

1-1-2012

"the Gift Of The Moment": Walter Benjamin And Comics History

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“THE GIFT OF THE MOMENT”: WALTER BENJAMIN AND COMICS HISTORY

by

AUSTIN ST. PETER

THESIS

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

2012

MAJOR: ENGLISH

Approved by:

Advisor

Date

DEDICATION

To my wife Hilary, who refurbishes everything with historical value.

To my family at home in Pontiac, Michigan, you share in this success.

I hope that you know.

To Houdini, my faithful writing companion.

This work was composed by keystrokes and purrs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Barrett Watten, my director, for his support of my project. I would also like to thank Dr. Jeff Pruchnic for his exceptional feedback when it mattered most. Further thanks go to Dr. Hilary Sarat-St Peter, my brilliant wife who had to put up with hearing me read my drafts aloud. I would like to thank Kay Stone, the Graduate Program Specialist in the WSU English department, for her expert help throughout. I would like to thank Paul Youngquist and Dan Patterson for their texts of encouragement.

Finally I would like to thank my family, the ones that raised me in the place where I grew up and the new family that I've added by marriage. Thank you for your love and support.

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With this joy that I remember, however, another is fused: that of possession in memory. Today I can no longer distinguish them: it is as if it were only a part of the gift of the moment I am now relating, that it, too, received the gift of never again being wholly lost to me – even if decades have passed between the seconds in which I think of it.

Walter Benjamin, “A Berlin Chronicle” (343)

This is what must be enunciated, this is what must *be recalled*, for at stake is an act of memory – this is what must engage memory in the present, *in the presence of the dead*, if that can be said; for however difficult this remains to say (Cicero will agree: *difficultus dictum est, mortui vivunt*), the dead live and the absent are present. They still keep watch over those who keep watch over them. And the given word [the ‘pledge’, *la parole donnée*] before the living dead, before ‘the dead here present’, rushes up *here and now*, in the first person plural, in the faithful and present tradition of *our* politics.

Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (95)

I. Introduction

In this essay, I examine the historical narratives of the field of Comics Studies through criticism of Walter Benjamin. In the U.S. and Canada, the field of Comics Studies comprises relatively few academic practitioners. The small number of dedicated scholars who do produce work in this field grow increasingly concerned with this legitimization of both the medium of comics and the field of Comics Studies. The battleground for these debates over legitimization most frequently take place in historicizing/periodizing scholarship, in the utilization of and debate over aesthetic and genre histories produced prior to the emergence of Comics Studies as a field. Moreover, this increasing concern co-occurs with Comics Studies’ move from a field outside of academia to one becoming institutionalized.¹ Far from remaining a periphery, or perhaps generational, concern within the

¹ In just over the past decade, several new print and web journals have taken up root providing field-specific locations for the publication of English-language academic work concerned with comics, in particular *Image [&] Narrative*, *International Journal of Comic Art*, *Signs: Studies in Graphical Narratives*, and *ImageText*. Beyond field specific journals, there have been recent numerous (within the past decade) comics-related publications in major journals across the academic landscape. Comics-related work have appeared in a number of journals including: *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, *animation: an interdisciplinary journal*, *College Literature*, *Cultural Critique*, *The Journal of American Culture*, *Journal of American Studies*, and *Visual Studies*. This list of journals is by no means comprehensive. In winter 2006 *Modern Fiction Studies* dedicated

field, these definitional and legitimizing debates have taken up a central position within Comics Studies. With this in mind, this essay addresses the relationship between Comics Studies historiography and the politics of legitimation. I will analyze and explain the dominant historical origins narratives of comics and situate them into their broader historical structure. I will then discuss the interplay of these historical origin narratives, using them as a way to access and understand the ability of Comics Studies historiography to act as a space of agency for oppositional politics.

The “traveling companion” for my analysis of comics historiography is the Frankfurt school philosopher Walter Benjamin. While it may seem strange to combine an analysis of the writings of Benjamin with a narrative about the politics of academic legitimation, this is done with a clear motive. This essay will show that the legitimating methods and the broader historical structure work in tandem to produce a self-confirming, circular discourse that negates and recuperates oppositional structures. In Benjamin’s works, we will find a theoretical toolkit to critique these broader historical structures. More importantly, in “the gift of the moment” and his writings on collecting, he provides an alternative critical practice and social role for Comics Studies scholars that resists the current problem of negation and recuperation.

II. Comics as Minor Objects

an issue entirely to comics scholarship. In 2009, the MLA added a discussion forum specifically for Comics and Graphic Narrative as a result of the work of Hillary Chute. Doctoral programs specializing in Comics Studies with specialties in Composition, Visual Studies, or Visual Communication have emerged at University of Florida, University of California, Santa Cruz, and University of Toronto, Mississauga. Strong support for Comics Studies (with likely programs emerging in the near future) exists at Michigan State University, University of Mississippi, Bowling Green State University, and Georgetown University.

While comics critics have his infinitely-productive work to provide a framework for producing scholarship ‘in the mode of’ Benjamin, he himself made next to no comment on the medium in his work published during his lifetime or posthumously.² Had Benjamin made it to the U.S. with the visa Max Horkheimer procured for him, he would have arrived at a kairos moment for sequential art. In April 1938, *Action Comics* No. 1 hit the newsstands featuring Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s story “Superman” in its first thirteen pages. In June 1939, Superman became the first character to receive his own self-titled comic book. By 1940, Siegel and Shuster’s *Superman* alone accounted for a circulation of 1.2 million copies and solidified superhero comics as the dominant published market genre in sequential art (Goulart 78). Given Benjamin’s aesthetic predilections, it seems unlikely that this American cultural moment would have gone unnoticed. As Susan Sontag notes, Benjamin “loved old toys, postage stamps, picture post cards, and such playful miniaturizations of reality as the winter world inside a glass globe that snows when it is shaken” (19). Benjamin had a love of the miniature, as a device of fantasy (a topic that he planned on writing on shortly before his death) but also for its uselessness, its collectability, and its connection to childhood. It is this connection to childhood that is central to my reading of his work. Across Benjamin’s writings, the figure of the child is ever present. He is fascinated by childhood play and collecting in “A Berlin Chronicle,” “Enlargements,” and “Unpacking My Library.” Benjamin considers the relationship of children to society and technology in his speculative

² In the sixth section of “The Work Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility,” on photography, Benjamin comments, “At the same time, illustrated magazines begin to put up signposts for him – whether these are right or wrong is irrelevant. For the first time, captions become obligatory. And it is clear that they have a character altogether different from the titles of paintings. The directives given by captions to those looking at images in illustrated magazines soon become even more precise and commanding in films, where the way each single image is understood appears prescribed by the sequence of all the preceding images” (258). In this case, Benjamin is speaking about “illustrated magazines” in the vein of *Harper’s*, *Scribner’s Monthly*, or *Ladies’ Home Journal* – publications with wide circulations. This passage is noteworthy, however, on two accounts: first, the woodcut and print precursors to comics had captions similar to those in these magazines (encompassing the visual/verbal blend of comics art); second, his acknowledgement and emphasis on film as a sequential art form.

discourses “To the Planetarium,” “Theories of German Fascism,” and his final work “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Regardless of their substantial philosophical and theoretical importance to him, Benjamin maintains the child’s minorness and powerlessness as key attributes.

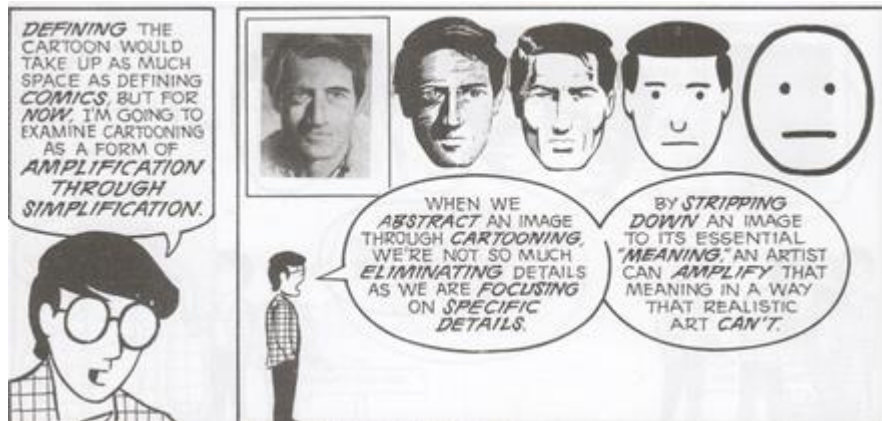


Figure 1. McCloud. Amplification Through Simplification.

Minor aesthetic objects have particular importance in contemporary considerations of cultural studies, avant-garde scholarship, and critical theory. Take, for example, Sianne Ngai’s article “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde”: in her analyses of modernist and postmodernist avant-garde poetics, Ngai places emphasis on diminutive objects, their relations to mass production, and their attendant helplessness. In “Cuteness,” she discusses lyric poetry as a “genre predominantly if not always correctly associated with small and compact texts” that has “always been forced to negotiate its relationship to cuteness in a way that other literary forms and genres, such as the novel, have not” (815).³ The medium of comics, too, has had to negotiate its relationship to

³ Though the aesthetics of cuteness are not of principle concern for the purposes of this particular essay, I find it important to note that her interrogations of the relationship between subject and object in (in particular in her account of *cutification*, 816) are interesting when juxtaposed with my later analysis of the ideas of Walter Benjamin. In her account of the relationship of subject and object, there is an ever-present “sadistic desire for mastery and control” (816), or a “latent aggression towards a vulnerable object” that turns into “explicit aggression” (828). This violent underpinning is what is later mirrored back by cute object’s acuteness, sharpness, “harmful-if-swallowed” relationship to the consumer.

cuteness, as well as its relationship to children's literature, kitsch, and mass/commodity culture. Regardless of if they meet the aesthetic criteria of *cuteness*, comics, whether in strip or book form, certainly fall under the miniature, the small, the collectable. This is due not simply to their physically diminutive stature, but to the aesthetic and formal properties of the sequential art medium itself.

This aesthetics of minoriness appears in multiple significant works of Comics Studies theory, particularly in the writings of Scott McCloud, Will Eisner, and Rodolphe Töpffer. In the fledgling field of Comics Studies, McCloud's *Understanding Comics* is one of a handful of works from the past two decades firmly fixed its canon. One of a number of key ideas McCloud introduces in this work (fig. 1) is his concept of "amplification-through-simplification" (30). For McCloud, amplification-through-simplification is a variable process which tends towards a pair of directions, which he calls iconic abstraction (pictorial expression that tends towards language) and non-iconic abstraction (pictorial expression that tends towards the realm of shapes, "the picture plane"). The triangulation of realist, iconic, and non-iconic representation in *Understanding Comics* provides a near-totalizing map of the pictorial vocabulary of comics: such is the centrality of amplification-through-simplification to his model of the formal qualities of the medium (fig. 2). The north-most point on the pyramid is abstraction towards "the picture plane," where "shapes, lines and colors can be themselves and not pretend otherwise" (51). The bottom right-most point on the pyramid is abstraction towards "iconic representation," where "every line has a meaning."

Because of the relationship between these three points, the artist working in sequential art utilizes the amplification-through-simplification technique, a selective reduction of visual detail, as a way of focusing the reader's attention on a finite number of carefully constructed specific

details within the comics panels (i.e. to achieve a reduction in visual “noise” and/or to produce iconic simplicity), or to draw attention to the way details break into frames and bleeds.

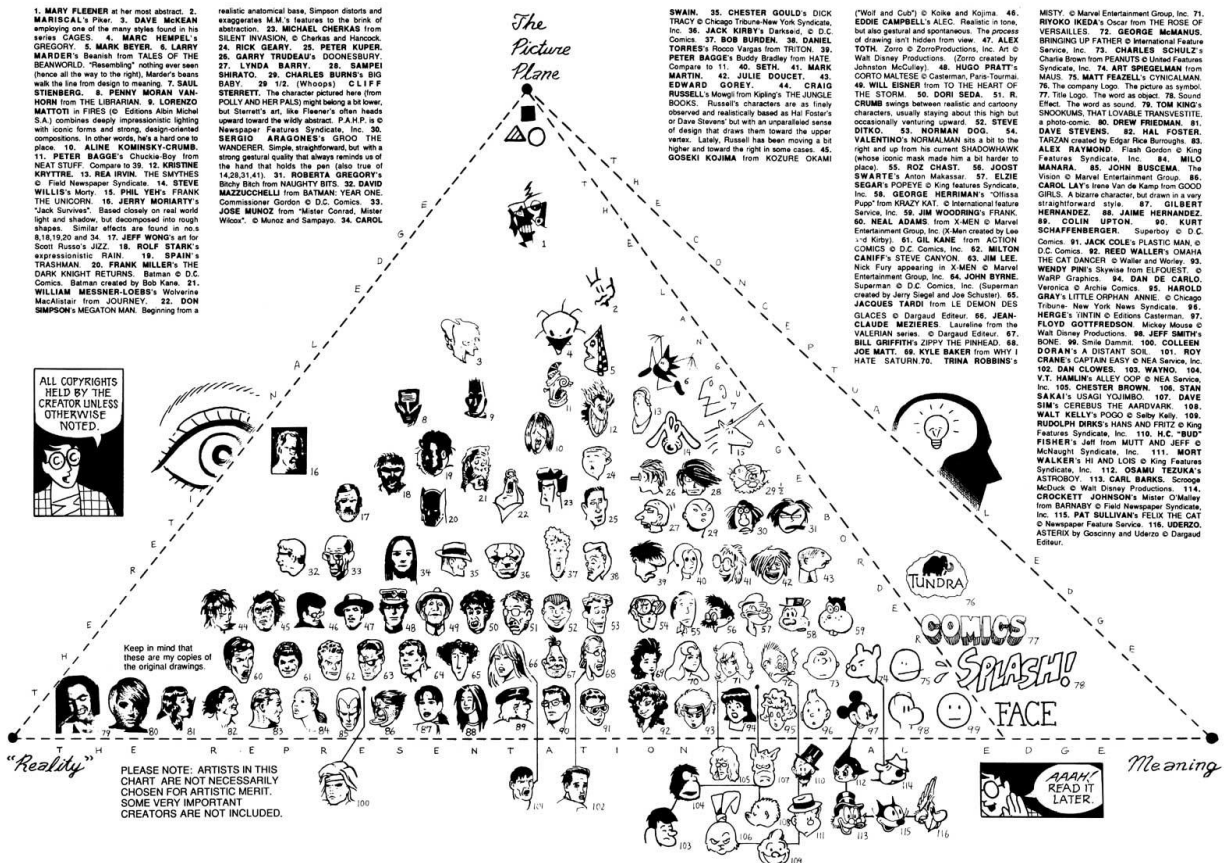


Figure 2. McCloud. Triangulation of Realism and Bifurcated Abstraction.

Amplification-through-simplification is one of a handful of unifying formal properties of comics. McCloud is but one of several critics and historians who have recognized this particular aesthetic property of comics. In *Comics and Sequential Art*, Eisner comments, “In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language – a literary form, if you will. And it is this disciplined application that creates the ‘grammar’ of Sequential Art” (8). Eisner’s economical

“grammar” and McCloud’s “pictorial vocabulary” both retread ground covered by Swiss artist Rodolphe Töpffer over 150 years prior to the publication of McCloud’s work. In his *Essai de physiognomie* (1845), Töpffer interrogates the economy of lines in the representation of the human face (fig. 3). Töpffer’s essay on physiognomics uses caricature as a method to reveal the fallibility of phrenology, concisely defined by comics historian David Kunzle as the “assumption that the shape of the skull, particularly the upper part surrounding the brain, infallibly reveals character and even destiny” (“Rodolphe Töpffer” 22). Töpffer strips the detail of his varied renderings of the human head down to “the barest of signifiers” (21). He does this with purpose – as a way of displaying that the viewer brings to the table their own interpretation of a facial expression.⁴ Physiognomy, as opposed to phrenology, purports to read character and feeling from signs on the face accepting that the results are mysterious, incomplete, and potentially contradictory. From there, he confronts the variability of the human head, comparing phrenology directly to physiognomy to de-essentialize it (fig. 4). Very little of Töpffer’s work would find an audience in the United States.⁵ It was not until 1965 that the essay containing his socially significant critique of the aforementioned pseudoscience as well as his aesthetically significant drawing instruction would be translated into English.

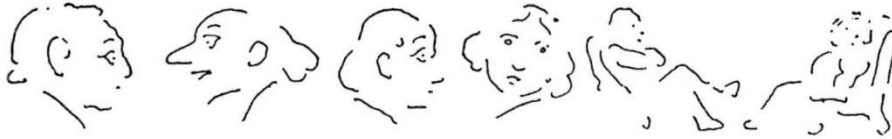
It is this *formal* economy-of-line, this intentioned reduction and minuteness, which resulted in the early relationship of young/child consumers to comics. This was despite the social goals of early practitioners of sequential art and their adult target audiences. According to Maltese comics

⁴ Kunzle’s quote from *Essai de physiognomie* – “And note well that the least practiced eye supplies the gaps in imitation, with a facility and above all truthfulness which turn entirely to the advantage of the artist. They are, heads, a gentleman and a lady who present broken lines in the highest degree, discontinuities of contour not a little monstrous” – comes from the only current English translation of Töpffer’s work, Wiese’s long out-of-print *Enter The Comics* (1965).

⁵ Critic and editor John Neal published his *History de M. Vieux Bois* as *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck* (1842). I cover Töpffer’s multiple introductions to U.S. audiences in Section 8.

critic Gōrg Mallia, “Comics visual literacy seemed to be more easily acquired by the young than the symbolic literacy of morphemic syntax,” despite the fact that it was “complex and elaborate” (¶3). The aesthetic minorness of comics as objects lead children – similarly

DAVID KUNZLE



“And note well that the least practiced eye supplies the gaps in imitation, with a facility and above all truthfulness which turn entirely to the advantage of the artist. There they are, heads, a gentleman and a lady who present broken lines in the highest degree, discontinuities of contour not a little monstrous . . .” (*Essai de Physiognomie*, 1845).

Figure 3. Töpffer. Economy of Line in Representation of the Human Face [1845].

