THE COMICS GRID
Journal of comics scholarship

Johnson, RL 2023 I'm Not a Hero, I'm Just Drawn That Way: A Review of *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact*. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 13(1): pp. 1–7. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.10780

Open Library of Humanities

I'm Not a Hero, I'm Just Drawn That Way: A Review of *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact*

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact*. University of Texas Press, 248 pages, 2023, ISBN 9781477327364

Ryan L. Johnson, Dallas College, United States, ryanjohnson5005@yahoo.com

Comics Studies is a growing field that is gaining increasing attention in the academic world. This attention, however, typically focuses on the "literary" aspects of comics, emphasizing the "novel" part of graphic novels. This review examines the ways in which Jeffrey A. Brown seeks to counter that trend by analyzing comic illustration styles in his new book *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact* (University of Texas Press, 2023). The review examines the six visual styles Brown focuses on and the ways in which he attempts to bring scholarly attention to the illustrated aspects of superheroes.

In the past two decades, superhero narratives have risen to prominence in popular culture. Superheroes dominate the cinema, old and coveted issues are considered sound financial investments, and the scholarly field of Comics Studies has gained a sense of legitimacy in wider academia. While these are positive changes to most comics fans and scholars, including Jeffrey A. Brown, he notes that most of the consideration given to comics in general and the superhero genre in particular emphasizes the narrative aspect of these tales at the expense of the artistic. Brown himself admits that there are several extant works exploring art in comics, such as Scott McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics*, but his estimation of the overall field seems accurate. After all, trade paperbacks and similar volumes of collected comics are typically called "graphic *novels*," while works like *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home*, which helped to gain serious critical attention for comic books, were extolled for their use of "literary" forms like autobiography and have won literary awards. Similarly, individual author/creators like Grant Morrison, Alan Moore, and Gail Simone are regularly discussed primarily in terms of their ability with narrative. Given the importance of illustration in the pages of superhero comic books, then, this lack of focus is especially problematic, and an issue that Brown sets out to correct in his monograph *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact* (Brown 2023; **Figure 1**).

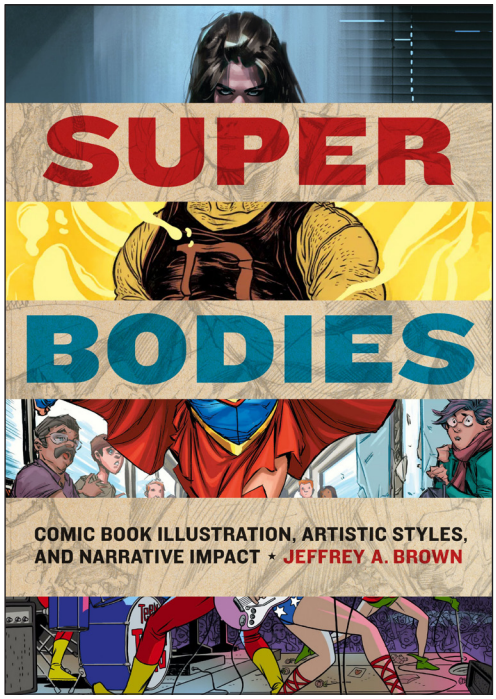

Figure 1: Cover of *Super Bodies* (2023) © University of Texas Press.

While not exactly a history, Brown combines an historical perspective with an eye for ideological analysis in his discussion of the six primary artistic styles in current superhero comics: Idealism, Retro, Realism, Cute, Grotesque, and Noir. By Brown's own admission, these are not the only styles of art in comics, but they do represent the most common forms. Similarly, the categories are not hard and fast divisions—Alex Ross, as Brown discusses in chapter 4, regularly creates a Retro atmosphere in his works by using time-specific Realistic paintings—but they do provide a framework for examining the ways in which visual aspects of comics can influence their underlying meaning (Brown 2023: 114–115). In particular, the book discusses the presentation of the superheroic body, which as a symbol of hegemonic, masculine power has been

the subject of study by Brown in other works, such as *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (University Press of Mississippi 2001) or *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (University Press of Mississippi 2011), along with numerous other articles. Finally, while it is not discussed explicitly, much of the book expands on Comics Studies with reference to Film Studies; an appropriate connection given the transmedial nature of superheroes not only in the modern age of superhero movies, but since the very beginning of the genre, which made the jump to radio and film within their first decade.

