

---

Joy Katzmarzik, *Comic Art and Avant-Garde: Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" and the Art of American Newspaper Comic Strips*

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15335>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.15335

ISSN: 1991-9336

**Publisher**

European Association for American Studies

**Electronic reference**

"Joy Katzmarzik, *Comic Art and Avant-Garde: Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" and the Art of American Newspaper Comic Strips*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 11 December 2019, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15335> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15335>

---

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

---

## Joy Katzmarzik, *Comic Art and Avant-Garde: Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" and the Art of American Newspaper Comic Strips*

---

- 1 Joy Katzmarzik, *Comic Art and Avant-Garde: Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" and the Art of American Newspaper Comic Strips*
- 2 Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6876-0
- 3 Katherine Marazi
- 4 Some people do not appreciate the seriousness of newspaper comic strips, the fact that they contain cultural knowledge and can in fact be a serious and critically comment on our society. When one hears the word comic strips one usually thinks: funnies, entertainment, humor, cartoons, low art and appropriate for children (see *Garfield*, *Peanuts*, *Marmaduke*, etc.). In the academic sphere, apparently comic strips "fly under the radar" and "remain neglected" (Katzmarzik 12). This comes as no surprise if one were to consider how some people still view and treat comic books and graphic novels. Fortunately, in the academic sphere thanks to research such as that of Joy Katzmarzik on newspaper comic strips, and the research of other scholars on comic books and graphic novels attitudes towards these media are changing. Katzmarzik informs that so far, when approached and examined, newspaper comic strips are considered from a socio-scientific viewpoint, a media studies viewpoint, a pedagogical studies perspective, a comprehensive historical approach, within the context of popular culture and, finally, in relation to humor studies.<sup>1</sup> Regarding newspaper comic strips in particular, there are some scholars who aim at establishing the connections between newspaper comic strips and avant-garde art thus demonstrating the shift from silliness to significance that such media can attain. Joy Katzmarzik is one such scholar whose study, *Comic Art and Avant-Garde: Bill Watterson's "Calvin and Hobbes" and the Art of American Newspaper Comic Strips* (2019), focuses on newspaper comic strips as an avant-garde art form and questions the label of low art that is usually attributed to them (11). The overall intent of her thesis is to "disentangle the interdependence of commerce,

humor, and art in newspaper comic strips" and her focus is specifically on Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985-1995).

- 5 In her first chapter, Katzmarzik highlights the complex art form of newspaper comic strips, the unique publication process and the political and critical nature they can acquire. Her approach is further influenced by Amy L. Devitt's *Writing Genre* and by extension the structure adopted in her book caters to: the study of genre in context; the history of genres, the creative boundaries, the social setting and the genre's relationship to the particular social structures and groups it interacts with in addition to the intent of showing how a newspaper comic strip can be funny but should also be taken seriously. Her book successfully manages in convincing one of the artful significance of this medium and even prompts one to go back and reread comic strips or read them for the first time.
- 6 In chapter two, definitions pertaining to the medium at hand are provided. Notwithstanding the comics association to comedy, their dual nature of image and text (elements that coexist and are interdependent on each other), the hybrid nature of comics complicates how they are approached and analysed. This is mainly due to the fact that there is a tendency to draw on terminology/concepts from visual arts for the images and literary studies for the narrative content in addition to the unique terminology of the comics genre (e.g. panel, gutter, speech balloon, etc.). Hence, though a clear-cut definition may not exist and the ones that do may not be entirely sufficient, Katzmarzik suggests that for newspaper comics a formal approach should involve focus on the function of the medium rather than attempting to assign it a definition. Katzmarzik emphasizes how comic strips "do not create an unreachable ideal as superhero comics do, but rather sketch the as-is state of the human character" (45). While the newspaper will print the current events, both domestic and international, "the comic strips often juxtapose the mundane happenings in life" (45) thereby making them closer to life and as Bill Watterson points out "their ability to entertain and still tell of daily life makes them an art form, as they are capable of expressing truth" (45).
- 7 In chapter three, Katzmarzik redirects her focus to the history of newspaper comics so that the analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes* that will follow in later chapters can be better appreciated. Evidently, Bill Watterson the creator of the respective newspaper comic strip under focus saw that much of the best cartoon work in the medium was done early on in the medium's history and he had become quite disappointed and frustrated with the direction newspaper comics had taken by the late 80s and 90s. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw technological, cultural and social changes from the telegraph to the telephone, from a broader circulation of newspapers to mass production that granted more leisure time and desire for entertainment via toys, sports, and comic strips, and from a rural to an industrial urban society that was being enriched culturally and socially by immigrants. Katzmarzik informs that the first generation of artists (1890s-1920s) did not simply produce entertainment but used their comic strips to reflect on and comment on important social issues of the time. Watterson strongly believed that this generation was the one that manufactured true artworks, fully capable of telling the truth (51-52).
- 8 The first newspaper comic strip of that time that gained immense popularity was subjected to commercialization and turned into the first copyright debate was Outcault's *Down at Hogan's Alley* later to be known as *The Yellow Kid* (1894). Reference is

