Peanuts in Focus at Last

Jared Gardner and Ian Gordon, eds. 2017. The Comics of Charles Schulz: The Good Grief of Modern Life (Critical Approaches to Comics Artists Series). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 234 pp. ISBN 978-1496812896.

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In a career spanning 50 years (1950–2000), Charles Schulz produced nearly 18,000 *Peanuts* strips which were syndicated in 75 countries, translated into 21 languages, and achieved a readership of 355 million (Laux). Schulz's strips (which he claimed were about nothing) and their cast of Charlie Brown, Lucy, Snoopy, Linus, Peppermint Patty, Woodstock and the rest, offered a unique daily exploration of such ideas as joy, loss, disappointment, friendship, love, and the meaning of life, leaving an indelible mark on popular culture, and one that continues to resonate in a variety of media forms in the years since his death. Despite the global popularity of *Peanuts* and its widely recognisable characters, Schulz and his creation have yet to receive the attention they deserve in academic scholarship. This collection of critical essays issued in the *Critical Approaches to Comics Artists Series* by the University Press of Mississippi, edited by Jared Gardner and Ian Gordon, aims to correct this lack of attention and is a valuable contribution to the body of scholarship on Schulz and *Peanuts*.

The essays included in the book explore Schulz's works from a wide range of perspectives and examine issues such as gender, language, the sublime, children's consumer culture, failure, sincerity, and sport, as well as the influence of George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* on *Peanuts*, the placing of *Peanuts* in the historical context of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and transmedial intersections between *Peanuts* and television, the art market, Charlie Brown cafés in Asia, and parodies of *Peanuts*. The essays are organised in four sections: Philosophy and Poetics, Identity and Performance, *Peanuts* and History, and Transmedial *Peanuts*.

At the very beginning of their Introduction, Jared Gardner and Ian Gordon emphasise the enduring presence that Schulz's strips still have in contemporary culture, from reruns of the strips themselves to new releases of their animated versions in the form of film and television series. The editors go on to outline the current state of affairs regarding the lack of scholarly work given to Schulz's strips,[1] delving into the potential reasons for this: general neglect of newspaper comics in favour of the graphic novel; Schulz's own refusal to be considered an "artist"; the very nature of the comic strips themselves, which appear to offer their existential concerns too easily, "too democratically for an academic scholarship built on the fetishization of 'rigor' and intellectual priestcraft" (5-6); and, finally, the very problem of the massive volume of Schulz's work. Despite such challenges, this collection includes an impressively varied range of perspectives on Schulz's strips, and these are individually summarised by the editors in the concluding part of the Introduction.

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[1] It must be pointed out that this situation has improved since the publication of this volume. One notable example of work that has been done on Schulz's texts includes *Peanuts and American Culture: Essays on Charles M. Schulz's Iconic Comic Strip* (2019), edited by Peter W.Y. Lee.

In the first essay, "Peppermint Patty's Desire: Charles Schulz and the Queer Comics of Failure", Ben Saunders examines Schulz as a philosopher of desire who continually dealt with the issues of longing and disappointment. After establishing failure as "an ontological given of [Schulz's] universe" (13) and laying out the author's list of depictions of failure ("failure at sports, academic failure, romantic failure, even the experience of being failed by one's idols", 13), Saunders focuses on the intersections of desire, frustration, misrecognition, and exclusion as embodied by the character of Peppermint Patty. Saunders identifies Peppermint Patty as a representation of "female masculinity" and queer or genderqueer identity whose characterisation and visual depiction frustrate prescriptive gender norms, and then goes further by investigating Peppermint Patty's complex desire. As Saunders shows, Peppermint Patty's desire revolves around *how* she wishes to be desired, and not by whom, but Schulz's strips regularly frustrate Peppermint Patty's wish. Saunders claims that by situating Peppermint Patty's desire in a particular experience of desire, of a desire to be desired as herself and not according to certain normative standards, her longing becomes universal and potentially shared by anyone. Importantly, however, the inevitable failure of desire that Peppermint Patty experiences is also shown to be universal: in the world of *Peanuts*, failure is shared by everyone, in whatever form, and not merely foisted on its queer "other". In fact, Saunders claims that such a persistent investment in failure by Schulz's work attests to a fundamental rejection of the normative and a refusal to participate in the American myth of success.

