DRAWING IT PROPERLY: AN EXAMINATION OF SMOKING PORTRAYALS IN TEXTS ON HOW TO DRAW IN THE NOIR GRAPHIC NOVEL/ COMIC BOOK STYLE

HOUGHTON Daisy[1], HOUGHTON Frank[2]*

[1]University of Galway, College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies, Galway, Ireland

[2]Technological University of the Shannon, Social Sciences ConneXions Research Institute, Limerick, Ireland

Abstract

Smoking remains a leading cause of mortality and morbidity globally. Therefore attention must be paid to the manner is which pro-smoking materials may serve to reflect, reinforce and ultimately reproduce smoking behaviours. Prior examinations have identified high levels of smoking imagery in graphic novels/ comics. This pattern was replicated in a specific examination of the noir crime genre of graphic novels/ comics. In order to explore this in further depth this research identified and analysed two art texts that specifically address how to draw in the noir graphic novel/ comic genre. This analysis revealed a substantial volume of smoking imagery, often positioned prominently and of a large size . Smoking was clearly integral to the characters from the initial scene setting and conception of the image. This analysis also identified portrayals of smoking associated with stereotypical images, such as those of macho males and seductive women, including the classic femme fatale trope. Recommendations to combat the potential impacts of such imagery are made.

*Corresponding author: Frank.Houghton@LIT.ie

Introduction

Graphic novels are a popular contemporary form of entertainment, particularly among adolescents and young adults [1-4]. As such, their portrayal of health and harm related behaviours have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years [5-9]. Increasing attention has also focussed on their potential to positively impact health [10-17]. Given the deadly impact of smoking [18-19], and the fact that most smokers start smoking before the legal age of tobacco consumption [20-21], the portrayal of smoking behaviours in such novels has been a particular focus [22-26]. At this more impressionable age many adolescents/ young adults develop their identity and sense of self, and subsequently adopt certain health protective or health risk behaviours [27-29].

Noir graphic novels have been identified as particularly problematic in relation to their portrayals of smoking [25-26]. This form of graphic novel is often modelled on a rather gritty, dark and seedy side of archetypal American society in the 1930s to the 1950s, as depicted in the works of authors such as Hammett [30-33], Chandler [34-38], and Caine [39-41]. A recent examination focussing on noir graphic novels noted high levels of smoking portrayals, especially among women vis-à-vis other forms of graphic novels. Sexualised smoking imagery and the trope of the smoking femme fatale were clearly evident in the noir graphic novels examined [26]. The femme fatal trope has been explored in-depth as a crucial element of the noir genre [42-51]. Smoking portrayals like these are important as such imagery can serve not only to reflect and reinforce them but also serve to help reproduce patterns of behaviour. The observation of high levels of depictions of women smoking in noir novels is particularly problematic given the rise in the female readership of graphic novels [52], female smoking rates [53], and an estimated death toll from smoking among women in excess of 2 million annually [54].

While conducting our recent review of smoking in noir graphic novels [26] we noted that several of the texts reviewed contained additional pages which detailed elements of the script setting the scene for the novels, as well as examples of early sketches of the artwork. These extras obviously help to provide readers with an insight into the creative and production process involved in developing a graphic novel. We were struck by the inclusion of script and sketch images which explicitly detailed smoking. It appeared that to create a graphic novel was in part inherently linked to portrayals of smoking. For example, the following scene-setting script from the extra material at the end of Batman: Year One reads:

Interior of Gordon's apartment. Barbara lies, asleep…Gordon sits, tense, troubled, on the foot of the bed, holding an ashtray in one hand, smoking with the other. Through a window behind him Gotham tenements rise, almost obscuring a full moon… [55]

