theories and methodologies

Context Rocks!

AMY J. ELIAS

SEARCHING FOR THE PHRASE "APPRECIATION OF LITERATURE" IN GOOGLE'S *NGRAM VIEWER* SHOWS THAT THE PHRASE REACHED ITS PEAK usage in English publications between 1936 and 1937 and then nosedived after those years. It's interesting to speculate about what came together at that time. In 1937, DC Thomson published the first issue of *The Dandy*, one of the best selling comics in the history of British pop culture and the third-longest-running comics in the world; Daffy Duck debuted in the animated short *Porky's Duck Hunt*, directed by Tex Avery for the Looney Tunes series; and *Detective Comics* commenced publication. A year later, *Superman* went public. But 1937 also was the year that John Crowe Ransom left Vanderbilt University for Kenyon College and published "Criticism, Inc." in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*. The target of Ransom's ire is "moralist" historical criticism, into which camp he puts actual morality purveyors, the new humanists and the new leftists (those purveyors of what we often now call symptomatic readings), and "personal registrations" or unfettered appreciation (597). While of course correlation is not causation, 1937 might mark an important fork in the subterranean lines in the United States, where the two trains of comics fandom and literary criticism begin to go in different directions, on trajectories that take them farther apart during and after World War II: comics toward the aesthetics of appreciation, and criticism to increasingly professionalized literary analysis.[1] Critics today seem to be returning to this junction, asking how comics and criticism might reunite. Perhaps that convergence is happening now, through approaches variously known as surface reading (Best and Marcus), reparative reading (Sedgwick), close reading, postcritique (Felski, *Limits*), thin description (Love), or redescription (Latour)—each of which encourages professionalized critical appraisal without taking rolling stock into dead-end symptomatic tunnels. Perhaps it is through some other approach, one that may look like Hillary Chute's *Why Comics?*

Chute chooses description over suspicion deliberately, as a reading methodology attuned to comics analysis. Her descriptive

AMY J. ELIAS is a professor of English and the director of the UT Humanities Center at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She is the author of books and articles about contemporary literature and its relation to media and the other arts, and she was a principal founder of ASAP: The Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present and a founding editor of that organization's award-winning scholarly journal.

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criticism is predicated on the values that Rita Felski aligns with postcritique—summarized by Stephen Best as attentiveness, attachment, and receptivity (340).[2] Chute's page and panel analyses flatly refuse symptomatic reading or interpretative pyrotechnics in favor of description mixed with more than a soupçon of appreciation.[3] Consequently, reading the book as a scholar respectful of formalisms and wary of explicit dismissals of historicism and scholarly expertise at a time when the world is in desperate need of both, I was thrown into a metadiscursive space reading this text. It made me ponder what kind of model for academic criticism this book might provide—beyond its stated value as an introduction to first-time readers of comics. What critical method would be appropriate to the comics medium and to Chute's position as a fan as well as a scholar of underground comics? What would it take to form an underground appreciative criticism (that enemy of professionalized theory) that was predicated on, yet also aimed to disrupt, close reading as objective criticism?

Why Comics? is organized to address the ten "biggest themes in today's comics and graphic novels" (31). The most thorough discussions concern comics artists from the United States who have worked in punk or underground comics and whose aesthetic aims include the disruption and interrogation of norms.[4] The focus tends to be on artists rather than works, though Chute discusses specific texts and unabashedly uses the terminology of appreciative evaluation that Ransom decried: a common transition word starting paragraphs is "Fascinatingly" (e.g., 311); work is described as "arrestingly beautiful" and done in a "stunningly virtuosic style" (143); "*Black Hole* . . . is masterfully gorgeous" (158); Joe Sacco's *Footnotes* "is a masterpiece of reporting and research" (341); and Sacco draws "remarkable comics landscapes" (321). Chute's love of the artifact spills over into the production values of the book, which is a cool physical object in its own right, designed by William Ruoto with more than one hundred illustrations. She claims numerous times that the true value of comics as a form is that it combines the visual with the verbal to convey ideas and emotions directly to readers (e.g., 239). This is what she calls the immediacy of comics, and this immediacy is linked to its visuality in a basic kind of way: Chute assumes that drawing things as well as describing them in words somehow makes them more real and present to a reader. While much could be done to complicate such an assumption and to clarify most of the terms of the claim, I would note that this idea rhymes with Chute's descriptive aesthetics. She reads in the present tense, producing detailed readings based in ekphrasis. In some ways this is predictable, for, by definition, the comics critic almost always explains, in writing, the properties of pictures. (Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is an exception that proves the rule, in that it is comics criticism actually produced in comics form, combining visual and verbal representation.) *Ekphrasis* is a complex term with a complicated history but has been most often linked in twentieth-century criticism to James Heffernan's flattened conception of it as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3). Central to the term has always been a tension between word and image, of the kind fundamental to the comics medium, and a strain between representing a thing and representing one's response to it.[5] (Think of how these tensions slide across a poem such as Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn.") Ekphrastic criticism allows Chute both to describe the comics she loves and to express her love of them.

