***Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, Volume 33 (2026), No. 1, pp. 117-120**

Review of

The Figure of the Teacher in Comics: A Psychoanalytic Study of Immaterial and Fragmented Education

David Lewkowich, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2024

TESNI ELLIS
York University

On the cover of Archie series' *Laugh* No. 287 (from February 1975), high school students Archie, Betty, and Jughead sit in the front row of a classroom, facing a teacher who's seated at her desk, bent over a stack of notebooks, grading. Behind her, pinned neatly to a bulletin board, are pictures of students. The large print above the pictures indicates these are "Students I have flunked!" Seeing this, Archie, with a look of worry on his face, whispers to Betty, "I think our new teacher is using psychological warfare on us!" His words are contained in a speech bubble and "psychological warfare" stands out in a large, red, thick font. This issue of *Laugh* is one among a handful I found at a garage sale recently. Flipping through its pages now, as I wonder where my childhood collection of Archie comics ended up, I am also thinking about what David Lewkowich would say about this scene. I understand he would analyze the scene without taking any of its formal and narrative elements for granted, to study what the figure of this stern, unnamed teacher reveals not only about Archie's world but about our own shared fantasies, fears, and unconscious beliefs about teachers.

The Figure of the Teacher in Comics is an ambitious and thorough study in which Lewkowich offers a psychoanalytic reading of teachers like Archie's who are "ubiquitous and unavoidable" in comics (p. 42). His work departs smoothly from scholarship on comics' pedagogical uses in classrooms, although he does note the expansive and critical uses readers and teachers make of comics across subject areas. He focuses his reading on what he finds in these texts, where even the teachers who appear only briefly are treated as figures whose presence (or absence) can show and tell us about educational life as we know and imagine it. Comics, he argues, are uniquely suited for a project aiming to "describe the contours of our shared educational social unconscious" (p. 9) because their structural, formal, and cultural characteristics allow for the materialization and exploration of hidden, fragmented, and emotionally charged aspects of educational life that other forms of discourse often neglect. He reads an impressive collection of comics for their metaphors, poetics, and non-narrative elements, carrying on practices in the field of comics studies that recognize through their images, words, and construction, in these works "no single [element] is idle or accidental, that each has a specific place within the comic's larger poetic pattern" (p. 36). In that pattern, Lewkowich shows, we can see assumptions and imaginings about educational life in new, and often dark, detail.

To gather his "figures" while confined to his home during the pandemic, Lewkowich searched online archives for English-language North American comics where a teacher was present. Over two years he compiled a database, he writes, "bursting with more images and short sketches of teachers in comics (hundreds upon hundreds of characters) than I ever thought it would be possible to encounter" (p. 41). While the collection varies in style and genre, and spans decades of publications, his boundaries limit the study mostly to mainstream printed comics. Although this leaves out webcomics and forms from an underground comics scene, this aligns with his focus on fictional representations with wide cultural circulation that have a "normalizing power" (p. 14). While gathering his database, he saw that teachers "crop up in the most unexpected of places" (p. 41). He writes, "I noticed what the lack of attention given to teachers in comics might reveal about what and who we take for granted, and how amending this gap might cultivate new forms of understanding about the unspoken fantasies undergirding educational life, as well as research related to it" (p. 42).

After laying the groundwork for his analysis, in chapter two we are taken to a most troubling place. This chapter deals with the traumatic effects of schooling and the adolescent student's unconscious aggression, revenge fantasies, and parricide directed at teacher figures. Lewkowich tends to this topic with care, showing how these widespread graphic representations of fantasies are not just gratuitous, they serve a psychic function: the students are playing out a developmental necessity, however cruel and aggressive. The students must use their teachers in this way, during a volatile time; and the comic provides a form for acknowledging the school as a site of trauma and suffering. Still, it is a challenging chapter as Lewkowich works to understand the symbolic meaning of these representations while reckoning with the problem of actual violence directed at real teachers.

In the third chapter, Lewkowich challenges a conventional reading of a common "grammatical device of cartoons and comics" (p. 97): the thought bubble. Lewkowich considers what these devices reveal about the teacher's relationship to thought, asking, "What kind of thought is thought in the thought bubble?" (p. 104)? We also learn that this device that uniquely provides access to characters' internal, often conflicted lives, appears to be on the decline in contemporary comics (Camden, 2020). Lewkowich thoughtfully points out this is a significant loss: as readers lose access to the wild thoughts and difficult emotional truths of characters, they also lose the chance to recognize these as something like their own. Through Lewkowich, I wondered how the disappearance of the thought bubble might be telling us something about thoughtfulness writ large.

In the next chapter, we explore the teacher's ambivalent relationships through another formal convention at work in comics known as *emanata*, "the squiggles and symbols used in the indeterminate representations of teachers' emotions" (p. 135). Sweat drops, a hand swirling in the air, storm clouds, and sharp red lines are all given multiple, simultaneous meanings as Lewkowich takes no line of *emanata* for granted. Chapters five, six, and seven focus on superhero comics where teachers' identity conflicts, anxieties, and survival strategies play out; dual, split, plural, or lost identities are explored as responses to threats of institutional demands and incompatible ideas. These chapters are noteworthy for explicitly linking his project to present-day teacher contexts in novel ways, reorienting the banal expression of the teacher as a "superhero" to show a more complex relation. Like that between the teacher who grapples with their public duties and private identities and the superhero who, "begins to notice his double life as an irreconcilable tension to be traveled through, rather than a problem to be resolved" (p. 268).

