How to Mark a Comic

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Three years ago, I accompanied a group of students to a conference on environmental issues, a key component of which was a job fair rife with activist groups desperate to recruit students. Most of these groups relied heavily on visual messages, and most of the students who interacted with them were swept away by oil-covered birds and filthy coal-fired power plants. My observations of the students' reactions planted the seed that our students must be literate in multiple ways, for, as most in our field know and as Peter Felten, Director of the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning at Elon University, observes, images "are becoming central to communication" (60). It is our responsibility as educators to foster multiple literacies.

Several years later, and with enthusiastic support from my college, I developed the course Visual Literacy and the Graphic Novel, a multidisciplinary capstone course for students in the final semester of their associate's degrees. While I disagree that visual literacy "require[s] more complex thinking skills than traditional literacy requires" (Seglem and Witte 216), it does require that students, via educators, recognize the value of multiple literacies in an increasingly visual world. The steps of the critical reading process are largely the same—close observation, annotation, interpretation.

That I chose graphic novels was largely selfish—I love them, and, as a literature instructor, I feel a certain affinity for any text calling itself a novel. However, the choice is sound. Graphic novels not only introduce students to the approaches, processes, and terminology of visual literacy, but also offer the complexity of the multimodal text. I'm certainly not the first to recognize this, as Gillenwater succinctly explains in "Lost Literacy," "the graphic novel is a

medium through which both print and visual literacy can be taught." Students in the early stages of literacy might be overwhelmed by the multimodality of such texts, but the advanced critical thinking that post-secondary educators strive to foster is well served by such complexity.

While I contend that the process one must use for the critical understanding of visual or multimodal texts differs little from the process one uses for the critical understanding of written texts, one step in that process is challenging—annotation. The value of annotation is great:

> Annotation is a strategy that teachers can introduce to their students as a means to teach content. Students can then use it in their content classes or with other complex text that they may come across. When students annotate they can better see how the author structures an argument in the text. The best benefit, however, is that because students are focusing closely on the structure and content of the text, they become more active and engaged readers. (Zywica and Gomez 156)

One the first day of Visual Literacy and the Graphic novel, I challenged my students to consider ways in which they might effectively mark their texts to facilitate critical reading. By the end of the semester, we had made little progress. Some might credit this to the reverence which some students have for their textbooks, others to the ever-present pressure to keep books pristine in order to maximize their return from the bookstore. Neither of these was an issue, I think, for my students were experienced book-markers, and knew they had little to gain from selling a pile of graphic novels back to the bookstore.

While I have long since abandoned the notion that books are sacred objects not to be marred, I, too, struggle as my students did to mark my graphic texts effectively: margins are too narrow (Fig. 1), or, in some cases, non-existent (Fig. 2); sticky notes or other inserts are clumsy; and, perhaps the most difficult obstacle, any alteration to the page seems too drastic. (Fig. 3, 4)

Any mark may alter the image, adding lines, colors, or elements to that image that, at best, distract from the original design.

In short, the annotation techniques that we use for written texts, as detailed by Mortimer Adler in "How to Mark a Book," are inadequate and ineffective. Note that most of Adler's suggestions mention margins, a conceit reflecting the dated notion that books are only and always written texts. If we can imagine for the moment that graphic novels are more visual texts than written texts, we can look to those disciplines whose texts are largely visual—art history, for example—and perhaps discover ways in which we might more effectively critically read and annotate visual texts. I started with my husband, and former art history student, who explained that he often made rough sketches of paintings to annotate, or made notes in the margins around the reproductions printed in his texts. This first is easily discounted, for while one could reasonably sketch a painting or two, one cannot sketch an entire book of paintings (or drawings, or panels). The second point takes us back to an earlier concern—what margins? I do not disagree that these methods are effective when annotating a particular page or panel—a copy, a rough sketch, or the occasional note provides a simple alternative to the original. But what of the rest of the text? Consider content analysis, a methodology that requires not only close and careful reading, but meticulous marking and coding. Even if one did have a working annotated copy, the functional space of most graphic novels leaves little room for detailed annotation.