Yet Chute places ekphrastic surface readings of her favorite comics in a compendious context that shows how attentiveness, attachment, and receptivity also describe her relationship with the artists and the fan communities she studies. The social lives and voices of artists enter the text: instead of giv-

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ing us discoveries of new artists, a new history of the medium, or deep symptomatic readings, Chute gives us authors' biographical details, their theories of and comments on form (their own and others'), stories of professional and personal encounters, and gossip—context and more context. Hers is almost an ethnographic approach, one recalling Johannes Fabian's envisioning of sound and voicedness as the basis of a coeval contemporaneity centered in a more genuine and dialogic communication between researcher and subject.

Chute's overall method involves appreciation, ekphrastic surface reading, and a surfeit of context. It depends on her establishing trust with the artists whose work she analyzes as well as creating a trustful relationship with novice readers (who could easily be suspicious of the comics medium, particularly in its radical underground instantiations) and scholar critics (who might cynically dismiss her appreciative stance). This method demands that she make connections between the authors' biographical contexts and their aesthetic styles. As a result, for Chute, tracing connectivity becomes an aesthetic method much more often utilized than is the extended analysis of aesthetic objects. Chute sets up networks of affiliation, charts migrations over borders (of genres, of status, of aesthetic territories), values the creative and productive aesthetic, and shows the power of affective engagements. She seems well respected and is seen as genuine by her artist friends; in the world of underground comics, she's trill. She works the tricky borders between institutional, commercial, and radical art territories, rejecting cultural analysis that is based on preformed theoretical discourses, political interventionism, and the quantitative methodology that all regularly characterize what the academy considers to be serious literary criticism. At the same time, she seems to reframe the public pedagogical aims of pragmatic formalists such as I. A. Richards. Chute's book is neither a Latourian study in network assemblage nor an exercise in practical aesthetics (Latour; Bennett). It focuses on the careers and artistic ambitions of the artists, the way their work is situated in specific artistic communities, and the surface analysis of form. In fact, Chute produces a somewhat old-fashioned contextual criticism that eschews high theory, assumes the validity of authorial intention and the authenticity of voice, and dismisses the affective fallacy as irrelevant.

Chute also speaks back (I assume unintentionally) to recent work in postcritique. In "Context Stinks!," for example, Felski provides a subtle analysis of context, arguing that while it "is not optional," debates today rage about what counts as legitimate context in the arena of literary analysis (573). Rightly noting that "fealty to the clarifying power of historical context" characterizes criticism based in a hermeneutics of suspicion, and going back to her longtime ally Bruno Latour, Felski forwards two claims:

> 1) that history is not a box—that conventional models of historicizing and contextualizing prove deficient in accounting for the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of particular texts—and 2) that in doing better justice to this transtemporal impact, we might usefully think of texts as "nonhuman actors"—a claim that . . . requires us to revise prevailing views about the heroic, self-propelling, or oppositional nature of agency and to ponder the links between agency and attachment. (574)

Felski's first point is that texts circulate; as a result, they have affective punch beyond the times in which they are written, and they take on different meanings in different historical and social contexts. But they do have meaning: they relate to and affect readers transtemporally and transhistorically. "Context does not automatically or inevitably trump text," she writes (580). The purpose of Felski's intervention is to free the literary text from the confines of its birth conditions and to free us as interpretative readers with the Latourian

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insight that the social is not a bounded formation but is instead whatever phenomena come together at a given time to create assemblages, networks, and affinities. "The social," she writes, "is not a preformed being but a doing, not a hidden entity underlying the realm of appearance, but the ongoing connections, disconnections, and reconnections between countless actors" (578). Felski's second point is that texts themselves should be seen as nonhuman actors "enabling their own survival" and "weasel[ing] themselves into our hearts and minds" (582):

> Artworks can only survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching on to receptive hosts. If they are not to fade quickly from view, they must persuade people to hang them on walls, watch them in movie theaters, purchase them on Amazon, dissect them in reviews, debate them with their friends. . . . The number and breadth of these networks prove far more salient to a text's survival than matters of ideological agreement. (584)

For Felski, context lets the work and its constituent parts, such as its characters, become agents that reach out to form affective networks with readers and consumers and with other phenomena that ensure their survival. The text itself—rather than its human creator—has a sociality, embedding itself in numerous networks and interacting with different kinds of mediators.