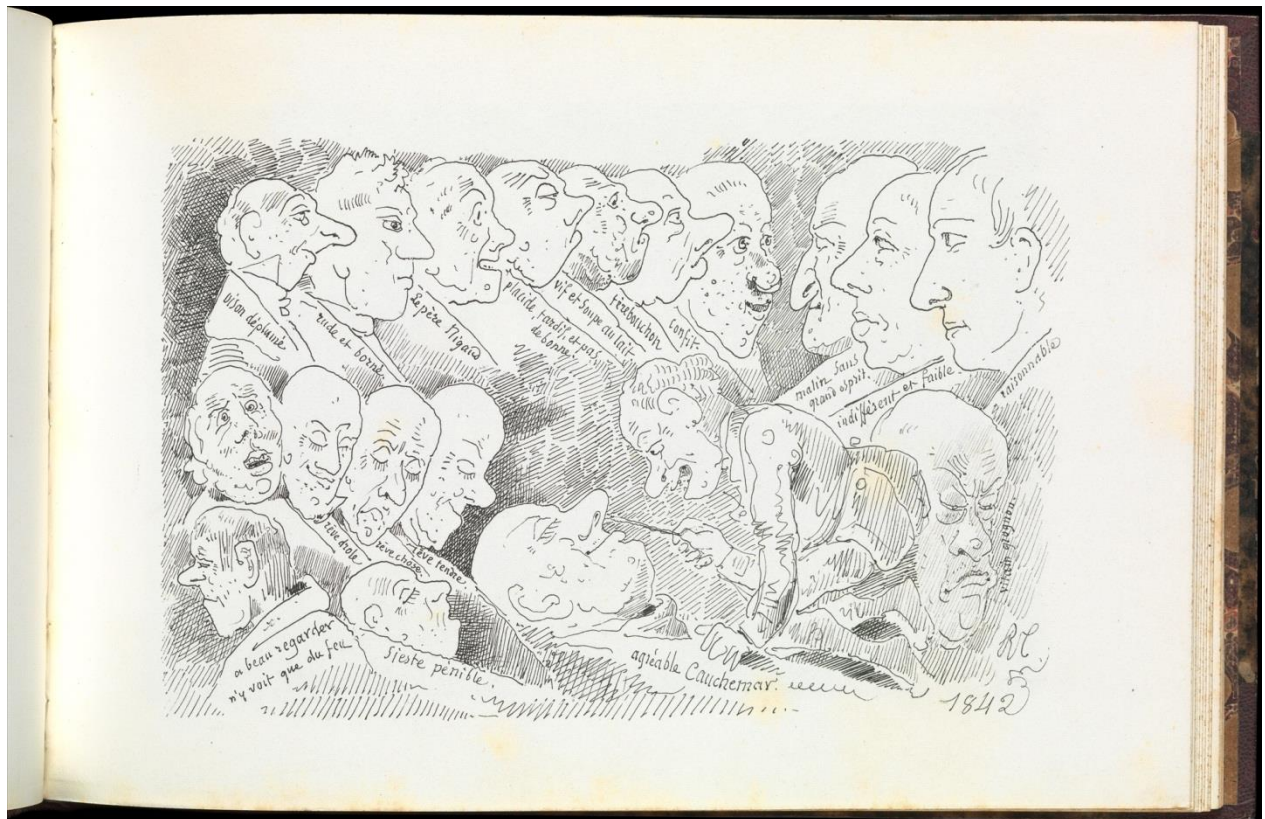


Figure 4. Töpffer. Critique of Phrenology, Variety of the Face [1842].

powerless, minor subjects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – to engage with the medium’s unique visual-verbal blend. Walter Benjamin was interested both in children as minor subjects and in minor, small objects. These points of connection provide a base with which to interrogate his writings and to use his work to address Comics Studies scholarship. While I have located the places of congruity between Benjamin and the medium of comics, now I will start to examine the theoretical concepts in Benjamin connected to children and minor objects. This examination provides the starting point for an understanding of the Benjaminian concepts that we will utilize in interrogating the problem of legitimation and definitional debates within Comics Studies.

III. Collecting and “The Gift of the Moment”

Given Benjamin’s relationship to children and collecting, in this section, we will examine the relationship of Benjamin to childhood experience through his understanding of child collectors and introducing a key theoretical concept described here as “the gift of the moment.” In “Unpacking My Library” (1931), Benjamin aligned the act of collecting with childhood experience:

I am not exaggerating when I say that to a true collector the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth. This is the childlike element which in a collector mingles with the element of old age. For children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unending ways. Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals – the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names. (61)

Connecting Benjamin’s observations to comics, we may observe that children, the target audience of the form by the 1940s, collected strips clipped from newspapers and books in their closets and

under their beds in shoeboxes. These acquisitions came from the emergence of a newly discovered purchasing power. Indeed, one of the allures of comic books for children, particularly following the Second World War but certainly prior, was the sense of private possession that came with the exercise of their own economic activity (Jackson and Arnold ¶7). This too aligned with Benjamin's archival sensibility. For Benjamin, collecting is an intensely personal act whose meaning is embedded in private ownership, "But one thing should be noted: the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter" ("Unpacking My Library" 67). Continuing along these lines, Sontag notes that in Benjamin's autobiographic "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), he articulates his memory of his first books as an experience of childhood rapture (20).

When Sontag's emphasis on Benjamin's joy in receiving his first books aligns with his emphasis on private property, it almost constructs an image of Benjamin who revels in capitalist culture. However, we can also situate this site of joy and rapture as a site of resistance. In her essay "The City of Collective Memory," Dianne Chisholm maintains that in "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), (as well as in the whole of *One Way Street*), Benjamin "showed how memory, particularly childhood memory, of city objects and spaces can subvert reified reason by conjuring remembrances otherwise lost to bourgeois history" (198). In Chisholm's reading of Benjamin, memory becomes an "excavation site" where one digs for fragmentary moments of past experience (206). These memories themselves constitute a collection; like the aforementioned collection of books, this collection of memories is also highly personal. This fragmentary collection of recollections to Benjamin is like "an attic unvisited for years" and "the junkroom of the West End bourgeoisie" ("A Berlin Chronicle" 606). For Chisholm, childhood memory functions as a way

renewing the junkroom of memory, equally likely to find “value in junk as in riches, since junk, along with the waste products generated from all forms of construction, avails itself for children’s play” (207). Childhood memory refurbishes these fragments with historical value, disconnecting them from both *use value* and *exchange-value* (“perceived at the time of production”) as well as the destructive erosion of the “march of progress.” The site of childhood joy then is integral to Benjamin’s resistance to commodity culture, and aligns childhood memory and collecting into a critical historiographic project.⁶

The memory of joy experienced by the child collector of comics becomes “the gift of the moment” that collapses the distinctions between then and now, subject and object. Benjamin found a way of awakening “concealed life in petrified objects” and of scrutinizing “living things so that they present themselves as ancient, ‘Ur-historical’ and abruptly release their significance,” as Theodor Adorno put it in his “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin” (233). His concern for junk and detritus, for eclectic and minor objects, comes from his belief that the salvation of humanity is indelibly linked to the downfall of the subject (230). Returning to his section on collecting from “Unpacking My Library,” it is not by accident that his defense of private collections is not for the benefit of the collector, but rather for the objects collected. Through his anti-subjectivism, Benjamin emphasizes the uselessness of things – the helplessness of objects. By collapsing the organic and the inorganic, Adorno claims Benjamin’s thought “is so saturated with culture as its natural object that it swears loyalty to reification instead of flatly rejecting it” (“Portrait of Walter Benjamin” 233). Rather than producing alienation as in Marx, reification for Benjamin becomes a way by which to cultivate a concern for the marginal, both marginal objects as well as marginal

⁶ Chisholm utilizes this methodology to produce a critical *counterhistory* as a way of understanding the city as a space of queer collectivity. A successful application of a similar strategy can be seen in Delany’s account of the gentrification of Times Square in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*.

subjects. Subjects so reified, such as children in Benjamin, take on a renewed significance. To reformulate my earlier statement in another way: it is unlikely that Benjamin would have overlooked the cultural emergence of superhero comics as children and their relationship to nature through technology (and by extension, mass media) were of particular philosophical importance to him,⁷ locked under his microscopic gaze like the grains of wheat he showed his friend Gershom Scholem.⁸ To summarize: “the gift of the moment” is a moment of inverted reification that produces care for the marginal objects and subjects gathered by the child collector. Having come to an understanding of what “the gift of the moment” is and its connection to child collecting, we will move next to further analyzing the way that the same “the gift of the moment” manifests itself in Benjamin’s speculative discourses in order to better understand this element of his work.

IV. Benjamin’s Speculative Discourses

Understanding how “the gift of the moment” fits into his broader project of technological and historical critique is necessary in order to utilize it in relation to Comics historiography. As a way of understanding how “the gift of the moment” and Benjamin’s critiques fit together, let us consider a pair of speculative discourses that Benjamin published in the 1930s. The first, from “Theories of German Fascism,” on Ernst Jünger, is a meditation on a collection of essays Jünger produced which were popular among Nazi youth. Benjamin’s commentary is intensely critical of

⁷ I should take a second to address the question of whether or not Benjamin idealized or romanticized children. Ulanowicz points out that “Benjamin’s observation of children’s fascination with rubbish was not made out of sentimental condescension nor was it intended as an exercise in nostalgia. Rather, it was meant to characterize young people as skilled collectors. Although he certainly did not romanticize children – indeed he once described them as little dictators – Benjamin nevertheless admired their capacity for collecting” (¶1). Ulanowicz references a moment in Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater” (1929) where he comments that the “child inhabits his world like a dictator” (204).

⁸ As relayed in Sontag’s introduction to *One Way Street*, “Scholem relates that when he visited Benjamin in Paris in August 1927 (the first time the two friends had seen each other since Scholem emigrated to Palestine in 1923), Benjamin dragged him to an exhibit of Jewish ritual objects at the Musée Cluny to show him ‘two grains of wheat on which a kindred soul had inscribed the complete Shema Israel’” (19).

a portrait of the First World War that ignores “the new warfare of technology and material,” in particular gas warfare. Beyond that, Benjamin accuses Jünger of promoting a fascist ideology that calls for eternal war, which he saw as “none other than an uninhibited translation of the principles of *l’art pour l’art* to war itself” (122). According to Peter Osborne in his *Politics of Time*, by the end of 1935 this relationship of art for art’s sake to the conception of war became one of Benjamin’s principle concerns (153-54). Benjamin’s anxiety about the connection of art to warfare, aesthetics, and fascism can be confirmed by even a cursory glance his canonical essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproducibility” (1936). One of the ways that this early formation of these concerns differs from “Work of Art” is in his attempt to think *through* the change in historical relations between society, authority, and technology with the goal of imagining the future moment:

In reality that war is only this: The one, fearful, last chance to correct the incapacity of peoples to order their relationships to one another in accord with the relationship they possess to nature through their technology. If this corrective effort fails, millions of human bodies will indeed inevitably be chopped to pieces and chewed up by iron and gas. But even the habitués of the chthonic forces of terror, who carry their volumes of Klages in their packs, will not learn one-tenth of what nature promises its less idly curious, more sober children, who possess in technology not a fetish of doom but a key to happiness. They will demonstrate this sobriety the moment they refuse to acknowledge the next war as an incisive magical turning point, and instead discover it in the image of everyday actuality. And they will demonstrate it when they use this discovery to transform this war into civil war and thereby perform that Marxist trick which alone is a match for this sinister runic humbug. (“Theories of German Fascism” 128)

Here, Benjamin’s hope for Germany is entangled with a reorientation of the relationship between subject and object expressed as a relationship to nature mediated by technology. The ways that individuals utilize technology and use it to interact with the natural world stands in for the way that individuals interact with one another. This destructive ends-means relationship of domination inherent in the application of technology to warfare results in a mapping of that mode of interaction

on to social relations. While Benjamin rejected the presence of Hegelian positivity that he saw in dialectical materialism, in this earlier work he preserved the kernel of the Marxist revolutionary teleology (“A Portrait of Walter Benjamin” 235-36). In this essay, “the gift of the moment” enables “sober children” to understand technology not as a “fetish of doom” but as a “key to happiness”; this happiness is contingent on understanding the First World War as a final opportunity for a transformation of the relationship between subject and object, with childhood memory providing the blueprint for this intellectual-social work. This model is present in his earlier work as well, and can be found in an earlier form in Benjamin’s essay “To the Planetarium” (1923-26), where he previously considered the same themes:

This immense wooing of the cosmos [The First World War] was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale – that is, in the spirit of technology. But because the lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction through it, technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. The mastery of nature (so the imperialists teach) is the purpose of all technology. But who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children? (103-4)

A more overtly Marxist Benjamin couches his revolutionary desire firmly in the materialist paradigm that he would later abandon, calling those that caused the war “ruling class imperialists” who are driven by a “lust for profit.” But, even within these ideological constraints, Benjamin’s privileging of the childhood experience (and thereby, memory) is his principle concern.

In his later speculative work, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), following the Nazi-Soviet Pact of Non-Aggression in 1939, Benjamin emptied the Marxist revolutionary telos of “homogenous and empty time” and infused it with his own religiosity through his concept of “messianic time” [*Jetztzeit*]. This reworking of his prior idea of revolution came as a result of his belief in the failure of positive history as articulated in his thesis 7, “There is no document of

civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). For Adorno, affirmative dialectics meets its end at Auschwitz; for Benjamin, affirmative dialectics ruptures and comes to a standstill following the Hitler-Stalin Pact (Lyotard 90). Slavoj Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, reads the concept of revolution in the “Theses” as “a moment of ‘stasis’ when the continuity is broken, when the texture of previous history, that of the winners, is annihilated, and when, retroactively, through the success of the revolution, each abortive act, each slip, each past failed attempt which functioned in the reigning Text as an empty and meaningless trace, will be ‘redeemed’, will receive its signification” (143). In place of a positive or Hegelian history, historical movement ceases and becomes a self-contained, repeating circuit: dialectics at a standstill [*Dialektik im Stindstall*]. Benjamin’s ‘dialectics at a standstill’ forces the relationship between the ‘then’ and the ‘now’ into a closed loop: a temporal monad.⁹ Through this temporal monad, redemption (the goal of revolution) is positioned outside of history – linear time is halted. The negativity of the monad as rupture or break and its repositioning of redemption as somewhere else external to history on the surface seems like a departure from the nine-tenths greater learning promised by nature in “Theories of German Fascism” to “sober children” who discover their right relationship to nature through technology. However, the cessation of happening and the collapse of the forward motion of history are integral to Benjamin’s critique. His historical critique, “the gift of the moment,” and the role of childhood memory reunite on further analysis of Benjamin’s

⁹ The description of Benjamin’s project in “Theses” as a monad is taken up by both Žižek in *Sublime Object* (140) as well as in Peter Osborne’s *The Politics of Time*, where he relates the temporal monad directly in resistance to Hegelianism: “How can history present itself as a whole in the time of now, outside of the confines of the ultimately time-denying eternal present of Hegelianism? The trick lies in the monadic structure of the dialectical image, production object of now time. For rather than constructing a linear unidirectional series of successive instants (Aristotle’s ‘before/now or then/after’), or a three-dimensional temporal spectrum (Husserl’s ‘past/present/future’), Benjamin’s dialectical images are constellations of the ‘then’ and the ‘now,’ which, in the hermetic enclosure of their internal relations, mirror the structure of history as a whole, when viewed from the standpoint of its end” (145).

“Theses.” Before moving to highlight that relationship, let’s pause to consider just what historical structure he opposes.

V. Positive History

At this point, I will shift from my consideration of Benjamin’s “gift of the moment” in order to foreground the structure of history that Benjamin critiques, the same model of history that underpins historical work in the field of Comics Studies. Before we can understand how this historical structure is utilized in Comics Studies, we have to first define it. Returning to Benjamin with this in mind, the necessity of the “dialectics at a standstill” in Benjamin’s writing is due to his understanding of the failure of “positive history.” If the relationship to nature (and thereby the relationship between subject and object) is mediated by technology in Benjamin, then the relationship of society to technology is mediated by a particular relationship to Enlightenment master narratives of historical progress. The structures, representations, and politics of history itself becomes a form of technology that determines or fixes these relationships. Adorno articulates this concern best in his volume *Negative Dialectics*, in the section on “Universal History” where he directly confronts constructions of history in Hegel:

After the catastrophes that have happened, and in the view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for the better world is manifested in history and unites it. Not to be denied for that reason, however, is the unity that cements the discontinuous, chaotically splintered moments and phases of history – the unity of the control of nature, progressing to rule over men, and finally to that of men’s inner nature. No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. (319)

In “To the Planetarium” and “Theories of German Fascism,” Benjamin warned of an impending calamity that would be realized if the relationship societies did not reorient their relationship between nature and technology. Adorno published *Negative Dialectics* having lived through a

fifteen-year exile during World War II; he bore witness to the fulfillment of Benjamin's warnings. Adorno revises and expands on these warnings, further connecting the relationship of history and technology to the history of warfare itself whose achievement is the atomic bomb.

Taking a moment to clarify my terms, thus far I've used a variety of diverse nouns and adjectives to refer to what I see as a singular historical construct. Benjamin and Adorno refers both alternatively refer to it as "universal history" and "natural history"; Dianne Chisholm calls the historical form "bourgeois history"; Susan Buck-Morss, when working with the ideas of Jurgen Habermas, calls it "empirical history" and when discussing Benjamin calls it "History-as-Progress" (Buck-Morss 248, 262). In this essay, I've alternatively referred to this historical formation as Hegelian history and as what I find most accurate, "positive history." But what *is* positive history and what are its particular features? This question is an important one to address if we are to both understand Benjamin's critical practice *and* the structure of historical narrative and representation in the field of Comics Studies. As earlier stated, the historical structure critiqued by Benjamin is also the one employed in Comics Studies. Note that Benjamin, and Adorno after him, were concerned about a particular system of historical form and argumentation, the dialectic, whose modern philosophical standard bearers were the philosophers Hegel, followed closely by Marx and Engels. The structure of the dialectic has been to some degree fixed since classical philosophy: thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. What Hegel, Marx, and Engels did was to rethink what could be understood through the framework of dialectics. For Hegel, the very totality of history itself could be understood as a massive dialectic process which leads to the present moment. One of the clearest articulations of this historical figuration in Hegel comes in his volume on political philosophy, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1820):

The spirit of a nation [the spirit of the state, *Volksgeist*] is an existing individual having in particularity its objective actuality of self-consciousness. Because of this particularity it is limited. The destinies and deeds of states in their connection with one another are the visible dialectic of the finite nature of these spirits. Out of this dialectic the universal spirit, the spirit of the world, the unlimited spirit, produces itself. It has the highest right of all, and exercises its right upon the lower spirits in world-history. The history of the world is the world's court of judgment. (199)

Not only is the world interpretable through the lens of dialectics in Hegel, the dialectical process is guided by a transcendental, objective world-spirit [*Weltgeist*]. In the Hegelian system of dialectics, this extends from the relations of being and ontology (as articulated in his *Science of Logic*) to the relations between countries (*Volksgeist* to *Weltgeist*) to as articulated above. This formulation of the dialectic presents the present as determinist telos: as Osborne calls it “the ultimately time-denying eternal present of Hegelianism” (*Walter Benjamin* 319). In Marx and Engel’s revision of Hegel’s dialectics, they supplant the *Weltgeist* as the historical guide of the dialectic with class antagonism and materialism. This is succinctly articulated by the oft quoted line from *The Communist Manifesto*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 31). While Marx and Engel’s rejected the transcendental guide of the dialectical process, and despite Marx’s assertion that he “turned Hegel on his head,”¹⁰ he and Engels maintained that the dialectic is inherent to nature and that history itself could be an object of analysis. In Marxist dialectics, history progresses through a series of historical stages by way of dialectical moves: for example, from feudalist society which is challenged by the bourgeoisie and eventually gives way to capitalism; this followed in sequence by capitalist society

¹⁰ “My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea,’ he transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea.’ With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. ...the mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell” (“Afterward to the Second German Edition” n.p.).

which will face a proletarian uprising eventually yielding to the rise of socialism. This philosophy of history bursts on to the world geopolitical stage through Lenin, the October Revolution, and the rise of the Soviet Union and its official adoption of *diamat* under Stalin.

