

## Review Essay: Assessing Contemporary Comics Scholarship

Bart Beaty  
*University of Calgary*

**The Aesthetics of Comics.** *By David Carrier.* Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. 139 pp. ISBN 0415278732.

**How to Read Superhero Comics and Why.** *By Geoff Klock.* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002. 204 pp. ISBN 0826414192.

**Comics and Ideology.** *Edited by Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., Ian Gordon.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001. 303 pp. ISBN 0820452491.

**The Language of Comics: Word and Image.** *Edited by Robin Varnum, Christina T. Gibbons.* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 222 pp. ISBN 1578064147.

The scholarly study of comic books and comic strips (collectively, comics) is, to provide the generous reading of the situation, in a state of infancy. While the rise of cultural studies and theories of post-modernism have suggested that the high/low distinction characterizing the study of culture has been abrogated, the reality remains that much of the present-day media industries remain out of bounds for researchers in the contemporary university, and also at university presses. While comics and cinema celebrate roughly contemporaneous birthdates in the 1890s, only one of these new visual forms has been historically legitimated, and only one of them has spawned large scale programs of study. Nonetheless, eventually all infants grow to be toddlers, and comics scholarship looks to be moving from its booster seat. Papers on comics are peppered across journals in the humanities and social sciences, and there are now a number of annual conferences dedicated to the form. The *International Journal of Comic Art* is now in its sixth year of publication, and an increasing number of books have emanated recently from university presses. With comics scholarship taking its first steps towards maturity, four recent books highlight the limitations of the field as it currently exists.

David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* claims to be the first book on comics authored by an analytic philosopher, a claim that is undoubtedly true. Car-

---

Bart Beaty is a Professor in the Faculty of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary, Calgary, AB T2N 1N4. E-mail: [beaty@ucalgary.ca](mailto:beaty@ucalgary.ca).

**Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 29 (2004) 403-409**

©2004 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation

rier, best known for his work in the field of art history and modernism, provides a slim volume that seeks to examine comics in formal terms, in relation to painting. Carrier's book is broken into three parts. The first section, "The Nature of Comics," offers four chapters dealing with what the author contends are the distinctive elements of the form: the use of caricature, speech balloons, image sequences, and the blending of words and images into a common frame. The second section, "Interpreting Comics," addresses a number of issues raised by the form and exemplified by George Herriman's greatly celebrated jazz age daily strip, *Krazy Kat*. Finally, the book concludes with an argument about comics as post-historical art, a term that the author borrows from Arthur Danto. Here Carrier argues that comics exist outside of art history, and that they exemplify no formal development of their own. This is a highly contentious (some would claim ludicrous) assertion.

Carrier's assertion about the irrelevance of art history in the face of comics (and, consequently, the irrelevance of comics in the face of art history) stems from a reification of the high/low divide between comics and historically legitimated cultural forms that dominates the book. He suggests as early as the second page that "comics, by contrast, are like pop music—an art form almost all of us understand without any need for theorizing." The contrast, of course, is to old-master art. Carrier repeats this assertion throughout his text ("cartoon strips are self-interpreting pictures"), choosing to prove this assertion through an analysis of the work of Gary Larson, creator of the *Far Side* newspaper comic panel. In limiting his analysis to Larson's work, Carrier does himself no favours. First, Larson's strip—which is not sequential and which makes extremely limited use of word balloons—mitigates his own attempts to define comics in a formalist manner. Second, Carrier's assertion that "almost all Larsons are absurdly easy to interpret" (p. 22) leaves one wondering what it is that he hopes to explicate with his own analysis. In a way, Carrier's argument exists as a form of academic parody, constantly articulating its own lack of relevance.

If *The Aesthetics of Comics* has a larger point to make, it is made in the final section relating comics to the traditions of art history. It is possible that a very interesting book can be written on this subject, one that will detail the specific ways in which art history has worked to exclude comics from the history of twentieth century image making while at the same time celebrating artists whose work is intimately bound to the history of the comics form (Lichtenstein, Erro, Pettibon, and so on). Nonetheless, this is not that book. Carrier is caught up in the art historian's disdain for comics even as he flounders to legitimate them. Comics, he argues, are useful insofar as they help to identify the "essence" of painting, primarily through the enunciation of a lack. Comics, we learn, are not to be contemplated at length, and their charms reside outside the domain of traditional art. Carrier suggests that Herriman's *Krazy Kat* exemplifies life in a post-historical world, that is, a world in which the trajectory of painting has been exhausted. The death of painting is akin, he suggests, to the life of comics which, in any case, never had a life to call their own or a history to take note of. Certainly Carrier