Associated with this text Figure One details an outline sketch from the 'extra' material, as well as the final image from the body of the text.
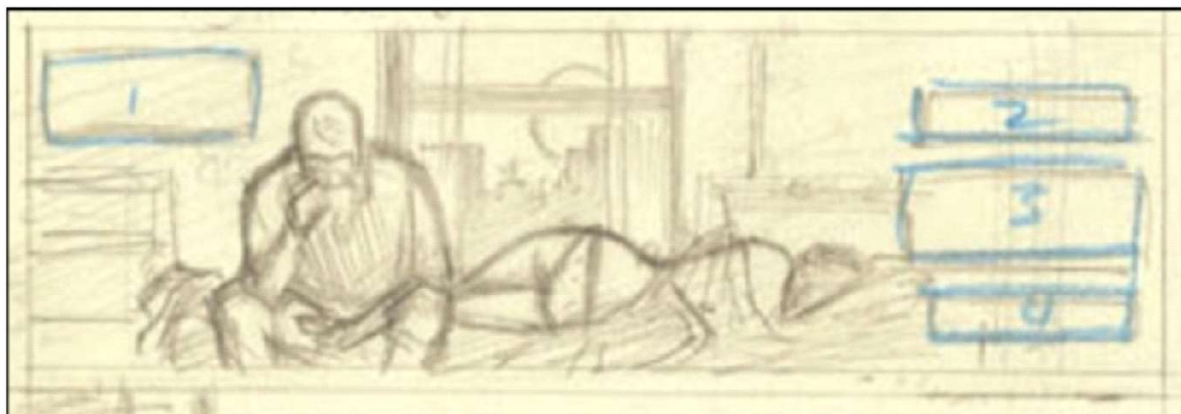
Figure 1. Draft & Final Scene Demonstrating a Portrayal of Smoking from Batman: Year One [45]

Given the acknowledged resurgence in the popularity of such noir graphic novels [56-58], it is worth exploring how such portrayals of smoking are perpetuated. As noted above, its ongoing portrayal in both texts [22-25], and the extra background material included in many graphic novels [26] may be key elements. However, an additional key element in the propagation of such images may be texts that specifically address learning how to draw in particular art styles.

Humans have engaged in art since prehistoric times [59]. Art remains an accessible past-time or hobby for many that is often fostered by primary and secondary school systems [60-61]. Art in various forms is also often not only a subject in higher education [62], but also routinely features in more widespread adult and community education offerings in many countries [63-65]. Precise information on the number of people that engage in artistic pursuits informally is very unclear. Forbes noted that the most important demographic among crafters were Millennials aged 18-34 years [66]. More detailed statistics are hard to find, although it is interesting to note that 25% of the Finnish population aged 18-64 enrolled in non-degree subjects studied art classes (20% among males, 30% among females). This equates to approximately 100,000 people [67].

However, some information on the prevalence on the volume of art practice may be inferred from an economic perspective. The significant size of the global arts and crafts industry should not be underestimated. A recent examination of the USA noted that 63% of households, representing 117 million people, participated in a craft or hobby activity in the past 12 months [68]. This survey identified that almost US$44 billion was spent on such activities, and noted that painting and drawing was the most common activity.

This research set out to explore if texts designed to help teach graphic noir drawing styles featured or promoted smoking imagery, and if so in what ways.

Method

In line with Leech & Onwuegbuzie's typology this research is classed as a partially mixed concurrent dominant status design, with precedence being given to the quantitative element [69]. This method combined quantitative content analysis [70] with directed qualitative content analysis [71-72]. In directed qualitative content analysis an initial coding schema is developed and following immersion in the data it can developed further and amended [71-72]. Thus it is a hybrid inductive- deductive approach. The tension inherent in combining quantitative and qualitative approaches is duly acknowledged [73]. However, from a pragmatic perspective [74-77] these differing paradigms can be used for complementary purposes [77]. Quantitative content analysis focussed on: actual tobacco use; implied tobacco use; and tobacco paraphernalia.

The two researchers discussed borderline images in depth in order to reach consensus.

An extensive online search identified two texts that specifically addressed the issue of how to draw in comic noir style [78-79]. These two texts constituted the sample for this examination and are explored below.

