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Sjö, Sofia

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Comics and Meaning Making: Adult Comic Book Readers on What, Why, and How They Read

Sofia Sjö

Introduction

To comprehend contemporary meaning making we need to explore how people engage with popular culture. Since the turn of the millennium, the research area of religion and popular culture has grown extensively. Though the focus has often been more on popular cultural texts than on the reception of these texts, several studies have underlined the existential potential of engagement with popular culture (Axelson 2008, 2014, 2017; Blom 2021; Lyon and Marsh 2007).

While scholars have extensively studied some forms of popular culture, such as films (Knauss 2020), other areas are still in need of research. This is the case with comic books. Not only have religious aspects of comic books seldom been explored (de Rooy 2017; Koltun-Fromm 2020), making this volume noteworthy, but generally there has also not been a lot of research conducted with a focus on comic books and meaning making. There are studies of how children (Norton 2003) and adults (Botzakis 2011) understand comics and what they mean and mean to them, about comic book fans and fandom (Orme 2016), and comic book collecting (Woo 2011), and many studies do mention how fans have received comic books. However, few studies have explored what reading, collecting, and talking about comic books can mean to people.

This chapter wishes to do something about the partial lack of explorations of comics and meaning making. The focus is on what six avid readers of comic books and graphic novels have to say about what they get out of reading comics and how their reading relates to meaning making. The participants are between thirty-seven-and sixty-three years old and live or have lived in Finland. They

read different kinds of comic books and graphic novels and they have all been asked to talk about their personal engagement with comic books and graphic novels: what do they read, how do they read, why do they read, and how has their reading changed over time.

Theoretically, this project builds on the notion of lived religion and meaning making in contemporary life (McGuire 2008). The basic argument of lived religion is that we need to move beyond traditional forms of religious expressions to capture aspects of contemporary meaning making. This is thus a perspective that often incorporates a wide and functional understanding of religion—religion as meaning making. The perspective is practice focused; what is explored is what people do and find meaning in (Ammerman 2021, 15–20). One important area of exploration has been how individuals engage with popular culture (Blom 2021; Cloete 2017; Crome 2019; Winston 2009) and this study contributes to this field.

Previous Research and Frameworks

In exploring aspects of contemporary meaning making, this project relates to and builds on previous research regarding meaning making and popular culture. It engages with earlier findings and explores how well earlier models and frameworks work to capture how the participants in this project relate to comics. Below, the main conversation partners are introduced.

Meaning Making and Comic Books

The fact that comic books are important for some people is well known. Bonny Norton (2003), among others, has illustrated what children get out of reading comic books. Norton highlights a common thread in comic book reception research: finding that comic books do something useful (Dorrell, Curtis, and Rampal 1995; McGrail et al. 2018). This is not least prevalent in studies with a focus on education. Stergios Botzakis (2006, 2009, 2011) has asked the same question I have: what do adults get out of reading comic books? His findings are noteworthy, though somewhat restricted due to his goal of seeing the usefulness of comic books.

Botzakis has interviewed adult comic book readers in their twenties and early thirties about their reading and identified several reasons for reading. In his doctoral thesis (2006), Botzakis discusses five reasons and in a later article (2009),

he presents the following four reasons: Reading as study; reading as appreciation and ownership; reading as friendship; and reading as search for meaning. In discussing this final reason more in-depth (2011), Botzakis has illustrated how reading comics can have moral, critical, and connective/validative dimensions. In this study, I primarily engage with the four reasons for reading that Botzakis discusses in his 2009 article and the aspects of meaning making presented in his 2011 article.

Botzakis's findings are an essential reference point for this study. However, it also highlights the need to consider the context and the participants. As is discussed in this study, there are obvious differences in the findings of this and Botzakis's study, differences related to both context and participants.

