

# MORE CRITICAL APPROACHES TO COMICS

Theories and Methods

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# CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xiv
Introduction	1
MATTHEW J. BROWN, RANDY DUNCAN, AND MATTHEW J. SMITH	
<b>PART I</b>	
<b>Viewpoint</b>	<b>5</b>
1 Critical Theory: Celebrating the Rich, Individualistic Superhero	7
MATTHEW P. MCALLISTER AND JOE CRUZ	
2 Postcolonial Theory: Writing and Drawing Back (and Beyond) in <i>Pappa in Afrika</i> and <i>Pappa in Doubt</i>	20
CHRISTOPHE DONY	
3 Critical Race Theory: Applying Critical Race Theory to <i>Black Panther: World of Wakanda</i>	37
PHILLIP LAMARR CUNNINGHAM	
4 Queer Theory: Queer Comics Queering Continuity: <i>The Unstoppable Wasp</i> and the Fight for a Queer Future	48
VALENTINO L. ZULLO	
5 Disability Studies: Disrupting Representation, Representing Disruption	61
KRISTA QUESENBERRY	

CONTENTS

6	Critical Geography: Brotherman and Big City: A Commentary on Superhero Geography	75
	JULIAN C. CHAMBLISS	
7	Utopianism: The Utopia Conundrum in Matt Hawkins and Raffaele Ienco's <i>Symmetry</i>	88
	GRAHAM J. MURPHY	
<b>PART II</b>		
<b>Expression</b>		<b>103</b>
8	New Criticism: Ordered Disorder in Jaime Hernandez' "Flies on the Ceiling"	105
	ROCCO VERSACI	
9	Psychoanalytic Criticism: Visual Pathography as a Means of Constructing Identity: Narrating Illness in David Small's <i>Stitches</i>	119
	EVITA LYKOU	
10	Autographics: Autographics and Miriam Katin's <i>We Are on Our Own</i> and <i>Letting It Go</i>	134
	ANDREW J. KUNKA	
11	Linguistics: Comics Conversations as Data in Swedish Comic Strips	145
	KRISTY BEERS FÄGERSTEN	
12	Philosophical Aesthetics: Comics and/as Philosophical Aesthetics	160
	AARON MESKIN AND ROY T. COOK	
13	Burkean Dramatistic Analysis: An Echo of Diversity: Dramatistic Analysis of Comics	175
	A. CHEREE CARLSON	
<b>PART III</b>		
<b>Relationships</b>		<b>189</b>
14	Adaptation: From <i>Mason &amp; Dixon</i> by Pynchon to <i>Miller &amp; Pynchon</i> by Maurer	191
	DAVID COUGHLAN	

CONTENTS

15	Transmedia Storytelling: Hyperdiegesis, Narrative Braiding, and Memory in <i>Star Wars</i> Comics	206
	WILLIAM PROCTOR	
16	Parasocial Relationship Analysis: “Like Losing a Friend”: Fans’ Emotional Distress After the Loss of a Parasocial Relationship	221
	RANDY DUNCAN	
17	Historiography: Incorporating Comic Books into Historical Analysis: Historiographical Cross-Reference and <i>Wonder Woman</i>	233
	ADAM SHERIF	
18	Bakhtinian Dialogics: Comics Dialogics: Seeing Voices in <i>The Vision</i>	246
	DANIEL PINTI	
19	Scientific Humanities: The Scientific Origins of <i>Wonder Woman</i>	261
	MATTHEW J. BROWN	
	<i>Index</i>	275

# INTRODUCTION

*Matthew J. Brown, Randy Duncan, and Matthew J. Smith*

We (in this case just Randy and Matt) conceived of the original *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (2012) in response to a gap in the literature. It seemed that if other media had methods textbooks that helped students adopt a critical approach to their messages (take, for example, Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck's *Critical Approaches to Television*, 2004) then so should Comics Studies. Others agreed, and the first volume was honored with both the Peter C. Rollins Book Award in Sequential Art/Comics and Animation Studies and a nomination for "Best Educational/Academic Work" in the Will Eisner Comic Book Industry Awards. Due to the success of that book, Routledge pressed us to consider updating it with a second edition. Then, along came Matthew Brown, a fervent adopter of the first volume with the idea of not merely editing what had been published in 2012, but adding a second volume. After all, the methods in the 2012 book were still valid and valuable, and cutting some of them to add just a few new methods would not do justice to the ever-expanding breadth of approaches in Comics Studies. We recognized that Matthew would help bring a fresh perspective to the selection of methods and invited him on to the editorial team for, not a new edition, but a companion volume. We (now Matthew, Randy, and Matt) believe the talented scholars recruited for this project have made *More Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* a worthy companion to the first volume.

The word "critical" appears in the title of this book just as it did in the companion volume. In a couple of reviews and face-to-face encounters, fellow scholars expressed some disappointment that the first volume did not completely live up to its title. While they generally liked, and even used the book, they lamented, "It's not what I thought it was going to be." What they meant was that not all the methods presented were Critical Theory approaches. We were using the old school (pre-Frankfurt School) term "critical" to refer to scholarship that involves description, analysis, and evaluation. In that broad sense of critical analysis, a variety of approaches, including Critical Theory, can be employed in the analysis stage of the process.