Results

Table One details the results of the quantitative content analysis of the two art texts. With one text including a total of 35 panels portraying smoking and the other portraying 45 such images, it is clear that smoking imagery was heavily featured in both.

Table 1. Results of Quantitative Content Analysis of the Noir Drawing Texts

Criteria	How To Draw Noir Comics [79]	Drawing Crime Noir For Comics & Graphic Novels [78]	Total
No. of Pages	148	148	296
Panels with Only Male/s Smoking	48	25	73
Panels with Female/s Only Smoking	4	11	15
Panels with Male/s & Female/s Smoking	0	0	0
Panels with Neutral/ Indeterminate Gender Research Portraying Smoking	0	0	0
Total Panels Portraying Smoking	52	36	88
Panels with Female/s Only Not Smoking	74	132	206
Panels with Male/s Only Not Smoking	305	210	515
Panels with Male/s & Female/s Not Smoking	53	23	78

Male figures were more likely to be portrayed smoking that females, although almost a third (30.6%) of smoking related images in one text featured women [78]. Chi-square analysis exploring the total male/s only smoking/ non-smoking portrayals vis-à-vis the total female/s only smoking/ non-smoking portrayals noted that males were statistically significantly more likely to be portrayed as smoking, $X2$ (1, N = 809) = 5.25, p = .022.

Figure 2. Examples of Smoking Portrayals in Noir Drawing Texts [79]

Examples of portrayals of smoking can be seen in Figure Two. It is important to note that such imagery may not feature just one smoker, but multiple, as demonstrated in Figure Two [79].

Figures Two and Three also demonstrate an important point about the noir drawing texts. Smoking is portrayed not only in the form of cigarettes (Figure Two), but also via a hookah (Figure Two), and cigars (Figure Three).

As well as featuring completed images of characters smoking, a standard feature in such drawing texts is a series of panels demonstrating the various stages in the creation of the image, from a sketch outline to its final form. It is interesting to note that in some ima gery the cigar or cigarette is so integral to the image that it appears in the very first sketch outline.

Figure 3. A Male Smoker from Conception to Completion [78]

Examples of this for a male smoker can be seen in Figure Three, while Figure Four features a similar series of images for a woman. The imagery associated with the portrayals of smoking are important. The male crime boss portrayed in Figure Three is tall and strong, with exaggeratedly broad shoulders. He is expensively and smartly dressed, commanding and relaxed. This powerful man is smoking a large cigar and appears at ease in his position of control. The woman smoker in Figure Four is younger and lithe. She is attractive with flowing hair, and dressed to reveal her slim body. Shown in a position of power, she sits astride her captive in a sexually dominant and provocative position, her gun aimed at her male captive's groin.

Figure 4. A Female Smoker from Conception to Completion [78]

Figures Three and Four demonstrate the types of stereotypical gender based imagery that are very common in graphic novels. The important aspect in the context of this research is the additional portrayal of smoking. Figures Five and Six further demonstrate the association of these gender stereotypes with machismo, sexuality and smoking.

The two men portrayed smoking in Figure Five appear strong, determined, healthy and attractive. They are the epitome of the 'hard boiled', no nonsense, cool macho male that features strongly in the noir genre.

Figure 5. Examples of Smoking & Machismo [78-79]