In their model of historical development, Marx and Engel's saw capitalism as an intermediary phase of history. However, Marx uses the triadic form of the dialectic for both the means by which Capital extracts surplus value and the way that Capital circumvents limitations to its profitability ("General Formula of Capital" n.p.). David Harvey, in his essay "The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis this Time," comments:

In the latter work [the *Grundrisse*] Marx argues that the circulation and accumulation of capital cannot abide limits. When it encounters limits it works assiduously to convert them into barriers that can be transcended or by-passed. This focuses our attention upon those points in the circulation of capital where potential limits, blockages and barriers might arise, since these can produce crises of one sort or another. (¶2)

This form of creative destruction closely mirrors the dialectical form, with Capital performing a "negation of the negation" against any limit point or barrier erected in its path.¹¹ It is clear that not only dialectical materialism but capitalism too co-opted Hegel's historical dialectic to its own ends. There can be no better example of this appropriation/assimilation than in Francis Fukuyama's essay "The End of History?" This essay asserts the victory of liberal democracy and the "free market" over Marxism at the crucial hinge point of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Fukuyama posits as telos the expansion of liberal democracy and "free market" capitalism over the whole world, leading Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* to call Fukuyama's larger volume a "gospel" of the death of Marxism (16). The form of dialectical, "positive history" is not simply one inherent to Marxist or to capitalist structures, but one that pervades and coopts both. Benjamin's

¹¹ As Harvey calls it when describing the circulation of Capital in Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity* 106. The "periodic paroxysms of crisis" mentioned by Harvey are the contradictions that are inherent to the dialectic.

understanding of this underlying structure of “positive history” means that his criticisms apply to both capitalist and Orthodox Marxist projects and that Benjamin provides a model of a Marxist historiography that rejects the dialectical form of positive history.

One fundamental problem of the dialectical approach to history is that the Hegelian Absolute, Marxist materialism, and the expansionary logic of Capital each position themselves as affirmative dialectics and with it as an affirmative cultural formation.¹² By “affirmative culture,” I mean that they occupy the positive (thesis) end of the historical dialectic and position themselves as the “correct social formation of the progress of history. All critique is ultimately ineffectual (or minimally effectual) as the negative end of the historical dialectic is inevitably and invariably sublated [*aufgehoben*] into the positive: determinate negation [*bestimmte Negation*] or some form of recuperation into an a priori affirmative.¹³ The first term occupies a place of successive victories either leading to the status quo, a justification of current social dominance as in Hegel, or a longer view of inevitable world-historical teleology whose horizon is the complete global adoption of its system as in the dialectical materialism of Orthodox Marxism and the expansionary forces of Capital and its teleological “End of History” – all and each a particular dialectical “history of the

¹² I’m using this term in this fashion with full knowledge of its loaded tradition in both Adorno and in Herbert Marcuse. A longer, more substantial history of the concept and critique of the dialectic would demand the inclusion of commentaries on both Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as Marcuse’s “On the Affirmative Character of Culture” (1937) and his more enduring *One-Dimensional Man*. In these works, affirmative culture is almost exclusively used in relation to Bourgeoisie culture and periodization (“Bourgeois epoch” for instance). However, I think this term is appropriate for this collected set of positive dialectical histories given their relationship to instrumental reason, technology, and Enlightenment master narrative. To some degree, what is “affirmative” about affirmative culture is that it supports the existing social order.

¹³ An understanding of negativity that, of course, ignores the radically negative’s role in setting the dialectical process itself in motion. See the first half of Barrett Watten’s chapter “Negative Moments,” from *The Constructivist Moment*, as well as Slavoj Žižek’s commentary on Hitchcock’s “Rear Window” and the Lacanian “object-cause of desire” in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. In his recent volume on Hegel, Žižek puts it succinctly: “Hegel’s (and Lacan’s) hypothesis is that this holds for all divisions of a genus into species: every genus, in order to be fully divided into species, has to include such a negative pseudo-species, a ‘part of no part’ of the genus, all those who belong to the genus but are not covered by any of its species. This ‘contradiction’ between a genus and its species, embodied in an excessive group whose consistency is purely ‘negative,’ is what sets a dialectical process in motion” (*Less Than Nothing* 28).

winners.” Underpinning this view of history is the notion that the world is ultimately mappable, that it can be understood as a coherent, unified whole: a notion which leads to an ultimately false, essentializing totality. The preceding problematic is closely connected to the following: the set of these affirmative dialectical histories represent the concrete manifestations of the historical grand narratives of Enlightenment with its attendant fixation on instrumental reason, positivism, and technological modernity whose ideal of progress is coterminous with domination. That is to say that the idea of a dialectical progression of history is to some degree *ineluctably* entangled with Enlightenment: this is equally true of capitalism and Marxism which Žižek rightfully comments looks for a global revolution “which will then abolish the basic social antagonism, enabling the formation of a transparent, rationally governed society” (*Sublime Object* 4). The attachment of Enlightenment narrative to positive (universal) history marries the circular causality dilemma to Adorno’s declaration that “universal history must be construed and denied” – it must be construed because it already has been (*Negative Dialectics* 319).

Now that we have a name and a historical context for the historical structure that Benjamin critiques and that comics scholarship utilizes, how do we go about using this information towards a formal analysis of already existing historical narratives in Comics Studies? I’ve spent a bit of space here defining and contextualizing positive history, but how do we *see* positive history? That is, how do we *identify* positive histories within an episteme or specific discourse, in a historical construction or a field of knowledge? What are its formal properties, associated concepts, and identificatory tropes? A total list would be impossible, but we can turn to the work of Michel Foucault for something closer to a method. In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault works through Nietzsche’s concept of genealogy, using a close reading of his work as a means of producing a model of “effective history” as opposed to “traditional history” (87). His category of

traditional history closely maps on to our already established concept of positive history. Moreover, Foucault mirrors many of the Adorno's concerns. Foucault states that "we should replace the two great problems of nineteenth-century philosophy" passed on by Fichte and Hegel (96). These two great problems he refers to are "the reciprocal basis of truth and liberty" and "the possibility of absolute knowledge." The latter of these, absolute knowledge, predicates or underpins the notion of a universal history. In the place of these, Foucault suggests an idea from Nietzsche "To perish through absolute knowledge may well form a part of the basis of being." The idea of perishing through absolute knowledge mirrors the Adorno's critique of Hegel's *Weltgeist* as "defined as permanent catastrophe" (*Negative Dialectics* 320). Foucault's declaration that "humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" seems to directly target the idea of a dialectical progression of history: one marked by the resolution of conflicts, the synthesis of various antagonisms and contradictions, destined for a distant temporality of neither an Absolute nor a rationally-governed utopian future (85).

An analysis of Foucault's essay provides us with a conceptual field by which to further understand positive history. Producing a conceptual field is a near necessity: Positive history, as critically and philosophically normative, takes on the ideological characteristic of normative invisibility (similar to whiteness in Race Theory, heteronormativity in Queer Theory, etc.) which obscures our abilities to render its features concretely. To facilitate analysis, I've parsed Foucault's essay for the specific language where he describes traditional history. In some cases, due to the comparative nature of the work (effective history/genealogy against traditional history/demagoguery), some of the descriptive language is from selections where genealogy is

negatively defined – that is, that it contrastively defines genealogy by describing positive history and utilizing simple logical negation. When Foucault employs this technique of contrastive definition and description to produce language about traditional history, I’ve noted so in the table and noted the telltale simple negator.

Figure 5. Language of Positive History in Foucault’s “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.”

Language Used to Describe Traditional History in Foucault	Contrastively Described?	Logical Negator	Page
“linear development”	No	--	76
Reduction “to an exclusive concern for utility”	No	--	76
“assumed words kept their meanings, that desires pointed in a single direction, and that ideas retained their logic”	No	--	76
traces the “gradual curve of evolution”	No	--	76
“metahistorical development of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies”	Yes	“Rejects”	77
Searches “for origins”	Yes	“Opposes”	77
“extends his faith in metaphysics”	Yes	“Refuses”	78
Finds “a timeless and essential secret” behind history	Yes	“Not”	78
“the origin is linked to...the site of truth”	No	--	79
“vantage point of absolute distance”	No	--	79
pretends “to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things”	Yes	“Not”	81
Resembles “the evolution of a species”	Yes	“Not”	81
Maps “the destiny of a people”	Yes	“Not”	81
Erects “foundations”	Yes	“Not”	82
“uninterrupted community”	Yes	“Wrong”	83
“final term of a historical development”	Yes	“Avoid”	83
Places “present needs at the origin”	No	--	83
Seeks “the emancipatory power of meaning”	Yes	“Not”	83
Offers “the spectacle of a struggle among equals”	Yes	“Not”	84
“imposition of a duration not intrinsic to them”	Yes	“Not”	85
“arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law replaces warfare”	Yes	“Not”	85
“reintroduces (and always assumes) a suprahistorical perspective”	No	--	86
“function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself”	No	--	86
“always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all displacements of the past”	No	--	87

“perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development”	No	--	87
Gives “the reassuring stability of life and nature”; “traditional foundations”; “pretended continuity”	No	--	88
“successive forms of a primordial intention”	No	--	88
Confirms “our belief that the preset rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities”	No	--	89
“given to contemplation of distances and heights: the noblest periods, the highest forms, the most abstract ideas, the purist individualities”	No	--	89
Risks “adopting the famous perspective of frogs” (<i>fameux perspective des grenouilles</i>)	No	--	89
“a complete denial of the body”; “placing of conclusions at the beginning”; “making last things first”	No	--	90
“Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy – the unavoidable obstacles of their passion.”	No	--	90
“A characteristic of history is to be without choice: it encourages thorough understanding and excludes qualitative judgments – a sensitivity to all things without distinction, a comprehensive view excluding differences. Nothing must escape it and, more importantly, nothing must be excluded.”	No	--	90-91
“reduction of all things to the lowest common denominator”	No	--	90
“hides its singular malice under the cloak of universals”	No	--	91
“As the demagogue is obliged to invoke truth, laws of essences, and eternal necessity, the historian must invoke objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past.”	No	--	91
“denies the body to secure the sovereignty of a timeless idea”; “effaces his proper individuality”	No	--	91
“In appearance, or rather, according to the mask it bears, historical consciousness is neutral, devoid of passions, and committed solely to the truth.”	No	--	95
Affirms “the unity of the subject”	No	--	96
“the reciprocal basis of truth”; “possibility of absolute knowledge”	No	--	96
Judges “the past in the name of a truth we can only possess in the present”	Yes	“No Longer”	97

These forty-one moments in Foucault's essay work to remove the veil of normative invisibility from positive history in such a way that its positions and allegiances, indeed its politics, become opaque. The producer of positive history places their own subjective appearances under erasure; they are embodied while denying the historicity of the body and exclude while positing their own perspective as a comprehensive view. Their historical product occupies the performative, but ultimately false, position of objectivity making a claim to both the possibility of truth-in-history and to the possession of that truth. Positive history claims to have discovered this embedded, gnostic truth in the search for origins. It hides the absence of said truth behind suprahistorical etiologies and teleological structures of indeterminate origin and length, extending the range of its oracular gaze to the beginning and end of what it examines. It proclaims the whole of what it has examined as *the whole itself*, replacing the set of things examined by positive history as the set of the history of the examined. It hides what it excluded behind universals, which as their name suggests are so large that they cannot be looked around. Like a politician, positive history asks for belief in its inscriptions and faith that the words that it says will mean the same thing tomorrow. It asks you to extend the same trust in the unity, the completion, of its history which mirrors the development of humanity itself and affirms its importance above all other created things. It tells you that you too have that same unity. Positive history says, "You were born and you will die. While you live, you will struggle. So too does history, which is a linear continuity of moments and historical struggles from the moment of its birth (that I have decided) to its death which will occur some indeterminate future moment. We are all the same." Positive history tells you that, anyway, there are no other options: its history is bedrock. It promises that it will deal with you fairly.

Looking through Benjamin and Foucault, on a formal level I see that positive history has the following characteristics:

1. Attempts to assert or posit an origin for its subject matter;
2. Reduces its subject matter to a “lowest common denominator” by removing difference and diversity in the name of utility;
3. Foregrounds a technology/media as a condition for possibility, or as a source of epoch break;
4. Presents conflicts as between equitable forces, as having relatively equal power, or fails to note the discrepancy in power differential between contesting forces;
5. When shown, above conflicts are framed as already-resolved, preserving continuity of past to present;
6. Gives its model and conclusions in the form of objective fact;
7. Fails to acknowledge or recognize its exclusions or moments of narrative discontinuity

Having read positive history through the locus of Benjamin, Adorno, and Foucault and generated a series of criteria for concrete analysis, the next portion of this essay will turn the structure of historical narrative and representation in the field of Comics Studies. Through a careful analysis of historical research and an application of the formal characteristics of positive history we've produced here, we will be able to see the structure of positive history within comics historiography.

VI. Positive History and Comics Studies

To understand the possibilities of critical agency and capability in Comics Studies historiography, we first need to find a point of access into which to insert ourselves into the historical debates within the field. A full consideration of the history of comics would include at minimum considerations of origin, periodization and breaks, and teleology. Comics scholarship certainly has its own popular structure of periodization, the “age” structure: *golden age*, *silver age*,

bronze age, modern age. This structure has the advantage that it was constructed outside of the formation of Comics Studies as a field; it arose out of the hobby shop (Jackson and Arnold ¶4). However, periodization structures in comics scholarship are genre-specific, taking on either comics strips, comic books, or web comics – with limited cross mapping capability. For the purposes of this essay, we’ll consider only a single strand of positive history whose structure operates at the level of medium: origin or *Ursprung*.¹⁴ Let us consider for the *Ursprung* of Comics Studies: “The Yellow Kid” Narrative. A creation of Richard F. Outcault, “The Yellow Kid” is the name of a comic strip character published in both William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* near the turn of twentieth century. In the United States in the 1890s comic strips were added as regular inserts in newspapers as a means to attract large immigrant populations in urban centers (*Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels* 18). The power of comic strips to influence mostly English-illiterate populations was understood as early as 1871 when New York politician William “Boss” Tweed is reported to have said, “Stop them damned pictures. I don’t care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents don’t know how to read, but they can’t help seeing them damned pictures!” The Yellow Kid appears as a small, bald child in an ill-fitting, long sleeved yellow nightshirt. Brian Boyd in his “On the Origin of Comics” describes Outcault’s creation as “a gleefully populist, lowest-common denominator *low play*” (103). This is an apt description to some degree; strips portraying The Yellow Kid were filled with pidgin English and the eponymous protagonist was himself a soiled Chinese-immigrant caricature.¹⁵ However, this misses the point that The Yellow Kid’s representation of child poverty

¹⁴ In Foucault’s reading of Nietzsche, he points out that Nietzsche uses three distinct words for “origin”: *Ursprung* [“original basis”], *Entstehung* [“emergence”], and *Herkunft* (“descent”, connected to biology). *Ursprung* connects to metaphysical origins or the search for etiology: to traditional history. My usage of “origin” in this essay, unless otherwise noted, aligns with this particular usage in Foucault (79).

¹⁵ Sabin describes “The Yellow Kid” as “a Chinese-looking urchin”. Petersen in his *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels* calls The Yellow Kid “a mongoloid-looking, bald child” (97).

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the majority view among academics and serious commentators on comics up until now is that the Yellow Kid was the first comics superstar. Here is a quote from the latest in a long line of studies: ‘The Yellow Kid has been accepted by several generations of comic strip historians as a pivotal creation in the history of the comics.’ (“Ally Sloper” ¶43)

Even a cursory glance at contemporary scholarship in the field confirms this claim. It’s possible to find examples of this even in a fairly recent article published in *ImageText*, one of the central journals in the field published out of University of Florida.¹⁶ In Kathy Merlock Jackson and Mark D. Arnold’s “Baby-Boom Children and Harvey Comics After the Code: A Neighborhood of Little Girls and Boys,” Jackson and Arnold provide a list of previous comics texts that contain child protagonists. This list begins with The Yellow Kid and ends with Little Lulu, furthering the idea of The Yellow Kid as starting point (5).

The narrative of The Yellow Kid as the origin of comics was most certainly widely circulated by the time that the United States entered World War II. It’s used in the earliest English language volume on comics, Martin Sheridan’s *Comics and Their Creators* (1942): “The first comics didn’t appear in the United States until the latter half of the nineteenth century. Richard F Outcault, a former draftsman for *Electrical World*, created a little roughneck character from the slums and called him The Yellow Kid” (16-17). Sheridan’s book was, as M. Thomas Inge puts it, “neither a history nor a critical study” but a loose collection of interviews and biographical sketches of seventy-five artists and writers (xii). Coulton Waugh’s 1947 volume *The Comics* represents the earliest published attempt to produce an English language history of comics. Waugh begins his history at the same point as his predecessor with an introduction unironically titled “In The Beginning” where he devotes the first nine pages of the volume to Outcault’s creation. On the

¹⁶ University of Florida is the only English PhD program in the United States thus far to open a degree track specifically for Comics Studies, as a “Comics and Visual Rhetoric” track. Also, they host the prominent “Comix-Scholars Discussion List.”

final of those pages, he declares Outcault a “founding father” of comics. This etiological narrative was embraced on both sides of the cultural isle. In his Adorno-influenced essay “Notes on Mass Culture” (1948), critic Irving Howe comments, “The comics further dissociate personality by erasing the distinctions between adulthood and childhood. (Popular songs revert to baby-talk to relieve adult tension.) The first comic strip in this country was *The Yellow Kid*, a creature half-man and half-child, full of premature and malicious wisdom” (48). In this essay, Howe extends his critique of mass culture to comics strips and cartoons. He is particularly critical of both Donald Duck, who he sees as having “something of the SS man in him” (47).¹⁷ While he connects Donald Duck to authoritarianism, he condemns the comic strips *Katzenjammer Kids* and *Krazy Kat* as providing a fantasy mechanism for the safe violation of social law that ultimately reinforces real conformity. However, the source of research that lead Howe to his origin of comics (as well as to *Katzenjammer Kids* and *Krazy Kat*) was none other than “a naïve but useful book, *The Comics* by Coulton Waugh.” While Sheridan, Waugh, and Howe show that *The Yellow Kid* origin was widely disseminated by the start of the War and the immediate post-War period, it’s widely understood that the status of Outcault’s character in the canon as the origin of comics became fixed by Bill Blackbeard.¹⁸ Blackbeard’s most recognized work, *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (1977) co-edited with Martin Williams, had an enormous distribution through its connection to the Smithsonian Institute. It was here that a broader audience outside comics scholars and enthusiasts were introduced to *The Yellow Kid* as the starting point of comics, “The American comic strip first attained definitive form in a Sunday *Yellow Kid* page, drawn by Richard Felton

¹⁷ This is highly ironic given the cultural capital of Walt Disney’s anti-Nazi propaganda Donald Duck cartoon *Der Fueherer’s Face* released in 1942, just six years prior to the publication of this essay.

