

[INTERVIEW]

Reimagining the Comic Form: History, Narrative, and the Work of Sonny Liew

STEPHEN SHUKAITIS | INTERVIEW WITH SONNY LIEW

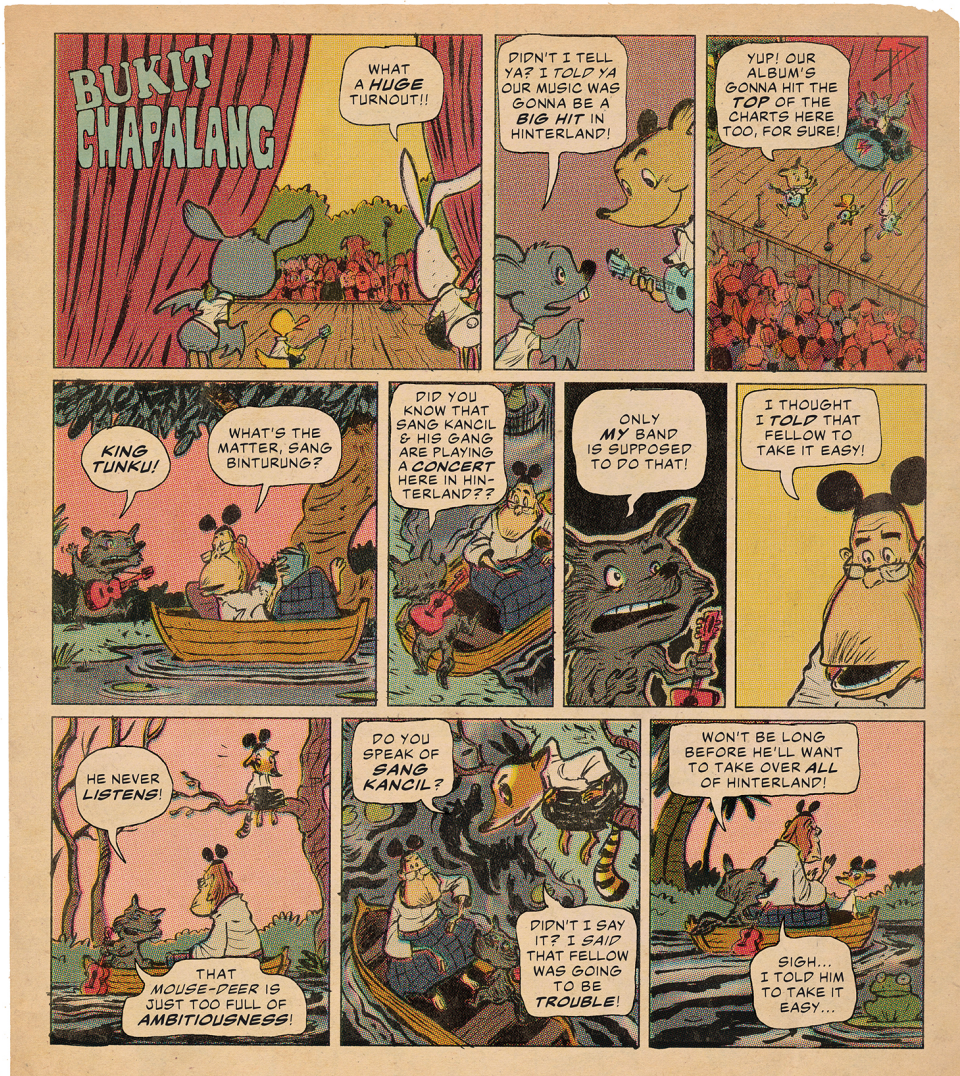
Abstract

This interview with comic and graphic artist Sonny Liew surveys his work over the past 15 years, which has brought more attention to comics from Southeast Asia and expanded the possibilities of the medium. Liew discusses his influences and approach to storytelling, and engaging with the histories and political milieus that often form the backdrop to and inform the stories being told.

Sonny Liew (b. 1974) is a Malaysian-born comic and graphic artist based in Singapore. He is best known for the book *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015), which has won a wide range of artistic and literary awards. Through his efforts in writing, illustration, and theatre, he has expanded literary and graphic forms, and increased the recognition and opportunities for creative work in these areas.

