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Delight at the New: A Review of *Comics and Modernism: History, Form, and Culture*

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This article is a review of the comics studies collection Comics and Modernism: History, Form, and Culture (2024), edited by Jonathan Najarian. The collection features a range of articles by comics scholars on the social, cultural and aesthetic relationships between comics and avant-garde art practice- specifically modernist art practice.

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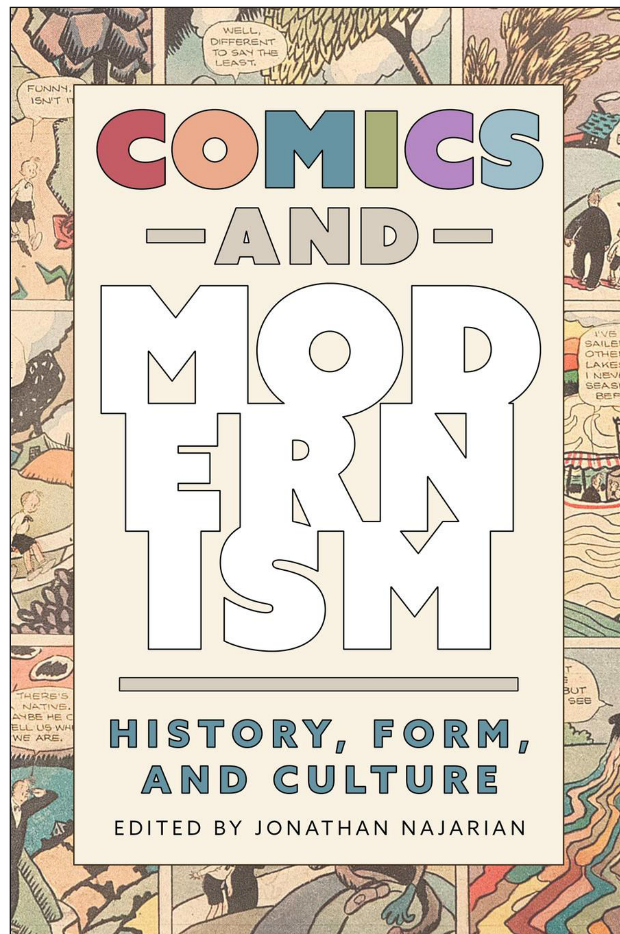

Figure 1: Cover of Comics and Modernism: History, Form and Culture, edited by Jonathan Najarian. © University of Mississippi Press, 2024.

There are a number of touchstones regarding comics' relationship to modernism that recur throughout this volume, one being the High/Low exhibition curated by Adam Gopnik and Kirk Varnedoe for MOMA in 1990. In a chapter on comics in the associated book they examined the work of a range of strip artists that, "in its aggressive, individual stylization, its eccentric graphic simplification- its entra-nce into worlds of fantasy that are touched by an undertow of strangeness, disorder, or unease- seems to belong to the modern tradition" (Gopnik and Varnedoe 1990: 154). A lot of critical ground has been covered since then- indeed this is the period that has seen the growth and consolidation of the field of Comics Studies itself. One of the functions of Comics and Modernism: History, Form and Culture, edited by Jonathan Najarian (**Figure 1**), then, is to map out the various ways in which the intersection of comics and modernism has been understood and theorised thus far (which is certainly not to deny the freshness of so much of what is contained here). It also succeeds amply in pointing towards new directions for comics scholars, in a series of essays characterised by a dynamic and wide-ranging interdisciplinarity, and in some cases wonderfully surprising and insightful novelty. In his introduction to the book, Jonathan Najarian notes the timeliness of the collection, drawing, as it does, on relatively new scholarly approaches evident in both New Modernist Studies and Comics Studies (Najarian 2024a:7). It is very refreshing to see, in addition to an openness around the conceptualizing of modernism(s), a broad understanding of comics culture that takes in, for example, gag cartooning and popular illustration, as well as relationships to a range of other

twentieth century media that includes photography, advertising, cinema, television, and literature. This breadth of inquiry is entirely appropriate to a volume that seeks to elucidate the confluence of two areas that are themselves characterised by fragmentation and diffusion.

Matthew Levay, in his chapter on anachronistic comics, cites Jared Gardner's situating of comics as "the first and arguably most important of the new vernacular modernisms" (Gardner 2012: 7; Levay 2024: 287), and indeed, like cinema and psychoanalysis, comics and modernism share certain circumstances of birth, subsequently coming of age in response to the same forces of social, political and cultural change. Noa Saunders employs the notion of a 'sensorium' to evoke the sensations and emotional states that emerge, often unnoticed, in response to the everyday experience of urban modernity, and which informed the metropolitan surrealism of Winsor McCay's *Little Nemo* series (Saunders 2024). The modern comic strip emerged in the late nineteenth century, out of a confluence of technological advances in printing, communications networks, commodity culture, and mass readerships. The new medium, as it evolved in the US, the UK, and elsewhere, was as much a feature of modernity as was the Eiffel Tower or the light bulb, and indeed one of the key structuring principals of this collection is the fact that a whole range of artists- popular cartoonists and high-minded modernists alike- were essentially responding to the same stimuli and attempting to make sense of the same chaos. Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, (No. 2)* (Duchamp 1912) is alluded to by several of the writers here and is singled out by Najarian as exemplary of the ways in which modernist artists trod paths that had for some time been familiar to comic strip artists of the period. Of course, famously, comics' modernist credentials received a tip of the hat early on from central figures such as Joyce, Eliot, and Picasso, and there is a sense in many of these chapters in which comics are not being reclaimed for modernism, so much as that the relationship was firmly established from the beginning. In many respects, this volume does for comics what Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands* (Leslie 2002) did for animation, locating the progressive and subversive potentials inherent in a popular graphic form, mapping its various common causes with the *avant-garde*, and spiritedly working to dismantle established boundaries and oppositions.