Similarly, Figure Six details images of female smokers that are strongly stereotypical. The women portrayed are young, attractive and highly sexualised. They are both slim, with narrow waists and exaggerated breasts and hips. Both are dressed to reveal their bodies and positioned responding to the gaze of the reader in a somewhat coquettish manner.
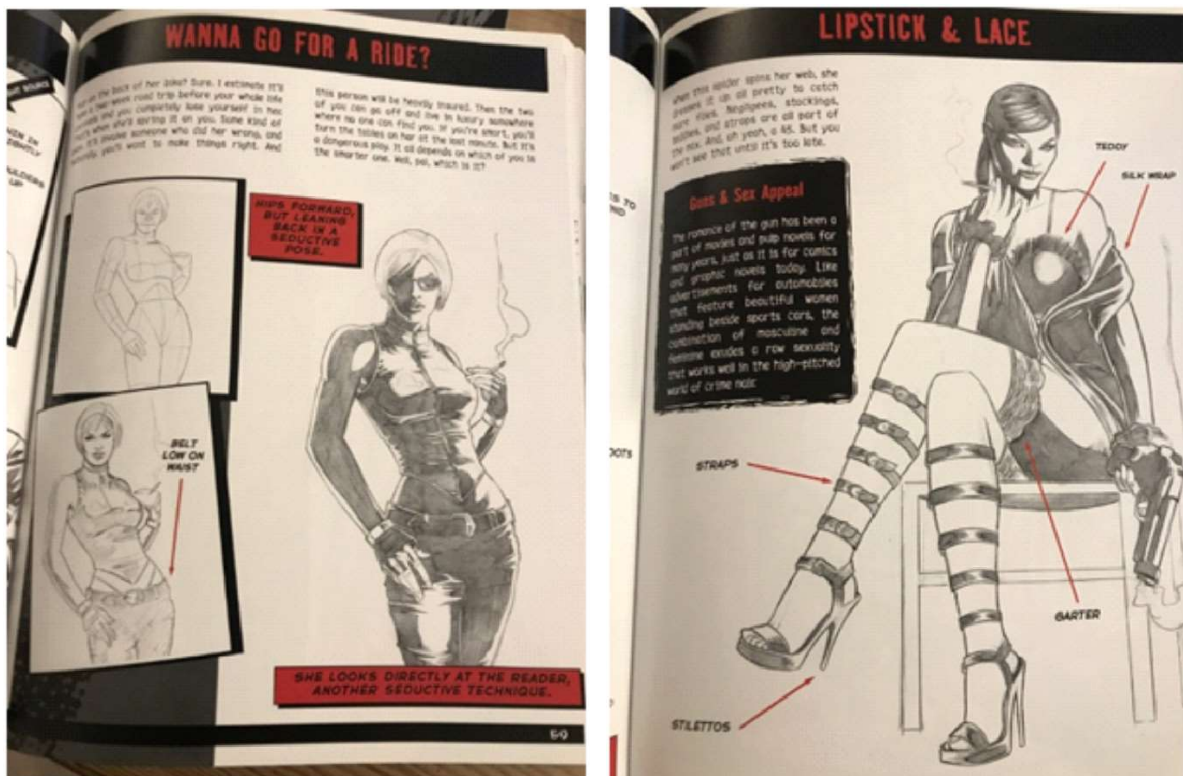

Figure 6. Female Sexuality, Seduction & Cigarettes [78]

Figure Seven also demonstrates an additional key media trope of the noir genre, that of the femme fatale. These are seductive and powerful women with deceitful plans. They are routinely portrayed as attempting to in-veigle men to unwittingly do their bidding before being ultimately discarded or killed. The addition of a cigarette is used to strengthen portrayals of their sexuality, independence, and power.
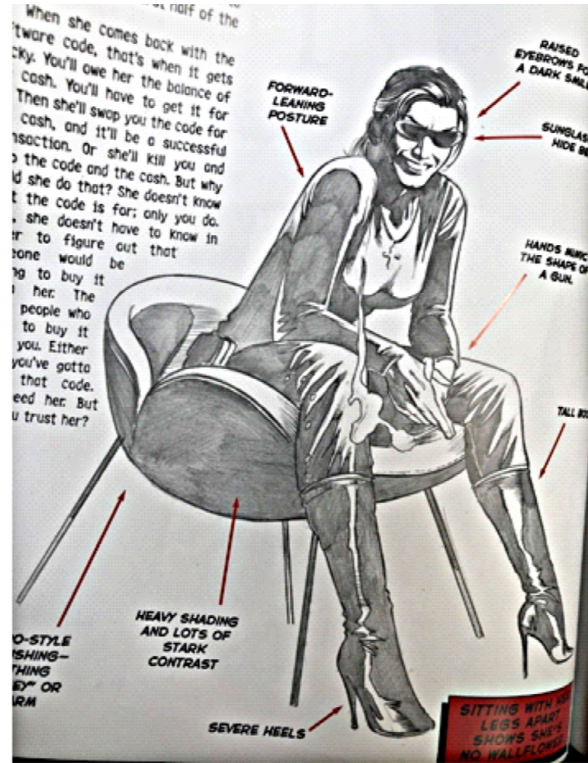