The second essay, "There Has to Be Something Deeply Symbolic in That: *Peanuts* and the Sublime" by Anne C. McCarthy, proposes that there is a sublime aesthetic in *Peanuts* and that it is most clearly visible from the long-running "football gag" in which Lucy pulls away a football just as Charlie Brown is about to kick it. McCarthy begins with a description of a common reaction to the sublime, which she compares to a kind of repulsion and fear, or a cognitive breakdown that happens when we try to perceive more than our senses or our imagination allow (the author uses the example of trying to hold all of Schulz's almost 18,000 strips in one's mind). McCarthy traces the evolution of the football gag and its meanings from its earliest form, identifying several Biblical references in the strips. These mark a shift from the "poetics of repetition to the aesthetics of contingency" that involves a constitutive rupture between form and content which suggests a potentially endless series of football gags and "the sublime abyss that exists beyond the borders of the strip" (35). McCarthy also provides a reading of Charlie Brown's own different interpretations of the inevitably pulled-away football, showing how his attempts at finding the reason for Lucy's actions parallel our own attempts at uncovering the meaning of the forty-one "football gag" strips, and how both Charlie and we as readers come up against the "aesthetics of contingency" which only seems nihilistic, but in which McCarthy recognises flexibility, inexhaustible possibility, and a generative potential. As McCarthy points out in the conclusion to the chapter, Charlie Brown's mistake lies in his continued attempts at uncovering a hidden meaning, or "hidden continuities in a constitutively discontinuous world" (39). The open-ended series of football gags remind us to search "outside the economy of meaning" and accept instead that we have not yet and cannot ever finish reading *Peanuts*, for the experience its repetition of contingency offers is one of "coming face-to-face with the illegibility of the world" (39).

The final essay in the first section, "Saying, Showing, and Schulz: The Typography and Notation of *Peanuts*" by Roy T. Cook, starts from Will Eisner's notion that text in comics carries both textual and visual information, and focuses on the functions of text and other forms of notation in *Peanuts*. After briefly laying out the conventions that determine the interpretation of text and images in comics, Cook identifies two ways in which Schulz combined, subverted, and added to those conventions. Firstly, Cook shows that Schulz's comics combine two or more conflicting standards for how we are supposed to interpret panels (e.g. by the inclusion of a type of text that is both something that is heard and something that is seen), thus redirecting the reader's attention to the resulting narrative confusion. Essentially, this is a metafictional approach that forces the reader to consider the mechanisms of meaning-making within the strip or within particular panels. Cook terms this strategy *multimodal metafiction*, a phenomenon involving a narrative element that activates "two or more conflicting conventions regarding proper interpretation of the fiction" (51). Secondly, Cook underlines novel conventions that Schulz applies to musical notations and how we are meant to understand them, which adds an additional level of narrative depth if we grasp the allusions inherent in Schulz's approach. Cook shows how Schulz's drawn musical notes of certain pieces played by Schroeder, one of the characters often depicted playing a toy piano, are in fact actual transcriptions of Beethoven's works. Since these are carefully chosen to fit the content or theme of a particular strip, Cook points out that a full understanding of many *Peanuts* strips involves recognising Beethoven's works quoted within them. By thus uncovering the various subversive and metafictional effects of *Peanuts*, Cook draws attention to the structural complexities and formal experimentation hiding in Schulz's creations.

The second section of the book begins with the essay "Consuming Childhood: *Peanuts* and Children's Consumer Culture in the Postwar Era" by Lara Saguisag, which examines *Peanuts* in the context of the expansion of children's consumer culture in the postwar period. It explores how Schulz's strip "depicts, interrogates, and celebrates young people's relationships with goods and entertainment" (66), discovering an ambivalent stance towards children's activities of consumption. On the one hand, Saguisag finds that some strips suggest children are exposed to an excessive consumer culture that insists on ushering them into the role of consumer, one that they are unprepared for due to their lack of awareness of consumption practices. In such strips, children are depicted as particularly vulnerable to the distractions of postwar prosperity, and there is a sense of concern that the growing availability of goods "could lead to a constant sense of dissatisfaction among consumers, whether young or old" (70). On the other hand, some strips show the usefulness and even inescapability of child-oriented consumer products, such as toys and other objects used in play, recognising their potential for nurturing creativity and imagination in children. In her comparison of *Peanuts* with *Calvin and Hobbes*, which grappled more openly with the dangers of consumerism, Saguisag finds an overall absence of explicit attack on commercialism in Schulz's *Peanuts*, locating instead a tendency to position *Peanuts* as "a wholesome alternative to the more troubling entertainments" and the establishment of a fictional world "that was largely unsullied by the ravages of consumer culture" (76).