Liew grew up in Singapore, and pursued his higher education overseas; he studied philosophy at Cambridge University and illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design. In April 2021 he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Essex for achievement across his artistic practice. He first

[Southeast of Now
Vol. 7 No. 1 (March 2023), pp. 175–96]



The **Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA)** was one of three political parties that made up the ruling coalition, and the appointed representative of Chinese interests in the Federation. The PAP had hoped that a show of strength in the federal elections would demonstrate their appeal to Chinese voters, thereby convincing the Tunku that they could replace the MCA as a worthy coalition partner. This move, however, antagonised the MCA and its leader **Tan Siew Sin**, and further fuelled fears amongst conservative Malay leaders like the **United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)** Secretary-General **Dato Syed Ja'afar Albar** that Lee Kuan Yew's ultimate ambitions lay in becoming the Prime Minister of all Malaysia.

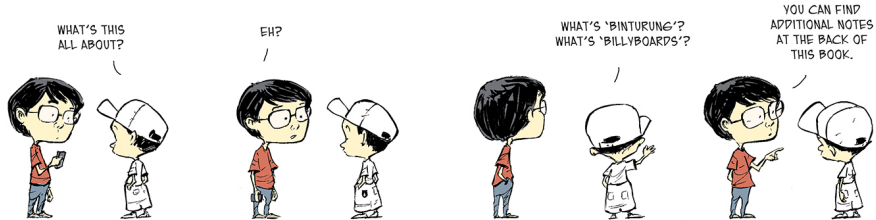


FIGURE 1: Page from The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye

began his work in comic illustration during the 1990s with a Singaporean daily tabloid *The New Paper*. After studying in the United States, he started to work with major US companies including DC and Marvel. Over his career, he has worked on a wide range of topics and subjects, from stories involving street urchins (*Malinky Robot*, 2002–11) to a graphic novel adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (2010). His work expands the boundaries of creative expression whether by utilizing superhero and science fiction tropes, such as his work on *Doctor Fate* (2015–16), or using comics as medium to explore the life of Singaporean painter Georgette Chen (2014). Liew also edited three volumes *Liquid City* (2008, 2010, 2014), anthologies of Southeast Asian comics that brought new attention to the high quality of often overlooked comics produced in the region.

The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye, the work that he is best known for, has won multiple awards including the Singapore Literature Prize, the Pingprisen for Best International Comic, and three Eisner awards. Liew's work in the arts has for years expanded the possibilities of visual expression and storytelling. By developing his craft, he has managed to bring new attention to the medium and expand its visibility and recognition. Likewise he has broadened the capacity of comics as an art form that can expand how we relate to and understand history. I continue to be impressed and moved by Liew's work. That includes not just his published work, but also how the stage production *Becoming Graphic* in which he was involved for the 2017 Singapore Festival of the Arts used the superhero archetype to explore issues around mortality. For this interview I sat down with Liew to have a conversation about themes across his work, particularly focusing on his approach to narrative and storytelling.



Stephen Shukaitis (SS): Who would you say are your main influences as an artist and as a storyteller?

Sonny Liew (SL): Off the top of my head, I would say Bill Watterson, Katsuhiro Otomo, and to some extent, Yoshiharu Tsuge. Frank Miller, Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, those would be earlier. Their influences are not so obvious, but I'm sure some of their DNA is in there somewhere.

SS: You have a very instantly recognisable visual style. It's interesting that whether you're doing *Doctor Fate* or *Pride and Prejudice*, you'd see there is some similarity, which is quite striking because those are quite different

characters. It's not just visual style, but also in terms of how you approach storytelling.

SL: Yes. I'm sure I have some visual tics that even I am not aware of. I'd worked with Mike Carey on a couple of books, and after reading some of his other work, I thought I'd detected a certain story structure pattern that seemed to recur in all his stories, and I remember him being a little surprised when I mentioned that to him—it wasn't something he was consciously doing. I don't think that's unusual, patterns and recurring things in our work that we might not be fully aware of.

SS: Do you ever try to provide signs of the ways you want your audience to interpret your work, or ways you want to approach it, or do you try to leave it open?

SL: I think it is a bit of both. As a creator, you have to strive for some kind of clarity in what you are doing. I think it's a bit of a copout to say just the reader can interpret things whichever way they want and leave it at that. That's like writing yourself a blank cheque. You do need to have some kind of storytelling structure and purpose in mind. That's not to say that authorial intention is all that matters, or that alternative interpretations aren't valid, just that you do have to take some responsibility for meanings and ideas you want to convey.

