p. 83) or ways that obscure "the text's productive source in the writer's physical and social being" (Leslie and Watson 2002), and the modes of reading and looking invoked, construct relationships between writer and reader that perpetuate the dispossession of knowledge and shore up the privatising logic of neoliberalism. As Humphrey argues, most academic texts (including this book itself) "assume a fairly uniform multimodal structure" - but "educational comics like the "Introducing" and "For Beginners" books can help us challenge & re-evaluate normative academic discourses and hegemonic textual practices" (2015, p. 20).

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[1] For a discussion of the impact of semiotics and structuralism in Art History and Comics Studies see Chapter 7.

[2] This included dissecting the psychopathology of Soviet Communism at the threshold of its collapse (see Werckmesister 1999).

[3] This is to say nothing of work on post-digital art that has updated debates about art and autonomy in the context of the wider neoliberal restructuring of work (and the art market), with important bearings on any study of contemporary cultural production (see Stakemeier and Vischmidt 2016).

[4] Writers and Readers published several books by Berger including *Permanent Red* (1979), *About Looking* (1980) and the novel *Pig Earth* (1979), as well as work by other art critics like Peter Fuller.

[5] In this sense the *...for Beginners* books come under the definition of applied comics – aiming to communicate information to a specific target audience in a way that shapes how the works are designed. Like many applied

comics the majority of the *...for Beginners* titles were collaborations between subject specialist writers and comics artists (see Wysocki 2022).

[6] This followed the first of the series, a translation of Rius' *Cuba for Beginners* in 1975. A 1979 animated trailer was produced for *Marx for Beginners* by Bob Godfrey's *Movie Emporium* and *Cucumber Studios*.

[7] The setting up of Writers and Readers was apparently directly influenced by Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay 'The Author as Producer' which was a touchstone for these movements (see DeBolla 1987).

[8] Rifas was due to illustrate *Middle East for Beginners* written by Allan Solomonow, but the project never moved beyond the proposal stage, possibly due to the fallout from Writers and Readers disbanding as a cooperative (see Anderies 2017).

[9] These strips were published in collected form as *Urban Paranoia* by Suburban Books in 1977, Van Loon having met publisher Alan Courtney working at *Lower Down.*

[10] As Jelena Stojanović (2014) and A. J Paylor (2021) observe, as well as détourning other visual imagery using comics devices the Situationists détourned comics themselves and drew their own comics from their founding in 1957 onwards, firstly with the inclusion of decontextualised single panels in Jorn and Debord's experimental collage books *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1959), but also in their films and periodicals – Paylor describes their journal *International Situationniste* as "littered with comics" used to propagate their ideas (2021, p. 1015). But it was particularly from the mid-1960s onwards that they created comic strips, comprising a range of collaged imagery combined with phrases from their texts, including several to publicise their journal and books. This followed the publication of Rene Viénet's 1967 text 'The Situationists and the New Forms of Action Against Politics and Art' asserting how easily comics lend themselves to détournement and how easily "other mediums could be detourned through using the graphical conventions of comics" (Paylor 2021, p. 1023).

[11] The only photograph reproduced without any amendment is one of far right dictators Chile's Augusto Pinochet and Argentina's Jorge Rafael Videla (Lekachman and Van Loon 1981, p. 161)

[12] The split apparently followed a dispute over rights to some titles in the *...for Beginners series* being sold to Pantheon Books. Thompson moved back to New York and set up Writers and Readers Inc. and later formally incorporated the London-based Writers and Readers Limited in 1992. Appignanesi co-founded Icon Books that same year. Both reprinted several *...for Beginners* comics while adding new titles to their respective series. From 1999 the Icon series was renamed *Introducing…*. (Today they are called *...A Graphic Guide* and the series includes works in larger formats including Meg John Barker and Jules Scheele's *Queer; A Graphic History* and *Gender: A Graphic Guide*). After Thompson's death in 2001, For Beginners, LLC was established which also republished older titles and commissioned new ones. Appignanesi was also involved in establishing and writing SelfMadeHero's Manga Shakespeare adaptations.