

**Joy Katzmarzik.** *Comic Art and Avant-Garde: Bill Watterson's 'Calvin and Hobbes' and the Art of American Newspaper Comic Strips.* Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019. 298 pages.

Newspaper comic strips are one of the most accessible and well-known examples of American popular culture. As M. Thomas Inge points out, “[a]long with jazz, the comics strip as we know it perhaps represents America’s major indigenous contribution to world culture” (xi). *Peanuts*, *Dilbert*, and *Garfield*, to name just a few, have entertained readers for years, mixing humor with political commentary and social criticism. As such, as objects of academic and critical interest, comic strips are located at a creative and compelling intersection of literary studies, cultural studies, visual studies, media studies, American studies, and comics studies. Indeed, newspaper comic strips and their scholarly investigation have been marked by a peculiar paradox. On the one hand, recent years has seen an unprecedented resurgence of graphic novel and comics studies, triggered by the publication of such contemporary masterpieces as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986), Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan* (2000), or Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006), as well as the never-ending interest in the DC and Marvel universes. On the other hand, while so much attention has been given to longer graphic works, newspaper comic strips, popular as they are, have been somewhat neglected in comics studies. While numerous anthologies of various comic strips (*The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (1977), *The Comic Strip Century: Celebrating 100 Years of an American Art Form* (1995), or publications in “the complete” format, such as, for example, *The Complete Peanuts*) and studies highlighting the cultural significance of the form (*Comics as Culture* (1990)) have been published at least since the 1970s, few books actually provided an insightful analysis of concrete titles.

Joy Katzmarzik, in her study *Comic Art and Avant-Garde*, published as a part of “The American Studies Monograph Series” edited for the German Association for American Studies, examines the genre of newspaper comic strips through the lens of Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985-1995). Thus, while she firmly positions her research within the critical framework of cultural studies, she also expands it by constructively engaging with the notion of the medium per se. As such, Katzmarzik’s book adds to the growing field of more specialized studies of newspaper strips, including David Kunzle’s *Father of the Comic Strip: Rodolphe Töpffer* (2007) or Michael Tisserand’s *Krazy: George Herriman, a Life in Black and White* (2016). Drawing on Amy L. Devitt’s *Writing Genres* (2004), Katzmarzik structures her analysis around the central question of the genre, the newspaper comic strip, and examines *Calvin and Hobbes* from a multifaceted perspective, in which both form and content of the strip play an important role. Each of the five chapters centers on a given genre question, such as the definition of the newspaper comic strip, its history, formal features, and, finally, its capability to comment on the realities of the 1980s and the 1990s, as evidenced by *Calvin and Hobbes* specifically. As such, all chapters in the book may be treated as a mini-study of a particular issue, which, bit by bit, build on one another to provide the reader with a comprehensive view of Watterson’s work. As Katzmarzik herself observes in the introduction (14), such an approach has both its advantages and limitations, because she is able to highlight certain issues at the expense of others.

In any case, thanks to the elaborate and yet rigid structure of the book, Katzmarzik takes the reader step-by-step through all the different facets of *Calvin and Hobbes*. In the extensive introduction, which is listed in the table of contents as the first chapter, the reader is presented with various perspectives on studying newspaper comic strips, which, however, are limited to rather general and evident questions of humor, popular culture, and downplaying comics as an art form. Indeed, in her introductory discussion of Leslie Fiedler's *Waiting for the End* (1965) or David Kunzle's two-volume history of early comic strips (1973, 1990), the author appears to address rather obvious questions, as the current research on the form has already dealt with such issues. In the second part of the introduction, Katzmarzik presents the general premise of the strip and its main characters, locating the 6-year-old Calvin in an intertextual field of adolescent protagonists and the history of religion (with John Calvin as the obvious reference). She characterizes Calvin as a "hybrid" character, neither and both a child and an adult (25), and further refers to him as a "pragmatist," "sentimentalist" and "philosopher" (26-28). Respectively, Hobbes, neither and both a stuffed and a real tiger, is seen as "a parody of Thomas Hobbes's ego-centered worldview" (32). And intriguing as these points are, unfortunately, due to the structure to which the author adheres, they are further developed only in chapter five.