SS: Do you see there being different ways you approach work on your own projects or projects you're doing by yourself and you're developing the narrative, versus when you're just working on the visual?

SL: Yes. A lot of the time, the artist is hired after the script has already been written, or at least the initial pitch, so the themes or ideas of the story have already been developed. In such cases, I try to flesh out that story as best I can visually. Once in a while, I will suggest things, but for the most part, by the time the script is finished, I think the writers and the editors have already settled on the bulk of the story, so it's hard to really change its fundamental DNA at that point.

SS: Even if you have the script, the story is always told through the visuals itself. It can be a quite different story depending on how you develop the images.

SL: For example, with *Doctor Fate*, when I first heard that the new version would have an Egyptian-American protagonist, I thought the story might engage with a lot of contemporary political issues like the Arab Spring. I did suggest

this to Paul, and I think he had some sympathies for that approach, but also felt that DC comics wouldn't be too comfortable with something too political in nature. There are mentions of the situation in the Middle East in the story, but maybe not as much as I would have hoped for. With *Eternity Girl*, I thought the ending could have dealt with the character's struggle with depression in a more open-ended way. The compromise we struck was to have the visuals hint at that, but ultimately it was Magdalene's story to tell, and I wanted to do my best to come up with visuals to support that.

SS: Over the course of the *Doctor Fate* series, for some of them you were listed as illustrator, some of them you were listed as storyteller.

SL: With *Doctor Fate*, it was because Paul was very generous. His take is that the artist is as important to the storytelling as the writer. He made it explicit that he wanted both of us to be credited as storytellers in the book.

SS: I think that should in general be the approach taken, recognizing how storytelling occurs as much through the shaping of the visual imagery along with everything else.

SL: Right, but it also depends on the relationship between the writer and artist. How much face- to-face interaction there is can also be a factor, so every project can have its own dynamics.

SS: With *Doctor Fate* you did a really good job of reimagining the character. I think you've done that across a number of stories, about how our character is in a new position or as a migrant or takes on an inheritance, for instance in *Shadow Hero*. I love the section where the mom is trying to push him on. And there you have a different version of the superhero origin story, but this time it's the mom with unrealistically high expectations. I wasn't aware of that character to begin with so it's quite interesting reimagining a backstory for him.

SL: From what I understand, in the original comics, the Green Turtle starts to tell his origin story several times, but always gets interrupted by some urgent business he needs to attend to. The series ended after only about a half dozen episodes, so that origins story was never actually revealed, and Gene thought that gave us an opportunity to fill in that gap.

SS: But that retelling of the original story, you're retelling the story from a different perspective. You've done that a number of times. For instance in *Wonderland*, the whole story is not about Alice...



FIGURE 2: Cover from Issue 8 of *Doctor Fate*.

SL: That's actually the White Rabbit's maid, Mary Ann.

SS: Yes, who is another character that I suspect most people, and hopefully just not me, have never really thought about.

SL: Yes, and I don't think many would have remembered Mary Ann as a character. She's probably only mentioned in passing once in the book when the White Rabbit mistakes Alice for her and calls her by that name.

SS: It reminds me of the Italo Calvino novel, *Invisible Cities*, which is based around conversations between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. Polo is supposed to be giving reports about different cities but of course he's doing something far different, of course, because this is an Italo Calvino novel. There's this one wonderful part where they're looking at a chessboard and are talking about different aspects of the game, moving back and forth. Is there a limit to the stories that can be told from it? And then at one point, Marco Polo says, maybe instead of looking at the moves on the chessboard you should look at the grain of the wood. It shifts the story from being about the obvious characters to being something that was previously unnoticed. And then you bring out a whole another level of information and storytelling dynamics that are not usually engaged with.

SL: There are other stories that draw our attention to minor characters like that, right? Like in *Rosencratz and Guildenstern are Dead*. They even did a *Star Wars* version of that—focusing on the adventures of two Stormtroopers named Rosencratz and Guidenstern on the Death Star while Luke, Ben Kenobi, and Darth Vader are engaged in their own shenanigans.

SS: Is that something you do purposely, take minor characters and expanding them?