takes no note of it. His book is filled with sweeping judgments on the history of the form, but the text itself demonstrates little awareness of that history. Only the *Far Side* and *Krazy Kat* are discussed in any sort of detail, with the contributions of most of the notable names in the history of the medium mentioned in passing (Will Eisner, Robert Crumb) or omitted entirely (Jack Kirby, Chris Ware). I can't help but think that if I wrote a comparable book entitled *The Aesthetics of Painting* that addressed only the work of Pablo Picasso and Edward Hopper while proclaiming that no significant differences can be found in the history of art (since it is also just pigment on canvas), I would never be able to find a publisher. That, I suppose, is the primary difference between comics and painting in the contemporary academy.

If Carrier approaches the study of comics knowing too little of the field, Geoff Klock knows too much—but little of it useful. Klock's bizarrely titled *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* is a pseudo-scholarly volume from a former PhD student turned night watchman. The book is organized as a series of eight chapters, each addressing a small number of superhero comic books published since the mid-1980s. Klock does not attempt to present a history of the superhero—or even a justification for his interest in superhero comics, despite the promise of the title—but instead provides a “superhero mini-canon” (p. 16) that is heavily influenced by a reading of Harold Bloom. Indeed, so heavy is Bloom's influence on the book that his name appears on no fewer than 48 of the book's 181 pages, and he is quoted relentlessly in the manner of an undergraduate midterm exam (Harold Bloom's ideas about the birth of consciousness can help explain the rise of self-reflexive superhero comic book stories. Discuss). Klock rejects out of hand approaches to the material that are derived from non-literary sources, and even many that are derived from those sources. His dismissal of post-modernism and deconstructionism as “tedious” (p. 3) ill serves his argument given that many of the books that he discusses are self-consciously working through post-modern aesthetics. Indeed, Klock's conception of Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* as “a kind of pastiche” seems terrifically misplaced given the complete disdain with which he regards theories of post-modernity. A lack of theoretical sophistication mars this book from beginning to end, which reads more like the first draft of a dissertation than a fully-realized scholarly manuscript.

In a nutshell, Klock's argument is that superhero comics have become increasingly self-referential and self-aware, and that as a consequence of this they are getting better. The teleological aspect of his argument is made unusually explicit when he writes that “*Planetary* is the apex toward which this book has developed” (p. 153). Klock's approach to these comics is, in contradistinction to Carrier's art historical approach, entirely literary. Indeed, one could read this book without any sense that comic books are a visual mode of communication. No art appears in the text, and the contributions of artists to the books are never discussed. Artists are lucky to be mentioned briefly in passing, with many not making the cut. Klock provides a radical challenge to critics who have character-

ized the appeal of contemporary superhero comics as primarily visual by simply failing to acknowledge the work of the artists altogether.

Ultimately the author glosses over any aspect of the superhero comic industry that cannot be bent to fit his trajectory of the heroic development of the self-referential action hero. The tremendous influence that non-superhero comics had on the drive to create “mature” stories using superheroes is ignored, as is the far more proximate effect of DC’s Vertigo imprint of “adult” genre comics—an imprint that spawned the careers of many of the writers whom Klock ultimately celebrates. As a result, Klock discusses contemporary superhero comics merely as stories with no context and no formal qualities beyond their own self-referentiality. The comics upon which he focuses are those that most aggressively celebrate an in-bred knowledge of the history of the medium, and whose pleasures are almost entirely limited to the most dedicated and hardcore of superhero fans. Klock champions those books that celebrate the reader who has the most insider fan knowledge—readers like Klock.

The insularity of *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* is additionally reflected in the book’s awkward attempts to deal with the politics of the comics that it discusses. Given that superhero comics function most clearly as a form of fascist wish-fulfillment, Klock’s inability to deal with the politics is the central failing of the text. Many of the comics considered here explicitly deal with the issue of superheroics as a form of fascism. Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, for example, posits an explicitly fascist Batman fighting a guerrilla war against queer coded villains. Klock contends that Batman represents both “a rebel and a dispenser of a new hegemonic discourse” (p. 43), or, I suppose, an oppressive liberator? The book lacks the critical distance to really deal with these questions, and here Klock’s casual dismissal of cultural studies and theories of post-modernism proves fatal. As a book about post-modern culture that completely lacks a theory of modernism or modernity, Klock is ill-equipped to deal with *Kingdom Come*’s attacks on multiculturalism or the implications of *The Authority*’s success in “killing God” (literally). That these books espouse a fascist political philosophy—whether ironic or straightforward—is an aspect of the work that the author approaches a number of times but is unable to really come to terms with. Ultimately his argument amounts to little more than an apologia for a tiny sliver of the contemporary comic book field written from an outmoded literary perspective.

