BREAKING THE FRAMES: POPULISM AND PRESTIGE IN COMICS STUDIES

Marc Singer (Author)
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Reviewed by Mattia Arioli

Marc Singer's *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies* (2018) boldly enters the critical conversation about comics scholarship as the author advocates for more rigorous critical methods without renouncing to the rich and diverse critical methodologies that compose this multidisciplinary field. He makes the case for a discipline that can embrace different perspectives in order to expand our understanding of comics. Interestingly, this lucid discussion surfaces in a moment in which the medium has received more scholarly attention than ever before.

In his book, Singer criticizes the approach taken by many scholars who are not familiar with the medium, and he tries to demonstrate how the field could benefit from a more careful engagement with comics. He argues that academics should pay close attention to comics' material, historical, and cultural contexts, especially when they cross over from other fields. For example, he criticizes Lillian S. Robinson's (2004) *Wonder Women*, as the author rarely acknowledges the writers and creators behind the female superheroes she analyzes. Therefore, her approach ends up essentializing the characters she examines, making them archetypes. As Singer suggests, this methodology is somehow fallacious as it treats comics as anonymous mass cultural products, removing them from the process of their own creation.

Marc Singer also challenges other comics scholars who are often devoted fans and thus somewhat uncritical of their beloved comics' artists. He insists that comics scholars should not champion the comics or the authors they study in order to make a place for them in 'legitimate literature,' and by default legitimize their research subject. He observes that some academics engage in special pleading on behalf of comics, in a desire for the medium to be taken seriously. However, he maintains that scholars should seek to prove comics' worthiness for study by showing they can stand up to ideological

critique regardless of the result of such processes of validation. He rephrases and reiterates Joseph Witek's dictum, 'Never apologize, never defend.' Indeed, according to both academics, comics scholars should never apologize for their field of study, nor should they concede any doubts about the importance and rigorousness of their research.

These observations about the current state of the art of comics studies prompt Singer to make the case for a more balanced and thorough field that is less hagiographic, and less prone to establish canons, which are often dictated by ideologies of literary critics and based on elitist hierarchies of taste. He indirectly challenges the insularity of the comics canon, which is formed by a narrow range of authors, genres, and production methods.

Moreover, Singer observes how the critical discourse about comics has often been shaped by what he calls a populist rhetoric that he attributes to some cultural studies scholars whom he describes as defensive, anti-elitist, and often neglectful towards economic and historical contexts. He argues that popular-culture studies has often "hardened into a mode of cultural populism that celebrates any and all manifestations of popular culture while dismissing their critics as elitists" (9). Building upon Jim McGuigan (1992) and Thomas Frank's (2000) works on cultural populism, he maintains that the endorsement of popular taste is often in line with neoliberal ideology and the concepts of consumer sovereignty and popular will. He blames this ideology for creating a climate of suspicion towards critical analysis, too often dismissed as a form of elitism.

In particular, he refutes Henry Jenkins' call to "return to the treehouse where we used to talk about the latest comics with our buddies, or perhaps something which is one part local comic shop and one part university bookstore" (2012, 2). Whereas Jenkins wants to avoid comics studies isolating itself from fans and creators by establishing canons and hierarchies of taste, Singer (reprising Witek's arguments) argues that comics scholars should not renounce the markers of academic discourse, e.g. specialized discourse and citations, as these elements are necessary in order to establish one's work as part of a larger critical conversation. Indeed, as already observed by

Charles Hartfield and Hillary Chute, comics scholars often fail to engage with other relevant studies in the field. For example, Singer notices how Hye Su Park neglects to mention Witek's (1989) chapter on *Maus* (one of the first scholarly works on Spiegelman) in her bibliographic essay (2011) on the same topic. However, I believe that accessibility and academic rigorousness should not be constructed as antithetical and opposing entities. Scholars should not renounce the attempt to make their work comprehensible to a wide audience of non-specialists. Even though Jenkins advocates for an anti-elitist field, his (comparative) research is well defined.

Singer holds this uncritical populist drift to be responsible for the celebration of unreflective reading and the suspicion of academic scholarship. He also problematizes the construction of anti-elitist (but equally patronizing) condemnation of critical judgement, noting that the uncritical endorsement of popular taste often echoes with consumer sovereignty. In his opinion, the desire to speak to many different audiences has led many to abandon the standards and practices of academic scholarship, not allowing the field to expand its knowledge.