¹⁸ See the tributes to Bill Blackbeard on *The Comics Journal* (www.tcj.com/bill-blackbeard-tributes/) as well the longer “Bill Blackbeard, R.I.P.” (www.tcj.com/bill-blackbeard-rip/) to get a small the extent of his influence. Blackbeard’s personal comic strip collection of more than 2.5 million strips is housed at Ohio State University as part of the *Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum*.

Outcault for William Randolph Hearst's *American Humorist* weekly comic supplement to his *New York Journal*, on October 18, 1896" (Blackbeard and Williams 13).¹⁹

One would think, given the ubiquity of the preceding narrative and its influence on the development of Comics Studies as a field that it should be possible to ask a basic question such as "When was 'The Yellow Kid's first appearance in print?" This request for a simple temporal index is revealing. Influence of Blackbeard's massive coffee table book aside, his information for the earliest Yellow Kid comic is unreliable largely due to a lack of access to effective research materials.²⁰ He even misdates the comic he believes to be The Yellow Kid's first comic appearance, "The Yellow Kid Takes A Hand At Golf"; this particular strip was not published in *New York Journal's* "Hogan's Alley" serial until 24 October 1897. Similarly, Inge, in his previously mentioned introduction, notes that Waugh's early volume relied almost entirely on the microfilm archive at the New York Public Library and that "his dates are not always correct." Looking to recent scholarship in the field of Comics Studies, we can precisely narrow the "origin of comics" and the first appearance of The Yellow Kid to 2 June 1894... or 17 February 1895... or 25 October 1896. All three of these particular dates come from reputable scholars: 1894 comes from Roger Sabin's "Ally Sloper: The First Comics Superstar?"; 1895 comes from Matthew P. McAllister, Edward H. Sewell, Jr., and Ian Gordon's "Introducing Comics and Ideology"; 1896 comes from French critic Thierry Groensteen's "The Impossible Definition" from his recently translated *The System of Comics* ("Ally Sloper ¶43; McAllister, Sewell and Gordon 1; *The System of Comics* 13). Mike Benton, in his *The Comic Book in America: An Illustrated History* also dates The Yellow Kid to 16 February 1896 (14). The just-released volume by Jared Gardner,

¹⁹ Here, Blackbeard refers specifically to "Yellow Kid Takes A Hand At Golf," reprinted in his volume.

²⁰ Blackbeard ran a nonprofit institution out of his home, the *San Francisco Academy of Comic Art*, for three decades (1967-96). It was the first such collection in the United States.

Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First-Century Storytelling (Post*45 series, 2012), concurs with Groensteen and Benton in dating *The Yellow Kid* to 1896 (43). Roger Sabin, too, dates *The Yellow Kid* to 1896 in his canonical history *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* agreeing with Gardner, Groensteen, Benton and disagreeing with...himself (20).



FOURTH WARD BROWNIES.
MICKEY, THE ARTIST (adding a finishing touch)—
Dere, Chimmy! If Palmer Cox wuz t' see yer, he'd
git yer copyrighted in a minute.

Figure 7. Outcault, “Fourth Ward Brownies.” *New York World*, 17 February 1895.

How do we address this discontinuity and fragmentation? Discontinuity, after all, would seem like a problem given what we know about the formal characteristics of positive history from Foucault and Benjamin. Here, the difference in dating denotes that these authors are pointing to three distinct published comics. I should address 17 February 1895 first, which is the most frequently cited date for the first publication of *The Yellow Kid*. While Blackbeard calls his example “*The Yellow Kid* page,” it’s vital to note that early on *The Yellow Kid* appeared exclusively in a preexisting strip drawn by Outcault named “Hogan’s Alley.” “Fourth Ward

Brownies” (fig. 7) was the first Yellow Kid appearance in a “Hogan’s Alley” comic published by Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*.²¹ However, as was custom for artists during the period, Outcault would often sell his art to multiple venues, and “Hogan’s Alley” also appeared eight days earlier in a small humor magazine named *Truth* (Olson ¶5). According to Richard D. Olson, The Yellow Kid appeared four previous times in this magazine before his first appearance in *New York World* with the earliest (fig. 8) occurring in the 2 June 1894. This accounts for the first two dating discrepancies, but what about the third? At the beginning of this section of the essay, I reproduced the comic “The Yellow Kid and His New Phonograph” (fig. 6). This comic, published in *New York Journal* on 25 October 1896, marks the first time that Outcault uses a sequence of images separated by a loosely defined panel structure. Similarly, this also marks his earliest use of word balloons. For particular scholarly definitions of “comics,” in particular creative reinterpretations of Eisner’s “sequential art” definition, these two features are prerequisites for what separates “comics” from illustration, cartooning, etc. While the other “illustrations” or “cartoons” had Yellow Kid, for many comics historians this is the first Yellow Kid comic.

With this explanatory framework, the differences in dating the Yellow Kid narrative could be reconciled and the harmonized in a way to preserve the continuity of this dominant history. This is what a responsible scholar would do when faced with a narrative discontinuity: collapse the distinctions into a single account, negating the produced tension and contradiction to ultimately restore the narrative to a false sense of wholeness. This is what Olson attempts in his photo essay “R. F. Outcault, The Father of Sunday Comics, and the Truth About the Creation of the Yellow Kid.” Olson attributes the date discrepancy to “the sources a given author uses, thus

²¹ Image care of *The R. F. Outcault Society’s Yellow Kid Site*, which is curated by Richard D. Olson.



Figure 8. Outcault. “Feudal Pride in Hogan’s Alley.” *Truth*, Saturday, 2 June 1894.

perpetuating existing errors” (§7). However, while this may have been true at the beginning of Comics Studies scholarship, this is almost certainly not the case at this point. Early comics scholarship had to deal with the problem of a lack of access to original publications and materials. Contemporary comics scholarship has over a dozen research libraries that actively house and archive comics texts.²² Many of these collections have online access to their archives. Given the available access to original sources, it is unlikely that scholars in Comics Studies do as Olson suggests. Rather, the contradictions here show is that “The Yellow Kid” narrative is not about archival or source-related confusion regarding the proper dating of the art of Richard F. Outcault. With its increasing capability to double check its original sources, the conflicting date information in contemporary scholarship gestures towards another cause for the discontinuity. To give yet

²² These research resources include: the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State; the George A. Smathers Libraries at University of Florida; the Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State; the Murray Comic Book Collection at Duke; the Michael E. Uslan Collection of Comic Books & Graphic Novels at Indiana; the Comic Art Collection at Michigan State; the P. Craig Russell Collection at Kent State; the M. Thomas Inge Collection of Comic Arts at Virginia Commonwealth; and the John Phillip Borger Comic Book Collection at University of Minnesota.

another example of date discontinuity, the Ohio State University digital archive site for its The Yellow Kid collections states on its home page that “Outcault drew this character for the *New York World* from 5 May 1895 to 4 October 1896” (“Introduction: The Yellow Kid Digital Album” n.p.). Given that we know that Outcault both provided “Hogan’s Alley” earlier, as well as that The Yellow Kid appeared in these comics (and others) earlier than their given date, what reason could OSU have for presenting this later date? This source, and others, point to the Sunday, May 5th, 1895 date as the first Yellow Kid comic due to this being the first “Hogan’s Alley” printed as a *color* insert in *New York World*. This begs the question: what color was The Yellow Kid’s nightshirt in “At The Circus In Hogan’s Alley”? None other than a powder blue. He would not appear in anything resembling his archetypal yellow nightshirt until Sunday, February 24th, 1895 in the comic “An Untimely Death,” and even then his nightshirt was more of a mustard color. Yellow Kid would not appear in his immediately recognizable form until the comic “Golf – The Great Society Sport As Played In Hogan’s Alley” in *New York World* on 5 January 1896.

It is entirely possible to debate the “first appearance” of The Yellow Kid based on iconic and formal elements (facial expressions, wardrobe, coloring, location in and centrality to the frame, etc.), though this type of formal debate over individual comics is almost never undertaken. Despite the shifting artistic object of *Ursprung*, what we must understand is that the historical narrative has preserved the outward appearance of scholarly agreement and continuity. This would only be possible if *any* of Outcault’s misbehaving child comics could function as its object: each of his comics experience a flattening to equivalence or universal exchange. Cumulatively, these shifts in object choice gesture towards an understanding of positive history that I believe that Foucault already grasped in his rejection of traditional history: *Ursprung is not a factual or empirical category, it is a political one*. In positive histories, the search for “origins” only takes on the form

of objective fact or a search for truth. Ultimately, it uses indexical language as a mask to cover a particular politics. In this case, the politics of this positive history can be stated simply: who the artist was and where the comic was published is of greater political importance than what comic was run and when it was published. One of the astounding parts of returning to earlier works in comics scholarship is that scholars from these periods often did not bother with the same universal masks or reasoned obscurantism to bury their politics. Returning to Blackbeard's *Smithsonian Collection*, he puts his motivations bluntly:

The elements of the American comic strip were already there...It remained for the United States, then entering fully its own era of mass communications, to put all these elements together and make something new of them, something new and compelling, and so irresistible that it spread (along with our movies and our music) around the world. (11)

He expresses an overt politics of American media exceptionalism where Blackbeard sees the comic strip as a part of a complete package of mass media commodities. Here, Blackbeard's Gospel of comics represents a part in trinity whose telos is nothing less than global acceptance and consumption. Only a few paragraphs down the page, he further remarks,

Only in the past decade has the American newspaper comic strip begun to be recognized in its own country as an innovative and creative cultural accomplishment. It has long been hailed in France and elsewhere in Europe as one of the important achievements in the arts of this century, and it has been studiously examined there in a number of journals exclusively devoted to the subject.

Blackbeard forthrightness firmly fixes the importance of his project of establishing the Comic strip canon with both nationalist and media politics, and explicitly inserts comics into the culture industry as a form of exported, standardized mass culture commodity. The importance of The Yellow Kid narrative is that the *Ursprung* of comics is an American *Ursprung*: Outcault is an American citizen and the comic strips popular rise to global preeminence came as a result of a fierce media battle between moneyed interests. It is a capitalist *Ursprung*, where all of the

prominent players (Richard F. Outcault, Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst, and even Thomas Edison) are wealthy celebrities with a role to play in a Gilded Age labor dispute that is central to the history of Western media itself. While sources varied widely on which of Outcault's comics was the first Yellow Kid comic and when it was produced, none of the sources failed to accurately note the site of the litigious copyright conflict, New York, or the identities of the major players and their newspapers, the *New York World* and *New York Journal*. The term *Yellow Journalism*, pejorative shorthand for news that fakes its sources, engages in spectacle over substance, or that misrepresents its source materials to increase sales, is a truncated version of *Yellow Kid Journalism*; the site of the *Ursprung* of American comics is simultaneously the site of the origin of the collapse of representational integrity in mass media.

Ultimately, Waugh, Blackbeard, and those they influenced were successful in fixing The Yellow Kid narrative as the origin of comics on both a national and international level. In an out of print UNESCO International Social Science Council initiative-funded study, *Comics and Visual Culture: Research Studies from 10 Countries*, Rolf T. Wigand begins the narrative of United States comics with:

It is interesting to note that in the United States comics received their initial impetus from a newspaper war between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer in the mid-1890s. Colored supplements to the Sunday issues of the *New York Journal* and the *New York World* vied with each other to build circulation. A significant part of this rivalry was played by funny drawings involving a character who came to be known as 'The Yellow Kid'. This sketch achieved popularity quickly and increased the circulation of Pulitzer's *New York World*. Within six months, Hearst came out with a new comic section: 'eight pages of iridescent polychromous effulgences that make the rainbow look like a piece of lead pipe (Waugh, 1947, p. 6).' Hearst headlined his cast of characters 'The Yellow Kid', for Hearst had hired the original artist and his creation away from the *World*. Pulitzer promptly bought him back, but was again outbid by Hearst. Consequently Pulitzer hired another artist and for some time both papers tried to outdo each other with independent version of the vulgar, raucous 'Kid'. The yellow color of the strip and the notoriety arising from

the contest between two newspapers gave rise to the term ‘yellow journalism’.
 (“Towards a More Visual Culture Through Comics 23)

Wigand, a communications scholar who spent the mid to late 1980s in Germany, encountered The Yellow Kid narrative in both Europe and the United States (“Curriculum Vitae” n.p.). As the first essay on comics in this international volume, his account of The Yellow Kid narrative provided not only an origin for American comics, but also stands in for an origin of comics in general; the following essays in the volume provide no challenge to this etiology or alternative model. It is hard to overstate the stabilizing effect of this historical narrative on Comics Studies, but I believe that I can illustrate this to some degree by turning to Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Spiegelman, following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, began this project as a way of dealing with his own psychological trauma from the attacks. The volume is an oversized board book with a black-on-black cover containing a pair of darker silhouettes of the towers in the center. (The cover is based on Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly’s own 24 September 2001 cover of the *New Yorker*.) The book is structured into a distinct pair of objects: ten poster-sized comics addressing Spiegelman’s fractured psychological state and seven plates of classic newspaper comics from the first years of American comics. In between the pair, there is an essay titled “The Comics Supplement” which is styled as to a single fold of a newspaper. In this essay, Spiegelman reproduces a familiar narrative moving from *Hogan’s Alley*, *Katzenjammer Kids*, Schultze’s *Foxy Grandpa*, onward to *Happy Hooligan*, *Kinder Kids*, Verbeck’s *Upside Downs of Little Lady Lovekins and Old Man Muffaroo*, ending at *Little Nemo In Slumberland*, McManus’s *Bringing Up Father*, and Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*. This familiar narrative, which starts with an image of The Yellow Kid playing the violin, provides the same function for Spiegelman that poetry did for the majority of New Yorkers in the wake of the attacks:

Poetry readings seemed to be as frequent as the sound of police sirens in the wake of September 11—New Yorkers needed poetry to give voice to their pain, culture to reaffirm faith in a wounded civilization. I must have heard W.H. Auden’s ‘September 1, 1939’ a dozen times in those weeks, but my mind kept wandering. I found no solace in music of any kind either – it seemed too obscenely exquisite. The only cultural artifacts that could get past my defenses to flood my eyes and brain with something other than images of burning towers were old comic strips; vital, unpretentious ephemera from the optimistic dawn of the 20th century. That they were made with so much skill and verve but never intended to last past the day they appeared in the newspaper gave them poignancy; they were just right for an end-of-the-world-moment. (11)

It is here at the end-of-world-moment, where the *Ursprung* of comics doesn’t simply function as origin. It moves past Spiegelman’s defenses, convinces him that a moment of “optimistic dawn” or “open-ended possibility” ever existed – convinces him of the hidden truth behind the present historical moment.

While the UNESCO study did not posit an alternative *Ursprung* for comics, this does not mean that none exist. The Yellow Kid narrative is now but one of several contesting narratives on the origin of Comics in the nineteenth century. Further on in this essay (in section 8), I’ll address and outline three other historical narratives which conflict with this dominant *Ursprung*: Roger Sabin’s British “Ally Sloper” narrative, the prominent Rodolphe Töpffer narrative, and the recent push towards and construction of a narrative for William Hogarth. These three contesting *Ursprung*’s are illustrative for understanding the ways that positive history and determinant negation intersect. Having established the structure of Comics histories primary narrative, The Yellow Kid narrative, as a positive *Ursprung* that presents the appearance of narrative continuity, we can now return to our previous discussion of Benjamin to further understand how “the gift of the moment” aligns with his critique of positive history.

VII. Relocating “The Gift of the Moment”

In section 5, I defined and established a set of characteristics for normative, universal historical production (“positive history”) that operates with the goal of producing a veneer of continuity and stability that between the contested past and present moment. This positive history directly aligns with Enlightenment politics of technological and historical progress. In section 6, I applied this understanding of positive history to the field of Comics Studies to understand how the field maps its prevailing origin for the medium. As a result, we found that The Yellow Kid narrative is firmly fixed in a mass media and nationalist politics, a politics which is not immediately apparent or foregrounded by comics scholarship. In this section, we return to Benjamin to relocate our primary theoretical construct of concern, “the gift of the moment,” in his “Theses.” Given the history of Benjamin scholarship, it is necessary to situate and differentiate my reading of Benjamin in the context of broader criticism, with the aim of then using this formulation of Benjamin’s work to understand how “the gift of the moment” appears in his final work “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

Having returned again to Benjamin, we should ask ourselves if it is even possible to locate childhood memory or “the gift of the moment” in Benjamin’s late work? If it is indeed locatable, does it occupy the same critical position? In his twelfth thesis, children are still of radical importance. Benjamin positions the image of “liberated grandchildren” as the “greatest strength” of Social Democracy – a strength undercut by burden of being trained for a social role as the redeemer of future generations (260). However, the role of childhood memory and joy in response to a formative object connection is occluded in Benjamin’s speculative discourse. We are blocked from looking at these elements, so integral to “the gift of moment,” directly. Benjamin points us towards the logjam in thesis 2, “Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption” (253-54). This entanglement of happiness with redemption, joy with revolution,

infers that the location of redemptive agency (the image of redemption) is simultaneously the place where “the gift of the moment” will reemerge.

The problem of Benjamin’s ‘dialectics at a standstill’ as a historical monad is that, as Adorno notes, it is Medusan in that Benjamin brings positive history braking to a halt (“Portrait of Walter Benjamin” 233). It is passé at this point to assert that Benjamin’s now-time disrupts praxis; that in severing ties with Hegelian history he abrogated agency that comes with “historical change” or Enlightenment concepts of progress. Positive history forwards the cause of instrumental reason and legitimating discourse; affirmative culture mistakes Realpolitik for critical agency. This does, however, further complicate any attempt to locate “the gift of the moment” in Benjamin’s “Theses” as a form of critical agency that does not stem from false, but discursively dominant totality of positive history.