Whether we work from the position that graphic novels and comic texts are primarily visual or primarily verbal, these texts are, of course, multimodal; therefore, annotation methods designed specifically for written texts or specifically for visual texts do not accommodate the graphic novel or comic text. Theories in teaching and reading multimodal texts abound, and theorists praise the complexity of these texts and detail the effort that students and instructors

alike must put into critical understanding of them. However, few offer any suggestions for that most fundamental component of critical reading—annotation. Peter Felten explains, "Proponents of visual literacy contend that if the physical act of seeing involves active construction, then the intellectual act of interpreting what is seen must require a critical viewer" (61). While he argues that an essential component of interpretation of the visual is the ability to create meaningful messages, he has overlooked the step between seeing and interpreting—annotation.

In pondering the alternatives and solutions to this problem, I find myself returning to written texts, namely, the many student editions of Shakespeare texts in which the original text and summary, notes, or even "translation" are presented side-by-side; or translations of texts in which the original and its translation are aligned; even the ubiquitous PowerPoint "notes" page, on which the slide (the original text, if you will) and a space for notes are aligned. (Fig. 5) While serving different purposes, each of these examples shares a common design and a common function—an original text, in its original form, accompanied by some material that facilitates critical reading, be it notes, translation, or simply the space in which to comment and reflect on the material. In each, we have a working model for the publication of academia-friendly graphic texts, and one that does not compromise the integrity of that text—a design in which the original text and white space are laid out side-by-side, and in which neither the size nor layout of the original text is compromised.

While it may seem easier to simply use multiple copies of a text—a clean reference copy and a working annotated copy—there is a potential in a new design to transfer the cost of purchasing multiple copies (copies that still lack adequate space for annotation) to the publication of editions that more effectively meet our academic needs, editions that not only

facilitate annotation, but that also offer critical introductions and essays, much like the critical editions of countless canonical works.

In addition to print publication is the potential for new media to enable to students of comics and comic art, and other visual disciplines, to annotate without permanent alteration. The examples I have shown you today were created rather awkwardly—the image copied into OneNote, the notes added on a tablet, then saved as an image. Digital versions of graphic novels published and made available as academic editions could offer limitless and innovative annotation methods, methods that neither permanently alter the text when published nor when annotated.

So, how does one mark a comic? Ineffectively, clumsily. We do the best with what we have, but what we have could be vastly improved. As the field of comics studies grows, and as more instructors use multimodal texts of any kind, we must develop the tools by which to study these texts, the most basic tool being, of course, the text itself. As such, we need the support of publishers who value our academic work and understand the necessity of academic editions of these texts, texts that we so highly value. To claim that academic editions of graphic novels are unnecessary devalues or even outright ignores the work and effort we have made in this field in such a brief period of time. As the discipline of comics studies grows, we will hope that it is not the publishers themselves who we must convince of the academic value and validity of these texts.