Another touchstone that necessarily features in several articles is The Armory Show of 1913 (The Armory Show 1913), the conventionally acknowledged site of modernism's arrival in America, and the occasion of significant overlap between the worlds of *avant-garde* art and popular comics, in that a number of quite high-profile cartoonists exhibited paintings at it. These included prolific comic artists like Rudolph Dirks and Gus Mager, as well as Walt Kuhn, one of the exhibition's organizers, who

had himself contributed strips and cartoons to the newspapers' funny pages. The exhibition also featured at least one artist who was contributing to U.K. comics at the time, though he doesn't get a mention here- the Irish painter and cartoonist Jack B. Yeats, someone who personally embodied, through his multiple areas of practice, this relationship between the popular graphic arts and the more elevated reaches of expressionist modernism. Katherine Roeder also notes the number of cartoons and strips that appeared in the Show's wake which parodied and satirised the art that was exhibited there, pointing out that, in the case of a cartoon by McCay for example, the parodies of modern art were often not very far removed from the cartoonists' own approach to their medium (Roeder 2024: 33). The apparent ambivalence towards modern art on the part of contemporary cartoonists may well relate, it is suggested, to a proprietary sense of having originated many of the common formal and stylistic approaches. At the same time, by re-presenting *avant-garde* work in the familiar form of newspaper cartoons, these artists contributed to the popularization and de-mystification of modern art for mass audiences in the U.S. Cubism, for example, would inform many areas of popular visual culture from children's book illustration to the fashion industry, and we should therefore not be at all surprised to see it reflected in the cartoons and strips of the day.

David M. Ball emphasises the historiographical benefits to be derived from examining comics and modernist art in parallel to each other, complicating the discourse of 'newness' in relation to both and, particularly in the light of more recent scholarship, recognizing antecedents and formal interrelationships (Ball 2024). While a small criticism of the collection might be that the analytical traffic is largely one-way, in that we get little on comics' contribution to modernist work in other media, Ball makes the important point that while modernism has been of interest to comics scholars, and has long been central to the celebration of Herriman's *Krazy Kat* for example, the reverse is not necessarily the case, as the absence of comics from literary modernist anthologies attests. While it is true that there are some examples of high-level modernists professing a love for the medium, it was more common for artists and critics- particularly critics- to designate comics as a "defining point of contrast, taking them as the detritus of a degraded commercial culture in opposition to modernist experimentation and expression," as Jackson Ayres has noted elsewhere (Ayres 2016: 111). Following Bart Beaty, whose *Comics Versus Art* is an important precursor to the present volume (Beaty 2012), Glen Willmott begins by focusing on the different institutional habits and expectations associated with the comics world and the art world, arguing that they prompt entirely different forms of engagement (Willmott 2024). He goes on to spend some time satisfyingly unpacking the specific

ways that *style* manifests in comic art: style in the service- not of difficulty or obscurity- but of accessibility and 'abandon'. "[A]ll that is difficult melts into style," he suggests (Wilmott 2024: 29), with regard to the ways we readers allow ourselves to be drawn into cartoon worlds.

The volume is very much focused on American iterations of modernism (and comics) and, with some exceptions, we get little on developments in European art movements during the twentieth century or the evolution of the comic strip form in, say, France or Germany. This concentration is not necessarily a flaw, but rather points to the potential scope of this territory, Najarian being clear from the start that there are inevitable gaps- a number of which, including the work of key figures like Lyonel Feininger, are specified early on (Najarian 2024a:9). One notable exception to this Europe-shaped lacuna is Daniel Worden's focus on relationships between the work of Italian futurists such as Marinetti and Balla, and the celebration in comics, from Superman to the X Men, of physical and technological transformation (Worden 2024). His contribution contains an extended unpacking of Joe Shuster's depiction of Superman on the cover of *Action Comics* #1 as an exemplary case of popular modernism in comics, arguing that "futurism as an aesthetic style had entered the popular lexicon of visual iconography" and thus readily appealed to the mass readerships that took to these publications with such relish in the 1930s and 40s. Louise Kane does allude to British comics- *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* specifically- in a chapter outlining some of the shared history of the comic and the magazine (Kane 2024: 132). She explores the grey definitional area in relation to both comics and magazines, particularly during the messy early decades of their evolution, prior to the more general compartmentalization, specialization, and differentiation of readerships that would characterise both forms throughout the twentieth century.