There is a space of significant congruity between Žižek and Osborne’s readings of Benjamin: they both agree that his “Theses” should be understood through the lens of negativity (*Sublime Object* 144; *Politics of Time* 144). This is in no way surprising given that Benjamin attempts to make a radical break with positive history, that his “angel of history” *inverts* the concept of progress itself, “history is an economy of violence dissembling as progress” (*Politics of Time* 141). His concept of messianic time is expressed as rupture and repetition. Given the myriad structures of negativity embedded in this work and the antagonism between Benjamin and the dialectic, “Theses” may be best understood through the lens of the avant-garde. Osborne takes a similar path in mapping Benjamin:

To put it another way, ‘now-being’ is a form of avant-garde experience. For the avant-garde is not that which is most historically advanced in the sense that (in the image of Benjamin’s backward-looking angel) it has the most history behind it – an *historicist* image if there ever was one, even if progress is inverted into the piling

up of the wreckage of a linear catastrophism. The avant-garde is that which, in the flash of the dialectical image, disrupts the linear time-consciousness of progress in such a way as to enable us, like the child, to ‘discover the new anew’ and, along with it, the possibility of a better future. (150)

An avant-garde Benjamin affords the opportunity to understand and advance a form of social philosophy and practice rooted in his rejection of Hegelian historicism – including its system of determinant negation. In *The Constructivist Moment*, Barrett Watten provides a model of avant-garde negativity that extends beyond the boundaries of the modernist and postwar “historical” avant-gardes: an avant-garde that is a negative moment in the construction of culture that is under continuous redefinition (281). In his revisionist account of the avant-garde, the avant-garde is a form of systemic negativity that manifests in a repetition of discontinuous moments. According to Watten, each of these discontinuous moments follows a structure: first, a ‘becoming outside’ of the system²³; second, a moment of cultural opposition (“reflects on itself and rejects what it sees”); third, a hunt for a higher-order (but ultimately unknowable) wholeness to replace the false totality of the historical present; fourth, a manifestation of this negativity as positive phenomenon (individual or collective, as art, theory, subculture, social movement, etc.).²⁴ A vulgar mapping of an avant-garde Benjamin read through Watten’s account of the avant-garde would likely start with the historical circumstances of Benjamin’s “becoming outside,” of deterritorialization.²⁵ This deterritorialization could be rooted in any of a sequence of historical moments for Benjamin: Hitler’s rise as chancellor of Germany in 1933; Benjamin’s loss of German citizenship under the

²³ Marianne DeKoven in *Utopia Limited* levels a critique of the possibility of ‘becoming’ outside’ as a critique of the continued relevance of the avant-garde, “This radical avant-gardeism, like radical and countercultural ‘two-dimensional’ oppositionality in general, has been discredited in postmodernity; linked both to a naiveté of a belief in the possibility of an Archimedian lever, a utopian position at least potentially outside ideology and social construction, and to modernist hierarchical elitism in its total and Great Refusal of existing, particularly popular, cultural forms” (41). The critique of ‘becoming outside’ is taken up Watten’s “The Turn to Language and the 1960s”.

²⁴ See both Watten, “Negative Examples” in *Constructivist Moment* 282-83 and “Foucault Reads Acker and Rewrites the History of the Novel” 59-60, 62-63.

²⁵ “By analogy, the process of ‘becoming outside’ does not imply one has always been outside or will always remain there; it is a nonmimetic result of deterritorialization” (“The Turn to Language and the 1960s” 140, note 7).

Reich Citizenship Law; his incarceration in a French internment camp in Autumn 1939; or the signing of the 1939 Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and Russia. The signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact was the occasion for his production of “Theses,” according to Scholem (*Benjamin* 152).²⁶ Accordingly, “Theses” represents an oppositional moment, a turning away from, a traditional Marxist understanding of history rooted in a Hegel-Marx dialectics viewed as the failure of Marxism inherent in communism’s alignment with fascism. (Many of the concepts contained in “Theses” represent a legacy of oppositional moments beyond this single turn.) In place of the “false totality” of dialectical materialism, Benjamin introduces a revision of historical materialism in a Messianic ‘cessation of happening,’ a gathering of the past in the present, through which the past and the future are redeemed (*Politics of Time* 143). One way this opposition/revision of historical materialism occurs is through the ‘dialectics at a standstill’ and the rupture of ‘now-time’ [*Jetztzeit*].

Having quickly and crudely mapped out the first three moments of an avant-garde Benjamin through Watten’s model, we come to the question of what form negativity takes as positive phenomenon in Benjamin’s temporal politics. For the broader work of this essay, the answer to this problem will inform the concrete critical practice that we choose to advocate for as a resistance strategy to the problems of legitimation in the field of Comics Studies. To that end, this is a moment of significant concern where understanding how other critics would answer this question is paramount. The answer in Osborne to this question would be the overdetermined concept of the “dialectical image,” the “productive object of now-time” (*Politics of Time* 145). Writing on Benjamin, Osborne defines the dialectical image as “constellations of ‘then’ and ‘now’ , which in the hermetic enclosure of their internal relations, mirror the structure of history as a

²⁶ Also, see Osborne’s footnote 50 on p. 166.

whole, viewed from the standpoint of its end” (*Benjamin* 319). For Osborne, the dialectical image is the synecdoche of redemption: images which enable/carry the perspective of redemption which is positioned outside of history. One of the more productive functions of Watten’s model is that it gives us a way of approaching Osborne’s answer, which I see as essentially a category error. As Benjamin comments in “Re: The Basic Theory of Historical Materialism,” “History decomposes into images, not into narratives” (qtd. in Buck-Morss 220). This language of decomposition hints to the position of the dialectical image in the constitutive negativity that *produces* the positive phenomenon, rather than being *produced by* said negativity. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin states, “[The dialectical] Image is dialectics at a standstill”;²⁷ Benjamin’s use of the copula “is” here articulates the identity of his negative temporal figuration, that which brings positive history to a halt and ruptures it with messianic potential, with the dialectical image. The dialectical image’s identity with his ‘dialectics at a standstill,’ rather than its *production by* negativity, is part of Benjamin’s very philosophical system. According to Buck-Morss in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, “Benjamin believed such philosophico-historical constellations could be represented by a dialectical image rather than by dialectical argumentation” (67).²⁸ The dialectical image then could be seen as occupying the abstract space of argumentation (as part of a constellation that includes “dialectics at a standstill,” “now-time,” and “empty, homogenous time”) rather than occupying the concrete space of phenomena. Marita Bullock’s reading of Max Pensky’s *Melancholy Dialectics* makes clear that “[the dialectical image] is only valuable to the extent that it provides a clue to

²⁷ “It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relationship of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in natural but figural <bildlich>. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical – that is, not archaic – images. The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.” *The Arcades Project* 463 [N3,1].

²⁸ Not only was this a point of difference between Benjamin and Adorno, it also became a source of conflict. See Buck-Morss’s footnote on 67.

greater meaning or totality,” the higher, unknowable totality of Watten’s account of avant-garde negativity (Bullock 55).

If the positive phenomena of Benjamin’s temporal politics is *not* the dialectical image, then what/where is it? Osborne catches a momentary glimpse of it in his prior locating the avant-garde as the site of the breakdown of progress: the avant-garde “disrupts the linear time-consciousness of progress in such a way as to enable us, like the child, to ‘discover the new anew’ and, along with it, the possibility of a better future” (*Politics of Time* 150). Returning again to “Re: The Basic Theory of Historical Materialism,” Benjamin’s first concern is “the historical object is that for which the act of knowledge is carried out in its ‘rescue’” (*Dialectics of Seeing* 220). We may recall that “Theses” (as Benjamin’s revision of historical materialism) is an accumulation of past oppositional moments: the foremost among these moments, and his most sustained critique across his body of work, is his conviction that the salvation of humanity is linked to the eradication of the subject. Osborne makes the connection between Benjamin’s radical “antiprogressive futurity” and childhood experience, but fails to map this connection back on to Benjamin’s *prior* oppositional moments.²⁹ Osborne fails to see the connection between Benjamin’s inversion of progress and Benjamin’s philosophical assault on the subject; instead he reduces the goals of the avant-garde to another formulation of Pound’s exhortation to “Make it new.” The role of childhood memory in Benjamin is to gesture back towards a formative moment of the collapse of subject. The “gift of the moment,” obstructed from our view in “Theses,” returns from its occlusion in the site of Benjamin’s anti-subjective politics, the space of redemptive agency in Benjamin. Recalling my prior comments on the autobiographical “Unpacking My Library” and “A Berlin Chronicle,” the

²⁹Coined by Watten in *Constructivist Moment* (256-57) to describe Žižek’s analysis of the “Angel of History” in *Sublime Object*.

method by which childhood memory breaks down the subject can be expressed in two simple words: *children collect*.

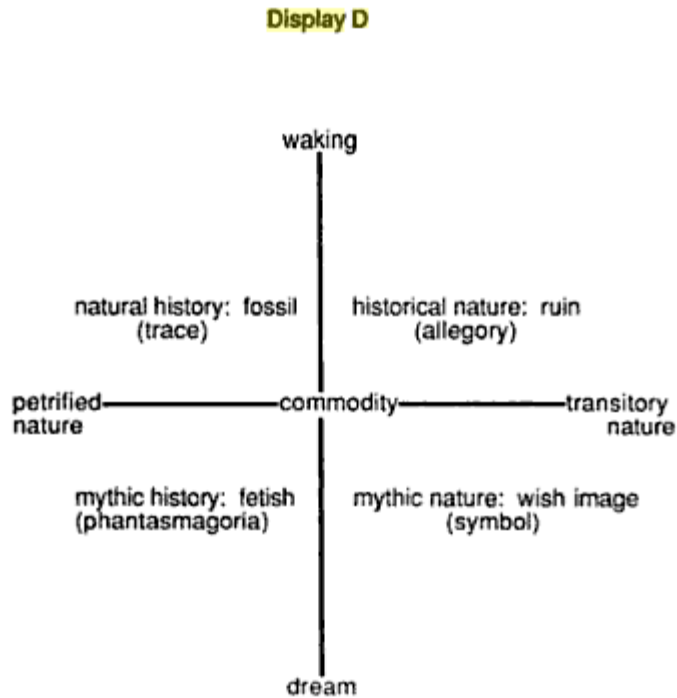


Figure 9. Buck-Morss, Display D, The Structure of the Arcades Project.

Before moving on to further considerations of collecting (and with it, a more detailed consideration of Benjamin’s “Theses”), I want to return to the assertion that I’ve just forwarded: that to some degree Osborne, Buck-Morss, and a wide number of other scholars have committed a form of “category error” in assigning the dialectical image to the realm of positive phenomena. It is not enough to hinge such a claim on a single copula in Konvolut N of the *Passagen-Werk*. Rather, this relationship between concrete and abstract when attempting to elucidate the dialectical image has been a prolonged problem for those attempting to understand it: even for Benjamin’s closest associates. In Benjamin’s 1935 essay on Paris, he stated that “ambiguity is the figurative

appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill. The standstill is Utopia, and the dialectical image therefore a dream image” (*Arcades Project* 10). According to Anthony Auerbach, Adorno was concerned by this portion of the essay, calling it “undialectical” and telling Benjamin that this put his entire critical project at risk.³⁰ Consider, for a moment, Buck-Morss’s diagram (fig. 9) of the structure of the “invisible, inner structure of the *Passagen-Werk*” (211). I would argue that the “commodity” listed in the center, that she says stands at “the ‘midpoint’ of the project,” represents the individual vignettes of Paris collected within the *Arcades*, rather than the dialectical image itself. Rather, the “dialectical image,” the dialectics at a standstill, are the play of forces *outside* of the commodity or series of commodities. Put another way, Auerbach says that the *Arcades* is “arguably no more than an elaborately woven net designed to collect a dialectical image” (2). The net, the concrete manifestation used by Benjamin to capture an abstract ideal, is his collection of the fragments of Paris. The critical practice of collection is the logic of the *Arcades* itself. The critical practice in Benjamin that produces his structural negativity as a positive phenomenon is simultaneously the critical practice that informs his critiques of positive history. Therefore this practice is of vital importance for understanding the way through the legitimizing and historical problems I noted in the introduction to this essay. How does the formal practice of collecting operate in such a way to provide an oppositional capability against positive history and affirmative culture? In this next section we will reconnect the formal practice of collecting to its original site in child collecting, which is the originary site of “the gift of the moment.”

³⁰ Adorno and Benjamin 110. qtd in Auerbach 6. [On this page, Auerbach misattributes this to Benjamin’s *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940*. Eds. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Trans. Manfred R. and Evelyn M. Jacobson. (University of Chicago Press, 1994) on pp.110-114. However, in that volume 110-114 cover Benjamin’s correspondence from 1918.]

VIII. Politics and Possibilities of Collecting

Each stone he finds, each flower picked and each butterfly caught is already the start of a collection, and every single thing he owns makes up one great collection. In him this passion shows its true face, the stern Indian expression which lingers on, but with a dimmed and manic glow, in antiquarians, researchers, bibliomaniacs. Scarcely has he entered life than he is a hunter. He hunts the spirits whose trace he scents in things; between spirits and things years are passed in which his field of vision remains free of people. His life is like a dream: he knows nothing lasting; everything seemingly happens to him by chance. His nomad-years are hours in the forests of dream. To it he drags home his booty, to purify it, secure it, cast out its spell. His drawers must become arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt. 'To tidy up' would be to demolish an edifice full of prickly chestnuts that are spiky clubs, tinfoil that is hoarded silver, bricks that are coffins, cacti that are totem poles, and copper pennies that are shields. Walter Benjamin, "Enlargements" (73-4)

Here, we return to the site of "the gift of the moment," child collecting, as a way of further understanding critical collection's ability to critique affirmative culture and positive history. Further, we will map this understanding of collection onto Benjamin's final work. Continuing from the critique of Osborne and Buck-Morss: if "dialectics at a standstill" and the dialectical image are one and the same, then the externality of redemption inherent to the monadic structure of the standstill (the moment of messianic cessation that fixes past to present) is mirrored in the quasi-external relationship of the collector to their collection. In "Enlargements," Benjamin supplies one of his most protracted reflections on a child collecting. In this instance, the collector hunts the scent of spirits [*Geist*] in the object world. While on the hunt, linear clock-time breaks down. The temporality of the child collector is markedly different from Hegelian positive history; it is dream-like, contingent, and without notions of causality or *Ursprung*, origin or intentionality. In this section of Benjamin's writings the child collector removes objects from the world to bring them into "the forests of dream." He outlines the effects, albeit in vague terms, of the practice of child collecting – one that he describes as "to purify, secure it, cast out its spell." While he does not say what the spell is, or what exactly he is purifying or securing, we can extrapolate the results of this

process from the collection he describes at the end of the section. First, the child collector separates each object from its attendant *use value* or *function*. Chestnuts are not roasted and eaten; bricks are not used for building; tinfoil is not used for cooking or conduction; cacti no longer grow in the ground, bearing fruit, flower, or oxygen; pennies are no longer used for currency. Instead, each object selected by the child collector becomes an implement of warfare. However, the each of the objects collected, the child's arsenal, is woefully inadequate to the task of waging war. A tinfoil war chest can purchase no supplies; tiny pennies are insufficient defenses; cacti totem poles fail to produce terror or awe; bricks are ill-prepared to house the dead; chestnuts are hardly weapons of mass destruction. The child collector establishes a new frame for each of their objects, a frame which renders the objects contained even *more* useless relative to the social function of the objects therein contained.

This uselessness, indeed this ineffectuality, seems an analogue to Adorno's thesis of the social ineffectuality of autonomous art which he forwards in *Aesthetic Theory*:

What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions. Its historical gesture repels empirical reality, of which artworks are nevertheless part in that they are things. Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness. (227)

Here the child collector, far from attempting to utilize the object world in such a way as to enable their choice of objects to further an ends/means relationship, the primary relationship of instrumental rationality, interprets their items so as to reveal a concealed character. The object, once placed in the child's drawers – which are all at once “arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt” – is rendered powerlessness. The object removed no longer interacts directly with the “empirical world”; its range of address is dramatically reduced. As Adorno puts it, “though their powerless and superfluity in the empirical world they emphasize the element of powerlessness in

their own content” (104). However, in its autonomy, it speaks more clearly to a different social relationship – the relationship of the child collector to the object world. The child collector’s attempts to “purify” or “cast out” the spell or spirit [*Geist*] of the object involuntarily intensifies the object’s ability to speak to the social relationship of subject and object. “The effort to purge them of whatever contingent subjectivity may want to say through them involuntarily confers an ever more defined shape on their own language” (104). The objects in the child’s collection are all and each a product of social labor; the historical relationship of this labor is stripped, replaced by the function and import conferred by the frame of the child’s choice. These frames are unstable and subject to slippage; the whole is untidy and “to tidy up” would be tantamount to an act of destruction.

My emphasis on the place of collecting in Benjamin’s theory is echoed in the afterword of Max Pensky’s *Melancholy Dialectics*. Here, Pensky looks at Susan Buck-Morss’s undeveloped assertion that the *Arcades* is a unity of Benjamin’s thought in the single combined image of the *Grübler* (that is, the allegorist) and the collector (240). For Pensky, Benjamin’s collection of fragments of Paris in the nineteenth century becomes a “collection-convocation, a *Sammlung-Versammlung*,” which means “to summon forth the powers latent in ‘dead nature’ itself, to bring out of this juxtaposition of ‘like’ elements a power of indictment against the conditions of fragmentation” (242-43). Rather than an indictment against the conditions of fragmentation, Benjamin’s work enacts a reversal where the logic of collection critiques the conditions of homogenization, the dramatic flattening and simplification that takes place under the pressures of commodification, empirical culture, and positive history. Indeed, as a critical practice collecting has the potential to preserve the systematic negativity of the initial “becoming outside” through the critic’s relationship to the frame and their particular critical object selection. There is a danger

in locating critical practice and investing agency in something as embedded in commodity culture as collecting. It is wholly and completely possible that in the context of capitalist, affirmative culture that collecting can simply become a logic of primitive accumulation or yet another mechanism of extracting surplus value. It is not by accident that the label “collector’s item” is generally assigned to mass-manufactured “collectibles,” a category of market goods created for the sole purpose of being collected.

