COMICS AND AGENCY

Edited by Vanessa Ossa, Jan-Noël Thon, and Lukas R.A. Wilde

Comics and Agency

Comics Studies

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Contents

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Comics and Agency

Introduction

> When Marty Gold finished inking the pages that Joe had just completed, they would be strapped to the back of a motorcycle by the kid from Iroquois Color and carried along Broadway, down past Madison Square and Union Square and Wanamaker's, to the Iroquois plant on Lafayette Street. There, one of four kindly, middle-aged women, two of whom were named Florence, would guess with surprising violence and aplomb at the proper coloration for the mashed noses, the burning Dorniers, the Steel Gauntlet's diesel-driven suit of armor, and all the other things that Joe had drawn and Marty had inked. The big Heidelberg cameras with rotating three-color lenses would photograph the colored pages, and the negatives, one cyan, one magenta, one yellow, would be screened by the squinting old Italian engraver, Mr. Petto, with his corny green celluloid visor. The resulting color halftones would be shipped uptown once more, along the ramifying arterials, to the huge loft building at West Forty-seventh and Eleventh, where men in square hats of folded newsprint labored at the great steam presses to publish the news of Joe's rapturous hatred of the German Reich, so that it could be borne once more into the streets of New York, this time in the form of folded and stapled comic books, lashed with twine into a thousand little bundles that would be hauled by the vans of Seaboard News to the newsstands and candy stores of the city, to the outermost edges of its boroughs and beyond, where they would be hung up like laundry or marriage banns from wire display racks.
>
> (Chabon 2000, 74–75)

This elaborate description by Michael Chabon traces the complicated paths taken by the drawings of Joe Kavalier, protagonist of Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay* (2000), when the first intradiegetic issue of the "The Escapist" comic is completed in 1939. Comics were not simple "things," Chabon informs the interested readership in this monumental homage to comics history, they were an enormous industry even back then, a complex network of agency distributed between countless individual and collective actors ("the squinting old Italian engraver," "men in square hats of folded newsprint"), institutions ("the Iroquois plant on Lafayette Street," "the newsstands and candy stores of the city"), technologies and machines ("the big Heidelberg cameras with rotating three-color lenses," "the great steam presses"), and infrastructures ("shipped uptown once more, along the ramifying arterials," "hauled by the vans of Seaboard News"). Joe and Clay, in the midst of all this, must continuously reassert themselves against other powerful actors such as their editor George Deasey, the company owner Sheldon Anapol, the advertising agency Hitherto, Burns, Baggot & DeWinter, as well as the producers, writers, and actors of the subsequent "The Escapist" radio show. The network's more

visible nodes, which public recollection will focus on most within the story, are certainly the magnificent fictional creations such as the eponymous "Escapist" and his many adventures as well as the ephemeral objects that hold the "network" together as commodities and goods, distributed in "a thousand little bundles." The specific materiality of those books, we are reminded again and again, serves as an anchor of memories and nostalgia for those who work with them and for those who bought, read, and collected them: "Joe loved his comic books," Chabon reflects on his protagonist's life in one of the last chapters, "for their inferior color separation, their poorly trimmed paper stock, their ads for air rifles and dance courses and acne creams, for the basement smell that clung to the older ones, the ones that had been in storage during Joe's travels" (2000, 575). Less apparent, but perhaps most influential on the lives of Joe and Clay – as well as on their creations – are the millions of anonymous readers, some of which become only visible through their different stances on "The Escapist" comics. Their engagement ranges from fannish enthusiasm over political zeal to the admiration of fellow artists from other media, and finally to a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in which Joe is accused of the encouragement of juvenile delinquency by promoting homosexuality through his work. Cameo appearances of (and references to) Dr. Fredric Wertham, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, and Orson Welles notwithstanding, Chabon's account of twentieth-century comics and media history is clearly fictional. It nevertheless articulates a precise question in literary form: Where does agency reside within these networks of production, distribution, and reception surrounding "The Escapist," and how do the fictional character and his adventures as they are represented in comics and in other media forms influence, shape, and transform the currents of individuals, companies, and perhaps US history itself?

Comics and Agency

Notions of "agency" distributed by semiotic, technological, and sociocultural means among the heterogeneous actors surrounding "comics" as an assemblage or a dispositive certainly require further investigation. The concept has proven indispensable in a wide range of disciplines for determining processes of mutual influences and responsibilities for specific actions. Fields of study extend from political science to anthropology and ethics, all strongly influenced by sociology, as one of the latter's basic questions has long been how the agency of individuals can be conceived in opposition to social structures (Giddens 1984, 17–45; Hays 1994). In some contrast to these approaches derived from sociology and

related fields, distributed agency is not yet established as a standard concept in comics studies, nor indeed in media studies (for a survey, see Eichner 2014; the term is also commonly used in game studies in order to describe the various opportunities for interaction and engagement that video games afford their players; Bódi and Thon 2020; Nguyen 2020; Bódi 2023):

> Media Studies are usually concerned with the economic, social, and political conditions of the *production* of media, the analysis of media *content*, the reception and consumption of media products including the characteristics of *users* of media, and finally, the *critique* of media in general from a cultural and historical perspective.
>
> (Belliger and Krieger 2017, 20, original emphases)

Approaches to *mediating and mediated agency* were first developed in response to Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which has been booming since the 1990s (Latour 2005; Blok et al. 2020), leading to subsequent drafts of an emerging "actor media theory" (Schüttpelz 2013; Krieger and Belliger 2014; Spöhrer and Ochsner 2017). Most existing approaches to mediating and mediated agency, despite all internal differences, were undeniably characterized by a strong orientation towards perspectives developed by Bruno Latour (2005), Michel Callon (1986), Antoine Hennion (2015), Madelaine Akrich (1997), and John Law (2002). An "actor" is here understood as any entity that becomes recognizable as the catalyst or cause of interrelated, complex chains of action, transformation, or reconfiguration. Other important strands of research include critical posthumanism and neomaterialism inspired by Donna Haraway (1991) and Katherine Hayles (1999), which dissolve traditional subject/object boundaries altogether (Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013), while "flat ontologies" are also prominent among proponents of object-oriented epistemology (Harman 2002; Bryant 2011; Bogost 2012). According to all these "new materialisms," agency can not only be attributed to "natural" persons, but also to "things" as heterogeneous as materialities, devices, inscriptions, institutions, or programs within complex configurations or assemblages.

For Latour, all and any entities are to be treated indifferently in ontological terms, as mere "quasi-objects," fleeting nodes of distributed agency (Belliger and Krieger 2017; Seier 2017). Hence, Latour addresses mediation wherever actors are connected as "mediators" or "intermediaries" to transmit any "meaning or force" (2005, 39). In light of all these interconnections between actors, Erhard Schüttpelz has coined the term "Operationsketten" [operational chains] (2008, 234), which are linked through modulations of agency. Operational chains of comics would thus include natural persons and their institutional roles (such as writers, colorists, and letterers), apparatuses and materials (such as drawing pens and reading apps), as well as texts and inscriptions (from specific

editions of a given book to entire genre traditions). This list must remain programmatically open: "Following this definition, 'mediators' or 'médiateurs' can be personal, technical, discoursive – they can be any kind of transformational linkage between delegated agency" (Spöhrer 2017, 11). Andrea Seier has pointed to the fact that it is not "networks" that offer the starting point and the foundation of any ANT investigation, but "the establishment, interference, and transformation of the *agency of actants*" (2017, 41–42, emphasis added). Agency thus turns out to be a truly foundational concept, because any "capacity to act" (Callon 2005, 4) precedes an identification of subjects vs. objects as well as stable domains such as nature vs. culture or human vs. technology.

The fifteenth annual conference of the German Society for Comic Studies (ComFor), "Comics and Agency: Actors, Publics, Participation," focused specifically on the interrelations between (groups of) individual, collective, institutional, and corporate actors of comics (including graphic novels, manga, cartoons, and other forms of sequential or cartoonish images). Even if many classifications in the world of comics – such as the distinction between authors and readers – seem less salient from this point of view – as producers may have once been consumers and readers easily become authors and artists themselves – they are distinguishable through a particular distribution of agency within historically evolving media configurations. If readers, authors, or editors comment on or add to an existing work, they operate within different dimensions of agency defined by their possibilities to influence, alter, or shape other actants in the network. Agency is at stake when audiences resist hegemonic meanings and interpretations of multimodal texts in order to assume opposing positions. In the same manner, authorship could be understood as the attribution of agency to and across various medial instances and roles such as writers, artists, colorists, letterers, or editors, as well as commercial rights holders such as publishing houses or conglomerates (for US superhero comics, see, e.g., Stein 2021). Instead of considering Marvel, for instance, as a monolithic institution of publishing power, we can approach it as a network of people (with different roles) as well as of material resources that all gain certain amounts of agency through their position as part of the quasi-object "Marvel." The latter thus not only entails editors, authors, and artists, brick buildings, paper and ink – but also employees and objects in less visible positions, such as perhaps janitors or coffee machines. Even if network theory aims to shine a light onto these less obvious forces at work, a less hierarchal structure in terms of theoretical design by no means implies an equality of power, since the individual agency and "connectedness" within any network can differ greatly for individual nodes. The conceptual lens of "distributed agency" might also be able to trace a continuity between "mainstream" and "alternative" traditions of comics and comics scholarship, where exchanges between approaches derived from cultural studies on the

one hand (concerned with popular superhero comics, *shōnen* or *shōjo* manga, or globally marketed franchises) and literature studies on the other (concerned with more "literary" genres such as comics autobiographies, journalistic, or other non-fictional works) are still more the exception than the norm (Singer 2018, 1–35). Both comics traditions, after all, are equally responsive to their markets as well as to their creators, distributors, and readers. From this point of view, a specific comic as a semiotic and material object or as a "site" of distributed agency can be related to aspects of comics' *production* (e.g., authorship, technical affordances, infrastructures, and institutions), to aspects of comics' *reception* (e.g., consumption, appropriation, and participation) as well as to aspects of comics' *recognition* (e.g., circulation, canonization, and discursivation). An even broader perspective includes further relations such as those between different media (i.e., comics' potential for adaptation and transmedialization; Davis 2016; Yockey 2017; Rauscher et al. 2021).

Comics and Mediality

In order to provide a brief overview of possible dimensions of comics and mediating/mediated agency (which draws on Jung et al. 2021), we will begin by differentiating between specific dimensions of their mediality. Comics can be identified by their integrated "base media," writing and sequential images, with the interplay of written and pictorial elements being increasingly referred to as multimodality, both within comics studies (Herman 2010; Kukkonen 2011; Packard et al. 2019) and beyond (Kress 2010; Gibbons 2012; Bateman et al. 2017). These semiotic structures will always be integrated into some sort of "carrier medium" that lends material support, such as newspapers, booklets, or digital reading technologies (Thon and Wilde 2016; Kashtan 2018; Jenkins 2020). Yet, we can also speak of comics themselves as a "medium conventionally perceived as distinct" (Rajewsky 2010, 61), which allows us to focus on comics as an artistic genre, communicative form, or cultural technique that can be imitated or "quoted" in other medial contexts through intermedial references. Here, multidimensional conceptualizations of media and mediality such as those proposed by Siegfried J. Schmidt (2000, 2008), Marie-Laure Ryan (2004, 2006), and Jan-Noël Thon (2014, 2016) provide further orientation by allowing us "to distinguish between at least a communicative-semiotic, a material-technological, and a conventional-institutional dimension of media and their mediality" (Thon and Wilde 2016, 233) in general as well as of comics and their mediality in particular (as discussed in more detail by Wilde 2021), without prioritizing certain projects, interests, and terminologies over others.

First, whatever we approach *as comics*, it is clear that the respective artifacts will have a communicative-semiotic dimension: Comics usually tell stories or communicate other kinds of meanings that may be actualized differently by various groups of readers. For media studies scholar Werner Faulstich, a "medium" would hence be "*ein institutionalisiertes System um einen organisierten Kommunikationskanal*" [*an institutionalized system around an organized channel of communication*] (2002, 26, original emphases). In this perspective, we can consider media as "Kommunikationsinstrumente" [instruments of communication] (Schmidt 2008, 144). Jan Teurlings even speaks of a "transmission approach" (2013, 106) to media production studies. In this view, then, media primarily establish "the condition of the possibility of communication and cooperative action beyond the *hic et nunc* of interaction" (Belliger and Krieger 2017, 22). In a subsequent "agentic analysis," the corresponding *meanings* could be reconstructed with recourse to specific actors and their interpretative authority according to social and institutional roles. A variety of different methods are available for this purpose, from semiotics-based textual analysis to empirical reception research.

Second, it should also be clear that these "semiotic sites" are always dependent on a material-technological dimension of "carrier media" or distributional media. With Schmidt, we thus consider media as "Medientechniken (bzw. sogenannte technische Dispositive)" [media techniques/technologies (or so-called technical dispositifs)] (2008, 144). The field of multimodality research, for example, tends to emphasize a comparatively narrow conceptualization of media that highlights their material-technological dimension: If one considers writing and images *not* as base media, but as semiotic modalities, then one draws a sharp distinction between the material substrate (the "medium") on the one hand and an abstract semiotic form realized within it on the other: "[M]edia become modes once their principles of semiosis begin to be conceived of in more abstract ways (as 'grammars' of some kind). This in turn will make it possible to realise them in a range of media" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 22). Yet, the material-technological dimension of media is perhaps best regarded not as autonomous, but as a materialized expression of sociocultural negotiation processes. This becomes clear, for example, in the fact that certain technological

Formate [. . .] – sowohl durch explizite Normierungen wie auch durch unabsichtliche Affordanzen – immer ganz spezifische und selektive Formen von Gebrauch, ganz konkrete Adressat*innen und eindeutig bestimmbare Rezeptionssituationen [antizipieren].

[formats (. . .) – both through explicit standardizations and through unintentional affordances – always (anticipate) very specific and selective forms of use, very concrete addressees, and clearly determinable reception situations.]   (Fahle et al. 2020, 13)

Third, the production, distribution, and reception of printed or digital comics (and all of their various meanings) will thus always be embedded in a conventional-institutional dimension of mediality that can encompass more or less strongly conventionalized and institutionalized social practices. Schmidt calls this a consideration of media as "institutionelle Einrichtungen bzw. Organisationen" [institutions or organizations] (2008, 145). Communication studies or journalism, for example, tend to focus on conceptualizations of media as "mass media" and thus foreground the social-institutional dimension of their mediality – but other media certainly also exhibit a social-institutional dimension. The actors involved could then once again be defined according to medium-specific roles: Comics know not only writers and artists but also publishers, editors, reviewers, booksellers, and many more, who can play a decisive role in the production, circulation, reception, and discursivation of a comics text (Woo and Stoll 2021). Connected to their roles are certain conventionalized habits, which the media historian Laura Gitelman describes as "cultural protocols" (2008, 5): How do we generally use a certain type of media artifact? For which social spheres are they intended in a certain historical and cultural context? Some of these "normative rules and default conditions" (Gitelman 2008, 7) are "industrially defined," others emerge in more of a "grassroots" fashion.

Since these three areas are interconnected aspects or dimensions of specific media artifacts, it has proven useful to consider them as medial qualities or *medialities* (Thon 2014, 2016; Thon and Wilde 2016; Giannoulis and Wilde 2020). With regard to specific artifacts or events – such as a particular comic, film, or video game – these three dimensions of mediality should always be observable at the same time, but may very well receive different attention depending on the specific research interest. For those who, like Hartmut Winkler, are more interested in the communicative-semiotic dimension of media ("gesellschaftliche Maschinen, die ein Biotop für die Semiose, für die Artikulation und für die Herausbildung von Zeichen bereitstellen" [social machines that provide a biotope for semiosis, and for the articulation and the formation of signs] [Winkler 2008, 118]), the material-technological dimension as well as the actual human actors that operate it appear as a mere "medial context." Other media scholars problematize an overly narrow communicative-semiotic perspective as they are more interested in the material-technological dimension of mediality interacting with different human actors on an affective and bodily level. Yet, other researchers focus primarily on conventional-institutional questions of mediality when they investigate the socio-political dimensions of production, circulation, and reception and their associated structures of power and (in)equality. In any case, different conceptualizations of mediating and mediated comics agency could be located alongside these three dimensions of mediality.

Mediating and Mediated Agency in a Comics Context

Within the dimension of communicative-semiotic mediality, we could first look at (groups of) human actors in different contexts struggling to influence and determine the meaning of comics stories and characters. Often, hypothetical intentions of authors are taken into account here (Chris and Gerstner 2013; Gray and Johnson 2013), at least to the extent that they can be plausibly reconstructed (or inferred) from comics texts themselves or from surrounding paratexts and discourses (Kindt and Müller 2006; Currie 2010; Thon 2016). Michel Foucault's concept of an "author function" (1998, 221) is also relevant here, as it describes the attribution of authorial agency to some human actors and not others. At the same time, inevitably, questions of *distributed* authorship are at stake, which can become extraordinarily complex, especially in the case of comics' author collectives (Thon 2016, 125–166) and publishing houses as copyright holders, providing various creative frameworks and limitations for hired authors. The interests and relative agencies of these diverse groups of actors can, in many cases, hardly be brought down to a common denominator. This is especially relevant for serial and, potentially, transmedia(l) characters that have been reused and recontextualized in and around comics for decades (Thon 2019; Wilde 2019a, 2019b; Pearson and Thon 2022, 2023/forthcoming; Kunz and Wilde 2023/forthcoming). Within the present volume, for instance, Mark Hibbett (2022) reveals through an empirical, data-driven study on Marvel's character Dr. Doom that the majority of industrial actors (59%) credited with the character's countless transmedia(l) appearances between 1961 and 1987 have worked with him only once. As Dr. Doom never had any series of his own during that period, instead being inserted wherever creators felt the need for it throughout comics, animated films, or radio shows, there have been multiple authorial agencies – rather than a single overarching one – that could be said to control the character as such. Hibbett's study thus reveals a significant misalignment between actual distributed authorship, on the one hand, and its public perception, on the other.

Some of the actors shaping the meaning of comics certainly stay invisible by default, most prominently perhaps editors. In the present volume, Romain Becker zooms in on this question, looking closely at the many editing practices of the German publisher Reprodukt. The mostly translated (reprinted) texts in Reprodukt's catalogue are appropriated in countless ways, even in cases where the publishing house had no say in their initial production:

> By modifying a comic's outward appearance, and/or even what it contains, Reprodukt leaves its imprint on it, and can reclaim a form of authority on who reads the comic and on how they read it [. . .]. Reprodukt's influence on comics can sometimes truly be considered to be *editorial writing*, making them a co-creator of said pieces, rather than a mere mediator between linguistic areas. (Becker 2022, 60, original emphasis)

Jessica Burton (2022) broadens the scope of these considerations with her contribution on Tintin's global journey in the 1960s and the editor's role within this period of change for European comics. Burton also advocates the concept of an "editorial voice," especially when the role of the editor merged with that of the writer for the first time and at least a few editors – such as René Goscinny and Jean-Michel Charlier for the comics magazine *Pilote* – became quite visible for a broader public.

A general tension in the correlation of agency with intentionality results from the observation that not merely "intended" meanings can be relevant for a work's cultural impact. Rather, such relevance can be attributed perhaps to an even greater extent to unintended, possibly ideological dimensions which can only be "uncovered" through critical analysis (through a "symptomatic reading" [Best and Marcus 2009, 1]). The text itself and the reader (or groups of readers) emanate their own forms of agency in these cases. Even an ostensibly "ironic" utterance can, for example, perpetuate problematic (e.g., sexist, racist, or homophobic) patterns and discourses, beyond any hypothetical or actual authorial intentions. Already in the communicative-semiotic dimension focused on by different kinds of textual analysis, it may then be appropriate to systematically distinguish (implied or attributed) authorial agency from "textual agency" as such – *a text's multifaceted agentiality*. A certain ideological position may show effects without being in any way intended by or reflexively conscious to the respective actors, just as stereotypes might be revealed from their continuous repetitions. Jörn Ahrens approaches these questions with a nuanced look at the conflicting meanings in Tullio Altan's graphic novel *Ada dans la jungle* [*Ada in the Jungle*] (Altan 1985) and Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie's comics series *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya: Life in Yop City*] (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014), which "unfold counter approaches in dealing with the representation of cultural clichés and stereotyping" (Ahrens 2022, 237) – that are, for example, manifested in the European appropriation of "Africa," with its deep entanglement in Orientalist imaginations and traditions.

On the side of reception, too, different groups of actors come into view, as they negotiate diverse interpretations and "subversive" readings with each other (Hall 1973; Jenkins 1992). Since the meanings and the cultural relevance of comics may change over time, historically variable groups of recipients have to be taken into account (often reconstructed as "model readers"). Again, this is especially

complex for serial and, potentially, transmedia(l) characters, something that is discussed by Ashumi Shah and Anke Marie Bock for the character of Death of the Endless, who was initially created by writer Neil Gaiman and artist Mike Dringenberg for the *The Sandman* series (1989–2015). While "Gaiman, who boasts a prominent digital presence via his social media handles – specifically on Twitter and Tumblr –" (Shah and Bock 2022, 147), is a particularly salient example of a prominent author figure, Sha and Bock focus on the agency of fans or, rather, "prosumers" of Death, as she is continuously reinterpreted, appropriated, and transformed in fantexts on platforms such as DeviantArt. A more troubling example for fan agency in user-generated paratexts (Gray 2010; Mittell 2015; Brookey and Gray 2017) is provided by Christopher Pizzino, who critically discusses the YouTube channel of Richard C. Meyer, a key figure in what is now commonly called "Comicsgate." Meyer offers a notorious variety of destructive "criticisms" of "social justice warrior" comics, most often Marvel superhero comics, and the creators who make them. Pizzino points to Mayer's presence in the videos as "an embodied reader" (Pizzino 2022, 179) proposing that, "[l]ike the proverbial customer, the religious pontiff, or the absolute sovereign, the comics reader's body is always right" (Pizzino 2022, 180). His analysis relates Mayer's self-representation to the latter's position between fans, creators, and the very material he engages with. Pizzino's important study reveals that, while the term "agency" often invokes positive connotations of initiation and innovation, autonomy and intervention, it must be seen in a more nuanced way that often deserves, or even necessitates a critical approach (for respective criticisms addressing agency in relation to various technological and cultural interfaces, see, e.g., Hadler and Haupt 2016). Accordingly, an agency-centered textual analysis of a comic might ask, with Erhard Schüttpelz, how "die Interessen der Gruppen durch die Form ihrer Inskriptionen und Gegenstände ausgehandelt und ineinander übersetzt [werden]" [the interests of groups are negotiated and translated into each other through the form of their inscriptions and objects] (2013, 38).

Yet, exploring material-technological mediality evidently goes further than that. Asking about agency in this dimension investigates how the material conditions of comics' production, distribution, and reception structurally influence and co-determine the abilities of the actors situated therein. We might thus also investigate the distribution of agency *between* human and non-human or even entirely amongst non-human actors (Knappett and Malafouris 2010). This is immediately apparent for digital media such as video games, the "interactivity" of which constitutes a crucial design element of the media texts themselves (Thon 2016; Fernández-Vara 2019, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2020). Connecting the question of comics and agency to the field of game studies, Hans-Joachim Backe investigates "*hybrid game comics*" (Backe 2022, 283, original emphasis) that explicitly

and deliberately reference comics not merely on the level of content, but also in their visual and formal design. Underscoring that agency is a distinct theoretical concept in game studies and "one of the central criteria for the discussion of the 'gameness' of digital games" (Backe 2022, 284), Backe evaluates how this field-specific understanding of agency relates to, contradicts, or affirms the desired comics aesthetics.

The agency of the material-technological dimension of comics does not have to be limited to digital media, however. Against the background of neomaterialist approaches (Bennet 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Goll et al. 2013), the concept of an "agency of materials" has been applied, for instance, to the oil paint of classical painting, whose material properties enable certain actions and uses while restricting others (Lehmann 2012). This can be connected to the "affordances" of any object or dispositive, a term that was initially derived from the work of psychologist James J. Gibson (1979), but has long since become a part of the standard vocabulary of media studies (Zinnien 2008). If applied to questions around comics agency, the distribution of agency within a dispositive appears as being determined by the material and digital affordances that open up or close off certain actors' scope for action (including specific interpretations). Serialized comics' ephemeral, often "trashy" material quality affords their "cheap" and lowly status in the cultural commodity market as well as a specific potential for nostalgic recollection (Jenkins 2015). Henry Jenkins, for instance, expands on his recent exploration of the material side of comics culture in *Comics and Stuff* (2020): "Comics are stuff – material objects in their own right, which are appraised, collected, interpreted, displayed, bagged, stored, sold, etc., in a complex set of cultural negotiations within the context of everyday life" (Jenkins 2022, 26). In his contribution to the present volume, Jenkins further explores how the "archival and repertoire cultures" (2022, 27) of comics are reflected in Dylan Horrock's comic *Hicksville* (1998) as practices, performances, and fantasies that have "grown around" the material interfaces of comics. Importantly, comics and their materialities do not exist in a cultural vacuum, but are always related to other forms of media and their material properties and affordances. This is a perspective also taken by Grace Schneider, who looks at comics as a site for exercising "archival remediation" (Schneider 2022, 267), especially with regard to materials derived from photojournalism. Schneider discusses the complex dialectics between photographic practices, on the one hand – embedded in a "belief system that grants the status of visual proof to technical images" (Schneider 2022, 275) – and drawings which "denounce[] the presence of a manual gesture" (Schneider 2022, 275), on the other.

Schneider's invocation of the "archive" already points to the third, conventional-institutional dimension of mediality that we have distinguished above, a dimension of mediality that particularly foregrounds questions of social agency.

The "network" in Actor-Network-Theory is not thought to be a technological entity in the field of digital media (Stegbauer 2010), but a mere operational perspective applied to actors in various social contexts (Latour 1999a, 1999b, 174–215). Latour thus increasingly favored neologisms such as "worknet," "action net" (2005, 132), or "actant-rhizome ontology" (1999a, 19; Jensen 2020). Analogous terms have emerged in communication and media studies, especially "assemblage" and "dispositive." Since both terms are commonly used to discuss the relationship between media systems and social agency, a closer look at their respective emphases is warranted. The term "assemblage" is derived from Gilles Deleuzes and Félix Guattari (1983). Even it its current usage (e.g., Wise 2017), it retains a typically poststructuralist double meaning, insofar as it captures both the process of assembling elements and the result of such a process: "What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations, between them [. . .]. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 42). In media studies, the term "dispositive" is perhaps more common. Dispositives can be understood as institutionalized correlations of applications, devices, and settings (Deterding 2013), as is the case, for example, with the "dispositive of cinema" or the "dispositive of television" (including their established uses in certain social frames). The concept of the dispositive, which goes back to Foucault (1980), is especially concerned with power relations, thus transcending the more descriptively oriented ANT endeavors. Dispositives and assemblages, however, coincide with Latour's notion of networks (composed of "quasi-objects") in that they all inevitably bring into view the socio-political dimension of media systems: The cinema is then not only a place for experiencing films, but also a social configuration that produces a certain kind of subject. According to Giorgio Agamben (2008, 14), a dispositive is thus a historically situated, social structure that turns human individuals into subjects with specific positions in social power relations – not only within political or sociological configurations ("Regierungsmaschinen" [machines of governing] [Agamben 2008, 38] such as prisons, asylums, or schools) but also in connection to the domains of media. In her contribution to the present volume, Mel Gibson analyzes the development of graphic novel collections across British public library services in these terms, as a complex interrelation between both human and non-human actors (including objects and spaces). The publication of the Youth Libraries Group's *Graphic Account* in 1993 (Barker 1993) can thus be seen as "a moment where a range of actors of various kinds came into contact and functioned as catalysts for complex change and the reconfiguration of how graphic novels were understood, leading to more physical collections and to a shifting understanding of comics as a medium in various professions and institutions" (Gibson 2022, 214).

Another complex example that showcases social agency and conventional-institutional aspects of comic's mediality is investigated in Matthew Smith's contribution on the San Diego Comic-Con as a particularly versatile space of intersections between social roles of both professional and fan visitors: "Comic-Con is each of the following: an invasion, a homecoming, a publicity event, a jury, a consciousness-raising session, a costume party, a networking event, a marketplace, a life support system, a classroom, and a ritual" (Smith 2022, 191). The respective dynamics of "fan agency" in the context of such cons are thus quite complex, entangled in a multitude of heterogeneous interests and co-opted by corporate agendas. From the perspective of a socio-politically oriented mediation theory, it can hence be hypothesized that personal and group agency, across all social contexts, is also mostly (pre)structured by media (Crowley 2013, 331) and that, conversely, material-technological affordances specifically anticipate "ganz konkrete Adressat*innen und eindeutig bestimmbare Rezeptionssituationen" [very concrete addressees and clearly determinable reception situations] (Fahle et al. 2020, 13), which means that they function as "Kondensationen kultureller Aushandlungsprozesse – kultureller Performativitäten" [condensations of cultural negotiation processes – cultural performativities] (Fahle et al. 2020, 12). From an intersectional perspective, such an approach must then also always ask about the respective agential in/equalities within networks of comics production, distribution, and reception, as various subject positions and binary oppositions constitute, solidify, or challenge associated power structures (such as "male" vs. "female" or "*white*" vs. "PoC"; Noble 2018; D'Ignanzio and Klein 2020). This is a perspective also taken up by Cathérine Lehnerer, who reflects a practice-based approach via comics workshops with students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds as a site to negotiate fluid identities and to enable cultural participation. Participants in her workshops were encouraged to question their own and each other's identities and their reliance on aspects such as skin color, cultural origin, or gender identification through comics drawings employed as avatars of themselves. Lehnerer aims to understand social agency in terms of "conviviality," a term that "refers to the process of how people interact and communicate with each other" (Lehnerer 2022, 229) in a way "that motivates communal thought and action" (Lehnerer 2022, 228) – and is here facilitated through comics as a communicative-semiotic, material-technological, and conventional-institutional form of expression.

Considered in these terms, one and the same individual "kann [. . .] der Ort mannigfaltiger Subjektivierungsprozesse sein: der Mobiltelefonnutzer, der Internetsurfer, der Schreiber von Erzählungen, der Tangobegeisterte, der Globalisierungsgegner usw." [can be the site of manifold processes of subjectivation:

the cell phone user, the Internet surfer, the writer of narratives, the tango enthusiast, the opponent of globalization, etc. (Agamben 2008, 27)

Perhaps obviously, the social dimension of mediating and mediated agency already plays a significant role for the communicative-semiotic dimension of mediality, insofar as "authors" and "readers" are at least to some extent produced via communicative-semiotic processes. Joshua Meyrowitz's well-known study *No Sense of Place* (1986) serves as a prominent example of how the effects of media on such social roles (in the sense of Erwing Goffman [1976]) can be traced. The contribution by Laura Glötter likewise discusses the "strategic self-depiction and the glorification of other artists" (Glötter 2022, 119) in the comics series *Kanon* by Lars Fiske and Steffen Kverneland (2006–2012) as an execution of authorial agency that perpetuates the idea of an omnipotent author figure. Yet, Fiske and Kverneland also use their comics to advocate for public funding of comics artists and purchasing programs, further underscoring that they regard comics as valuable cultural artefacts. Quite similarly, Barbara Margarethe Eggert, in her contribution, investigates how the role of the "comics author" is represented within the autobiographical and self-reflexive comics of Austrian artist Nicolas Mahler (e.g., Mahler 2003) and a *Drawn & Quarterly* anthology (Devlin et al. 2015) which both deal with agency in the process of creating, publishing, and distributing comics. However, in contrast to the proposal of public funding found in *Kanon*, Eggert's close readings reveal a "mighty yet invisible non-human agent" determining or limiting all creative control, namely the economic forces that have "the final word when it comes to 'making' comics in the narrower sense of publishing and distributing them" (2022, 115).

Conclusions

Mediating and mediated agency, in the broadest sense, is relevant wherever mediation takes place; wherever agents are placed in relation to each another within chains of operations and interaction. This once again expresses a conviction that manifests itself across all contributions to the present volume in one way or another, namely to think comics agency as strictly relational. As Mitchell and Hansen note, "media studies can and should designate the study of our fundamental relationality, of the irreducible role of mediation in the history of human being" (2010, xii). Mediation in/with comics can be modulated through communicative-semiotic artifacts (media texts and their oft-contested meanings), through material (2022, 000) as well as technological tools, technologies, and infrastructures of production, distribution, and reception (sometimes in the form of "carrier media"), as

well as through social-institutional frameworks, conventions, and social power relations within medial dispositives. Importantly, these aspects of comics mediality and agency are often closely entangled, which is why it is necessary to consider all three dimensions of (communicative-semiotic, material-technological, and conventional-institutional) mediality and (communicative, material, and social) agency in their interrelations. Against this background, the following contributions offer a selection of spotlights on comics "sites" of distributed agency. The resulting studies show how productive the question of agency can be as a starting point and a common denominator for specific projects – and how, at the same time, it may serve to relate rather different approaches to each other and open up new avenues of inquiry in the process.

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Henry Jenkins
What We Do with Comics
The Agency of Collectors in Dylan Horrock's *Hicksville*

Somewhere on the other side of the planet, closer to Antarctica than to Australia, there lies a town – Hicksville – where comics are treated with the respect they deserve. In 1998, Dylan Horrocks's *Hicksville* (1998) burst onto the comics scene, almost literally from nowhere, and focused American and British attention on Oceanic comics for the first time. *Hicksville*, the graphic novel, is Horrocks's meditation on the nature of comics, the industry's lack of respect for its own history, the willingness of creators to sell their souls for commercial success, and the narrow, myopic, and xenophobic space from which most readers construct their canon. In that sense, *Hicksville* continues the tradition of utopian literature; the creation of a utopia to turn real-world conditions on their head.

People in Hicksville are anything but hicks: They are pop cosmopolitans who read and discuss comics from all over the world; they know their medium's history and they enshrine it through local festivals; they name a local cafe after Winsor McCay's Rarebit Fiend. *Hicksville* captures Horrocks's experience of reading comics in New Zealand, a country on the periphery, but also, as a consequence, at the crossroad between many different comics cultures. From the opening line, a quote from American superhero artist Jack Kirby warning that "Comics will break your heart" (Horrocks 1998), Horrocks raises the possibility that things might be otherwise. My analysis of *Hicksville* here is an extension of the conceptual framework I introduced in my recent book, *Comics and Stuff* (Jenkins 2020), a book which drew on recent writings about collecting as a meaning-making and identity-forming activity as we construct ourselves in relation to the "stuff" with which we choose to surround ourselves.

When I wrote my book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Jenkins 1992), which celebrated the collective and individual agency of media fans, I struggled with how to discuss fans as collectors of various media artifacts. The book opens with a critique of the infamous *Saturday Night Live* sketch where William Shatner told *Star Trek* fans to "get a life," and their inappropriate desires for worthless trinkets and artifacts was a major target of its stinging satire. When I published *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Star Trek and Doctor Who* (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995), I almost removed my author's byline because I was so offended by the publisher's decision to put a picture of action figures on the cover, again representing fans as obsessive and immature consumers. I was interested in the creative expression of fans, focusing on fan

production rather than consumption. Behind all of this was a certain degree of shame about my own collecting habits. I was not ready to share with the world what an incurable pack rat (bordering on hoarder) I am, and I lacked conceptual tools to discuss collecting and hoarding as meaning-making activities.

Through the years, my thinking started to shift as I read accounts of collecting cultures by Lincoln Geraghty (2014), the work of consumer culture scholars such as Grant McCracken (1990) or Robert Kozinets (2009), and Jared Gardner's (2012) discussion how collecting practices inspired the work of some of my favorite alternative comics creators. But it was the discovery of the work of Daniel Miller, especially his books *Stuff* (Miller 2009a) and *The Comfort of Things (*Miller 2009b), which opened me up to a growing body of writing across anthropology, sociology, museum studies, archeology, literary studies, consumer studies, and art history, among other fields, which deals with the ways we forge our identity through the objects we assemble around us, mapping our sense of belonging onto our belongings. Here, I found accounts of collecting which did not simply see it as commodity fetishism but rather as a central element in the way contemporary and historical cultures have functioned.

In *The Comfort of Things*, a series of portraits of the ways different British households along the same London Street organize their stuff, Miller writes,

> [t]hey put up ornaments; they laid down carpets. They selected furnishing and got dressed that morning. Some things may be gifts or objects retained from the past, but they have decided to live with them, to place them in lines or higgledy-piggledy; they made the room minimalist or crammed to the gills. These things are not a random collection. They have been gradually accumulated as an expression of the person or household. (2009b, 2)

These configurations of objects are an aesthetic project, just as much as Joseph Cornell's boxes were, although of a much more everyday fashion. These people are curators of their own life worlds, authors of their own identities, through materials they have collected, assembled, and transformed across their lifetimes, negotiating with others in their household about what should be displayed and cherished, and what should be culled and discarded. As Miller continues,

> [t]he aesthetic form that has been located in these portraits is not simply a repetitive system of order; it is above all a configuration of human values, feelings, and experiences. They form the basis on which people judge the world and themselves. It is this order that gives them their confidence to legitimate, condemn and appraise. These are orders constructed out of relationships, and emotions and feelings run especially deep in relationships. (2009b, 2)

Some of these choices are idiosyncratic, reflecting our unique personalities and interests; others are subcultural or perhaps broader still, reflecting shared

assessments amongst a larger community of people. As Miguel Tamen writes in his book *Friends of Interpretable Objects*,

> [a]ll over the world, different groups of people gather around various bits and pieces of the same world, attributing to them intentions, dispositions, and even languages. Some of these activities appear to be, to me at least, a little eccentric [. . .] but this may only mean that I am not a member of certain groups [. . .] There are no interpretable objects or intentional objects, only what counts as an interpretable object, or better, groups of people for whom certain objects count as interpretable and who, accordingly, deal with certain objects in recognizable ways. (2004, 3)

There is agency aplenty in these accounts of the logics that shape our relations with material objects and of collecting culture more generally.