Film and Meaning Making

Botzakis's study touches on aspects of meaning making, but this is an area of research in which other forms of popular culture have been explored more. Tomas Axelson has in several projects studied film and meaning making. In his doctoral thesis (2008) he offers a detailed exploration of what is meant by meaning making; a concept that is often used without much discussion. Meaning can be understood as relating to different levels. Axelson builds on Jos van der Lans (1987), according to whom meaning making on a first level, refers to naming objects and events. On a second level, meaning is constructed in the understanding of more complex phenomena and the social setting, relating to social adaptation and commitment. On a third level, meaning is constructed in relation to one's own identity and questions such as "Who am I?" and "What is the purpose of my life?" Finally, on a fourth level, meaning is understood in a more abstract and philosophical way concerning ultimate concerns and metaphysical questions.

In later studies (2014, 2017), Axelson has further explored the meaning making process in relation to films. The focus is here on individuals' engagement with films that they have been moved by. Axelson has identified several ways in which individuals engage with films (2017, 12; 2014, 127). These dimensions of engagement open up for comparisons with other forms of popular culture. Not all of the varied dimensions are prevalent among the participants in Axelson's study, and neither are they in the material for this study. However, they indicate not only the diverse ways in which one can engage with popular culture but also possible differences depending on the form of popular culture. The most essential dimensions are introduced in the analysis part on in this chapter.

Television Fandom and Meaning Making

Several studies have illustrated that being a part of fandom is meaningful (Jenkins 2018). Minja Blom (2021) has in her doctoral thesis explored how meaning making in fandom can incorporate mythical and ritualistic aspects. Her focus is on fans of vampire television series and the material has been gathered from online discussion forums. Building on William Doty's mythography (Doty 2000), Blom first presents a mythological fandom framework. The first aspect of this framework is Metaphors: the series work as metaphors for fans and suggest something essential about life. The second aspect is Heroic Models: the series offer models for the fans that they live by, models that can both challenge and confirm prevalent norms.

In understanding fan rituals, Blom uses Johanna Sumiala's (2010) comprehension of media rituals. Blom writes about her fan ritual model:

Fan practices function as communal fan rituals that connect people with imagined communities via the media, but also with communities formed by close friends and family. The communal aspects of rituals are central in fan rituals, but fans also use viewing practices to break free from their everyday life and find new strength. (Blom 2021, 2)

Blom encourages the reader to test her models in relation to other forms of fandom. She also highlights how concepts from the study of religion can be used in interpreting meaning making in a secular setting. In addition, her study, just as this one, looks at fan practices from the perspective of lived religion and contemporary meaning making (Blom 2021, 16). For these reasons, Blom's study is a useful conversation partner, and particularly her explorations of rituals are highlighted here.

By providing important comparisons and valuable understandings of meaning making, the studies presented earlier aid in answering the main questions of this study: what do adults get out of reading comic books and what forms of meaning making do their engagement with comic books relate to?

Methodology

In finding participants for this study, snowball sampling was used. I reached out to colleagues in academia and acquaintances in Finnish science fiction and fantasy fandom, who put me in touch with possible participants. Consequently,

three of the participants are academics and five are active in some form of science fiction and/or fantasy fandom. There was thus an overlap of the academic and fandom-related participants.

All of the participants were interviewed via Zoom and the interviews took from forty-five minutes to one and a half hour. The participants were sent the interview questions in advance. The questions focused on memories of reading comic books, reading comics during different times of their lives, how they generally read comic books, what reading comic books means to them and has meant to them during their life, and fandom activities. The interviews were conducted in Swedish or Finnish.

All interviews have been transcribed and the quotes used in this study have been translated into English by the author. In analyzing the interviews, a combination of a thematic and a critical comparative analysis was used. Themes highlighted in previous studies of popular culture and meaning making were identified and these were then explored in more detail bringing forth both similarities and differences. In presenting the findings, the focus is on dominant features and on giving the participants a voice via quotes from the interviews.