Figure 7. The Femme Fatal Trope [78-79]

Another notable feature of both noir graphic novel drawing texts, was not just the number of panels featuring smoking, but the size and prominence of this imagery. Figure Eight features examples of this. Both images are full page images featuring smoking. In terms of impact the second panel in Figure Eight is from the cover of the book, which clearly demonstrates the prominence given to such imagery.
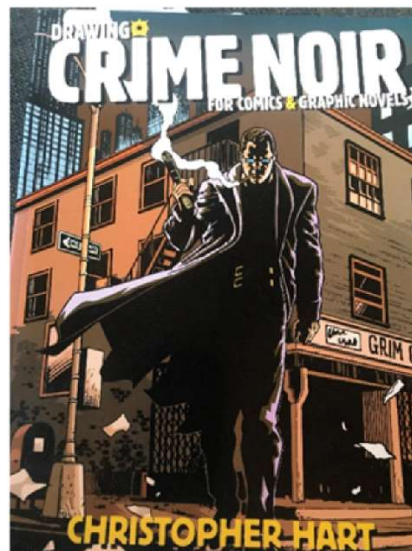

Figure 8. Size and Prominence of Smoking Portrayals [78-79]

It should be noted that the smoking image in the second panel of Figure Five also fills an entire page without any other text or images. The second panels in both Figure Six and Seven above are also examples of such smoking imagery effectively filling whole pages.

It is important to be cognisant that the addition of smoking imagery is neither accidental nor incidental to the noir graphic novel genre. This is amply demonstrated in Hart's text (p.64) in a section titled Coffee & Cigarettes, which includes the text:

I want you to see the subtle things you might've missed. The things that create the magic, the aura of the moment. The small things. The smouldering cigarettes…a pair of beautiful bedroom eyes. It's finishing touches like that that'll give your work an edge…The Flash of a Lighter. A good ice breaker when you want a lady's attention, the flicker of fire adds a dramatic element, illuminating an otherwise dimly lit scene… Ashtrays and Conversations. Long talks on the phone are measured by how many butts are burned through in an ashtray.[78]