SL: I don't think I've set out on purpose to do that. Maybe it's more a case of myself and others wanting to explore new story angles, develop the story arcs of characters whose stories haven't been fully fleshed out.

SS: One thing you do visually which I quite like—and I'm curious about how it fits into that relationship between image and storytelling—is having sequences where there will be sudden quick changes between visual styles. That happens in *Eternity Girl*, which goes through a series of different shifts



FIGURE 3: Cover from Issue 3 of Eternity Girl.

where you're miming styles of different artists. There's a section of *Charlie Chan* where you do that, and there's this part in *Malinky Robot* where you do that.

SL: Looking back I think that might have been something I picked up from *Calvin and Hobbes*, where Watterson would sometimes draw the strip in a different style or genre. Maybe also the weekly British comics magazine *2000 AD*, which showcased a wide variety of artists every week. As opposed to the Marvel and DC Comics, where it was usually one artist throughout the book, and where there was more of a house style in general. *2000 AD* was more of an anthology, with stories often in radically different styles. That was maybe one of the early influences that made me realise that you could tell stories in a lot of varied styles.

I tried out the use of different styles in the early *Frankie and Poo* strips, but I think the *Malinky Robot* story *Bicycle*, where different characters offered their own impressions of a mutual acquaintance by telling stories shown as different comics genres, would have been the first time I tried to create stories-within-stories in a more experimental way.

SS: When I was thinking about your switches between styles, it reminded me of, and maybe this is pretentious, when Brecht talks about the idea of the alienation effect.¹ Or basically when in storytelling you bring attention to the fact that they are a narrative, how they're constructed. The idea is designed to bring out the constructed nature of all narratives. You really do this in the piece in *Liquid City Volume Two*.²

SL: Well there is a conscious effort to remind the audience that every story is constructed. The different styles can signal to the reader that they should be aware they are reading a story. That's important since storytelling seems to be the way we humans engage with and understand the world. Being aware of the way we construct and are manipulated by them maybe gives us a chance to step back and examine our deeply held beliefs, whether in politics, history, or morality.

SS: Yes, that makes sense. It seems that some of your work more broadly engages with those kinds of shifts in terms of how historical narratives themselves are constructed. And at that point it's not just a method of visual storytelling but also an approach to engage with and understand history. June Yap (2016) has written about this, suggesting there's a particular kind of historiographical aesthetic that can be seen across artistic works coming



FIGURE 4: Page from Malinky Robot.

from Southeast Asia over a number of years and in widely varying formats and media. And reading across your work, I think you can see a similar element, or at least an engagement with alternate histories in a way that probe the established ones. For instance, in *Charlie Chan* you have a narrative, a reimagined history, where the merger does not occur.

SL: There are many ways to talk about history. Certainly one of the challenges of my next book is how to frame the story that I want to tell. With *Charlie Chan*, I knew very early on I wanted to do a book that was framed as a history of Singapore comics, but with the new book it's not quite clear yet what the framing will be. Especially after *Charlie Chan*, I want to avoid doing the same things again. That's one of the challenges—how can the story be as interesting, maybe even as dense, without relying on the same narrative formulas used in *Charlie Chan*? That's one of the key things I'm trying to figure out.

SS: There is an essay by PJ Thum in the book, *Hard Choices: Challenging the Singapore Consensus* where he is revisiting the history of Singapore. He has this quote where he says:

Singapore's success is derived from democracy, diversity and dissent. But this lesson is missing in the official government narrative of history ... When we misapprehend the basis of Singapore's success, we limit our understanding of the present and unnecessarily constrain our choices for the future. (2014: 140)

It's basically saying there are important parts of the history here about Singapore that is quite different from the norms of political discussion in the present. He's basically saying that we need to go back and revisit these moments when there was a more open and different kind of history in Singapore. Because, I think early on in *Charlie Chan*, there's a part where I think you described, your character describes the politics of Singapore as being electrifying.