Participants

Four of the participants identify as males and two as females. They all have families in the form of partners and/or children. Their families do not always share their interest in comic books, but they also generally do not seem to mind it. Several of the participants at some point used the word *nerd* to describe themselves:

Nerd [laughs] in general.

I was very nerdy as a kid as well.

A kind of typical nerd.

The word *nerd* was not used in a derogatory way. Instead, the participants seemed at home as nerds and active fans of some form of popular culture.

The participants all own comic books and regularly purchase comic books, but few of them see themselves as collectors. As one participant puts it:

It's not that I consciously collect ... they [comic books and graphic novels] just accumulate, if you put it like that ... I don't know if you could say that I am a comic book collector, as I buy them to read them myself.

Here is a difference in relation to the readers Botzakis (2009) interviewed. There is a clear appreciation of ownership among the participants of both studies; all the participants enjoy owning comics that are important to them. However, while some of Botzakis' participants highlighted the potential to make money of comic books (Botzakis 2009, 54–5), this is mentioned by none of the participants in this study.

All of the participants mainly read comics on paper, but online reading is also engaged with. Apart from an interest in comic books and graphic novels, the participants also have in common a general interest in reading. None of them thus only read comic books or graphic novels rather they engage with many forms of literature and many forms of popular culture. In this way they resemble Botzakis's participants for whom reading is “an intertextual activity, involving a variety of texts and a variety of media” (2009, 54). In this study though it is the participants interest in comic books and graphic novels that is the main focus.

Analysis

During the interviews the participants together mentioned over seventy different comic books, comic strips, or graphic novels, in addition to talking about publishers such as DC, Marvel, and Egmont, genres such as *mangas*, science fiction, fantasy, and westerns, and websites such as Webtoons. Despite this richness, they all had comic books and graphic novels that were more important to them, and these were the publications the interviews focused on.

For two of the participants, *Donald Duck* was a favorite that they had read since childhood and continued to read today.¹ Two had a similar relationship with *The Phantom*.² For one of the participants *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* held a special place and for another the same was true for *Batman*. Three mentioned Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* series and for one this was the clear favorite. Two mentioned regularly reading *mangas*.

Reading for the Stories

The participants reasons for reading were many faceted. This is something that Botzakis (2006, 2009, 2011) also clearly shows in his study. A main reason the participants in this study gave for reading comics was the stories:

I focus on stories. I do not have a reason to collect a whole [comic book series] ... I'll buy until a storyline ends.

It is not the case that I read comics only when I'm tired and do not have the energy for something else, it is the stories.

It doesn't have to be very well drawn all of it or like visually appealing, it can be grotesque sometimes, that doesn't matter either as long as it has a story.

There is thus a love of reading and stories driving these participants, but this, as already highlighted, is not combined with an idea of profit as it is for the readers in Botzakis's "Reading as Appreciation and Ownership" (2009, 54–5).

Reading as a Break

A recurring topic brought up in the interviews is the contemplative side of reading comics, an aspect also central in Axelson's study, where the participants often reported viewing films to relax (2014, 2017). The participants in this study very often read to relax and to take a break from the everyday.

It's kind of that little break. From the everyday I guess. It comes and I have done my part of whatever it may be, doing the dishes, and then I go and lie down and read.

Those [*Donald Duck* pocket books] I read when I just want to zero my brain a bit. If you want to press the reset button and detach from the everyday- without having to think a lot.

Comic books and graphic novels can of course also be challenging and provide food for thought, but this does not take away from the fact that reading also can mean getting away from the everyday for a while.

Reading Rituals

This contemplative dimension of reading comics is connected to other dimensions we find in Axelson's study (2014, 2017) and also in the work of Blom (2021). Reading comic books for several participants has a ritual dimension to it, in the sense that it is something that is done in a certain way and at a certain time and "forms regularity in everyday life" (Axelson 2017, 12).

I bought them when the work week had ended, right after work I would walk down to the store and buy a comic book and then it was kind of done, then I had a break.