Comics and Stuff (Jenkins 2020) grows out of my recognition that, while some of these conceptual frameworks have informed rich and nuanced writing about literature and the visual arts, much less has been done applying this approach to the study of popular culture, even though this focus on everyday meaning-making has been central to cultural studies, going back to Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and many of its other founding figures. As someone who still clung to the battered and torn comics I had acquired during my childhood, not to mention some of the vintage Pogo books belonging to my father that dated back to before I was born, I knew that collecting, memory, and meaning were vitally connected where comics were concerned. Comics were among the interpretable objects around which I had forged so many friendships. And because the readers, authors, and artists within comics culture were all collectors who shared overlapping frames of reference, these curatorial practices were informing what kinds of collecting stories and telling objects made their way into contemporary graphic novels. I was fascinated by the increasingly cluttered yet always meaningful mise-en-scène in contemporary graphic novels and how these depictions might shed light on how we navigate a world awash with stuff.

Comics and Stuff represents an attempt to explore the relationship between contemporary graphic novels and "stuff," understood as both material objects and the emotional baggage they carry for us. It consists of a series of essays about graphic storytellers and their relationship to the stuff in their lives, an attempt to demonstrate a new approach to comics studies that is located somewhere between formalist analysis of narrative and mise-en-scène, on the one hand, and cultural studies of everyday material practices, on the other. Such an approach allows us new ways of looking at comics composition (as much focused on what's within individual images as with the sequential dimensions of this artistic form), one which asks us to reconstruct the mental frames which collectors and hoarders alike map onto their beloved objects. This approach

recognizes that every object we see in a panel was drawn with intentionality, even as doing so adds to the creative labor the artist must perform.

In the book, I make three basic claims that make this mode of analysis possible:

1. Comics are stuff – material objects in their own right, which are appraised, collected, interpreted, displayed, bagged, stored, sold, etc., in a complex set of cultural negotiations within the context of everyday life.
2. Comics depict stuff – in ways that help bridge between the depicted world and our own, often with great virtuosity as a curatorial and citational practice, connecting graphic novels to a broader range of artistic practices (from still life paintings to scrapbooks).
3. Comics tell the story of our relationship with stuff – describing how collectors collect but also struggle over objects, how interpretable objects get passed along as gifts or inheritance signaling connections across generations in the family.

Each of my readings place different emphasis on these three claims, modeling a research agenda that I hope others will deploy in their own analysis of favorite graphic works, since it is clear that my readings come nowhere close to exhausting the implications of these basic claims.

My corpus in this book reflects a broad range of different artistic projects, but they all come from the realm of alternative comics. I am often asked whether this approach could also be applied to mainstream superhero comics, and the answer is yes and no. Yes, mise-en-scène is a source of meaning-making within the superhero tradition, but interpretable objects are more often aligned with characters and their displays of memorable artifacts from their crime-fighter careers than having specific significance for the individual artists. Because these characters and their possessions are themselves the possessions of DC, Marvel, and the other corporations, they accrue collective meaning over time, and they may take on meaning in the imaginations of individual collectors; however, they are less likely to carry idiosyncratic associations for creators who are doing work for hire and may only have temporary custody of these assemblages of souvenirs from other people's stories. I have no doubt that something meaningful can be found through looking at the stuff Batman displays in the Batcave, for example, or the various objects from Krypton that keep cropping up in Superman's life, but the tools for mapping those meanings are necessarily different as a consequence of the corporate mechanisms that give birth to superhero comics.

For the artists I discuss in the book, their "stuff" is often literarily their own belongings, as we see when Bryan Talbot shares the wonder cabinet of pop culture artifacts that I saw in his house when I visited him in Sunderland, when

Kim Deitch depicts his wife Pam's collection of black cats purchased on eBay, or when Carol Tyler shares materials from her father's scrapbooks in tracing her family history or her own scrapbook in mapping her teenage obsession with the Beatles. Their collections get raided for visual references as they are crafting their panels, and often they share the history of how these objects came in and out of their lives as materials from their collections or as inheritance passed down from previous generations. Stuff, thus, shapes the choices they make about what to depict in their panels and how to tell their stories.

Here, I am extending the book's discussion of comics *as* stuff, looking at the way *Hicksville* explores the different archival and repertoire cultures that have grown up around comics, and what it says about the experience of collecting comics. I am also interested here in what Horrocks has to say about the relationships between authors and readers within this broadly defined comics culture, a theme he expanded upon in *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* (Horrocks 2015). But, first, I want to situate Horrocks's works within the particularity of New Zealand as a crossroads in the global circulation of comics.

The Utopian Imagination

The Canadian comics artist Seth captures the feeling of *Hicksville*'s many fans:

> I wish there was a Hicksville. If there was, I'd find it. I might not want to spend the rest of my life there [. . .] but I'd certainly like to visit for a month or two each year. Sometimes, when I'm reading this story (and I've read it many times) I can almost believe there is such a place. Far back, in the dustier parts of my brain, there is a tiny inkling of an idea that perhaps Dylan is writing about a real place – a safe haven for the broken dreams of all those great cartoonists who came before me, a place unsullied by the realities of the comics "industry." Of course, there is no such place. (Seth 1998, n.pag.)

Seth's hesitations say much about the utopian tradition: There is "no such place" as utopia, yet we would love to visit it if there were. Constructed as a thought experiment, the well-crafted utopia can live so vividly that readers become uncertain of its ontological status.

The central mission of the utopian tradition, Steven Duncombe suggests, is to explore alternatives:

> We need utopian thinking because without it, we are constrained by the tyranny of the possible [. . .]. To imagine something other than this takes a bold leap [. . .]. This sort of unrealistic Utopia, in its true meaning of no-place, still retains its political function as an ideal: a loadstone to guide us and a frame within which to imagine, yet it never closes off this imaginative journey with the assertion that we are there. (Duncombe 2012, n.pag.)

Duncombe argues that the utopia is not best understood as a "plan," a blueprint for a better society, but rather as a "prompt" (2012, n.pag.), which encourages people to consider other possibilities. The no-place "creates a space for the reader's imagination to wonder what an alternative someplace might be, and what a radically different sensibility might be like" (Duncombe 2012, n.pag.). And the utopia functions as a prompt because we do not know how to get there.

Horrocks makes a similar point when he speaks of his comics as mapping "our internal landscapes: the daydreams, the fears, the fantasies, the experiences" (quoted in David 2011, n.pag.), or, in this case, as outlining a particular vision for the future of comics:

> That's true that maps are definitions and limit the interpretation. They imply a particular interpretation and suppress the alternative interpretations. But that's why I never want a single map. What I want is an infinite atlas, an infinitely open atlas of maps. So I'm always open to looking at a new map from the same familiar landscape and finding out new things about it that I never would have thought of before.
>
> (Horrocks, quoted in David 2011, n.pag.)

Maps are representations (interpretations even) of physical space; different maps of the same territory show different aspects of the depicted environment. Moreover, Horrocks imagines such maps as exceeding the limits of the printed page, as having multiple affordances, and supporting multiple layers of annotation:

> A map is not even a three-dimensional world transformed into two dimensions, it's a multi-dimensional world that includes layers of politics and history and people's emotional attachments to certain aspects of the landscape – all sort of things are feeding into the decisions that a cartographer makes about what to include in your map, what to highlight in your map, effectively what story you're telling about this landscape with the lines and colours and so on. And so you get all kinds of maps telling different things about the same landscape. (Horrocks, quoted in David 2011, n.pag.)

Hicksville offers alternative visions of comics archives, libraries, and collections, each portraying different material and meaning-making practices that might grow up around comics. In his book *Avatars of the Word*, James J. O'Donnell tells us,

> historically, cultures dependent on the written word have all shared the fantasy of the virtual library – that is, they have cherished some notion of total inclusiveness. What they achieve is always far short of anything that might be considered the totality of output of the written word for even a brief period. (1998, 40)

O'Donnell is interested in how cultures negotiate the gap between their imagined ideal of the all-inclusive collection and the reality of actual library holdings, suggesting that fantasies about libraries tell us much about what different societies value about print culture. O'Donnell defines inclusiveness in terms of

the works that the library contains, but, in the case of comics, it might include which readers are invited to engage with comics, given historical shifts that have narrowed comics readership. For Horrocks, imagining the ideal comics library doesn't just involve imagining alternative collecting and circulation practices: It also involves imagining alternative comics that have not and may never be produced because of constraints on creative expression.

Horrocks has been an active participant within those debates about the future of comics, writing an important critique of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994). Horrocks praises McCloud for modeling "a way of talking about comics that affirms and supports our longing for critical respectability and seems to offer an escape from the cultural ghetto" (2001, 1). Many people have seen McCloud as offering an expansive vision gesturing towards all the things the medium might do. Horrocks, however, called attention to the ways McCloud's definition also sets borders:

> Nowhere in *Understanding Comics* does Scott attempt to justify why 'Sequential Art' should be seen as the one definitive element in comics to the exclusion of all others: the combination of words and pictures, the use of certain conventions (e.g. speech balloons, panel borders), particular formats, styles, genres, etc. (Horrocks 2001, 2)

Horrocks, for example, explores the consequences of McCloud's emphasis on the pictorial rather than the verbal dimensions of comics or his insistence that children's picture books and single-panel cartoons were not included. Once again evoking maps and atlases, Horrocks writes about *Understanding Comics*:

> For all the exciting new territory it opens up, it is still only one map. Like any map, it presents only one way of reading an infinitely complex landscape, thereby suppressing other possible readings [. . .] The maps I use most often are those which allow me to go wherever my work takes me. (Horrocks 2001, 6)

Given his rejection of fixed borders and his desire for multiple escape routes, *Hicksville* represents a range of possible histories – and possible futures – for comics.

Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo have described *Hicksville* as offering a robust depiction of "the field of comics," documenting "the relationships between different modes of production, the role of creativity, the importance of the past, and [. . .] ethics in the future" (2016, 134). In their sociological analysis of comics culture in *Hicksville*, they chart the different characters, their values, and their discoveries over the course of the narrative. I will consider similar issues but in terms of locations rather than events, an approach consistent with Horrocks's recurring cartography metaphors. By showing us the different locations comics occupy in Hicksville and beyond, Horrocks offers alternatives for what

might be required to "save" comics, though, ultimately, he proposes a deceptively simple idea – it takes a village.

"The Ass-End of Nowhere": Comics Culture in New Zealand

Hicksville opens with the journey of Leonard Batts, journalist and critic for the expansively named *Comics World Magazine*. Batts travels to Hicksville in search of a backstory for Dick Burger, a local artist who has found success in the American comics industry. Burger discouraged Batts from making this trip: "I'm pretty sure no-one will want to know about a small town in the ass-end of nowhere [. . .] There's nothing interesting about Hicksville" (Horrocks 1998, n. pag.). The local bus dumps him on the roadside, offering no service beyond that point. He flags down a passing car, but, when Batts tells its driver his goal, the woman (who later turns out to be Grace) also refuses to take him to his destination. His laptop stops receiving signals the minute he arrives, and there are no fax machines. Horrocks depicts Hicksville as a one-street town, with the road dead-ending in the ocean. As far as Batts is concerned, Hicksville is certainly "the ass-end of nowhere" – just where we would expect to find a utopia.

But, for Horrocks, Hicksville stands for something rather different. Horrocks first conceived of Hicksville when he had been living in England for several years and began to feel homesick for the country of his origins. He wanted to draw New Zealand's beaches and buildings in his mini-comics, and, as he did so, he began to invent an imprint:

> You know, just for fun. I made up a publisher named Hicksville Press, which was run by this old lady Mrs. Hicks. I started to develop a backstory, that it was in this old store in this tiny town in Nowhere, New Zealand. And this old lady ran this press where she turned out strange comics and it really expanded from there.
>
> (Horrocks, quoted in David 2010a, n.pag.)

When he returned to Auckland, Horrocks deepened his understanding of this location's potentials for his storytelling:

> As *Hicksville* also evolved, it became a story about what Maori call "turangawaewae" – which means "a place to stand" – something like a spiritual home, the place where your roots are buried deep in the earth. I was very aware that New Zealand is at the very margins of the world, just as comics are at the margins of the literary and art worlds. But both New Zealand and comics are, for me, home. They're where I come from, and where I've

> always chosen to return. *Hicksville* is about making the edge into the centre – and then
> seeing how the world looks.   (Horrocks, quoted in PW Staff 2010, n.pag.)

Writing from the periphery has allowed Horrocks to invite readers to reconsider what they think they know about the comics medium.

Horrocks also published *Nga Pakiwaituhi o Aotearoa* (2000b), a guidebook cataloging the work of more than fifty local comics artists, coming from Hicksville Press (now the name of an actual imprint controlled by Horrocks). In the booklet's forward, Horrocks notes, "I never thought there was anything unusual about the comics scene here; it seemed small enough to me when I was growing up and I imagined there were much bigger and better ones everywhere else" (2000a, 2). As an adult, he appreciated the particular and sometimes paradoxical qualities of his country's comics culture. Tim Bollinger, another local artist, explains:

> because of the almost complete absence of a commercial framework within which the art
> form has developed in the United States for example, New Zealand comics have devel-
> oped as something akin to a "cottage" industry [. . .]. What New Zealand comics have in
> common, if anything, is their environment of isolation and cultural hostility.
>   (Bollinger 2000, 17)

For most of its history, Bollinger notes, New Zealand was defined primarily as a market for comics produced elsewhere – especially in Great Britain – but, even then, the flow of comics into the country was erratic. Protectionist regulation largely blocked American comics from this market until the final decades of the twentieth century. As late as 1958, the national government maintained a list of more than 260 comics titles that could not be sold there, including virtually all superhero titles. Some American adventure strips – notably Lee Falk's *The Phantom* – did remain available in New Zealand long after comics fans in the west had lost interest, and some of the country's first comics publishers started in order to gather and reprint (often illegally) these prized strips. With the rise of underground and alternative comics, a generation of younger artists emerged through the student press and self-publishing comics, especially mini-comics, for the local market.

In "A Letter from Hicksville," Horrocks described how he first encountered the work of his American contemporaries. Writing about his friend and fellow cartoonist Cornelius Stone, he explains,

> [w]e discovered *Raw* together, when a local book-exchange owner came back from a trip
> to the States with a suitcase full of Underground comix, which he sold from under the
> counter by word of mouth [. . .]. As soon as we caught sight of *Raw #3* we knew the world
> had shifted on its axis. In New Zealand you had to work hard to find that kind of treasure.
>   (Horrocks 2000a, 27)

Most New Zealand comics are self-published, created out of passion, rather than as a means of making a living:

> We have the people who try cartooning for a while and then give it up – because it doesn't pay, it earns them no respect, they've been burned by the industry or it's just too much hard work. Some of whom are painfully talented. And we have people who spend years working on comics that no-one will ever hear about [. . .] Because here, cartoonists really do *love* comics.
> (Horrocks 2000a, 33, original emphasis)

From his childhood belief that there must be someplace else where comics thrive, Horrocks had come full circle, so that in *Hicksville*'s closing pages, he depicts 1950s American cartoonist Mort waking from a daydream, "I tell ya', Lou – somewhere in the world there are people who care about comics as much as we do waiting for people like me 'n' you to take 'em into places they've never been, even if no one's paying" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). If ever such people existed, they are the residents of Hicksville, as Horrocks imagines them.

Mrs. Hicks's Lending Library

Having failed to make it to Hicksville by his own will, Batts collapses and awakes in the bed of the grandmotherly Mrs. Hicks, who functions as his tour guide. "I couldn't help but notice you have a few comic books yourself, Mrs. Hicks," he observes. "Oh good heavens – doesn't everyone" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), she responds, without the slightest hesitation. In Hicksville, everyone – men and women, young and old – reads and knows a great deal about comics. Whereas Horrocks's autobiographical writings describe scarcity growing up in New Zealand, we find here only plentitude, with more shipments of new comics from around the world arriving every day. Today's batch includes a new issue of *Khalkha Komiks* from Mongolia and "some new undergrounds from Helsinki" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), suggesting a degree of comics cosmopolitanism unmatched anywhere else. The postman tolerates Batts's interest in American superhero titles, but what he really loves are British mini-comics. Hicksville can embrace a range of tastes and interests, as long as everyone loves comics in some form.

There, in the center of this one-street town, lies Hicksville Bookshop and Lending Library, curated by Ms. Hicks, and open to all on a self-serve basis: "If there's anything you're interested in, don't hesitate to borrow it" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), she explains, as Batts stares in astonishment at the rare and highly collectible comics on display. As he explains later, "I don't understand it. You've got multiple copies of every issue of *Action Comics* since Number One! [. . .] There are thousands of comics in there! Things so rare I've only read

about them!" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Batts breaks out in a cold sweat just holding some of these titles, but Mrs. Hicks takes it all for granted, "We do try to keep a good range, dear, as any library should" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.).

At a time when comics were being collected by speculators as an investment, when price guides shaped conversations amongst comics fans, and when publishers were sometimes cynically producing alternative covers or renumbering their issues to create more collector's editions, Mrs. Hicks seems totally uninterested in comics' exchange value: "We don't pay any attention to that sort of thing in Hicksville, although I understand some of the early numbers are rather hard to come by these days" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Part of what gives this imaginary library poignancy is the sense of precariousness, as we imagine how these precious objects would be handled by people elsewhere – how many of the rare titles would walk away in a system where there is no oversight, how many of the pages would be smudged and damaged in a world where comics retain their value only in pristine condition. Implied here is the idea that a different comics culture would generate an alternative set of collector ethics – one based around a sharing rather than hoarding economy, one based on cultural rather than economic value.

While in the real world, there are some material libraries and archives with important collections (The U.S. Library of Congress, the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at the Ohio State University), Mrs. Hicks Library, lacking any formal institutional status, is much closer to what Gail De Kosnik (2016) describes as a "rogue archive," one which develops its own norms and practices to reflect the fan community in which it is embedded. De Kosnik defines "rogue archives" in terms of a set of digital practices, but leaves open the possibility that it could also refer to a material collection like this one. She writes,

> constant (24/7) availability; zero barriers to entry for all who can connect to the Internet; content that can be streamed or downloaded in full, with no required payment, and no regard for copyright restrictions (some rogue archivists digitize only what is already in the public domain); and content that has never been, and would likely never be, contained in a traditional memory institution. (De Kosnik 2016, 2)

Just as De Kosnik sees the "rogue archive" as modeling an alternative to existing libraries, Mrs. Hicks's material practices – freely accessible, widely circulating, without regard to copyright constraints, outside traditional institutions, etc. – also suggest other ways archives and libraries might operate.

Dick Burger's Stash and Emil Kopen's Studio: Commerce and Art

Horrocks contrasts Batts's trip to Hicksville with two other journeys: Sam Zabel's trip to America to visit his boyhood friend Dick Burger and Grace's adventures in the mythical country of Cornucopia. In the first instance, we see Sam standing in Dick's private vault, looking through long-boxes of rare superhero comics. "Not a patch on Mrs. Hicks, of course, but not bad considering" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.), Sam concludes. If comics in Mrs. Hicks's collection are a shared social good, Burger's comics are his own personal stash, a privatized resource from which he can steal ideas for future issues of his *Lady Night* titles. Cut off from a larger social context, comics become "licensed properties."

From the moment Batts arrives, it is clear that Burger has done some unspeakable wrong for which his hometown community cannot forgive him. This subplot recounts his futile efforts to win back Sam's respect so that Dick's boyhood friend will share some hometown stories at the gala inducting Burger into the Comic Book Hall of Fame. Batts admires Burger as a creative genius, but Burger embodies everything Horrocks sees as wrong with contemporary comics. Burger's commercial success is undeniable: He flies around on a private jet, owns a major media empire, hangs out with top film stars, hires Dire Straits to perform at his pool party, and treats Stan Lee as his flunkie. Burger embodies the franchising of contemporary comics culture, his formulaic stories are important only as intellectual property for other media sectors. Burger generates brutal and semi-pornographic versions of a simple, earnest Golden Era superhero, "Lady Night." The big-screen movie based on Burger's highly popular "Arterial Spray" storyline, for example, depicts the scantily clad Lady Night – "the tits are part of the costume" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.) – decapitating her foe, Deathscum, with dental floss. Burger's soulless search for fame and fortune is contrasted with another local artist, much more respected by the community there – Tisco. Grace explains: "His magnum opus keeps getting longer and longer, and the title changes daily" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Tisco only shows one page at a time to some lucky reader, only to box it and never share it again, and, above all, he never talks to publishers. Tisco produces purely from a love of comics, uncompromised by market expectations.

While Sam Zabel in *Hicksville* rejects Burger's offer to join his Eternal Comics empire, Dylan Horrocks was seduced by DC's advances in the wake of *Hicksville*'s success, spending several frustrating years writing for DC (*Batgirl* #39–57 [2003–2004]) and Vertigo (*Hunter: The Age of Magic* #1–25 [2001–2003]). Horrocks, ultimately, learned the hard way what Sam Zabel grasps in only a few pages:

> DC really doesn't exist anymore to create great comics. It doesn't even really exist to sell comics. The primary existence of DC now is to serve as an intellectual property platform for Time Warner. (Horrocks, quoted in David 2010b, n.pag.)

For those who saw *Hicksville* as a manifesto for an alternative comics culture, his time in the commercial mainstream was seen as selling out, whereas Horrocks was frustrated by the lack of creative opportunities when working with other people's franchises.

Horrocks describes Cornucopia as somewhere near Peru or Africa; "It's hard to keep track after a while" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Here, comics are not treated as industrial product; they are an art form, perhaps even a philosophy, as Grace discovers when she visits the studio of Emil Kopen, the country's greatest comics artist. Kopen shares with Grace what he sees as the strong parallels between comics and maps:

> These maps tell stories, which is to say they are the geography of time [. . .]. These days I have begun to feel that stories, too, are basically concerned with spatial relationships. The proximity of bodies. Time is simply what interferes with that, yes? [. . .]. You are here near me, like a bright flame. That is more important than why or how you are here. The things we crave are either near us or far. Whereas time is about process [. . .]. Behind such processes there is a stillness; and in that quiet exists spatial relationships which transcend time. (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.)

Whereas Burger and his contemporaries in the American comics industry pursue dynamism, Kopen sees comics as transcendent and contemplative: Words and images work together to map the relationship of objects and bodies across space and time. Horrocks had originally sought to extend this short chapter about Kopen and Cornucopia into a full-length graphic novel, "Atlas," but this work remains unfinished, leaving these few pages as a tantalizing glimpse into another comics-utopia. In *Hicksville,* Horrocks provides his most vivid representation of comics as art and philosophy, as a means of individual creative expression, as an extension of national culture, and as a means of reflecting on the human condition. One would be hard pressed to apply any of these values or functions to *Arterial Spray*.

Kupe's Lighthouse: A Beacon for Comics Creators

By the book's concluding chapters, Batts has fallen over a cliff and been rescued from the sea, waking up in yet another library – this one, the secret library housed in the island's lighthouse. Here, he discovers room after room of treasures, "all of these hundreds of important comics that nobody's ever heard of"

(Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Here are previously unsuspected works by the medium's greatest artists – Harvey Kurtzman, Wally Wood, Rodolphe Topffer, Winsor McCay, and Jack Cole among them; such works were never produced in the real world because these artists had no outlet to pursue such projects. The library also contains comics by fine artists, such as Picasso, Dali, and Lorca, who, in reality, never produced comics because of the form's debased cultural status. The fantasy is that, across the twentieth century, the best comics creators sent their brain children, often still in manuscript form, to the lighthouse for safe keeping. Sometimes, Mrs. Hicks prints a limited run, and they circulate amongst local residents. But, often, these artifacts are simply stored away, awaiting a more appreciative readership someday, somewhere. As Kupe, the lighthouse keeper and librarian, explains:

> The official history of comics is a history of frustration, of unrealised potential, of artists who never got the chance to do that magnum opus, of stories that never got told – or else they were bowdlerised by small-minded editors, a medium locked into a ghetto and ignored by countless people who could have made it sing. Well, here it is. The other history of comics. The way it should have been. The masterpieces. The great novels. The pure expressions. Going back hundreds of years. (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.)

Kupe has a calling, not simply a job: to preserve and protect this "birthright." Kupe is named after "the mythical first settler of Aotearoa, the Maori name for New Zealand" (Pilcher and Brooks 2005, 278). Not coincidentally, Kupe was the pen name Horrocks used for some of his own earliest comics. By the book's end, Batts has returned, transformed by his experiences in Hicksville, planning to lock himself away in the library and read to his heart's content. When Seth and others say they want to go to Hicksville, this is the library they have in mind.

Kupe also answers Batts's questions about how Dick Burger alienated this community of comics lovers, whose ethos stresses collective good rather than personal gain. As a young man, Burger had shown real potential and serious ambitions, but when others read his work as autobiographical, Burger felt exposed. So, he began to copy comics from the library, at first to master his own technique, but later to gain more creative distance from his work. He sold out his artistic ambitions for commercial success, violating Hicksville's taboos by stealing a text from the secret library, adapting it for a more "contemporary" readership, and publishing it as his own. In doing so, Burger made his fortune in America, but lost his way back home.

Here, we see a somewhat romantic conception of art – one that celebrates art primarily in terms of individual expressive genius. Great artists produce great art, and great art endures, even if, or especially if, the culture is not ready to embrace it. Such a perspective risks oversimplifying the relations between

culture and commerce – commerce is the enemy of creativity – rather than seeing commerce as sometimes providing the preconditions for meaningful expression. The lighthouse keeps the public at bay, but Horrocks is also interested in what happens when the public embraces cherished cultural materials as resources for expressing their own identities.

Hogan's Alley Day: Rituals and Repertoires

Kupe's library is an archive, a bounded collection of materials that gain value primarily by being removed from circulation. James J. O'Donnell (1998) describes such collections as reflecting the particular status of knowledge in a print-based culture:

> Surely it is not self-evident that the words of other times and places, frozen forever in unchanging form, should live on indefinitely, in ever accumulating, geometrically expanding heaps; even less self-evident that human beings preoccupied with the real problems of their present should spend any appreciable amount of time decoding and interpreting the frozen words written by people long dead. (O'Donnell 1998, 32)

The emergence of print, in this account, supports a conception of knowledge as something that can be accumulated and stored, researched and catalogued, outside the flow of time.

Diana Taylor has contrasted the archive with the repertoire, which, she tells us

> enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge [. . .]. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning. (Taylor 2003, 20)

Print culture encourages archives, but repertoires thrive in oral-based cultures. When we describe comics (and often their readers) as "semi-literate," a slander thrown their way by many through the years, we may be signaling the ways comics readers negotiate between the textual and the performative, between the archive and the repertoire. Many aspects of embodied knowledge reach the page through the depiction of characters' gestures, stances, and proximity to each other: Meaning emerges in the space between characters, as Kopen suggests, but also in the gaps between words and pictures. Comics artists convey emotional states through bodily signs that depend on shared social knowledge; they show us more than any author could tell us.

A *Hicksville* sequence set during the town's annual Hogan's Alley Day party envisions comics culture as a repertoire, as townspeople perform their relationship to beloved comics texts. As depicted by Horrocks, the event breaks down the boundaries between different forms of comics – characters from underground comics (Ziggy the Pin-head) co-exist with the American comic strip tradition (Popeye, Charlie Brown), superheroes mingle with characters from Herge's *Tintin*, and Grace even shows up dressed like a figure from Kopen's art comics. Some costumes are worn year after year, a central aspect of the townspeople's identities, while others are handed down or swapped off, bearing memory traces of their previous performers. Sam surprises his neighbors by dressing as Charlie Brown after many years as Robin, whereas Helen has borrowed Grace's Batgirl costume, which she has long admired. Wearing these costumes involves a step outside of normal social relations – a mild form of carnival – yet it also solidifies those relationships, making each community member's fantasy life visible to the others.

Batts's presence is disruptive – he literally does not know his place; he has no history in this community; people do not yet know what he values. Batts dresses as Dick Burger's Captain Tomorrow: "I figured if I can't get anyone to talk by being friendly, I'd try being provocative. People let all kinds of things slip when they're angry" (Horrocks 1998, n.pag.). Batts almost comes to blows with several hot-headed townies. The repertoire is more fluid than the archive; it evolves over time, allows for new meanings and identities, but its underlying logic must be respected if the community is going to maintain its coherence.

Understanding comics culture as a repertoire of social practices, rather than an archive of collected texts, reflects Horrocks's growing recognition of what comics mean from the perspective of their readers:

> I don't believe I have the right to set the terms by which people access my material, nor where they take it from there. Once I've written a story or drawn a comic – certainly once I put it out into the world by publishing it (online or on paper), that comic is out there living its own life and interacting with all the people who come across it. It's like having kids. Once you've brought them into the world, they're not actually your property to do with as you will. You have a very important relationship with them, and you deserve to have people respect that relationship. But in the end, they're in the world and they have their own life. Eventually other people will have relationships with them as important as yours – and it's not fair to try to dictate those terms until the day they die.
>
> (Horrocks, quoted in Spurgeon 2011, n.pag.)

The Hogan's Alley Day sequence illustrates what happens when comics become a vital dimension of their readers' social lives – not something to be preserved but something to be performed. Here, we see a classic example of what Lincoln Geraghty calls "transformative nostalgia," describing the ways that fan communities may shift the meaning and status of objects (whether Lego sets in his

case or comics in ours) "from childhood to adulthood" (2014, 164). in Hicksville, adults come together to play with images and costumes drawn from those comics that had been meaningful to them as children and deploying this iconography to reconfigure their social relations with each other. *Hicksville* suggests that no matter how much we seek to shift the status of comics into the realm of art, there still remain vital links to a prepubescent world where such questions felt less relevant than the secret identities and powers of our favorite superheroes.

The Readers' Playground: *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen*

This alternative conception of comics readership forms the backbone of Horrocks's most recent graphic novel, *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* (Horrocks 2015) – a several-decades-belated sequel of sorts to *Hicksville*. Expanding upon his conception of comics as closely related to maps, Horrocks has discussed the place of world-building in contemporary popular culture, a concept he traces from literary utopias and "fairylands" through comics and video games. Artists construct worlds as "playgrounds" in "an attempt to understand something" (Horrocks 2003, n.pag.). But "once the playground is built, others can come and try it out – hopefully gaining their own insights and understandings along the way" (Horrocks 2003, n.pag.). Such an approach regards "viewers, readers and users as active, interactive participants" as each person "brings their own contribution" (Horrocks 2003, n.pag.), modifying the work – if only in their imagination – to make it a better vehicle for personal and collective needs. Horrocks concludes,

> [t]his is not to say that the artist has no influence on how his or her artwork will be experienced [. . .]. If you put up swings, people will come and swing on them. But equally, some will use them as imaginary rocket ships, others will twist the chains to see them spin and some adventurous souls might even shinny up to the top of the poles, using them as a climbing frame and not a swing at all. (2003, n.pag.)

Here, we may come back to Duncombe's idea that the utopian novel serves as a "prompt" for speculation and a resource for conversations. All imaginative works open worlds that are only partially contained within their pages.

In *The Magic Pen* (Horrocks 2015), the central archive is a selection of comics from across history, representing a mix of genres, all contained within an Otaku girl's book bag. Readers can enter fully into these comics' worlds, taking

the stories in their own directions, integrating their visions into their own dream life. Early on, Horrocks pokes fun at the pretensions of Alice, who shares her fan fiction with Sam:

> It's mostly a collection of nerdy wish-fulfillment fantasies – inserting my thinly disguised alter ego into movies, books, comics, or TV shows I like. But I also try to unpack the underlying ideologies of pop culture tropes and genres, the gender politics, racism, heteronormative bias.   (Horrocks 2015, n.pag.)

Sam's eyes pop as he sees what she's done with Harry Potter. By the end, Sam appreciates that, where pop culture fantasies are concerned, one size does not fit all. Sam has the discomforting experience of being transported into one comic book after another whose world view jars with his own, finding it frustrating to get caught up in "someone else's fantasy" (Horrocks 2015, n.pag.). "Ha! Welcome to my life!" Alice explains,

> I'm a geek, but I'm also a girl. Fantasy is what I live for. But most of the imaginary worlds I spend my time in were made up by men – often with some pretty icky ideas about women. So I've learned to take those imaginary worlds and make them my own – subverting them to serve my fantasies – not theirs.   (Horrocks 2015, n.pag.)

Such a perspective would not have seemed out of place in *Hicksville,* where women are just as apt as men to read comics and their content reflects this more diverse audience. But Alice's identity pushes against our world's comics market. She has to work harder to situate herself and her fantasies in the comics she enjoys.

If *Hicksville* defends the rights of artists to make the comics they want, *The Magic Pen* suggests that those rights extend to the reader. By the end, Horrocks more or less completely breaks down the walls separating the two. Comics are a resource, he suggests, through which many different people map their experiences and express their fantasies. The new utopia is not simply a library of the great comics that were never produced, but rather a space where diverse people have the capacity to tell their own stories. Yet, this more expansive role of the reader involves some loss, since he understands these readers in highly individualized terms: Despite the reference to gender and subcultural identity as shaping how Alice reads comics, Horrocks imagines each reader pursuing their own tastes which cannot be fully appreciated by others around them. The reader's interpretive freedom destroys the "village" represented in *Hicksville* – a small town where, regardless of their tastes, everyone shared a common love of comics. But *The Magic Pen* and *Hicksville* embrace an expansive notion of the stories comics might tell – with his protagonists finding themselves inside everything from mid-century space opera to schoolgirl manga, from medieval broadsheets to countercultural fantasies. Taken as a whole, these imaginary worlds represent an appreciation of

graphic storytelling every bit as broad as that displayed by Mrs. Hicks's lending library.

Hicksville and *The Magic Pen* both tap a body of vernacular expertise and shared experience between readers and storytellers alike. Dylan Horrocks assumes a reader with a broad knowledge of the history and culture of comics, with a shared critique of how contemporary comics publishing operates, with shared fantasies about what a better alternative might look like, and with a mutual longing for a place – maybe multiple places – where comics received the respect they are due. These relationships to comics are expressed here both with regard to the material objects – comics as stuff – and to the repertoire of practices, performances, and fantasies that represent the diversity of the community that has grown up around that stuff. Across the two books, Horrocks pays tribute to the diverse kinds of stories comics have told (or might have told) in different historical and national contexts and the diverse communities of readers they have (or might have) attracted.

How's stuff with you?

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Jessica Burton
Tintin's Global Journey
Editors as Invisible Actors behind the Comics Industry of the 1960s

The editorial role is a vital contribution to the comics production chain, without which many comics would not exist – editors are the invisible actors who keep the industry moving. They are also complicated in terms of agency – in some ways, they are beholden to the wants of their readers and those of their publishers, but their agency may alternatively become apparent in the final comics product. This chapter has the dual aim of bridging the gap between the worlds of comics production and of comics academia, aiming to open an ongoing conversation into this under-studied aspect of production. Despite the crucial nature of the editorial role, it is often one that goes unnoticed within scholarship. Casey Brienza points out "an especially urgent need" (2010, 105) for comics production research, arguing for a sociological approach to its actors. This call has been met with great progress in recent years, with notable examples considering cross-publisher practices (Lesage 2018) or histories of individual publishers (Moine 2020). For the most part however, literature that examines behind-the-scenes roles tends to focus on artists and writers, usually in the form of general audience biographies (Delisle and Glaude 2019) or, rarer, on working conditions for creators (Kohn 2018). The editors' role in general has been sparingly acknowledged, and when it is referenced, it uses the editor as a publishing figurehead rather than their role (Pessis 2006). One notable exception to the existing scholarship is a proposed publication *The Comics of Karen Berger: Portrait of the Editor as an Artist* (Bieneke n.d./forthcoming) whose call for papers (published in 2019) promises an in-depth look into the specific contributions of one editor as well as into the blurring between editorial and creative role. It is in this vein of research that this chapter aims to encourage wider considerations of comics' most invisible actors: its editors.

The chapter will examine the role by first briefly considering duties of general editors and particular tasks of comics editors, specifically reflecting upon the Franco-Belgian context and on the 1960s as a period of change in terms of the editor's role in comics. Within this timeframe, it will assess the comic magazine as a vessel for editorial voice, or in other words, the relationship between editors and their readers. Arguably, this is where we see the greatest level of editorial agency too. The concept of *editorial voice* underwent an interesting change in this decade, as the roles of creators and editors merged, and editors were credited and became well-known to a wider public for the first time. Some of the most famous cases of

this occurrence were creators who became Editors-in-Chief of popular comic magazines, including Greg for *Journal de Tintin* [Tintin magazine] in 1965 and René Goscinny and Jean-Michel Charlier for *Pilote* [Pilot] in 1963. The comic magazine thus rendered *some* editors visible, but this was not necessarily the case for most in the profession, particularly not for those working on comics albums.

The present contribution will therefore draw a distinction between the visibility of editors in different comics publishing formats, examining the increasingly visible role through the comic magazine format as well as the almost entirely invisible one in the context of comic albums in the 1960s. In this chapter, these terms are taken to respectively mean youth magazines of around 50 pages featuring a majority of anthology comic strip content with editorial material and games, on the one hand, and the soft or hardcover book of a minimum of 48 pages containing one story or series of stories relating to the same characters, on the other. The study is concerned with the Franco-Belgian comics industry.