SL: Yes, the 50s and 60s were a more tumultuous era, arguably the crucible where modern Singapore was forged. There is contestation over the history and narratives of that era. More recently there was talk about Asian Values and how that meant Asian societies are more communal and less individualistic and confrontational. That's a notion that has been contested too, and I think such struggles again reflect the importance of narratives in our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

SS: Those are periods of Singapore's history when I think you could say there was something of an anti-colonial cosmopolitan left. There are a number of quite interesting stories from that period, events that I wouldn't have expected. For example, there are photographs from a 1958 rally at Victoria Memorial Hall where there's a large banner with an image of Patrice Lumumba and text saying "Learn from the Great Democratic Hero Lumumba" and "Work hard towards completely wiping out Colonialism". Here you have a celebration of Singapore as part of the anti-colonial left. I found it quite interesting in that that you'd have people who would see connections between local politics and trying to include the anti-colonial politics of Africa.³

SL: Yes, they were very conscious of it. Lim Chin Siong, even later on in his life, when interviewed, would talk about how he saw Singapore's fight for independence as part of a wider global anti-colonial movement. That's him in the picture.

SS: Yes. This other image is from a rally in 1961 after Lumumba gets assassinated. If I remember correctly, thousands of people came to the rally. When I first saw this image I was not aware that those kinds of connections were being made.

SL: I've never seen this picture before. This is interesting—all the pictures I've seen of this event have been close-ups of Lim, not this wider shot of him.

SS: That's interesting, because that's a perfect visual form of editing out that dynamic of Singapore being part of the anti-colonial left. These images are from the National Archives. In certain ways, for instance, when you talk to people about Singapore, these histories that are there, those people get edited out or forgotten. I don't want to reduce your work to retelling of history, but it seems to me one of the ways I approach your work with *Charlie Chan* was bringing up other histories where you might bring those histories back into play or tell them differently. It functions to say "you forgot this" or "what about this?" But doing it in a way that's a bit more playful and appealing, so it would be something that people would want to read rather than a dry 'school' lesson.

SL: I suppose all countries have their own national histories, the official versions of their past. People who tell it will try to argue that you need those myths. Even though they know they're myths or selective interpretations, they believe

that it's important to have them to keep the country united. If there are too many competing narratives, a country might lack the necessary stories to bind everyone together. I think that's the argument the people who are in favour of the story would make.

SS: Maybe it's because you're not getting rid of that story, but having the story being a bit more porous.

SL: Yes, more inclusive. That's how I would put it.

SS: Would it be fair to say there's been a dynamic where your work was more recognised first outside of Singapore in terms of work you do with DC and other publishers, and you definitely have been known through work done internationally than locally?

SL: That seems to be a common complaint or observation, that you have to succeed elsewhere before you get recognised. We're not confident enough in our own institutions to accept what local institutions say are good *is* good. Whether that's the case because we have an inferiority complex or whether the institutions themselves don't have a good enough track record is hard to determine. In general, we still think that you have to have success in a bigger market like the US or China before it becomes valid here.

SS: With the *Liquid City* series, what were you trying to do when you were putting those together? When I first came across it, I took it that they were trying to bring more of a focus to comics produced in the Southeast Asian region. Was that the idea?

SL: Yes. The initial spark for that was having worked on the *Flight* anthologies of Kazu Kibuishi. I remember back then he had this forum where everyone would show their works in progress, and the whole community of artists would say, "we can improve it here, etc." Most people were very receptive to all the suggestions. It felt like we were part of this community of storytellers who were helping each other.

Flight was also one of more commercially successful anthologies.⁴ So I thought: why don't we do something similar for Southeast Asia? We tried out the forum approach, though for some reason, it seemed harder to get creators engaged with the process here. But I think the anthologies did help make everyone more aware of the diversity of creators in the region, establish some connections between creators.

SS: What was it like working with a company like Image as opposed to like DC? Was it different process-wise?

SL: Image operates with a different model from DC. The whole idea behind their model was to have everything largely creator-owned. Financially, it's a bit tricky because you get nothing upfront, whereas the DC model, you get paid a page rate so you know you'll get paid for the work. With Image, the money is entirely sales-dependent, so if a book doesn't do well, you might not get enough remuneration for the time spent on it. The *Liquid City* anthologies did ok—they made enough to fund the editing and design work needed on the volumes, but not quite enough to pay the creators involved.

SS: If the great side of creator-owned work is much more control and ownership over your work, the downside might be shifting the risk onto the artists.

SL: Almost all of the risk, actually. Image will basically take a fixed cut of the profits, something like \$5K, which also covers their printing costs. You have to hope the book makes enough to cover that, before the creators involved start seeing revenue. It's basically self-publishing with a bit of help, almost like a getting a grant to self-publish.

