2008 Pilgrim Award

Adam Frisch

British SF critic and writer Gwyneth Jones has been selected as the recipient of this year's SFRA Pilgrim Award. She joins an illustrious set of former Pilgrim winners whose criticism has continually demonstrated science fiction's relevance to our contemporary world, its problems, and its potential.

2008 Pioneer Award

Lisa Yaszek

As chair of the Pioneer Award Committee, I'm pleased to announce that the 2008 Pioneer Award goes to Sherryl Vint for her outstanding essay in the March 2007 issue of *Mosaic* entitled "Speciesism and Species Being in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" As we noted in our message to SFRA President Adam Frisch: "The committee was extremely impressed with both the originality of [Vint's] textual readings in this essay ...[and] [her] ability to show readers how SF authors (and scholars!) engage a wide range of scientific, social, and philosophical issues ranging from meditations on classical Cartesian selfhood to the impact of speciesism on new forms of technocultural subjectivity. We very much look forward to reading more of [Vint's] work in the future."

Please join me in congratulating Sherryl, who will be in attendance at SFRA 2008 in Lawrence, Kansas.

Feature Article: 101

Comics Studies 101

Joe Sutliff Sanders

One of the most cherished announcements in introductions to monographs of comics scholarship is that comics scholarship has finally arrived, that at long last, people are talking about comics. Such a sentiment dates back at least thirty years and is obviously not perfectly accurate. Comics studies today is a field with multiple international conferences and journals, scores of articles, many excellent (and many more less than excellent) monographs, and one remarkable university press that has carved out a market identity partly thanks to its dedication to quality scholarship on comics. This is a robust field with its own terminology, ideological camps, and venues. In this article, I provide an introduction to the shape of the field with an eye toward revealing good opportunities for an interested but uninitiated researcher to make an entrance.

What Is a Graphic Novel?

The most important step in an introduction to comics studies is a definition of the terms that the field has settled on. First, the umbrella term: *comics* is the term used to refer to graphic novels, comic books, comic strips, one-panel illustrations intended to stand on their own, and the immediately surrounding forms of expressing (including, for example, safety instructions on commercial airlines). *Comics* is the one term that can mean all the others, each of which refers to a specific subset of the broader field.

The other key terms to the field are best understood by their historical links. One-panel illustrations have been used for centuries to make satirical commentary, and it is through them that fundamental tools of comics—for example, the word balloons that enable dialog in comics—were popularized. In nineteenth-century America, editors caught up in the newspaper wars found that short stories involving a sequence of these illustrations—what we would now recognize as "comic strips," the often four-panel form on the comics page of major newspapers—could increase sales enormously, thus ushering in an age of comics in a popular form that has yet to abate. For the sake of simplicity, here, the term *comic strips* tends to refer to these short, serial narratives, even if they have only one panel.

Publishers further found that they could use the same materials they had originally printed as comic strips to generate another stream of revenue if they pasted those strips together and reprinted them in book form. These cheap, magazine-format books came to be known as *comic books,* and although today they almost invariably feature original content (thus the newest issue of *Detective Comics* will feature an original story that takes up the entire content of the book, rather than several strips reprinted from original appearances in newspapers), their basic form has remained the same. Today, comic books are most easily recognizable because of their format: their spines have staples, and their pages (usually around thirty-two per book) are printed in vertical rectangles.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a new form of comics began appearing, spawning the term *graphic novel*. Today, this term tends to be reserved for book-length comics, and it can mean either a book composed of material reprinted from magazine-style comic books or original material that fills the book from beginning to end. The industry originally differentiated between book-length compilations of reprinted comics by calling them *trade paperbacks,* an unimaginative if perfectly accurate name, keeping the term *graphic novel* for original-content books, but that distinction has grown lamentably rare. *Graphic novels* is also the term currently used to refer to reprints of comic strips, such as in the case of the handsome two-volume compilation of the entire run of *Calvin and Hobbes.* Thus, just as a comic book can best be identified by its similarity to a magazine, with staples in the spine and relatively few pages, *graphic novel* now refers to a square-bound comic of any length, with original content or not.

There is still a great deal of grumbling about the term *graphic novel.* People outside the field tend to assume the term refers to a book containing something particularly violent or racy. Scholars who champion autobiographical comics point out that, for example, a book about the author's father's experience during the Holocaust should no more be called a novel than any other

book about true events. And most books published in this format are reprints of comic books published separately, meaning that graphic novels are often better understood as graphic story arcs. Regardless, the name seems to have stuck.

What Is the Machinery of Comics?

Comics tend to use a sequence of still images, thin lines between those images, and a set of iconic tools to imply sound and movement. Each of these still images is called a *panel*. Panels are usually separated from one another by a thin line called a *border,* a nearly invisible element of comics art that has enormous artistic potential, since its thickness can imply mood, its angle can imply genre, its distance from the next border can imply time, and its absence can imply sublimity. Within panels, characters generally speak to each other in word balloons (rounded objects with tails pointing to the mouths of the speakers), while narrators or off-scene characters speak in captions (small fields of text enclosed in square-edged boxes).

Fields of Study: Formalism

The eloquence of the visual elements of comics has inspired a major concentration within the field of comics studies. Charles Hatfield, in his 2006 survey of comics scholarship, makes the claim that formalism returned to the forefront of comics studies after the publication of the massively influential *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud's 1993 book-length comic book both examining and portraying the formal principles of comic art. Hatfield is very likely correct, considering the field's ongoing interest in the nuts and bolts of how comics work. Robert C. Harvey's 1996 *The Art of the Comic Book,* for example, insists that the study of comics may include traditional literary tools for analysis of, for example, plot, character, and theme, but it must include a careful reading of how the visual dimensions of the text perform their work. A similar strategy underlying Hatfield's own excellent work on comics can be detected in the subtitle to his 2005 book, *Alternative Comics: an Emerging Literature.* Here, Hatfield thinks through the underground comics scene in terms of genre and international borrowings, claiming that "alternative comics invited a new formalism" (x). *Alternative Comics* engages fully with the historical and cultural milieu that helped produce the alternative comics scene, but the book is primarily a close reading enabled by keen observations of how comics work. Even more recent is Douglas Wolk's *Reading Comics* (2007), which explores the metaphors of comics. For each of these scholars, the machinery of comics is a primary concern.

Children and Comics

Often when critics have talked about comics, they have felt a strong need to distance their subject from literature for children, often using the tiresome cliché that comics are not just for children anymore. There is, however, a great deal of excellent work on comics and children, and there is room for much more. Hatfield (2006) makes this point compellingly, offering a thorough reading of the field for scholars interested in pursuing questions of children and childhood through comics. Similarly, Stephen Cary speaks for an important segment of the field in his book *Going Graphic: Comics at Work in the Multilingual Classroom*

(2004), a study of how comics can be used in service of teaching literacy. A recent meeting of the annual academic conference on comics at the University of Florida focused on the intersection of childhood and comics, as did issue 3.3 of the online journal *ImageTexT*. This area of the field is newly revitalized and seems ripe for exploration.

When the Fans Become the Subject

Another promising line of inquiry in comics scholarship is fan studies, a burgeoning field in many areas of academia. Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (2000) works as the cultural study of the Batman phenomenon it clearly intends to be, but it also opens for comics scholarship some important insights on how a fan community can manufacture its own history. By reading closely the aspects of Batman that fans have clung to, as well as reading the battles between fans and merchandising media, Brooker lays the groundwork for exploring a dialectical relationship between fans and comics. Too, Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (2001) works primarily as a study of how race, creativity, and the economics of comics work, but it is perhaps most valuable for its insights on how the fan culture engaged with questions of ethnicity and comics during the brief life of a comic book company that fans perceived to define itself according to race. As with those of Brooker's text, the fans in Brown's study reveal a thriving culture in which difficult questions of market and identity can be tested.

History in and through Comics

Comics have also benefited from a series of historical treatments. For the most part, these have consisted of studies about the history of comics itself. Women in comics are a particular field of interest, as in Maurice Horn's *Women in the Comics* (1977) and books by Trina Robbins, including *From Girls to Grrrlz* (1999), which traces how the comic book market abandoned a girl readership. Others attempt to give a historical explanation for the context of a certain kind of comics, as Roger Sabin does in his book on comics for adult readers (1993). Joseph Witek provides a close reading of autobiographical comics in his book *The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (1989), but his real goal is the historical situation of the autobiographical movement in the history of comics.

More broadly useful are books that use comics to read history. Best known of these titles is Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: the Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001), a wonderfully thorough analysis of how certain kinds of comics over the decades corresponded with changes in American youth culture.

Theory and Comics

There has been very little application of critical theory to comic books. Geoff Klock's *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why* (2002) uses psychoanalytic theory to explain the power of superhero comics, but it seems to be the exception rather than the rule. A new annual journal, *Mechademia*, makes some strides in filling the void with exceptional articles (some in translation) using theoretically informed analysis to discuss—in the example of

the recent second volume—the theme of networks of desire. No theoretical angle seems out of bounds for the journal, although there is a clear sense that purely formal approaches are not as interesting as historical, cultural, or theoretical readings. The journal focuses on Asian (primarily Japanese) comics as well as anime and the other art forms relevant to comics in Southeast Asia.

Talking about the Contexts in which Comics Work

By far the most common form of comics scholarship, and the one exception to the general absence of critical theory in comics scholarship, is cultural studies. It is not surprising that comics studies have thrived when performed from a cultural studies perspective. Cultural studies' emphasis on how marginal texts coalesce to nudge and be nudged by a broader culture allows readers to skip over the question of formal quality entirely and go right to a study of what the books mean, what they are trying to achieve, and whether they have achieved those goals.

Comics studies has provided a great deal of useful insight on how and why cultures work the way they do. Alphons Silbermann and H. D. Dyroff's edited collection, *Comics and Visual Culture* (1986), includes essays on comics in ten different countries, each essay driven by excellent research and hard data on how the economics of popular culture work. Martin Baker has produced two strong books on comics in Britain, including one on the public reaction to horror comics in the mid-twentieth century (1984) and another on the way ideology is deployed in the public space to justify regulation of popular media (1989); both books, it should be noted, also have implications for the study of children and comics. Another example is M. Thomas Inge's 1990 *Comics as Culture*, which uses close reading and insights on the formal qualities of comics to explain how "comics serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores" (xi).

Two books expand this kind of inquiry to the use of comics in non-Anglophone cultures. First, Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas's *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture (1994) provides a provocative look at how comics themselves c*an represent Occidental depravity to Muslim cultures and how the unique social structures of the Arab world can force new meanings from familiar comics icons. Anne Rubenstein's *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation* (1998) shows how "The story of comic books, their readers, their producers, their critics, and their relationship to the Mexican state offers an excellent window into…cultural processes" (6). It is further useful as a brand of fan studies, since it is actively interested in the productively subversive readings fans insisted on making of their comics in postrevolutionary Mexico.

Comics are well situated to talk about the pulse of a culture, and it is therefore likely that this will continue to be the main thrust of comics scholarship for some time to come.

Where Is This Conversation Being Held?

There is a long tradition in comics criticism of useful insights from sources less formal than obviously academic journals. The *Comics Journal*, for example, is a mainstay in the comics community with no academic pretensions, and it continues to provide strong readings of comics and the comics industry. In the tradition of the journal, nonacademic presses have produced thoughtful insights on the field. To this end, for example, Fantagraphics—a publisher better known for printing the work of underground comics legends—has published books such as *Reading the Funnies* (2001) and *The Sandman Papers* (2006). As the editor of the latter says in his introduction, his advice to contributors "encouraged direct, non-jargony writing" (viii). With the continued publication of the *Comics Journal* and new books from the likes of Fantagraphics, it is likely that an important part of the discourse on comics will continue to take place outside strictly academic borders.

But there are new and exciting venues for comics scholarship that are more immediately recognizable as academic. A handful of journals with an academic pedigree focus on comics scholarship, including *Mechademia*, mentioned above, as well as *ImageTexT, Image [&] Narrative*, and the *International Journal of Comic Art*. Other journals eagerly consider work on comics, including *Extrapolation, Foundation*, *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, *Journal of Popular Culture*, and *Science Fiction Studies*.

One of the most significant places for the conversation in comics studies is the University Press of Mississippi. M. Thomas Inge has helped guide the selection of excellent works of criticism for the press, which continues to produce crucial monographs. Additionally, the press has an impressive line of compilations of interviews with important creators, including Art Spiegelman, Charles Schulz, and Carl Barks.

What Still Needs to Be Done?

Comics studies is, as I said in my opening, already robust and thriving. However, there are areas within the field that clearly need development. From my comments in the preceding categories, some of those areas will already be evident: a recapturing of the intersection of children and comics, more and broader analyses of what comics and fans have meant to each other, historical research into critical moments of comics history, and a more robust use of critical theory could all improve the conversation already in place.

Further, although there are a good number of works on women in comics, there are few works on the women who have helped produce comics. Neil Gaiman tells stories of the importance of a female executive at DC, for example, who made a point of drawing British talent into American comics, leading directly to some of the best superhero comics the field has seen. Louise Simonson has worked on comics for decades, as have Gail Simone and Trina Robbins. Phoebe Gloeckner has published an important collection of her own underground comics, perhaps providing an alternate history to the story of alternative comics previously told. And very recently, Alison Bechdel won enormous acclaim for her autobiographical graphic novel after a long career writing one of the only widely printed comic strips about lesbians. But there has been very little work making figures such as these central to the history of comics.