Thus, for Felski, there are two kinds of context: the rich context of history that involves all parts of a continuously evolving social formation that is always in flux and changing in response to new social conditions, and a localized context in which an object has its own agency, creating networks of reception that allow it to survive over time and have meaning even after its own authors and its original readers have passed away. I have no problem with either of these claims—though I can't help reading Felski's attribution of public-relations savvy to the text as a whimsical provocation—but I am struck by what is left out here: namely, the author, and particularly the relation between authors and critics.

Chute's text in fact points to a kind of context that has been overlooked in Felski's animation of the object, one that allows us to bring the human artist back into the conversation. Chute's method enacts Felski's idea that "works of art cannot help being social, sociable, connected, worldly, immanent—and yet they can also be felt, without contradiction, to be incandescent, extraordinary, sublime, utterly special. Their singularity and their sociality are interconnected, not opposed" (*Limits* 11). Yet Chute's text implicitly rejects Felski's pronouncement that "context stinks," for in *Why Comics?* almost everything is based on context—neither the context of the big ideological bad boy called symptomatic reading nor the context of the sauntering, meandering flaneur named assemblage, but context constructed much more in an old humanistic way, a context that links people in dialogic relation.

In other words, Chute's text led me not in the direction of surface reading or postcritique but in the direction of a kind of criticism I call rhetorical dialogics. Rhetorical dialogics presupposes a social and ethical relationship between author and reader, an intent to communicate something to someone through the act of artistic creation, and therefore it establishes affiliation and attunement as rhetoric. Such communication is not a thesis sentence, is not stagnant, and is not solely in the author's control. Any communication through an artwork to an audience is prone to misinterpretation, reinterpretation, failed interpretation, or mutating interpretation over the course of an artwork's existence. Yet when applied to literary arts, rhetorical dialogics asks us to remember that, as Marjorie Levinson has noted, when reassessing formalisms of the past, we should not focus exclusively on the New Criticism (563). That

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is, current debates about surface reading and postcritique might go not only in the direction of thing theory and actor-network theory, or of Ransom and objective criticism, but also in the direction of Wayne Booth.

While Ransom implies in "Criticism, Inc." that surface analysis of connotation and literary device should be done in the service of perceiving the almost transcendental wholeness of the poetic idea embodied in the work (shorthanded for New Criticism as "organic unity"), rhetorical poetics is based on a rhetorical communications model. For example, Booth's work, particularly in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, is an attempt to focus on the ethics of reading in order to rescue narrative study from the clutches of contextual criticism—which for the past twenty years has often dismissed formalisms as myopic, antihistorical, academicist, elitist, and implicitly coded with hegemonic Western values. But Booth's work also aimed to extricate formalist analysis from the objective criticism of the New Critics; the Chicago Neo-Aristotelians worked against New Criticism's postwar definition of the text by systematically and painstakingly refusing literary texts the status of verbal icons and constructing a "rhetorical poetics" that insists that literature is a communicative event between author and reader, who are in a relationship that has aesthetic, interpretative, and ethical stakes.[6]

I have been interested for some time in how a rhetorical aesthetics might include not only the rhetorical relation between author and reader but also a relation involving critic and artist and context. In what ways can we suture the split between creative writing and criticism, between artists with their language of craft and critics with their language of analysis? What would it look like for criticism to forge a new kind of collaborative relationship between critics and authors, in which critics recognized that authors try to say things and worked with artists to find out what those things might be? Building the argument of his recent book on theories of dialogue, Richard Sennett has returned the word *collaboration* to the arts to describe such a project: for Sennett, productive collaboration is a craft that involves working together on shared projects instead of merely theorizing or apprehending concepts. The social is not just a network: it is a doing.

From this perspective, the artist has a special role to play—not the heroic role of the modernist creator, nor the old humanist role of the philosopher king, but rather the role of a real, thinking, flesh-and-blood being who actually creates and circulates things (as opposed to the notion that things create and circulate themselves) and who tries to engage, through the artwork, in an act of rhetorical communication with others. As Chute herself notes, "images in comics are created out of whole cloth by a living, breathing body" (35). What new terminology might be needed to describe a close reading that is also a critical reading but that also does not do violence to the text or feel it necessary to pretend that the author is always already dead, that the text writes itself, or that it is necessary to erase the human in human relations because of a threat of anthropocentrism?