A case study of two foreign rights comic album editors, Pierre Servais (head of foreign rights at Casterman) and Per Carlsen (founder of Carlsen Verlag and director of Danish foreign rights agency, Illustrationsforlaget), will then be presented. In examining the corpus of correspondence between the two men in the publisher archives of Casterman, the chapter intends to contribute to a greater understanding of how international publisher ties manifested through different editorial roles. Indeed, Servais and Carlsen played a large role in the international diffusion of the famous *Tintin* series. Available in over 70 languages and countless transmedia products, researchers have focused on the series' global diffusion through questions of translation, its societal issues, and its creator (Cartier et al. 2019). Yet, little has been discussed about the invisible industry actors behind this global phenomenon. It is entirely possible to argue that *Tintin* could not have reached such worldwide visibility without the aforementioned actors, and this chapter thus aims to shed light upon these actors, who, until now, have remained mostly invisible.

The Role of Editors

The role of an editor is a varied one. To begin to understand it, we must first make some clarifications about the term and the facets it can encompass. The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP)[1] defines the role as "professional help

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1 The CIEP (formerly the SfEP – the Society for Editors and Proofreaders) is a UK-based professional editorial body, which offers training, guidance, and a job board for editors and those wishing to hire an editor.

to make a text ready for publication or use by ensuring that it is clear, consistent, correct and complete" (CIEP 2021, n.pag.). Though this is a contemporary definition, it provides a simple overview that editors give *professional help* – the person behind the role has been professionally trained to do so, but they offer *assistance* rather than taking full creative responsibility. They are therefore the facilitators rather than the makers of a published product, working from behind the scenes in an often invisible capacity. For the Franco-Belgian context, the respective term *éditeur* is broad. It can mean the individual who is doing the job or refer to the publishing house. In some cases, it has been several things all at once, for example Dargaud *Éditeur* which indicated both Georges Dargaud the person in his role as editor-in-chief and as CEO of the publishing company, which *éditeur* also refers to. Questions of crediting are relevant regarding this definition, as albums would be credited simply with the publisher under *éditeur*, while magazines would include the name of the editor-in-chief in this category.

We must then contextualize what it is editors do. This is a difficult task, as duties are too wide-ranging to give a complete description, but professional editing bodies attempt to give insights. One such example is describing how "an editor needs lots of different skills to successfully publish a book [. . .] to be creative [. . .] to be collaborative and strategic [. . .] as well as really good project managers" (Seaman 2018, n.pag.). A consensus through these resources is that an editor's role is many jobs rolled into one. When we consider the field of comics editing, the role becomes even more varied. The comics editor's job is to make a product the best it can be in terms of story, visuals, and final product. They are involved in development, script editing, and facilitating working collaboration of creators. Once final pages are submitted, it is the editor's job to render the pages publishable, which may involve facilitating lettering corrections, art corrections, and proofreading. They can also be involved in the marketing of the book to retailers and are crucial decision makers in choosing which stories get published.[2] We may therefore summarize the editorial role via several key elements: Editors are professionals with many varying duties and responsibilities and are facilitators and mediators who must have a detailed knowledge of creation and the production processes. Without them, comics could not be published.

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2 List of duties taken from professional editorial experience of the author.

The Editorial Voice

Though the role may go somewhat unnoticed by the broader public, there can be a strong link between comics editors and their readers. Comics editors have several ways of communicating with their audience. In the first instance, it is the editor's job to commission books that people will *want* to read (and of course to make money through sales). Requiring an extensive knowledge of target audience preferences, the editor in this case acts as the spokesperson for reader desires. The editor also communicates indirectly through marketing copy used to sell the book and directly in the pages of comics, whether through recap pages or the captions placed within or underneath comics panels that can refer to previous issues or give a translation. These all allow the editor to interact with the reader outside of the action of the given story in order to grant supplementary information. The concept of *imagined communities* (Anderson 1983) is a relevant point of reference here, as editors in this case are the invisible glue that unites a fan (imagined) community by mediating the reader experience through a bridging of story world (the fiction) that seeps into the real world (the editorial production behind it).

This distinct editor-reader relationship is particularly evident in comic magazines, rendering the role somewhat more visible than in other formats. Magazines often have some form of "Letters to the Editor" section, where the editorial team engages directly with reader comments or queries. This interactive section has been examined in the American context in the construction of arguably the most well-known editorial persona of Stan Lee, who used the letters to facilitate his own career and build the community of his linked fans, as outlined by Peter Bryan Cullen (2010). Such pages have also been an integral presence in Franco-Belgian comic magazines right through the twentieth century and are examined in detail for *Pilote* by Eliza Bourque Dandridge (2008). A strong fan community was furthermore created through such letters in *Journal de Tintin*, resulting in official fan clubs. Editors reinforced that they were interested in hearing about the club's activities with an extent of editorial control over readers' lives, as they encouraged youngsters to live the morals depicted in the magazine. The bulletin for the *Tintin 2000* club, published in the Belgian edition, is revealing in this regard; the editorial note (signed by Tintin) insists that clubs "faut tenir 'Tintin' au courant de ces activités" [must keep Tintin informed of their activities] (Leblanc 1967b, 27). Inclusive language linking readers into the editorial team such as "nous, nos, notre" [we, us, our] could be found in abundance, while the editorial voice would almost always refer to readers as "chers amis" [dear friends] and make frequent reference to what linked these fans together in a community.

What is interesting to note in *Journal de Tintin*, however, is that the persona of Tintin himself was presented as the editor, somewhat diminishing the public profile of the actual editorial team. Initially in the 1960s, editors of *Journal de Tintin* would take the time to respond to a few letters, publishing the original short paragraph and a brief response in bold text from the editors in the *Entre Nous* [Between us] (Dargaud 1963) section of the reader letters page. The other half of the page was dedicated to notes of readers seeking pen pals additionally placing editors in the facilitator-of-fan-contact role, as they were choosing which letters appeared. The *Entre Nous* section gradually merged into a conversation between the Tintin character and readers over the decade. At first, the page was named *Tintin Courrier* [Tintin letters] (Dargaud 1963), then an image was added of the character, which appeared above the *Entre Nous* title, depicting Tintin at a typewriter while his dog Snowy licks envelopes (Dargaud 1965). In the Belgian edition this was entirely taken over by the character when the section was named *Tu écris . . . Tintin répond* [You write . . . Tintin replies] (Leblanc 1967a). We thus see here that the editorial role was certainly acknowledged and visible through reader letters but became reappropriated to embody the voice of the Tintin character rather than the real editors behind the content. Arguably, in this case, the character of Tintin does not have the agency, it is the editors, but their role is reduced to invisibility.

The Creator-Editor

The comic magazine is nonetheless a crucial component in understanding the visibility of the editorial role. This was particularly true in the 1960s, as creators were given the role of editors, granting the role a certain level of public visibility. Some of the most popular publications in this period were the aforementioned *Journal de Tintin* and *Pilote* (the magazine in which the *Astérix* series found its fame). Both began with more business-like men at the helm of the projects, but both editorial committees decided to promote creators already working for the magazine to editor-in-chief, due to sales decline. It was perhaps felt that people with more of a knowledge of the business of creating comics would have more imagination to create a more exciting product (Dayez 1997).

In the case of *Journal de Tintin*, which had cycled through several editors from its inception in 1946, this man was Greg who took over in 1965. The magazine had previously encountered the "problem" that Hergé was the creative director (and pseudo editorial role) and in the beginning would often not allow strips to appear if he felt that it did not fit with the image of the Tintin character. Until

Greg's arrival, creators were also under ongoing stress from monthly reader surveys, which the editor would use to decide the titles to be dropped from publication. Kohn aptly describes the workplace struggle, with editors considered as the "employers" of creators, and notes

> une forme de pression hiérarchique exercée par l'éditeur ou le rédacteur [. . .] qui possède le pouvoir d'embaucher ou de rejeter [des histoires].

> [a form of hierarchical pressure exercised by the editor (. . .) who has the power to discontinue or reject (stories).]   (2018, 236)

As the magazine evolved, creators as a whole were afforded more creative freedom thanks to Greg's influence and his cancellation of the survey model. Being first a creator himself, he understood the struggles of his team and used his editorial powers to try and make changes to the magazine model. This is an interesting dichotomy between two forms of creator-editor with Hergé as the unwilling editor who wanted to maintain the interests of his own creation in contrast to Greg as the editor who used his visibility and experience to enact creative change for the anthology magazine.

For *Pilote,* the role of creator-editor was shared by Jean-Michel Charlier and René Goscinny, with Albert Uderzo as Artistic Director from 1963. Like Greg, for these men, the treatment of creators was a key concern. The magazine's foundation came from a dispute of creators who wanted to unionize in 1956 against poor treatment working for *Journal de Tintin* and *Spirou*, hence them striking out on their own to publish *Pilote* in 1959 (Ratier 2013) with the idea to pay higher wages in recognition of time and talent (Michallat 2018, 85). Publisher Dargaud bought out *Pilote* in 1961, and after the purchase the three founding creators signed away their shares in the magazine and their titles were downgraded to a more generic *conseil de redaction* [editorial committee] (Michallat 2018, 82).

The magazine founders Goscinny and Charlier, then key writers and editorial members, were instated to fully-fledged Editors-in-Chief in 1963 after Dargaud wanted to experiment with the magazine to combat falling sales. They were both a huge influence on the magazine and its creators, thereby changing the output product. Just as *Pilote* had wanted to pay its creators more, it also wanted to give them more of a voice within their magazines, a phenomenon related to their past experience:

> They [i.e., Goscinny, Charlier, and Uderzo] insisted on structuring their office as a collective in which the opinions of all members were solicited and considered. Weekly meetings were open to all and attendance was high.   (Bourque Dandridge 2008, 25)

The concept of the celebrity is also relevant. Before the 1960s, Hergé was one of a few exceptions to the rule of creators behind comics strips getting little recognition or fame from their work. Indeed, writers did not officially have to be credited on comic strips, as the profession of comics writer was not recognized until this time. Goscinny himself was a key advocate for this change (Lob 1988). *Pilote* played a large role, letting readers get to know the personas of its creators and editors. The arrival of comics series like *Achille Talon* [*Walter Melon*] even satirized editorial policy by depicting parodies of editors like Goscinny within the strips. This strip is applicable to the considerations of the magazine editorial role as it was created by Greg, editor of rival magazine *Journal de Tintin*, and poked fun at his own editor[3] of jokingly named *Polite* magazine in the strip for his constant exclamations of "No, no, no!" (Greg 1963, n.pag.). It is also an indication of a change in reflections, giving readers a new comical look into the editorial work going on behind the scenes. Creators and editors were therefore more publicly visible in the comic magazines themselves but also started appearing on television and radio shows at this time.[4] The 1960s made many *Pilote* creators household names, a legacy that would shape the French comics industry for decades.[5]

The editors named above continued their work creating stories alongside their editorial duties for the magazines and made vast changes in the format and tone of the magazines proving popular with increased sales figures, at least for a few years. While the publishers may have simply wanted someone with intricate knowledge of the creation process to boost sales, their editors became advocates for creators' solidarity and a greater editorial voice. On the surface, this appears to have also meant a greater cooperation between editor and creator within magazine publication teams. Cooperation was also achieved on a cross-publisher scale, aiming at a more widespread distribution for magazines (Burton 2019), which resulted in close editorial collaboration between individuals like Goscinny and Greg. The comic magazine rendered the editor more visible in several ways, including the direct communication with readers through letters, a more public profile in terms of crediting, and appearances by editors in various media forms. The format is uniquely suited to such visibility as it contains features, letters, and competitions, thereby offering a much greater chance for editor-reader engagement. The album however, usually containing only one comic story, did not generally offer this possibility.

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3 The satire was made in good humor and fully signed off by Goscinny, who allowed many parodical depictions of himself to appear in the publication.

4 *Le Feu de Camp du Dimanche Matin* is one such show, that gave *Pilote* creators carte-blanche for a radio comedy sketch show on *Europe 1* in 1969.

5 Creators did however stage an editorial coup in 1968 for more creative freedom.

Transnational Publisher Editorial Collaboration

Album editing was therefore a much more invisible field to work in within the comics industry. While it was the job of a comic magazine editor to select strips for each issue or write for features and engage with the reader, the role of an album editor was more akin to book publishing, and they were more involved in the production process.

Through a case study of editors behind the *Tintin* global phenomenon, Pierre Servais and Per Carlsen, we see the process of publishing albums as outlined in correspondence, giving a rare glimpse into the intricacies of comics production as discussed between its invisible actors. The sample of letters between the two men date almost exclusively in the year 1968, thereby at times giving a day-by-day update into production issues.

The two also had somewhat different roles, making for an interesting comparison. They were both editors in name but had differing duties. Pierre Servais is very much the embodiment of an invisible actor – he was the driving force of *Tintin*'s global journey, but there is little mention of him in the historiography of the *Tintin* phenomenon. Per Carlsen's name on the other hand has become much more well known by being attached to the Danish/German publisher he founded, Carlsen Verlag. Arguably though, little is known about the man behind it, or his contribution to the *Tintin* series' global visibility.

Pierre Servais's contributions were recognized by those who worked with him, however. Alain Baran, who acted as personal secretary to Hergé between 1978 and 1983, remarked that Servais was

> [l]'ambassadeur le plus extraordinaire que les albums Tintin a connu à travers le monde parce qu'il s'est voué cause et âme à la diffusion dans toutes les langues possible de l'univers de Tintin, des albums Tintin évidemment.

> [t]he most extraordinary ambassador that the *Tintin* albums have ever known around the world, because he dedicated his entire heart and soul to the diffusion of the Tintin universe, of the *Tintin* albums of course, in all possible languages.]   (2018, n.pag.)

Baran's reflections are one of the few examples giving specific details about Servais's contributions. In the video, Baran describes how Servais's parents had lamented that the new comics form was no way to make a career, and yet this was exactly how the editor did so, with *Tintin* accounting for the majority of his professional output.

We see the editor as mediator very clearly in the case of Servais, as it was his job to consider the merits of and forward multimedia adaptation requests to Studios Hergé. He was the first point of contact for publishers and media producers and would then do the research on such a project and forward the details for the

attention of the Studios. When Hergé had doubts as to the merits of a translation or adaptation, it was Servais's job to convince him on behalf of the Casterman company (Servais 1960). Servais was arguably one of the founders of the foreign rights industry as we currently know it. Nowadays, there are full companies such as *Mediatoon*[6] which publishers subscribe to in order to let them deal with foreign rights and media adaptation, putting his incredible accomplishments as one man into perspective.

The 1960s were a period of enormous exports for the *Tintin* series and Servais was the uncredited architect behind all of this. His legacy endured, when his successor Étienne Pollet (grandson of Louis Casterman) embarked upon the journey to translate the *Tintin* series into regional dialects and languages throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In terms of production, Servais was also extremely well connected to all aspects of the production line within Casterman[7] and their affiliated international partners. Though Casterman were responsible for the Tintin albums only, he also forwarded requests pertaining to *Journal de Tintin* to Lombard editor Raymond Leblanc. Servais was also responsible for requesting and sending rights payments. His role was therefore essential to almost every aspect of Casterman's *Tintin* album production.

In a similar fashion to Servais, Per Hjald Carlsen strove to make *Tintin* as successful as it could be in the countries for which he held publication rights (Denmark, Sweden, and Germany) from behind the scenes in the late 1960s. Carlsen had first been trained in print production in Germany, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and France and then worked in the family publishing business. Armed with this experience and the knowledge from publishing press translations of comic strips before World War II, he started to publish children's picture books such as *Petzi* [*Barnaby Bear*/*Rasmus Klump* (DK)]. Carlsen extended the Danish publisher into Germany in 1954, and into Sweden in 1967. It was through the *Tintin* series that the publisher started publishing comics in 1967. Despite these achievements, it would seem that Carlsen *chose* to be an invisible actor

> og han træder sjældent offentligt frem, [. . .] han ikke ønsker officielle hverv inden for forlæggernes kreds.

> [and he rarely appeared in public, (. . .) he did not want official positions within the circle of publishers.]
> (Hartmann 2014, n.pag.)

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6 A French media distribution company which sells licensing rights to international publishers for comics, derived animations, and media products.

7 Casterman at the time consisted of two separate entities, the publisher and the printworks. Servais was very involved in the technical specifications he discussed with the head of the printers.

Unlike Servais, Carlsen is frequently referenced within the historiography, but usually on the surface level, merely as the founder of Carlsen Verlag. His contributions to the international success of the *Tintin* albums are rarely acknowledged. In this case though, we are presented with another reason for such editor invisibility: Some, like Carlsen it would seem, simply did not wish to be fully credited for the work they do.

The working relationship between Servais and Carlsen was close, even though the *Tintin* albums were seemingly rather unsuccessful in the territories Carlsen published them in (Carlsen 1968a). Correspondence between these two men is significant and offers detailed insights into the editorial work going on behind the scenes, placing the editor role as an integral component in the production chain. They pursued success and cultivated their working relationship despite an initial lack of sales, with much advice from Servais for ideas to generate more public interest in the series (Servais 1968a). The men address each other frankly but politely, giving us an idea of the true market happenings with no redactions. By seeing the problematic elements within the production chain, we are able to arrive at a deeper analysis of how the industry worked than we could if everything had gone smoothly. The day-to-day business is also conveyed, e.g., via conversations on lettering corrections though their printer colleagues (Carlsen and Voss 1968; Servais and Veys 1968). In some letters, Carlsen admits his disappointment at sales of the first years, but expresses hope for the future, particularly as libraries are unexpectedly the biggest buyers in Sweden and consistently put in large orders for books they find to be "of quality" (Carlsen 1968b). The scope of the subjects discussed in the letters clearly demonstrates that the editors needed to be knowledgeable about many things beyond the comics content, with issues as wide-ranging as the value of the Danish krone in relation to the Belgian franc (Servais 1968b). We can also see that Casterman believed the German/Danish/Swedish territory to be important, so much so that they gave preferential concessions, allowing Carlsen double the standard time for rights and printing payment (Servais 1968b).

One specific production element that appears in the correspondence concerns a set of defective Swedish copies of *Les Bijoux de la Castafiore* [*The Castafiore Emerald*], which went out to retailers and libraries. They had been printed at Casterman and then sold on by Carlsen in Sweden. Carlsen expresses his dismay that they were getting copies returned on a daily basis and writes multiple letters to try and find a solution between January 1968 and April 1968. Servais acts as a mediator between Carlsen and the Casterman printing department. Eventually it is decided that Carlsen will return the full stock to Tournai for repair, as it was faster than making a new print run of the book (Carlsen 1968c; Servais 1968c). This production mishap had the potential to be disastrous for the Carlsen/Casterman relationship and indeed the future of publishing *Tintin*

in Sweden (particularly as Carlsen points out the recent removal of *Tintin* from a so-called Swedish publishing blacklist and the great shame it would be to lose the progress made). The two parties remained professional and courteous throughout this process, each working to find a solution. The relationship clearly did not suffer too much, as six subsequent *Tintin* titles were published later in the year in all three countries.

The letters also give a valuable insight into the markets of the countries, as well as demand for the books. We see from print orders where the books were most popular, for instance with the number of printed copies for *Les Cigares du Pharaon* [*Cigars of the Pharaoh*]: Germany was the largest order (10,000 copies requested), then Denmark (7,000 copies), and then Sweden (5,000 copies) (Servais 1968b). There is confirmation that Germany and Sweden think of the albums as *books* rather than comics, both from the forwarding of positive reviews from the Buying Centre of Swedish Books and the desire from the German arm of Carlsen to receive printed albums in time to exhibit them at the Frankfurt Book Fair.[8]

These letters are a precious detail in showing the importance of editors and the sheer scope of elements that they had to oversee. Such correspondence is unfortunately a rarity in publisher archives, given the fact that many of these conversations were seen as unimportant. We cannot discount the significance of such partnerships in building an international industry of the 1960s, however. As demonstrated here, through collaboration of individuals like Servais and Carlsen, a path was laid out for a more concrete type of working relationship between editors within the industry. In some ways, this was also a recognition of the power of editors both as an influence on how the industry worked and on what was published. Nonetheless, the role of an album editor was certainly an invisible one, as shown by the lack of acknowledgement of these two men in the multitude of writings on the *Tintin* series.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the editorial role and its considerable contribution to the comics industry. The role is a vital but invisible part of keeping books progressing into publication. The duties of an editor are wide-ranging, with a different set of duties for each individual, each project. The variety makes the role somewhat difficult to quantify, however, and even professional editorial bodies struggle to define everything an editor might do. Nonetheless, we have

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8 One of the most famous book publisher events to this day.

seen that this is a unique and varied profession, one which becomes even more specialized within the role of comics editor due to the added artistic elements and higher number of creators to liaise with. This may go some of the way towards explaining the lack of scholarship surrounding the comics editor; as each responsibility is different for each individual, as well as different for every single comic published, the scope of these invisible actions can be simply too broad to allow for a detailed analysis. This is also explained in part by Brienza (2010), who notes a need for personal-level engagement with creators willing to be interviewed. This chapter thus also aims to respond to Brienza's (2010) calls for more research into comics production, via the only personal traces left of these editors: their correspondence. With comics scholarship increasingly concerned with the production chain of the industry and even taking steps towards examining editors with reflection such as the aforementioned (Bieneke n.d./forthcoming), it is hoped that these actors will become more visible. There are many more avenues to explore in future research, however, including questions of the briefly mentioned hierarchy and how this is affected by gender and class, as well as family connections in the publishing industry. The examples of editors used in this chapter are all white men of middle to higher-class, quite typical for the profession of editor in general, and does not give an insight into the often even more invisible work of female collaborators, particularly in the 1960s, which of course merits further research.

The editor can have great influence on comics content, as we have seen in the case of comic magazine editors-in-chief as well as in that of the *Tintin* albums in the 1960s. A crucial element of this influence comes from the editorial voice, which can in some ways be thought of as the editor's personal stamp on the product, and indeed a demonstration of their agency. For Greg, Goscinny, and Charlier, this stamp came in the form of a new tone for their magazines, granting the rest of the magazine creators more creative freedom, and certainly made the role of the editor more visible. Format can therefore be a consideration at the level of editor visibility, with a clear distinction between magazines and albums. For album editors Servais and Carlsen, meanwhile, their extensive duties did not necessarily lead to greater visibility. Their mission was to publish *Tintin* in as many languages and territories as possible and, arguably, *Tintin* could not have reached fame around the world without such invisible actors. Correspondence between these editors is a rare demonstration of the duties of and relationship between international editors, showing the necessity for a vast knowledge of publishing as well as market trends and a shared responsibility for the production chain across nations. Mutual respect was key, and without such a collaborative relationship, *Tintin* may not have travelled as it has.

This chapter has offered a brief glimpse into the editorial world in the context of France and Belgium in the 1960s. It has shown that we must consider

the role and the power it represents, as well as given examples of some important individuals. It must be taken into account that these individuals are the exception to the rule, and that there are many hundreds, or even thousands, of comics editors through history who have not been so well known because of the role's general invisibility. Just as it could not give a full overview of every comics editor, the chapter has not sought to give a full picture of the many aspects still yet to be studied, but is merely a start of a conversation that is somewhat overdue.

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Romain Becker

How a German Publisher Appropriates Comics It Did Not Originally Publish

"[Éditrice], c'est un métier qui consiste à transformer des fichiers Word en PDF" [Publisher is a job that consists of converting Word files into PDF files] (Meurice 2020, n.pag.) – this statement by comedian Guillaume Meurice would most likely be easily dismissed by scholars in book history, in publishing studies, or in production studies, seeing as how when working closely with writers and artists, publishers evidently do contribute to the creation of books, and are an essential link in the production chain. By counseling creators and helping transform a raw manuscript into an actual publishable (and usually sellable) piece, their influence on books can hardly be denied, making their responsibility and "propriétés proches de celles de 'ses' artistes ou de 'ses' écrivains" [characteristics close to that of 'their' artists and 'their' writers] (Bourdieu 1991, 6). However, in cases where publishers had no say during the creative process and where a book template had already been produced, for instance when publishers bought adaptation rights to a piece, their influence may matter less and it seems more contentious whether the creators and their book are truly "theirs," as Bourdieu put it. This latter scenario is especially common in the German-language comics publishing business, as indeed, the vast majority of comics published in German – around 84% of new releases in 2014 (Hamann and Hofmann 2015, 102) – were originally published in another language. This means that in almost all of these cases, the German publishers' job consisted of merely "converting" already printed pieces into their own language, not of assisting in the production of a new piece. Hence, saying these foreign publishers possess a form of agency in the creation of comics seems to be a tenuous claim at best, at first glance.

However, the editing practices of Reprodukt, a German publisher founded in 1991, demonstrate how comics can be appropriated even by a company that did not partake in their initial production. Symptomatic of German publishers in general, the vast majority of comics worked on by Reprodukt are ones for which they bought the rights: Around 76% were first published by someone else.[1] The new publisher's work then mostly consists of translating comics for

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1 These 76% relate to the totality of comics published by Reprodukt between 1991 and 2021. There are significant variations depending on the years: Whereas in 2002, all comics were imports, just one year prior, almost 60% were original publications by Reprodukt. In more recent years, as Reprodukt's production has ramped up, the share of original publications has varied

the German-language market, but in doing so, they actually possess leeway in adapting individual comics or series to their own editorial views and practices, as well as to their audience. Indeed, even for a comic that has already been released once, a publisher can decide to re-edit and reshape the piece. By modifying a comic's outward appearance, and/or even what it contains, Reprodukt leaves its imprint on it, and can reclaim a form of authority on who reads the comic and on how they read it. In that sense, the secondary publisher can make a piece or even an entire series "theirs," expropriating the original creative and editorial team. Reprodukt's influence on comics can sometimes truly be considered to be *editorial writing*, making them a co-creator of said pieces, rather than a mere mediator between linguistic areas. Drawing on reception theory as well as on production studies whilst using concrete examples from Reprodukt's diverse catalogue, the following pages shall demonstrate just how a German editorial team manages to keep a form of agency and control on comics that did not originally belong to them.

Harder, Better, Pricier: The Strong Influence of Materiality

Perhaps the most apparent way in which this appropriation shows is when Reprodukt changes a comic's physical properties. Without altering the actual contents of the piece, the publisher can choose to modify its format/size, its binding (including the type of cover), as well as the quality of the paper and the printing – although the latter two elements are usually determined with the printer's input. It must be noted here that while Reprodukt does not release comics digitally as of 2022, other publishers can also alter a comic's materiality through digital distribution. Changes made to these physical properties affect not only the way one interacts with the comic, but also who interacts with it: Using the expression literary theorist Genette used to describe the paratext, the aforementioned material elements can be said to be the "lieu privilégié d'une pragmatique et d'une stratégie, d'une action sur le public" [privileged place of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the audience] (1987, 8). This effect on the audience is further reinforced by the fact that a comic's materiality also largely determines its price.

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between 10 and 30%. There is no clear tendency for Reprodukt to publish proportionally more or less comics created by German-language artists over the years.

For instance, one can expect Reprodukt's hardcover edition of Luke Pearson's (2014) *Hilda und der Schwarze Hund* [*Hilda and the Black Hound*] to appeal to a different audience than its subsequently (2019) published softcover version: With its embroidered back and its heftier price tag (20.- EUR rather than 15.- EUR), the former will most likely be bought by people of a higher economic and cultural capital, or be bought as a present. Being more luxurious in appearance, yet also sturdier, one may perhaps want to give it to a younger child whose parent will read it to them. Likewise, the conversion of a comic to a different format will induce different people to read it differently. Such is the case for the pocket edition of Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's (2020) *Ein Sommer am See* [*This One Summer*] – its 17.3 cm x 13 cm size means it can easily fit some pockets and would not be too heavy in a teenager's rucksack, contrary to the 21.5 cm x 15.3 cm standard edition published four years earlier (2015). As a historian specializing in comics production, Sylvain Lesage notes on pocket editions of comics that the "format incite à une lecture décomplexée, une lecture nomade; la bande dessinée de poche se glisse dans le cartable et s'échange à la récréation" [format encourages spontaneous reading, nomad reading; the pocket comic fits into a backpack and is traded during recess] (2011, n.pag.). Furthermore, the smaller size, and the lighter and pulpier paper mean the price is reduced, as well: from 29.- EUR for the standard edition to 10.- EUR for the pocket one. Undoubtedly, as Lesage adds on pocket editions, "leur prix, d'abord, facilite son acquisition; il permet également de faciliter l'achat impulsif. Le réseau de diffusion du poche permet par ailleurs de diffuser la bande dessinée dans d'autres lieux que les librairies: relais de gares, kiosques, maisons de la presse . . ." [firstly, their price facilitates acquiring them; it also encourages impulse purchases. The pocket format's distribution network allows for comics to be distributed in other places than book shops: train stations, newsstands, so-called press houses . . .] (Lesage 2011, n.pag.). As is the case for the *Hilda* series and others, by publishing multiple different editions of the same piece, Reprodukt can expect it to appeal to a larger audience than with just one of these books, and readjust subsequent printings depending on a given edition's commercial success.

All in all, changes to a comic's binding, paper quality, format, and subsequently its cost, give a publisher leeway to nudge the comic's reception in a particular direction. Even limiting the print run, or creating an edition with an alternative cover, as they did with the so-called Vorzugsausgabe [preferential edition] of *Schönheit* [*Beauty*] (Hubert and Kerascoët 2013), can encourage certain readers, in this case, "collector-speculators" (Gabilliet 2013, 154), as Jean-Paul Gabilliet calls them, to purchase a comic. However, it is important to see that such decisions on physical matters are made by publishers depending on the local comics market. Indeed, certain comics may attract a wealthier audience in Germany

than they would have in Japan, for instance. Thus, unless they wish to challenge current cultural practices, a publisher may want to comply with their market. Nevertheless, these adaptation practices are a way of appropriating comics for the foreign publisher, as they themself choose to alter its properties depending on which particular crowd they want to attract in a given area.

On top of the material properties of the text itself, peripheral elements can be added by the publisher so as to promote a particular reception of a piece. These epitextual additions, as Genette calls them, are indeed opportunities for more editorial paratext, "la frange du texte imprimé qui, en réalité, commande toute la lecture" [the fringe of the text, which, in reality, commands the entire reading] (Lejeune 1975, 45), as the formula used by Lejeune and repurposed by Genette goes. Concretely, the creation of a slipcase made specifically for both volumes of Pénélope Bagieu's *Unerschrocken* [*Brazen*] (individual volumes in 2017 and 2018, slipcase in 2021), for example, gives Reprodukt additional space to add illustrations or a text of its choosing on the slipcase's exterior, more space controlled directly by it, not by the artist or by retailers. Furthermore, the slipcase edition incites buyers to purchase and consume both volumes, although they are largely independent from each other from a narrative point of view. French publisher Gallimard went further with this idea of cohesion, and created a massive collected edition of both volumes (Bagieu 2019), released at a lower price than the combined individual volumes. Still, the slipcase strategy may be more sensible for a smaller publisher such as Reprodukt, as it does not necessitate the reprinting of volumes and means the new compiled version will not compete with the individual titles – all in all meaning Reprodukt gains more options for how to sell the comic. Other such peripheral elements include: a flyer recommending which parts of the *Donjon* [*Dungeon*] series (Trondheim et al. 2005–2021) should be read by which kind of reader, as well as explaining the series' complex timeline, nudging readers towards reading the forty-odd albums of the series in a particular order; pamphlets featuring titles made by the same artist or upcoming titles; stickers representing characters from various Reprodukt comics, etc. These small trinkets are generally included with orders from Reprodukt's website or are available at retailers, and serve not only as advertisement, but also to show the coherence between the various comics published by Reprodukt, making them part of a larger brand rather than separate pieces from around the world. Seeing as how the epitextual agency can be said to reside solely within a given publisher's hands, they hold power over how a piece will be perceived by the audience that is yet to read it, or as Jonathan Gray puts it in the context of film and television studies: "[T]he paratext may well be, for such (non)viewers, the entirety of the text" (Gray 2010, 70).

It's a Long Story: How Publishers Appropriate Comics and Series by Lengthening Them

A non-peripheral element of comics that can be altered by the publisher, and *does* have an impact on the actual contents, not just the initial reception, is its length. Publishers such as J'ai Lu BD lengthen comics when converting them to another format – in the case of said publisher, the pocket format. As panels are reorganized, cropped, and redrawn in order to remain legible even on smaller pages, the entire structure of a comic can sometimes be altered, resulting in significantly longer pieces whose rhythm and visual workings are vastly different from their original edition: an entirely new comic created not by the artists, but by their publisher (Lesage 2011; Becker 2021). In contradistinction, Reprodukt preserves the visual integrity of the pieces it adapts, even when it alters their format. Still, some of its published work is longer than it was in its original release, because Reprodukt may add additional material.

In cases where the comic is part of a series, Reprodukt can choose to add another part of the series, making the piece a compilation rather than a single issue. The repercussions on the comic can be substantial, as demonstrated by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie's *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya of Yop City*] series. Initially published in French by Gallimard in six volumes of slightly more than 100 pages on average (Figure 1), Reprodukt decided to change the makeup of the series by compiling three volumes of around 370 pages (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, 2014b), meaning the series is composed of only two books in German (Figure 2). This change made by Reprodukt serves not only to adapt the series to the German-language comics market and, more specifically, to their own readers, but also to transform it into a different reading experience.

The two books are, of course, much more voluminous than the single issues, which entails that they are also more costly: 39.- EUR a piece instead of 17.- EUR. Thus, the readership of Reprodukt's version must be able and willing to pay almost forty euros for a single comic and should be accustomed to reading lengthy books. In comparison to Gallimard's *Aya* comics, one can expect Reprodukt's to appeal to presumably older readers from a more privileged socio-economic background. Furthermore, compiling the comics means that, quite logically, one has to purchase fewer to complete the series. Not only may this lower the inhibition for starting a series – after all, it is only two volumes long now – it is also more practical to have to buy less volumes in German-speaking countries, as comics shops and shelves are few and far between there. An added benefit of compiling an already completed series means the release dates can be closer: Whereas French-language readers who picked up the series as it released had to stay
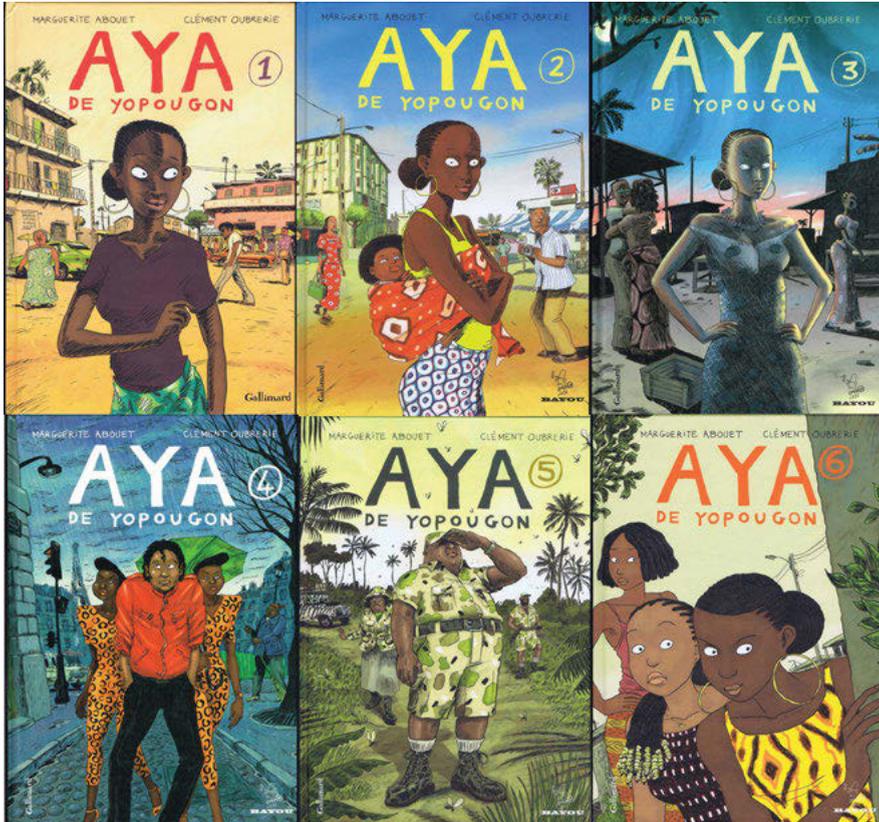
Figure 1: The six individual Aya volumes were released in Gallimard's Bayou collection between 2005 and 2010. The clearly numbered covers show a wide variety of characters – the titular Aya is even missing from the covers of volumes 4 and 5 (Abouet and Oubrerie 2008, 2009, cover pages).

hooked for over 5 years in order to read the plot's ending, German-language readers only had to wait for a few months. This also entails that the difference in sales between the first and the last volumes may not have been as high as it was in the French edition, where readers had more time and occasions to quit the series mid-way. Although the complete *Aya* series costs more in French than it does in German, the higher production cost resulting from more volumes, and
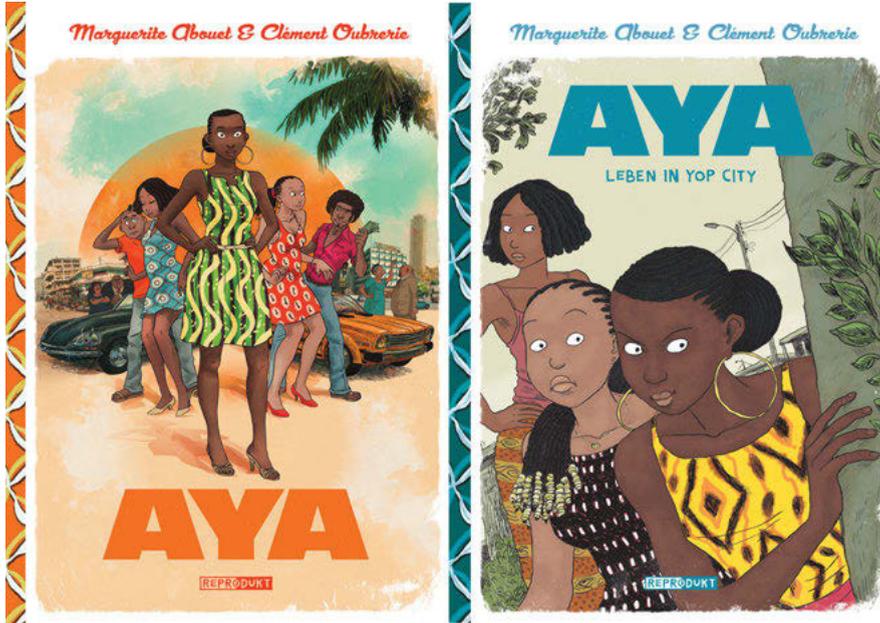
Figure 2: The two Aya compilations published by Reprodukt in 2014. The name of the second volume as well as the cover illustrations have been changed from the initial release. The left volume's cover illustration stems from a movie poster, the right one's is the same as the original 6th volume's (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, cover page; Abouet and Oubrerie 2014b, cover page).

the likely lesser sales numbers for the later volumes mean that Gallimard's bene-fice proportionally to the sales may not have been as high as Reprodukt's.[2]

Additionally, the longer reading experience provided by the compiled volume means that the episodic nature of the *Aya* series is largely diminished: Each book's story now goes beyond the resolution of one given conflict per character, and delivers an in-depth exploration of Ivorian society, where suspense is quickly resolved, and thus sidelined, compared to the single issues. The narrative cohe-sion given by Reprodukt is further strengthened by changing the volumes' titles. Whereas the French volumes are all clearly numbered, Reprodukt merely added a

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2 Given that, apart from all-time best-sellers, comics sales numbers in German-speaking coun-tries are but a fraction of the French-language market, one can expect the total (not propor-tional) commercial benefits to have been much higher for Gallimard than for Reprodukt.

subtitle to the second, calling it *Aya: Leben in Yop-City* [*Life in Yop City*][3] (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014b) (see Figure 2). This means both volumes are presented as being potentially independent from each other, prompting some readers to buy the second volume not even knowing it is a sequel; in contrast, it is unlikely one would buy *Aya de Yopougon 4* (Abouet and Oubrerie 2008) without having first read all of the preceding volumes, especially since the cover does not even feature the titular character (see Figure 1).