Indeed, in the following three chapters, Katzmarzik focuses on the formal features of newspaper comic strips. In the second chapter, she comments on various working definitions of comics and the implied hybrid nature of the form. And as relevant as these issues are, they nevertheless constitute a mere background for what appears to be of most interest to the reader in this study, namely the approach to the comic strip itself. Once again, it is in the final section of Chapter Two that Katzmarzik raises some interesting points. For one, instead of simply focusing on the formal features of the comic strip, such as sequentiality, length, verbal-visual narration and the presence of a recurring cast, which have been analysed by the majority of comics scholars, she treats the medium of the strip as a starting point for a functional analysis. Indeed, Katzmarzik argues that "the question of... function is equally important to grasp the genre and goes beyond a mere normative level by posing the question of [its] narrative potential beyond the narrative structures imposed on [it]" (44). She subsequently lists the functions of the comic strip that, though crucial, have often been overlooked in "purely" medial studies. These functions include the ability to elicit sympathy and the presence of "recurring surprise" that, when combined, have "the potential to confront the reader with the deepest questions of human nature" (46). Once again, however, this argument is somewhat cut short and the full "functional" potential of *Calvin and Hobbes* is unpacked in the fifth chapter.

What follows in the third chapter is a historical overview of how the comic strip has fulfilled its functions since the 1890s to the 1990s. The author traces the development of the genre since the times of *Hogan's Alley*, and the cult figure of the Yellow Kid, *Little Nemo*, and *Krazy Kat*, which first freely explored the potential of the form. Then, Katzmarzik focuses on the so-called Golden Age of Comics, i.e. the 1930s and the 1940s, comments on the censorship of comics in the 1950s (brought about by the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954), and, finally, describes the impact of Pop Art on comics in general. The "general" reader

will of course greatly benefit from such a historical overview. The “specialist” reader, a comics scholar or a cultural scholar, however, could browse through this section as it is largely based on Robert C. Harvey’s *The Art of Funnies* (1994), Jean-Paul Gabillet’s *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (2010), or *From Comics Strips to Graphic Novels* (2013) edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon. Once again, the most insightful section is the final one, in which Katzmarzik locates Watterson’s work in the context of the 1980s and the 1990s. She demonstrates that while Watterson himself was never involved in the underground and avant-garde comix scene which flourished in the 1980s (with Robert Crumb and Art Spiegelman as its main representatives), even as the so-called mainstream artist he still insisted that newspaper comic strips should be regarded as an art form. Indeed, in his struggle for greater artistic freedom, Watterson is presented as a unique figure in the mercantile world of mainstream publishing. Katzmarzik quotes from and analyses numerous interviews with Watterson. She also extensively refers to a lecture given by the artist at Ohio State’s Festival of Cartoon Art in 1989, tellingly entitled “On the Cheapening of Comics.” It is at this point in the book that Katzmarzik lifts the veil on why she refers to avant-garde in the title of her study, as Watterson emerges as a radical and unorthodox artist. He actively opposed the market rules which governed the publication of his strip and, as Katzmarzik points out, stopped *Calvin and Hobbes* in 1995, that was at the time during which the strip enjoyed its greatest popularity.

Chapter four, in turn, examines in detail the formal features of comic strips, systematically arranging various graphic and narrative techniques. Katzmarzik discusses layout, panel composition, character design, background, and lettering first, roughly drawing from Will Eisner’s classic work *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). Such a general discussion is followed by a thorough analysis of selected strips from *Calvin and Hobbes*. Katzmarzik demonstrates how Watterson manages to do a sort of balancing act between the limitations that the form implies (which have to do with space, length, etc.) and his avant-garde aspirations, playing with panel shape, colour, perspective, and composition. Of course, the ultimate goal of such an analysis is not to give media studies “its due,” but to demonstrate that the comic strip, similarly to other visual narratives, narrates through its structure. Indeed, as Katzmarzik points out, Watterson uses “the visuals as an active narrative element” (150). In what appears to be a somewhat unforeseen pairing, Katzmarzik then moves on to a discussion of humour. Though crucial in a study devoted to the comic strip, the analysis of humour nevertheless seems at odds with a very systematic and methodical examination of the formal and structural features of the comic strip. Still, Katzmarzik sets to analyse the forms of humour with the same precision, listing incongruity of characters, literal meaning of words, unexpected references, unexpected places, and unexpected reaction of objects as the main features of humour in the comic strip. She refers to a number of classic strips and classic literary texts to exemplify the mechanisms of humour, demonstrating that, when assessed against such a background, *Calvin and Hobbes* once again does not “play by the rules,” but rebels against the expectations of the mass market and the mass audience.