SS: Yes, almost like facilitated self-publishing.

SL: Yes, you do get the Image branding and they would promote your book in the Diamond catalogue. But you still have to do a lot of legwork yourself. If we were in the US and we could go to all the comics conventions, it would probably have been easier to promote *Liquid City*.

SS: It probably makes it a lot more feasible for someone to be able to be in that circuit. A book is little bit harder to do, so that as well. But also, when something is published by Image, it has a certain mystique to it. Would you say that your recognition of success has helped at all with bringing more attention to comics in the region or in Singapore? The reason I ask this is, I was having a chat yesterday with a friend who is involved in local fiction publishing. One of the things he said was that what would be really useful is if someone's novel or someone's play could become a Hollywood blockbuster, and then that would magically help us get better distribution, it would help to bring a lot more attention to writers and creators here. Do you think you've done that intentionally or accidentally to bring more attention to work here or has that not really happened very much?

SL: I would guess every little bit helps. I know Singapore is trying to promote #BuySingLit.⁵ For *Charlie Chan*, the sales in the US have been good for the kind of book it is, but they aren't stellar. Locally, I think it's raised the profile of comics a little bit. Maybe a few more comic books about Singapore history have emerged. I don't think it has changed the industry in any fundamental way. It's just raised awareness a little bit, maybe encouraged some younger artists to try making comics. But that's mostly speculative, and those are things which are hard to quantify right now.

SS: If you magically could choose one of your works to get adapted into a film, which one would you choose?

SL: Right now, a *Charlie Chan* adaptation is being developed. They've worked on a script but there still quite a lot of parts that need to be put together. They probably can't get funding from the usual avenues, like the NAC or MDA though, given the controversies about the book's contents.

SS: It's funny because maybe they're re-reading it as an outsider. When I read it, I actually couldn't understand what the problem was. Was it the joke about Richard Marx?

SL: No. From what I gather, it was mainly about the depiction of Lee Kuan Yew as a fierce boss in the Singapore Inks section, where he is banging the table, being temperamental. That's from the grapevine though, it was never made clear what the issues were.

SS: Isn't that always the problem? That you're never quite sure exactly what the OB markers are?⁶

SL: Exactly, right. Yes, that's part of the problem.

SS: What was it like working on *Adventure Time*?

SL: What happened was I had worked on a short *Adventure Time* story, and I guess they liked it enough to offer me the scripting gig. But when I started working on it, I realised that the new series was supposed to be part of the actual series canon, so there were more restrictions on what was possible. For example, I wanted to have Princess Bubblegum grow old in the story, but that couldn't be done because she was supposed to be immortal. It also became clear that though I was a fan of the show, I didn't really know enough of the lore to do justice to the series without a lot of research.

SS: You weren't fully immersed and...

SL: I wasn't fully immersed in it, didn't have the bandwidth to do the research and wasn't too keen to operate under the lore restrictions. So ultimately they used the broad story idea outline I'd come up with and still credited me even though another writer did the actual script.

SS: I am not even a serious fan, but I have a fond memory of seeing an *Adventure Time* bathroom in St Petersburg. I was invited by a bunch of tech workers who wanted to set up a new kind of union for precarious tech workers. They wanted me to come and do a talk to them about precarious work and labour organising. I went there at St. Petersburg and they were holding this several-day event in this café. The bathroom was entirely painted with scenes from *Adventure Time*. I had never come across it before, so it was quite strange to walk into a bathroom and have the characters everywhere.

SL: It took me a while to get into the series. I'd been aware of the characters from seeing merchandise and cosplayers at conventions, but only started watching it after season 4.

SS: These are the different mechanisms of the industry, whether it's the comics industry or any other serially produced series. I remember Alan Moore talking about plot lines he wanted to develop that were deemed too extreme to do with established characters. Were you given any restrictions of things that could or couldn't be done with *Doctor Fate*? I'm just thinking about stories you can tell with characters that are established. Is it fairly common to have boundaries about what you can do and can't do?

SL: I'm not too well versed on this, but my sense is that it depends on the series you're working on. With Batman, there's the main Batman series, and then there are the offshoots like *Elseworlds*, where you can do whatever you want. It can be Batman as a vampire, a zombie, a chance to explore alternatives that wouldn't fly in the main series.

