

DRAWN INTO NARRATIVE

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The academe, as an institution, has been historically complicit in the breaking up of disciplines and, as an industry, has endowed little intellectual prestige or value on “popular” works. In literary studies, so-called interdisciplinarity continues to shuffle narrowly between elitist revaluations of allegedly emergent forms, often belatedly inducted into the roster of “Literature” long after their period of emergence, and a largely thematic or metaphoric cross-disciplinary referencing in readings of canonical texts. In comics studies, Charles Hatfield (2010) reflects on the ever-“nascent” status of a field that has seen burgeoning scholarship yet little institutional footing. He suggests that this lack of disciplinary structuring is precisely what allows for more productive dialogue, “one, because the heterogeneous nature of comics means that, in practice, comics study has to be at the intersection of various disciplines (art, literature, communications, etc.); and, two, because this multidisciplinary nature represents, in principle, a challenge to the very idea of disciplinarity” (2). Likewise, while the Philippine academe’s drive toward specialization has had the tendency to limit parameters for what can be considered as proper objects of literary scholarship, it has also produced an overfull “margin” in which intellectual resistance and creative ferment are bolstered by the same conditions of constraint.

In the same spirit, this issue of the *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature* encourages conversation among works that would not normally be drawn together. The relative freedom enabled by this platform generates fresh possibilities for critical and literary production, as it accommodates dialogues on forms that have not yet been consecrated as “serious works” among literary

circuits, as well as dialogues among new and seasoned scholars whose works, in conversation with each other, simultaneously trace and expand the parameters of critical literary practice set by academic institutions.

This issue focuses on illustrated narratives — multimodal literatures that appropriate image for narrative and narrative for image. In this coinage, we have retained “narrative” to ensure an undeniable tangent to literary studies from interested contributors, and placed “illustrated” to invite a variety of contributions from various fields while, at the same time, strategically screening out readings of mechanically produced images, i.e., film, photography, and other traditional media. This was the extent to which we negotiated the selection with disciplinary boundaries to provide common ground. We recognize that scholars, in aspiring towards interdisciplinary practice, need “a grounding provided by their home discipline, and yet they need to remain vigilant to the different possibilities provided by the alien landscape of comics” (Smith 2011, 147) as well as other media. In this issue, the landscape extends to webcomics, animation, games, fan production, and beyond.

The surfeit of multimodal experimentations, hybridized literary forms, and new modes of narrative storytelling, in tandem with the heterogeneity of how narratives are experienced, present new challenges to literary critical practices. Certainly, the relationship between text and image is not new by any means, yet the particular array of responses to our call for critical works on narrative affirms that this relationship bears revisiting, and certainly much critical reappraisal, particularly as the “visual turn” progresses within the Digital Age.

The selections in this issue foster conversations among scholars operating from a spectrum of institutional and academic experiences, including undergraduate works. We have resisted dividing the collection into subsections sorting the amateur voices from those better established, in the belief that many of the possible connections are lost if we mark each contribution for its difference rather than its relation to the voices before and after it. Nonetheless, this issue is organized with the logic of narrative in

mind, as will be apparent to anyone (apart from the issue editors) who would read an academic journal from cover to cover.

The conversation opens with Molinia Anne Velasco-Wansom's exploration of aesthetics in Philippine animation. In the "Art of Making Do", Velasco-Wansom lays out what it means to produce animation about poverty from within conditions of poverty, and how this material context necessarily impacts that artistic industry. Self-emancipation of the poor and disenfranchised, while thematically central to the many animated short films, proves a difficult cause to espouse from within the animation industry, not for a lack of effort to narrativize and represent it, but because the conditions required for artists to go into animation—"the most expensive artistic industry"—limits the opportunity to the educated middle classes. Thus, works do not always communicate across social groups and tend to reproduce rather than "to reclaim the aesthetics of poverty from poverty porn".

The call to reclaim self-emancipating discourses from being rendered merely as thematic concern is not limited to the Philippine animation industry or the stories they circulate. Japanese animation, which see larger international circulation, also tell stories about the conditions that disable productivity and social harmony. In her work on the anime series *Psycho-Pass*, Anna Felicia Sanchez prods at the uncomfortable implications of institutional and cultural conformity, particularly when faced with the "differently abled". Approaching the text from within disability studies, Sanchez draws parallels between the series' premises and those of medical disciplines, particularly psychiatry. She argues that disabling has become a social process that worsens the historical disenfranchisement of people typically considered "disabled" or people who, for one reason or another, cannot abide by norms. Reviewing the Foucauldian conception of the human monster as it relates to this Japanese futuristic dystopia, Sanchez's analysis echoes warnings of how far institutionalization, when it forgets to be humane, penalizes non-normativity.

