

7-26-2012

How do we read comics of the quotidian? (Part III of a Series)

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Recommended Citation

Bramlett, Frank, "How do we read comics of the quotidian? (Part III of a Series)" (2012). *English Faculty Publications*. 20.
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How do we read comics of the quotidian? (Part III of a Series)

For the final installment of this series about comics and representations of everyday life, I will be considering a short comic by Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá called “Happy Birthday, My Friend!” The collection of comics is called *De:TALES* and its subtitle is *Stories from Urban Brazil*, which describes the setting of each story perfectly: city streets, restaurants, night clubs, homes, art museums.

To me, the idea of a birthday seems pretty routine. After all, everybody has a birthday and birthdays happen every day. On the other hand, each person has only one birthday each year (the complications of February 29th birthdays notwithstanding). So how routine, ordinary, or ‘quotidian’ can a birthday celebration be?

In this case, the birthday boy is one Calea, and his friends have made arrangements for a celebration at a local bar, where many friends have gathered. Calea doesn’t live near these friends anymore, though, so he’s been gone for a while. In this panel, we see his girlfriend in the extreme foreground playing a song on the jukebox while Calea walks toward her. (The song lyrics read “and everybody hurts,” which possibly cites a song by the U.S. musical group REM.)



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/juke-box-everybody-hurts.jpg>)

The physical setting of the panel is utterly ordinary. People are occupying the sofa and chair in the background, the lighting in the room seems dim, and the darkness of the night sky shows through the window above the sofa.

As the night progresses, Calea decides to make a toast, and the friends raise their beer bottles. (The lone female is holding a water bottle rather than beer, and that may be the reason why she doesn't raise hers.)



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/toast-page-86.jpg>)

The three friends participating in this toast are celebrating friendship, although they acknowledge the fact that they don't get to see Calea like they used to. These friends don't seem sad. On the contrary, they seem very happy to spend time with Calea.



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/toast-page-87.jpg>)

The built-in tension of the birthday celebration grows even greater as we near the end of the story. It is clear that Calea cannot remain with his friends and must be going back to where he came from. The friends say their goodbyes, and Calea is gone.

Whether birthdays are quotidian on one hand or special celebrations on the other is an important question here. But this question is made more difficult by the fact that Calea is a ghost. He "moved away" because he died, not because he took a job in a different city or moved to a different part of Brazil for the sake of a relationship. Thus, his visit with his friends for a birthday celebration is highly remarkable and quite out of the ordinary.

My two previous posts on comics and the quotidian explored the way characters manage their everyday lives vis-à-vis the danger of bombings (<https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/05/10/how-do-we-read-comics-of-the-quotidian-part-i-of-a-series/>) in one instance and in interactions with robots

[\(https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/06/21/how-do-we-read-comics-of-the-quotidian-part-ii-of-a-series-2/\)](https://pencilpanelpage.wordpress.com/2012/06/21/how-do-we-read-comics-of-the-quotidian-part-ii-of-a-series-2/) in the other. But how do we read this comic...this story about a birthday party for a ghost? To what degree is this a comic of the quotidian?

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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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