In Memoriam - Hannah Frank

SCMS mourns the passing of one of our young members, Hannah Frank. Her mentor, Tom Gunning, offers this tribute:

It is always difficult to mark the passing of our colleagues, to acknowledge that those we have loved and learned from are no longer with us. Usually this act of mourning includes a list of their achievements and the legacy left behind after a long career and life. It is all the more difficult for me, and for those who knew her, to mark the death of our dear friend Hannah Frank because her life, already so rich in achievement for one so young, but richer still in promise, was curtailed so suddenly, unexpectedly and so prematurely this August. Our field has been robbed of one of its rising stars, one of its most original and inquisitive minds. Beyond this we have lost a spirit marked not only by her genius but her generosity, not only her tireless research, passionate in pursuit of details, but her startling originality, probing into fundamental questions. Hannah’s life and work was imbued with sparkling wit, a sense of humor and delight. She embodied animation in every sense of the word.

Hannah Frank was my student, but every one who taught her, at Yale, Iowa and Chicago, experienced that essence of true education -- learning from your students. Her focus was on the history and technology of animation, a passion she possessed from childhood (she once posted something she wrote at an astonishingly young age of her desire to study the evolution of cartoons). But as deeply as she penetrated into her topic her interests were broad and varied. Within animation she could cover everything from Disney to Len Lye, from Fleischer to Breer, from Soviet animation to Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs. Speaking as someone with a deep interest in animation but nothing like Hannah’s erudition, I found she would sweetly correct my generalizations, pointing out on Facebook after I did a brief presentation on Bacall to Arms, that the wonderful Warner Brothers tribute to movie-going actually recycled an early WB cartoon I had never heard of. But if Hannah had the chops to challenge any buff, she was never just a fan.

What other scholar of studio animation could pull off a detour from a discussion of studio practices into details of the paper and handwriting of Emily Dickinson's poems? This section of her dissertation was more than a display of recherché knowledge, however. Through it Hannah opened the issue of the importance of the materiality and labor that goes into all artwork and which can be obscured in reproduction. Hannah probed animation, examining the individual cells and sketches in order to uncover the anonymous labor that went into them. Like art historian Michael Camille uncovering the grotesques in the marginalia of medieval manuscripts, Hannah found the traces of reuse, the moments of pentimento, left behind by the inkers or in-betweeners never meant to be visible, but brought to light by her caring eye. She could subject all films to this sort of scrutiny. I remember her demonstrating that a close-up of
Claudette Colbert in Sirk’s Sleep, My Love had actually been flipped in printing in order to avoid the side of the actress’ profile that she hated, and yet preserve an eyeline match.

Hannah’s Facebook page was filled with little discoveries, demonstrations and witty comments along with statement of political commitment (like her recent post on removing confederate monuments). They were alas ephemeral and of course my grief now is compounded by the sense that much that she knew will never make it into print, although one hopes her brilliant dissertation will become a book. But even after only her first year of full time teaching at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, it is clear she touched students through her teaching as much as her writing will continue to inspire us. Her humor was subtle, but could be biting, yet also generous and her kindness and consideration shone from her eyes and smile. No theodicy, no philosophy can reconcile me, or any of us, to this loss. In the midst of it we realize what a unique gift it had been to have her with us, even briefly.