In educational inquiry and as a reader, I am drawn to autobiographical and amateur comics, so I see Lewkowich as having saved the best for last. In the final chapter he turns to discuss comics made by students in his own classrooms—preservice teachers who create comics about their fears and desires about teaching "from the vantage point of dreams" (p. 308). His students' comics are as raw and revealing as the dreams they seek to represent. Lewkowich shows how comics and dreams are complementary, and how these students' comics provide a place for working through feelings and affects that official educational discourse often ignores. To end, in a personal postscript, Lewkowich traces his own history as a reader of comics to suggest that comics' nature as a subversive, "troublemaking" art form make them

a "bad teacher" (p. 329), which is a good thing: "a teacher potentially teaching bad things: uncontrollable, unvetted knowledge, stories whose meanings remain dangerously unsettled" (p. 331).

Admittedly, my own familiarity with the comics he analyzes was limited—I recognized Archie, Peanuts, and some superhero characters I know through pop culture references. Yet, this did not diminish the reading experience. Some readers may occasionally feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of examples and density of analysis, but the book lends itself to the same interactive reading approach that Lewkowich took up to create it. Readers might read out of sequence, for instance; or search for favourite superheroes, serials, and characters to see what scenes Lewkowich presents, taking a deliberately slow look at these images to reconsider their strategies and unconscious meanings, before reading what he makes of them. Readers taking a linear approach will appreciate the way he returns to some characters across chapters: Miss Grundy, Spider-Man, Black Lightning, and Johnny Thunder receive extended analysis that spans various psychoanalytic concepts. And any reader will appreciate the meticulous approach to exploring some at times unsettling findings that reveal a hidden, dark reality underlying educational life as represented in comics and, as he convincingly argues, that is significant for how real teachers are understood and understand themselves.

Lewkowich identifies recurring tropes that consistently depict the teacher's inner life as conflicted, anxious, and at times deeply troubled. Teachers in comics, he shows, are rarely stable figures; they are split, disguised, resentful (and resented). Lewkowich shows why this matters through a thoughtful intertwining of his analytic tools—the social unconscious (Weinberg, 2007) and structures of feeling (Williams, 2009). The social unconscious explains the invisible, deeply ingrained social dynamics of internal psychic life that are shared collectively within a society. Closely related, structures of feeling help explain how these unconscious social dynamics are collectively experienced and expressed, like when we meet them in artworks and cultural texts. By reading comics from "multiple directions" (p. 36), Lewkowich unearths the unconscious desires, contradictory thoughts, and dream states of educational life revealed in comics. From there, he asks "the question of why particular kinds of images and tropes appear to persist across time, and how such persistence may relate to and affect our capacity to think (or not think) about the social categories and individual experiences that such images tend to point to in real life" (p. 14).

In the same issue of *Laugh* with the teacher and her "psychological warfare," the first story inside shows Archie's disciplinarian principal, Mr. Weatherbee, and his teachers Professor Flutesnoot and Miss Grundy, devolving into a snowball fight while Archie and Jughead watch on. The teenagers comment, ironically, on how childish their teachers are (because, in the panels just before, Mr. Weatherbee was reprimanding the teenagers on their own snowball fighting antics). This issue of Archie is lighthearted on the surface, but after reading Lewkowich's book, I see these teachers and their hypocrisy as more than just gags—they are symptoms of something cultural and shared, part of the social unconscious of schooling. But a darker tone permeates Lewkowich's discussion because what he found were "anxious underworld[s]" (p. 299) and hidden, conflicted emotional truths that are more often suppressed by the normative discourse of hope and resilience in education. Still, from the dark he provides space for creative and rigorous thinking of the situation of the teacher. This study brings literary analysis, comics studies, psychoanalysis, and teacher education into conversation in a form that philosophical inquiry in education will recognize as a thorough, significant interrogation of how teachers and teaching are thought in cultural texts.

Lewkowich's is a book about reading—what reading asks of us, what we project onto characters, and what these characters give us back. He writes:

> In this book, I set out to find the figure of the teacher in comics, motivated by the presumption that if what we read affects who we are, tracing the meanings associated with teachers in comics may work to tell us something about the underspoken and unrecognized expectations framing the work of teachers in real life. (p. 331)

What he found was at times unsettling and has implications for educational inquiry that seeks to understand and transform the conditions that students and teachers alike confront and negotiate in their schools. It is a book about teachers, too; teachers who deserve, like comics themselves, to be seen as far more complex than we assume. I sensed an underlying grief in the writing: grief for what teachers endure, for how they split themselves to survive, for how they are imagined, and for how limited our cultural repertoire is for picturing them differently. This perhaps urged Lewkowich to refrain from asking "anything that resembles an answerable question" (p. 18) with an infectious conviction that other possibilities must exist.

References

Camden, V. J. (2020). The thought bubble and its vicissitudes in contemporary comics. *American Imago*, *77*(3), 603–638. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27154620

Weinberg, H. (2007). So what is this social unconscious anyway? *Group Analysis*, *40*(3), 307–322. https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316407076114

Williams, R. (2009). On structure of feeling. In J. Harding & E. D. Pribram (Eds.), *Emotions: A cultural studies reader* (pp. 35–49). Routledge.