In "How Can We Lose When We're So Sincere? Varieties of Sincerity in *Peanuts*", Leonie Brialey identifies sincerity as one of the existential preoccupations regularly contemplated by Schulz's characters. Brialey examines several varieties of sincerity (Linus' sincerity about the Great Pumpkin, Lucy's lack of sincerity in pulling away the football, and Charlie Brown's absurd understanding of sincerity), as well as the sincerity of the *Peanuts* strips themselves. As Brialey attempts to show, Schulz's work manifests sincerity through the gentle tone of the strips, achieved through Schulz's art and timing, and the way the concept of sincerity is discussed in *Peanuts*. Brialey finds that in *Peanuts* sincerity is always mixed with irony, usually by evoking the issue of sincerity in a punchline or by emphasising the naivety of a character, but also claims that this combination ultimately gives "the strip an undeniable emotional weight" (83). Seen as constantly oscillating between sincerity and irony, *Peanuts* in fact enacts the same movements that are involved in our own everyday life: as Brialey shows, simply being a human being "is a strange double act of sincerity and irony whereby we have to sincerely act like the thing we already ironically are" (85).

Jeffrey O. Segrave's "I Thought I Was Winning in the Game of Life … But There Was a Flag on the Play: Sport in Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*" closes the second section of the book by examining the role sport plays in the development of character, the contemplation of social issues in sport and ontological themes significant for the human condition, and the promotion of the Olympian idea that value should be found in trying, not winning. In his analysis of sport and the development of character, Segrave focuses on Charlie Brown's constant experience of dismal failure at everything he touches, through which he ultimately becomes "the postmodern abstraction of Everybody" (94). Expanding the centrality of sport to the entirety of the strip, Segrave shows how this topic allows Schulz to portray a wide variety of interior problems that trouble our daily lives, including frustration, melancholy, fear, anxiety, and self-doubt. Through the dynamics of sport and the endless examples of losing at games in *Peanuts*, Schulz surveys the American cultural obsession with winning, instead of celebrating the ideas of fair play, sportsmanship, and the aesthetics of competitive sport. Despite the prevalence of losing in *Peanuts*, Segrave shows that what truly matters in these strips is the spirit of endurance: Charlie Brown never quits, never stops trying, and thus fully embodies the Olympian idea of nobility found in taking part, not necessarily winning. As Segrave points out, in the background of the world of sports, Schulz shows us "that failure and the way we confront it constitute human success" (104).

The third section, dedicated to *Peanuts* and history, opens with Michael Tisserand's "Footballs and Ottim Liffs: Charlie Brown in Coconino". Tisserand's chapter examines the influence of George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* on Schulz's *Peanuts*. Despite apparent differences in style between the two strips (for instance, where the dynamic action of *Krazy Kat* takes place in expressionistically rendered desert vistas, *Peanuts* is set in minimalistic, Midwestern landscapes or in the interiors of suburban homes), Tisserand detects Herriman's influence throughout *Peanuts*, both visually and thematically. From the zigzag pattern on Charlie Brown's shirt to flora, fauna, and inanimate objects that suddenly become animated, from the recurring motif of falling leaves imbued with an unexpected poignancy to overt quotations from the Bible, Tisserand convincingly shows that there is much to be gained from juxtaposing the works of Herriman and Schulz.