Each volume being longer and containing a more cohesive story also means the comic is easily marketable as a *graphic novel*, and thus more likely to be distributed by general bookstores, as well as reviewed even by literary critics. As Jean-Matthieu Méon puts it, the status as a graphic novel "is first and foremost defined through editorial formats" (2020, n.pag.), after all, meaning the massive *Aya* is more likely to be considered as such than the shorter volumes. Furthermore, Méon claims that this symbolic label enables a piece to be placed "in a continuum which goes beyond comics by encompassing cinema and literature and which is meant to give the works a more solid artistic grounding" (2020, n.pag.) – a filiation on which Reprodukt may have wanted to insist by using the same illustration on the first volume's cover (see Figure 2) as the movie poster for the 2013 animated film (Abouet and Oubrerie 2013). Although Reprodukt may have gambled on it when releasing its adaptation in 2014, the movie did not have a German-language release, meaning readers could not be expected to recognize the illustration from the promotional poster on the comic cover. Nevertheless, the poster's cleaner and more detailed drawings and shading, as well as the faded colors on the edges contribute to giving the first cover cinema-like aesthetics that are quite distinct from the other cover illustrations. These paratextual and material changes lead to Reprodukt appropriating the series in a different way than Gallimard and are assets in a comics market as small as the German-language one: necessary strategies for the works published by Reprodukt to garner an audience and attract reviews.

When speaking about added content, one can of course not omit bonus pages or illustrations, sometimes created specifically for Reprodukt's edition of a comic. In the case of Nicolas Mahler's (2017) *Goldgruber-Chroniken* [Goldgruber chronicles], the artist added annotations, an epilogue, and follow-ups to storylines developed in *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* [Art theory versus Miss Goldgruber] (Mahler 2003), the first of the three comics included in the *Chroniken*

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3 The English-language edition released by Drawn & Quarterly uses the same naming scheme as the German-language releases. This shows that Reprodukt's publication strategy is not particularly original, but has rather proven its worth in other markets, as well.

trilogy. This results in the plot being somewhat different from what it was when *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* was initially released by Austrian publisher edition selene. Although the publisher adds contents made by the artist himself, one could argue that this helps Reprodukt make the comic its own, as it transforms this specific compilation into a retrospective of sorts, where the artist confronts his previous work critically, making it a different piece from the individual comics. Additionally, the selection of the compiled comics is also an arbitrary choice made by the publisher: Of Mahler's four autobiographical pieces on creating comics, only three are contained in the *Chroniken*, whereas for reasons pertaining to the publisher's logic, *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* [Franz Kafka's non-stop laughter machine] (Mahler 2014) remains a standalone comic, in spite of tackling similar subjects in a similar style.

In the same vein, Reprodukt can choose to include comics into series they were not really a part of, thus inciting people to add somewhat unrelated comics to their collection. For instance, Lewis Trondheim's (2018) somewhat autobiographic *Die Abenteuer des Universums* [The Adventures of the universe] is categorized as being a part of the *Herr Hase* [*The Spiffy Adventures of McConey*] series on Reprodukt's website, albeit actually belonging to the *Abenteuer ohne Herrn Hase* [Adventures without McConey] series, comics explicitly said to be *without* the eponymous character. While the name of the series does reference Trondheim's most famous creation, this comic in particular is not set in the same storyworld and is composed of single-page comics, far from *Herr Hase*'s usually cohesive albums. Still, the structure of the publisher's catalogue creates a link between two different series here, as tenuous as it may be.

Divide to Conquer: Appropriating a Series by Shortening It

Contrary to volumes 1 and 4 of the *Ohne Herrn Hase* series, however, the two middle-parts are not mentioned as being part of the same series. Indeed *Mein Freund, der Rechner* [My friend, the computer] (Trondheim 2002) and *Nicht ohne meine Konsole* [Not without my console] (Trondheim 2003) were not published by Reprodukt, but by the Carlsen publishing house. When Reprodukt bought the rights to this series and others, it decided to re-edit and re-publish most, but not all of Trondheim's comics – for some, it merely bought all unsold copies from Carlsen. Thus, while volumes 1 and 4 were produced by Reprodukt, the volumes 2 and 3 one could purchase from the publisher were actually publications made by the rival company, which may explain why they are not advertised on Reprodukt's

website as belonging with the comics it actually released. Perhaps in order to maintain a visual homogeneity between comics of a same series, or simply for commercial reasons, these volumes are *de facto* left out of the series by the publisher, made to seem like single-issue comics. Both volumes have gone out of sale by now, either because all copies have been bought, or because Reprodukt decided to only sell the *Ohne Herrn Hase* comics it published itself. In a sense, in order to truly make Trondheim's series its own, Reprodukt chose to strip it of two of its parts.

Speaking of leaving out elements: Reprodukt has changed the makeup of other comics series or collections, and for various reasons. In spite of the different elements in a series being coherent with one another from the artist's point of view, it is truly up to the publisher to respect these elements belonging together or not. Firstly, there are the above-mentioned licensing-right issues that can arise and mean a series is published between multiple publishing houses. Secondly, there are occurrences where the publisher may not publish a complete series because of economic and critical shortcomings. For example, of Bastien Vivès, Michaël Sanlaville and Balak's (2013) twelve tomes of *Lastman*, only the first four volumes were published by Reprodukt – according to a forum post by Reprodukt editor-in-chief Dirk Rehm (2016) himself, the fifth was in the works, but was dropped due to disappointing sales. The series remains widely successful in French-speaking countries, and even sparked an animated series and a video game adaptation; nevertheless, it did not resonate with Reprodukt's audience, demonstrating that not all attempts of appropriating a comic for one's audience will be fruitful. Albeit a decision prompted by exterior factors, the choice to keep a series forever incomplete was ultimately made by the publisher, not the artists. Thus, an editorial decision means that reading *Lastman* in German is another experience entirely than it is in other languages, one where the narrative is not complete and does not span over different forms of media.

Lastly, a series or collection can be shaped and appropriated according to more internal factors, namely the publisher's political and editorial stance. One notable example for a reshaping prompted by political ideals is a comics series aimed at pre-school children, the *Kleiner Strubbel* [Little Tousle-Head] series by Céline Fraipont and Pierre Bailly (2013–2021). Of the first ten published volumes, only volume 5, *La Tribu des Bonapéti* [The tribe of the Bon Appetits] was never published by the German publisher, most likely for political reasons. Indeed, although offset by the simplified art style, the color scheme used for the title character could be seen as reminiscent of blackface. This visual element becomes especially apparent and controversial in the context of volume 5, where the title character meets a cannibal tribe. Seeing as how this volume in particular could be considered to promote racist depictions of people of color (see Figure 3),

Reprodukt, a politically left-leaning publisher, may have decided to erase the volume from its canon continuity by not publishing it in the first place. Of the later, more recent volumes of the series, others were not released by Reprodukt either, but most of these can be expected to simply not have been released *yet*.[4]
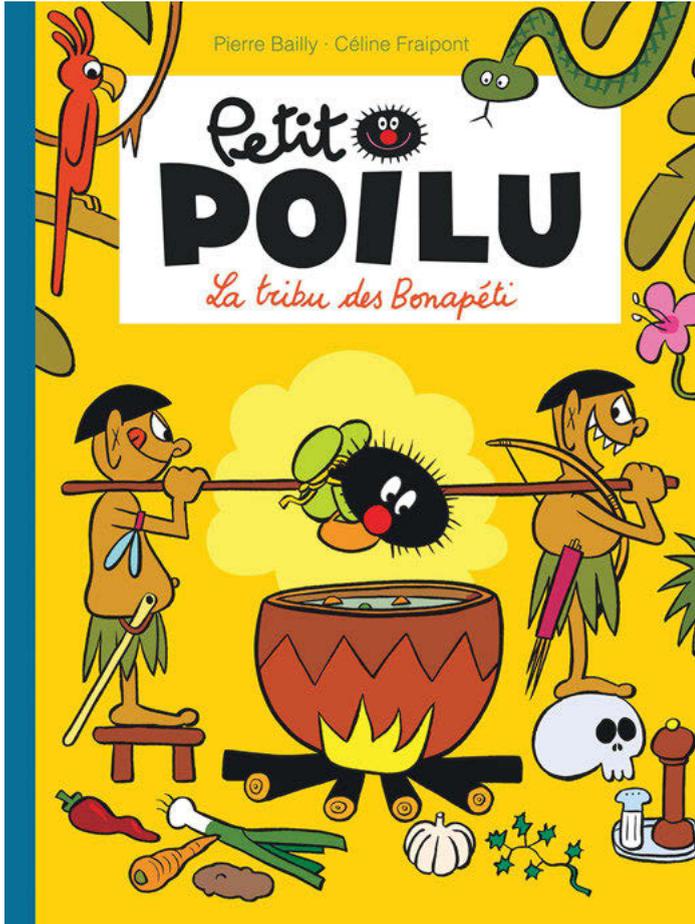
Figure 3: The cover for a *Petit Poilu* album that has not been adapted by Reprodukt. The cover shows a supposedly cannibal tribe of indigenous people wanting to cook the titular character. The illustration reproduces colonial imagery and racial stereotypes that could be considered inappropriate for young readers (Bailly and Fraipont 2009, cover page).

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4 The output of *Kleiner Strubbel* comics has been steady and rapid, but Reprodukt took a break from 2019 to 2021, perhaps in order not to overtake the French publications.

Nevertheless, volume 15, which questions gender stereotypes, and received back-lash from conservative newspapers in France, may have also been willfully ex-cluded from the series' German run. In this case, probably not because Reprodukt condones gendered behaviors – after all, the company publishes and publicizes various feminist comics, and comics on queer identities –, but because it could nevertheless not want for a children's series to possess such an obvious political subtext, or simply wish to avoid controversy. Clearly, by selecting which comics to publish and which not to, Reprodukt appropriates the series and gains a form of interpretative authority on it, demonstrating that it possesses textual agency.

Here, one can introduce the concept of editorial writing, used by production scholars Anne Réach-Ngô and later by Brigitte Ouvry-Vial to describe the traces of editorial authorship during the Renaissance, as it could be applied to a contemporary comics publisher, as well. According to them, "*écriture éditoriale* désignerait, à travers la typographie, la mise en chapitres, l'organisation formelle de l'ouvrage, les traces visibles et lisibles de l'auctorialité éditoriale [. . .] inscrit[es] dans la matérialisation de l'écrit" [editorial writing designates the visible and in-visible traces of editorial auctoriality inscribed into the materialization of writ-ing [. . .] via the typography, the division into chapters, the formal organization of the piece] (Ouvry-Vial 2007, 78, original emphasis). Through the formal changes made to the structure and contents of the Bailly and Fraipont's series, one could argue that the German *Kleiner Strubbel* is not only the artists' invention, but also that of the editors, who co-wrote it, in a way. The same goes for Mahler's *Gold-gruber-Chroniken*, where through the combination of different volumes into a single book, Mahler's individual pieces are now perceived as belonging to one cohesive narrative, all because of an editorial decision.

The Publisher as a Narrator: Choosing Which Story to Tell

Another series highlights how editorial choices can affect how not only a piece, but an entire artist will be perceived by a given audience, meaning the publisher in a sense rewrites the artist as opposed to only their work, making them their own. Regarding the Japanese artist Shigeru Mizuki, for example, Reprodukt de-cided to publish his autobiography differently than its Canadian counterpart Drawn & Quarterly. While the latter published a four-part series on Mizuki's life (Mizuki 2013), French publisher Cornélius (Mizuki 2012) and Reprodukt (Mizuki

2020) released a trilogy.[5] Indeed, the various publishers unexpectedly adapted different autobiographic pieces: Whereas the Canadian publisher adapted the manga *Shōwa-shi* [Shōwa era], originally released from 1988 to 1989, the German and the French publishers translated Mizuki's shorter 2001 production *Boku no Isshō wa GeGeGe no Rakuen Da* [My life is Shigeru's paradise] (Mizuki 2001). A great many pages of Mizuki's later autobiography, the one published in German and French, actually stem from the older *Shōwa-shi*, and as can be expected for biographies, both pieces essentially tell the same story, albeit with a different aim – against this background, the question for a publisher is which of the series to select for publication, and why.

In spite of the commercial and critical success enjoyed by the English version of *Shōwa-shi*,[6] Reprodukt chose to nevertheless adapt *Boku no Isshō*, as it is closer to its vision of what kind of stories it wants to publish. According to Reprodukt's self-description, it releases comics where "Person und Erfah[r]ungen der Autor:innen im Blickpunkt [stehen]. Auch wo Fiktion entsteht, werden autobiografische Bezüge erkennbar, bleibt die eigene Perspektive der wichtigste Ausgangspunkt" [the person and experience of the author are at the center of attention. Even when a fictional story is created, autobiographical references can be recognized, and the personal perspective remains the main focal point] (Reprodukt n.d., n.pag.). Although Mizuki's *Shōwa-shi* is personal, it is also a historic documentary on Japanese society and on the evolution that it underwent – hence why the English-language edition is titled *Showa: A History of Japan*. While this may have been a better sales pitch than simply a biography of an artist not too well-known in the West, the German publisher decided to publish a piece that related to the company's ambitions: Instead of publishing a *History of Japan*, Reprodukt chose to publish a history of Mizuki. This even extends to the volumes' titles: Whereas Drawn & Quarterly neatly categorized each part by the dates in which the plot takes place (*Showa: A History of Japan 1926–1939*; *Showa: 1939–1944* . . .), Reprodukt included the artist's name in the title[7] and, in spite of their retaining a similar chronological structure, used a more thematic approach to divide the volumes, calling their comics *Shigeru Mizuki: Kindheit und Jugend* [Childhood

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5 The series on which Cornélius's and Reprodukt's adaptation is based was six volumes long – shortening a series' run is a strategy of leaving one's imprint on a comic that was discussed earlier in this chapter.

6 The comic was nominated twice for the Harvey Awards and thrice for the Eisner Awards, where it won in 2015 and 2016.

7 On the cover, "Shigeru Mizuki" is written in the same font as the rest of the title, implying the name is a part of the title. Furthermore, on Reprodukt's website, as well as in product descriptions of retailers and reviews, Shigeru Mizuki is listed as the title and as the artist of the series.

and youth], *Shigeru Mizuki: Kriegsjahre* [War years], and *Shigeru Mizuki: Mangaka*.[8] By altering the titles, Reprodukt appropriated the series differently than its Canadian and French counterparts, and by publishing another autobiography of the same artist, it arguably altered how that artist would be received in German-language cultures. Reprodukt's and Cornélius's Mizuki is highlighted as an artist with a tragic personal backstory, whereas for Drawn & Quarterly, he is perhaps first and foremost a witness of Japan's evolution throughout the twentieth century.

Speaking of evolution: It is up to a publisher to make a given comic go with the times and adapt it to what readers may expect in a given era – or not – shaping it according to what the former deems relevant. Without necessarily changing the contents, an older piece can be appropriated by a publisher so as to be presented as a comment on contemporary issues. Reprodukt accomplished this with Robert Crumb's *Amerika* (Crumb 2019), giving it a not-so-metaphorical new coat of paint. While this collection of short comics was originally published by Knockabout Comics in 1994 (Crumb 1994), most of the stories it contains date back to the early 1970s. While one can most certainly compare issues and conflicts of back then with those of today, and perhaps discover a striking resemblance, this reading is not necessarily incentivized by the British publisher. In contradistinction, Reprodukt presents its 2019 release of the same anthology as one containing "eine bitter-böse Abrechnung mit dem amerikanischen Traum, die – obwohl zwischen 1965 und 1996 entstanden – aktueller nicht sein könnte" [a ruthless confrontation with the American dream that – albeit created between 1965 and 1996 – could not be any more contemporary than it already is] (Reprodukt 2019, n.pag.). Further links with contemporary American society are reinforced by explicitly naming Donald Trump as one of the many characters portrayed in the book. However, back when Crumb drew him in 1986, Trump was still a real estate tycoon, and not a former politician, meaning the particular short story starring him was not conceived as a comment on US politics *per se*, but rather on the state of the financial system. Still, given how interested overseas media were in the Trump presidency and in the then upcoming 2020 presidential race, it makes sense to market *Amerika* as if it contained a contemporary vision of the US, and as if it focused on Trump.[9]

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8 Cornélius used the same tripartition for their adaptation of Mizuki's autobiography, but called their volumes *L'enfant* [the child], *Le survivant* [the survivor], and *L'apprenti* [the apprentice]. While the same stages of Mizuki's life are accentuated in each volume, the different titles nevertheless connote different interpretations the publishers made on what these stages represented for the artist and narrator.

9 As a matter of fact, the short story in which Donald Trump appears is a mere 6 pages long, making up barely 6% of the 96 pages long anthology, meaning he is hardly the focus of the comic.
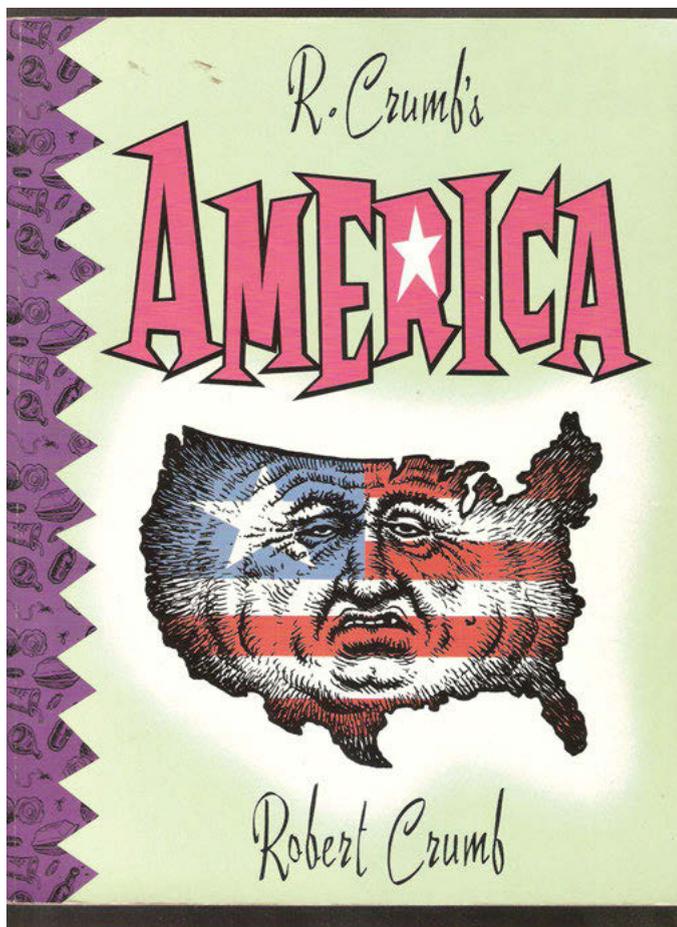
Figure 4: The cover for Knockabout Comics' *America*, a compilation of short comics published by Robert Crumb. The illustration shows the United States personified as an obese and unfriendly-looking person (Crumb 1994, cover page).

The association with the Trump presidency is further strengthened by altering the cover. Both editions contain the same cover illustration: the wrinkled face of a grimacing, very stout human, in the shape of a map of the US, colored with a motive reminiscent of the Puerto Rican flag, but that most likely represents a modified US flag (see Figures 4 and 5). The same illustration (minus the flag motive) is used in one of the short stories, where it is said to represent the greedy, cruel, and ugly "Modern America" (Crumb 1994, 4). However, the original cover background's uniform mint green (see Figure 4), perhaps signaling sickness, was changed
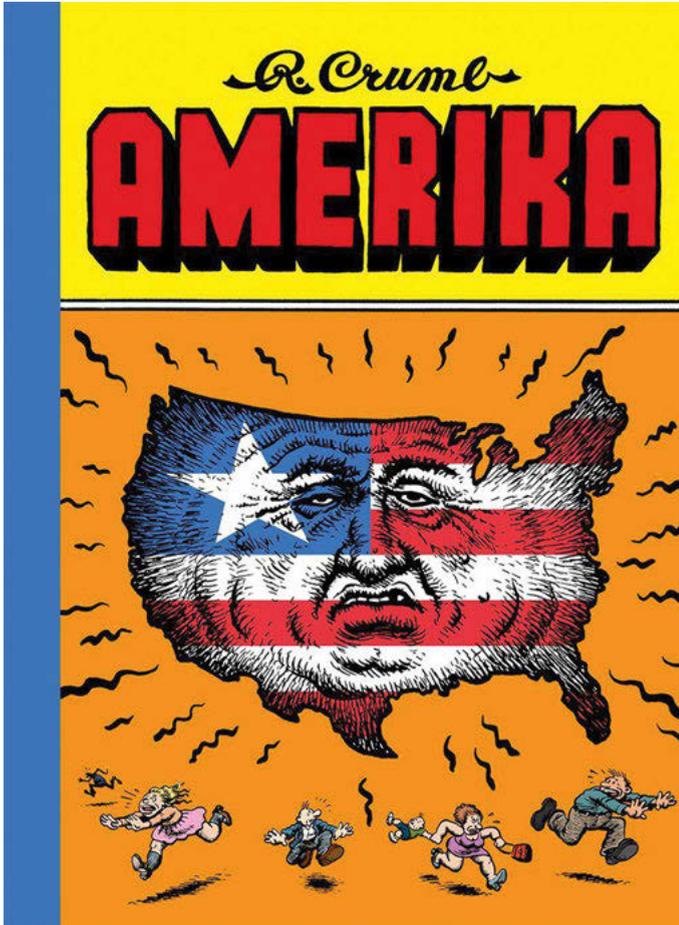
Figure 5: Reprodukt's cover for its 2019 adaptation of Robert Crumb's comics collection. The color scheme is different from the one of the piece it adapts, and may be reminiscent of caricatures of then US-President Donald Trump. The positioning of the colors yellow and orange could fit with representing the face's hair and skin color (Crumb 2019, cover page).

by Reprodukt to orange on the bottom two-thirds and yellow on the top third (see Figure 5). Associated with the portrait of an older, obese, presumably male person, the color scheme used by Reprodukt can easily make one interpret the cover illustration as representing Trump, seeing as how these colors were, in fact, associated with the former President's hair color and skin tone, and prominently used in caricatures. Additionally, several characters fleeing from the gigantic face were added, as well as wriggly lines representing stench or possibly
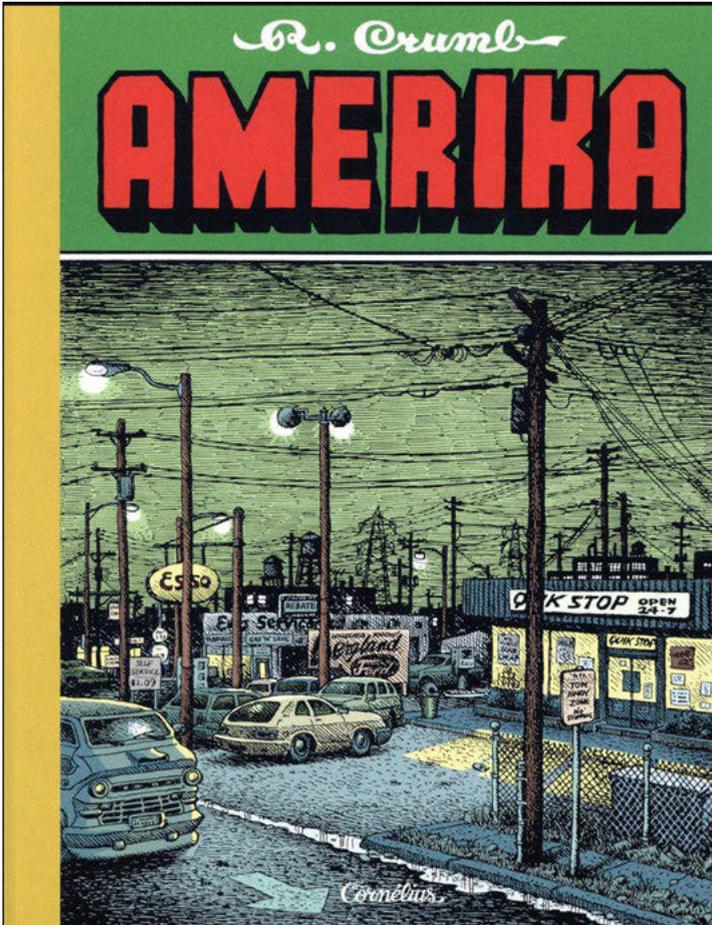
Figure 6: Cornélius's 2004 adaptation of Robert Crumb's comics collection. In contrast to the original release and other adaptations, the French publisher decided to show a commercial district on the outskirts of a US-American town on the cover. The greenish colors from the original cover may represent an inherent sickness to the American way of life (Crumb 2004, cover page).

loudness, all accentuating its supposed repulsiveness. Coupled with the publisher explicitly naming Trump in the book's description, as well as releasing the comic in February 2019, right at the start of the US Democratic Party's presidential primaries, and thus, at a time where German-language media would look at US politics with renewed and heightened interest, it is clear that Reprodukt somewhat hijacked the comic's interpretation. The German *Amerika* is not a

comment made by Crumb on today's US politics, but rather a comment made by Reprodukt, its interpretation of how this anthology should be read today.

In contradistinction to its foreign colleagues, French publisher Cornélius chose to represent a typical suburban commercial district on the cover (see Figure 6), signaling the comic as being a portrait of worldwide consumer culture in general. This is emphasized by its product description stating that Crumb's "constat lucide et acerbe qu'il dresse de son pays vaut pour tout l'Occident, tant nos modes de vie semblent s'être calqués sur le rêve américain" [clear-sighted and ruthless appreciation of his country is valid for all of Western society, seeing as how our ways of life seem to have copied the American dream] (Cornélius 2021, n.pag.). Here, the cold colors and most notably the green sky may hint at this American dream having become unhealthy, if not sick. Nevertheless, this cover represents the US as being a drab and sad place rather than the repulsive subject it seems to be in Reprodukt's edition. Thus, as evidenced by the cover illustrations, different publishers chose to interpret the piece differently, making the comic tell a bit of a different story depending on the edition.

Conclusion

As one can see, whenever different forces, be they the artists or previous publishers, claim authorship on a piece, even when market dynamics try to impose how a comic ought to be released, and the times should determine how it ought to be read, Reprodukt – and other companies – can keep a large part of their agency and appropriate parts of these aspects. As claimed by Ouvry-Vial and Réach-Ngô (2007), publishers do, in fact get to actively take part in authoring a comic and are not merely passive recipients. Contrary to most artists, their agency does not limit itself to the textual, but reaches to the paratextual and its impact on the broader public (even those parts of the public that will not consume the products), in spite of not always having been involved in the creative process.

Of course, the publisher's agency can still be limited by the artistic input, by the market . . . and even when it is not, a publisher will not necessarily impose its vision: In fact, only a minority of series published by Reprodukt contains changes of the likes that were discussed here. Perhaps due to an increasingly globalized way of consuming media, modifications (other than of the language and lettering of a comic) are not always necessary to appeal to an audience in a given country. Even when there are such alterations, most, if not all of them have been made with the artists' consent and approved by them in order to appeal to Reprodukt's readers. Especially when the changes do not alter the writers'

and artists' intentions for the text, but only the paratext and epitext chosen by the original publisher, they may be gladly accepted. In the end, while publishers have a great deal of control over comics, they usually also have to keep up a balance with the artist's own agency, and with market dynamics; if they neglect this balance, they risk failing to disseminate the comics they want to spread. As a publisher that prides itself on releasing personal comics, Reprodukt generally uses its editorial power with great responsibility, and it tries to be faithful to what the artists want to express. Being in the latter's favor and strictly adhering to their vision means they may ask for their other comics to be released with the same publisher and may incite them to attend marketing events such as book signings. In a few of the cases mentioned in this contribution, however, far from being a mere mediator for the artists, or from simply turning Word files into PDF files, Reprodukt shows the great extent of their agency as publisher.

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Mark Hibbett
The Agents of Doom
An Empirical Approach to Transmedia Actors

In his book *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling*, Matthew Freeman (2016) divides the components of a transmedia character into three separate categories: character-building, world-building, and authorship. The first category concerns aspects of the character themselves, such as their appearance, personal history, and way of speaking, while the second is to do with the storyworld they inhabit, including other characters, locations, and history. The third category, authorship, is to do with the actors who "dictate characters and entire fictional story worlds, building both of these aspects across multiple media" (Freeman 2016, 33).

Freeman suggests that authorship can be further broken down into two author-functions: that of a market author-function and a textual author-function. The market author-function relates to Foucault's (1969) indicative function, focusing on the way that the presence of an author's name guides readers to what is inside and to what other texts exist, while the textual author-function relates to those who are credited with its actual production.

To take an example from the world of comics, the textual authors for *Uncanny X-Men* #146 (Claremont et al. 1981) are those who appear in the issue's credits – Chris Claremont ("writer"), Dave Cockrum and Joe Rubinstein ("artists"), Tom Orzechowski ("letterer"), Glynis Wein ("colourist"), Louise Jones ("editor") and Jim Shooter ("editor-in-chief"). The market authors are first and foremost Marvel comics, whose corporate ownership is proclaimed on the cover, but also Stan Lee, who "presents" the story, as he did most Marvel comics during the 1970s and 1980s. Here Lee's name is used to reassure potential purchasers that what they will find inside is a genuine, canonical Marvel comic, similar to the way that the names of Edgar Rice Burroughs or Ian Fleming are used in conjunction with *Tarzan* and *James Bond* texts, even when the actual stories told are nothing to do with the original authors (Freeman 2015).

As Freeman says,

> [i]f both character-building and world-building [. . .] are important to transmedia storytelling, then authorship is crucial for achieving both character-building and world-building. (2016, 38)

In other words, transmedia characters depend on authorial actors to bring them into existence, and this chapter will look at the actors responsible for the existence of one specific character: Doctor Doom.

Doctor Doom and the Marvel Age

Doctor Doom is one of Marvel's most popular supervillains, making his first appearance on the cover of *Fantastic Four* #5 (Lee and Kirby 1962) where he threatened to "destroy the Fantastic Four forever!" According to Stan Lee, the character's popularity was clear from the start:

> Within a matter of days the mail came flying in. And it all carried the same message. Bring back Dr. Doom! [. . .] After the first thousand or so letters we suspected we had a hit!
>
> (Lee 1976, 13)

As a result, Doom soon began to appear in other series. Just over a year after *Fantastic Four* #5, he guest-starred in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #5 (Lee et al. 1963), and over the course of the next decade also appeared in *Daredevil*, *The Avengers*, *Strange Tales*, *The Silver Surfer*, *Sub-Mariner*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Not Brand Echh*, as well as a brief run as the second feature lead in *Astonishing Tales*.

Doom's wanderings were not, however, restricted to comics. Marvel began to tell their stories on multiple media platforms early on in their history, with the *The Marvel Superheroes* cartoon (1966) being the first, and Doom appeared in this as guest villain in the "Namor the Submariner" segment (Barnholden 2021). The *Fantastic Four* themselves did not appear in other media until a year later, in the *Fantastic Four* cartoon series (1967), which featured Doom in several episodes. He has continued to be featured across Marvel's transmedia excursions over the next half century, appearing in all four *Fantastic Four* movies (including the unreleased Roger Corman movie) as well as in the *Amazing Spider-Man* newspaper strip, in *The Superhero Squad Show* cartoon, in the *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* game and in many, many others, with a long-awaited arrival in the Marvel Cinematic Universe expected soon (Goodwillie 2021).

The fact that Doom has made most of his appearances as a guest rather than as the lead of a series means that he has developed independently of a specific creator or creative team, in much the same way that modern transmedia characters are developed by large teams of creators. This is true of several characters within the early Marvel Universe but, as Douglas Wolk has said, "Doom was absolutely the most interesting" (Wolk and Reed 2021, n.pag.).

Characters with their own series tend to have creative teams who generate their stories for months, sometimes years at a time, making it generally straightforward to assess who the actors responsible for them are. However, this is much more difficult for a wandering character like Doom, whose responsible textual authors change rapidly as they move from series to series, and so it is easier to make incorrect assumptions about their actors.

This tendency towards errors will be demonstrated later via the results of an online survey of comics academics and fans, who were asked who they thought were the actors responsible for Doctor Doom (Hibbett 2020). This was a self-administered online survey, which was advertised on comics mailing lists, online groups, and via Twitter during April 2020, with 225 respondents eventually taking part. Alongside questions on authorship, respondents were also asked about their own knowledge and experience of Doctor Doom in different media and time periods. On average, each was aware of Doom appearing in 3.89 (median answer 4) different media types, with almost all (98%) being aware of him in comics, followed by movies (82.2%), cartoons (72.8%), and video games (48.0%). For comics, respondents were asked how familiar they were with texts in individual decades from the 1960s up to the 2010s, on a scale of 1 ("not familiar at all") to 5 ("very familiar"). On average each had some familiarity (score 3–5) with 3.72 out of the 6 decades, with the decade 1970–1979 being known by the most respondents (67%) and 1960–1969 by the least (58%). Overall, the survey was thus representative of a wide range of experiences of the character over time and media, with a slight bias towards comics – not surprising, given that the vast majority of the character's appearances have been in that medium. However, as will be seen, some unforeseen biases did emerge within the sample as a result of the way that respondents were recruited.

All of the data used in this chapter was taken from a wider project examining the character of Doctor Doom during "The Marvel Age." This is a term regularly used in comics fandom, biographies, popular texts, journal articles, and academic volumes, as well as in Marvel's own publicity, but it is very rarely formally defined. The only aspect of the Marvel Age that is almost uniformly agreed on is that it began with the publication of *The Fantastic Four* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1961), which saw the beginning of Marvel as the creative underdog, changing the nature of superhero storytelling (Raphael and Spurgeon 2004, xiii). Ideas of the end date vary widely, but it is generally seen to be over by the mid to late 1980s when Shooter's reluctance to risk innovation meant that DC came to be seen as the home of innovation in superhero comics, with Marvel now the conservative sales-leader unwilling to experiment (Pustz 2016; Tucker 2017).

However, it is possible to periodize the Marvel Age in empirical terms by applying a production of culture approach, viewing the Marvel universe as "the product of collective, often routinized, human activity" (Brienza 2010, 105). Specifically, using the position of editor-in-chief as a marker for a change from one period to another – in line with Peterson's (1982) "Occupational Careers" and "Organisational Structure" as constraints on the production of culture – makes it possible to use the credits and the cover-dates of the comics themselves to determine the start and end dates of the period. Using this method, "The Marvel Age" can be

said to begin with comics dated November 1961, with *Fantastic Four* #1 under the editorship of Stan Lee, and end with those dated October 1987, the final month in which all Marvel comics listed Shooter as editor-in-chief (Hibbett 2019).

It is important to note that these cover-dates are those which appeared on the front of the comics, not the dates they were actually issued. The standard practice in magazine publishing is to use a cover-date that is some weeks or months ahead of the actual on-sale date, in theory to give the publication a longer shelf-life before the news vendor removes it from sale (Adams 1990). During the 1960s, US comics publishers tended to use a cover-date two to three months ahead of the on-sale date (Levitz 2010). The advantage of using cover-dates is that they are readily available, as the name suggests, on the cover of comics text, whereas the on-sale date might differ depending on the company, publication frequency, and region.

For other media types, this form of dating does not apply, but dates of first publication or broadcast are more reliable and discoverable, and so for the purposes of this research the first issue dates for comics dated between November 1961 and October 1987 were used (i.e., 8 August 1961 and 14 July 1987 [Voiles 2018]).