SS: What was it like working on *Becoming Graphic*? As someone who went there as an audience, I found it quite interesting trying to work between different mediums and talking about the storytelling process. I would guess that the theme of theatre was actually quite different from the way you would approach other projects.

SL: Yes and no. I went there quite nervous because I had no experience in theatre and no clue what to do. Ong Keng Sen was the one who commissioned the play, and he said, don't worry, we'll find you a playwright to work with. He or she will take care of that stuff. That's what Edith did, essentially. What I ended up doing was creating a comic story called *Green Bolt* and telling Edith what themes and ideas that story explored, and she just built a play around it.

In the early parts of the rehearsal process, Edith and the cast would take scenes from comics, and try to translate them into the theatre medium. They did a week of experimentations with word balloons, sounds, with lighting, to see how the visuals could be reinterpreted. So: Yes, obviously different mediums with their own conventions, but I also noticed that the way that they refined the play was actually very similar to the kind of editing that happens with books.

They would run through the play, and then say, this thing isn't quite working, let's switch a scene around, let's have that tweaked a bit to make it flow better. That's what you do in any storytelling medium, whether it's writing a novel, comic, or a TV show. In that sense, it felt similar to what I understood as the storytelling process. It was more collaborative as well—in comics it's often just a small team, or one writer and one artist, maybe an editor. Plays tend to involve a bigger group of people, so the process did feel more communal, community-based.

SS: I also find it hilarious that the *Green Bolt* kills people by disrupting their left ventricle.

SL: Yes, that came from reading about common forms of death!

SS: Do you think people can purchase that work, people who are familiar with the comic books or more of the *Charlie Chan*? Are there distinct audiences, or do they overlap? I'm guessing the people who let's say saw *Charlie Chan* on *The New York Times* bestsellers list are different from the people who picked up *Doctor Fate*.

SL: There are some fans here who buy everything and support what I do, but I think most people would know me better through *Charlie Chan*, and most of the people who turned up would have been there because of their awareness of that book. Edith has her own fans as well.

SS: I think there's also been some of the value of comics in that they're telling you a story about superheroes, but they're done in a way in which

people bring different things to them and have characters in different ways. Maybe that's part of, at least for me, part of why I tend to like ... I'll say I like Marvel characters a bit more and that, to me, DC characters always seem like they're a bit too overpowered and lacking in personal flaws. Like Superman is always good. As opposed to Tony Stark. He can get drunk and having his own demons or Peter Parker dealing with his personal anxieties. Maybe this is a very naïve view, but I find that easier to identify with.

SL: I think that was partly a result of the work Stan Lee and Jack Kirby did, where they consciously created characters who faced more everyday problems, like Spiderman in his Peter Parker persona. Fantastic Four are a family who have to deal with their own squabbles like all families do. But my sense is that over time, superheroes became more complex as a whole—like Batman with all his psychological problems. And as mentioned, away from the main story-lines they do experiment with characters and try to explore them in a more nuanced way.

SS: Have you read Alan Moore's guide to writing?

SL: Yes, I have a copy of his book.

SS: The thing I remember about it is his take on, basically saying that you need to write for the specifics of your medium. There's a script kind of story that we're told in comics specific to the nature of format and medium. For instance, traditionally there would be an ad on page four, and because of that it changed how he approached what would appear on the pages directly before and after that. That's the kind of detail which is extended to not just the comic medium but rather his overall approach to storytelling, where it's those easily overlooked details in the format themselves that end up being very important. His storytelling is very rooted in that space and that format.

SL: For sure, yes.

SS: I suppose that's why trying to adapt Alan Moore is kind of doomed, because if you're faithful to it, you've actually betrayed it, and if you attempt to change it, then you've changed it.

SL: I agree with him to some extent. Every medium has its own strengths and weaknesses, therefore if you translate something, it's not going to be the same

experience; but telling different stories in different mediums seems totally valid to me. As long as you're aware that it's going to be different, I can't see why you can't adapt it. Moore has said he's happy to sell the rights, he just doesn't approve of the final product because to him it is nothing to do with his original comic. It's a different thing. But I think he could be a bit more generous in saying it could be a good movie as well, just that it's not going to be the same thing. But maybe the problem with many of the adaptations of his movies is that they aren't actually very good movies in themselves.