Joseph J. Darowski's "Schulz and the Late Sixties: Snoopy's Signs of the Times" performs a reading of Schulz's strips featuring Snoopy as a commentary on the historical events of the late 1960s. Darowski identifies two significant moments from the American history of this period that receive an ironic reworking in the form of Snoopy's adventures: firstly, the space race between the United States and the USSR and, secondly, the contentious Vietnam War. Darowski shows how the space race was reflected in the cinema, on television, and in comic books, including *Peanuts*, and how Schulz's depiction of Snoopy's landing on the moon can be read both as a celebration of the triumphant achievements of the nation and an indictment of the unreasonable tensions produced by both blocs involved in the Cold War. Darowski reads the other monumental event from the same period of the late sixties, the Vietnam War, as a crucial reference point for understanding Schulz's strips about Snoopy's fantasies of being a World War I flying ace. The controversial war is thus seen through the lens of a different war, but one that allows Schulz's strips to thematise concerns shared by soldiers from both time periods, such as the futility of warfare, imperialism, the endless nature of war, the mental health of soldiers, alcoholism, hatred and belligerence, as well as the treatment of soldiers.

The last chapter in the third section, "Franklin and the Early 1970s" by Christopher P. Lehman, focuses on Franklin, the strip's first African American character. Although Franklin was not developed into a strong character and though Schulz did not use Franklin to directly illustrate the topical issues of the civil rights movement, Lehman asserts that his appearances helped in the evolution of Charlie Brown and in Peppermint Patty's establishment of personality. By placing Franklin in the same environments with other white characters, Schulz was also able to quietly reflect such hot political processes as school desegregation and increasing diversity. Lehman thus identifies *Peanuts* as an integrationist comic strip that avoids employing Franklin for ethnic or stereotypical humour, although the author simultaneously recognises the limits of Schulz's approach, such as his reluctance to allow Franklin to carry daily episodes alone or even depict him on his own in a panel. In his analysis of the character, Lehman goes beyond the limits of the strip, and explores Schulz's depiction of Franklin in animated episodes of *Peanuts*, tracing the character's increasing visibility on television.

The final section, "Transmedial *Peanuts*", investigates Schulz's creation outside the boundaries of the newspaper comic strip. In the first chapter of this section, "Making a World for All of God's Children: A Charlie Brown Christmas and the Aesthetics of Doubt and Faith", Ben Novotny Owen identifies some of the reasons for the success of the animated film *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The author argues that the special's lack of polish (which actually evoked the very style of the comic strip, an accomplishment that was at the time rare in the history of animated adaptations of comic strips) and use of children's voices for the characters attested to a kind of unpretentiousness, authenticity, and sincerity, all of which underline the special's theme of spiritual truth. The chapter explores how the special's animator, Bill Melendez, created its visual identity, reworking Schulz's strips for a new medium by retaining their flat design without employing Disney-style animation, the standard for the industry since the late 1920s. Furthermore, the chapter probes into the special's Christian themes and its oscillation between illusion and disenchantment, a

message of Christian faith confronted with a sense of loneliness, alienation, and anxiety, especially when placed in the context of Cold War-era fears of nuclear annihilation.

In the chapter entitled "Charles Schulz, Comic Art, and Personal Value", M.J. Clarke examines the dynamics of the growing market for comic art such as Schulz's. Firstly, Clarke discusses the similarities and differences between the market for comic art and the traditional art world. While the market for Schulz's drawings carries some markers of the traditional art market (e.g. knowledge and understanding of value require years of experience, art pieces are only briefly available as a commodity, and only within the art market are they sold at high prices), it contains an element of informality in the great personal value that collectors ascribe to Schulz's drawings, simultaneously placing such deeper connections above the traditional trinity of aesthetic, economic, and social values. Starting from this insight, Clarke discusses how alternative art worlds, such as the one concentrated on Schulz's strips, establish their own conventions of bestowing and maintaining value without a relationship to the world of high art, thus complicating current sociological theories of art. Regarding this point, Clarke shows how collectors and dealers in the market for Schulz's art are not recruited from among existing connoisseurs of the art world but from among fans already deeply interested in the world of comics or Schulz specifically. Lastly, Clarke explores how the collectors of Schulz's works sacralise his pieces by investing them with personal and nostalgic value.