Generating a Corpus and Sample

Data about Doctor Doom's appearances in comics was primarily sourced from *The Grand Comics Database* (1994–), an online resource which was set up in 1994 as a successor to the paper-based Amateur Press Alliance for Indexing (Klein et al. 1994; Rhode and Bottorff 2001). *The Grand Comics Database* has been widely used by researchers in comics studies (Hatfield 2012; Beaty et al. 2018), as it allows users to download information as an SQL file, a relational database format containing all of their current data in a format which can be uploaded to the user's own computer server, so that new queries can be run, and reports created, without needing internet access or further interaction with the site owners (Date 1986). The information contained within *The Grand Comics Database* has been entered over many years by a network of volunteers who suggest changes or updates to the data, which is then assessed by moderators. This peer review of the data makes it, theoretically, more comprehensive, and reliable than other systems set up by single enthusiasts, although a lack of clear guidance on what should be included means that some problems arise.

For example, initial queries of *The Grand Comics Database* showed that Doom appeared in issues 65, 85, 90, and 91 of *The Defenders*, but online versions of these texts showed him to be completely absent. Eventually paper copies were

tracked down, and these revealed that Doom was briefly mentioned in the *Bull-pen Bulletins* editorial page, common in all Marvel comics published that month. Similarly, in July and August 1976, the character Red Skull apparently appeared in almost every single Marvel comic, due to his role fighting Captain America in an advert for Twinkies. In both cases the original data entry volunteer had decided to enter information about paratexts, which were not usually included, leading to confusion in the analysis.

Other issues encountered along the way included multiple errors, such as naming the wrong creators, and a great deal of missing data, particularly around inkers and letterers. Thus the data was checked against information from *Comic Book Database* (Comic Book DB 2006), described as cataloguing "every comic book, graphic novel, manga, illustrator, publisher, writer, and character . . . ever" (Hoover 2013, 46), and *Comic Vine*, which calls itself "the largest comic database online" (Guerrero 2006, n.pag.).

An initial search of *The Grand Comics Database* brought up 243 comics which listed an appearance by Doctor Doom within the cover-dates. Cross-checking against the other databases at first revealed an additional 22 stories which apparently featured Doctor Doom, but a closer examination reduced this number to three, with the other 19 cases being errors where Doom did not appear at all, or incorrectly listed reprints. This was a lengthy process due to the different ways that each system recorded series titles. Examples of this included the use of the definite article (e.g., some listed *The Fantastic Four* as *The Fantastic Four*, while others referred to it as just *Fantastic Four*), changes to titles of ongoing series (e.g., *The X-Men* becoming *The Uncanny X-Men* and then *New X-Men*), and various other problems such as volume numbers and annuals. These issues are common to all comics databases and have caused difficulties for other quantitative data analyses of comics (Beaty et al. 2018), with the solution always being a manual check of the individual data items (Walsh et al. 2018).

Collection of data on non-comics appearances by Doctor Doom began with internet searches employing multiple combinations of variant versions of the character's name ("Doctor Doom," "Dr Doom," "Dr. Doom," and "Victor von Doom"), with words describing media types, such as "television," "radio," "film," and "game." Similar searches were also undertaken for the Fantastic Four, reasoning that any media that featured them was likely to also feature their arch enemy, and this identified a great many different texts from the obvious, such as the two *Fantastic Four* cartoon series, to obscure items like the *Fantastic Four Radio Show* (1978) starring a young Bill Murray as The Human Torch. The process of tracking down media appearances carried on throughout the research, with some items appearing while looking for others. For example, the Power Records album *The*

Fantastic Four: The Way It Began (Thomas et al. 1974) was only discovered while looking for information about a similarly titled Hanna Barbera cartoon episode.

Once the corpus was fully checked and cleaned it contained a total of 266 texts, divided by media type as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Corpus by media type.

Media type	Texts
Comic	236
Cartoon	15
Audio/Mixed	6
Game	6
Newspaper	3
Total	**266**

Carrying out a full analysis of all of 266 texts was impossible for the research project, and so a sample of "representative" cases was selected (Corpas et al. 2010). "Representative" here refers to "the extent to which a sample includes the full range of variability in a population" (Biber 1993, 243), and can be tested by comparing "the occurrence and/or proportion of situational characteristics represented in the full population" (Gray et al. 2017, 2) to that in a sample, to assess whether the two match. In other words, if it can be shown that a sample has the same properties as the overall corpus then it can be said to be "representative" and therefore valid for analysis.

The properties chosen to assert representativeness here were series title and date. These were chosen because the information was readily available and independent from the analysis. Grouping texts by date was done by splitting "The Marvel Age" into three sub-periods based on the editor-in-chief position and the cover-date for comics, or the equivalent publication or broadcast date for other texts. The sub-periods used were November 1961 to August 1972, when Stan Lee was editor-in-chief, September 1972 to April 1978, when Marvel had four different editor-in-chiefs in quick succession, and May 1978 to October 1987 under Jim Shooter. The number of texts in each sub-period is shown in the table below:

Grouping texts by the series titles was more complicated, due to Doom's wandering nature. During the timeframe analyzed he appeared in 72 different series, and for over half of them (42 series) he only appeared in a single issue or episode. It would be impossible to make a representative sample with so many distinct titles, and so these were grouped together in several ways, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Texts by sub-period.

Period	Texts
Nov 1961 - Aug 1972	78
Sep 1972 - Apr 1978	54
May 1978 - Oct 1987	134
Total	**266**

First, annuals and special editions were grouped according to their "home" series, so that, for example, *Giant-Size Avengers* and *The Avengers Annual* were placed into the same group as *The Avengers*, while *Giant-Size Super-Villain Team-Up* was grouped with *Super-Villain Team-Up*, and so on. Other texts were grouped thematically, so that the various role-playing game companions such as *Marvel Superheroes Players Book*, *Marvel Superheroes Role-Playing Game Judge Book*, and *Marvel Superheroes Secret Wars RPG* were grouped together as "RPG Magazines," while *Marvel Treasury Special*, *Marvel Treasury Edition*, *Marvel Comics Super Special*, and so on were grouped as "Specials/Treasuries."

Finally, any single texts remaining were put into the general groups "Other comics," "Other cartoons," and "Other non-comics." This enabled the generation of the groupings as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Series groupings.

Series	Texts
Fantastic Four	60
Other comics	27
Super-Villain Team-Up	16
Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars	12
Not Brand Echh	10
The Avengers	10
What If?	9
Astonishing Tales	8
Spider-Man/ Spider-Man And His Amazing Friends	8
Thor	7

Table 3 (continued)

Series	Texts
The Amazing Spider-Man	6
Spidey Super Stories	6
Specials/Treasuries	5
Iron Man	5
Daredevil	5
RPG Magazines	5
The Uncanny X-Men	5
Sub-Mariner	4
Beauty and the Beast	4
The Incredible Hulk	4
Dazzler	4
Marvel Team-Up	4
The Thing	4
Marvel Fanfare	4
Fantastic Four vs. X-Men	4
Fantastic Four (radio show)	4
Fantastic Four (1967 series)	4
Secret Wars II	4
Crazy Magazine	3
Marvel Two-In-One	3
Other non-comics	3
Strange Tales	3
The Amazing Spider-man (newspaper strip)	3
Other cartoons	3
Total	266

With these groupings in place, Stratified Random Sampling was used, dividing the corpus into strata by series and period and then selecting so that the distribution was the same in both, ensuring that the sample was representative of

the sample as a whole (Salkind 2010; The Pennsylvania State University 2018). By this method, a sample of 69 representative texts was generated, upon which all further analysis would be based.

Entering Data

With the sample selected, a database was set up and used to enter information about the market and textual authors, along with other information collected for the wider project. This was collected afresh for the project, rather than relying on the data within existing databases, which had been shown to be extremely unreliable.

For comics texts, the market authors were taken to be the companies or individuals named on the cover, or described as "presenting" the contents on the first page. In almost all cases, the latter took the form of "Stan Lee presents," with Lee's name being used to sell the contents, rather than as a contribution credit. Similarly, for other types of text, the market authors were taken from the part of the credits sequence, usually the start, where the person or organization presenting the text to the audience was declared. For example, in the 1967 *Fantastic Four* cartoon series, the credit "The Fantastic Four appear in Marvel Comics Magazine" was given, with the name "Marvel Comics Magazine" [sic] being used to market the contents, not to give credit for creating them. Information about textual authors was taken from the part of the credits, which listed contributors and their roles. For example, the textual authors of radio shows were taken from the names read out at the end of the show, while for animated TV shows it came from a combination of the opening or closing credits, depending on which was used by the individual text.

For all texts the credits were entered exactly as they appeared, rather than attempting to slot them into categories such as "writer" or "penciler." Following this process removed the need to judge what the terms meant. In the sample, there were 267 unique descriptions of roles recorded, including otherwise unclassifiable credits such as "unashamedly unleashed on an unsuspecting world by," "mentalist," and "engineer." A possible downside of this approach is that creators who are not credited on a text are not included in the analysis. For example, it was common practice in the 1960s for artists who did regular work for DC to use a pseudonym when working for Marvel (Evanier 2002). This information is sporadically available on some of the databases, but not uniformly, and often relies on additional knowledge not available in the text. The data collection was concerned only

with what appears within the text itself, not that which might be known, or assumed, by cognoscenti, in order for it to be empirical and replicable.

Market Authors

Across all media types there were 21 different market authors identified, but there were only eight distinct names that appeared more than once in the sample. This was partly due to the fact that the name "Marvel" was often used differently, as in "Marvel Productions Limited," "Marvel Comics," "Marvel Comics Magazine" or "Marvel Comics Group." At the beginning of the Marvel Age, this might have been due to Martin Goodman's propensity for giving his companies several different names, but this continues throughout the entire period of study (Simon 2011; Howe 2012). Whatever the reason, all these different names were grouped together as "Marvel."

In non-comics texts, the names of other companies appear in cases where Marvel had to go into partnership with other organizations because they did not have the ability or capacity to produce such texts themselves. Power Records, Krantz Films, Grantray Lawrence Animation, Hanna-Barbera Productions, TSR Inc and Register, and Tribune Syndicate were all included, but none appeared more than twice in the sample so they were grouped together as "other production companies." Similarly, other individual creators named as market authors were grouped together, giving a final list of market authors as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Market authors.

Market author	Texts	%
Marvel	69	100
CC/IND (distributors)	50	72
Stan Lee presents	37	54
Other production companies	8	12
Other creators	4	6

The clearest outcome of this is that some form of the brand "Marvel" is always used to denote market authorship of Doctor Doom, regardless of period or media type. This is hardly a great surprise, as he is well-known as a Marvel character, but it does give empirical proof for something which might otherwise only be

assumed. Other production companies which were listed all came from non-comics texts and were uniformly the partner that Marvel was working with at the time. No text in the sample was produced solely by another company, without Marvel's involvement. "Stan Lee presents" appears on almost half of all texts, although only in comics. This market authorship first appeared after Lee had stepped down as editor and writer, almost entirely relinquishing his role as a textual author in comics. No text included Lee as both a textual and market author, illustrating the difference between the two roles. The other creators named were Ed Hannigan, Bill Mantlo, Bob Hall, and David Micheline. Nowadays, "star" creators are regularly used to sell comics, with their names prominently displayed on the covers, but this data shows that this was comparatively rare during the period studied.

More surprising is the fact that Marvel's two distribution companies of this period, Curtis Circulation and Independent Distributors, appear on the cover of over 80% of all comics texts (50 out of 61). It could be argued that these markers are there purely for legal reasons, rather than as an attempt to sell the text itself, but nonetheless they are associated with the character as his distributors.

Comparing this data to the results of the survey brings up significant differences – Table 5 shows the percentage of survey respondents who mentioned a market author (% Survey), compared to the percentage of sample texts in which that market author was named (% Sample):

Table 5: Comparison of survey responses and empirical data for market authors.

Market author	% Survey	% Sample
Marvel	87	100
CC/IND (distributors)	0	72
Stan Lee presents	30	54
Jack Kirby	11	0
Other company	41	12
Other creator	11	6

As in the empirical data, Marvel is the highest-ranking market author, noted by 87% of survey respondents. Other companies were mentioned much more often by respondents than appeared in the sample, although this can partly be explained by the fact that the survey asked for overall views of Doom rather than

just in this time period, so this figure includes names such as Fox and Disney, who do not appear in the sample.

Stan Lee was mentioned by 30% of respondents and Jack Kirby by 11%, despite the latter never appearing in the sample results as a market author. There certainly were occasions when Kirby's name was used to sell comics during the period in question, notably in 1975, when Marvel's in-house fanzine *FOOM* heralded his return to the company with headlines such as "Jack's Back!" and "The King Is Here" (Hatfield 2012), but the empirical data shows that his name was not used to anywhere near the same extent as Stan Lee's. Other creators were also named more often in the survey than in the dataset, though again this was partly due to the fact that respondents named people such as Jonathan Hickman, Mark Waid, and even the rapper MF Doom, who would not work on the character until several years after the Marvel Age.

Finally, distribution companies were not mentioned at all. One reason for this might be that such companies no longer appear on the cover of comics, so that survey respondents were less likely to be aware of them. Indeed, the data shows that they started to disappear towards the end of the period studied, as Marvel moved towards using the direct market instead (Howe 2012). It might also indicate that such companies are not thought of by fans and academics as "authors" in the same way as "Marvel" or "Stan Lee presents," but the fact remains that they are included on the bulk of comics texts and so have some sort of connection to the character, which is not being collected or recorded in the survey. The usefulness of the empirical data in uncovering information which is missed by traditional means is shown even more clearly by the analysis of textual authors.

Textual Authors

Analysis of textual authors showed that there were 164 people whose names were associated with Doom's stories, the majority of whom (59%) only appeared once in the sample. This is empirical evidence for the idea expressed earlier that wandering characters like Doom are passed amongst different creators, rather than having a dedicated creative team.

Of the 67 textual authors who appeared more than once, only six did all of their work on the character within a single series. These were John Beatty (3 issues of *Marvel Super-Heroes Secret Wars*), Marie Severin (3 issues of *Not Brand Echh*), Pablo Marcos (2 issues of *The Avengers*), Peter Gillis (2 issues of *What If?*), Wally Wood (2 issues of *Astonishing Tales*), and Win Mortimer (2 issues of *Spidey Super Stories*). For all others, their work was spread across multiple series, again

demonstrating that Doom was a wandering character without a single guiding creative team or regular series.

There were 18 textual authors who appeared five or more times in the corpus, and these are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Textual authors.

Textual author	Texts
Jim Shooter	29
Stan Lee	23
Joe Rosen	15
Jack Kirby	10
Artie Simek	10
Joe Sinnott	10
Bill Mantlo	8
Jim Salicrup	7
Tom Orzechowski	7
Glynis Wein	7
Sam Rosen	6
Roy Thomas	6
Mike Eposito	6
Tom DeFalco	6
Christie Scheele	5
Archie Goodwin	5
John Byrne	5
Jim Novak	5

Jim Shooter appears most often because, in addition to writing or penciling some stories, he is credited as "editor-in-chief" on almost all texts created during the third sub-period of May 1978 to October 1987. Similarly, Stan Lee's name appears as writer, editor, or both on almost all texts produced during the first sub-period, none at all during the second, and then on four non-comics texts during the third. This is almost the reverse pattern to his appearances over time as a market author, showing again his switch in roles.

As will be shown, many of the other textual authors here are people who fans would not immediately associate with the character. Joe Rosen (who appears more often than Jack Kirby), for example, was a letterer, as were Artie Simek, Tom Orzechowski, Sam Rosen, and Jim Novak, while Glynis Wein and Christie Scheele are colorists. These creators would work on many more titles per month than writers, pencilers, and inkers, and so would be expected to appear more often. Colorists especially would appear much more often in the above table, but for the fact that they were not regularly credited during the 1960s.

In fact, the only creators in the above list who are solely credited as writers or artists (or equivalent terms), rather than also appearing as editorial staff, are Jack Kirby, Bill Mantlo, and John Byrne. This differs markedly from the results given in the fan survey, where almost all of the names associated with the character belonged to writers and artists, as shown in the next table. Respondents to the survey noted 113 different textual authors, 59 of whom were mentioned by more than one respondent. Table 7 shows the percentage of survey respondents who mentioned a textual author (% Survey), compared to the percentage of sample texts in which that textual author was named (% Sample), for all those mentioned 10 or more times in either sample or survey:

Table 7: Comparison of survey responses and empirical data for textual authors.

Textual author	% Survey	% Sample
Stan Lee	85.33	33.33
Jack Kirby	83.56	14.49
John Byrne	37.78	7.25
Jonathan Hickman	18.67	0
Marvel Comics	12.44	0
Mark Waid	11.11	0
John Buscema	10.67	0
Walt Simonson	9.33	0
Jim Shooter	9.33	42.03
Mike Weiringo	7.56	0
Ryan North	7.11	0
Roy Thomas	6.67	8.7

Table 7 (continued)

Textual author	% Survey	% Sample
Mike Mignola	6.67	0
Joe Sinnott	6.67	14.49
Chris Claremont	6.22	0
Roger Stern	4.89	0
Steve Ditko	4.44	0

As with all of these statistics, it should be remembered that they are based on a sample, not the corpus as a whole. For example, Steve Ditko definitely was a textual author of Doctor Doom during this period, notably on his first appearance outside of the *Fantastic Four* series in *Amazing Spider-man* #5 (Lee et al. 1963), but he does not appear in any of the texts in the sample.

In the survey, respondents were asked about textual authors as follows:

> [p]lease enter the names of any people or organisations that you associate with the creation of Doctor Doom's stories. Please note that this can refer to anybody who worked on any story, not just the original creators of the character. (Hibbett 2020, 5)

The vast majority of respondents still identified Doom's creators, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, as people they associated with the character, despite the fact that the survey explicitly stated that it did not refer just to the original creators of the character. After that were creators responsible for fan-favorite runs on *Fantastic Four*, such as John Byrne, Jonathan Hickman, Mark Waid and Mike Weiringo, and Walt Simonson (Burlingame 2018; Franke 2018; Marston 2020). "Marvel Comics" is also included in this category, despite the introductory text making a clear distinction between the creation and marketing of stories, and the examples for "market authors" including other corporate entities such as DC Comics, showing that some fans see the organization as an active textual author of the character.

The presence of Ryan North in the table also demonstrates the problem of bias in any survey of opinion. At the time the survey was conducted, he was the writer of the *Unbeatable Squirrel Girl*, where Doctor Doom had recently made a guest appearance. North very helpfully retweeted my call for participants on Twitter, which resulted in several fans of that series taking part, thereby skewing the results of the survey as a whole. His co-creator Erica Henderson was mentioned by 7 respondents, for example, while in the section about other characters associated with Doom, Squirrel Girl was mentioned 19 times, ahead

of more traditional members of Doom's supporting cast such as Valeria (16) or Kang the Conqueror (7).

The only inker to be mentioned in this shortened list is Joe Sinnott, although Bob Layton was mentioned by six respondents, and both Artie Simek and Sam Rosen were named by one – the same person who also named Bill Mantlo, Archie Goodwin, and many others. Apart from these, and Marvel Comics itself, the entire list is made up of writers and artists, completely ignoring the cultural work that is done by colorists and letterers, as well as by most inkers, as part of the generation of comics texts. This disparity between the views of survey respondents and the empirical data is illustrated more clearly in Table 8, which shows the comparative rankings of textual authors in the survey and sample, once those who were not working during the period have been removed.

Table 8: Comparison of rankings for relevant textual authors.

Textual author	Survey	Sample
Jim Shooter	5	1
Stan Lee	1	2
Joe Rosen	–	3
Jack Kirby	2	4=
Joe Sinnott	7=	4=
Artie Simek	31=	4=
Bill Mantlo	31=	7
Jim Salicrup	–	8=
Tom Orzechowski	–	8=
Glynis Wein	–	8=
Mike Eposito	–	11=
Tom DeFalco	–	11=
Roy Thomas	7=	11=
Sam Rosen	31=	11=
Christie Scheele	–	15=
Jim Novak	–	15=
John Byrne	3	15=

Table 8 (continued)

Textual author	Survey	Sample
Archie Goodwin	20=	15=
John Buscema	4	–
Chris Claremont	8	–
Roger Stern	9	–
Steve Ditko	10	–

What this table shows very clearly is that, apart from recognizing the input of Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Jim Shooter, the results of the survey present an almost completely inaccurate view of who the textual authors during this period actually were. It also ignores textual authors from other media. These do appear further down in the results, but they are all connected to the *Fantastic Four* movies, such as the directors Josh Trank (7 mentions), Roger Corman (5) and Tim Story (5), or the actor Julian McMahon (4) who played the character in *Fantastic Four* (2005) and *Fantastic Four: Rise of The Silver Surfer* (2007).

No other creative staff for other media were mentioned at all, though this might in part be explained by the fact that, in the sample, textual authors almost always stuck to a single media type. The only textual authors to move across media types were Stan Lee (cartoons, comics, and newspaper strip), Jack Kirby (cartoons and comics), Gene Colan (cartoons and comics), Larry Lieber (newspaper strip and comics), Mike Zeck (comics and TSR roleplaying game) and Bob Layton (comics and TSR roleplaying game). The small number of non-comics texts in the sample, though representative of the corpus as a whole, gave little opportunity for textual authors in other media to make many appearances in the data. Even with all these caveats, however, the survey was once again shown to be an inaccurate way of assessing textual authors.

Summary

This chapter has demonstrated how empirical data-driven methods can be used to create and analyze a comics corpus. It has compared the results of such an analysis to the results of a survey and shown that the two differ enormously. The empirical method includes all market and textual authors involved in the production of these texts, whereas the survey heavily privileged specific types of actors

while ignoring others. For market authors, distributors were ignored, while for textual authors, most inkers and all colorists and letterers were excluded.

While the survey was not designed to capture a perfect reflection of fan and academic opinions, it does broadly echo the views often found in such discourses, where certain types of actors are much more heavily discussed, and credited, than others. As an example, even the referencing system used for this volume requires only the writers and artists to be listed, not other actors such as colorists, letterers, or editorial staff.

It could reasonably be argued that this is because other actors do not contribute to the texts in the same way. A letterer, for example, is unlikely to have the same impact on a text as the writer or penciler. However, ignoring these actors completely gives a false impression on who, or what, is responsible for the market and textual authorship of such texts across different media. An empirical approach, therefore, is a way of, if not eliminating such problems, at least illuminating them.

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Barbara Margarethe Eggert

Agency in the Making

Distribution and Publication as Topics in Nikolas Mahler's *Die Goldgruber Chroniken* and the Anthology *Drawn & Quarterly*

Finding a publisher and/or distributing one's work have always been major issues for comics artists (Chute 2014, 4–5) as these steps are crucial to making one's work visible. One key moment in comics' distribution history is the legendary "birth" of the underground comic on 25 February 1968 in San Francisco.[1] 25 years later, Crumb (1993, 1995) captured this moment and the spirit of those days in a drawing that appeared on the covers of two magazines. It shows a pedestrian walk in front of an old Victorian house at the corner of Haight & Ashbury that is crowded with people in hippie style following their different agendas: One bearded guy in flip-flops, an Indian tunic, and bell-bottoms sells an issue of *San Francisco Oracle*, the psychedelic underground newspaper founded by Allen Cohen and head shop owners Ron and Jay Thelin in 1966. Another bearded individual has drugs to offer. The bespectacled Crumb in his signature suit and an ultra-pregnant Dana Morgan Crumb in her flowery dress look almost bourgeois in comparison to the hippiesque crowd. Their low rider baby carriage, which is positioned right underneath Morgan Crumb's baby-belly, is full to the brim with Crumb's newly "born" brainchild *ZAP Comix*, one issue of which is being presented by the artist right in the center of the whole composition. A hippie-couple marvels at this sight: The under-age-looking girl in a short see-through tunic and flowers in her hair gasps while her older partner, who looks worn as well as bewildered, utters the words "A comic book?! Hm . . . ." The rest became comix (distribution) history.

Without the contribution of Robert Crumb and, of course, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, who created the first women's autobiographical comic story (Chute 2014, 81), autobiographical comics[2] would not be what they are today (Chute 2014, esp. 8, 165, 189). This might be especially true for comics visualizing self-reflection and introspection concerning erotic and sexual matters, not shying away from being obscene and breaking taboos (Chute 2014, 81–97; Sina 2020). Ever since the 1970s, when autobiographical comics gained momentum (Gardner 2008, 1), many

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1 As Kunka (2018, 33, 57–58) shows, there are different versions of the historical event and the personae involved.

2 There has been no terminological consensus on how to refer to comics with autobiographical content (Pedri 2013, 127).

comics artists such as Art Spiegelman (1991), Lynda Barry (2002), Phoebe Gloeckner (2002), and Alison Bechdel (2006) have used their art to reflect not only on their love life but also on their existence as creators of comics, turning their work at least partially into a meta-comic, a subjective graphic narrative about creating graphic narratives (Stein 2009; Chaney 2011; Pedri 2013; Køhlert 2019).

How to Be an Artist (2001), one of Eddie Campbell's Alec-centered comics, is not only concerned with the artist's semi-autobiographical struggles to have his work published but also tells the story of the birth of a (then) new comics genre: the "graphic novel," a term that is still being debated among both comics artists and comics scholars (Williams 2020, 6–10; Etter 2021, 3). Campbell also thematizes the personae who have agency in deciding whether a comic gets "born" on the market: the publishers, the editors, the book agents, and, of course, the comics artist(s), who might take on several of the aforementioned functions in addition to providing the creative content.

All these examples have two things in common: Like Crumb's drawing, they employ visual metaphors that anthropomorphize the product of their "labors" – and they address the entities who have agency in "making" comics. In this context, I define *agency* as the power to initialize, foster, or prevent publication and/ or distribution of comics. While most agency theories refer to human networks, others include non-human actors in the network of agents (Ossa et al. 2022): One example for the latter is Alfred Gell's controversially debated *Art and Agency* (1998), in which he attributes agency to things, namely objects of art.[3] As Caroline van Eck sums up, Gell defines the agency of artifacts as "the power to influence their viewers, to make them act as if they are engaging not with dead matter, but with living persons" (van Eck 2015, 49). And indeed, in his drawing from 1992, Crumb and his wife are shown parenting *ZAP Comix*. They handle it with care and take it out in a carriage as if it were a baby and not just a comic book, turning it into an entity with agency in the Gellian sense.

Focusing on excerpts from two heterogeneous examples – an "autography" (Gardner 2008, 10) by Nicolas Mahler, on the one hand, and an anthology by Canadian micro-publisher Drawn & Quarterly, on the other – this chapter aims to analyze and compare the functions and aesthetics of passages dealing with publishing and distributing comics, paying particular attention to agency and its coverage on different diegetic levels. Whose agency and which aspects of it did the comics artists chose to visualize – and to what effect? Intertwined with the

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3 Even though there are more recent publications on the nexus of art works and agency, for example Horst Bredekamp's *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency* (2018), their theoretical framework does not hold up to Gell's "carefully crafted theoretical armature" (Rampley 2019, 9).

thematically focused close-readings is a discussion of comic-specific iconography and iconology of the agents in the publication game, hence rooting the contribution in the field of art history as well.

A Self-Made Misery: Nicolas Mahler's Take on Publishing and Distributing His Work

Vienna-based comics artist Nicolas Mahler (born in 1969) has become internationally famous for his economic style of drawing, his characteristic lettering, and his laconic tone, which he applies to his literary adaptations as well as to his own fictional writing and his autobiographical comics. The German versions of Mahler's comics are published by different publishing houses, including traditional literary ones who only lately jumped onto the (now safe) graphic novel bandwagon – such as Suhrkamp, Insel, or Reclam. However, most of his autobiographical comics are to be found in the comics program of Reprodukt, a Berlin-based independent publisher founded in 1991 that specializes in (translations of) international autobiographical graphic narratives. In 2017, Reprodukt put *Die Goldgruber Chroniken* [The Goldgruber chronicles][4] on the market, a compilation of 334 pages, combining three previously published autobiographical comics by Nicolas Mahler (2003, 2007, 2010).

In this contribution, I will focus on the first 13 chapters of (the yet untranslated) *Die Goldgruber Chroniken*, which had initially been printed in 2003 under the title of *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* [Art theory versus Mrs. Goldgruber] by Vienna-based Edition Selene, a publishing house which ceased to operate in 2010. On 84 pages, Mahler invites his readers to a humoresque retrospective of the everyday humiliations he had to suffer from as a young comics artist in the 1990s. In concordance with Philip Lejeune's definition of autobiography in the field of literature, Mahler's *Kunsttheorie vs. Frau Goldgruber* is a "retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own experience, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (LeJeune 1989, 4). Central to LeJeune's concept is the "autobiographical pact" (1989, 22), which has the reader assume that author, narrator, and protagonist are the same person – an assumption that is also key to David Davies's concept of "fidelity constraint" (2007, 46). Even more than literary autobiographies autobiographical comics do, of course, show a media-specific tendency "towards self-reflexivity

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4 This and the following translations are my own.

and often featur[e] metafictional elements that point to ideas of the self as a construct" (Williams 2011, 356), making use of the "medium's inherent characteristics of multimodality, sequentiality, and image-text interactions" (Kunka 2018, 6).

Mahler's autography is a fine example of that: He begins his autography in a classical rhetoric way by acclaiming its credibility and factuality (*adtestatio rei visae* [evidence of the fact]): He overdoes it a bit and, while this hyperbole is the first step in sealing the "autobiographical pact" (Lejeune 1989, 22), it also plants a seed of distrust concerning the narrator's reliability when it comes to proportionality. This part of the book which is labeled as "Geleit" [preliminary note] is to be found on page 7, right before the prologue and hence in a position that oscillates – in Genette's (1997) terms – between text and paratext. Though this page makes use of Mahler's avatar[5] – the experiencing I and main character of the text – the "Geleit" is not part of the main text itself.

Following Genette, the paratext is "[m]ore than a boundary or a sealed border, [. . .] rather, a threshold" (1997, 1–2). Using a scroll and trumpeting like the angels at judgment day on a medieval altarpiece or woodcut, the avatar and its twin as guardians of said threshold announce a message from the narrating I:

> Diese Aufzeichnungen beinhalten Passagen weiser Beschimpfung, persönlicher Diffamierung und unzulässige Verallgemeinerungen.

> [These records contain passages of wise name-calling, personal defamation, and unacceptable generalizations.]   (Mahler 2017, n.pag.)

Underneath the scroll bearing this inscription, it is being stated

> Dennoch ist KEIN WORT frei erfunden – . . . Alles ist genau so passiert.

> [Nevertheless, NO WORD is freely invented – . . . Everything happened exactly like that.]
>   (Mahler 2017, n.pag., original emphasis)

Analyzing Bechdel's narrating I that constantly doubts the reliability of her own perception (Bechdel 2006, 140), Nancy Pedri has shown that, in the realm of autobiographical comics, "[a]uthority and doubt [. . .] unite to ensure credibility" (2012, 134). However, Mahler does not make use of this technique, but rather undermines his own credibility by combining verbal emphasis with a pompous judgment day iconography. Exaggerations as stylistic element are a recurring element in the publication, especially in the passages on publishing/distributing comics. This is in line with the way he draws his characters. Mahler introduces his avatar and his antagonist in the peritext of the book, to be more precise on the cover jacket.

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5 As always in his autobiographical comics, Mahler represents himself by use of his avatar who shares the artist's name (Mahler 2017, 11–12, 19, 65).
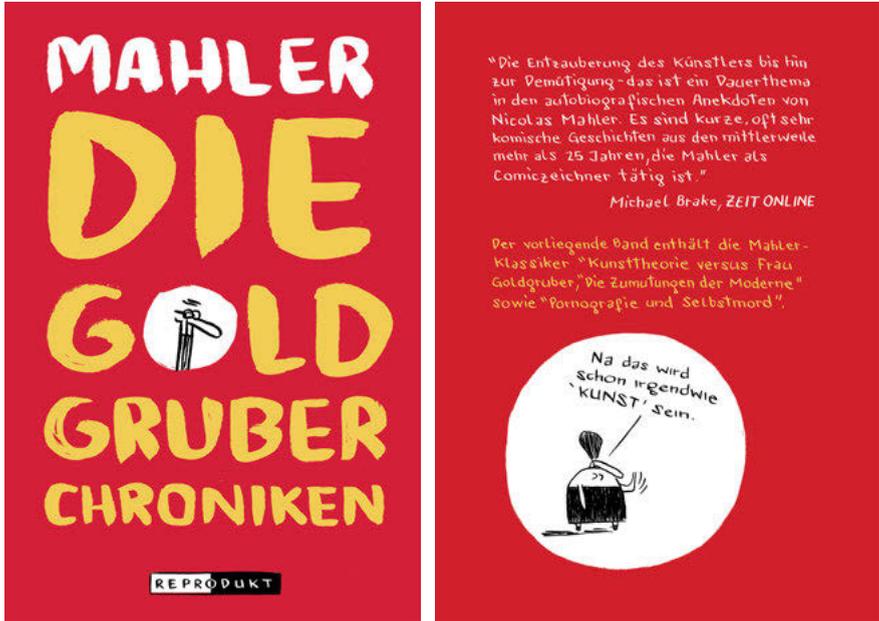
Figure 1: Cover jacket of *Die Goldgruber Chroniken* (Mahler 2017), © Nicolas Mahler.

Mahler's cartoonesque style echoes the main traits of his creator, but exaggerates them as its slim body with its long legs has almost no breadth, whereas the long nose, distinct brows, and glasses defy any sense of proportionality. On the cover, the avatar looks at his readers framed by the "o" in Goldgruber – the last name of his antagonist – not unlike Kermit the Frog or Gonzo when announcing *The Muppets Show* (see Figure 1). Mrs. Goldgruber herself is depicted on the back cover in a *tondo*-esque white shape. This framing resembles the glimpse through a telescope or a microscope. It also resembles floodlight, linking the aesthetics of the comic to film and theatre.[6]

Both characters have their first "stand off" in chapter two: The story at the tax office unravels, employing a grid of four panels per page, which is the dominant layout of the pages of the whole publication: Tax officer Mrs. Goldgruber is very skeptical about Mahler's graphic output qualifying as art. Her judgment does matter because in Austria artists have to pay fewer taxes (Mahler 2017, 19) – and this is what Mahler's graphic alter ego is striving for. But when it comes to

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6 On the parallels between theater and comics, see Schmitz-Emans (2021).

accepting evidence for Mahler's artistic legitimacy, the tax officer's standards are very eclectic: Documents in foreign languages, for example, do not count for her (Mahler 2017, 19–21).

In the end, it is a publication that convinces Mrs. Goldgruber of Mahler's being an artist: Not because he had been successful at finding a publisher, but quite to the contrary, because his drawings neither look like what she regards as real comics (such as *The Smurfs* or *Mickey Mouse*; Mahler 2017, 24) nor like an economically successful product and hence must be qualified as "schon irgendwie 'Kunst'" [somehow "art"] (Mahler 2017, 24). What else would they be? It is the publication whose agency allows Mahler to have his way with his taxes. Due to this important status, *Le labyrinthe de Kratochvil* [The labyrinth of Kratochvil] (Mahler 2002), the game-changing publication, is being presented in close-up, larger than life, claiming a whole panel to itself (Mahler 2017, 21). As will be shown, it is one of only two close-ups in the whole autography.

In another episode, Mahler follows his theory-enthusiastic publisher's wish and spreads his own philosophy about publishing (Mahler 2017, 31–38). His avatar is preaching from a pulpit-like high desk (*ex cathedra*) – not to a choir of art students, but to almost empty rows; only one chair being occupied by an uncanny, silent Mahler-Doppelgaenger, maybe a stand-in for his younger self (Mahler 2017, 33). After the trumpeting twins in the epitext, this is the second time where Mahler plays with the comic-specific repetitive self-representation by including two versions of his "pictorial embodiment" (El Refaie 2012, 91) in a shared space. In doing so, he provides an audience for his avatar – but he also marks his avatar's ramblings on the intradiegetic level as a soliloquy. Admitting that he applied to art school in order to have free access to a screen printing machine as a means for (re)production (Mahler 2017, 33), "professor" Mahler wants to finish his lecture-soliloquy. This is when his publisher steps in and has him literally at gunpoint, forcing him to elaborate on his theory. So "professor" Mahler continues:

> WAS WILL COMIC? Eine Veröffentlichung in Heft- oder Buchform in möglichst großer Verbreitung. . .
>
> [WHAT DOES COMIC WANT? A publication in the form of a floppy or a book with the widest distribution possible. . .]   (Mahler 2017, 36, original emphasis)

Sitting on top of a stack of heavy tomes, like a stylite or pillar-saint, he preaches on: "Die Originalzeichnung ist wertlos. Das Buch ist das Original" [the original drawing is worthless. The book is the original] (Mahler 2017, 36). And he continues to rattle about original drawings in exhibitions, as these are not interesting (Mahler 2017, 36), because "Die Erzählung ist wichtig, und nicht die einzelne Seite" [it's the narrative that's important, not the individual page] (Mahler 2017, 37). According to

"professor" Mahler, there is but one thing being worse than showing original drawings in museums – and this is painting panels on large canvasses to show them in exhibitions. This is when the irritated publisher pipes in that Mahler himself shows his works in galleries and does have an exhibition coming up soon where he is supposed to show his drawings on large canvasses. This leads to a confession that once more undermines the autography's credibility, this time on an intradiegetic level: "Schimpfen wird man ja wohl noch dürfen . . . ich mach ja dann eh bei allem mit" [One will be allowed to grumble . . . in the end, I am taking part in anything anyway] (Mahler 2017, 37). In many autobiographical comics it might be true that "the diegetic self [. . .] gains the reader's belief" (Pedri 2013, 148), but with Mahler, this is not the case.