To reconcile the failings of Carrier’s limited art historical style and the fannish insularity of Klock’s literary approach, one can turn towards more broadly social questions. *Comics and Ideology*, edited by Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon, collects a dozen essays that seek to understand comics within a larger context of produced meanings. As with any anthology, the result is largely mixed. One particular limitation of the book is an overly broad focus. With chapters on ownership concentration in the American comic book market, suffragette cartoons in turn-of-the-century *Life* magazine, small press Hong Kong feminist comics, Wonder Woman as immigrant parable, queer comic strips, and *Dilbert*, the book’s focus is incredibly wide-ranging. Indeed, the

volume at times seems more like an issue of a comics-related journal than a closely edited anthology. The editors ameliorate this problem to a certain degree with an exceptionally coherent and well-argued introduction that outlines the history of comics scholarship in a cogent way and makes a strong case for the need for a book like this one. Nonetheless, the book does at times seem over-represented by superhero comic books and gender analyses, particularly given the absence of essays specifically dealing with subjects as broad as race and class.

In the case of the individual essays, after the introduction few are stand-outs. Certainly the best essay is provided by Ian Gordon, whose reading of Superman through various cross-media articulations of the character (comic books, film, television) pays special attention to the way that the character has been shaped by—and framed by—merchandising, and further notes the way that the current trademark holders (Time-Warner) have sought to mitigate Superman's status as a product through the use of irony, while at the same time retaining the character for continued commercial exploitation. Nonetheless, many of the other essays in the volume do little to move beyond the “show and tell” approach to research that seems symptomatic of comics scholarship. Essays by Robyn Goodman, Wendy Siuyi Wong and Lisa Cuklanz, Anne Cooper-Chen, Morris Franklin, and Edward Sewell lack fundamentally strong arguments. Each introduces a subject to a reader who might be unfamiliar with, for example, comic book letters to the editor dealing with gay superheroes, but does little to provide fresh insight or an innovative reading. Content analysis is the dominant approach in many of these essays, and they do little other than state the facts of the case.

Other essays in the volume are marred by shoddy argumentation. McAllister's essay on media concentration falls into a common trap of political economy, confusing market consolidation with a lack of diversity within the market. Further, a lack of primary research allows the author to too blithely blame the bankruptcy of Kitchen Sink Press on distributors rather than on poor management choices relating to investment priorities. Matthew Althouse's essay on the ideology of Britain's *Judge Dredd* comics suffers from weak-kneed critical analysis. Althouse argues that the fascist comic series (in which the lead character is police officer, judge, and jury, proclaiming “I am the law!” and executing criminals in the streets) is either a strong criticism of Thatcherite Britain or possibly a strong endorsement of it. Julie Davis' essay on the subversive power of Scott Adams' *Dilbert* daily strip bogs down on the question of resistance. Davis spends considerable time responding to Norman Solomon's contention that the strip acts as an inoculation that pacifies office workers by presenting systemic and institutional problems within capitalism as merely the actions of individualized incompetents. Davis wants to reject this “left-wing” argument by asserting that *Dilbert* “validates” readers' work experiences (295) and allows them to “cope with day-to-day problems by often reflecting the lived experience of workplace realities and shows them that others share their fate” (296). Or, in other words, Davis agrees with Solomon, she just doesn't feel that systemic inequities are a problem, and argues that his alternatives—organizing and protest—are “economically prohib-

itive, if not illegal, for most salaried office workers” (p. 284). It is unusual, to say the least, to find a scholarly book on the topic of ideology that is willing to argue that unionization is a hassle. *Comics and Ideology* casts a wide net and, as a consequence, brings in its share of awkward and addled essays.