Indeed, as Katzmarzik subsequently demonstrates in the fifth and final chapter of her study, *Calvin and Hobbes*, a work of art in itself, does not shy away from

engaging in a political and cultural debate. Of course, Katzmarzik understands what the capabilities and the limitations of the medium of the comic strip are and, thanks to the argument that has been presented in the book so far, the reader is fully aware of them as well, yet she is able to see the political behind the ostensibly humorous. In a somewhat ironic, but at the same time instructive, manner, the chapter begins with a quotation from an interview with Bill Watterson, who points out that “[i]f you draw anything more subtle than a pie in the face, you’re considered a philosopher. You can sneak in an honest reflection once in a while, because readers rarely have their guard up” (175). With that thought in mind, Katzmarzik sets to discuss Watterson’s comic strip in the broad context of the 1980s and the early 1990s in America, with a particular focus on issues such as religion, the environment, and the role of television. *Calvin and Hobbes* is seen as “a humorous blueprint of society” (176). It uses fragmentation to parody and exaggerate certain trends and ideas.

The analyses of the selected strips that follow truly constitute one of the most interesting sections of the book. Katzmarzik looks at the (post)Puritan American society of the 1980s and demonstrates how the comic strip, and Calvin in particular (the reference to John Calvin is of course highlighted at this point), parodies postmodern ethics. Respectively, drawing on Watterson’s life-long interest in modernist art and its principles, with a particular focus on the notions of craft, authorship, and creativity, Katzmarzik then moves on to examine the role and status of post-modernist art, as presented in the strip. She reads *Calvin and Hobbes* in terms of its critique of post-modernist artistic “gimmicks,” such as self-staging, downplaying the role of skill and talent, and inventing -isms in an attempt to legitimize what is often derivative. This pairing of religion and art explored in the first part of the final chapter finds its counterpart in the combined discussion of ecology and mass media that follows. While Calvin is seen as a character who tends to romanticize nature in a truly transcendentalist fashion, as the child of the 1980s, he also ultimately renounces it for the sake of television. Indeed, Watterson’s work in general is seen as a parody and exaggeration of certain contemporary trends.

As a whole, the book effectively discusses how Watterson’s work builds on the existing tradition of the comic strip genre, exploring its possibilities and limitations to comment on the America of the 1980s and the early 1990s. It is a truly interesting and engaging read.

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**Carmen Rueda-Ramos and Susana Jiménez Placer, eds. *Constructing the Self: Essays on Southern Life-Writing*. València: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2017. 370 pages.**

*Constructing the Self: Essays on Southern Life-Writing* is a crowning achievement of the Research Group “Discourse and Identity” at the University of Santiago de Compostela. The book is the 147<sup>th</sup> volume in the “Biblioteca Javier Coy d’estudis nord-americans” series published by Publicacions de la Universitat de València. The nuanced readings of southern autobiographical writing not only suggest the continuing relevance of the works the edited volume explores, but also the importance of what these southern texts set out to show: that southern autobiographical writing not only (re)constructs and performs the self, but also presents a self-image of southern culture embracing the plurality of selves. *Constructing the Self* is a triumph of collaborative work by eighteen contributors from all around Europe and the USA working within southern studies. It is from this international collaboration that the book draws its strength. Carmen Rueda-Ramos and Susana Jiménez Placer managed to compile a truly impressive list of renowned scholars collaborating on this book project, yet the editors were able to unify these numerous voices into a cohesive text divided into five interrelated and cross-linked sections.

This division of essays “loosely reflects the development of southern life-writing, from its beginning to more recent approaches to autobiographical works that incorporate contemporary critical theories and perspectives” (31). The book progresses