Further evidence of the integral nature of smoking to the noir genre in these texts advising on drawing techniques can be seen in the inclusion of explicit anti-health messaging. As can be seen from Figure Nine, while pointing at a finished cigarette being extinguished in an ashtray a line of commentary reads 'THERE ARE NO "HEALTH NUTS" IN THE UNDERWORLD' [78]. Similarly, when pointing at a cigarette being held ostentatiously by a woman in the noir genre, the accompanying text dismissively reads ' "CANCER SHMANCER" ' [78]. This disregard for known health risks and the framing of such concerns as the domain of people obsessed by health is very stark.
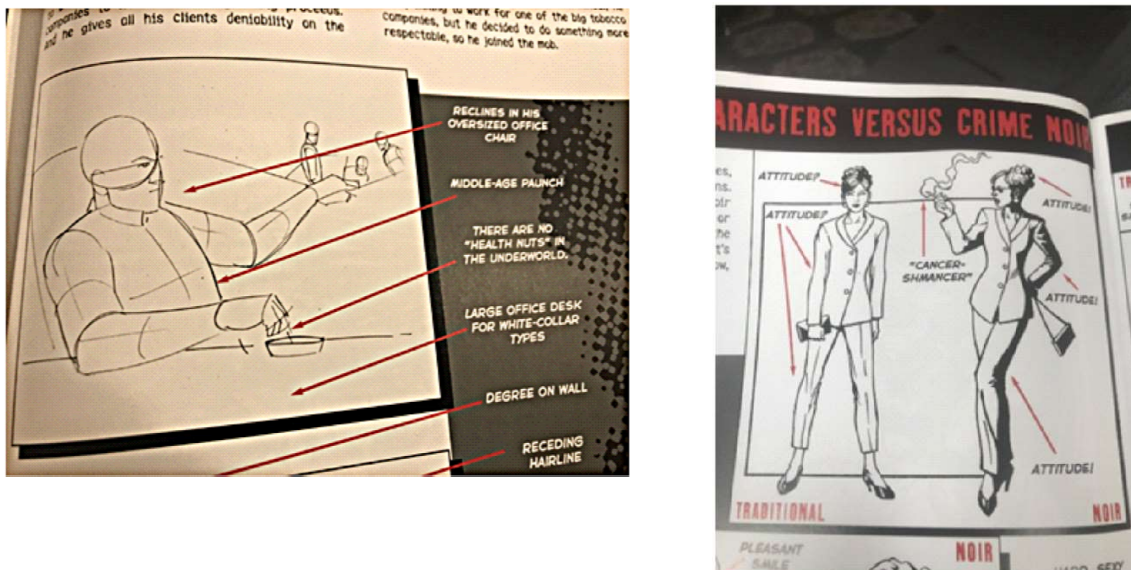

Figure 9. Explicit Anti-Health Messaging [78]

In our recent analysis of portrayals of smoking in noir graphic novels [26], we noted the substitution of other objects instead of cigarettes. This was most obvious in an image where a stereotypical image of a smoker appeared to have had the cigarette replaced with a drinking straw [80]. In this analysis we termed this positive phenomena 'substitution' [26]. See Figure Nine for evidence for this phenomena in two images from one of the noir drawing texts []. In these images, although a cigarette would typically be portrayed being smoked by the man driving, he has a toothpick in his mouth instead.
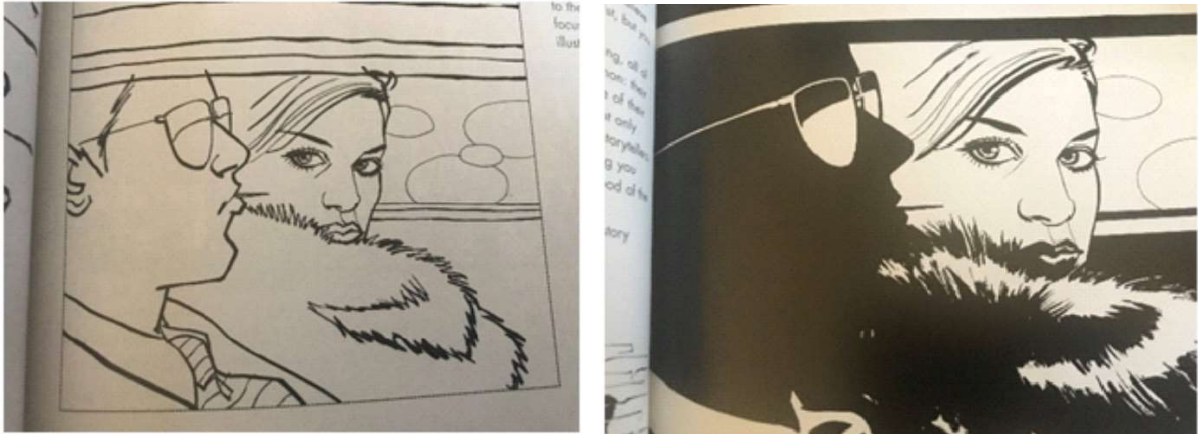
Figure 10. Examples of Substitution [79]