In regard to layout, *Super Bodies* begins by establishing the theoretical groundwork and overall history of superhero illustration. Rather than examining the history of superhero art and illustration in itself, however, Brown focuses on the reception/perception of comics art, which he argues has typically been the most disregarded aspect of an already denigrated medium. He moves through the high-speed, high-output shops of the Golden Age, the legal battles and struggles of Jack Kirby, the rise of the superstar artists in the 1990s and their independent publishers, and the influx of manga and anime around the turn of the millennium. While the book does admit that comics have been widely regarded as art (or at least having artistic potential) in the past two decades, especially by younger generations, it spends a great deal of time displaying the ways in which comics art was downplayed as immature, childish, meaningless, or tainted by commercialism (Brown 2023: 30–31). So much so that it becomes distracting at moments. As Brown himself indicates, the battle of comic books and superheroes for legitimacy has more or less been won in the common consciousness, and resistance is fading fast in the halls of the academy and "high art." In my own experience, as an instructor of college Art and Humanities classes, I regularly include works by Jack Kirby, Alex Ross, and other comics illustrations in discussions of painting and other visual art. When I ask students (mostly Gen Z but including many older returning students as well) if these illustrators should be artists, they often struggle to understand the question. They typically don't understand why anyone would consider it *not* art, indicating just how readily accepted mass-produced works have become in the common consciousness. Doubtless, some of Brown's attention to this negative view of comics comes from direct experience of having his interest in superheroes insulted with those same terms—an experience any comics fan over a certain age is intimately familiar with. And it is important to remember the historical attitudes towards comic art, as it influenced the production of these works. Yet Brown's insistence on fighting a battle that he has already won at times gets in the way of an otherwise insightful and interesting examination of the history of illustration in comics, which Brown is correct in saying gets less consideration.

The attention to attitudes, historical or modern, regarding comics art loses importance as Brown shifts to analyzing specific artistic styles, starting with the most dominant form of superhero illustration: Idealism. In the vast majority of superhero comics, the protagonists are displayed as perfect physical specimens. In part, this stems from comics' well-known status as (male) adolescent power fantasies, offering an example of the hypermasculine ideal body that a reader would wish to have. Or, in the case of hypersexualized female bodies, a figure that the presumed-male audience would fantasize about dating (Brown 2023: 61). The idealized form also connects to the archetypal association of "beautiful" with "good," connecting moral with physical superiority (Brown 2023: 63). Brown notes that there is a great deal of variation within this style, as health and beauty trends come and go and the "perfect" physical ideal changes, but the idea of embodying and reinforcing the hero's social mission with physical idealization is the standard of the superhero genre: the norm against which all other styles are considered variants, hence its inclusion as the first style under discussion.

The next style to be considered is less exaggerated than Idealism, and centers on the capturing of nostalgic feelings with the Retro variation. Brown points to this style developing specifically in response to the success of the 1990s cartoon *Batman: The Animated Series*, which used a strong art-deco, noir style influenced by the Tim Burton films and the Max Fleischer *Superman* cartoons of the 1940s, drawing attention to the transmedial nature of superheroes even at the visual level. The Retro style uses heavier lines and simpler designs to evoke the feeling of ages past and especially the simplicity of childhood. Yet, as Brown points out, these works are often the height of late capitalist postmodernism, as they recreate a style or feeling that never really existed in the first place. These new illustrations in the Retro style do not recreate past panels and illustrations, they merely *feel* like they do, establishing them as textbook simulacra and suggesting a stronger potential for ideological influence than merely recreating fond memories (Brown 2023: 95). Realism, the next style to be examined, often overlaps with Retro, as it can aspire to recreate historically accurate costumes and scenes, but it relies on a different emotional appeal. Rather than a feeling of nostalgia and the supposed simplicity of childhood, Realistic comics attempt to depict the god-like, superpowered figures as real, ordinary people. The fact that these characters look like they could be real individuals encountered on the street likewise adds a level of verisimilitude to the narrative, making the stories feel more real and more serious, even as they present impossible feats of superheroics (Brown 2023: 118). And this, in turn, reinforces Brown's initial point about how visuals are used to tell the story just as much as more traditional narrative elements.