In the 1940s cinema was not widely regarded as a unique art form. While some critics felt that it was akin to theatre, others saw it as related to the novel. Andre Bazin’s critical and theoretical emphasis on the notion of deep focus provided the cinema with a unique element that allowed formal film analysis to be launched, and film studies to follow. In many ways, the study of comics remains stuck in the 1940s, albeit caught between the novel and art history (rather than the theatre). If a formalist framework is required to pull the study of comics from this rut then perhaps it can be found in *The Language of Comics: Word and Image*, edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons. This collection of ten essays addresses a particular formal element peculiar to comics—the word/image interaction on the printed page. As with *Ideology and Comics*, the results are somewhat mixed and not entirely focused. Chapters include essays on pre-twentieth-century comic strips, wordless strips, magazine cartooning, word balloons, and even animation. While more narrowly focused than *Ideology and Comics*, the volume still suffers somewhat from a lack of thematic unity that would make it difficult to assign, for example, as a textbook for a class dealing with formal issues in comics.

Nonetheless, the book does have a number of essays that one would want to assign in any class dealing with the comics form. Catherine Khordoc’s essay on the use of word balloons in the *Astérix* comics of René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo is a very concise and precise overview of this aspect of the comic’s form (David Carrier should take note!). Similarly, Todd Taylor’s work on the ethos of the coyote in the *Road Runner* cartoons is fascinating. Taylor argues that in animation—and by extension, comics—one first judges character as a function of line work in the illustrations. His detailed reading of the representation of Wile E. Coyote as an image, rather than a character, goes a considerable distance towards introducing a new concept into the field of comics scholarship. Similarly, Gene Kannenberg’s reading of the comics production of Chris Ware (*Jimmy Corrigan*), is the type of formal analysis that is all too absent in the work of Carrier or Klock. Kannenberg, a professor of literature, spends considerable time working through the specific ways that Ware uses visual elements such as page design, lettering, and panel flow in order to shape his narratives in a way that is specific to the comics form. Further, his introduction of the concept of the artist’s book to explain Ware’s practice is tremendously productive. These essays succeed precisely in the ways that Klock and Carrier do not, by approaching the field of comics from a particularly comics-oriented perspective, rather than as mere subsidiaries of literary study or art history.

If these essays have a limitation it is an obvious one central to most formalist analyses—a too narrow argument. Few of the essays in *The Language of Comics* attempt to address comics as anything other than formal exercises and the social,

historical, and ideological implications of these works is almost entirely absent from the text. In the worst cases this leads to a sort of insularity of its own kind. R. C. Harvey, for example, spends much of his essay disputing the definition of comics proposed in Scott McCloud's 1993 book *Understanding Comics*. That Harvey disputes McCloud's definition in seemingly all of his published writing makes this essay all the weaker. A broader historical context would similarly help the argument of Marion Perret, who examines comic book versions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Perret's narrow focus fails to fully take into consideration the historical circumstances surrounding the production of, for example, *Classics Illustrated* in the postwar period, whose editors inserted the soliloquies as large blocks of text at the request of educators. As a result her essay is less useful than she might hope. Further, Perret's focus on the skill with which various artists have adapted the soliloquies in that play leave her with nothing more for a conclusion than "some artists are better at this sort of thing than others." Indeed, much of the book ultimately seems to come down to purely aesthetic evaluations of the works, pronouncing some books "good" and others "bad." This seems more a function of criticism than scholarship, although for a field in its infancy, often the two go hand in hand.

Given the fact that comics scholarship is still in its infancy, some may suggest that my assessment of these books has been unnecessarily harsh. This argument is common among comics fandom and even among comics scholars. The argument asserts generally that comics, as a maligned and ignored medium of communication, need to be bolstered by those that are interested in the form. If we are to have courses in comics studies, or departments of comics studies, the medium must be promoted to its detractors. Comics must be celebrated. Indeed, this sentiment is explicitly espoused by Varnum and Gibbons in the introduction to *The Language of Comics*: "Taken together, all these essays celebrate comics" (p. xviii). This is an uncommon attitude for a scholarly volume, but it is so common within comic's culture that it has been given a name: Team Comics. The celebration of comics—or any aspect of culture—has its place in our society. Nonetheless, the place of scholarship is not to celebrate, but to interrogate. It is not enough that books are now being written about comics. Nor will it be enough that good books be written about comics (although that would be nice). Rather, it is incumbent on scholars of this medium to bring to light submerged insights into culture generally that the specific form of comics illuminate. Sadly, for the most part these volumes do not take up that particular challenge, but the brightest essays discussed here hint at the possibility. It will be by developing these leads that comics scholarship will reach maturity.

