

SKETCHY MATERIAL

by Kerry Soper (Popular Culture and Comedy)



Photo by David John Arnett (Photography '24)

FOR 20 YEARS I have been trying to say the phrase “I study cartoons” while keeping a straight face and not laughing apologetically. There is no reason to be embarrassed about this, of course; I have colleagues in the College of Humanities, after all, who unselfconsciously study horror movies, fairy tales, anime, and video games. My lingering discomfort probably comes from having started my career (in the late 1990s) when an older model of the humanities—one that was mostly about an exclusive and highbrow canon (the greatest hits of Western art and culture)—dominated our curriculum. While we have not completely abandoned that traditional legacy (trying to keep the best parts and shedding the problematic ones), it is nice to be working now in an era when the humanities have expanded to include the study of popular, folk, and minority cultures—as well as non-Western cultural perspectives and traditions. In my own field, it has been exciting to figure out new ways to study, curate, and sometimes create popular texts that are not shaped by the outdated assumption that all things mainstream are hopelessly shallow or lowbrow. To elaborate, as I study cartoons, I try to think about the ways that distilled, iconic images can alternately invite potent reader identification, communicate essentialized ideas and social types in goofily poetic and vivid ways (sometimes for good and at other times for ill), and use a hybrid verbal and visual text to deliver comedic ideas in succinct and surprising ways. (I wish my own cartoon were a better illustration of those dynamics; maybe you can pull out one of your dog-eared *Calvin and Hobbes* or *The Far Side* books if you need a good reminder.) ☐

THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW WERE "HUMANITIES"



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