However, from a tobacco control perspective it was also interesting to observe an apparent reversal of this phenomenon in one of the noir graphic art texts. As can be seen from the four images in Figure Ten between images two and three, a cigarette was substituted for a bottle, presumably of beer. This phenomena is termed here Replacement.
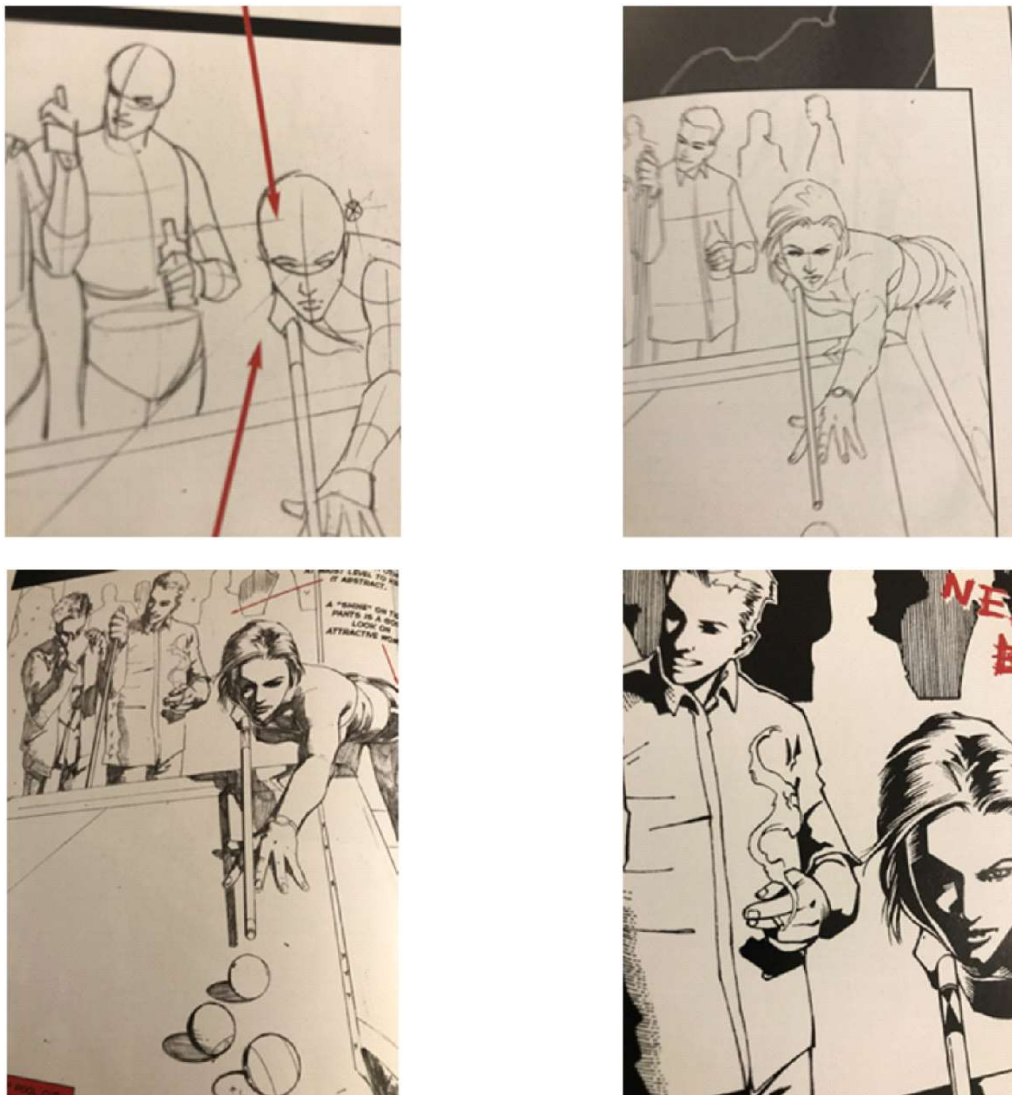