It has kind of become a routine for me. Simply at the beginning of my lunch break I read my comic strips.

You shouldn't sit and be like, you should preferably be lying down when you read them, because they are relaxing. There are these routines that I have... It is the same ... if I buy a comic book at an antiquarian then you open it at a café with a coffee and a bun or a sandwich. So you enjoy it, the thing becomes a whole.

The last quote highlights another aspect that is connected to the contemplative dimension—the role of the body and the material side of comic books.

The Material and Corporeal Side of Reading

Axelson talks of a senso-motoric dimension that refers to how films generate physical responses in viewers (2017, 12), but this is not quite the point here. Rather, the readers I have interviewed highlight how reading is often related to relaxing the body by lying down or reading in bed or by combining reading with the joy of, for example, Saturday morning coffee. Or, in the case of one participant, other more or less regular and bodily aspects:

I have a really dumb ritual and this is a bit embarrassing but I'll tell you anyways.
I only read mangas on the toilet.

The material dimension of physical comic books is also specifically highlighted and related to bodily sensations by some of the participants, specifically touch and smell.

That first time when you open it [the comic]. It's the same as when you buy a new novel. When you open it the first time, it's an, I like the feeling when the paper breaks for the first time.

I like this holding it in my hand and to lie down on the sofa or the bed to read ... To be able to like open up a new comic book and like that. That is cool in itself.

There is nothing that smells as good as a new comic book.

There is thus a clear corporeal-material dimension to reading comic books that refers to the bodily sensations that are both brought on by the physical object of the comic book and the rituals of relaxing the body or combining reading with consuming things you enjoy. Though the body is also a part of engaging with other forms of popular culture, reading comic books would seem to include the body and the material as a more prominent feature.

Reading as a Not-So-Social Act

Rituals are in Blom's study (2021) highlighted as something that brings people together in real or imagined communities. The fans in Blom's study feel connected both to other fans and to the characters on the TV screen (2021, 135–65). Botzakis in turn discusses reading as friendship and highlights how his readers feel a connection to the comic book characters they love (2009, 55–6). For film viewers, watching films have a social dimension; you can do it together and it stimulates conversations (Axelson 2017, 12).

The participants in this study do mention that they like talking about comic books with others; however, this is not something that comes across as an essential aspect.

I kind of don't have a great need to discuss it.

Most do mention that it can be nice to talk about comic books, but it does of course have to be with the right people—others who have read what they have read. As the readers in this case are somewhat older, they do point out that they had more people to talk to when they were younger and also more of a need for it then.

It was more important for me when I was younger.

There is this fandom and all these others that you can be a part of and discuss but people the same age and like that, there isn't much of that.

What the participants mostly seem to wish to get out of talking about comic books are recommendations of things to read. However, this they can also get from fanzines and online reviews, so actually talking to someone is pleasant, but not that important.

Comparing the participants of this study to the ones in Botzakis's study (2009), there seems to be an age aspect here. While several of Botzakis's participants are still looking for their place in life, my participants are more settled and do not generally turn to comics for friendship or to other readers to find a social dimension. Reading is for them more of a solitary affair, but this does not make it less important to who they are.

Reading as Identity Work

Building on James Paul Gee (1996), Botzakis (2009, 52) highlights how reading can be seen as a part of identity work; what we read says something about who we are and how we see ourselves. Watching films and engaging in television fandom also tie into aspects of identity. Axelson talks of the self-reflexive dimension of

watching films (2017, 12), while Blom highlights how fans can find meaningful metaphors and models in what they watch (2021, 87–114). As pointed out, the participants in this study are avid readers in general, so their identity is not captured only via comic books or graphic novels, but it is an aspect of it.

For the participant who loves Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*-series (1988–96), the graphic novel series is something she has come back to over and over again in her life. She has also engaged with *The Sandman* in her academic career, but it is the way the series has fascinated her personally that is most essential for her.