As I have noted elsewhere, an urgency to communicate, a return to embodiment, a longing for authentic exchange, and an exhaustion with irony are markers of the contemporary arts ("Art," "Dialogical Avant-Garde").[7] We see such values expressed in the vitality of affect studies, new theories of enfleshment and care, socially distributed cognition, and theories about relational arts that have arisen after the turn of the twenty-first century. Of course, criticism that depends on critics talking to artists would be unique to the contemporary period, the time when artists and critics are both alive together—a distinctive way that the contemporary can contribute to literary understanding—and it would do something different from what the author interview did. And perhaps we can

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glimpse what this would look like if we read Chute's *Why Comics?* as an exercise in rhetorical dialogics that asks author and critic to engage in an ongoing, nonteleological, and honest exchange with the potential to change both parties and open up new perspectives on creative process as well as specific artworks. Chute's ekphrastic readings, while inevitable given her subject, have the potential to model such interaction: for the Greeks, ekphrasis was part of a rhetorical education aimed at conveying someone's (physical and emotional) experience of a thing to someone else through elaborate description.

That last idea is particularly important: Chute makes it clear that she is engaged in an educational as well as a diagnostic exercise. Chute's approach is permeated by an extreme generosity, one that unlocks her critical mind to consider creative artists' perspectives. Chute never tries to pass for anything other than a critic-scholar, but she redefines this role in dialogic terms and undertakes a journey that is shared by artist and critic, critic and fan. This is most evident in the book's last chapter, about her attendance at the San Diego Comic-Con, where her description of that event doubles as a description of her method in this book: Comic-Con is "invested in being accessible to readers, and celebrated by fans. Its profound nonjudgmental openness is its most salient feature" (395). While Chute's anxiety about her academic status occasionally shows (e.g., she lets us know what conferences she organized and that she is at Comic-Con writing for the prestigious journal *Artforum*), the book more often than not seems a collaborative project. Chute has cultivated long-term relationships with the artists who are the subjects of her more detailed observations, and they contribute original artwork to the book (the cover art by Jaime Hernandez, Chute's author portrait by Seth, and the preface cartoon by Gary Panter). As a practiced interviewer and former contributor to *The Village Voice* (her contributions include work on Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, comics by Sacco, and music), but also as a representative of the academy, Chute clearly knows and is trusted by these creatives, and that is no small thing, especially when one is talking about underground artists.[8]

Rhetorical dialogics would be a type of criticism that redefined context not as something thwarting affiliation and attunement but as something integral to those processes. Different from (but related to) the rhetorical poetics of narratology, it would demand cooperation between critics and artists and seek to create new models of ethical sociality around the work of art. It would form a contrast to a perspective that sees the object as actor and implies that its origin in human intention is irrelevant to its meaning in the deictic now into which it asserts itself. Rhetorical dialogics would acknowledge that while, yes, things such as texts carry different meanings in different times and can morph in different hands, the art object has actually been created by someone, someone with an intention to communicate something—beauty, anger, philosophical meaning, political critique, vocabulary, the idea of a book—to someone else, someone who reads, which at our present time mostly means other human beings. This is not a sexy insight and even seems fairly retrograde in the context of new materialist theories that allow books to make friends, create allies, attract disciples, and invade receptive hosts like alien beings ready to burst out of all our chests at opportune moments. In a time, however, when whatever human intention *is* is increasingly mediated if not defined by multinational corporations and political tyrants, perhaps a return to a radicalized notion of human flesh, and the dialogue and artistic intentionality it engenders, is an important idea.

We see this return in some versions of relational art, black care ethics, queer theory, and affect studies, among other approaches. Similarly, rhetorical dialogics does not reject the human as a starting point for criticism,

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but like these other approaches, it also is not predicated on the heroic mythologies of an older European humanism. It would find logical Chute's engagement with artists and her implicit claim that images provide us with the opportunity to forge new kinships. While swerving toward a slightly different meaning, Chute's text might agree with Roland Barthes's poetic thought that "[t]he pleasure of the Text also includes a friendly return of the author" (qtd. in Gallop 5).

Best has asked whether, at this point in the history of literary criticism—after decades in which critics have been trained to read suspiciously—we can perform nonsuspicious readings (339). Such a Blakean organized innocence may be out of our reach, but certainly critics working in contemporary arts studies can consider artists as we do our work. And, without a doubt, resistance to the neoliberal university demands that we forge new intellectual communities that bring artists and scholars together and that are based on trust and open interchange, instead of retreat to separate spheres competing for institutional resources or professional prestige and remaining siloed by institutional structures. Writing for a general audience, Chute might not challenge critics' current notions about what comics are. However, her book does present a different kind of criticism for consideration, one that is neither surface reading nor symptomatic reading but dialogic engagement. Her book should challenge us to ask how we articulate the pleasures of reading and art appreciation and how critical theories about reading and interpretation include or do not include the communities of makers that they depend on and whose work they interpret.