Figure 11. Replacement of a Bottle with a Cigarette

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Discussion

The results of the examination of the noir graphic art texts above largely mirror our analysis of noir graphic novels themselves [26]. Both texts on noir graphic novel art techniques examined included a problematic number of images of smoking. A total of 88 such images spread across less than 300 pages is clearly a significant issue of concern from a tobacco control perspective. Portrayals of smoking appear integral to conceptions of how to portray the noir genre and its characters. The images examined above, and the text from one of the books, clearly demonstrate how smoking is intimately connected to the original conception of the characters and scenes.

It is evident that smoking was also linked in these texts to sex and seduction, as well as machismo images and the femme fatale trope. These explicit linkages are also of great concern. The portrayal of such powerful characters as smokers may impact readers through both the normalisation of smoking and, particularly in the case of adolescents and young adults, identity formation and associated health behaviours.

The inclusion of explicit anti-health messaging in the texts was a shocking and unexpected finding in this analysis. To explicitly minimise the negative health impacts of smoking and to insinuate that concern over the negative impact of cigarettes was for the weak, is a disturbing element of the texts' explicit narrative. Although two images showing the potential substitution of cigarettes for another object (tooth picks in this case) were evident in this analysis, the replacement of an object for a cigarette in one series of panel images was also an issue of concern.

Art remains an important hobby for a significant number of people. Graphic novels have increasingly moved into a more mainstream position in many countries [81-84], and are also increasingly both read and drawn by women [52, 85-88], as well as men. Additionally the noir genre remains popular, and has even grown in recent years [89]. The high number of positive and powerful portrayals of smokers in these noir graphic art texts therefore requires a response.

It is recommended that texts including so many smoking images should carry a parental advisory warning and specify that they are not appropriate for people aged under 18. It is recommended that when such texts are located in public libraries that they be placed in the adult art section, rather than an equivalent children's section. It is also important that health practitioners and art therapists working with clients are aware of the potential pro-smoking connotations and semiotics in this genre. Finally, it is recommended that public health educators, health education specialists, and tobacco control activists actively engage with artists to re-develop such works to portray the real impact of smoking. It would, for example, still be firmly in keeping with the noir genre to have a minor character who smokes portrayed as suffering from the ill-effects of a smoking related disease such as throat, mouth or lung cancer or emphysema. Such portrayals would serve to negate some of positive connotations of smoking that are currently so prevalent in noir graphic texts and associated art texts.

Resumo

Fumado restas ĉefa kaŭzo de morteco kaj malsaneco tutmonde. Tial oni devas atenti la manieron, kiel por-fumadaj materialoj povas servi por reflekti, pli-fortigi kaj finfine reprodukti fumajn kondutojn. Antaŭaj ekzamenoj identigis altajn nivelojn de fumaj bildoj en grafikaj romanoj/bildstrioj. Tiu prototipo estis reproduktita en specifa ekzameno de la noir-krimĝenro de grafikaj romanoj/bildstrioj. Por esplori tion pli profunde ĉi tiu esplorado identigis kaj analizis du arttekstojn, kiuj specife traktas kiel desegni en la noir-grafika romano/komika ĝenro. Tiu analizo rivelis grandan volumenon de fumaj bildoj, ofte pozi-

ciigitaj elstare kaj de granda grandeco. Fumado estis klare integrita al la karakteroj de la komenca scenaro kaj koncepto de la bildo. Ĉi tiu analizo ankaŭ identigis portretojn de fumado asociataj kun stereotipaj bildoj, kiel tiuj de maĉismaj maskloj kaj delogaj virinoj, inkluzive de la klasika femme fatale tropo. Rekomendoj por kontraŭbatali la eblajn efikojn de tia figuraĵo estas faritaj.References

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