made to other publications that enriched the function of the medium as well as its artistic capabilities and content. Katzmarzik further points out that with the rise of syndicates whose intent it was to make the publication and distribution process easier we also have the appearance of a new medium, that of the comic book. Granted other social and technological advances also led to the development of this medium but the end result is that it affected aspects of the newspaper comic strips. On the one hand, newspaper comics had a new competitor – one that broke free from the carrier medium of the newspaper and had more freedom for creation – and on the other hand, it needed to consider new audiences and topic areas, thus the introduction of adventure and family comics in the newspaper comics domain with examples such as Richard W. Calkins and Phil Nowlan's *Buck Rogers* (1929), Rice Burrough's *Tarzan* (1929) and Chic Young's *Blondie* (1930) and Walt Kelly's *Pogo* (1948) to name a few. While the 40s prove to be the first time that newspaper comic strips gain attention as a genre in itself, the appearance of the "Tijuana Bibles" that led to the association of comic books with sex and violence ultimately led to comic books gaining a bad reputation and even undergoing severe censorship in the 50s due to Fredric Wertham's publication *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). Continuing her focus on the historical context, Katzmarzik states that surprisingly, Wertham did not attack newspaper comic strips as he felt they were already being censored under the respective newspaper syndicate(s). Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding comic books at that time, certain people's inability to see comic books and newspaper comic strips as something distinct and the rise of Pop Art did take its toll on newspaper comic strips. The aforementioned role of the syndicates also led to a more prominent marketization of comic strips and restricted the artistic freedom of the creators to a degree. The Comics Code Authority (1954) though directed at comic books did leave room for an authoritative "judge" to rule on what was appropriate, artistic or relevant in newspaper comic strips. In spite of these hardships in the comic strips, the 50s did bring about some renowned comic strips such as Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* (1958). Pop Art also influenced parameters of the newspaper comic strip. As Katzmarzik notes, Andy Warhol's factory concept led to the replacement of comic strip artists when the original author retired. In the post-war era, the drawing style generally "influenced by a playful, expressionism, abstraction, or fantastical worlds" now shifted "to the impersonal and functional pop art drawing style with distorted body proportions" while comics also impacted Pop Art as can be seen in the example of Roy Lichtenstein (73). Comic strips, however, were now becoming shorter, could be read quicker, and the overall style was becoming simpler. Meanwhile, rivalry from other visual media essentially pushed newspaper comic strips to the fringes (75). The 70s saw a shift particularly for graphic novels and comic books via the works of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* (1978) and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1991). Comic Studies was now on the rise with scholars such as Arthur Asa Berger's examination of comic strips and American culture in *The Comic-Stripped American* (1973). Author/artists at the time did not necessarily see their work as art – such as Carl Barks and Charles Schulz – and judging from the trajectory Jim Davis's *Garfield* (1978-today) took both as a newspaper comic strip turned comic book and always accompanied with merchandise, then at the very least one could consider comics as popular art. The syndicate, however, remains the intermediary deciding which comic strips and content they feel will sell best; this system, as Katzmarzik states, has not changed though artists are more aware of their rights nowadays. In other words, the syndicate has a word in the creative/artistic process much like the production studio has a say in the artistic/

creative process of a film or TV screenwriter or director. The daily and/or weekly workload and deadlines can burden creativity and artistic creation where quality is sacrificed for quantity. Watterson's stance, in the 80s no less, that comic strips ought to be considered an art form, was not only a breath of fresh air for some but at the very least a unique stance; though judging from his speech "The Cheapening of the Comics" (Festival of Cartoon Art at Ohio State University, 1989), the audience remained divided. As Katzmarzik informs, however, Watterson – though a very private person – did see his occupation as a newspaper comics artist to be an "exceedingly rare privilege" where one's work is read and seen every day by so many people (80). His relationship with the syndicates was "rancorous" as Watterson's main objective was to secure the rights to his work, his art and not have it exploited, marketed, merchandized or taken out of context (80-81). Watterson decided to stop writing the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip at a point where it was receiving vast popular attention. He did not come to this decision lightly but it was based on certain factors such as: he felt he had done all he could artistically with the medium, due to various constraints of the medium he feared it would become repetitive and wear down or bore readers, and he did not want to keep it running just for the sake of keeping it running (86-87). The turn of the century was not only met with the death of three prominent figures in the field of comics (Charles Schulz, Carl Barks and Will Eisner), it also witnessed the introduction of manga to American culture, the ever-increasing adaptations of graphic novels and comic books into films and TV series, and finally the internet as a platform for webcomics but also for online newspapers and archives has and is still changing the characteristics and potential capabilities of these media.