Changing the topic soon after condemning those of his invisible intradiegetic students to hell who will show their original drawings in galleries (Mahler 2017, 37), he concludes with the phrase: "Ein gutes Comic aber gehört – wie jedes Buch – in die BUCHHANDLUNG und nicht ins MUSEUM" [But a good comic belongs – like any book – into a BOOK SHOP and not into a MUSEUM] (Mahler 2017, 37, original emphasis). This leads to the question if Mahler pictures himself as being successful at making good comics and has agency to land them on the shelves of a book shop. Rather not – or at least not at first. For example, chapter eight, which has the most panels on publishing (see Figure 2), covers his unsuccessful attempt to establish his own micro-publishing house (Mahler 2017, 56–60), whereas the next chapter shows the publication of his collected works as an unfulfilled dream that died due to a lack of financial support (Mahler 2017, 64). Just as *Le labyrinthe de Kratochvil* (Mahler 2017, 21), this (non-existing and yet rejected) book is shown in close-up.

Nicolas Mahler, the "real-life I" (Herman 2011, 233), tells all these episodes on his former lack of agency in publishing and distributing his work from the safety of having long since become a renowned comics artist. However, the experiencing I's failed attempts at distribution and publication serve as a constant well of humiliation in the comic – and the remaining 200 pages of the tome show that, even after successful publication, lots of humiliations lie ahead.

Drawn & Quarterly's Love Letter to Its Former Editor

The second example, *Drawn & Quarterly: 25 Years of Contemporary Cartooning, Comics, and Graphic Novels* (2015), is also being told from the safe side: Edited by Tom Devlin, its 776 pages offer inside glances at the first quarter-century of
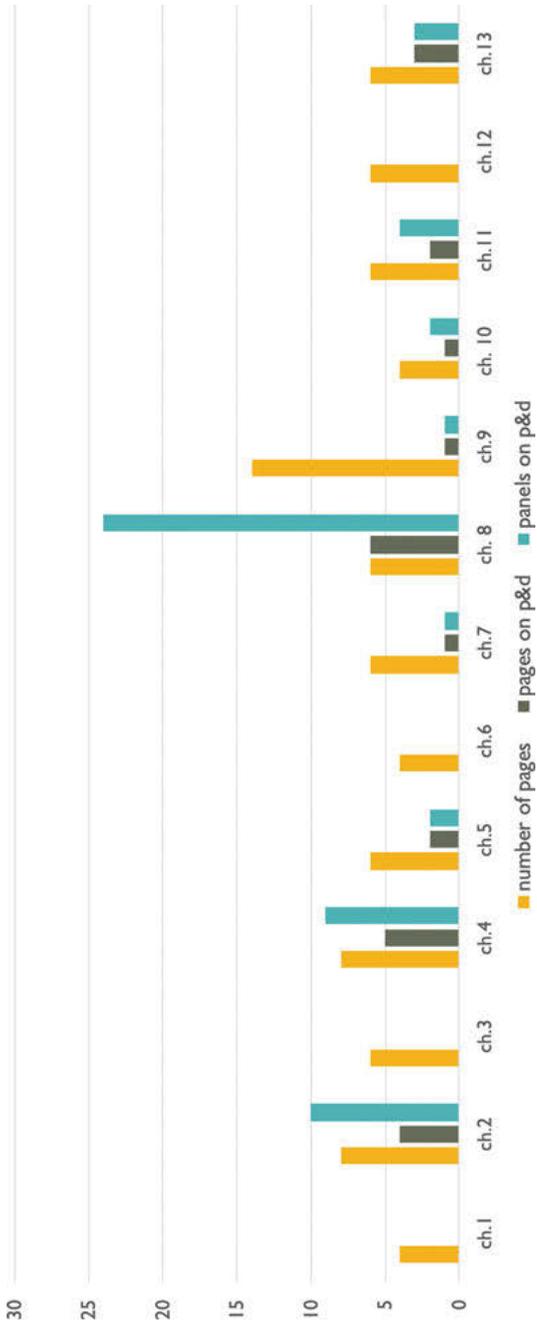
Figure 2: Number of pages/panels focusing on publishing and distributing (p&d) comics in *Die Goldgruber Chroniken* (Mahler 2017), graph by Barbara M. Eggert.

the Canadian micro-publishing house founded by Chris Oliveros (born in 1966) in 1989. The first part of the publication's title does not only refer to the name of the Montreal-based micro-publishing house, Drawn & Quarterly (D&Q), but also their quaternary anthology of the same name (*D&Q*). The book contains comics and cartoons as well as photographs, correspondence, biographies, personal reminiscences, interviews, and essays (see Figure 3), and is meant to be "a portrait of a literary movement in progress" (back cover).
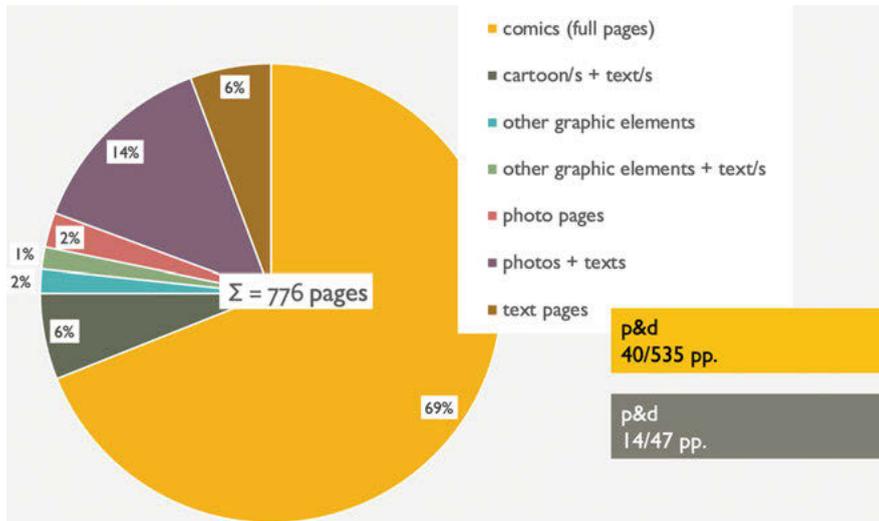
Figure 3: Number of pages/panels focusing on publishing and distributing (p&d) comics in *Drawn & Quarterly: 25 Years of Contemporary Cartooning, Comics, and Graphic Novels* (Devlin 2015), graph by Barbara M. Eggert.

The publication is sprinkled with comics and cartoons visualizing steps in the process of publishing and distributing comics which are to be found on 54 pages total. Some of these comics mockingly visualize the desire to be printed by D&Q (DeForge 2015; Sturm 2015), others portray the nostalgic feelings for the first issue of the anthology *D&Q* (Ollmann 2015) or make metaleptic fun of returning from the grave to contribute to the volume the reader has in their hands (Huizenga 2015). Three contributions feature Chris Oliveros's role in the history of the publishing house, and these will be analyzed in the following paragraphs.

The first panel of Chester Brown's one-pager (see Figure 4) frames its title, "A History of Drawn & Quarterly in Six Panels." To reconstruct the chronology of the moments depicted, the four pictorial panels have to be read from top to bottom, from right to left (first row), left to right (second row), and right to left again
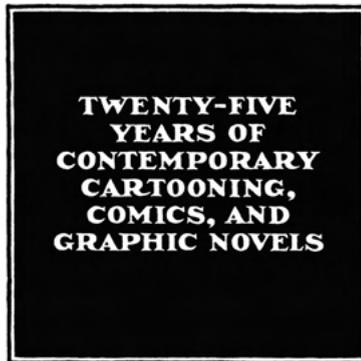
Figure 4: "A History of Drawn & Quarterly in Six Panels" (Brown 2015). © Chester Brown. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

(third and final row), forming an 'S'-like structure. The panels could have also been called "The Four Seasons of Publishing Comics," as the four episodes are linked to spring, summer, autumn, and winter respectively. The first episode is set in springtime. Since antiquity, artists have associated this season with youth (Rubinstein 1997). People with umbrellas are roaming a pedestrian walk in rainy Montreal, all of them facing left, the direction associated with the past. An umbrella-less and pensive-looking young Chris Oliveros is being shown as swimming against the current, thinking of a possible future that might hold the founding of a comic book company. This panel carries us back to the very beginnings of the publishing house in 1989, a time when the idea did only exist inside of Olivero's head (Rogers 2015a, 13, 17). In the visual arts, summer is associated with Ceres, the Greek goddess of agriculture, fertility, and relationships. And indeed, the second comic panel gives us the name of the fruit of Olivero's endeavors: It was in August 1989 that the company was registered as Drawn & Quarterly. The content of the thought bubble is cheerful: Oliveros, in summer apparel, looking slightly older and a bit heavier is thinking proudly about the talents he had been able to sign up since August 1989. In the third panel, the leaves are turning again – both metaphorically and literally. Set in fall, the panel frames an aged and ruffled-looking Oliveros, trotting through an empty neighborhood. The barren trees and falling leaves make a visual parallel to his negative thoughts as he wonders why he started the business after all. Whereas, in the visual arts, autumn is associated with Dionysus and (drunken) ecstasy, this panel follows a rather sobering train of thought, with all ecstasy being gone. The fourth and last comic panel frames Oliveros in a winter coat, standing in front of a brick building, pausing, looking at his readers – he hit a brick wall. Oliveros quit being a publisher shortly after the publication of this book to pursue a career as a comics artist himself.

In his one-pager eulogy, Brown works a lot with parallel structures, repetition, and variations. These aspect are typical for the medium of comics, but also relevant in pictorial cycles from the middle ages, be they frescoes, illuminations for a book, or ornaments on church vestments. In all manifestations of pictorial cycles – regardless of their date of origin – the placement of the protagonist(s) plays a vital role in the interpretation of the narration (Eggert 2017). In Brown's one-pager, Oliveros is always inserted just slightly to the left of the middle axis of each panel. Tracing an imaginary line through his representations adds two vertical strokes to the s-shape of the panel arrangement, transforming them into a dollar sign, communicating one reason for Oliveros's decision to step back: constant money worries about the publishing house.

In contrast to this rather glum summary of the genesis of Drawn & Quarterly, a series of cartoons by Seth visualize happier key moments in the history of the

company, forming a condensed narration in itself: His cartoons accompany an interview with Chris Oliveros by Sean Rogers (Rogers 2015b). All of them show the multifaceted agency of the former editor and use nostalgic sepia tinges to depict these fond memories. The series starts with a bleed, a variation of Brown's "spring panel" (Rogers 2015b, 60), followed by three episodes depicting the publisher in exchange with D&Q artists Julie Doucet (Rogers 2015b, 62), Seth (Rogers 2015b, 63), and finally Chester Brown (Rogers 2015b, 65). The latter receives money for *The Playboy*, Drawn & Quarterly's first graphic novel which was published in 1992. Next, there is a whole line-up of D&Q-artists following Oliveros on his way to the convention in San Diego in 1998 (Rogers 2015b, 66–67), heaps of comics in tow. The cartoon on page 68 has Peggy Burns and Tom Devlin joining D&Q in 2003, whereas the final cartoon in the series shows Chris Oliveros surrounded by books (Rogers 2015b, 73), the attribute of a successful creator of a publishing house, and crowned by a halo.

Figure 5: No Problem" and "Just Kidding" (Beaton 2015a, 2015b). © Kate Beaton. Used with permission from Drawn & Quarterly.

A pictorial Christianization of Chris Oliveros is also to be found in two one-pagers by Kate Beaton (see Figure 5), who shows Chris Oliveros as a godlike or at least godfather-like figure: "No Problem" (Beaton 2015a) introduces Beaton's avatar, a posh and successful creative donning sunglasses, smoking a cigar – having her

feet on her desk, clearly her own boss. Nevertheless, the real boss is Chris Oliveros, shown in the next panel, also wearing sunglasses inside of his office like a mix of a mafia boss/godfather and a successful broker. Accordingly, the sign in front of him reads "DA BOSS." On the wall behind him, we can see a graph covering the rising statistic of D&Q, he has boxes full of Eisner-winning artists and folders containing presumably successful financial issues. Beaton convinces Oliveros to publish her latest cartoon of a farting George Washington, the first president of the United States, whose counterfeit can be found on the US-American one-dollar bill; in the "No Problem" one-pager, this cartoon wins Beaton a sack of money.

"Just Kidding" (Beaton 2015a) features the same personae – but as an analepsis, it pictures Beaton's humble beginnings when it was hard for her to even pluck up the courage to ask for a publication in form of a comic book. Having her first encounter with Oliveros, who is shown as a patient saint or guru, palms together, radiating calm in form of a halo, Beaton prays "Jesus take the wheel" (Beaton 2015a, 59). And that is what Oliveros aka Jesus did by publishing her first comic. The twist in the chronological order of the two episodes is in unison with the whole anthology which is mainly concerned with looking back and documenting Oliveros's multifaceted agency.

Conclusion

As has been shown, in both examples, distribution and publication are treated as more or less continuous strands, but with a focus on different agents: Mahler's autography fictionalizes and ridicules his own experience as a comics author/ self-publisher, whereas the anthology edited by Tom Devlin visualizes a kaleidoscope of perspectives of many grateful Drawn & Quarterly artists on their (former) publisher, Chris Oliveros. This is rare, because, in spite of being a (if not *the*) key figure in the publication game, publishers usually do not enjoy the awareness of the general public and, if featured in (autobiographical) comics at all, they are usually depicted as giving the artists a hard time (e.g., Tatsumi 2009; Igort 2015). In Crumb's aforementioned "nativity drawing," Dan Donahue, the publisher of *ZAP Comix,* is literally not in the picture, making only Crumb's own agency visible, which includes turning the pregnant wife into a marketing tool for his own successfully-ended pregnancy with *ZAP Comix* as its result.

Not unlike Crumb, Nikolas Mahler also seems to (re)present himself as a solo agent: And indeed, at the beginning of his career, Mahler acted as his own editor, publisher, and distributor, doing everything himself. In his "practitioner's autobiography" (Byrd 2016, 224) which is "simultaneously a book about the production

of comics *and* a book about Mahler's development as a cartoonist" (Byrd 2016, 218, original emphasis), he shows his avatar in all of these roles. To this date, Mahler does still treat his work as a self-publishing, self-editing comics artist would do: Every word is printed in his distinct, handwritten font – including paratexts such as reviews on the back jacket text and the imprint – clearly marking the book as his creation inside out and back to front, and executing the agency he lacked when operating as a single agent outside of the publication and distribution network of the comics market.

With its combination and compilation of various materials including photos, facsimiles of documents, and comics contributions in different styles by a broad range of comics artists, *Drawn & Quarterly: 25 Years of Contemporary Cartooning, Comics, and Graphic Novels* has a different approach here: By digging in the archive, the aim is to highlight the diversity of the publishing house and the publisher who made this diversity possible. On a pictorial level, the veneration of Chris Oliveros's work as the founding publisher is mainly communicated by showing the results of his work: the published books of "his" comics artists. Whereas Mahler exaggerates his failures and lack of agency both on the textual and pictorial track, parts of the anthology read like a sanctification of the former publisher in showing the wonders he worked. Some of the contributions featuring Oliveros himself employ allusions to religious iconography and/or to post-modern star cult, namely mafia movies. With Kate Beaton, it is obviously a mix of both, with Oliveros in godfather-mafioso-style in one one-pager and as the saint-like be-haloed addressee of her prayer in the other. In the cartoon string by Seth, the halo makes a reappearance in the final image, which has Oliveros surrounded by books, which are both signs for his success and instruments of torture that finally led to his quitting D&Q (Devlin 2015, 73).

Christianity as one of the three great book-centered religions and its iconography find an echo in Mahler's graphic memoir, too. He presents his avatar as a mix of an angel of judgement day ("Geleit"), preacher, stylite, comics missionary, and comics saint, trying to convince the world of the worthiness of the medium. It is an interesting coincidence that, in the choice of his profession, Mahler followed his surname's calling and became a painter (*malen*, Middle High German *mālen* = "to paint"), whereas Chris Oliveros – such as his name saint Christopher – chose to carry the burden of the publishing world. This is another parallel to medieval saints, whose fates can already be etymologically constructed from their names: In his *Legenda aurea*, a collection of the lives of medieval saints, Jacobus de Varagine (ca. 1260/2012) always starts each *vita* [saint's life] with an etymological passage, focusing on the foreshadowing name.

Both examples also introduce non-human entities with agency, namely books. Both autography and anthology portray the age of printed comics,

presenting the published product either as an achievement or as an unfulfilled dream. Only recently, Joachim Trinkwitz explored comics as "Objekte, die handlungsmächtig ihre Rezipient_innen zu bestimmten Handlungsweisen her-anführen" [objects with agency, which lead their recipients to certain ways of acting] (2021, 239). Both Mahler and Devlin go one step further in showing that even the wish for the published product, the pure imagination of either seeing one's own or others' comics on the shelves of bookstores, can set the wheels in motion and make comics artists and editors act in a certain way – presenting the books as if they were human agents.

Finally, both publications also include an allusion to another non-human agent in their titles, as Gold(gruber) and Quarter(ly) refer to money. In the end, both examples circulate around the elephant in the room, the finances or lack thereof (Mahler 2017, 64): Money as the mighty yet invisible non-human agent has the final word when it comes to "making" comics in the narrower sense of publishing and distributing them.

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Laura Glötter

Comics Artist versus Artistic Genius

Kverneland and Fiske's Approach to Artists, Metafiction, and Allusion to Contemporary Sources in *Kanon*

Between 2006 and 2012 the Norwegian comics creators Lars Fiske and Steffen Kverneland published the five-part series *Kanon* [Canon]. Besides Kverneland's detailed depiction of the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch, Fiske presents the reader with the life and works of the German artist Kurt Schwitters, who worked tirelessly during his artistic phase, named Merz, and consequently named himself *Herr Merz* [Mr. Merz]. The two cartoonists present decontextualized episodes from the artist's lives that form a non-chronological biography and offer the reader a kaleidoscopic overview. Munch and Schwitters are characterized based on quotes from contemporary witnesses and create the impression of two talented and eccentric, albeit tortured, artists. This portrayal follows a centuries-old tradition that envisions the artist as someone who is not subject to any rules, requires no formal studies, and whose creativity stems solely from an intrinsic source. Hence, their choices show that Kverneland and Fiske think of Munch and Schwitters as artistic geniuses.

Kanon also offers a striking addition to this notion, though, as Kverneland and Fiske, rather than depicting the mere vitae of these artists, dedicate significant space in the comic to themselves and their works besides *Kanon*: Alongside their portrayal of Munch and Schwitters, they recount, on an extradiegetic narrative level in the style of metafiction, the experiences they have gathered and the incidents that have taken place during their research, as well as their own opinions. In this way, the depiction of the artist biographies – and thus also the illusion of the narrative – get repeatedly disrupted to present the reader with panels containing photos and drawings of the comics artists themselves. *Kanon* thus becomes an exceptional example of how comics creators handle the discrepancy between strategic self-depiction and the glorification of other artists, and what happens when the artist-author construct encounters that of the artistic genius.

The Role of the Comics Artists in *Kanon*

When it comes to the examination of work with a not insignificant textual component, the starting point usually entails the question of authorship. The contemporary discussion of this concept goes back to a discourse that began in the late

1950s and was initiated by Roland Barthes's "La mort de l'auteur" ["The Death of the Author"] (2002) and continued in the 1960s, not least with Michel Foucault's "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" ["What Is an Author?"] (1994). Significantly, according to Daniel Stein (2009, 202), the discourse on authorship in comics also developed in the United States, almost simultaneously with the onset of this debate. The resulting overcoming of the stigma of the comics author as a producer of a standardized mass medium only strengthened the urge for creative self-dramatization and representation of comics authorship, which had already originated in early newspaper comic strips. Kverneland and Fiske also step into this tradition; through the depiction of their work with Munch and Schwitters and their research journeys, elements of authorial awareness repeatedly emerge to interrupt the artists' biographies. Despite the clear pattern of authorship, it should be kept in mind at this point that *Kanon* is a comic that does not separate writer and artist. Kverneland and Fiske represent both roles, so the artistic aspect should not be left out. Against this background, and especially since the cartoonists consciously juxtapose themselves with the artists in the context of comics artist biographies, they are to be understood as artist-authors at this point. This comparison becomes especially clear because *Kanon* is a metacomic that is aware of its production conditions and conveys to the readers that they are witnessing the development process. This is particularly evident in a statistical survey: In fact, of the total 559 pages,[1] Kverneland and Fiske fill 65 (11.63%) with thematically related side stories about musicians and other artists. A further 160 pages (28.62%) contain either drawings or photos of themselves. In this way, the comics artists take the reader with them on their research journey and share their considerations and thoughts about the project. This concept, which Ansgar Nünning calls "biographische Metafiktion" [biographic metafiction] or "fiktionale Metabiographie" [fictional metabiography] (2009, 132), focuses on the imaginative reconstruction and portrayal of a famous person and is distinguished by its high degree of aesthetic, historiographic, and biographic self-reflexivity. In the case of *Kanon*, it also offers Kverneland and Fiske the opportunity to emphasize their own importance by strategically inserting themselves into the comic. This becomes clear at the very beginning of the series, as the comics artists show – and thus introduce – themselves to the reader on the endpaper of the front cover of the first volume. They present themselves as overweight and in a traditional Bavarian dress. This representation goes back to their first joint comics project *Olaf G.* [*Olaf G.: A Life in Pictures*], for which Kverneland and Fiske traveled through Bavaria to research

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1 Including the front and back covers, the appendix, the list of sources, and the inside pages of the covers. Statistic collected via a study conducted by myself.

the life of the Norwegian artist Olaf Gulbransson, who lived in the area for many years. The resulting comic is also interwoven with depictions of their research journey and devotion to German beer and heavy foods. The self-portrait in *Kanon*, an allusion to their depiction of their Bavarian gluttony and its consequences, therefore, presupposes that the public is familiar with their earlier work. Interestingly, they used the endpaper from *Olaf G.* as a template for their heads in *Kanon* and simply fleshed these out to create their bodies, thereby connecting the two comics, in a rather specific and distinctive way, through illustration.

The reader gets to know both authors better on the opening splash page of *Kanon*, through Fiske's drawing of them as naked sauna-goers. This is followed by an illustration, also by Fiske, of them walking to the Munch Museum, giving the reader an indication of place. Shrouded in cigarette smoke, they reach the museum café, where they are pictured as drinking beer and espresso. Kverneland, with the explanatory caption "Litt senere" [A little later] (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 4), continues the scene on the following page. Numerous empty beer glasses, spiraling emanata, and crosses for pupils indicate that time has passed and Kverneland and Fiske are now inebriated. In this state, they then visit the museum, whereupon a conversation is shown explaining to the reader the project of creating a comics biography about Munch (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 1–4).

The image of the boozing cartoonists features throughout the *Kanon* series almost as a leitmotif. Thus, Kverneland and Fiske, accompanied by a nearly omnipresent hip flask, portray themselves as eccentric artists and in this manner set out to find traces of Munch and Schwitters. During this search, the authors do not only visit places that were of great significance to the artists or that served as settings for their pieces, but also reconstruct some of them. Fiske, for example, pictures himself and Kverneland in Schwitters "Merz Barn," a hut transformed into an art installation in Cumbria, where the director of the Littoral Arts Trust gives them, and therefore the reader as well, an explanation of an artistically decorated wall (Fiske and Kverneland 2011, 33). A parallel to this is a sequence in which Kverneland shows himself and Fiske in Berlin visiting the Architektenhaus [architect house] where the Fall Munch [Munch affair] of 1892 took place, the Equitable-Palast [Equitable palace], another exhibition house, and Munch and Strindberg's favorite pub Zum Schwarzen Ferkel [To the black piglet]. At the end of the sequence, Kverneland makes it clear that none of the buildings survived the war, and the comic shows the viewer entirely new buildings in merely the same location.

For this depiction, Kverneland elaborated a kind of hybrid panel: The base of the panel represents a photograph into which the cartoonist drew himself and Fiske. This type of representation used here, which Matthew T. Jones calls "intermedia reflexivity" (Jones 2005, 271), once again brings the authors' research

journey into focus and, through the overlapping of media, evokes a perception of greater authenticity. Kverneland and Fiske go one step further to approach Munch's paintings in a manner characteristic of the metapicture level defined by W.J.T. Mitchell (1994, 35): Photographically, they recreated the poses of figures painted by Munch at the places where the works were created, or even the locations that served as backgrounds. There is, for example, a panel showing Kverneland standing in an S-shaped pose and pressing his hands to his cheeks, recreating Munch's most famous work *Skrik* [*The Scream*], while commenting through speech bubbles on the painting's creation.

In addition to these recurring external references, the comic also features sequences that exhibit characteristics of the form of self-referentiality in comics defined by Lukas Werner (2016, 304). This is visible in a sequence that shows the authors in their favorite pub while discussing their work *Kanon*, as Kverneland consciously borrowed its composition and narrative structure from a previous panel that depicts Strindberg and Munch in the pub Zum Schwarzen Ferkel. In both sequences a passerby coincidentally becomes a witness of the pub scene, lights a cigarette, and eventually leaves, appalled by what they have seen. Likewise, the artists in both sequences stand out for their eccentric, rude behavior that repulses the outside world (Fiske and Kverneland 2007, 83–85, 94–96). Kverneland hereby likens himself and Fiske to Munch and Strindberg, conveying a tradition of the artistry of which they are the worthy inheritors.

The fact that this way of depicting their research trips or the re-enactment of works is not the only self-portrayal of Kverneland and Fiske clearly shows their interest in presenting themselves to the readers and characterizing themselves within this framework. This is evidenced by several sequences that show the two authors outside the context of Munch and Schwitters: Through the use of anecdotes from their childhood, they communicate the talent they possessed from a young age, as well as offer the reader a means of connecting with them on a more human level. They form the focus of all of these panels, sometimes in curious ways. Kverneland, for example, recounts to Fiske and the reader how, as a young boy, he called for his mother repeatedly when he was on the toilet. Afterward, he learned that she did not hear him, but the village children did and therefore gave him a corresponding, embarrassing nickname (Fiske and Kverneland 2012, 56).

A far more glorifying self-portrayal on a metapictorial level is found at the end of the third issue of *Kanon*, where they depict themselves over four pages as superheroes, utilizing a style that diverges distinctly from their usual one. The reduced, though still striking, use of the color red in this drawing recalls the propaganda posters from the previous century. Kverneland and Fiske seem to have evoked this parallel consciously – at least they label the four-page depiction

"KANONPROPAGANDA" (Fiske and Kverneland 2009, 65–68). Furthermore, they genuinely have the aim of propagating a message, for emblazoned in red and white capital letters on a two-page splash panel is Norway's culture budget for comics from 2009 (Fiske and Kverneland 2009, 65–66). Beside the 603 million kroner apportioned to the Norwegian film industry and the 1.1 billion to the music industry, the allotment of 1.8 million kroner for the comic-book sector comes across as minuscule. According to Kverneland and Fiske, the culture budget, which was set by the former Minister for Culture, Trond Giske, turns projects like *Kanon*, which had to be subsidized using illustration commissions, into "financial suicide" (Holen 2010, n.pag.). Under the banner of "KANONPROPAGANDA," they thus demand a purchasing program and work grants for comics. Their infuriation that comics belong to a cultural niche in Norway is the most evident in their adaption of the cover of *Fantastic Four* #83 – *Shall Man Survive?* (Lee et al. 1968, cover), as Trond Giske takes on the role of the comics supervillain Maximus the Mad. While on the original cover Maximus the Mad is destroying a tile floor, on the *Kanon* version Giske, fittingly, is demolishing gutters and panels, some of which contain speech bubbles, and saying, "Ingen innkjøpsordning for tegneserier! Ingen egne Arbeidsstipend heller!" [No purchasing program for comics! No separate work grants either!]. The title, "SHALL MAN SURVIVE?" is replaced with "VIL KANON OVERLEVE?" [Will *Kanon* survive?], while Fiske, Kverneland, and their *Kanon* characters take on the roles of the superheroes. The authors, depicted as Human Torch and Black Bolt, also give themselves speech bubbles reading, "Kulturell apartheid!" [Cultural apartheid] and "Det ville knapt blitt verre med FrP!" [It would hardly be worse with FrP!] (see Figures 1 and 2).[2] Then, on the final two pages of "KANONPROPAGANDA," Kverneland and Fiske appear as Human Torch and Karnak the Shatterer – portrayals that they also borrowed from *Fantastic Four* issues and that they supplement with speech bubbles to demand work grants and a purchasing program (see Figures 3–6). By reminding the reader in a footnote that this is an adaption of Jack Kirby's – Stan Lee is not mentioned – *Fantastic Four*, Kverneland and Fiske not only present themselves as superheroes but also place themselves on a par with one of the most renowned superhero comics artists of all time. Also remarkable here is the fact that the authors incorporate their own political concerns, external to the content, into a comic that presents itself to the readers as an artist biography. In doing so, they stand up for Norwegian artists and the comics industry through their representative appearance as underestimated artists, and at the same time make it clear that they define their own comic as culturally valuable and worth reading.

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2 The FrP is an abbreviation of *Fremskrittspartiet*, a right-wing political party in Norway.
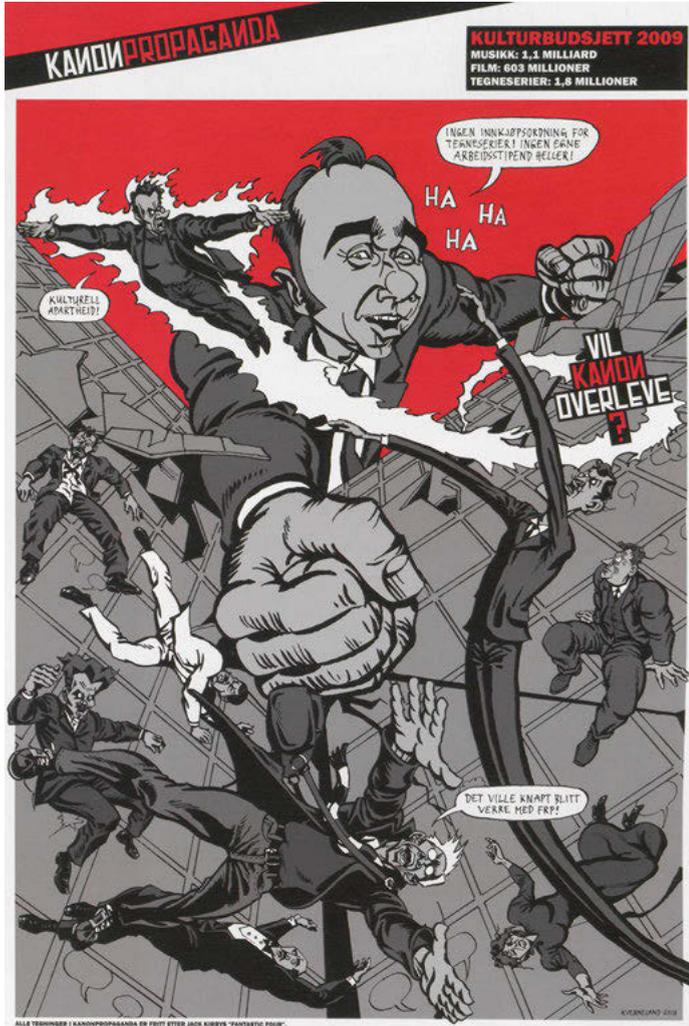
Figure 1: Lars Fiske and Steffen Kverneland's KANONPROPAGANDA as an adaptation of *Fantastic Four* Vol. 1 #83 "Shall Man Survive?" (Fiske and Kverneland 2009, 65).

"KANONPROPAGANDA" stands out because it features at the end of an issue, but, as already pointed out, it is not the only side note that appears throughout *Kanon*: Throughout the five comics, the reader repeatedly gets confronted with pieces by the two comics artists that are not connected to the main story. These decontextualized self-referential sequences bear similarities to advertisements, disrupting the story at vital points and showcasing more of the authors' work.

Figure 2: Cover of *Fantastic Four* Vol. 1 #83 "Shall Man Survive?" (Lee and Kirby 1968, cover).

The structure described here, as well as the sequences and procedures dealt with in the comic, can certainly be seen as representative and illustrate the relationship between author and work: The extent of the authorial self-reflection, which is worked out primarily using self-referentiality, shows that *Kanon*, in the form of a compilation of two artists' biographies, ultimately represents a stage for the two authors.
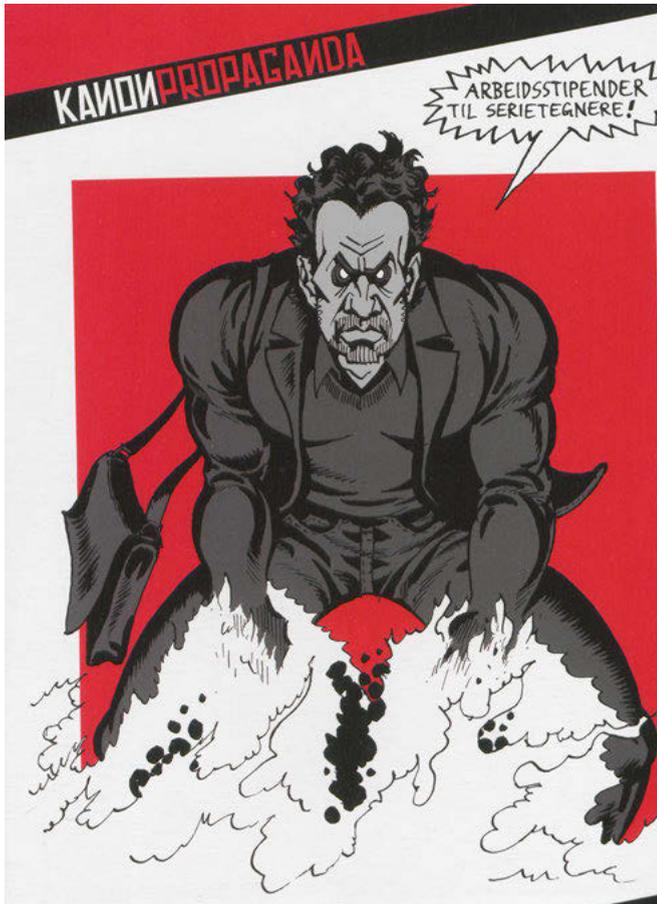
Figure 3: Steffen Kverneland as an adapted version of the *Fantastic Four*'s Human Torch from *Fantastic Four* Vol 1 #83 "Shall Man Survive?" (Fiske and Kverneland 2009, 66).

Their assessment is additionally emphasized since they do not interweave this self-presentation into a comic about fictional characters, but juxtapose themselves with real artists in a self-created artist biography. At the same time, they convey certain parallels between themselves and Munch as well as Schwitters. Since Kverneland and Fiske in turn characterize the artists in the course of using elements of the artistic genius construct, they increase their own value.
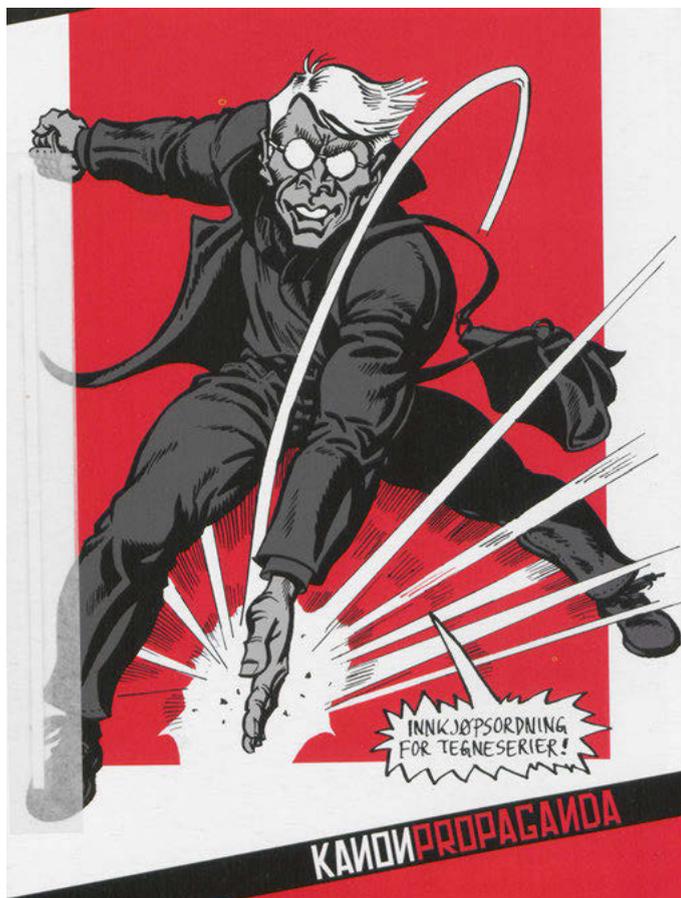
Figure 4: Lars Fiske as an adapted version of Karnak the Shatterer from *Fantastic Four Annual* Vol 1 #5 (Fiske and Kverneland 2009, 67).