I found it when I was in high school, my high school boyfriend was a big fan and I started reading it then, the whole series had not come out yet, but there was something in it, probably the myths and archetypes used in it. It was something that connected very deeply with me.

Though she found the series close to thirty years ago, it is still important to her and just last year she even got a tattoo inspired by the series.

The identity connected aspects of comic books and graphic novels is naturally particularly related to the comic books and graphic novels that have been especially important to the participants. One of the participants who collects *Donald Duck* reflects in the following way on why he engages with this comic book.

There must be something in these stories, in these characters as well, okay the characters yes, Donald Duck himself. So yes, I have always kind of identified myself with him because he is this kind of normal guy for whom things do not always go that well, but who still has the energy to go on [laughs].

However, for others the aspect of identity is related to being a comic book reader in general.

Yes, for me comic books are important, they are a part of me. I have grown up with them, they have become like a part, they have been and will always be a part of me.

Several of the participants mention that reading comic books and collecting comic books they have read as children or since they were children has a nostalgic aspect to it, in the sense that it brings them back to their past but also connects them to this past in an important way. As one participant puts it:

It's like going back to the holy script.

In a way it allows them to accept themselves and who they are. They keep reading what they have always read because they enjoy it.

It gives you something, it gives, it keeps you young, and childish.

Reading as Learning

By engaging with popular culture, you can of course also learn a lot. This is clear in Botzakis's study in the notion of reading for study (2009, 53–4) and it also comes through in many of the dimensions Axelson has identified regarding engaging with films, such as the problem-solving dimension, philosophical-existential dimension, political dimension, and symbolic-nomic dimension (2017, 12; 2014). The participants of this study do highlight this potential to learn via comic books as well. One participant mentions learning about the experiences of trans people via comic books:

Because it's an unknown topic for me I like to learn more about it.

Another discusses how comic books can relate to and comment on what is going on in society.

It is not like I read a certain comic book because it is political. I would rather say that it has a satirical link so that it touches on what is going on in society, it can read it [society].

However, for most it is not the learning aspect of reading comics that is highlighted. This again might be related to age. As one participant discusses, he learned a lot about history via comics as a kid, but now the situation is different.

Nowadays I don't feel that I learn that much by reading *The Phantom*, it's more just something fun. Maybe not anything more special than that. But that is something nice in itself.

Reading as Visual Pleasure

A final dimension that needs to be highlighted is the aesthetic dimension. Films offer viewers audiovisual pleasures (Axelson 2017, 12). For readers of comic books, the audio part is missing, but the visual aspect is highlighted by all the readers I talked to for this study. Yes, it is the stories that are important, but there is no denying the important role of the visual—the pictures and art works—as well.

If they can't draw according to my brain, according to my taste, then I don't buy it. No matter how good the story is, if it isn't well drawn you cannot read it.

It is important, more than you might think. When I think about the web-series I read ... I've gone through a whole lot of series before I have found the ones I have stayed with, it's like if the art, the drawings, the visual, if it doesn't please me, then I easily leave it.

I like well-drawn [comic books], the kind that create a certain mystique.

Even the one participant who says she is not a visual person still, to her own surprise, keeps getting back to the visual and how beautiful some of the comic books she loves are:

It is very realistic and absolutely shockingly beautiful.

The participants in this study thus discuss many reasons for engaging with comic books. We see similarities with the ways in which fans engage with other forms of popular culture, but also differences. Reading comic books is thus obviously meaningful. But how does reading comic books more precisely relate to aspects of meaning making?

Reading as Meaning Making

Going back to Van der Lans's levels of meaning making (1987), the interviews for this study highlight how comic books can be a noteworthy aspect of who you are or who you see yourself as. The participants are comic book readers, they are aware that reading comic books is not that typical for their age group, but this does not matter. They read for all the different reasons highlighted earlier. Comic books do give insights into the world as well—Van der Lans's second level—and can no doubt also highlight thoughts related to ultimate concerns – Van der Lans's fourth level – but these are not very central aspect brought up by the participants in this study.