- 9 As can be seen thus far, Katzmarzik has carefully provided a historic and sociocultural context to her study of the newspaper comic strip and more specifically to the comics artist in question and the *Calvin and Hobbes* series. Up until this point, readers gain valuable information and insight to a medium as well as kinship media and the impact society had on them but also the impact they had on society thus furthering potential thematic areas for research. In chapter four, Katzmarzik argues that not every comic strip will employ the exact same techniques and further explains how this chapter will initially focus on techniques employed in comic strips – that distinguish them from comic books – and will be divided into two parts where the first focuses on the graphic techniques of newspaper comics while the second focuses on the narrative scope of newspaper comics. This is then followed by an analysis of the graphic and narrative components as well as the provision of a toolbox for anyone interested in analyzing comic strips through a comprehensive study of *Calvin and Hobbes* where attention will also be paid to the effects on the reader, the use and effect of humor and finally a closer look at specific techniques employed by Watterson. The graphic components Katzmarzik draws our attention to are: panel and frame, panel composition, character design/facial expressions and gestures, background and props and, finally, lettering. Regarding the narrative scope, Katzmarzik focuses on: narrative and narrated time, the role of the narrator, plot, character(s), structure (panels and gutter), setting, and, finally, theme. What is important to remember, as Katzmarzik states, is that graphic and narrative techniques "merge into one language" in comic strips (134). The last part of chapter four sets out to demonstrate how graphic techniques and narration are intertwined and inseparable through the analysis of *Calvin and Hobbes*. The analysis is straight-forward, informative, easy to follow and interspersed with additional examples from other comic strips. It truly covers the aforementioned graphic and

narrative range but examines both in an intertwined nature thus further proving how these two components complement each other in comic strips. Visual examples from *Calvin and Hobbes* help to illustrate points that are raised very effectively. In fact, they prompt one to begin reading the comic strip or go back and read it again. Focusing on the matter of humor, as Katzmarzik informs, once the descriptive part of prose began being replaced by illustrations and images – where essentially telling is replaced by showing – new techniques of creating humorous effects became possible (152). These techniques, or Comic Mode as Katzmarzik terms it, consist of: incongruity of characters, literal meaning of words, unexpected references and anachronisms, unexpected places, and, finally, unexpected reactions to objects all essentially working towards a parody of society. Humor, Katzmarzik stresses can “make readers question familiarities and remind them of the singular viewpoint and the habitual stance they have toward certain questions, issues, topics” (166); readers can also be caught by surprise where the comic strip confronts them “with new and surprising approaches to life” (167), as Watterson noted it can keep readers on their toes (167), and, in addition to entertainment, it provides critique on trivial as well as serious issues. Katzmarzik continues her analysis by focusing on humor in *Calvin and Hobbes* and again manages to depict the significant features Watterson brought together through text and image in his comic strip to create such effects thus standing as a noteworthy example of the creativity, artistry and imagination that goes into what some quickly glance at in their newspapers for brief entertainment.

- 10 In chapter five, Katzmarzik proceeds to the analysis of the content in *Calvin and Hobbes*, where she informs us that Watterson “uses the art form to pick up and discuss various social, political, and cultural topics of the eighties and nineties and to comment on the *condition humane*” (175) whilst adopting a style that is not confrontational, political, or indoctrinating – though it may at times be moralizing – but rather “humorously discuss[es] popular opinions without jumping to conclusions” (176). Given that the main characters, Calvin and Hobbes, are named after influential European figures whose ideas have had impact on American thinking, two topical areas that arise in the comic strip are that of philosophy and religion. As Katzmarzik states: “It was an age [the eighties and nineties] between the beginning of a post-Christian secularized worldview of the sixties and the radicalism of the twenty-first century’s New Atheism, and Calvin’s answers are a parody of the answers given by the postmodern world” (177), where Calvin is also conceived as a poster child for the “Me Generation,” a generation intent on their material well-being and self-esteem. When it comes to matters of religion, Katzmarzik informs that “Watterson’s Calvin also believes in the existence of a higher being, he does not believe in God in a Biblical sense. Thus, Calvin fits well into the context of the on-going secularization of the Western world in the second half of the twentieth century, which had its beginning in the sixties and from then on gradually pervaded Western society” (179). Questions such as: “Do you think there is a God?” and “Do you want me to become an atheist?” appear in the comic strip ultimately reflecting the “Me Generation’s” tendency to adjust the notion of a higher power or being according to their own desires. Essentially adopting “the universe” as a higher power, Calvin’s “notion of the universe resembles the naturalistic worldview toward the indifferent stance of the universe” as well as the deep innate human desire to control life but not succeeding to do so (185).
- 11 Katzmarzik notes that “the comics do not provide answers, but rather play with the Comic Mode and endlessly repeat the questions to the degree that they appear