The Construct of the Artistic Genius and the Use of Contemporary Sources in *Kanon*

To get a more nuanced understanding of which aspects of artistic genius Kverneland and Fiske actualize and which they neglect, it is helpful to draw on the history of the concept that has its origins in antiquity. Plato, building on the ideas of Socrates, developed the doctrine of the divine origin of artistic creativity which stated that artists served as mere tools of God and did not create anything
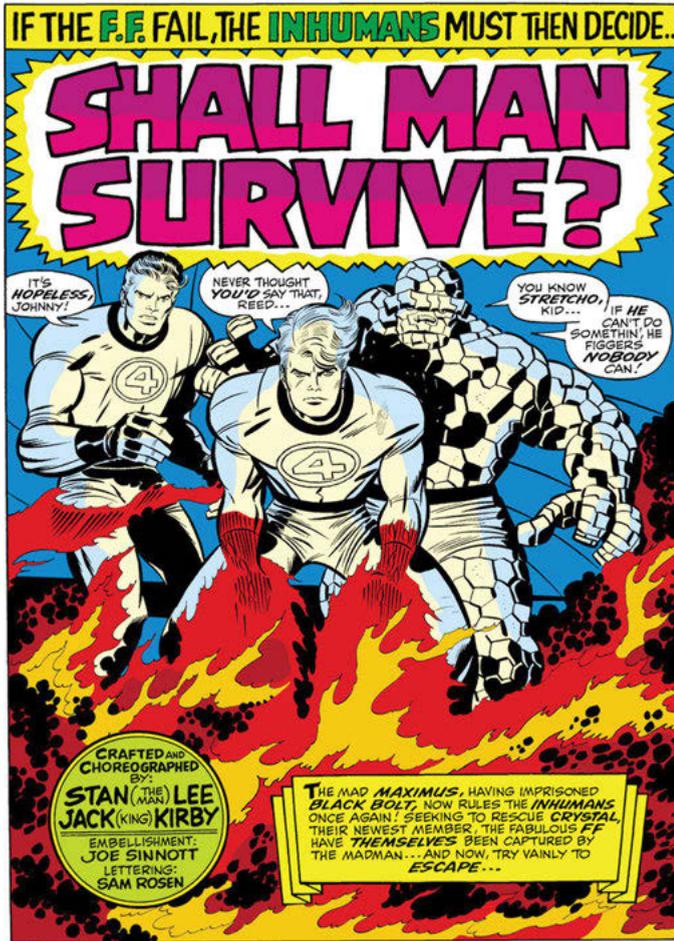
Figure 5: First page of *Fantastic Four* Vol. 1 #83 "Shall Man Survive?" showing Mr. Fantastic, Human Torch and Thing (f.l.t.r.) (Lee and Kirby 1968, 1).

themselves (Plato 1925, 534a–535a). But as the construct became more concrete over the centuries, its meaning changed, until in the Renaissance the focus shifted onto the subjectivity of the artist and their creative faculties. According to this new conceptualization, artists were no longer viewed as tools, but as creative individuals themselves (Krieger 2007, 35). This secularized conceptualization of the artistic genius reached its high point during the Sturm-und-Drang [Storm and Stress] movement and was used so frequently that scholars at the end of the eighteenth century increasingly distanced themselves from it. Immanuel

Figure 6: Karnak the Shatterer in *Fantastic Four Annual* Vol 1 #5 (Lee and Kirby 1967, n.pag.).

Kant redefined the concept in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [*Critique of Judgment*] (1790), explaining that a genius is not subject to any conventions, but sets conventions and new rules himself. Significantly, he also stated that a genius is a rare occurrence (Kant 1790, 46).

The conceptualization of artistic genius in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is of particular importance to the present chapter, as it falls within the creative period of the artists depicted in *Kanon* and thereby forms a basic tenor of the sources used by Kverneland and Fiske. While the popularity of this

construct did diminish over time, the image of the rare genius who embraces intrinsic inspiration to create both the magnificent and the novel from an intrinsic source of inspiration – à la Kant and also Arthur Schopenhauer's main work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* [*The World as Will and Representation*] (2014) – was firmly established in Munch and Schwitters's day.

Art historian Verena Krieger (2007) outlines how the development of the artistic genius has occurred since the eighteenth century by recording the characteristics associated with it. She sorts these into the categories of "Innerlichkeit" [inwardness], "Außenseitertum" [outsiderism], and "Leiden" [suffering]. Traits such as suffering and being opposed to civic society, she emphasizes, constitute the hallmarks of true artists in classical modernity. These artists stand out because of their refusal to adapt to the prevailing trends of their times (Krieger 2007, 44–56). Although this conceptualization of artistic genius still features prominently in Western societies, and numerous contemporary artists consciously play with it to garner publicity for their works and, above all, themselves, it is mostly viewed critically in academia – not least because it is often accompanied by a form of legend-building and fact-blurring.

In light of this, it is worth examining *Kanon* and its authors' approach to the written sources they used in particular: Right at the beginning of the comic, the reader learns from a conversation with Fiske, illustrated by Kverneland, that the captions as well as the content of the speech bubbles, in total the whole text of the Munch part, originates from fragments and sources by and about the artist (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 5). Although Fiske also intends to use quotations exclusively for his portrayal of Schwitters, he does not announce this modus operandi in *Kanon*. Instead, he merely hints at it in his stand-alone comic, *Herr Merz*, in a panel in which Schwitters explains, "Nur Schwitters kann über Schwitters schreiben" [Only Schwitters can write about Schwitters] (Fiske 2012, 6). This use of sources not only brings the characters of Munch and Schwitters to life but also serves as an effective means of characterization. While such selective use of sources does entail the risk of twisting the image of artists and reproducing only a subjective part of the reality, it also has the potential, depending on selection and emphasis, to render specific impressions of how artists were received by contemporary society. Kverneland and Fiske themselves aim to make their comic more authentic and more "real" through quotes, which is most evident in a panel where Kverneland complains about secondary literature and its unreliability (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 5). His own treatment of sources is an interesting contrast to this. This is not explained in *Kanon*, however it is in the stand-alone version of *Munch* that is spun off from it: Kverneland declares that he is going to draw on secondary literature for his depiction of the Norwegian artist. He names Arne Eggum's *Edvard Munch: Livsfrisen fra maleri til grafikk* [Edvard Munch: The

frieze of life from painting to graphic art] (1990) as his main source and explains that he will assign quotes from Munch's time to corresponding panels, while secondary literature will be listed in a bibliography at the back of the comic (Kverneland 2013, 8–9). This procedure not only illustrates a certain double standard on the part of the comics authors but also shows the power reserved to the agency to present selected, supposedly absolute literature to the reader.

After Kverneland has explained the general framework of the series, he presents the reader with a twenty-year-old Munch in the middle of an incident that would prove formative for both the artist and German art history: During an invitation-only solo exhibition at the Verein Berliner Künstler [Berlin artists association], the debate over Munch's artworks escalated, resulting in the early closing of the exhibition and almost the schism of the association. Munch himself reviewed this event and the aftermath in a letter to his aunt (Lande 1996, 112–114). These lines are decontextualized by Kverneland for *Kanon* and rendered in the form of a monologue Munch delivers while shown alone in bed. Significantly, in one panel Munch appears to address the reader directly, breaking the fourth wall. Through this provoked communication with the viewer and the resulting reader awareness, Kverneland underscores Munch's artistic reception, which changed following the scandal, especially in Germany, but also elsewhere (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 18–23).

The Fall Munch represented a rewarding opportunity for Kverneland. Since the consequences of the scandal affected the art scene of an entire country, the cartoonist is able to introduce Munch as a great artist and characterize him as a painter who was so removed from the mainstream and so provocative that he sparked disagreement within formal associations. It should also be noted here that the scandal triggered by Munch coincidentally constituted the final event that caused a long-simmering disagreement within the association to erupt – at least that was the opinion, among others, of the art historian Jaro Springer, who spoke out on the topic in January of the following year under the pseudonym of Dr. Relling (Springer 1893, 102).

Although the first two versions of Munch's most famous work, *Skrik*, were produced just one year after the scandal in the Verein Berliner Künstler, Kverneland only turns his attention to this painting in the final volume of the comics series, thereby transforming the painting that is often characterized as Munch's masterpiece, quite fittingly, into the summit of his artistic vita. The cartoonist contextualizes this work according to the prevailing academic state-of-the-art in the 2000s, which assumed that the eruption of Krakatau in 1883 had changed the color of the sky and that this circumstance impacted Munch's already weak psyche (Olson et al. 2007). Two diary entries from 1892 relate to this, as they describe an event that lingered with Munch long afterward: When

he was crossing a bridge with two friends in Oslo, he suffered a panic attack that made him perceive the clouds as blood-red and hear a scream echoing across the countryside. One of the entries is titled "Nizza 22/1 92" and is presumably the older of the two (Munch Museum 1891–1892). The second is merely dated to 1892 and is accompanied by one of Munch's sketches, which depicts a study from a piece finished that same year, *Syk stemning ved solnedgang: Fortvilelse* [*Sick Mood at Sunset: Despair*] (Munch Museum 1892), which Munch described as "det første Skrig" [the first *Scream*] (quoted in Eggum 1990, 221) (see Figure 7). Kverneland used the second entry as a basis for the comic: Eight panels are spread over two pages, accompanied by Munch's text (see Figures 8–9). Strikingly, the cartoonist even includes an extract that Munch had redacted,
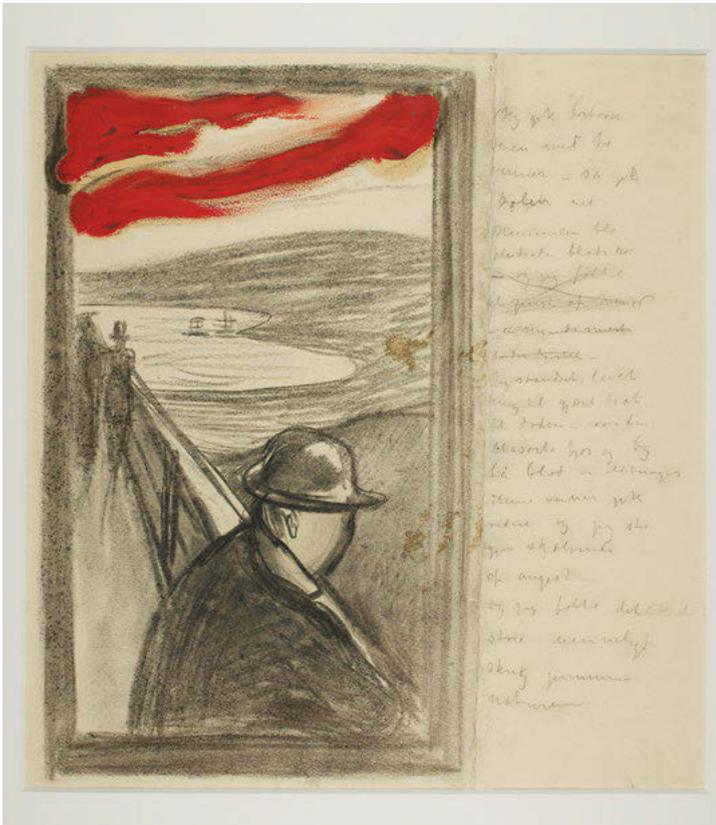
Figure 7: MM T 2367, Munch Museum. Dated 1892. Sketchbook. *Edvard Munch's Writings. Digital Archive*, published by the Munch Museum. https://www.emunch.no/ (acc. 13 December 2020).
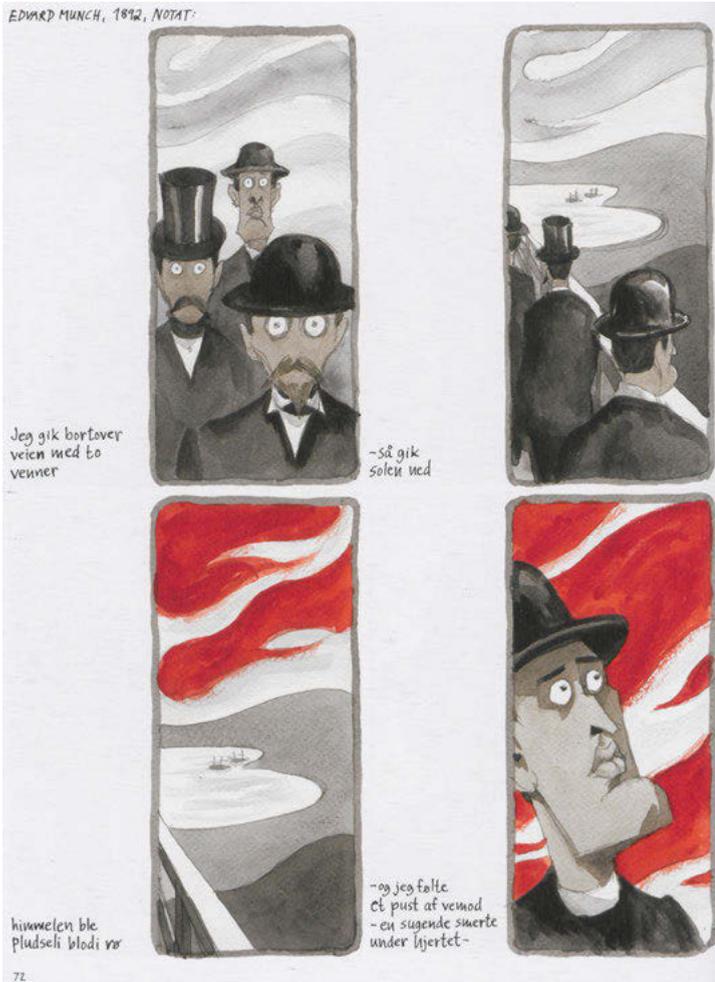
Figure 8: The first part of Kverneland's double-sided interpretation of Munch's panic attack (Fiske and Kverneland 2012, 72).

thus ignoring the artist's decision to dispose of some of the text and instead presenting it to the reader as an extant part of the entry.

Kverneland begins this panel sequence with an adaption of Munchs painting *Angst* [*Anxiety*], which depicts a gathering of people against a red-tinted sky: While the figures in the left middle ground of the picture have, if at all, only suggested faces, Munch provided the three figures that are staggered closest to the viewer with significant facial expressions. The wide-open eyes of the

Figure 9: The second part of Kverneland's double-sided interpretation of Munch's panic attack (Fiske and Kverneland 2012, 73).

middle figure and the pale, sunken faces evoke a certain unease. This feeling is complemented by the red billows in the sky, as well as by the title, which already conveys a clear emotion. Kverneland transformed the figure in the middle into a depiction of Munch that, following both the accompanying text and the original painting, seems to be staring with peeled eyes. Thus, Kverneland visually conflates the artist and his work in a fashion that, on the one hand, is typical for the idea of the artistic genius and, on the other hand, mirrors how Kverneland and Fiske insert their own interpretation into their work. The seventh panel,

controversely, is ultimately a rendering of the work *Syk stemning ved solnedgang: Fortvilelse*. Taken together, the individual panels and their respective texts clearly recall Munch's diary; nonetheless, Kverneland chose to swap around the positions of the text and images: If the text in the diary was located on the right page, he placed the panels on the left side. Thus, he leaves his own mark among the unusually high percentage of quotations and direct adaptions of Munch's work.

The pages following this present the reader with the completion of *Syk stemning ved solnedgang: Fortvilelse*, its exhibition, and the reception of the Norwegian writer Vilhelm Krag: In 1892, Krag composed a poem for the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* [Daily paper], whose ending Kverneland has the poet himself recite (Fiske and Kverneland 2012, 72–75). This interlude is explained by Kverneland's account of the creation of the work *Skrik* for which he refers to Krag and his poem.

Munch kept tinkering with the text in which he described the emotions that he experienced on the bridge, with the result that there are more than ten diary entries that are very similar in meaning and only vary slightly in form. Kverneland captures the fruitful moment of this development process in the two panels. In the first one, the reader is once again confronted with Munch lying in bed, while aquarelles above his head depict his thoughts and show how the artist is simultaneously contemplating the moment on the bridge and his work *Syk stemning ved solnedgang: Fortvilelse*. In the second, Munch's eyes snap open and he thinks of Krag, who is anxiously pressing his hands against his cheeks and whose eyes are likewise wide open with fear. Kverneland is presumably using Krag here as a metaphor for his poem, the emotions he felt when examining *Syk stemning ved solnedgang: Fortvilelse*, as well as Munch's anxiety on the bridge. Moved by this memory, Munch begins to work on *Skrik*. Notably, the reading direction changes during this sequence as Kverneland presents the process in a two-page spread. In doing this, he hierarchizes the events depicted throughout the comic, raising *Skrik* and its production to the climax (Fiske and Kverneland 2012, 76–79). These selected sequences reveal Kverneland's calculating approach. He chooses fragmentary aspects from Munch's biography and specifically highlights them. In doing so, he primarily shows Munchs conflict with society, which categorizes him as an artistic genius. In keeping with this principle, reference is also made to the supposedly indivisible unity of artist and work, which inevitably results in an exaltation of Munch as a person. Although Kverneland demonstratively draws from Munch's work and thus creates a certain degree of authenticity, the artist is already judged and valorized by taking up and omitting individual biographical aspects and by means of a dramaturgical rearrangement of the chronology. In the function of the author, Kverneland thus also shows presence in sequences in which he is not illustrated as a comics figure.

After Kverneland has conveyed the first impression of Munch to the reader, Fiske, on page 46 of the first volume, begins the part about Schwitters. By setting up the layout of the comic's section on Schwitters in a manner similar to the artist's graphics and advertising designs, he makes Schwitters portray himself to a certain extent. In this style, Fiske thematizes how Schwitters longed to join the Berlin Dadaists but was prevented from doing so by Richard Huelsenbeck. For this one-page illustration, Fiske draws on quotes from various contemporary witnesses as well as from Hans Richter's study *Dada: Kunst und Antikunst* [*Dada: Art and Anti-Art*] (1964). Remarkable here is that the sentence in the speech bubble on the third panel does not exist in the source text, even though Fiske has indicated that all the information on the first three panels comes from Richter (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 60).

Also in the following panel, Fiske uses altered quotes, which he again withholds from the reader: From John Elderfield's 1985 monograph *Kurt Schwitters*, he is borrowing a quote in it from Huelsenbeck: "He lived like a lower-middle-class Victorian . . . we called him the abstract Spitzweg, the Caspar David Friedrich of the Dadaist revolution" (Elderfield 1985, 40). When comparing this quote with the speech bubble in *Kanon*, it becomes clear that Fiske likewise chose here to make changes to the text without commenting on them:

> (Schwitters) levde som en middelklasse-viktorianer (. . .) vi kalte ham Dada-Revolusjonens Caspar David Friedrich.

> [(Schwitters) lived like a middle-class Victorian (. . .) we called him the Caspar David Friedrich of the Dada revolution.] (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 60)

That the German artist of the Romantic and Biedermeier periods, Carl Spitzweg, was omitted and only Caspar David Friedrich found his way into *Kanon* is probably due to the greater fame of the latter today. But again, and as well as Kverneland, Fiske uses his freedom as the author, which contrasts with the comic's self-proclaimed goal and intended authenticity. In addition, Fiske appears to address Huelsenbeck's statement, intended as an insult, in the second issue of *Kanon* as well, for he includes a pictorial quote on a half splash page and makes the panel reminiscent of a painting by Friedrich. Likewise, the *Rückenfigur*, a figure seen from behind which is typical of the painter, is identifiably Schwitters, who is distinguished as a classical artist by his canvas and easel and positioned roughly where Friedrich was while he was sketching his landscape, presumably *en plein air*. Fiske hereby turns the insult into praise and places Schwitters on a par with the renowned painter (Fiske and Kverneland 2007, 13) (see Figures 10 and 11).

The cartoonist marks the panel following Huelsenbeck's rejection with the date 1919, making the incident take place one year after the Caspar David

Figure 10: Lars Fiske's depiction of Schwitters painting en plein air in Norway (Fiske and Kverneland 2012, 13).

Figure 11: Caspar David Friedrich, *Landschaft mit Gebirgssee, Morgen* [*Landscape with Mountain Lake, Morning*], 1823–1835, oil on canvas, 71,5 x 93 cm (28,1 x 36,6 in), private collection. Source: Sotherby's, London, 12 December 2018, lot 8.

Friedrich insult, and quotes from Schwitters's *Das literarische Werk* [The literary work] from 1998. Out of this he also uses two sentences from the text "Merzfrühling" [Merz spring]. Noteworthy here is that the dates do not agree, as "Merzfrühling" is dated to 1924 (Schwitters 1998, 188). It is unclear, however, whether Fiske made this change to connect the events to the conversation that took place in 1918, making the story flow better, or whether this was a genuine mistake (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 60).

Das literarische Werk* also serves as the template for the final panel on the page, as Fiske has Schwitters declare: "Ren Merz er kunst, ren Dada isme er ikke-kunst (. . .)" [Pure Merz is art, pure Dadaism is non-art (. . .)] (Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 60). This decontextualized statement conveys a clear distancing from the Dada movement at the very least, if not an overtly hostile attitude towards it. In fact, Schwitters dubbed Dada "Nichtkunst" [non-art], though this label alluded primarily to its standing and meaning, namely as the "Reaktion auf Kunst und Reaktion auf Stillosigkeit" [reaction to art and to lack of style] (Schwitters

1998, 149). Schwitters wanted to emphasize that "dada aus Reaktion auf Kunst Nichtkunst mit Bewusstsein sein wollte" [Dada wanted to be non-art with consciousness out of reaction to art] (Schwitters 1998, 149). Schwitters also made a comparison between Merz and Dada which contained the sentence that Fiske would later borrow for *Kanon*: "Der reine Merz ist Kunst, der reine Dadaismus Nichtkunst" [pure Merz is art, pure Dadaism is non-art] (Schwitters 1998, 149; Fiske and Kverneland 2006, 60). It is interesting, however, that the omission indicated in *Kanon* conceals a clause separated by a semicolon, for the seemingly stabbing statement, follows the outright commendatory remark "beides mit Bewusstsein" [both with consciousness] (Schwitters 1998, 149). At this point, at the latest, it becomes clear that Fiske, while referring to contemporary quotations, adapts them at least partially to his own purpose. In this way, Schwitters is portrayed by him as a Dada opponent, as a reaction to rejection.

The three selected sequences, which can be considered as representative of the depiction of both artists, offer a compelling insight into the authors' source work and evaluation. Notably, Kverneland and Fiske characterize the artists by stringing together panels that show Munch and Schwitters misunderstood, afflicted, or acting eccentrically and that thus portray them as artistic geniuses. Through this characterization, as well as targeted information reproduction, the artist biographies of Munch and Schwitters are thoroughly calculated portrayals, yet presented as based on facts.

Showdown: Comics Artist versus Artistic Genius

Kverneland and Fiske present a special case of authorship: Their official topic, Munch and Schwitters, is not their actual focus. Instead, the authors are very concerned with how they are regarded themselves, using their own veneration of Munch and Schwitters as a backdrop to their own perceived venerability. The artist biographies that are the main part of *Kanon* are not supposed to be judged; instead, the artists Munch and Schwitter have, employing metafiction, already been judged by the comics authors and found to be geniuses.

The title of the comics series alone suggests an intention: The Norwegian word *kanon* embodies a gamut of meanings and is cognate with both the Latin *canna*, which can be translated as *pipe*, *vessel* or *reed*, and the Greek *κανών* [*kanón*], which typically means *rule*, *provision*, *list of classical writers*, and originally *straight bar*, or *ruler*. It can also denote an artillery cannon, a person who excels in a certain discipline, a polyphonic song, or a powerful strike in a ball game. Similarly, it can refer to the rules of the Catholic church, the biblical

texts that – unlike the Apocrypha – were regarded as genuine by the Apostolic Age, the list of saints, and a collection of distinguished literary works. A meaning related to this last one is also denoted by the adjective *kanon*, which corresponds to *very good* or *fantastic*. Furthermore, as an adverb, it has the meaning of *excessively drunk*. Although it is unclear why exactly they named their comic *Kanon*, the title does create the impression that Kverneland and Fiske portray themselves as the ones who decide which texts constitute the literary canon. The adverbial meaning, conversely, figures as a latent motif throughout the entire series.

While their modus operandi of recounting the artists' stories solely using quotes is supposed to lend their work extra authority, their portrayal of Munch and Schwitters as artistic geniuses has the side-effect of increasing their own importance. Therefore, they use their travels not only to depict the artists' journeys through life but also to portray themselves in a carefully chosen, engineered manner that seems to constitute their own image of what an artist is and should be. Munch and Schwitters thus serve as vehicles for the cartoonists' comics art, giving it an added gravitas as the artists constitute a culturally relevant topic. Striking as well is the contrast that Kverneland and Fiske create in their comic, for on the one hand they depict themselves as often drunk and almost crude, yet on the other, they regularly make cultural references, boast about their detailed research journeys, and show off using informative thought games. Critically, *Kanon* does not represent any new concept, rather Kverneland and Fiske are falling back on a tested strategy that proved to be fruitful in *Olaf G.*: The collision of the artistic genius with the self-depiction of the artist-author provides Kverneland and Fiske with an opportunity for authorial staging, representation of artistic attitudes, as well as self-exaggeration. In this way, *Kanon* becomes a prime example for the means with which comics authors make use of their agency to shape readers' interpretation of their work and direct that interpretation onto themselves.

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Ashumi Shah and Anke Marie Bock
Death of the Endless and Fan Projections

The lives and experiences of an individual are contextualized by society and history. Through the framework of society and culture, we develop our identities and relationships to other individuals, groups, and institutions. Addressing the long history of comics, Harriet E. H. Earle states, that, "as soon as humans could make marks on surfaces, stories were being told and visually represented" (2021, 33). Earle does not only assert that the notion of images accompanying stories can be identified across cultures around the globe (Earle 2021, 34) but also that a proliferation of the comic in contemporary society can be observed (Earle 2021, 57). The internet and the increasing embedding of social media in our everyday lives provide sites for sharing, circulation, and appropriation of media texts, as well as the formation of communities dedicated to specific media formats and texts, including comics. Rob Salkowitz triangulates the burgeoning culture of (fan) conventions as "a multi-billion-dollar" (2021, 147) commercial enterprise and the history of comics fandom. While initially catering to "hardcore fans" (Salkowitz 2021, 147), Salkowitz marks the change in convention culture today where "big brands and celebrities with little or no connection to fan culture are as likely to be present at conventions as artists and publishers" (2021, 147). In exploring the popularity of fan conventions and comics, Salkowitz notes the intersectionality of fandom and comics, thus paving the argument for fan agency beyond convention culture.

Noting the shift from niche to mass culture concerning comics fandom, Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo stress the role of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986 and 1991), in shaping "the canon of comic books and graphic novels" (2016, 17). Like Beaty and Woo, Earle traces the legacy of comics as a subject for scholarly consideration back to Spiegelman's *Maus* and claims that comics as a medium are not only popular but also transmedial and intermedial, and that "the modern Comics world is diverse, inclusive, and accessible [. . .] though the journey to public acceptance has been long, complex and circuitous" (Earle 2021, 57–60). With the growing popularity and proliferation of comics, particularly as the medium invited interaction not only with and between readers but also with other media formats and texts, it is necessary to situate comics in practices and discussions of cultural representation, particularly those by fans. *The Sandman* (Gaiman 2013a, 2013b, 2019), according to Joe Sutliff Sanders (2018, 340–342), redefined the medium of the graphic novel and enjoyed immense success, which not only gained the series a dedicated fan following but is also deemed largely responsible for the fame and fandom that its writer, Neil Gaiman, later enjoyed. Exploring Gaiman's

The Sandman universe, and specifically his character Death of the Endless as a case study, this chapter addresses fandom and practices associated with fanart. Sanders asserts that Gaiman has, since the release of *Sandman*, gained immense popularity. By positing Gaiman as a literary celebrity, who according to Beaty and Woo "commands a substantial fan base, augmented through canny use of social media" (2016, 61), we aim to, firstly, highlight the interaction between and the agency of the media producer, the media prosumers,[1] and the celebrity in textual meaning-making and, secondly, to illustrate the need for approaches that consider questions of remediation.

As we begin the consideration of the figure of the fan in relation to *The Sandman*, it is crucial to address the current discourse concerning comics fandoms. Fan studies scholarship has investigated comics fandoms from various perspectives and disciplines, including considerations of online and physical spaces, or the politics of culture concerning race, gender, and sexuality in comics – as, e.g., in the infamous "Comicsgate" debate[2] – or the relationship between the comics industry and fandoms (Healey 2009; Burke 2013; Scott 2013; Kohnen 2014; Perren and Feldschow 2018; Woo and Stoll 2021), or fan conventions at the heart of fandom and comics culture (Salkowitz 2021). With the shift afforded by new media, not only are media formats in a state of constant flux, but so are fandoms and fan practices, transforming strategies of composition, production, and distribution, as well as expectations of and appropriations by fans. Given this perpetual modification, the present chapter imagines the cultural text, in this case *The Sandman*, as constantly interacting with other media as well as with its producers and its fans. This interaction identifies the text *per se* as intermedial and transmedial in that, at any given point, shifts in processes of mediation and remediation can be observed.

As Jonathan Gray argues, "each and every media text is accompanied by textual proliferation at the level of hype, synergy, promos, and peripherals" (2010, 1). A media text is significantly influenced by synergetic elements like advertisements, trailers, casting choices, tie-in comics, films, books, or TV shows. Media texts also interact with other texts and influence meaning-making processes. Considering the concept of "death" as a paratext across different media, the term is certainly loaded with meaning across different philosophical, religious, and

1 Prosumers or rather prosumption can be described as the practices undertaken by active audiences that seemingly eradicate "the distinction between making and using media" (Gajjala et al. 2017, 1).

2 "Comicsgate" refers to the debate wherein primarily white male comics readers attacked publishers and comics that have pushed for diversity in relation to comics artists as well as characters represented in comics (Passmore 2019, 10–15).

metaphysical contexts and questions. Based on the socio-cultural environment of an individual, the concept would be perceived in a specific way and contribute to the meaning-making of life as well as the various notions of life after death. Likewise, exposure to media, especially texts that feature death, both as a state of non-being and as a personification, frame one's notion of "death." Death could be carrying a scythe and be dressed in flowing black robes, death could be the result of a car accident, Death is the kin of War, Famine, and Pestilence, or death is what awaits those who go to war; but Death can also be a grim reaper or simply the one guarding you from this life to the next. Every encounter with death, both in media and on a conversational level, creates a framework for how one may perceive the general concept. One's encounters with representations of death thus contribute to one's interpretation of it as a concept. Due to the vast amount of different deaths/Deaths in popular culture, the range of interpretations created by fans of various versions of death/Death is mind-blowing. A very specific and rather influential avatar of death is Death of the Endless from the *The Sandman* universe.

Gaiman's (and a great range of artists') *The Sandman* evokes a complex transmedial storyworld, expounded upon by an audiobook (Gaiman and Maggs 2020), an upcoming Netflix adaptation, as well as spin-offs such as the television series *Lucifer* (2016–2018, 2019–2020*)*, which entails many different levels of layered and nested narratives. This complexity is representative of new media trends, especially in terms of the relationship between the producers and prosumers of media texts, which problematizes the notion of agency and meaning-making. Transmedia storytelling, which involves the expansion of the storyworld across various media and platforms, is also characterized by prosumption practices of media fans. These practices involve appropriation and reappropriation of media content by engaged amateurs and can potentially threaten "the usual power relations between makers and consumers, often conflating and democratizing them so that lines are blurred and domination is usurped" (Gajjala et al. 2017, 1). Natalia Samutina (2016, 433–435) highlights the link between fan fiction and world-building, which also adds to the transmedia storyworld of *The Sandman*. Using Samutina's notion of "active transformative reception" (2016, 436) through the lens of which prosumers view media texts one can identify fan-made multiverses that are anchored by existents of the transmedia storyworld, for example, specific characters (here: Death of the Endless). Contemporary fandoms, therefore, employ the archontic principle (more on that below) to enrich the storyworld, making it not only transmedial but also transformative. Tracing the coinage of the term and the conceptualization of *transmedia storytelling* to Henry Jenkins and colleagues, Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman claim that the contribution of fans in the expansion of the storyworld is

> a social, commercial and semiotic necessity of certain tales. [. . .T]he consumers (readers, viewers, users) consider that the extension of a narrative world is not enough so they ask for more. [. . .] The storytelling is so strong that the characters require more space and time to tell their stories. (Scolari et al. 2014, 2)

Gaiman's *The Sandman* also features this type of transmedia storytelling, as Sanders (2018, 338–341) chronicles with regard to the development of its fan base, particularly highlighting the pleasures of building a collection and the desire to appropriate and transform the text that prosumer fans engage with.

In its first instantiation, Gaiman's *The Sandman* is a long graphic novel of over 2,000 pages, initially published in 75 monthly installments. This form of publication – on a regular basis and of a length of about 26 pages each – is characteristic of the comic book format, thus complicating its status as an alleged graphic novel. Earle argues that the "graphic novel" is one of the more contentious terms in the study of comics. It has been occasionally served as a substitute for "comics," particularly for comics containing "violent" or "sexually explicit" themes, as well as for previously serialized works, at times elevating their status to "high culture" (Earle 2021, 17–19). Hence, one may refer to *The Sandman* as a graphic novel not only based on its serialized format, but also its length as a compilation of large volumes, and mostly for its formal and narrative complexity as well as the themes it addresses. Additionally, Sanders traces the relationship between comics fans and the "direct market" to "floppies," which he defines as "monthly, magazine-style comics" (2018, 337). Noting that the term "graphic novel" was already around during the publication of *The Sandman*, which was characterized by "consistently good writing, a reliable production schedule, and narrow initial exposure" (Sanders 2018, 337), Sanders argues that *The Sandman* was not the first ever graphic novel, nor a first graphic novel "from a major publisher," but that it "filled a crucial role in the history of US comics" by demonstrating "that the future of comics lay not in monthly serials but in bound collections" (2018, 337–338). He then goes on to assert: "The story of *The Sandman*'s place in the history of the graphic novel is one of tension – and transition – between the ephemeral and the permanent" (Sanders 2018, 338). *The Sandman* was "published in ten trade paperback volumes, containing either a full story arc or a collection of one-off issues, resembling a collection of interrelated short stories" (Mellette 2015, 319). This multiple format release illustrates the publisher's attempt to appeal to audiences that were keen on "comics" as well as on "graphic novels." At the writing front, Gaiman himself considered *The Sandman* as "comic-ish" and introduced himself as a comics writer, as Cyril Camus (2015, 309) retells in an anecdote in his appropriately titled article "Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* as a Gateway from Comic Books to Graphic Novels." In this recollection, a literary critic treated Gaiman in a pejorative manner as he learned

about his work as a comics author. When the title *The Sandman* drops, however, his behavior changes extremely, as he perceives this visual narrative as "more than just comics": It is a graphic novel. When told that he writes graphic novels and not comic books, Gaiman "felt like someone who'd been informed that she wasn't actually a hooker; that in fact she was a lady of the evening" (quoted in Bender 1999, 32). Beaty and Woo argue that Gaiman, who "commands a substantial fan base, augmented through canny use of social media" enjoys increasing popularity after his "forays into broader popular culture" (2016, 61). As someone who dabbled in Sherlockian fan fiction himself, Gaiman is credited with supporting fan fiction of the texts he produces, and encourages holding public readings of his works (especially during the Covid-19 pandemic that ensued in a global lockdown).

As a literary celebrity and often identified with the titular Sandman in terms of visual resemblance (see note 3 below), Gaiman, in turn, epitomizes a particularly salient example of authorial agency. Gaiman, who boasts a prominent digital presence via his social media handles – specifically on Twitter and Tumblr – is often identified as the "poster figure" for those media texts the production of which he significantly contributes to. As Gray points out: "Numerous paratexts (and intertexts) create an author figure, surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value, and authenticity in an otherwise standardized media environment" (2010, 82). Although promos and bonus materials add to the overall perception of the text, it is not least the "poster figure," or celebrity associated with the text that invokes a great deal of interest among fans. Gaiman, whose works and words are characterized by certain stylistic elements that define "Gaiman-ness," is often identified as the "creator" or "writer" of various texts (and their adaptations), including *Good Omens* (2019–), *American Gods* (2017–2021), episodes of *Doctor Who* (2005–, S6E4, S7E12), *Lucifer* (2016–2021, the titular character is adapted from *The Sandman* universe), and the upcoming *The Sandman* Netflix show among many others. Gaiman's celebrity can mobilize his ever-growing fan community of the texts he produces simply by his association with them. Serving as one of the common ties between all of these texts, Gaiman, as both a literary and mainstream celebrity, is one reason for the migration of audiences and fans from one text to another. His activity on social media refreshes and keeps the memory of his long-standing works such as the *The Sandman* graphic novels alive, thereby adding another layer to its transmedia storyworld, wherein social media serves as a site of interaction between the producer and prosumers, enabling the collaborative culture that is characteristic of transmedia texts. Due to increasing textual synergy and proliferation in the age of new media, Gaiman's works have, over the past five years, been adapted and delivered in various media formats. Although the *The Sandman* series concluded as

graphic novels in 1996, the text continues to reinvent itself through later added prequels ("Overture"; Gaiman and Williams III., 2013–2015), paratexts, intertexts and adaptations, as is evident in the above-mentioned Audible example as well as in the Netflix adaptation of the comic that was announced in 2019 and is yet to be released.