Cute illustrations are the next category Brown examines, as seen in the various Lego superhero games and movies, the reimagining of superhero teams like the Avengers and X-Men as elementary children in some miniseries, and even the softening of formerly sharp and angular facial features of characters. This impulse Brown traces to the influence of Japanese popular culture, starting with figures like Hello Kitty, Sailor Moon, and Pokémon and only expanding as manga reached Western audiences in a big way starting in the late 1990s. In fact, Brown points out that many of the younger artists working on comics came of age reading manga along with superhero comics, and that they have naturally been influenced by anime aesthetics (Brown 2023: 141–143). In particular, he points to the *kawaii* or "cute" emphasis in anime, with its round eyes, soft features, and near infantilization of certain figures as a means to soften the violence of superheroes, including incredibly bloody characters like Deadpool or Lobo, who get made soft and cuddly. Brown also highlights the way in which the cute aesthetic can help to de-sexualize female figures, allowing for greater engagement by female creators and fans (Brown 2023: 147, 153).

In contrast to the lovable Cute style, Brown also examines the rise of Grotesque art in comics. This is not so much an examination of grotesque villains, who have historically been subject to the same "pretty=good/ugly=bad" stereotype that informs the Idealistic heroes. Nor is Brown interested in monstrous heroes like the Hulk or the Thing, whose disfiguration is a part of their personal tragedy. Instead, this chapter examines the reimaging of established figures and worlds into Grotesqueries, including works such as Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum*. By taking a familiar figure or setting and reframing it into a contorted, distorted nightmare image, the artist calls into question the purity and wholesomeness of the hero's ideology, and the lines between hero and monster become ever more blurred, both physically and morally (Brown 2023: 183). Something similar is achieved by the final art style to be considered by Brown: Noir. As the name implies, this artistic variant relies heavily on the Film Noir aesthetic, to tell dark, gritty, hard-boiled stories in the modern day, or set during the 1930s and 40s. Like Grotesque, Noir serves to undercut the power, surety, and moral superiority of the typical Idealized hero, turning the standard saving of the world into a constant, futile fight against a dark and corrupt cosmos, where the childlike heroism of more innocent styles does not exist (Brown 2023: 193). Finally, Brown concludes with a brief exploration of the impact of digital art and, more importantly, digital distribution on comic book visuals.

As stated, the artistic styles examined by Brown are not the only forms of superhero illustration, but they do cover the most common variations. Moreover, there are several illustrations in each chapter to highlight the major points and give examples of

preeminent artists of each style. Given the topic of comic book illustration, however, this monograph could easily have been produced as a coffee-table art-book, and so despite the regularity of comics panels it still feels like there could have been more. This book is not a graphic history of comic book art, as interesting as that would be, but a scholarly examination of an aspect of comics history and analysis, and it reads as such. It is approachable, and Brown explains details in a way that makes the text understandable regardless of the reader's superhero knowledge, but in each chapter devoted to an art style Brown rattles off a series of names and comics in a way that presupposes familiarity with these artists and/or their works, making the text somewhat less open to non-specialists. Likewise, the emphasis in early chapters on the ways in which comics and comics art have been denigrated might be more familiar and relatable to a comics afficionado than to an outsider and may color their reading somewhat.

Despite its limitations, though, Jeffrey A. Brown's *Super Bodies* does a good job of drawing attention to comics illustrations, both how they have been overlooked in decades past, and how they can influence the narrative and ideology of superhero stories. Additionally, as a comics scholar, I find it refreshing to see a scholarly study that explores the influences of other media on comics artwork, as well as one that spends so much time focusing on the impact of anime and manga. While not setting out to be a history, it provides a strong historical perspective on the evolution of superheroes through a lens that is, as Brown correctly asserts, less focused on than narrative concerns. Ultimately, Brown's text grants a valuable look at a corner of Comics Studies that does not get the attention it deserves.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Batman: The Animated Series 1992–1995. [TV show]. Sherman Oaks, CA: Warner Bros Animation.

Bechdel, A. 2007 *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Mariner Books Classics.

Brown, J.A. 2001 *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Brown, J.A. 2011 *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781604737141.001.0001

Brown, J.A. 2023 *Super Bodies: Comic Book Illustration, Artistic Styles, and Narrative Impact*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

McCloud, S. 1994 *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: William Morrow Paperbacks.

Morrison, G. 1989 *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*. New York: DC Comics.

Satrapi, M. 2004 *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*. New York: Pantheon.

Spiegelman, A. 1996 *The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon.