

# CLOSURE

Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung

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## On the Edge of Comics Criticism

*On the Edge of the Panel: Essays on Comics Criticism* reviewed by Benoît Crucifix

Building on a 2011 international conference held at the Universidad de Alcalá in Spain, *On the Edge of the Panel* brings together a rich and diverse set of English- and Spanish-language comics scholarship. It opens up a productive dialogue between various traditions of comics studies, both in terms of objects and theories, exploring the kind of international and transnational work that comics scholars have been calling for.

One of the strengths of *On the Edge of the Panel* is to offer a global audience a glimpse into the vibrant field of Spanish-language comics studies, with original contributions in English. Also important in this regard is the inclusion of texts in Spanish, affirming the vitality of comics scholarship in other languages, even though one of the inevitable downsides of such a bilingual publication is perhaps the imbalance between the majority of Anglophone essays and the occasional chapters written in Spanish.

*On the Edge* is divided into three parts, roughly organized according to methodology and moving from historical approaches through formal analyzes of specific techniques, to conclude with close-readings of particular works and authors. The historical chapters make a solid contribution to the diversity that the book seeks to advance, by interrogating a variety of objects and traditions – from British seventeenth and eighteenth century prints to early Spanish comics and Japanese manga. The articles follow in the footsteps of David Kunzle's (1973) pioneering work, subtly pushing ›origins‹ further back while questioning the dominant narrative of Rodolphe Töpffer as the ›father‹ of comics. The contributors navigate these muddy waters, where boundaries between caricature, engraving, print, and indeed ›comics‹, are blurred, with great caution, without eschewing the thorny issue of definition. The authors offer fascinating analyses of ›old‹ works, such as the late sixteenth-century visual narratives by Francis Barlow or the *Bibliae Pauperum* of the Middle Ages, through the lens of what we have come to identify as comics, without necessarily reclaiming them *as comics*. In this sense, the contributors are careful in their use of definitions. Yet, the continuing emphasis on distinguishing features of comics, such as speech balloon, sequence and narrative, remains at times imbued with a teleological perspective that Thierry Smolderen has warned comics historians against with the motto »the historian shouldn't explain the history of the form on the basis of its present state, but explain the present state of the form on the basis of its history« (2011, 1). The dominant definitions of comics as *sequential* and *narrative* loom large over these readings of comics history. At their best, however, the chapters, like Roberto Bartual's formal analysis of sixteenth-century graphic narratives and Nicolas Theisen's theoretical proposition based on Kitazawa Rakuten's work, are cautious to avoid the teleological trappings and offer rich, granular, contextual readings that duly historicize the

objects, filling in gaps in comics historiography and challenging naturalized conventions of comics.

The second part is more heterogeneous in its discourse and references, encompassing mostly formal-theoretical arguments, reading through corpora of varying scale. José Manuel Trabado, for instance, reads through Michael Rosen's and Quentin Blake's *Sad Book*, Pascal Girard's *Nicolas*, Aude Picault's *Papa*, and Simone Lia's *Fluffy* to reflect on the formal convergence between the picture book and the graphic novel, analyzing the operating contrast between the children's book graphics and intended adult readership. Daniel Gómez Salamanca and Josep Rom Rodríguez examine the place of caricature in comics from a more theoretical perspective, Mark McHarry studies the genre of boy's love manga, while Iván Pintor surveys historical comics to investigate the place of death and memory in the formal apparatus of comics. Using a wide transnational corpus, Álvaro Nofuentes' chapter offers an interesting complement as well as fresh perspectives for the concept of »graphic hybridization« that has been taking stock in comics studies thanks to Smolderen (2014) and Thierry Groensteen (2014) and of course Álvaro Nofuentes's (2011) own master thesis. Lastly, Joe Sutliff Sanders' excellent chapter makes a crucial contribution on digital comics by focusing on comics for mobile devices and close-reading the comixology-distributed but creator-owned *Valentine*. In this way Sanders shows how comics for mobile devices »promise [...] to revise what comics scholars have used to theorize comics« (175), renegotiating the conventional difference between comics and film through the integration of »mobile« images.

The last part of the book collects a series of close-readings on specific comics artists, ranging from »canonical« authors like Daniel Clowes, Frank Miller, or Art Spiegelman to more obscure material like Juaco Vizueté's *El resentido*. In the case of the former, given that some of the works already occupy significant shelf space on the comics studies rack, the authors do not always succeed in providing fresh perspectives into works as Seth's *It's a Good Life If You Don't Weaken* and Spiegelman's *Maus*, whereby the analyzes inevitably fall short because of the lack of engagement with that preexistent discourse. Nonetheless, other pieces precisely offer key insights into the work of established authors, such as Greice Schneider's reading of boredom in the comics of Daniel Clowes, which further fleshes out her masterful *What Happens When Nothing Happens* (2016), or Barbara Uhlig's detailed contextual analysis of the works of Andrea Pazienza and Lorenzo Mattotti, which highlights the impact of the 1977 student riots in Italy on magazines as *Frigidaire* and *Valvoline*.

All in all, the book thus brings together a diverse host of contributions, showing the vitality of English- and Spanish-language comics scholarship. This diversity, however, has its limitations: the nature, quality and size of the articles strongly vary, and the editorial apparatus does not succeed in giving the book a clearer focus. As such, the collection might reflect the vibrant heterogeneity of comics studies, but it does little to advance a specific angle or subject. In this way, *On the Edge of the Panel* seems to struggle with the difficult positioning of comics studies, where the frail red thread in the book is »simply« comics. It might contain rich and varied essays, but in an increasingly crowded market for comics scholarship, this lack of focus is an important hurdle to the circulation and visibility of these essays. For comics studies as a field to grow, one does not only need strong individual contributions, but mostly to demonstrate the ability to work collectively on specific questions.

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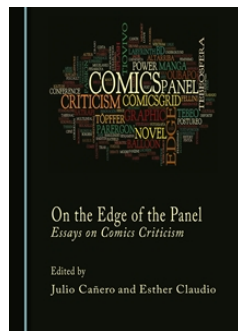
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