Ian Gordon's "Charlie Brown Cafés and the Marketing of Peanuts in Asia" studies the presence of Schulz's creation in Asia in the form of *Peanuts*-themed restaurants, showing how in this geographic area of the world the cast of the strip are mostly known from the series of animated films, beginning with *A Charlie Brown Christmas* (1965), and not the comic strip itself. The chapter pays particular attention to the responses of visitors to *Peanuts*-themed cafés, usually shared online on sites dedicated to customer impressions, and concludes that the relatively low scores the customers assign to the food served in such establishments is usually overshadowed by their enjoyment of the ambience and decoration, which evoke themes and characters from Schulz's strips. Gordon further develops his reading of this aesthetic appeal, explaining how the popularity of *Peanuts* characters, especially Snoopy, in East and Southeast Asia stems more from their "cuteness", a characteristic that aligns them with the Japanese aesthetic of *kawaii*, which has greatly influenced the Asian cultural sphere.

Finally, in "Chips Off the Ol' Blockhead: Evidence of Influence in *Peanuts* Parodies", Gene Kannenberg Jr. studies contemporary parodies of Schulz's strips. As Kannenberg points out, the history of *Peanuts* parodies is very long, hailing way back to the 1950s and the *Mad* magazine, which is the reason for the author's focus on a small sample of texts. Kannenberg first selects specific types of *Peanuts* parodies which use the form of Schulz's strip to discuss other texts, both cultural and textual. Such parodies decode one text and re-encode it, "transforming it for the amusement of an audience" (199), with the amusement often caused by the discrepancy between the different appropriated works (such as between *Peanuts* and *Metamorphosis*, with Schulz's format proving to be surprisingly suitable for a parodic reworking of Kafka's story). Kannenberg then offers a reading of several other parodies that employ significantly different approaches: Art Spiegelman's essay on Schulz (which uses Schulz's narrative strategies and visual cues), Chris Ware's tribute to Schulz's influence on his own style, and a series of mashups and remixes in various formats, including

online comics.

As the editors point out in the Introduction, this contribution to studies on Schulz and *Peanuts* "serves in part as a manifesto for some of the myriad things that we can do with *Peanuts*" (6). It is easy to conclude that the collection under consideration certainly succeeds in this endeavour, presenting an impressively broad interdisciplinary examination of *Peanuts* and so much that is connected to this masterpiece of American newspaper comic strips. There is perhaps no better evaluation of Schulz's strips than the one offered by Umberto Eco, as quoted in Segrave's chapter: "In the next strip he will continue to show us, in the face of Charlie Brown, with two strokes of his pencil, his version of the human condition" (88). This valuable volume of essays on Schulz's work reminds us of the importance of going back repeatedly to those deceptively simple strokes of the pencil in search of the new insights they can still hold for us.

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Jezični razvoj i škola

Katarina Aladrović Slovaček. 2019. Od usvajanja do učenja hrvatskoga jezika. Zagreb: Alfa d. d. 220 str. ISBN: 978-953-364-149-2.

Gordana Čosić

Hrvatski jezik dvadeset četvrti je službeni jezik Europske unije. Iako po broju govornika (otprilike sedam milijuna ljudi) pripada manjinskim jezicima, našao se u društvu velikih svjetskih jezika poput engleskoga, njemačkoga ili francuskoga. Na sadržajima školskoga predmeta Hrvatski jezik učenike se nastoji opismeniti na gramatičkoj, pravopisnoj, leksičkoj i stilskoj razini, kroz njih stječu prva čitalačka iskustva, a na odabranim književnim i drugim predlošcima uče o svijetu u kojem živimo. Uvod je to u knjigu Katarine Aladrović Slovaček *Od usvajanja do učenja hrvatskoga jezika.* Aladrović Slovaček svoj je znanstveni istraživački rad posvetila istraživanju hrvatskoga jezika kao nastavnoga predmeta i funkcionalnom opismenjavanju učenika tijekom učenja hrvatskoga jezika u školi. Nastoji demistificirati složeno učenje hrvatskoga jezika kako bi on postao predmet koji učenici rado uče i kroz koji uspješno usvajaju komunikacijske jezične vještine. Cilj je učenja hrvatskoga jezika „imati zadovoljne i komunikacijski osposobljene učenike danas, a sutra djelatnike u različitim profesijama i zanimanjima" (24). Autorica knjigom zaokružuje spoznaje do kojih je došla u