The avant-garde’s tendency to push formal practices towards a limit of possibility, then, provides a model for avoiding the recuperation of the formal practice of collecting by market forces and positive history. This can best be illustrated by returning once more to our Benjamin read through the lens of Watten’s model of the avant-garde. In his final work, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), Benjamin dedicates himself to dismantling positive history in both “historicism” and “Social Democratic theory.” A close reading of this work would repeat his critiques of the relationship of nature to technology; his antisubjective politics; his critique of the concept of progress; and his belief in the failure of positive history – much of what we’ve already covered here. Each of these can be found in Benjamin’s Angel of History (thesis 9) who perceives progress as an ever-growing pile of death and wreckage; his mechanization of Historical Materialism in the form of The Turk, a faux chess machine (thesis 1); his connection of progress to “homogenous, empty time” or clock-time (thesis 13); and his commentary on the relationship of Fascism to progress (thesis 8). Most of the familiar concepts conventionally addressed in Benjamin scholarship are similarly present: the dialectics at a standstill, the dialectical image, and messianic time all make an appearance in this speculative discourse. “The Gift of the Moment” is here too, transfigured. “The gift of the moment” is all at once: 1) the memory of childhood experience that reorients the relationship between subject and object, nature to technology; 2) the

formal practice of childhood collecting that refurbishes fragments with historical value, dispelling *use value* and *exchange-value*; 3) the site of “redemptive agency.” In the Social Democratic Marxism that Benjamin finds lacking and attempts to correct, the working class is seen as the redeemer, and this perspective is fueled by an image of “enslaved ancestors” rather than “liberated grandchildren” (260). Benjamin turns ideas embedded in conventional historiography on their head; rather than the working class as the redeemer, the source of redemption comes from outside of time, or possibly from a space of antiprogressive futurity. The future moment, the futurity of the liberated grandchildren, is also the space of messianic possibility: “every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might answer” (264). Rather than being liberated by the working class in the present, the liberated grandchildren are imbued with messianic power. We have been endowed with a *weak* form of that messianic power by our connection to the past. What does Benjamin suggest that the historical materialist *do* with that weak messianic power? Several of Benjamin’s verb choices (to “seize hold,” to “grasp,” to “preserve”) seem to suggest a particular formal practice. In thesis 5, Benjamin states, “The past can only be sized only as an image which flashes up at the instant in which it can be recognized and is never seen again. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). Here he points to seizing “hold of a memory,” the monadic connection between past and present in the dialectical image/dialectics at a standstill. This act of “seizing” the dialectical image the same act he attempts to perform in the *Arcades Project* – to seize, to “grasp the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” is the same as the act of collecting, the positive phenomenon of Benjamin’s negativity as formal practice.

The transfiguration of the “Gift of the Moment” and of this formal practice lies in *what* Benjamin advocates collecting in “Theses.” Benjamin expands the formal practice of collecting

towards its horizon of possibility. According to his thesis 6, it is to the historian to possess “the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (255). Benjamin makes a radical move in attempting to reorient Marxist historical materialism’s relationship to the past. Consider for a moment Marx’s famous quote from his “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (245). In the “Brumaire,” the relationship of the past to the present is a relationship of determinant victimization. The goal of the present moment is to throw off the yoke thrust on them, to remove the burden of the past. Benjamin does not underestimate the role of the past in producing the current moment, as seen in thesis 7 where he discusses the alignment of historicism with the victors, a continuous procession of rulers. But “Theses,” the role of present is not to liberate the future, but to use its connection to the past to *protect the dead* from the enemy. In *Sublime Object*, Žižek comments on the stakes of this redemption for Benjamin,

For Benjamin, revolution is an affair of life and death; more precisely: of the second, symbolic death. The alternative opened by the revolution is that between *redemption*, which will retroactively confer meaning on the ‘scum of history’ – on what was excluded from the continuity of Progress – and the *apocalypse* (its defeat), where even the dead will again be lost and will suffer a second death: ‘*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins’ (Thesis 6). (144)

Zizek uses Stalinist “scum of history” as a way of denoting the “loser” or non-victor status of those Benjamin seeks to redeem. Far from associating with the past as burden or antagonist as in Marx’s “Brumaire,” he sees it from “the perspective of those who had to *fail*, to miss their aim, so that the series of great historical deeds could be accomplished” (143). Benjamin’s past is the past of those excluded from positive history. This concern for the excluded in Benjamin’s historical practice is

also noted by Ashmita Khasnabish in her *Humanitarian Identity and the Political Sublime*, “Through the *Dialektik im Stindstall* [sic] objects are rescued from the false determinations of the time of the Present. The time of the messianic (Jetztzeit) rescues objects ruled by the tyranny of universal tradition” (101). The collector collects objects not for the collector’s benefit, but as I mentioned when commenting on Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library,” the collector collects for the object’s benefit. Reification in Benjamin functions as a way to cultivate a concern for marginal objects. When the formal practice of collecting expands, it retains this character. Benjamin’s collection of the past looks for “the scum of history” in the same way that he previously collected junk and detritus.

Žižek comments that Benjamin seeks “the *isolation* of a piece of the past from the continuity of history” (*Sublime Object* 137). This misinterprets a step in a process for the whole of the process. Benjamin drastically expands the scope of *what* is collected towards its theoretical limits. Benjamin gathers more than just “the scum of history”; he gathers the dead, gathers past traditions, gathers and redeems the history of failed revolutions. Ultimately, he seeks to redeem the past in its entirety, “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past – which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments” (“Theses” 254). The limit of Benjamin’s formal practice is nothing short of the redemption of the whole of history outside of time. Benjamin notes in thesis 17 that to “preserve” the lifework is also the same practice that “blast(s) a specific era out of the homogenous course of history” (263). Benjamin’s extension of collecting both preserves, recovers, or redeems the past at the same time that it explodes into history, producing a contradiction or antinomy. In Watten’s model of avant-garde negativity, the antinomy has a privileged position, “This fundamentally negative experience of contradiction is identical to a

comprehension of the whole, which is why such experiences of crisis, paradox, or destruction are so valuable to us” (*Constructivist Moment* 270). In rejection of the false totality of universalizing history, Benjamin offers this model of opposition as an alternative: the collapse of history and its preservation all in one.

What stands out is the *impossibility* of such a project. There is no conceivable way that one could undertake the redemptive project that Benjamin forwards in “Theses” – the messianic scope and the frame outside of time assure that this project exceeds the bounds of a concrete, ultimately reproducible process. Collecting can never reach this total horizon. This is a vital gesture. At the moment where a radical project is impossible, its impossibility becomes a politics³¹. Benjamin’s emancipatory political project has a horizon and location outside of instrumental rationality. I noted before my reading of “Theses” that the formal practice of collection had the potential to become coopted by capitalist culture. One of the strengths (and dangers) of affirmative culture and transnational capitalism is its ability to negate or subsume [*aufheben*] resistance into itself, often through institutionalizing pressures. This is a problem faced by commonly faced avant-garde artists, and is one of the strengths of understanding Benjamin’s critical practices through Watten’s avant-garde lens. “If a dialectic of tradition, revolt, or recuperation (either through a “failure” of aesthetic tendency or institutionalization) has been an unconscious framework for much thinking on the avant-garde, it is important to recast negativity in terms that do not lead to a predictable result” (268). A politics of impossibility functions as a barrier, or protection, against this type of consumption or cooptation. The points of contradiction, religiosity, and decoherence in Benjamin’s critical project of collection, when expanded against a horizon of possibility, generates

³¹ For more on the concept of a politics of impossibility, see Watten’s discussion of impossibility in the politics of the 1960s in “The Turn to Language and the 1960s”.

an incompatibility with positive historical practices that seek to flatten, simplify, and/or reduce and resolve difference and conflict. As this next pair of historical sections will detail, this thoroughly avant-garde resistant quality against institutionalization and negation is a much needed property for scholarship in Comics Studies. Comics Studies, beyond the previously discussed need for a dominant *Ursprung*, has substantial difficulties with its models of historiography that compromise even the possibility of radical politics.

IX. Oppositional Origins

Having outlined Benjamin's resistive practices, let us turn to the difficulties within comics historiography and academic legitimation that complicate and compromise oppositional politics. To this end, I will address three oppositional origin narratives, oppositional *Ursprungs*, as a way of thinking through problems of recuperation and negation. As I previously laid out, the *Ursprung* or dominant origin narrative of Western Comics Studies is "The Yellow Kid" narrative centering on the work of Richard F. Outcault and the New York media wars of the late nineteenth century. Scholarship centering on Outcault's work roots the origins of comics in a U.S. nationalist politics with New York as its epicenter. However, as the field has moved towards professionalization and academic legitimation, this particular *Ursprung* has come under critical review. While "The Yellow Kid" narrative narrowly retains its position among Comics Studies scholars (and more broadly in cultural consciousness), there are three other contesting origins for comics which provide serious contestation for the *Ursprung*'s site of privilege. As oppositional moments to the dominant *Ursprung*, I'll address each of these here.

In section 2, I linked Benjamin's interest in children and the aesthetics of minorness to the formal properties of comics a medium. In doing so, I utilized the work of a particular artist and

critic: Rodolphe Töpffer. Töpffer, a central figure in the development of caricature, was a nineteenth-century Swiss artist and art critic. While he is still largely unknown in the U.S. outside of Comics Studies, his corpus produced between 1830-46 had a far greater influence on visual arts and aesthetic development in France and francophone countries (*Father of the Comic Strip* 113-19). Despite his broader cultural and critical anonymity, Töpffer's work has had multiple points of introduction to a U.S. audience. John Neal, while living in Portland, Maine, translated and reprinted his *Les Amours de Mr. Vieux Bois* (Geneva, 1937) in English as *The Adventures of Obadiah Oldbuck* to use as a newspaper supplement. These supplements were later collected and reprinted as a complete volume in 1842; this eighty-eight page work is general considered to be the first comic book printed in America. Töpffer's work came to the attention of British art historian Ernst Gombrich and was featured prominently in his 1960 volume *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*. Chapter 10 of this text, "The Experiment of Caricature," comments on Töpffer's obscurity, "It is no accident that we should be lead back from Disney, Al Capp, and Brunhoff to that half-forgotten artist and thinker, for to Töpffer belongs the credit, if we want to call it so, of having invented and propagated the picture story, the comic strip" (Gombrich 336). Gombrich sees Töpffer as a quasi-prophetic figure whose earlier mentioned *Essai de physiognomics* stands with works such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting* (347-48).

David Kunzle continued Gombrich's privileging of Töpffer's work and criticism. At once, Kunzle is both one of the formative scholars in the field of Comics Studies and one of the central scholars in contemporary comics scholarship.³² His 1964 dissertation, "The History of the Comic Strip" directed by Gombrich, would form the base for Kunzle's pair of historical reference tomes: *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c.*

³² Gombrich directed Kunzle's dissertation at University of London in 1964.

1450-1825 (1973) and *The History of the Comic Strip, Vol. II: The Nineteenth Century* (1990). In the Preface to the first of these out-of-print works, Kunzle writes, “I have not been able, as I had originally intended, to include in the present volume the work of Töpffer, whom I hold in reserve for the second volume of this *History*” (n.p.). In his model of comics history, Kunzle places Töpffer as the hinge point or crux between comics “pre-history” or “pre-caricatural strips” (i.e. proto-comics) and comics proper.

Gombrich and Kunzle’s histories provide the center for the academic history of comics, or the “Töpffer” narrative. Within Comics Studies, this narrative is quickly approaching parity with (or threatening to supplant) The Yellow Kid narrative. McCloud describes Töpffer as “the father of the modern comic” (17). Groensteen in his (again) recently translated *System of Comics* begins his volume describing the “initial thunderclap” of Töpffer’s theorization of comics:

Inventor of ‘stories in etchings’ at the end of the 1820s, the Genevan Rodolphe Töpffer (1799) initiated the theorization of this new form of storytelling. For the reader at the end of the twentieth century, the first ‘defense and illustration of comics, his *Essai de physiognomie* (1845), opens stimulating perspectives for a reflection on art which, in the intervening period, has contributed in a decisive manner to the shaping of the modern imagination, thereby confirming the intuitions of the genial precursor. (1)

Groensteen, more than any other scholar after Kunzle and Gombrich, positions the Töpffer narrative as the *Ursprung* of comics, extending the sphere of influence from the medium of comics to the space of the modern imagination itself. Perhaps the most illustrative examples of the influence and pervasiveness of this particular historical narrative can be found in the way it is simply taken for granted by recent scholarship. One example of this critical acceptance can be found in the aforementioned article by comics theorist Gōrg Mallia. In his recent “Learning from the Sequence,” Mallia says with certainty that “this quality [economy-of-line] was introduced at

the very inception of the genre at the hands of Rodolphe Töpffer” (¶4). In Mallia, the narrative has taken on the property of normative invisibility; a particular strand of history changes into fact.

Not all of the contesting historical narratives of Comics Studies have had such widespread acceptance or adoption. One such narrative is the product of earlier mentioned Roger Sabin, British comics historian and critic whose *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (1993) and *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (1996) are canon. Of critical importance to Sabin’s model of comics history is a particular figure – Ally Sloper – who makes a recurring appearance in Sabin’s scholarly output. Early on in *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, Sabin makes a bold assertion of Sloper’s importance:

So we come at last to the first comic agreed to be worthy of the name: the curiously-titled *Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday* (Gilbert Dalziel, 1884). This was a cheap (one penny), black-and-white tabloid weekly that mixed strips, cartoons and prose stories, and which boasted a regular starring character: the eponymous Alexander Sloper. Although very few people have heard of the title today, it is undoubtedly one of the most important comics in the history of the medium, not just because it was first, but because it set standards in so many areas, both commercial and artistic. (15)

Sabin is correct about the anonymity of Ally Sloper, but his idea of his importance is intimately connected to how he frames the definitional and temporal/indexical politics of the work. *Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday* is a central text in Sabin’s historical model. However, due to the breadth of coverage in *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* he spends less than an entire page on this text. Sabin takes up a more sustained defense and advocacy for Sloper’s pivotal place in the canon in his 2002 conference paper “Ally Sloper: The First Comics Superstar?” In his paper, Sabin uses examples from a variety of texts, both traditional comics texts and other mass-produced consumer objects bearing Sloper’s image. He fixes the first appearance of Sloper to a 14 August 1867 issue of *Judy* humor magazine and co-ascribes authorship to both Marie Duval (Isabelle Emilie de

Tessier, a French cartoonist) and her husband Charles H. Ross. From there, he moves through newspapers and illustrated magazines to Sloper's uses in advertising for sauces and relish, bicycles and melodeons (¶9-11).

Sabin proposes Sloper as a direct anglocentric alternative to The Yellow Kid narrative. He starts the "Sloper narrative" with an assertion of cultural import, "Today, few people have heard of him outside of comics scholarship: but a century ago it is no exaggeration to say that his visibility in (UK) popular culture would have been comparable to that of any blockbuster Hollywood creation" (¶1). His contrast between Sloper and Hollywood sets the tone for the whole article: Sloper takes Outcault's creations place as the *Ursprung* of comics history. While Sabin's historical narrative not made the headway that the Töpffer narrative has towards a more-privileged position as *Ursprung*, it's a vital inclusion in any consideration of alternative origins of comics. Editors Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester felt Sabin's oppositional moment so valuable that they included it into their recent anthology *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008). In their framing introduction, Heer and Worcester locate the importance of Sabin's work not in its historical contribution but in the ways that the essay looks at "comics as a social phenomenon to illuminate issues of culture, narrative, and identity" (173). For them, the importance of the Sloper narrative is in the unique ways that it engages mass culture and nationalism. As the *Ursprung* is a political category, nationalist and media politics are distinctly the reason for the Sloper narrative's importance here as well.

The most recent oppositional *Ursprung* comes from an unusual, but ultimately unsurprising, source. As referenced in the introduction, in 2006 *Modern Fiction Studies* devoted a special issue to critical interest on Comics. This volume was co-edited by Hillary Chute, who had just defended her dissertation at Rutgers, and her dissertation director Marianne DeKoven. In their

co-authored “Introduction: Graphic Narrative,” they return to a central figure in the history of Western art: William Hogarth, whom they see as an “important historical precedent” for “today’s book-length graphic narratives”; “Hogarth continues to inform debates about comics today” (768-9). Chute and DeKoven’s contribution to Comics Studies historiography was, in 2006, an anomaly. Critical engagement in the field from *within* academia almost-exclusively came from scholars in Composition, Visual Studies, Visual Communication, Film, or History – not Literature.

However, Chute and DeKoven’s intervention and choice of Hogarth are both unsurprising. As the field of Comics Studies has increased in academic legitimation and as comics have built cultural and critical acceptance, it was something of an inevitability that such a cross-discursive, hybrid medium would draw critical attention from other academic fields. Further, the popular adult-oriented comics that generated critical interest and spurred the move towards cultural legitimation in the mid-1980s and early 1990s (*Watchmen*, *Maus*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *The Sandman V for Vendetta*, *Miracleman [Marvelman]*, *Palestine*, etc.) were all of a sustained-narrative fiction and nonfiction bent and book length. As such increased interest from literature scholars would be a wholly predictable outcome with the rise of the “Graphic Novel.” Moreover, Hogarth was an ever-present figure in Gombrich, Kunzle, McCloud, and Sabin, occupying the forefront of a set of artists “associated with” but to varying degrees “prior to” comics. Peter Paul Rubens, Jacques Callot, James Gilray, George Cruickshank, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Thomas Rolandson, and Francisco Goya all similarly occupy this space at the periphery.

Chute and DeKoven have assistance from contemporary scholarship in moving Hogarth from the ever-present periphery to position of origin narrative. In his short history of cartooning “How Comics Came To Be,” cartoonist, critic, and historian Robert C. Harvey situates Hogarth as the first of a number of eighteenth-century “gag cartoonists” whose caricatures were published on

single-sheet broadsides as issues of moral import (26). In the most recent example of Hogarth's contemporary shift in status is Joyce Googin's article "Of Gutters and Guttersnipes: Hogarth's Legacy." Googin sees Hogarth as a "progenitor of the medium" and a "significant innovator in the history of comics" (6). For Googin, the critical criterion for shifting Hogarth from outside comics history to inside is his relationship to modernity, or more concretely, "Hogarth's art, and consciously commercial art more generally, grew up in the eighteenth-century along a booming and fast moving market economy, heavily invested in the new finance" (22). Her analysis of Hogarth importance in the canon hinges on his relationship to growing categories of social mobility, the expansion and extension of credit, and his art's presence as commodity at the emergence of the industrial revolution. Hogarth, along with Sloper and Töpffer, each represent oppositional models of the origin of comics. These three vie for increased status and critical legitimacy as the field expands. However, as we observe in the next section, which of these narratives *holds* the privileged location of dominant *Ursprung* is largely inconsequential. To this end, section 10 is dedicated to understanding the mechanisms of legitimation in Comics Studies scholarship; section 11 is dedicated to understanding the ways negation and recuperation compromise resistive historical practice in Comics Studies.