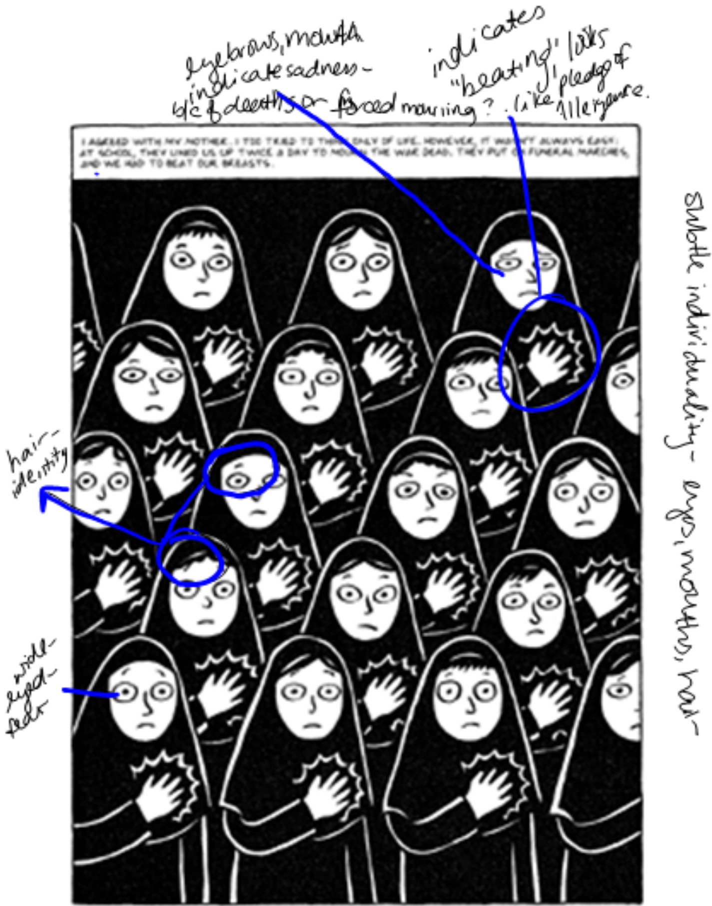
Fig. 1

Page from *Persepolis* (Satrapi) with narrow margins, allowing for minimal annotation.

Fig. 2

Page from *Incognegro* (Jonson and Pleece) with no margins, resulting in distracting annotation.

Fig. 3

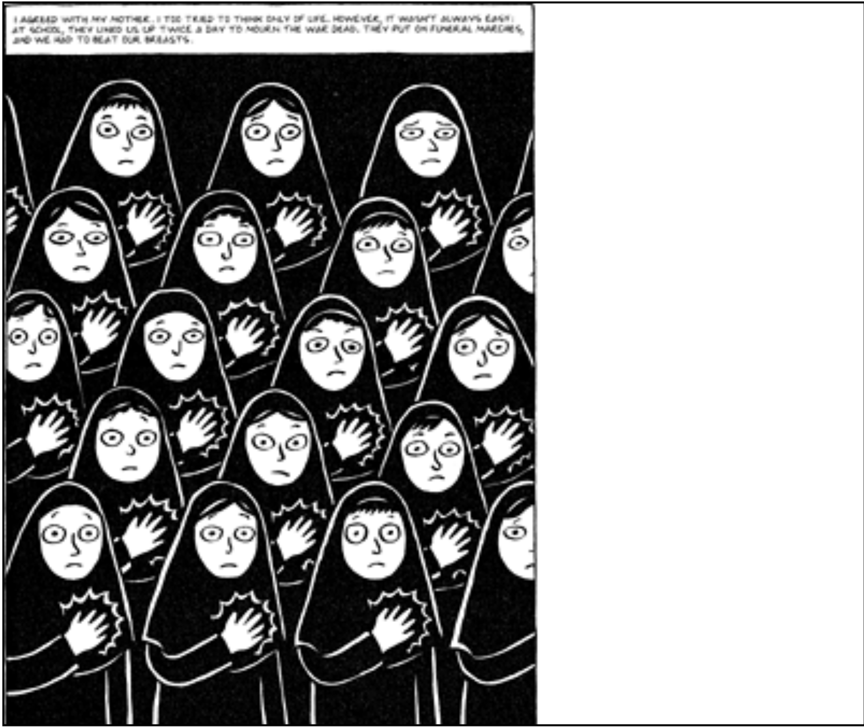


Page from *Persepolis* (Satrapi) with color alterations.

Fig. 4

Page from *Incognegro* (Jonson and Pleece) with color alterations.

Fig. 5



Page from *Persepolis* (Satrapi) with widened right margin

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