Notes

1. In *The Program Era*, McGurl notes that 1936 was also the year that the Iowa Writers' Workshop was founded, leading to a very different claim about diverging lines. I am fascinated by the large and complex body of literature surrounding the concept of appreciation in relation to literary analysis. See, for example, Graff's distinction between "investigators" and "generalists," the latter of whom "defended appreciation over investigation" (55), and discussions of "belletrism" (Williams), which includes personal and appreciative criticism. Feagin is interested in teasing out a philosophical approach to appreciation that is situated in relation to affect and emotion, leading appreciation down the path of affect theory, sentiment, and cognitive studies of emotion. Predicated on identifying relations between appreciation and critical apprehension, the literature on fandom and fan cultures is quite massive at this point; starting points would be Jenkins's work and the recently published collection *Fandom*, edited by Gray et al. The language of appreciation can also be found in studies of book groups and public reading cultures, as well as reader-response approaches (Long; Striphas). Moreover, Buckridge notes that "'[a]ppreciation' has a complicated history in the nineteenth century, made more so by its shifting relationship to an older and even more complex concept, that of 'taste'" (343). The term also has deep associations with pleasure, as in pleasure reading (Nell).

2. Critical description of the text also bears the burdens that literary description in the text once bore: "We still operate very much within the Aristotelian concept of action, which suggests that description be viewed as secondary, and purely functional, or merely decorative. Consequently, description is seen as something which must be kept in its place, functioning to fill in or to set up, and having a certain marginality or accidence, making it detachable or skippable; otherwise . . . it is seen to be uncontrolled or excessive or boring" (Kittay i).

3. Focusing primarily on the graphic novel, Chute only very occasionally refers to comics scholarship and does not rely on terminology that now commonly frames comics analysis, such as "autography"(Whitlock and Poletti; Gardner). Moreover, there isn't really a comprehensive formalist or historicist claim that holds all her chapters together. Instead, each of the book's chapters seems somewhat self-contained, and, as a result, sometimes the claims of one chapter appear to contradict the claims of another because the textual focus has shifted. For example, the claim that disaster is the foundational theme of comics (*Why Comics?* 32) seems contradicted by chapter 4, which discusses how important portraying the mundanity of suburban life is to Chris Ware's *Building Stories*, and the claim that literary graphic novels focus on the interiority of their characters (89) seems countered by analysis of a page from Richard McGuire's *Here* that gains its force from the unrelentingly objective point of view it adopts to examine historically juxtaposed events (26–27).

4. There is no chapter in this book called "Why Race?" or "Why Culture?" in a moment when black comics, Afrofuturism, and indigenous comics are flourishing. (See

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Howard's *Encyclopedia of Black Comics* and the collection edited with Ronald L. Jackson, *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, which explains the historical context in which black comics were formed.) In 2009 the National Museum of the American Indian held an exhibition, *Comic Art Indigène*, showing how "[s]tories of humor, adventure and the fantastic depicted through pictures have always been an indigenous practice" ("Comic Art"); the indigenous-narratives collective Native Realities has apparently sold out its comics offerings; and the first Indigenous Comic Con was held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 2018. Chute does touch on the idea of multiethnic comics in her chapters.

5. The term has become important to intermedial studies, "where relationships between words and images in particular have become a central field of investigation" (Rippl 3), but to my knowledge there has been no extended discussion of ekphrasis as a form of surface reading.

6. Phelan, following Booth's rhetorical method, notes two key principles of his rhetorical approach. The first is that "narrative is ultimately not a structure but an action, a teller using resources of narrative to achieve a purpose in relation to an audience." The second is that "the audience does not just react to the teller's communication; instead the audience and its unfolding responses significantly influence how the teller constructs the tale" (x).

7. Kester has written extensively about dialogic art; see also Bourriaud. Chute is acquainted with relational aesthetics: "I care a lot about the art world, have friends in it, and have participated in some performance art pieces by the German artist Tino Sehgal (at the Marian Goodman Gallery and at the Guggenheim Museum)" ("Why I Study Comics").

8. Mitchell writes that the 2012 conference at the University of Chicago, which Chute helped to organize, compelled "an ongoing conversation between academics and artists, a conversation that was occasionally interrupted by muttering from the artists in the audience (most notably Robert Crumb) about 'academic bullshit'" (255).

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