pointless. They raise questions and parody uncertainties of the secularized age that – despite its attempts to get rid of religion cannot shake the deep uncertainty of any transcendental power” (191). Another figure that lends itself so as to exact commentary is Santa Claus, acting as a metaphor for consumerism and becoming the religion in American culture that replaces Christianity. The figure of Santa Claus in the comic strips even rings out notes of McCarthyism due to Santa’s omniscience (192). When the focus shifts to that of human nature “the comics often bear a bittersweet sense of humor as Calvin’s frankness humorously reveals deeper truths about human nature and man’s excuses for fallen human nature” (195). After all, as Katzmarzik says, “Calvin totally embraces the corruption of man, and he frankly admits that his greed for money and materialism motivates him” (195). What is more, Calvin plays with his evil side, wanting to take advantage of it and reads it as a virtue posing questions such as “Do I really have to BE good or do I just have to ACT good?” raising the issue of morality and its relativization in a postmodern context (200-01). While insightful conversations pertaining to such complex topics occur between Calvin and Hobbes, the comic strips do not go so far as to actually tell us or impose on us what morality is but rather leave us to ponder on the fact.

- 12 Yet another complex topical area the comic strip tackles is the matter of predestination and free will; the comic strip “discusses the ambiguity of determining one’s own fate versus being caught in structures beyond one’s power” (209). What is more, Calvin’s egocentric nature becomes evident as he not only deems history as fiction but even sees his existence as having made the world a better place to the point that it warrants him not needing to take responsibility for anything (212). Unlike the aforementioned topics, the matter of human suffering is not dealt with humorous tones but with sincerity (Katzmarzik 213). Watterson’s strips that deal with suffering and death are met with diverse reader responses thus further indicating how powerful and thought-provoking comic strips can actually be. In light of this kind of topic, the ultimate good and the absolute constant that runs consistently through the comic strip is Calvin’s friendship with Hobbes (216-17). Katzmarzik’s extensive analysis of the content found in *Calvin and Hobbes* is insightful and prompts one to read the comic strips on an even higher level than that of mere entertainment. What is more, the occasional comparison of content seen in the comic strips with literary works such as that of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen Crane, elevate the significance and status of the comic strip as a medium and as literature/art.
- 13 The second half of chapter five focuses on what type of artist Watterson is and how that affected and influenced his art, his treatment of the medium as well as the content. More themes are also discussed in this part. Evidently, “Watterson uses a modern medium to discuss postmodern art, but not in a serious manner. Watterson uses Calvin as an outlet through which to poke fun at the contemporary art world” (219). Claiming that the modernist artists were his role models, Watterson saw the three major components of good art as being: craft, authorship and creativity” (227). It is through Calvin that Watterson unearths “his self-conception as a postmodern artist and how this impacts his art” (226). Katzmarzik very effectively inserts at this point of the chapter a concise overview of modernism and postmodernism focusing more so on how the terms were understood in the art world so as to provide a context for this analysis. More specifically, “Watterson was concerned with a quest for identity and self-discovery as a newspaper comic artist in a world driven by commerce” (230) and interestingly it is through Calvin that he manages to raise the same questions that



modernist artists had only here Calvin has adopted the attitude and worldview of a postmodern artist trying to answer these questions. Calvin is the "suburban post-modernist" as [h]e picks up the ideas and terminology of contemporary art, but as he drags these lofty concepts into his little suburban world, he reveals and ridicules the cant and empty rhetoric of the art world" (231). Calvin is driven either by monetary profit or boredom. Calvin, in a true postmodern fashion, emphasizes originality over creativity focusing on inventiveness and making something ingenious which of course contributed to an "anything goes" mentality when it came to postmodern art. The emphasis on Calvin's self-staging actually works as "a parody of the self-conception of postmodern artists" (234); unlike Watterson who wanted his art to convey truth and meaning, for Calvin "art is the arena where to stage himself" (235).