X. Opposition and Legitimation

Given that the Töpffer, Sloper, and Hogarth narratives are each oppositional movements pitted against a dominant Yellow Kid *Ursprung*, to what extent are these do these historical correctives have the capability of changing the *shape* or overarching structure of comics history? (That is to say, if one of these three historical oppositional narratives assumes the privileged position within the field over The Yellow Kid, will history in Comics Studies cease to be a positive construct?) They always already have had no chance of success. The dialectical form of positive

history already accounts for particular, corrective historical moments which are then sublated into positive history through the mechanism of determinant negation. This is not to say that an historical narrative cannot be changed, or that one narrative cannot succeed another. Rather, it is the dialectical structure of positive history within Comics Studies that compromises attempts to transform affirmative historiography in the field itself; its prevailing narratives retain their plasticity. In Comics Studies, the mechanism of determinate negation is connected to the field's growing presence in academia. In her essay "Decoding Comics," Chute states that "while academic publishing on comics is on the rise, the most useful recent texts are still, by and large, anthologies that are yet spotty, and not-always-easy-to-locate works published abroad, where the academic study of comics has a more established and serious history" (1015). This trope of "seriousness" pervades American public discourse as the hallmark of any discourse that seeks legitimation. It is the institutionalization of Comics Studies that intensifies this push towards legitimation both in academia and in American culture. Groensteen, in his essay "Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimation?," maps out a fourfold system for the reasons why comics still lack it:

Rather than entering into the details of this conventional debate over 'high' and 'low' art, I would like to propose a more general explanation of the fact that comics appear to be condemned to artistic insignificance. It seems to me that comic art suffers from a four-fold symbolic handicap. 1) It is a hybrid, the result of crossbreeding between text and image; 2) Its storytelling ambitions seem to remain on the level of a sub-literature; 3) It has connections to a common and inferior branch of visual art, that of caricature; 4) Even though they are now frequently intended for adults, comics propose nothing other than a return to childhood. (7)

Groensteen spends the rest of his essay engaging these various critiques, rejecting the first outright and showing some level of ambiguity to the second and third elements of his system. He rejects the notion that hybridity is a weakness for comics by asking, "Why should the two most respected forms of human expression, literature and drawing, be dethroned and debased as soon as they are side by side in a mixed media?" and attributing the delegitimation of comics to a "ideology of

purity” that has dominated Western aesthetics since Lessing (9). Groensteen accepts that comics share qualities (such as seriality) with paraliterature, but asserts that the “defense of comics depends on the recognition of the fact that they cannot be judged by the same criteria generally applied to literature” (10). The fourth delegitimizing handicap, “the return to childhood,” he accepts openly with all of its delegitimizing prejudice. While he spends considerable space on *cultural* legitimation, for Groensteen, however, the question of whether or not comics have obtained *academic* legitimation has been largely settled. While he starts out his essay by stating that “it is curious that the legitimizing authorities (universities, museums, the media) still regularly charge it with being infantile, vulgar, or insignificant,” he does not satisfactorily account for these authorities. This is because, as he comments, “previously blamed for all the sins of the world, comics would finally gain acceptance by educators” (7). He notes that by the 1970s in France, it became best practice for French teachers to use comics in educational settings as a mechanism of instruction under the motto “Comics can be educational.” It is enough for that “Comics were no longer accused of harmfulness” – legitimation in academia springs not from affirmation but from a non-pariah position. While this may have been true in France, it has certainly not been true in the United States, where academic acceptance of comics is still in process. In his *System of Comics*, Groensteen comments more broadly on the state of the field by saying that “it is rarely noted that practice has become divorced from theory. The works that have contributed to the understanding of the comics phenomenon are extremely limited in number” and that “Myopic scholarship, nostalgia, and idolatry have structured the discourses around comics for about three decades” (1). While the charge of idolatry seems exaggerated, there has been a strong critical fixation on particular canonical comics works. Take in particular Spiegelman’s *Maus*: there have been no less than two dozen significant essays on the work published since 1993. It has played a significant

part in five recent Comics-related dissertations, and a year ago received a recent retrospective named *MetaMaus* written by Spiegelman and edited by Hillary Chute. As pervasive as “idolatry” and nostalgia are within Comics Studies, an emphasis on these two of Groensteen’s criticisms detract from his third charge. Comics Studies and its scholarship has been myopic, but perhaps not in the sense that Groensteen suggests. Its myopia stems from the way that it has ultimately failed to understand the change in critical landscape produced by the move from outside to inside of academia. The shift in ground from outside historians, artists, and enthusiasts to an establishment setting has brought with it a host of legitimizing pressures that accompany the field’s aspirations.

The proliferation of academic comics scholarship in the past decade has afforded unique opportunities to examine this move towards legitimation. The field’s particular internal fixation on historicizing as a means of legitimation provides a window to understand how determinate negation functions on a formal historiographical level. There are four specific methods by which Comics scholars actively forward the authority of their own particular historical models: 1) Literary/Associative; 2) Technological; 3) Temporal-Indexical; and 4) Formal/Definitional (fig. 10). The Literary/Associative method maps an external structure of authority onto their particular historical example. It functions by creating a link to a source of already established authority through interpersonal connection, spatial proximity, and/or through contemporaneity to another authoritative historical object or field of inquiry. The Technological method either directly attaches the aesthetic properties of production to a specific technology, or makes a claim for a particular medium as an analogue to another more legitimized medium through technology as mediator. This method produces authority through invoking an already existing narrative of technological innovation as “progress.” The Temporal-Indexical model treats time as a static timeline, with priority given to the first node on the timeline as progenitor (as cause precedes effect). What is of

importance to this method is principally the structure of dating itself: time and date stamps prove the status of the work as “first” and thereby innovative. Here, the scholar foregrounds most basic meaning of *Ursprung* as “origin.” The final of these, Formal/Definitional method, is arguably the most rhetorically sophisticated. The Comics Studies scholar use formal aesthetic criteria as a basis of defining Comics itself, as medium or by genre. This is done in such a way as to privilege a specific set of examples, or to directly target and exclude another contesting set of examples central to a particular historical narrative. As I will show by moving through illustrative examples from the comics scholars I’ve already referenced, these four methods are not mutually exclusive.

Examples of the Literary/Associative method are generally the least transparent. We have seen how Gombrich, in his *Art & Illusion*, presented Töpffer’s *Essai* as of equal importance to da Vinci’s *Treatise on Painting*. In the same chapter, Gombrich makes an even more explicit use of this method by stating, “Töpffer’s humorous picture novels, the first of which Goethe admired and encouraged him to publish, are the innocent ancestors of today’s manufactured dreams” (336). Gombrich foregrounds Töpffer’s personal connection to Goethe, whose specter and influence are largely unconnected to the medium of comics, as a means of buttressing Töpffer’s

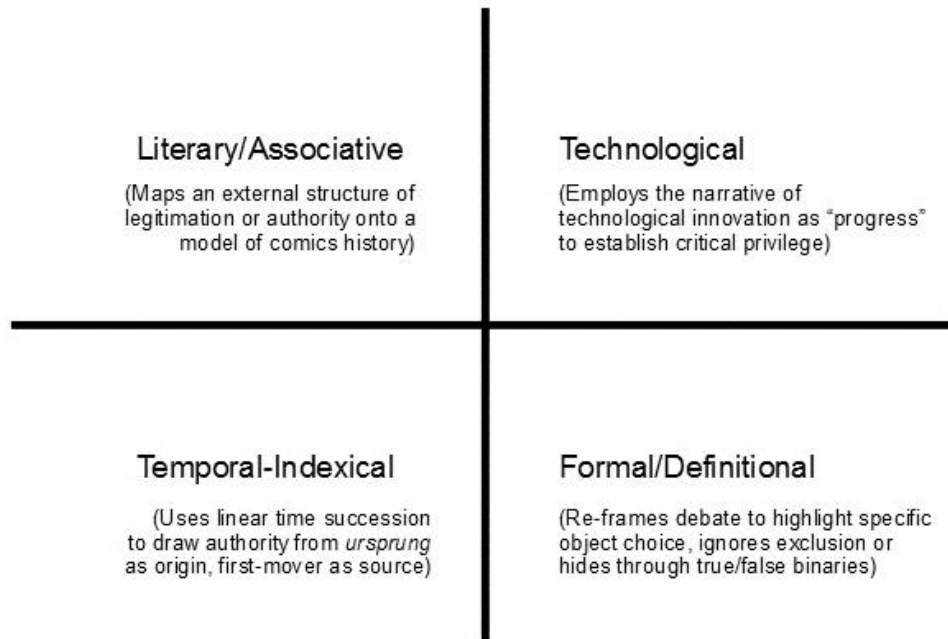


Figure 10. Methods of Historical Legitimation in Comics Studies

historical importance. Kunzle, also invested in the Töpffer narrative, in a vastly more sophisticated use of this method uses an intermediary to connect Töpffer to Charles Baudelaire. In his *Father of the Comic Strip*, Kunzle writes, “Charles Baudelaire, who fails to mention Töpffer in his printed essays on caricature, knew of the Swiss, probably through Theophile Gautier, the friend he called his master” (113). Gautier defended Töpffer’s *Reflections* in the *Revue des deux mondes* and was a known admirer of his work. Kunzle uses this connection of Töpffer to Gautier to create a broader context by which to advocate for a place of prominence for Töpffer as a formative figure in early modernism, contrasting Töpffer’s views on art to Gautier’s *l’art pour l’art* and Baudelaire’s aesthetics of *flânerie*. Though an association with the early modernists, Kunzle works to dramatically extend the Genevan’s importance. In another recent use of this technique, Chute and DeKoven make a similar set of moves in their Hogarth narrative:

More importantly, William Hogarth's work is fundamental to understanding how graphic narrative builds on a tradition integral to the history of the novel in the eighteenth-century. We may understand Hogarth's influence by reading his work as extending *ut picture poesis* from poetry to the modern genre of the novel: he introduced a sequential, novelistic structure to a pictorial form. (768-69)

Here, Chute and DeKoven take Hogarth – already a figure of significant legitimizing importance – and feel it necessary to connect him to a broader instrument of authority. Coming from literature, Chute and DeKoven understand the legitimating authority of *genre*. For Literary/Associative method, the overt connections between objects and structures of authority render power differentials transparent; Hogarth is a figure of immense discursive capital, but the novel as *genre* (or *modernism* as aesthetic movement with Kunzle) has categorical or structural power.

We have looked at how technology mediates relationships with nature in Benjamin. While Benjamin and Adorno highly critical of the role and place of technology, this critical frame is far from the position of contemporary affirmative culture, which cultivates this strain of modernist technological utopianism with renewed vigor. Other forms of new media/visual media (photography, film, television, other print genres, etc.) have had far more substantial and sustained market success than comics. This method is variably applied to both specific comics examples and, often, to the whole of comics as a medium. While in the process of describing the historical absence of critical attention to comics, Groensteen discretely connects Töpffer's *Ursprung* narrative to photography: “Modern (printed) comics appeared in the 1830s – in the form of Rodolphe Töpffer's pioneering work – which makes them more or less contemporary with the invention of photography. And yet, it was not until the 1960s that the French language found a permanent name for this mode of expression [*bandes dessinées*] – that was, by then, over a hundred years old” (3). Comics and photography come up together as new media cousins, as it were. Groensteen relates the two as to produce a contrast between the widespread cultural acceptance

and adoption of photography against the undervaluing and lack of cultural legitimation in comics. Sabin utilizes both the Literary/Associative and Technological methods in his aggressive push to legitimize his Ally Sloper narrative: “Movie stars, too, owed a debt to Sloper. Biographers of Charlie Chaplin have made much of the fact that he went on record saying that the comics he read as a child in London were the inspiration for his ‘Little Tramp’ character. W.C. Fields is speculated to have taken his act more directly from Sloper” (¶36-7). Sabin makes a claim that early “fledgling” cinema from the 1890s to 1915 borrowed heavily from two sources: the music hall and comic papers. Sabin goes further than Groensteen: far from simply stating that film and comics came up together, Sabin makes a case for the cinema’s appropriation of the content of comics. Chaplin and Fields, both significant figures in their own right and as such capable of conveying Literary/Associative authority, function here as synecdoche. Their appropriation and success stands in for the whole of film and the cinema as indebted to comics for their content contributions. Kunzle, far from picking a single, particular example to highlight comics relationship with technology and media politics, chooses to associate comics with the emergence of new media itself in *Early Comic Strip*. The duration of the history of his first volume, from 1450 to 1825, creates a set of historical bookends that begin with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Guttenberg in 1440 and ends with the beginnings of Töpffer’s production. In his introduction he asserts, “While the roots of narrative art extend, in various media, back to and beyond the Middle Ages, the narrative strip as a means of popular communication cannot be said to ante-date the invention of printing” (3). Harvey is quick to point this out as well, “David Kunzle, one of the pioneering scholars in the field, adds, in the first volume of his massive *History of the Comic Strip*, the requirements that there be a ‘preponderance of image over text’ and that the medium be a mass medium” (17). The invention of the press and movable type is the “Sinai moment” of new media

and mass media. Kunzle understands the legitimizing importance of this moment and produces a historical model that utilizes it as a condition of possibility for the medium.

To some degree, Kunzle establishes the chronological endpoint of comics as a mass media form by connecting it to the printing press. (Simultaneously, he establishes the medium as mass media commodity through fixing it to a technological moment of reproducibility.) To understand the Temporal-Indexical method of historical legitimization, it helps to imagine comics temporality in the least nuanced, most simplistic terms: as a singular timeline extending from the emergence of the printing press to the present moment. Authority via this method is derived from selecting and forwarding a historical example that occurs as far back on the timeline as possible. To some degree, this could even be expressed mathematically as a limit function where dates of sequential examples approach the moment of the first use of the printing press, expressed by an index/date between 1440 and 1450. Comics Studies scholars employ the legitimizing privilege of earlier dating for each oppositional *Ursprung* relative to dominant Yellow Kid narrative. Note that none of those positing alternatives to Outcault's creation chose an object or artist dated after The Yellow Kid, or at any point during the twentieth-century. Again taking the most aggressive grab at legitimation of his historical model, Sabin takes aim at The Yellow Kid:

The problem with this assertion excerpted here [that The Yellow Kid was the first character to inspire widespread merchandising]...is a very simple one: The Yellow Kid did not appear until 1894. By that time Ally Sloper had been a superstar for over twenty years. This evidence, as we have seen, is unambiguous. With due respect to the various (very kind) arguments around the definition of comics, it would be ideal if any future reprints of such books could be modified in this small but important regard. (¶43)

In this excerpt from his "Ally Sloper," Sabin makes explicit the historical priority of Ally Sloper over The Yellow Kid by virtue of earlier dating alone. This priority, for him, is enough to strike out historical priority of The Yellow Kid narrative, asking not only for acknowledgement but an

active modification of future critical volumes. Harvey makes a far more limited assertion of priority for Töpffer, but still roots this priority in the idea that Töpffer has first-mover priority, “By way of making a start, however, we must return to an era earlier than that of the Yellow Kid and a form more primitive, more basic” (18-19). The idea that Töpffer’s artistic output is in some way a more primitive or basic than Outcault’s is highly debatable, but the critical move that Harvey makes here is that Töpffer’s temporal location in an earlier “era” provides a privileged connection to a level of essential nature, or pure form. In another example of multiple legitimizing methods operating concurrently, Chute and DeKoven combine Literary/Associative method with Temporal-Indexical method. In order to build authority via temporal sequence, they choose to function as an oppositional narrative not to The Yellow Kid but to the Töpffer narrative. “In the mid-nineteenth-century, when Rodolphe Töpffer established the conventions of modern comics in Switzerland, such as panel borders and the combined use of words and images, he specifically described his work as drawing on two forms – the novel, and the ‘picture-stories’ of Hogarth” (“Introduction” 769). This is simultaneously an affirmation of the headway that the Töpffer narrative has made in reorienting the dominant historical origin of Comics Studies, but also on the status of Töpffer as central in the field. What Chute and DeKoven also construct is a logic of direct temporal succession, a sequence that at once operates as genealogy and as a means of building legitimation for their Hogarth narrative by generating a narrative of cause-and-effect.

Of the four methods of historical legitimation I’ve modeled the single, the one with the most influence would be unquestioningly the Formal/Definitional method. This set of legitimizing discourses dominates contemporary scholarship in Comics Studies. Given that Comics Studies is currently in the process of entering the university, the definitional politics take on heightened importance as scholars attempt to fix their concepts and historical models into canon. This

heightened importance occasionally takes the form of outright conflict. No single conflict in Comics Studies exemplifies this frontier attitude within the field than the definitional debates between Harvey and McCloud. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). In several essays, interviews, and volumes, but most clearly in “Describing and Discarding ‘Comics’ as an Impotent Act of Philosophical Rigor,” Harvey devotes space to critiquing McCloud’s definition, although not wholly on its content. Harvey describes McCloud’s definition as an “essay” rather than a “simple definition” (17). He includes a few (largely token) other definitions as an attempt to frame his commentary as addressing more than McCloud’s position. Still addressing McCloud, however, Harvey continues on the next page, “These definitions include what we call comics just as *quadruped* includes horses. But dogs are not exactly horses even though dogs also have four legs. A more accurate definition of each contains other distinguishing characteristics that make it possible for us to tell a dog from a horse” (18). On the following page, he continues “To McCloud and Groensteen and the rest, ‘sequence’ is at the heart of the functioning of comics; to me, ‘blending’ verbal and visual content is. McCloud’s definition relies too heavily upon the pictorial character of comics and not enough upon the verbal ingredient” (19). McCloud’s definition clearly has a (albeit minor) definitional politics attached to his object choice; he places *sequence* at the foreground of his definition of comics in homage to Will Eisner’s definition of comics as “sequential art” but also as a way ascribing minor privilege to Töpffer. McCloud describes Töpffer as the “father of modern comics,” producing a distinction between modern comics and comics prior to Töpffer. Further, McCloud places emphasis on the Genevan’s innovative use of panel borders (17). This formal

property, the use of multi-panel pages, is privileged by McCloud as a way of using his definitional politics to add legitimation to his comics examples (fig. 11).



Figure 11. Töpffer. Example of Panel Structure and Sequence [1842].

Harvey takes umbrage with this definition *not* because of its politics, but because of what Harvey feels that McCloud excludes: single-panel gag cartoons.³³ “The gag cartoon falls outside McCloud’s definition because it is not a sequence of pictures. In fact, gag cartoons fall outside most definitions of comics. But not outside my description” (“Describing, Discarding ‘Comics’” 19). This is a critical exclusion for Harvey because, as I mentioned earlier in introducing the Hogarth narrative, Harvey sees Hogarth as the first of a number of eighteenth-century gag cartoonists (“How Comics Came to Be” 26). Widespread critical acceptance of McCloud’s

³³ However, this is not the case. McCloud several times in his volume accounts for single-panel comics through mechanisms of internal closure, temporality, independent narrative relationships between word and text. See pp. 114 and 121 in particular.

definition would risk continued secondary or marginal status for Harvey's oppositional *Ursprung*. As such, not only does Harvey devote time to rebuking McCloud, he also – despite the title of the article commenting on the impotence of definitional politics – spends time forwarding his own definition of comics (“a visual-verbal blend”) under the guise of “describing” rather than defining comics, and then “discarding” comics and calling the same practice and objects *cartooning* and *cartoons*.