Nick Sturm's chapter sets out to problematise the historiographical leap conventionally made from *Mad* magazine in the 1950s to the underground comix of the late 1960s, by examining overlaps between modernist literary culture, small press publishing, and both popular and countercultural comics (Sturm 2024). Various elements associated with the comics of Crumb, Wilson, and others, including parody, satire and the breaking of sexual taboos, are central to the formally experimental comics that Joe Brainard had produced some years earlier in an entirely different context. Sturm also notes the importance of a collaborative and cooperative community as central both to the work of the New York School, with which Brainard was associated, and the underground comix movement, as well as emphasizing the role of facilitators like the poet Charley Plymell, a key figure at the nexus of comics and the San Francisco literary scene.

Jean Lee Cole gives us critical overviews of the careers of four women cartoonists- Marjorie Organ (another contributor to The Armory Show), Nell Brinkley, Kate Carew, and Djuna Barnes- all of whom made substantial contributions to periodical and newspaper media during the first half of the twentieth century, cataloging American social and cultural life in comic strips and illustrations that were both formally innovative and extremely popular (Cole 2024). Cole argues that all four used "caricature, exaggeration, and depictions of the grotesque and even the repulsive to elicit sympathetic, common feeling" (Cole 2024: 105), and to interrogate norms of class, gender and race. Similarly, Clémence Sfadj argues for the reassessment of the African American cartoonist Jackie Ormes, whose work, it is argued, (where it hasn't been overlooked by scholars of both modernism and comics) has been misunderstood and underestimated (Sfadj 2024). Sfadj emphasises the important role played by African American newspapers, also noting their links to modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Ormes' most successful creation, Torchy Brown, is exemplary in this regard, as a young African American woman located in what was for many the entirely new and unfamiliar context of contemporary urban life in the Northern United States. In a consistently insightful opening up of under-examined areas in print media and entertainment culture, Scott Bukatman considers female readerships, the functions of realist style, and the affective importance of illustrative detail (Bukatman 2024). Casting a wide net, the article locates evidence of how consumers saw themselves- their dreams and aspirations as well as their lived reality- reflected in a range of mid-century media, at one point productively comparing an illustrated airline advertisement to the incredible record cover art of the *Music for Gracious Living: Barbecue* LP. Bukatman forges refreshingly novel connections between television soap operas, fashion magazines, popular cinema, and illustration, demonstrating how romance comics in particular engaged with modernity, plugged directly into a familiar world of commodities, fashion, and lifestyle.

Andrei Molotiu celebrates the medium's self-critical ability to interrogate its own foundations and functions, which he regards as a quality inherent to both comics and modernist art- a quality that also chimes with Greenberg's claims regarding any medium's responsibility to fully exploit its own unique qualities and potentials (Molotiu 2024). The chapter uses Harvey Kurtzman's early work for *Mad* as an illustration of comics' 'reflexive reflection' on its medium specificity. This reflexive quality is also a key feature of anachronistic comics, such as Cole Closser's *Little Tommy Lost* (Closser 2013), which, Levay argues, as well as being temporally destabilizing for the reader, uses pre-War stylistic and narrative tropes as a means to critique the medium's engagement with social and political norms of earlier eras (Levay 2024). By the time we

get to Mouly and Spiegelman's *Raw* in some of the final chapters (Mouly, Spiegelman 1980–91), it's clear that its overt and highly visible employment of a modernist frame for the comics was really only the latest in a long, though largely unrecognized line (Najarian 2024b). At the same time the role played by *Raw* (via the high profile later achieved by *Maus*, but also in its own right) did much to create a disruptive space for boundary-pushing innovation during the 1980s and 90s. Indeed, in a development that would have been difficult to predict, it is at least partly due to the explicit incorporation of modernist strategies by artists as diverse as Alison Bechdel and Chris Ware that, over recent decades, comics have found a place on shelves in the previously off-limits realm of bookshops and libraries.

Reviewing the High/Low exhibition of 1990 with which we began, Robert Hughes argued that "since "low" sources cycle into "high" products that are then cycled back, as style, into "low" areas again, the supposedly rigid divisions between fine and popular art are more like a maze of mirrors, one reflecting the other ad infinitum" (Hughes 1990). This collection does an excellent job of mapping out and navigating these complexities of symbiosis and interpenetration in ways that often transcend the cultural hierarchies that have governed this territory in the past. One or two of the contributors do question the desirability of associating comics with modernist practice or with fine art more generally, suggesting- not unreasonably- that something of the form's raw appeal as dashed-off ephemera may be lost in the effort to forge such connections. What works so well in many of these essays is the interrogation of comics on their own terms, even as the medium is situated in relationship to other cultural forms. Hilary Chute in her Afterword argues that far from simply providing raw materials for more respectable artists to purloin and repurpose, or, conversely, simply parodying or pastiching the more meaningful or complex work hanging in galleries, the comics medium can itself be understood as a form of modernist practice (Chute 2024: 303).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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