SS: I think that is a personal bias, though one I share. In a certain way that's why I'm more interested in the connection between Eternity Girl and Doctor Manhattan, because, and this is where you tend to go at least partially. I know this is more a question about you, but it's at least partially inspired by or referenced to Doctor Manhattan, no?

SL: Probably, but actually she was meant to be a new take of Element Girl, who appeared in *Sandman*—a character wants to end her existence but has been unable to. But we couldn't use her because DC said she's appearing in another series, so Mags created a new character called Eternity Girl instead.

SS: I didn't know that.

SL: Well, we never talked too much about it, because we didn't want it be too obvious...

SS: I thought that was quite interesting. That's where the structure is a little different to theirs, that sort of having a bit of power or ... The way it works in the world like Doctor Manhattan because he's all time and space, and thus becomes very detached from everything ... That that's what made sense, the idea, this weird idea that living forever would actually make life rather depressing because we would have no meaning in something that has no end. And this may be a bit far field but I used to be quite interested in the roleplaying game, *Vampire the Masquerade*. Initially thinking about *Vampire the Masquerade*, in their former storytelling, the more detached the older vampires get from humanity, the more alienated they get, because everyone you know has died and died again and died again. There is an eternal recurrence of "nothing can mean anything", because it just passes very quickly.

SL: That's quite a common idea, immortal vampires finding themselves gradually alienated from life. I think I've seen it explored in *Buffy* and *Interview with a*

Vampire. The idea that what gives our lives meaning and sense is precisely the brevity of it, our awareness of mortality.

SS: Are there any aspects of your work that you wish were more appreciated or more known about?

SL: Maybe my paintings. When I finished art school, I was trying to decide whether to focus more on painting or comics. I think ultimately I chose to focus on comics, but I still hope to one day do more paintings. It's been hard to find the time to work on a proper series.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sonny Liew's *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* was a *New York Times* and Amazon bestseller, and the first graphic novel to win the Singapore Literature Prize. Other works include *The Shadow Hero* (with Gene Luen Yang), *Doctor Fate* (with Paul Levitz), and *Malinky Robot*, as well as titles for Marvel Comics, DC Comics, DC Vertigo, First Second Books, Boom Studios, Disney Press, and Image Comics. He has been nominated for multiple Eisner Awards for his writing and art (including six for *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye*) and for spearheading *Liquid City*, a multivolume comics anthology featuring creators from Southeast Asia.

Stephen Shukaitis is Reader in Culture & Organization at the University of Essex and is co-director of the Centre for Commons Organizing, Values, Equalities and Resilience. Since 2009 he has coordinated and edited *Minor Compositions* (<http://www.minorcompositions.info>). He is the author of *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Day* (2009), *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde* (2016), *Combination Acts. Notes on Collective Practice in the Undercommons* (2019), and editor (with Erika Biddle and David Graeber) of *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization* (AK Press, 2007). His research focuses on the emergence of collective imagination in social movements and the changing compositions of cultural and artistic labour.

NOTES

- ¹ For an interesting discussion of Brecht's concept of the alienation effect applied to contemporary aesthetics and politics see Duncombe (2007).
- ² Liew, Sonny (2010) "The Hunt for Mas Selamat," *Liquid City Volume 2*. Edited by Sonny Liew and Lim Cheng Tju. Berkeley: Image Comics: 105–114.
- ³ This image is held at the National Archives of Singapore. It can be viewed here: <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/photographs/record-details/b7754d56-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>. The NAS has other images of events in Singapore related to Patrice Lumumba that took place in Singapore in 1961, after his assassination.
- ⁴ For more on this series, see <http://www.flightcomics.com>.
- ⁵ For more information on this, see <https://buysinglit.sg>.
- ⁶ For more on OB markers, see Gomez (2000).

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- Liquid City Volume 1* (2008). As editor and contributor. Berkeley: Image Comics.
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- Sense & Sensibility* (2010). As illustrator. Original by Jane Austen, adaption written by Nancy Butler. New York: Marvel Comics.
- Malinky Robot* (2011). As writer and illustrator. Berkeley: Image Comics.
- My Faith in Frankie* (2011). As illustrator. Written by Mike Carey. New York: Vertigo.
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