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Greice Schneider. What Happens When Nothing Happens: Boredom and Everyday Life in Contemporary Comics. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Greice Schneider. *What Happens When Nothing Happens: Boredom and Everyday Life in Contemporary Comics*. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2016.

Keywords

Comics studies, Narratology, Phenomenology, Aesthetics, Boredom

Greice Schneider. *What Happens When Nothing Happens: Boredom and Everyday Life in Contemporary Comics*. Leuven: Leuven UP, 2016. 224 pp.

Drawing its title from a resonating sentence in George Perec's work *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, Brazilian author Greice Schneider's *What Happens When Nothing Happens: Boredom and Everyday Life in Contemporary Comics* duly fills a gap in cultural theory scholarship. In her introduction, she clearly identifies this gap: if boredom has been profusely studied from the most varied perspectives within the humanities, it has not yet deserved any exegesis of paramount significance in the field of comics studies. The absence of academic pieces on this subject is, to her avail, not in tune with the evolution of recent comics creations, which have abundantly taken up boredom both as a topic and as an empirical involvement for their readers. This trend of comics portraying boredom (connected with an affiliated dimension, everyday life) and of intentionally boring comics are an undoubtedly interesting body of work and a most influential one in contemporary creation. The main artists Schneider concentrates on for her analysis are the French Lewis Trondheim and the Americans Adrian Tomine and Chris Ware, but her theoretical framework can easily adjust to a multitude of other authors.

The book's structure is extremely efficient and distinctly reflects the eclectic but highly coherent choice of theoretical fields Schneider activates in this study. She splits her nine chapters into four different parts and evokes an approach to the topic which simultaneously puts in motion cultural studies, aesthetics, and narratology, as well as employing both macro-contextualization and close reading.

Schneider's take on boredom starts with a comprehensive history of the concept and phenomenon, which, although rejecting the quest for a "monolithic definition" (27), explains how several variants of boredom dialogue with modernity. It is manifest from the beginning of the book that Schneider holds a profound knowledge of the social, cultural, and political implications of comics as a medium and, particularly, of the vicissitudes of its institutionalization. This is primarily evident in her initial genetical consideration on boring comics / comics on boredom, whose rise she opportunely links to a double historical reason for the common orientation: a reaction against the dominance of action comics in the United States and the "attempt to reach more culturally legitimate genres" (45-46). Notwithstanding, it is through a diegetic and narrative prism that Schneider first attempts to juggle the notion of boredom and the world of comics, firstly commenting on well-known examples of alternative American comics and then nimbly tackling what she considers to be the four dominant appropriations of the everyday in contemporary comics: "observational humor," "contemplation," "derisive humor," and "ennui." Although every classification of this kind is necessarily reductive in the context of literary studies—and Schneider is clearly aware of this, since she always prefers to speak of dominant tendencies instead of exclusive memberships—her vectorial organization of

trends in the depiction of boredom in comics proves to be a very useful tool for the comprehension of her corpus and of contemporary graphic novels.

Part Two shifts the focus to boredom in aesthetics and uses Canadian graphic artist Seth as a starting point, who purportedly often tries to attain a state of “sublime boredom.” In it, Schneider points to the fact that boredom can be an experience with a high aesthetic potential, both in life and in art, and tries to pinpoint its functional laws by drawing from cognitive and sociological theory, namely Orrin Klapp’s seminal work *Overload and Boredom*. She then organizes her conclusions into several different antinomies, such as “slowness and speed,” “repetition and variation,” and “minimalism and excess,” which she finds are often paradoxically present in all comics about boredom/intentionally boring comics and which guarantee a fidelity of the reader apparently incompatible with the uneventfulness of the narrative.

Swiss narratologist Raphaël Baroni, who also wrote the well-deserved encomiastic preface for the book, points the way of the exegesis of boredom that is proposed in Part Three of *What Happens When Nothing Happens*. His concept of narrative tension, together with Meir Sternberg’s notion of narrative interest, will determine the exploration of what Schneider calls the “uneventful eventfulness,” an illusory Catch-22 that informs her explanation of the treatment of boredom in literature and which she later expands into the field of comics. This is done through the study of certain examples from American and French graphic stories where “suspense is suspended” (129) or “expectation becomes the event” (134).

The last part of the book is devoted to three in-depth case studies, which are fundamental tests of the practical applicability of Schneider’s theoretical reflections. If “The Little Nothings of Lewis Trondheim” scrutinizes the way in which the French graphic artist deals with rhythm and temporality when depicting boredom, “Adrian Tomine: Lost Gazes, Detached Minds” invests in the affective dimensions of the American author’s take on the topic, dealt with in a much more anguishing and unsmiling tone. Finally, Schneider ends the concluding part of her book with a solid approach to Chris Ware’s comics, analyzed according to the principle of resistance to narrative immersion. It is in this chapter that, in reality, intentionally boring comics and comics about boredom are the closest, conceding Schneider one of the main points she makes in this book: portraying boredom in comics is not only showing it, but enacting it through the reading experience.

Intentionally boring comics are not necessarily an uninteresting phenomenon: the novel way in which the *maladie* has inspired these authors is highly innovative and alluring, proving hence the exact contrary. It is because boredom is such an intrinsic part of modernity that it has interested these comics artists of major importance and attracted such a significant amount of readers and enthusiasts. This is thus an “exciting phenomenon” (195), both for comics and for comics scholarship. *What Happens When Nothing Happens* is a highly sophisticated piece of academic writing, as well as an absolutely indispensable read—and an utterly un-boring one at that.

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