- 14 Another complex debate that appears, according to Katzmarzik, is the relation between quality and art. "Whereas modern artists still had to defend themselves for their apparent lack of skill, postmodern artists have come to terms with that issue" (236). Though Calvin adapts the postmodern rhetoric – being a lazy and snotty six year old – he ends up ridiculing the loss of quality and the lack of standards in postmodern art (238). Regarding authorship, Watterson and Calvin's view greatly diverge. Calvin adopts the notion of commercialization for commercialization's sake, the aspect of marketability but at the same time he ridicules this as well. His art is consumer-oriented, it exhibits explicit humorous parodies on modern artists, in addition to expanding his art into different media, style-wise Calvin also ventures into abstraction, and similarly to artists in the twentieth century, he too invents his own art movements ("neo-deconstructivism", "neo-regionalism"). Instead of also producing a manifesto, Calvin provides his artistic statement whereby his work is "utterly incomprehensible and is therefore full of deep significance" (245). Granted, even Calvin reaches a point where he admits that his art is empty and has nothing substantial to say and could even be seen as meaningless (246). Another theme that can be found in Watterson's comic strip is that of ecology and nature where Hobbes acts as the mediator between man and nature and actually brings the wilderness into civilization. Meanwhile, Calvin holds a positive romanticized view of nature and simultaneously views it negatively as an unkempt wilderness. Katzmarzik points out the interesting desire of both Calvin and Hobbes to escape from civilization and its social norms and live freely in the wild but it ultimately becomes a clash of two worlds. This clash even persists between Calvin and his parents and how they each view nature differently. In the end, Calvin prefers the comforts of civilization to the hardships of living in nature. The matter of pollution is treated with more severity where Calvin blames the previous generation for the earth they are leaving to the next generation. Overall, the themes undertaken in the strips are contextualized in Katzmarzik's analysis with sociocultural and political events, thus indicating their significance and meaning even in a comic strip format. An additional important theme Watterson tackles is that of mass media and more specifically television. As Katzmarzik claims, "Watterson criticizes the overarching and ever-increasing power of TV as well as the industry behind it" describing media as silly and/or violent, while approaching the topic from a humorous and entertaining angle (260). Calvin is in fact a high media consumer, taking advantage of every opportunity to watch TV (either due to boredom, the fear of missing out or a means to escape) instead of reading a book or engaging in something more meaningful. Though Calvin is aware of the shortcomings of TV, he does not take responsibility for what he watches, or why he watches it thus being victimized but also perpetuating a problem by adhering to the



industry's tactics. Katzmarzik argues that TV impact was highly discussed in the eighties (not that it still isn't today) and some even saw it as a medium that was to blame for all the evil in the world; hence, the impact (e.g. addiction, violence, obesity, warped perceptions of reality, consumerism etc.) TV has on Calvin prompts deep thoughts on the impact TV has on children in general (268-72). Katzmarzik emphasizes that all the topical areas located in the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip can be seen in the eighties and nineties context – hence the contextualization she offers in her analysis – but they can also be seen as topics that persist and are still relevant and important even today.

- 15 In closing, Katzmarzik highlights that the comic strips and, more specifically, Watterson have the ability to express truths about the human condition by tackling serious and complex issues of culture and society in a humorous and entertaining way. Though she deems Watterson a moralist in his writing he is not a moralizer as he does not provide absolute or definitive answers to the questions and themes he raises but rather leaves room for readers to think and ponder. Indeed, even Katzmarzik's analysis is thought-provoking whether it is considered in the context of the eighties and nineties or in the context of 2019. Finally, Katzmarzik reminds readers that newspaper comic strips can be daily entertainment, amazing artworks, avant-garde through their experimentation, a medium that communicates serious and complex issues and ideas and can even serve pedagogical purposes given their hybrid nature. And yet, there still isn't sufficient research on the genre, the medium, let alone the content of comic strips. This prompts us to continue with this fruitful exploration. If more works followed Katzmarzik's example and provided such attention to detail, drew comparisons with other works of the medium in question or other works of literature/art and provided such a concise historical context, then, perhaps, more would be inclined to undertake such explorations.

---

## NOTES

1. Leo Bogart's *The Age of Television* (1956); Leslie Fielder's *Waiting for the End* (1965); Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964); Alfred Clemens Baumgärtner's *Die Welt der Comics: Probleme einer primitiven Literaturform* (1970); David Manning White and Robert H. Abel's *The Funnies: An American Idiom* (1963); David Kunzle's *The Early Comic Strip* (volume one, *Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*, published in 1973, and volume two, *The Nineteenth Century*, published in 1990); M. Thomas Inge's *Handbook of American Popular Culture* (vol. 1: 1978, vol.2: 1980, vol.3: 1981).