
Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections, edited by Martha Kuhlman & José Alaniz

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/3387>

DOI: 10.4000/belphegor.3387

ISSN: 1499-7185

Publisher

LPCM

Electronic reference

Chris Reynolds, "*Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections*", edited by Martha Kuhlman & José Alaniz", *Belphegor* [Online], 18-2 | 2020, Online since 16 December 2020, connection on 28 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/3387> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/belphegor.3387>

This text was automatically generated on 28 April 2021.



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REFERENCES

Comics of the New Europe: Reflections and Intersections, edited by Martha Kuhlman & José Alaniz, Leuven: Leuven U.P., 2020, 280p.



- 1 This book is undeniably a welcome study. Welcome because there are too few studies on European comics in general and even less about marginal[ized] ones, in English. Except for a couple of them (e.g., Bunjevac), the majority of the authors named in this study will be unknown to most scholars outside these “New” (i.e., mostly Slavic) European countries. But it is interesting to discover new talents and new issues, or new ways of bringing up older issues (e.g., trauma, censorship...).
- 2 Like the previous books published in this collection of “Studies in European Comics and Graphic Novels” (I reviewed several of them for this same journal), this book is of excellent material quality (glossy paper, good binding, pictures of high quality) and of very high scholarship. Martha Kuhlman is the editor of *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* (2010), published by the University Press of Mississippi, as well as of numerous articles and chapters, mostly on comics. José Alaniz may be less known in the field of comics in spite of, or maybe exactly because of his interest in the scholarship of marginality, since he is the co-editor of *Superhero and Critical Animal Studies* (2017), and full author of two books: *Death, Disability, and the Superhero: The Silver Age and Beyond* (2015) and *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* also published by the U.P. of Mississippi (2014). Critical Animal Studies and Disability Studies are quite new fields, and Russian or Slavic comics are still new to the immense majority of comics scholars. This is also why this volume is so important.
- 3 The book is divided in four parts, preceded by an introduction by the two editors. In this 20-page introduction, the co-editors explain why they chose the word “new” Europe, in the title instead of more obvious ones like “East” or “central”: It is because the former has “shifted towards [a] pejorative connotation” (8) and the latter has “receded from the horizon” (9) in the 2000s. Also recognized in the introduction is the fact that the works analyzed here are either difficult to access (e.g., out of print) and/or not translated (8). And even if these chapters are very concrete in their analysis and

provide some good pictures, it is not easy to have a real sense of what these works truly are. So, hopefully, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech, Serbian cultural centers will provide some resources to support independent translators to translate and publish these interesting stories for comics lovers and for scholars interested in popular cultures and in the political issues pertaining to these “new” countries.

- 4 Each part is about the same length (60+ pages), and except for the fourth one, contains three roughly equal chapters (15+ pages each). This quantitative balance may seem at first disproportionate, since the four “regions” have unequal demography, economy and/or political or cultural impact, especially considering that the fourth part deals with four different countries (Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary). This feeling is unfortunately reinforced by the fact that the first three parts are preceded by a sizeable introduction, while the fourth one has only a short one-page introduction for these four different countries (languages, cultures, comics traditions). However, except for this weak, and not clear nor clarified, point, the three other introductions are really useful.
- 5 The first part is about “[t]he former Yugoslav States,” that is, in this case, in spite of the plural, only about Serbia. Not being a specialist of this “new” Europe, the only artist I knew from this region is Nina Bunjevac since some of her works have been written in English and translated into other languages, and moreover, she actually lives in Canada where she participates in festivals and conferences. Furthermore, several articles have already been written on her work¹. There is still much to learn about her work in this chapter, entitled “Filial Estrangement and Figurative Mourning in the Work of Nina Bunjevac”, by Dragana Obradović.
- 6 Part 2 is about “Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic” with a short introduction (83-88) reminding us of the main key dates in the country’s history (i.e., 1918, 1940, 1945, 1968, 1989, and “the velvet divorce” in 1993) and the main popular authors in the country (e.g., Foglar and Fisher, Saudek), to conclude that “[o]verall, comics have received a significant amount of attention in the Czech republic , both in the academy and in the broader public sphere” (86). This section features two chapters on Czechia and one on a Slovakian artist, Branko Jelinek, who resides in Prague.
- 7 The introduction (137-142) to “Part 3: Germany,” is as much about West Germany (not part of the “new” Europe) than about “East Germany.” This is first, because the period covering East Germany’s history is quite short (40 years, from 1949 to 1990), but also because Germany, surprisingly, since it is such a strong cultural power in many other fields, does not have a strong comics tradition. Except for the unavoidable Wilhelm Busch, who was so influential on American comics (c.1860-1890s), and for the few interesting wordless graphic narratives produced during the rise of Nazism, there is not much until the last decade, except the several great comics artists who left Germany for other countries such as for France (e.g., Andreas). As mentioned at the end of the chapter, “comics as an art form and as a subject of academic study has been somewhat slower,” and there is only one publication on the subject in English (by Lynne Marie Kutch).
- 8 As for Part 4 on Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Hungary, as we already mentioned, it is strange that its introduction is so short, where one would have expected a longer one, since this section deals with four countries, each with its own language and culture. Similarly, it is difficult to know why “Poland” rates only one chapter (by Ewa Stańczyk)

in spite of the fact that it has one of the strongest comics tradition in the “new” Europe. Other than that, the 4 chapters are very instructive and excellently written.

- 9 This edited volume provides its readers much new and interesting information. Its 16 authors, including the two co-editors (five men and eight women), come from diverse backgrounds, from the countries dealt with in this volume (Serbia, Hungary, Poland, Czechia, Romania...) and others (Finland, the Netherlands, Australia, the USA). There is also a surprising, proportionally speaking, presence from Canada (three contributors: Eedy, Ottawa; Nijdam, Vancouver; Obradovic, Toronto). It includes three women artists (Nina Bunjevac, Wanda Hagendorn, Andrea Chirica), and ten men. However, this diversity is not so strong in terms of genres since, as is usual for comics academics, the commercial comics created in these countries are almost totally ignored. Except for a couple of references in the introductions, the book deals mostly with avant-garde and graphic narratives (novels, memoirs, ...). For example, one can find only two references to Marvel (241-42 & 266) and two to French language BD (Spirou, Tintin). It would be interesting to know more about commercial comics production in these countries. Something else might be lacking, which is implied by the almost exclusive interest in avant-garde: there are very few references to manga (five in the index), in spite of the very successful contemporary presence of the Japanese comics in these countries, like in many others. Also, interestingly enough, these European countries include many minorities (ethnic, linguistic...), and except for the brief mention of a project in the introduction to Czechia (p. 85, about the Roma), and at the beginning of the chapter on Bunjevac (about her 2012 work, *Heartless*), there are few mentions of them. On the other hand, also surprisingly and interestingly, indigenous people (i.e., Native Americans) seem to fascinate these “new” nations, since they are present in three chapters (Czechia, Germany, Ukraine). Finally, there is a significant reference to postcolonialism in the general introduction (12-13), but that concept does not play a strong role in the chapters except, as can be expected, in the chapter on Ukraine. Apart from these small weaknesses, overall, this is a very good, interesting, and useful study.

NOTES

1. See Mihaela Precup and Laura Pearson in Eric Hoffman and Dominick (dir.), *The Canadian Alternative*, University Press of Mississippi, 2016, pp. 207-223 and pp. 224-245 respectively.