In his opinion, the lack of knowledge and/or misreading of some comics scholarship has limited the possibilities to expand our understanding and craft as comics scholars. He illuminates this point with particular care and skill in his chapter 'The Myth of Eco,' where he demonstrates how some populist scholars misrepresent Umberto Eco's criticism while presenting similar axiomatic assumptions. Yet, he also observes a substantial difference among these two approaches: whereas Eco encourages the necessity of criticizing popular texts, anti-elitist scholars do not. He concedes that even though Umberto Eco's oneiric climate may not be the best or exclusive tool for interpreting superhero comics, Eco's arguments are still relevant and deserve more credit that his critics are usually willing to acknowledge. Indeed, since comics started to challenge Eco's oneiric climate at the same time the English version of Eco's essay ('The Myth of Superman') was published (1972 [1962]), this reiterative mode has neither disappeared nor been completely supplanted. However, Singer's argument is not an apology for Eco's work, as he criticizes the Italian scholar for overlooking the historical development of the medium and the role of economics.

The engagement with the relevant works in the field is here described as a fundamental practice in order to avoid 'reinventing the wheel' (30). However, the strength of Marc Singer's argument does not rely just on his criticism of other scholars, but mainly on his meticulous work of close reading, historical contextualization, and examination of the economic and material factors underlying comics production and publication. In order to achieve this aim, the rest of the book is organized around specific works by acclaimed comics creators (Warren Ellis, Alan Moore, Chris Ware, Marjane Satrapi, and Kyle Baker) and the academic and critical analysis of such works as well as Singer's own criticism.

In his second chapter he uses Warren Ellis work to demonstrate that historicism, hybridity, and hyperconsciousness are not relics of a vanished age, but consequences of an ongoing transformation in the production processes and culture, and consequently postmodernism. This point is further developed in the third chapter through a systematic analysis of Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, which features characters taken from late Victorian and early twentieth-century literature. Indeed, the possibility to (not) use certain characters influenced Moore and O'Neill's plot progression. Consequently, the development of their work was deeply shaped by copyright law. Therefore, the intertextual references are not only determined by artistic choices, but they also reflect material power relations. Singer observes how the practices of ownership and appropriation of this graphic novel makes the story oscillate between criticism of the Victorian age and idealization of it, as the graphic novel shows indulgence towards the controversial aspects of the period and reenacts nineteenth century racial stereotypes.

The second half of the book deals with 'realistic' comics. This discussion starts with Chris Ware, who is criticized primarily for his statements and anthologies about comics (rather than his work itself), which according to Singer aim at establishing a narrow canon. *Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies* (2018) illustrates that the aesthetic value that underlies Ware's anthologies inevitably reinforces the same hierarchies that contributed to the medium's marginality.

Similarly, Singer points out that the impulse to form canons has led some comics scholars to neglect David B. and L'Association's (Marjane Satrapi's editor) influences on *Persepolis* (2000-2003), an erasure that had the effect of making this comic appear more unique than it actually is. Singer also minimizes the influence of Persian miniatures on Satrapi's style, and he labels the claims that her art is specifically Persian as attempts to exoticize her work. This example serves the author as an admonition against scholars' championing of their beloved comics as rare gems with no connection to the medium's history.

Perhaps the last chapter on Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* (2008) contains the most interesting contribution to the field. In this chapter, there is less academic and critical response to other works, and it mainly features Singer's own original analysis of Baker's book. He shows how this comic does not fit into the definition of historiographic metafiction, as the author disregards any form of truth, accuracy, and referentiality, engaging in a narrative that Singer labels as "bullshit," a non-accurate rendition of the events that relies on a series of clichés and is unquestioningly accepted.

Breaking the Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies makes an interesting contribution to the field by problematizing some methodological procedures. It might be interesting to see if such points are able to trigger a debate about analyzing comics, defining standards, and elaborating models that encompass the contribution of different disciplines. Singer's examination of the current state of the art of comics studies offers some interesting reflections on how to make the field advance; however, his emphasis on mainly if not exclusively acclaimed comics artist, and the criticism about their works, reinforces the narrowness of the canon that he somewhat criticizes throughout his book. Indeed, comics scholars have often limited their analyses to two different genres, superheroes and (auto)biographies. It would have been interesting if the author had included less explored comics genres (war, horror, romance, fantasy, western, adventure, sci-fi, etc.) and criticism of them. Many genres are poorly covered or completely neglected. The current state of the art might be attributed to both the freshness and novelty of the field, but also the stigma that the medium has suffered until recently. This is particularly evident if we consider the fact

that there are only few works on comics aimed at children even though these titles have had great success, such as *Archie.* One of the reasons behind this lack of engagement and recognition might be attributed to the pressure to justify one's own research field that many comics scholars suffer. Indeed, in order to be accepted as a research subject, the medium had to demonstrate that it was not "just for kids." These considerations clearly demonstrate how academic research is often influenced by external forces and the desire for acknowledgment from the community.

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