On a brighter—that is, festive, transcultural, intertextual, but equally futuristic—note on cultural codification, Catherine

Regina Borlaza presents a closer analysis of a non-normative but heavily coded figure: the cross-dressing maid in *Gankutsuou*, an anime adaptation of Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Borlaza historicizes the character of Peppo within Japanese artistic tradition, drawing connections to the role of the onnagata in Kabuki and to tropes surrounding the "French Maid" in Japanese contemporary popular culture. It is within this complex web of cultural and transmedial adaptations that the study launches its exploration of the transformations that inform a character that appears to challenge but, under close scrutiny, continues to affirm particular gender norms.

This negotiation between challenging and affirming official discourse is a common enough oscillation within popular forms, which must after all both appeal to and stand out in the popular imagination. A further exemplar of this balancing act is the discussion of the Malaysian classic *Kampung Boy* put forward by Maria Rhodora Ancheta, which avoids the simplistic reading that aligns the text with projects of South East Asian community and nation-building. Ancheta analyzes, rather, how the comic reframes and redefines the concepts and rhetoric that inform the Malay cultural tradition, which it both critiques and affirms. Through incongruous humor, the comic communicates an open-ended and relational view of community.

No matter the medium, whether print or digital, an effectively humorous text requires an acute awareness of positionality as it toes the boundaries between the official and the offensive. Arbeen Acuña also deals with comedic traditions when he situates Emiliana Kampilan's work *Dead Balagtas* within the revolutionary tradition of the poet Francisco Balagtas. Acuña argues against blind conformity and mediocrity as he reiterates how Kampilan's web komix—contemporary, online, and countercultural—brings Balagtas' tradition of critical interrogation to a new generation of readers, who are both its target audience and the target of its criticism.

This direct interactivity with one's audience is enabled by online digital media in more than one way. Ushering in the discussion

of games, Jose Monfred Sy's work on interactive webcomics is a review of how the analysis of narratives adjusts to media specificity. Sy revisits the work of Emily Carroll in a discussion of space and abjection, tracing the concept syncretically through the text's theme, its narratological strategies, and the reader's relation to the text.

It is an argument that Myrtle Joy Antioquia pushes farther, as we formally arrive at video games, through an exploration of how the uncanny manifests in the narrative of *Doki Doki Literature Club*. Antioquia demonstrates how narrative and gameplay conspire in this controversial horror game to deny players the conventional agency and control expected in a dating simulator. Rather than allow the player to make decisions and romantically win the character of their choice, the game brings to surface, not only the digital coding that makes agency impossible, but also the hegemonic and gendered codes that trap both the fictive characters and the player who wanders into its interface.

The tug of war over the construction of gameworlds as storyworlds continues in Margarita Labrador's article, where she looks into the worlding of *Legend of Zelda* as it is caught between "official" narrative and fan-constructed continuities. In a reversal of conventional notions of "prosumerism," where fans take part in the production process, Labrador argues that the game developers themselves engage in fan production when they prioritize gameplay over constructing story lines, retroactively filling out the gaps in the storyworld after it has already been developed by players and fans. These tensions produce important dialogue within gaming communities, wherein engagement is a far cry from passive acceptance of what is "canon" or officially produced.

In this note, Sarah Christina Ganzon ties in the discussion as she delves into the complex hermeneutics enabled between narratives and player interaction. Ganzon looks, not at the game narratives themselves, but into how players describe their experiences of those games. These descriptions are also narratives and reiterate

that players are active agents not only within the gameworld, but also in the communities that produce and circulate those narratives.

A review of the issue selections reveals the importance of thinking outside the bounds of “authored” texts as well as boundaries set by media, genre, and discipline. These interrogations are active interventions of the “popular” imagination into official discourses, as the former refuses to remain neatly contained. This refusal of clear disciplinary boundaries may be why, for many scholars, the practice of writing about popular illustrated stories has to be “done on the side” of their specializations.

Thus, this issue hopes to be, in Hatfield’s words, “a workspace that is at least multidisciplinary if not truly interdisciplinary [...] fostering collaboration and collegueship across disciplinary and programmatic boundaries” (2010, 2). In the face of such heterogeneity, at the intersections of different cultures and media practices, meaning is still constructed best through dialogue. And so we encourage any reader of this volume to read across contributions and intimate for themselves where these convergences lead, and perhaps join in the conversation.

REFERENCES

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- Smith, Greg M. 2011. “Surveying the World of Contemporary Comics Scholarship: A Conversation.” *Cinema Journal* 50(2): 135-147.