One of the oldest examples of the use of the Formal/Definitional method to exclude a particular set of objects and privilege another comes from Kunzle. In order to privilege Töpffer in his massive *Early Comic Strip*, Kunzle uses a carefully nuanced definition, “I generally use the terms ‘narrative strip’ or ‘narrative sequence,’ or pictorial sequence’ (depending upon the format involved) in order to stress the *narrative* role of the medium, which I consider primary” (Preface n.p.). At first, it is unclear to what aim Kunzle forwards the necessity of *narrative*. One glance at his marginalia illuminates the scene, where he states that “even Hogarth has never been considered a *narrator*, and the lone pioneering article upon some of his most important narrative predecessors is brushed aside by a noted Hogarth critic...who finds them ‘fundamentally medieval moralities illustrating Luxury, one of the Deadly Sins,’ having little to nothing to do with Hogarth.” Here, the structure of Kunzle's definition is a means to retain Hogarth in the category of the “pre-caricatural strip” – to maintain the priority of the relatively anonymous Töpffer's “picture stories” [*histoires en estampes*, or stories told in prints] over Hogarth's immensely famous plates by means of establishing a narrative priority (Töpffer is simply perceived by Kunzle as a *stronger* narrator than Hogarth). Using the same rationale, but to an opposite conclusion, Chute and DeKoven refigure their definition of comics as “Graphic Narrative” in their “Introduction: Graphic

Narrative.” They do this expressly because of the narrative *strength* of Hogarth’s later works like “A Rake’s Progress” (1735) and “A Harlot’s Progress” (1731) (fig. 12).



Figure 12. Hogarth. “Hudribras beats Sidrophel and his man Wacum” [1725-30].

Hogarth’s narrative capability is vital to their model, which as literature scholars is invested in the ways that Hogarth uses image and text specifically to tell a story. Chute and DeKoven’s alternative *Ursprung* to The Yellow Kid narrative privileges Hogarth as a significant narrative that connects the history of the novel to the history of comics. This shows when one contrasts the description of their critical interest that Chute and DeKoven place in their endnotes: “We are particularly interested in long-form graphic narrative work, which can take the shape of a book, but can also potentially be an individual comic book or comic book series with a sustained narrative,” with Hogarth’s large book-length volumes of plates and engravings (779).

The most drastic example of this Formal/Definitional method comes from Roger Sabin in the self-aware way he forwards his Sloper narrative. First, he narrows his decisional model using formal and economic properties that directly support the dominant Yellow Kid narrative. “If a comic is something that is print based, mass produced, stars a continuing character and contains a significant part of its content [as] strips and cartoons, then maybe these publications fit the bill” (¶41). Several of these formal properties we’ve already encountered in our earlier discussion. Kunzle bounds comics in the technology of printing and mass production. McCloud and Harvey push strips and cartoons as defining criteria, respectively. Sabin’s choice to privilege The Yellow Kid narrative in his definition is an example *feint-and-parry* misdirection. The unique definitional property in his definition is Sabin’s insistence on “a continuing character” as a master trope. While immediately this seems to work to affirm The Yellow Kid *Ursprung*, what is more important is what this dictate *excludes*. Neither Hogarth nor Töpffer meet this particular formal quality. Sabin, then, manages to restrict the definition of comics so as to exclude *both* of the competing oppositional *Ursprungs*. He then counts on the aforementioned Temporal-Indexical method (that Ally Sloper predates Yellow Kid by nearly twenty years) to provide his historical example priority over the last remaining competitor. Perhaps due to the aggressiveness of his approach, in that he cuts and restricts too much, or perhaps due to the critical place both Hogarth and Töpffer has in the field of Comics Studies, but I reaffirm that Sabin’s oppositional *Ursprung* has made the least headway. Having mapped out the three oppositional historical origins in Comics Studies, and provided examples of how each of these engage particular methods of legitimation, I will next move to a description of how the structure of comics historiography and the methods of legitimation itself work to compromise the critical capability of Comics Studies historiography.

XI. Negation and “Theory-Death”

In this section, I discuss how each of the prior methods of legitimation are undercut in their critical capability – that is, how they are already coopted by the embedded structure of positive history to reproduce itself. Positive history is already embedded in legitimating structures and definitional politics (and in the form of dialectical history itself) as a way of assuring that the shape or structure of positive history endures regardless of which narrative dominates the field. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud describes the process of defining and redefining comics as ultimately a generative process that he describes as “The Great Debate” (23). This debate should occur between generations as each attempts to “try once more to re-invent comics.” This has not been the case; rather, the field of Comics Studies has locked into a perpetuating, repetitive discourse of competing models of history, definitional politics, and legitimizing methods. Harvey, in “Describing, Discarding ‘Comics’,” calls this “the abyss of definition into which nearly every serious discussion of comics has descended, sooner or later” (17). The abyss of definition is not an inaccurate description of the current state of Comics Studies scholarship. However, definitional politics is only a single facet (albeit the most significant) of a four-fold definitional-historical politics of legitimation.

This four-fold quagmire can be, perhaps, understood as the “Theory-Death” of Comics Studies, drawing on the work of avant-garde theorist Paul Mann. This problem of absorption and recuperation through institutionalization is more than reminiscent of his critique of the avant-garde in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*. In the chapter “The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Between Discourse and Text,” Watten provides a substantial explication of Mann’s argument, “The avant-garde dies into theory simultaneously when its political critique turns into an empty circularity of discourse, and when its radical forms are reduced to commodities exchanged in the market and collected by museums” (45). Watten describes Mann’s concept of

theory death as an “empty and self-confirming discourse” that “continues as its mode of reproduction nonetheless” and is eventually “always co-opted by the affirmative culture of institutions.” To this end, scholarship in the field concerns itself not with comics (the supposed object of study of Comics Studies), but with defining and restricting what comics are and what objects are legitimate historical examples of the medium.

While the medium of comics has had several avant-garde movements (e.g. Gaines’ post-CCA *Mad* Magazine, the underground comix of the 1960s, and the alternative comics of the 1980s), Comics Studies lacks any form of unified oppositional politics beyond the previously described advocacy for particular origin narratives and scattered identity politics-centered critiques. What is not at stake is the fate of any one oppositional politics movement, but the capability of the field to produce any form of sustained oppositional politics as it undergoes immense institutional-centered pressure to narrow objects of analysis, constitute a canon of “great works” (whose epicenter is often “the graphic novel”), identify and select practice-oriented works for instruction, solidify unstable definitions, manufacture coursework and consider its criterion for credentialing. Where the “historical avant-gardes” – Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, Abstract Expressionism, Cubism – each form a constellation or force field of cultural opposition that provides a form of ground for contemporary avant-garde studies, with comics occupy the tenuous space of commercial art. If, by definition, the academic role of Comics Studies is derived from the way it engages its specific medium (comics) then the largely coopted form of its field scholarship to some degree determines the critical capability and agency of the critics scholarly output. To some degree any oppositional movement from simple corrective to systemic overhaul that would occur in Comics Studies already occupies a space of easy recuperation. Why is this so? Because

Comics Studies historiography is partially-determined by the structure and politics of positive history.

This influence of positive history on all fields of scholarship in Comics Studies is pervasive. While each particular alternative *Ursprung* constitutes its own historical corrective or oppositional moment, the scope of their capability of producing resistance or reconfiguring the structure of comics history is, as I previously stated, nearly non-existent. This is not simply because they are *Ursprungs*, origins, that already a form of positive history. Though, in our illustrative historical examples this is the case. Rather, relationship of positive history to Comics Studies compromises critical agency *through* the politics of legitimation inherent to its institutionalization, inherent in the way that comics scholarship attempts to legitimize itself in its movement from outside academia to inside. Comics Studies legitimation reproduces Comics Studies scholarship in the service of affirmative culture. By engaging in *Ursprung*, the attempt to posit an origin, each academic who uses this form of historiography does make an a priori acceptance of a formal quality of positive history: the necessity and possibility of producing an origin in the first place. However, even if the type of historical model were *not* an *Ursprung*, if the model of historiography were *not* a search for a stabilizing starting point with which to anchor all other historical analysis, positive history still assures its own reproduction by coopting legitimizing discourse in such a way to assure its viral self-reproduction. To this degree, this essay simply used the contesting origin narratives of comics as an indicator species to understand how legitimizing discourse connects to positive history and affirmative culture.

Comics Studies further performs insertion into affirmative culture through their use the previously described four methods for producing historical legitimation. Each of these legitimizing methods has a direct correlation to one or more formal characteristics of positive history we

extrapolated from Foucault, Adorno, and Benjamin in section 4. The Literary/Associative method fails to note the discrepancy in power between their object, medium, or field of example and the external referent used to produce authority. The Technological method clearly foregrounds a technology or media as a condition of possibility. The Temporal-Indexical method reduces the form of history to a lowest common denominator by reducing difference and distinction to a singular, instrumental timeline. The Formal/Definitional model fails to acknowledge or recognize its intentional exclusions or foregrounding, as well as its moments of illogic or discontinuity. All four methods present their critical outcomes in the form of objective fact, as the productive expansion of knowledge in the field of Comics Studies. Given the historiographical and ideological deck, all and each of the four oppositional *Ursprungs* are simply recuperated into the structure of positive comics history either through slightly modifying the existing *Ursprung*, emptying out its politics into self-confirming, legitimizing discourse, or absorbing the critique into itself. This is clearly not to say that critical historiography is impossible in Comics Studies. Rather, I am asserting that Comics Studies has become locked into form of circular, self-confirming discourse – the discourse of legitimation – that creates a form of critical recuperation.

In his consideration of the avant-garde, Mann himself overtly connects this method of legitimation and recuperation to the structure of the dialectic and its relationship to affirmative culture: “this dialectical exchange itself as a primary function of so-called bourgeois culture” (Mann 18). His most clear articulation of this system follows:

Discursive practices are marked by their ideological specificity and concrete material conditions, but in the historical course of their interaction they also begin to manifest a generalized system (even a style) of relation and begin therefore to be related to a metasystem as well as to each other. The meta might very well arise and assert itself within particular institutions and works, but it hooks them to a systemic function that their specificity or immanence can no longer entirely exceed. It becomes increasingly apparent that distinct and contending discursive practices

tend to function according to a coordinated economic mechanism and that eventually the mechanism rises to the surface and must itself become the object of discourse. (28)

Comics Studies as a field is little more than a loosely coordinated series of particular practitioners, institutions, and works. Over its “historical course of interaction,” in its constitution as a legitimized mode of academic discourse, Comics Studies has taken on a form of critical historiography. This structure, the relationship of critics to positive history has taken a concrete form in the centrality of definitional and legitimizing debate to Comics Studies scholarship. This essay participates in this very discourse, a performative gesture of definitional politics and anti-definitional politics that, for Mann, would confirm the whole: “all criticism is discourse, and discourse has no negative force that is not reduced to dialectical systems-maintenance” (Mann 88). For Mann, the critical capability of Comics Studies would result in a form of archival fetishism, or even form of negation that is identical with bourgeois or affirmative culture. However, in Benjamin we find a way of avoiding this negation, reabsorption, and collapse into equivalence: the joy of the child collector. The child collector removes the object, extracts it from use value and exchange-value – both vital for any form of legitimating capability – and refurbishes the object with historical value. This provides an alternative to the current forms of critical engagement currently undertaken by comics scholars. In my conclusion, I will expand on this idea and propose a new role for comics scholars: the role the Critic Collector of comics.

XII. Conclusion

In this essay, I’ve highlighted a number of Benjaminian constructions: his “gift of the moment,” his anti-progressive/anti-Hegelian temporal politics, his systemic negativity expressed through the formal practice of collection, and the expansion of that formal practice towards a horizon of possibility/limit. This constellation of Benjaminian constructs acts as means of thinking

through the problems of legitimation and recuperation within the field of Comics Studies. To make my connections more explicit: Benjamin's "gift of the moment," the reorientation of subject and object embedded in childhood memory, provides a structural metaphor for the way Comics Studies scholars might approach their objects of critical analysis. In Comics Studies, the selection of individual comics objects from the medium serves to provide examples for discourses of legitimation, as weapons to stake a claim in a developing field. These structures of legitimation are framed and determined by broader structures of historiography *and* institutionality. In our politicized object selections, chosen for legitimizing *use value*, the relationship of the scholar in Comics Studies to their objects mirrors the relationship between society and technology critiqued by Benjamin in "Theories of German Fascism," "To the Planetarium," and ultimately "On the Philosophy of History." We each select our examples, our objects, our definitions with great care to use these artists and artworks as "fetish(es) of doom" to mark off discursive territory. With the continuation of internal definitional and legitimizing debates, we capitulate to affirmative culture and reproduce a self-reflexive, cyclical discourse whose only outcome is an inevitable simplification into a "history of the winners." In order to address this problem, I chose to turn to an unlikely source: avant-garde studies. Avant-garde studies' experience with problems of absorption, recuperation, negation, and academic legitimation make it uniquely suited to provide a space through which to think through these problems in the developing field of Comics Studies. Avant-garde cultural oppositionality provides it with a privileged epistemological frame with which to see the various, normally transparent, mechanisms of affirmative culture at work.

Throughout this essay, there is a clear (albeit Benjaminian) Marxist framework. This Western Marxist perspective reflects my concern for the dominating role the market is having in the formation and institutionalization of Comics Studies, as well as to the relationship of the art object

to society. A case could be made for the expansion and legitimation of Comics Studies as a byproduct of the widespread market success of another related sequential art genre: film. In U.S. theaters, Superhero Comic-related properties have had tremendous market success and presence since the mid-1990s. In the post-9/11 period, however, a number of franchises have gone on to enter the pantheon of historically top-grossing films, in particular Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, Christopher Nolan's *Batman* relaunch, and Joss Whedon's *Avengers*-related Marvel Properties. This period of production and financial viability of superhero film coincides with the expansion of critical interest and legitimation in comics following the publication of McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. It also coincides with the collapse of superhero comics publication and distribution following the collapse of the speculator boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s. From the mid-1980s until 1992, the U.S. comic book industry rapidly expanded as investors saw comics as another potential commodities market for investment. At peak, comic book sales reached \$850 million in 1993; by 1997, this had declined to \$425 million (McAllister 17). Between 1992 and 2004, the volume sales of comic books declined by eighty percent (Rozanski n.p.). This is not an argument for "the death of comics" or the end of superhero comics, rehashing the same postmodern endism that has persisted since Jim Starlin entered the industry in the 1970s. Arguably, due to the explosion of web comics in the past few years, there are more people producing sequential art than ever.

As capital and affirmative culture drives the forces of legitimation and institutionalization, so too does the market influence the identity and practices of Comics Studies scholars and scholarship: the greater the commodification of the art, the greater the commodification of the artist. The principle concern of the avant-garde is the social role and capability of art. For any Comics Studies scholarship so influenced by the avant-garde, its concern should be similar: at this

moment of greater imposition of market forces on academic production and identity, the social role of the Comics Studies scholar should come into question. What is to be done by Comics Scholars about the problems of the institutionalization of Comics Studies? To this end, I suggest a new understanding of the role of those who intervene in Comics Studies: as Benjaminian *Critic Collector*. The Critic Collector of Comics Studies recedes from the contested space of definitional politics and universal history, to cultivate a non-instrumental relationship with the artistic objects they select. The Critic Collector chooses either impossibly broad or inconceivably limited definitions for Comics, rejecting the utility and simplification inherent in the definitional politics in the field. Their critical production mirrors their expanded definitional politics, exploding definitions in that their output is all at once “arsenal and zoo, crime museum and crypt.” The Critic Collector cultivates a personal relationship with Comics art and rejects the expanding ground of institutionalization that pushes to exclude those outside of academia through the process of credentialing. The Critic Collector eschews the reproduction universal histories (the histories of empire) for local histories, histories of particular moments, or non-universalizing histories (such as Amy Nyberg *Seal of Approval*, Dan Raviv’s *Comic Wars*, etc.). In the place of *Ursprung*, the Critic Collector considers genealogy [*Herkunft*] and works to reconfigure the practices of historiography within the field.

This is not a value-neutral assertion, but rather a push for an oppositional politics that is set against the transfiguration of the field that is in process and the annihilation of its resistive critical capability. In undertaking this resistive politics, the Critic Collector would be well served to continue to consider the artistic and critical production of the postmodern avant-gardes. The obvious danger in doing so, my prior discussion of the Literary/Associative method which attempts to map outside authority on to Comics Studies scholarship as a mechanism of legitimation, is

disarmed by one simple fact: avant-garde studies has a largely marginal status in academia. (This is especially true of avant-garde poetry.) In the same way that the *social* role of Comics Studies critic can operate as a heuristic for future critical engagement, my choice to connect Comics Studies to the avant-garde has a propaedeutic function: the analysis and engagement of the avant-garde has immensely revolutionary value. From Hugo Ball to Cindy Sherman, Lyn Hejinian to Robert Smithson, El Lissitzky to Catherine Daly, Andy Warhol to Kasey Mohammed, Orlan to Art Spiegelman, Robert Glück to Robert Crumb, Chris Ware to Barrett Watten, the avant-garde opens to questions of narrativity, critical practice, temporality, means of production, body and identity politics, diasporic politics, performance, and media in a way that conserves or retains the critical capability of art and artist, critic and collector. This is fertile ground for any politics of active refusal.

Groensteen, in addressing the difficulties of cultural legitimation for Comics, comments that “comics propose nothing other than a return to childhood” (7). For the Benjaminian Critic Collector, this strain of delegitimizing discourse takes on special power. In their earlier referenced “Baby-Boom Children and Harvey Comics After the Code,” Jackson and Arnold state, “By purchasing their own comics, children felt a sense of ownership over their content, and as comics historian Denis Giffords notes, comics publishers were aiming their wares not at parents but specifically ‘at kids with hot dimes to spend’” (¶7). Children, not academics or professional critics, were both the early consumers of Comics art in U.S. and Canadian culture. The Benjaminian Critic Collector, far from working to dispel this connection under the largely-economic need for legitimation, knows that this relationship is a site of critical remembrance as the location of joy that informs collection as a critical practice. Children, in this intense move towards legitimation,

have been largely written out of the history of Comics despite being their primary consumers and advocates – their dedicated collectors.

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ABSTRACT**“THE GIFT OF THE MOMENT”: WALTER BENJAMIN AND COMICS HISTORY**

by

AUSTIN ST PETER**December 2012****Advisor:** Dr. Barrett Watten**Major:** English**Degree:** Master of Arts

This essay is a historiographical critique of the ways that the major historical narratives in the emerging field of Comics Studies are employed. I argue that scholars in the field utilize historical origin narratives and medium definitions with the intent to stake out a space of privilege for their privileged selections – thereby playing into a politics of legitimation. The major critic whose work I utilize to critique the major historical narratives of the medium, and ultimately the way that they are utilized, is the Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin. Not only do I employ Benjamin’s work to interpret and critique the space of contestation between field scholars and historical narratives, I also utilize Benjamin’s work to highlight critical practice, informed by a construct I call “the gift of the moment,” that serves to circumvent and subvert this circular legitimating discourse. I conclude by suggesting a new social scholarly role, which I call the “Critic Collector,” as model for oppositional politics.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Austin St. Peter studies Literature and Culture at Wayne State University. When he is not teaching, he spends his limited recreation time consuming media and enjoying the company those who matter most to him: his wife and his cat.