A typical stumbling block for all criticism that has had especially profound consequences for the study of comics is that scholars in the field have a tendency to theorize comics through

the narrow examples of only what they like the best, arguing implicitly and often explicitly that other comics—comics that don't fit the theories being tested—are not important enough to bring to the center of analysis. The formalists are the best at surmounting this divide, but other comics studies have had little success addressing a truly inclusive cross section of the field.

In addition, until very recently, there has been too little work on comics outside the English-speaking world. Japanese comics—manga—have received some attention and seem to be catching up more quickly than other nationalities, but it is often difficult to find work on Korean or even French comics.

Conclusion

Comics studies has been an active field for long enough to boast its own venues and debates. The work remaining to be done is still vast, but the discourse is enthusiastic and increasingly theorized. Come join the fun.
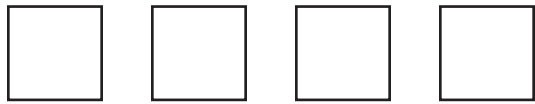
Feature Article: One Course

PKD Lit and Film

Shelley Rodrigo

The Course

I have taken my ENH 255 Contemporary American Literature and Film class, which I teach at Mesa Community College, Mesa, Arizona, and solely focused it on the works of Philip K. Dick (PKD) and the films adapted from those works. As a 200-level course, the general course outcomes relate to teaching general literary and film analysis skills; the course also introduces issues related to adaptation.

The Context

This is not your average community college film and literature course! Besides narrowing the focus of a contemporary American literature and film class to just the works of PKD, this class is the humanities course taught in our college's Think Big program. Caterpillar XXX has local Caterpillar dealers pair up with community colleges, where students learn to work on Caterpillar machinery and earn a two-year associate degree. The classes are made up solely of the Think Big students and are taught in the local Caterpillar dealer's training facility. This is my third year teaching both the technical writing and humanities courses for these students. By the time these students are in my humanities class, I've worked with them once before, and they've been together for over a year and half. They are also eight weeks away from graduation. Not only could they not care less about the humanities, but they also have no idea about how or why the humanities are important to their future career of fixing Cater-

pillar machines.

This course is heavily adapted for this student population. First, I have to grab and hold their attention for eight weeks. The first two times I taught the course, I themed it on cars; however, I figured science fiction with film adaptations with lots of SBU (stuff blowing up) might work just as well. Second, I have to keep the written texts short. I'm not saying these guys (yes, they are all guys) can't read; however, they don't want to read and when forced to do so are not very fast readers; they get overwhelmed and discouraged easily. It works out nicely that with as many novel-length works PKD wrote, most of the film adaptations are based on short stories. Finally, it helps to have some built-in humor to work with these students. I'm sure you can imagine the Beavis and Butt-head type sounds that came from the class the first day when I said we would be "focusing on Dick" and at times when I say, "So, what are the 'Dickian' elements in this text?"

The Philosophy

I want these humanities classes to get the students thinking about how our culture thinks about and depicts technology. I also want them to consider human interaction with different technologies, particularly because the students will be working professionally with machinery. With the critical eye PKD brings to technological advancements, I'm still able to make this connection to their future professional identities. I also want them to learn basic textual analysis skills, which I find are easier to learn when different media (film and written texts) are being compared.

The Texts

With the exception of *A Scanner Darkly,* I require reading and viewing of all PKD works that have been adapted to English-language films with reference back to the original text.
- "The Golden Man" and *Next* (2007)
- "Second Variety" and *Screamers* (1995)
- "Paycheck" and *Paycheck* (2003)
- "Impostor" and *Impostor* (2001)
- "We Can Remember it for You Wholesale" and *Total Recall* (1990)
- "The Minority Report" and *Minority Report* (2002)
- *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep,* the original American theatrical release of *Blade Runner* (1982), and the 1991 Director's Cut of *Blade Runner*

The choices are primarily based on which PKD texts have been adapted; however, I also wanted to focus on the works that dealt with themes about technology and humanity—*A Scanner Darkly* is not as directly focused on these subjects (although it is obviously focused on questions of reality, a major PKD theme that we do discuss). One of the reasons I like PKD's works for a literature and film class is that there are some films that parallel closely the story, imagery, and themes from PKD's original works and others that diverge greatly from his original texts. This diversity in adaptation facilitates rich discussion about the hows and whys of adapting a written text to film.