Regarding meaning as it is discussed by Botzakis (2011)—meaning as something with moral, critical, and connective/validative dimensions—we can also recognize these in the material of this study. One reader of *Donald Duck* likes the moral dimension in the comic book:

In the heart these stories, they are like family stories in a way, you stick together and help each other and, in that way, they have these positive values that I think are good.

Another reader highlights how some comic books inspired critical reflections about society when he and his friends were in their teens:

You debated. It was fun. And we were this generation in senior high that said we get this kind of humor. In contrast to the grown up's society.

The readers interviewed in this study also clearly recognize themselves in comic books and graphic novels and find validation.

Yes [laughs], if I put it like this, in *Asterix* I have always identified with the druid Miraculix a bit ... He's a real nerd and no one really listens to him. And then he is a bit of a know-it-all ... That feels right.

Still these are not the main meaning making features that reading comic books has for the participants in this study. Rather, this study highlights the ritual dimension that engaging with popular culture can provide. This is, as mentioned, a dimension that for Blom (2021, 135–65) primarily brings the participants in connection with others. For the participants in this study, it has a lot more to do with taking a break from the everyday, awarding yourself, and recharging by relaxing your body and enjoying something to eat. These are perhaps not aspects that are traditionally connected to concepts such as meaning making and ritual, but there is no doubt that this makes comic books meaningful for the participant of this study. And it is a feature of comic books that can perhaps be recommended for others as well. As one participant puts it:

Actually, if you would ask someone, it would suite everyone ... It is what it's for [the comic book]. That break. In that way it suits everyone. It's just that everyone doesn't enjoy reading comic books.

Conclusion

This study has explored what adult readers of comic books and graphic novels get out of reading and compared the types of engagement and meaning making aspects brought up by the participants with the findings of previous studies of popular culture and meaning making. There are several reasons for why one can enjoy reading comic books and graphic novels. For the participants in this study, the stories are essential, but reading also provides a break from the everyday and a ritual framework that highlights the material and bodily aspects of reading. Reading also connects to identity work and how the readers see themselves.

In line with, among others, Blom's study (2021), the meaning processes involved in reading comic books and graphic novels can well be related to the study of lived religion. The participants in this study do not relate to a great extent to existential questions such as why we live or die, the nature of existence or whether there is a god (Axelson 2008, 38), but their thoughts on why and how they read does underscore how meaning making is related to lived experiences;

what we do and what gives us pleasure, peace, or the energy to live our lives to the best of our abilities are important aspect of contemporary meaning making and lived religion.

The study highlights many similarities with how people engage with other forms of popular culture, but also differences that point to the need to explore varied kinds of popular culture and varied participants. The participants in this study express some similar ideas as the young adults Botzakis interviewed (2006, 2009, 2011), but also differences that relate both to the participants age and the contexts they are a part of. Studies of popular culture do tend to focus on young people. This study underlines that popular culture can be meaningful for all, independent of age.

There are limitations to this study. The group of participants is small and doing the interviews via Zoom was not ideal, though it did make it possible to carry out this project during a pandemic. However, no doubt sitting down with the participants and discussing their favorite comic books and graphic novels face-to-face would have brought more depths to the interviews. Still, the material does provide noteworthy perspectives and hopefully this chapter can inspire more studies of this kind.

Notes

- 1 Toivanen (2001) has discussed the popularity of the *Donald Duck* comic book in the Nordic countries and particularly Finland. In comparison to the United States, *Donald Duck* has for long been a Nordic favorite and in Finland not only among children but also among older readers.
- 2 As with *Donald Duck*, *The Phantom* has had a much greater success in the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, than in the United States, the country of its origin (Aman 2018). The two participants who mention reading *The Phantom* both read it in Swedish.

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