However, in retrospect, the first volume of *Critical Approaches to Comics* might have been a bit lacking in actual (Frankfurt School) Critical Theory approaches. Providing broader coverage of the dominant perspective in the humanities is one of the reasons for creating this companion volume. Another reason is to stay abreast of (or at least not far behind) the developments in the robust field of Comics Studies. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of Comics Studies, the literature in the field benefits from a steady infusion of different approaches, with conversation analysis, parasocial relationship theory, and psychoanalytic criticism among those contributions that have come to our attention since the previous volume.

In the first volume we placed a good bit of emphasis on production, from creative decisions to corporate decisions. This volume is more, but not exclusively, focused on reader response and on content analysis. The approaches employed in this volume reveal that the emotional reactions readers have to comics and the meanings they derive from them can be determined by a variety of factors that we have categorized as *Viewpoints*, *Expression*, and *Relationships*.

The approaches under the rubric of *Viewpoints* deal with social perspectives or ideologies, or they involve political or contextual critique. There might be occasional reference to the viewpoint of the author, but, for the most part, the methods in this section suggest how comics can be read through various perceptual filters.

The perceptual filters suggested by most of the approaches presented in the *Viewpoints* section are versions of Critical Theory, an approach that seeks to destabilize the widely accepted and often unquestioned concepts that support the dominance of certain groups and structures, and to emancipate the voices, usually of marginalized and oppressed groups, that have been suppressed by those in power. The members of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt who laid the foundations of Critical Theory, and perhaps even more so their acolytes, took to heart Marx's response to Ludwig Feuerbach that "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx, 1969, 15). Critical Theory is an activist strain of scholarship that seeks to have a liberating influence by calling attention to the power structures that stand in the way of a more just and equitable society, starting from an analysis of class structures and expanding to consider gender, race, colonialism, sexuality, and disability. As a family of approaches to the interpretation of literary and cultural artifacts, including comics texts, Critical Theory looks at the functions of such artifacts in supporting and naturalizing such power structures, as well as their potential for destabilizing them through counter-narratives. Over the past forty years, most humanities scholars have been trained in Critical Theory and have adopted the progressive ideology inherent in the approach

The Viewpoints, Expression, and Relationships sections of this book are contrived rather than naturalistic divisions that do not precisely reflect the practice of scholarship. For instance, while the Viewpoints approaches deal primarily with ideas (content), most of them also take into consideration how ideas are operationalized in comics through formal aspects such as panel juxtapositions and art style. Because the form and content of comics are inseparable, virtually any critical analysis applied to comics will deal, at least peripherally, with expression.

The approaches in the *Expression* section focus more intensely on the formal aspects of comics, including properties of visual form, sequential language, and narrative strategies. Robert C. Harvey, whose comics criticism evinces an appreciation for both clever gag strips and riveting adventure comics, does not totally discount the importance the story itself, but his primary litmus test for a good comic is “when words and pictures blend in mutual dependence to tell a story and thereby convey a meaning that neither the verbal nor the visual can achieve alone without the other” (Harvey, 1996, 4). The approaches in this section deal to some degree with the interaction and inter-animation of the textual and the pictorial, whether that blending be employed in producing a visual pathography, visually representing realistic talk-in-interaction, or depicting trauma in autographics. An analysis of comics form can be truly enlightening only in relation to the content of the comic, and vice versa.

Thus, aspects of both content and form find their way into the third section of the book. However, the approaches in the *Relationships* section put the primary focus on intertextual, contextual, and paratextual relationships between comics artifacts and other texts, media, and artifacts. There have always been some comics that exist in relationships with the source material from which they are adapted or draw inspiration. Increasingly, comics exist in relationships with other mediums that adapt their content or as just one portion of a transmedia story. Sometimes comics content relates to real-world events, including scientific and philosophical thought. Readers can have relationships with publishers, creators, titles, or characters. In the case of long-running comic strips and serialized comic books, readers can have decades-long relationships with fictional universes or characters. Comics always exist within a complex web of relationships, and this is one of the least explored aspects of comics. The approaches described in the Relationships section provide the tools for reducing that deficit of attention, and new ways to understand comics not just as a medium or an art form, but an aspect of the cultural life of many people around the world.

We hope that *More Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* will be a useful resource for professors and graduate students who are already producing comics scholarship, but our primary target audience is the growing number of potential comics scholars who are studying comics in a variety of courses. The book is designed to give students the tools they



need to actively engage in the analysis of comics. These tools are necessary to uncover the layers of meaning, relationships, and functions of comics that move beyond surface readings to scholarship. Each chapter explains and then demonstrates the application of a method or approach that students will be able to follow in their own critical analysis of comics. It is our hope that by applying a variety of perspectives and critical methods to analyzing the comics they find intriguing students will develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the communicative power and cultural significance of comic books, comic strips, and graphic novels.

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