

THE HUMOUR STUDIES DIGEST BOOK REVIEW

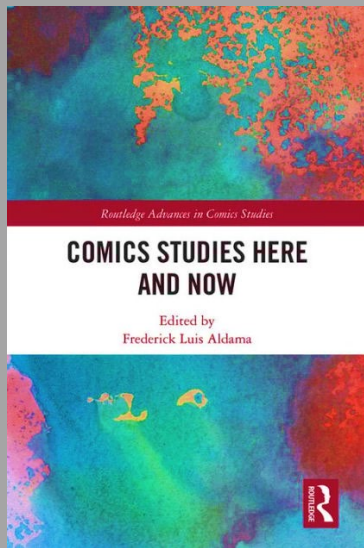
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Frederick Luis Aldama, ed. 2018. *Comics Studies Here and Now*. New York, Abingdon: Routledge. 364+pp. 36 figures. ISBN (Hardback): 9781138498976 ISBN (Paperback): 9780367590703 ISBN (eBook): 9781351015271. DOI: 10.4324/9781351015271.



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If ever a work can claim to have defined a phase in its discipline's history, this book certainly can. As the publisher's blurb states, "*Comics Studies Here and Now* marks the arrival of comics studies scholarship that no longer feels the need to justify itself within or against other fields of study". A triumphant coming-of-age volume, Frederick Luis Aldama's edited collection truly does "stake the flag" of comics studies' arrival as a fully-fledged discipline that "excavates, examines, discusses, and analyzes all aspects that make up the resplendent planetary republic of comics". The latest in the excellent series "Routledge Advances in Comics Studies", edited by Randy Duncan (Henderson State University) and Matthew J. Smith (Radford University), the book joins Philip Smith's *Reading Art Spiegelman*, Jeffrey A. Brown's *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, and Kai Mikkonen's *The Narratology of Comic Art*, all of which underline comics' status as "unique, transformative cultural phenomena". The editor of this volume, Frederick Luis Aldama, is a leading comics studies scholar who is particularly adept at navigating all manner of boundaries, including ethnicity, genre, and more besides. His various positions and publications are testament enough to the 'arrival' of comics studies as a powerful and prestigious field.

Following on from Aldama's very brief, and largely descriptive introduction, 21 chapters, divided into five parts and penned by 26 scholars (alone or in collaboration), speak to the full richness of comics studies. Everything from the very adult and serious works, through to the "deliberately juvenile, potentially offensive satirical comics" are given attention (4). It is particularly refreshing to see well-established

scholars rubbing shoulders with postgraduate students, as well as talented amateurs and poets. Gendered analyses, micro-histories, transnational approaches, and art-historical appreciations speak to the variety of scholarly approaches, but do not detract from the sense of a unity of purpose. The chronological scope of the volume is also impressive; early *Krazy Kat* and *Mutt and Jeff* comics from the 'teens and twenties of the last century feature alongside mid-twentieth-century and 'Gen X'-era comics like *Cathy*, as well as twenty-first-century material like Karen Tei Yamashita's *I Hotel*.

Of particular note are the chapters that themselves destabilise the boundaries of comics studies to explore what I might call epi-comic phenomena (material or practices dependent upon the comic artform, but existing apart from it as merchandise or other products). As a white, middle-class male, who grew up in the 1980s and '90s and witnessed the age of Netflix's *The Toys That Made Us* (2017-2019), I feel compelled to single-out the chapter by Jonathan Alexandratos and Daniel F. Yezbick: "Articulate This! Critical Action Figure Studies and Material Culture". Alexandratos and Yezbick look at "the synergistic union of comics and action figures" (108), in particular the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, drawing on such scholarly authorities as Hegel, Derrida, de Beauvoir and others to treat action figures in a serious and significant fashion. Items originally designed for child's play, and to take the comics and TV franchises beyond the page or screen, have become curated objects in the hands of adult collectors, and thus are, according to Alexandratos and Yezbick, "grievously underscrutinized" texts (114). This chapter is probably the Ur-text of a new branch of material culture scholarship.

For all its epoch-making nature, though, *Comics Studies Here and Now* does still point to how far the field has to go to reach its full potential. While the scholarship is inter-disciplinary, the vast majority of the volume's contributors are academics from English Literature, Comparative Literature, and Communications backgrounds. Of the 26 contributors, 22 are based in the United States, with only one from Asia, and two from Europe. Finally, 9 while many of the chapters treat cartoons and caricature in passing, only one – Cheng Tju Lim's chapter on "Singapore Cartoons in the Anti-Comics Movement of the 1950s and 1960s" – takes them as the chief focus for analysis. This oversight is common in comics studies, which frequently focuses on the literal definition of "sequential art" as a subject of investigation without acknowledging the single panel or the political-editorial form of comic art with nearly enough seriousness. Scholars of cartoons, *karikatur*, and *l'image satirique* may find themselves still only marginally "at home" in the now-established field of comics studies, just as they potter around the margins of the disciplines of History, Literature, Art History, and the like.

There is also a somewhat disappointing lack of visual comic material in the volume. This points to a conceptual issue that affects nearly all the chapters: the desire to treat comics (and material culture) purely as "texts". The hegemonic application of interpretations native to literary and language studies tends to crowd-out other – more challenging – ways of interpreting these cultural artefacts on their own terms. This is not entirely the fault of the editor or the contributors, of course. Copyright legislation – particularly in the neoliberal home context of the USA – make the use and re-use of comic art extremely expensive and difficult, necessitating some kind of reform

that does not privilege market forces in instances where the pure pursuit of new knowledge, not profit, is the prime motive. It would seem therefore that scholars, publishers and funding bodies – as well as archives and artists – have a long way to go in terms of re-shaping approaches to studying image/text that is more appropriate to its complexities.

To further blur the disciplinary and generic boundaries, *Comics Studies Here and Now* therefore reminds me of the Beatles' self-titled "White Album" (1968): the sheer richness, variety, and sophistication of the contents of the book make this a classic volume that will endure long beyond the 'here and now' of the title. However, it is just as valuable for being a portfolio packed with rough diamonds and unfinished pieces that promise even more to come (perhaps an *Abbey Road* or *Let It Be*). It draws a line, certainly. But there is a lot more white space to fill on the other side of that line.

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Richard Scully, FRHistS, is Associate Professor in Modern European History at the UNE (Armidale, Australia). Richard has maintained a deep interest in the history and development of political cartoons and graphic satire throughout his career. Author of *Eminent Victorian Cartoonists* (2018) and *British Images of Germany: Admiration, Antagonism & Ambivalence, 1860-1914* (2012), he has served on the editorial board of the International Journal of Comic Art and the *comité de lecture* of *Ridiculosa* since 2013. Richard has also co-edited *Drawing the Line: Using Cartoons as Historical Evidence* (2009) with Marian Quartly; and *Comic Empires: Imperialism in Cartoons, Caricature, and Sarirical Art* (2020) with Andrekos Varnava. His work has appeared in *German Studies Review*, the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *European Comic Art*, and *Victorian Periodicals Review*.