On a number of occasions, Gaiman has been compared to the titular Sandman in that audiences have wondered whether the character's visual depiction was based on Gaiman himself.[3] Although Gaiman denies that Sandman is visually based on him (e.g., in the afterword to "Preludes and Nocturnes"), he does, in some interviews and social media interactions, acknowledge the similarities between his appearance and that of Sandman, particularly the hair and dress style (Hoad 2013; see also Boucher 2009). Audience and fan interpretations in particular revise the character of Sandman as Gaiman, and these interpretations are also reflected in the casting choices of the Netflix adaptation. Tom Sturridge, who is to play the titular Sandman, is seen wearing black in Netflix' promotional poster, with his hairstyle similar to how a young Gaiman wore it, as indicated in the promo image that appeared on the website of *Variety* magazine 2021. While producers take creative liberties when adapting a text, the intertextuality between the "source" text and the adaptation can be discerned only when the similarities between the two texts are perceptible. When existents of these texts are noticeably linked, the storyworld archive grows. This aspect is succinctly tied to the transformative practices of fan fiction through the archontic principle by Abigail Derecho (2006). Derecho examines fan fiction as a contemporary literary practice and uses the Derridian term "archontic" to characterize it, stating that a text is an open archive accrued upon by fan fiction, and that "an archontic text allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects, and deposit the newly made work back into the source text's archive" (Derecho 2006, 64–65). Derecho (2007, 64) identifies intertextuality as a key feature of fan fiction, an assertion seconded by Samutina (2016, 434), who argues that the transformative nature of fan fiction enables prosumers to explore or co-create imaginary worlds. Intertextuality rests on the notion that the intertextual reference to another text is identifiable in the text being examined. With archontic texts, the "artifacts" that Derecho mentions make the fan fiction text

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3 1) Zorbonaut asked: "Hi. I just noticed I've never seen you wearing anything that wasn't pitch black. Don't you ever ask yourself on a hot summer's day 'I could really stop with the casual Morpheus cosplay and wear something comfortable'?" (zorbonaut 2015, n.pag.);

2) The-faraway-here-and-now asked: "You look very much like Dream of the Endless. Is this purposeful?" (the-faraway-here-and-now 2011, n.pag.); see also Woods 2013, n.pag..

recognizable in the sense that they add to the archive of the "source text." Furthermore, apart from their intertextual nature, works of fan fiction are also deemed as "appropriative" (Derecho 2006, 64), wherein fan fiction creators engage with a text as a collective and also on a personal level.

As communities, fandoms self-regulate and through interactions among its members, perpetuate certain "dominant" theories, ideas or artifacts concerning the texts they are fans of. These "changed narratives" or fan-made "alternative universes" (Samutina 2016, 434) illustrate the interpretive and meaning-making practices that prosumers engage in. These practices are most evident in "ships," and "ascended fanon,"[4] since fans engage in textual appropriation and recirculation. On a personal level, fans often project their aspirations for a text or an artifact in the text on to works of fan fiction they create, thus changing the narrative, as Samutina suggests. The alteration in fan fiction texts, while significant, is in line with intertextuality and the archontic principle in that it is recognized as an addendum to the archive of the source text. Comics fans engage in various fan practices, such as collection of comics and special editions, participating in conventions, engaging in cosplay, etc. Concerning *The Sandman*'s conceptualization as a transmedial franchise involving collaborative culture, fan participation, and creative engagement highlight fan agency, "with fan-created cultural productions existing in self-governed communities that accord them canonical status and reading them as ciphers of both the individual's and community's desires" (Earle 2021, 111). As audiences filter media texts based on socio-cultural as well as media-specific contexts, they also commence the appropriation of that text and "contribute reflexively to the formation of the product, extending its range and appeal in a way that can allow other fans to pick it up and extend it further" (Earle 2021, 110). While some audience members tend to maintain this appropriation in their imagination and aspirations for a text or a character, others manifest these appropriations in the form of fantexts. According to Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, fantext is "the entirety of stories and critical commentary written in a fandom (or even in a pairing or genre), [which] offers an ever-growing, ever-expanding version of characters" (2006, 7). Appropriative fan practices as well as fantexts align with Derecho's conceptualization of fan fiction as archontic, since

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4 "Ships," in fan fiction terms, refer to relationships between certain characters in a text who, according to the fans, share (often sexual) chemistry. These fans are known as "shippers." With reference to fan fiction authors, Sheenagh Pugh (2005, 244) defines "shippers" as fanfic writers and readers for whom relationships between characters are paramount. An "ascended fanon" is when a fanon ("fans' creation of details, plotlines, and characters unsupported by the original text" [Reijnders et al. 2017, 6–7]) becomes canon.

the source text is constantly layered with the interpretation of its audiences. As Hellekson and Busse argue,

> [t]hese multitudes of interpretations of characters and canon scenes are often contradictory yet complementary to one another and the source text [. . . creating] a larger whole of understanding a given universe. This canvas of variations is a work in progress insofar as it remains open and is constantly increasing; every new addition changes the entirety of interpretations. (2006, 7)

When considering a fantext, one can examine the changing interpretations of a text and its components because of the various filters that the fan appropriation generates. In this sense, the appropriation by the prosumer contributes to the larger understanding of the text and its consumption while also highlighting the relationship between professional and amateur transformative works.[5] Busse (2017, 46) suggests that transformative works can be understood in their negotiation and engagement with the source text, thereby identifying the appropriation of texts as both an individual and collective practice. As audience members appropriate Death, they transform her from how she is in the "source text," making fantext an amateur transformative work.

Furthermore, fan dialogue often also circulates around casting choices of adaptations of beloved texts. For example, fans particularly discussed the casting of Kat Dennings as "Death of the Endless" in the above-mentioned Audible adaptation of *The Sandman* based on their perceptions of both Death's character as conceived in the source text and Dennings's previous work in television and film. Gray argues that paratexts are intended to "proffer 'proper interpretations', some preceding the show's arrival in the public sphere, thereby setting up pre-decodings" (2010, 81). Along this line, Gaiman took to his social media to announce the release of *The Sandman* as an Amazon Audible Original, with Kat Dennings voicing Death of the Endless.[6] With this announcement, Gaiman indicated his endorsement of Dennings as fitting for the role of Death. Despite it being an audio-only text, Dennings's appearances in various roles in television certainly constitute a sort of paratext in that they alter the view one would have of Death and, consequently, of the graphic

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5 Media convergence has blurred the boundary between the amateur and the professional, given the interpretations by both parties of the text.

6 Gaiman wrote: "It's astonishing. (And this is just the first three books.) So proud to be part of it. You can preorder at http://adbl.co/TheSandman #TheSandmanaudio" (Gaiman 2020a, n. pag.); "You are going to be able to listen to the full cast #TheSandmanAudio at @audible from July 15th. This will be @DirkMaggs's adaptation of the first 3 Graphic Novels. They are stunning, with the cast of your dreams . . ." (Gaiman 2020b, n.pag.).

novel at large.[7] This would also be true of the other cast members, such as James McAvoy, Michael Sheen, or Andy Serkis. Furthermore, with the roles Dennings has played previously, she sets up a degree of expectations or, as Gray suggests, "pre-decodings" (2010, 81) by means of which audiences evaluate the text.

The interpretations and meaning-makings by fans are transformative and open up the text to revision and appropriation based on audience perception. The appropriation of the text can take place in numerous ways, one of which is through the creation of fantexts (such as fan art and fan fiction) and its circulation among fan communities. Busse claims that the context of writing fan fiction – the paratextual frame – is relevant to understand it in the first place, comparing it with "ephemeral traces" (2017, 53).[8] Contextualizing a text and then revising it based on fan interpretations highlights the agency of the prosumer and their prosumption practices. Above all, Gaiman's concept of Death functions as an ideal example to elaborate the notion of ephemeral traces and contextual consumption further. Gaiman's Death of the Endless contradicts the general perception of a personified death in western popular culture, and particularly these contradictory elements are often the subject of fan creations. This appropriation grants agency to the fan artists, thus lending them a medium to express their desire for a character to be portrayed in a particular manner.

One reason for Death of the Endless to go against the grain is the fact that various artists contributed to *The Sandman*'s visuals.[9] This provides nuances exceeding comics or graphic novels with only one visual artist. Furthermore, Death increases this special quality by deviating from many known concepts of

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7 Dennings thus fits into the producers' and fans' view of how Death of the Endless looks like, based on the original work as well as on fan art and other medial adaptations. The original Death, however, had her own role model to fit. Mike Dringenberg, one of the main artists for *The Sandman*, met a waitress who matched his imagination of Death. He drew the character based on Cinamon Hadley's looks and, by that, established her design by himself. All other characters stem also visually from Gaiman's imagination.

8 Busse uses José Esteban Muñoz's definition of "ephemeral traces" (Muñoz 2009, 28) to describe what is left after a performance, such as in theatre. According to Muñoz, these traces contain, amongst others, lived experiences which prevail much longer than the duration of the initial performance. This finds expression, in the case of fantext, as Busse (2017, 53) explains, in the fans' comments and discussions that are necessary to understand the given fiction. She identifies this as the paratextual frame of fan fiction.

9 In the spirit of participatory observation, our own personal image of *The Sandman*, for instance, is strongly influenced by Sam Kieth, Jill Thompson, Bryan Talbot, and Dave McKean. This, however, might not be the case for all readers.

death both in her visual and narrative characterization. To begin with, Death is female. She is one of the seven siblings that occupy abstract realms and are collectively called "The Endless." These siblings are Dream (also called Morpheus or the titular Sandman, who is the protagonist of the overall storyline), Delirium, Desire, Destruction, Despair, Destiny, and finally Death. Camus describes them as "anthropomorphic embodiments of 'eternal human traits'" (2011, 91). This elevates them even above God or gods in general. They represent and personify the respective concepts in reference to humanity, i.e., human emotions, beliefs, needs, and urges. Death is an essential element since everybody dies. She is the one collecting the dying people and accompanying them into her realm, the realm of Death. She embodies the bridge between life and death, even hinting that there might be some kind of afterlife (which is never disclosed). All things that live must die and therefore pass through her realm. This makes her unique already.

Figure 1: Death in "The High Cost of Living #1" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 23).

However, there are quite a few features and attributes which grant Death a special place amongst her siblings as well as amongst other conceptualizations of death, especially in popular culture. Although many different artists are involved in her visual depiction, she remains recognizable based on some constant features that never seem to change too much. For example, the depictions of her

Figure 2: Death in "The Sound of Her Wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 208).

Figure 3: Death in "Season of Mist: A Prologue" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 546).

indicated above (see Figure 1–3) are all drawn by various artists, namely by Chris Bachalo (Figure 1), Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III (Figure 2) and Mike Dringenberg (Figure 3) and belong to different stories of the *The Sandman* narrative, but in spite of this variation, they maintain a specific representation of the character of Death of the Endless. Among the most obvious signifiers of the character is her black hair, which often, but not always, covers part of her face. By

that, she hides not only her facial expression but also at least one of her eyes and, therefore, her identity and soul. In these instances, one cannot see both of her eyes and thus not peek into her soul, which in turn prevents one from judging her character right away. This provides her with an aura of mystery and secrecy. It appears as if she does not want to "reveal herself" completely, which indicates her knowledge exceeding those of others, and she does not share all of it. Her character thus gains depth and at the same time a high level of attraction. She arouses curiosity and casts automatically a spell over anybody she meets, including the reader. Moreover, she often has a unique mark under her eye, which references to the Eye of Horus. It symbolizes Heaven and light, which readily connects her with her function as a guardian between realms. The Eye of Horus is seen as a symbol of prosperity, protection, regality and is associated with the afterlife. In addition, she always wears black clothing as well as her necklace sigil, a "symbol of life, and the soul" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 42). This "ankh" is based on an Egyptian hieroglyphic symbol representing life as well as life after death.[10]

The employment of Egyptian symbols of life and death is of particular import here not only to enhance the narrative and Death's characterization but also to add a specific layer of intertextuality that often finds expressions in fan fiction, particularly in fan art. An example for this is the fan art by the DeviantArt user Gloriecilla, which reimagines Death as an Egyptian queen through their interpretation, perhaps even evoking a similarity between Death and Cleopatra, as indicated in Figure 4. The Egyptian reimagination has Death looking almost like Queen Cleopatra as she frequently appears in popular culture. Gloriecilla's Death of the Endless is adorned with a golden headpiece and has her forehead framed by a fringe, which is quite distinct from how she appears in the graphic novels with dense wavy locks that cover nearly half her face. Instead of highlighting her mysteriousness, this particular fan version thus opts to illustrate her as regal and powerful. However, she is still recognizable as Death because of her necklace and the eyelash curl by her left eye, reminiscent of the Eye of Horus. The ankh necklace that Death is often sporting in the graphic novels is an Egyptian symbol for life after death, so visualizing Death as an Egyptian figure might be a logical variation. Additionally, Death has an aura of "untouchability" about her, which Gloriecilla's artwork both conveys and elevates. Cleopatra-esque Death seems untouchable not only because she is Death, but also because she appears dignified and regal. This power of

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10 Furthermore, it is said to be an instrument in a life-giving ritual during which the loop is filled with some sort of liquid, which shall symbolically provide life (Schwabe et al. 1982, 457).

meaning-making and meaning-changing opens up a dialogue with the source text and its archive as well as the fan community, claiming agency as to the peripherals surrounding it.

Figure 4: Cleopatra-esque Death (Gloriecilla 2017).

Although her very nature, being Death, symbolizes the end of a life or an entire existence, the mark under her eye and her sigil suggest otherwise. Dying, and hence Death, do not necessarily entail an end; instead, these symbols represent the beginning of a new life, an afterlife. Although the Eye of Horus only refers to an afterlife, without making any claims about its pleasantness, it suggests that the afterlife might be better than life on earth. No suffering that is stereotypically linked with death might await; instead, people head into an afterlife in Death's realm at her side, which, by her characterization, does not seem too bad. Moreover, Death's necklace highlights her task to guide people from one realm to the other. It suggests that life on earth is merely an interruption of the never-ending life in her realm, as she accompanies people into the world during birth and out of it in death. Existence thus never ceases; it just changes states. The ankh around her neck as a recurring attribute indicates that her duty and powers deviate from stereotypical concepts of death that are mostly limited to gathering the dying. Moreover, it also symbolizes her character in much the same way as Superman's or Batman's iconic logos do, especially for her brother Dream. A special wall in Dreams home contains picture frames with

the sigils of all his siblings that enable him to communicate with them at any given time (Gaiman et al. 2013, 629). This means that Death of the Endless also does not represent dying as her most dominant identifying feature. People die for various reasons, but she is not causing this and therefore not guilty or responsible in any way. She is simply the guardian of those in the process of leaving life as well as those entering it, guiding them from one realm to the other. She usually exercises no power over life or death herself, as she does not decide who dies, but stands by them, nonetheless. Although this may seem to take from her the power of actually ruling over death, she is not represented as a weak or as a passive character. Death is a strong character and can actually change the rules of who dies if she wants to, but this is seldom the case.[11]

The most important and unique feature of Death of the Endless, however, especially in contrast to other personifications, remains the fact that she is represented as female and young. Most embodiments of the concept of death in literature as well as in popular culture rely on contrasting attributes, usually being male and rather old. Gaiman refers to such seemingly unspoken understandings of the figure of Death, yet challenges how death should be portrayed in *The Sandman* (see Figure 5). In this storyline, "The High Cost of Living," the boy Sexton meets Death and chooses not to believe her identity since she does not fit his stereotypical opinion of how death should look like. In his view, "death's this tall guy with a bone face, like a skeletal monk, with a scythe and an hourglass and a big white horse and a penchant for playing chess with Scandinavians" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 31). Gaiman breaks with these clichés by presenting the reader with a young and beautiful girl who looks not at all dangerous but has an aura of melancholy and untouchability. She seems distant, yet seeks being close to humans. She only connects with them in their very first and very last moments, and enjoys it greatly, although this is often one-sided, especially on her second visit. She loves humans and therefore does her best to make their ends as pleasant as possible, remaining calm and thereby exuding a notion of security and intimacy. She tries to explain what is happening as much as necessary and as little as possible, making the process of dying less lonely. Moreover, she just listens to what people have to say in their dying moments, particularly about what troubles them. It is hard for Death, however, to interact with people in their most vulnerable and emotional state. Almost nobody is happy to meet her since her appearance leaves no doubt that the end is

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11 In "The Sandman #13: Men of Good Fortune" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 326–350), Death grants Hob Gadling eternal life because he simply refuses to die and for her own amusement. He meets Dream once every century who observes his sufferings. Finally, Death offers him to end his life, but Hob still refuses to die. Death allows him his wish again and therefore exemplifies that it is she who decides in the end.

Figure 5: Challenging representations of Death in "The High Cost of Living #1" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 31).

near. This is the reason why she spends one day a century as a mortal.[12] In this storyline, she spends it with Sexton. This is also the reason why she looks like a teenage girl, as she occupies the body of one already dead or dying and tries to

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12 She uses the body of Didi, a sixteen-year-old who has lost her entire family to a robbery gone bad. At least that is the story she made up. Death explains to Sexton that Didi's family has never existed, that it is just a nice touch to make her feel more comfortable in Didi's world (Gaiman et al. 2019, 7–35).

connect with people in other moments than those of birth and death. However, she does not disguise herself. Using a human body is necessary since humans could not cope with her natural appearance, which is a rather common trope regarding celestial beings. She still introduces herself as Death, accepting all potentially negative reactions. No matter how people treat her, Death remains calm and rational, which ascribes a very reasonable and controlled nature to her character.

Figure 6: Death and Hazel in "The Time of Your Life #3" (Gaiman et al. 2019, 217).

Although she is a rather emotional being, she does not allow her feelings to influence her behavior or actions. In another storyline in the *The Sandman* narrative, "The Time of Your Life," she refuses to make a deal with Hazel, who wants to trade her life to save her dying son Alvie (see Figure 6). "A life for a life" is a deal many incarnations of death are well known to accept, but this is not the case here: Death straightforwardly rejects the offer. She could comfort Hazel by explaining that there was a universal balance and that Alvie must die for some specific reason, but this would be a lie and Death does not choose it. Rather, she is honest and trustworthy and accepts the burden of crashing Hazel's last hope. She embraces her duty and role to collect the dying, thus leaving the living behind in their agony. This loyalty to her role as well as her willful acceptance of emotional distress greatly influences her visual depiction. Although she appears as a young and pretty girl, she is serious and has a sober composure. Her presence conveys a feeling of dignity and authority based on how she is visually presented inside a specific panel, e.g., in the way she is sitting or standing, how she holds her head and waves her hair, or her general body posture. Her composure and the aura of dignity are enhanced by the way she talks to people and, even more so, how she listens. Listening is one of the few stereotypically female-connoted characteristics Death retains. In sum, she is a young, female embodiment of the abstract figure of Death as well as the personification of all emotions and feelings connected with death, dying, and an abstract and undefined afterlife, who unites all these ideas, assumptions, or concepts in her visual portrayal. Although many different artists present their own versions of her, highlighting their artistic skills and imagination as well as paying homage to the original creation (Earle 2021, 115–116), she distinctly remains Death of the Endless.

This is one reason why fans get particularly creative with regards to this character. The freedom of her visualization – as long as she remains clearly identifiable through the three main features of her sigil, the mark under her eye, and her black hair and clothing – invites fan artists to interpret her and create their own respective version of Death, participating in an ongoing series of portrayals. As Busse (2017, 50) states, fanfiction and, by extension, fan art, must be seen as part of an ongoing conversation. Thus, it is never complete or final, and sometimes even classified as "WIP," work-in-progress. It engages with both the original work and other products of fanfiction, charging the conversation with intertextuality and intermediality. In other words, fanfiction by nature correlates with other works as well as their discourses and cannot be regarded as completely independent. Fanfiction rather lives off of this interactive and productive discussion. Fans from all kinds of backgrounds engage in it on conventions, digitally in forums and chats, and especially on platforms that are

not primarily aimed at fan exchanges, such as social media. They thus create new communities which "function as 'affinity spaces' [. . .] in which like-minded individuals find one another and advance one another's skills" (Lamerichs 2018, 16). Fan art in general thus means not only to engage with the original work and other (fannish) versions of the represented characters, but also with the creators – both of the original and of the fan art. This puts the personalities in the focus, too, and has the power to elevate authors and creators to celebrities, just like Gaiman himself. This also illustrates that fan art operates across formal limitations and shifts between different genres and media.

Figure 7: Interpretation of Death (Uriel 2019).

Fan art featuring Death of the Endless engages with her different realizations by various *The Sandman* artists to which fans respond with their own visualizations. Some of these examples stick rather closely to the original, while others only borrow her three dominant characteristics (see Figures 7–9). Some deviate much more, for example by depicting Death with huge breasts or showing her almost naked (see Figure 10). This hypersexualized visualization implies her having even more power over others by eliciting sexual desire and projecting an aura of dominance, experience, sexual liberty, and self-determination.[13] This illustrates the power that fans exercise by creating fanfiction. Another example shows her next

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13 Death's hypersexualized portrayal opens a discussion about her being subject to a male gaze while experiencing a moment of empowerment instead of being objectified, which cannot be addressed here in detail.
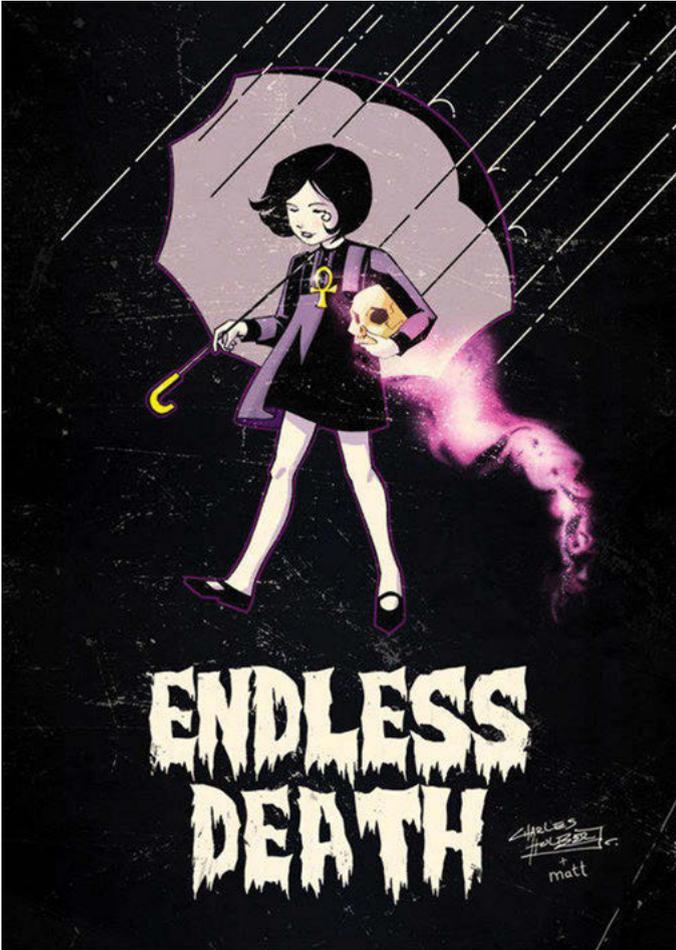
Figure 8: Interpretation of Death (KidNotorious 2009).

to a more stereotypical portrayal of death, accompanied by a winged skeleton (see Figure 11),[14] while others even provide her with wings (see Figure 12). These versions highlight the fact that fan art is constantly evolving and developing.

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14 Here, like in many other examples, Death is accompanied by the figure of death from the TV show *Supernatural* (2005–2020). On the one hand, this brings to the fore the importance of this particular show to fan art of Death of the Endless. On the other hand, it illustrates that these contrasting concepts of death do not have to contradict but can rather complement each other, symbolized by their interwoven hands, which "links" their respective narratives.

Figure 9: Interpretation of Death (Mordecai 2019).

Furthermore, it brings to the fore close relations to other concepts and depictions of celestial beings, such as angels. Wings are merely hinted at in the original work (see Figure 13). In this sequence of "The Sound of Her Wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013, 200–224), Dream spends the day with Death. Although the reader cannot see Death yet, a shadow behind Dream invokes her through an indication of dark wings. Dream states: "From the darkness I hear the beating of mighty wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013, 215), which suggests that Death, approaching here, indeed has wings that are merely not perceivable when she appears in her human form. Dream's speech underscores her powerful and sublime identity. Wings are therefore a potential further characteristic identity marker of Death that some fan artists take up, depending on how close Death's depiction should position her towards either a human or a celestial being. Her having wings stresses her non-human nature visually and thereby distances her from the humans she is visiting. In artworks such as the one reproduced in Figure 12, her relation to the Endless seems to be more important than her link to humanity.

Figure 10: Death pin-up (Szerdy 2020).

Figure 11: Interpretation of Death with Supernatural's death character (MasterOfFear n.d.).

Figure 12: Interpretation of Death (Cho n.d.).

Figure 13: Dream hearing Death approach in "The Sound of Her Wings" (Gaiman et al. 2013a, 215).

What becomes clear through all these examples is that fan art surrounding Death is often concerned with freeing her from her narrative setting and context, a limitation imposed by the creators of the source text. *The Sandman* was published by DC and therefore belongs to the DC Universe (DCU), which now is a multiverse, positioning Death and all the elements of the *The Sandman* universe in the DCU. Theoretically, she can meet other characters from the DCU, like for instance Superman or John Constantine.[15] In fact, *The Sandman* indeed contains certain connections to other DC works, for instance by referring to the character Scarecrow or to the Arkham Asylum in Gotham City (Mellette 2015, 324). Diegetic encounters with characters from other comic book universes or franchises are difficult and rare for legal reasons. Fans, though, do not have to stick to such rules and norms, as fanfiction "by its very nature has specific freedoms regarding content, form, and length" (Busse 2017, 49). As a result, there are many interpretations of Death meeting, for instance, Marvel characters like Wolverine (see Figure 14). Her kissing him on the forehead implies a blessing with immortality, a reference to the special healing powers of this Marvel character. Thus, this fan art presents its own explanation for Wolverine's ability to recover from any wounds and thereby avoiding

Figure 14: Interpretation of Death kissing Wolverine (Celis 2014).

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15 Examples for these meetings inside the DC Multiverse are *Action Comics Vol. 1 #900* (2011), where Death appears alongside Superman and Lex Luthor, *Captain Atom Vol. 2 #42* (1990), where she meets Nate alias Captain Atom, and *The Books of Magic Vol. 1 #4* (1991), in which she and Destiny appear as the universe's last two inhabitants.

death. This brings to the fore the agency of fans through their art, which is at liberty to extend or create new intertextual and intermedial connections. By borrowing from both DC and Marvel, these fans playfully imply a new multiverse that bridges legal and production-oriented gaps and, by doing so, initiate an even broader discourse of intertextual references.

Fanfiction, therefore, can be a site of change through its potential to combine different storyworlds and have various characters, which are usually strictly separated, interact. It thus can create new fictional worlds beyond the limitations set by specific publishing houses and also "reinvigorate our understanding and interpretation" (Earle 2021, 116) of both, the source text and prior fan-created text. The dynamic agency of fans is evident in the cyclical appropriation of the text and its existents (here, Death). By virtue of a text being archontic, its revision and (re-)circulation through canon, adaptation, or fantext is undertaken by authors and fans alike, indicating fans' claimed agency in the process of production.

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Christopher Pizzino
"I Always Win"
Corporate Comics, Delinquent Fans, and the Body of Richard C. Meyer

Comics scholars are quite aware – as researchers and, typically, as fans themselves – that reading comics has long been judged not only as juvenile and unsophisticated but also as potentially delinquent. In fact, it is well understood that a presumed connection between comics reading and juvenile criminality was a cornerstone of anti-comics movements in the middle of the twentieth century (Nyberg 1998, 88–97; Hajdu 2008, 229–273; Gabilliet 2010, 216–232). What has been less widely recognized in comics studies is that this general notion of the delinquent comics fan has historically been tied to the body. Recently, I have argued that the phenomenological richness of comics reading, especially the complex relations it activates between book and body, was targeted by mid-century anti-comics discourse as particularly anti-intellectual and socially destructive (Pizzino 2020, 17–24). Regarding this link between embodiment and delinquency, much has yet to be explored – not least, the way it can influence the roles a reader's body might be seen to play in contemporary comics culture.

Here, I consider the most notoriously delinquent body in recent comics fandom: that of Richard C. Meyer, a comics reader and, more recently, comics creator and publisher best known for the YouTube channel he founded in 2017 – currently titled *Comics MATTER w/Ya Boi Zack* (Zack is the name Meyer uses on his channel) – where he continues to post videos regularly. It is possible to explore how and why Meyer is condemned in comics fandom itself, as well as in mainstream media reporting, simply by discussing what he has said in his YouTube videos and in other venues online. But the simplicity with which (in my view at least) one can state what is wrong with Meyer in the context of comics fandom does not remove the difficulty of analyzing what he does as a comics reader in particular. I will explore the ways Meyer expresses the embodied richness of comics reading, particularly in videos where he films himself scanning the pages of new issues of comics titles. Through these videos (which will be discussed mostly in general terms; some are no longer visible on *Comics Matter* as of this writing, and not all were publicly available to begin with), Meyer claims absolute readerly sovereignty and a freedom from corporate and social control – although, as will be seen, his apparent authority is strongly tied to the contexts in which he asserts it.

My exploration of the power Meyer expresses in his videos will provide little justification for his own claims about his aims and tactics. Yet, there will also be little comfort for readers and creators who have been harmed, directly or indirectly, by his online presence. Unfortunately, the appeal of some of his videos, for some of his followers, resides precisely in their sexism, racism, and transphobia. However, the way Meyer presents himself as a comics reader also expresses aspects of comics readership that, while easy to mark as offensive or harmful in specific instances, are nevertheless strongly interwoven with the phenomenology of comics reading, with the consumption of corporately produced comics, and with a fraught history of policing comics readers as delinquent. I hope to show the difficulties of disentangling these elements and accounting for them responsibly. Hopefully, my analysis of these videos will shed light on reading and embodiment in the context of comics fandom. At the same time, I must point to some persistent ethical dilemmas in scholarly attempts to assess the meaning and value of comics reading, and the status and values of comics readers themselves – dilemmas not easily resolved even, or perhaps especially, when we are dealing with delinquencies as glaring as Meyer's.

Aside from the phenomenological matters on which I focus in this discussion, Meyer is less a unique instance of a delinquent fan and more an exemplar of a type that has drawn increasing public and scholarly attention. Scholarship in fan studies, and in audience studies more generally, has long been familiar with various problems intrinsic to the scholar/audience relation, not least that of the delinquent fan. However, as Natasha Whiteman effectively points out, a growing sense of internet culture as "a particularly threatening and barbaric environment" (2018, 510) for fan activity and interaction has driven increased scholarly interest and concern. In the coda of this chapter, I will return to the provocative discussion of this issue Whiteman provides, and particularly to her focus on questions of self/other relations in the context of audience studies. But here, at the outset, I observe more broadly that, while fan studies scholarship has succeeded in phrasing some of its abiding dilemmas with great sophistication, it has also demonstrated, willingly or not, how persistent these dilemmas can be.

A recent account of ethical problems in fan studies by Ruth A. Deller (2018) is exemplary in this respect. Early in her discussion, Deller cautions scholars who carelessly take a proprietary attitude to the fan discourses they research:

> There can [. . .] be formal and informal boundaries within fan communities and negotiating these can be complicated. When treating all fan communication, particularly when it is easily accessible online, as public and "fair game," researchers run the risk of reproducing negative representations of fandom. (Deller 2018, 131)

The nature of this "risk" is not specified (beyond the general mention of "negative representations"), but the implication is that fan discourse deemed ordinary and unobjectionable in its original context can be subject to unwarranted contempt by outside observers. In short, Deller suggests that the way fan activity is contextualized can make all the difference in how it is judged. One paragraph later, Deller complicates this claim by suggesting that scholars should "try to balance representing the diversity of fan voices and practices while being conscious of the sensitivities of fans whose interpretations or actions are often questioned or even silenced" (2018, 131). More pointedly, Deller notes that such

> silencing can occur within fan communities themselves, as fans enact forms of boundary policing and "shaming" about what is and is not acceptable practice – meaning the voices of certain fans, often those who are young, female and/or queer, become marginalized even within fandom. (2018, 131)

Taken together, these passages certainly indicate the difficulties scholars face when adjudicating various perspectives and constituencies in fan discourse. At the same time, Deller implicitly offers a basic guiding principle for such adjudication: to present, and to contextualize, fan discourses and voices in such a way that none of them will be unduly marginalized.

But this is hardly a simple principle; nor, apparently, can it be fulfilled by a unified practice. It is probably impossible to avoid "reproducing negative representations of fandom" altogether, when – in the very next breath, as it were – the scholar must observe that many fan communities "enact forms of boundary policing" that marginalize fan voices on the basis of age, gender, and sexuality. Arguably, this may simply be an acknowledgment on Deller's part that fan communities often have the same problems of inequity and exclusion as other social groupings. In practice, however, the work of representing marginalized fan voices can be difficult, if not impossible, to separate from a critique of tendencies existing specifically within fandom that marginalize these voices in the first place. Presenting fan discourse in an equitable manner that both acknowledges and tries to undo the marginalization of some fan voices requires not only mediation and adjustment of the degree and kind of attention given to various fan constituencies, but also a critical policing, or counter-policing, of some constituencies as the scholar judges needful.

Although Deller does not spell out what this policing aspect of scholarly endeavor ultimately means, it is strongly implied, if not presumed, that fan studies is an interventionist practice. Of course, most fan activity is interventionist in one way or another. The point of being a fan of, for instance, a film franchise is usually not to leave its status, meaning, and direction unaffected by one's attachment

to it. Most scholars of a given fandom are also fans, and as such, they would scarcely be unique in believing themselves qualified to decide how other fan voices can be weighed against one another and represented with adequate context and equitability. But what are the consequences of supposing, as Deller does, that fan studies has both a responsibility to avoid "negative representations of fandom" and an obligation to undo some of the effects of a given fandom's "boundary policing"? It necessarily follows that adjudicating among, and critiquing, differing voices and subject positions in fandom must be accomplished on the basis of a standard of equitability that is not apparent, or at least not in force, in the fan communities themselves. In other words, if we accept Deller's model of scholarly ethics, we must incline to see fan studies as a reformist discipline.

Deller's position provides an implicit critique of the "suspensionist" model of fan studies expounded by Matt Hills, who argues for the possibility of "refus[ing] to split fandom into the 'good' and the 'bad'" in order to embrace "inescapable contradiction" (2002, xii). Notably, Deller does not "split fandom into the 'good' and the 'bad'"; rather, she shows how critiquing "bad" fans does not require the championing of "good" fans with whom they can be contrasted (though it does bring critical attention to marginalized voices without claiming that they are good or bad). This also indicates that critiquing "bad" fans does not necessarily have anything to do with moral binaries, as Hills seems to assume.[1] Nevertheless, the dilemmas of Deller's approach indicate other critical and historical complications, particularly when applied to the case of a comics reader like Meyer.

Two complications merit attention here. First, Meyer's own self-representation is precisely that of a marginalized fan. Meyer has been a key figure in what is usually called "Comicsgate," the self-designation of a group of loosely affiliated comics fans and producers. Comics creator Ethan Van Sciver and Meyer himself have been the two most visible figures in this movement (though neither is strongly identified with the term at the time of this writing). In general, those who self-describe as part of Comicsgate claim that mainstream comics have suffered in quality and popularity as a result of undue influence from creators whose politics are left of center.[2] In his YouTube videos, Meyer offers a variety of criticisms of

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1 To grant a point to Hills (2002), however: There can be a tendency in fan scholarship to think of fandoms in terms of moral binaries, whether or not this tendency necessarily follows from core imperatives of fan studies.

2 Comicsgate is thus part of a larger constellation of putatively cultural, and frequently also political, phenomena emerging in the wake of what is usually called "Gamergate." For a helpful summary analysis of this movement's online dynamics, media presence, and larger political implications and effects, see Blodgett (2020).

"SJW" (social justice warrior) comics, most often Marvel superhero comics, and the creators who make them. Sometimes, he has focused on specific characteristics of specific titles and issues. Not infrequently, he has made broader claims that the creators he opposes lack talent, have poor values or poor mental health (or some other kind of putative abnormality), and/or have gained entrance to the comics industry as a corporate display of commitment to diversity despite the worthlessness of the comics they make. As part of these claims, Meyer has argued that some of the comics he despises are insulting to the fan constituents to which they supposedly appeal. Like a number of other Comicsgate-associated figures, he has argued that the voices and perspectives of politically conservative creators and readers are marginalized in comics production and fandom. Meyer would also claim that he himself is a victim of harassment and of attempts to get him fired (these claims are true in some instances, so far as I have been able to determine), and of attempts to stop him from publishing his own comics (this latter claim is dubious[3]).

Thus, from his own point of view, Meyer and his followers are being insulted and marginalized by corporate comics publishers, the unworthy creators they employ, and anyone who supports these publishers and creators. Meyer purports to speak on behalf of a diverse coalition of fans and creators (during its period of largest growth, his channel went by the name *Diversity and Comics*), and he often claims to be opposed not to greater diversity as such but to what he sees as left-leaning, politically aggressive comics of poor quality. Meyer would doubtless claim that his own perspective deserves more attention, and more charitable critical treatment, than it usually receives (certainly more charitable than it receives in this chapter). And while there is some evidence that many Comicsgate adherents see Meyer more as a useful gadfly than as an admirable representative of their values,[4] fans leaving comments on his YouTube videos often seem to assume that he is a sincere humanist who actually wants to see comics thrive as a diverse meritocracy. These fans are likewise eager to defend him when he is vilified in mainstream media outlets.[5]

Insofar as I follow Deller's assumption that scholars should adjudicate fan discourse fairly, I must observe that much of what Meyer claims for himself is unsupported by the facts; but here, further description of some of the content

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3 As reported in numerous comics journalism outlets, at the end of 2020, Meyer gave up his lawsuit against comics creator Mark Waid for tortious interference (Cronin 2020). For a summary of earlier phases of this lawsuit, see English (2019a).

4 For evidence of the existence of Comicsgate followers who accept Meyer's function as a gadfly while disapproving of some of his conduct, see English (2019b).

5 See the comments section below the YouTube video "Diversity in Comics Makes Bigots Mad" (Comedy Central 2018).

on his YouTube channel is in order. Meyer typically posts multiple videos a day, adding up to a total in the thousands since he started his channel the spring of 2017 (again, many of these videos are currently unavailable on his channel). Depending on which video a new visitor who has no prior knowledge of Meyer chooses, the channel can make different initial impressions. There are some videos in which Meyer discusses a new issue of a comic he likes and simply comments on its plot, themes, characterization, and formal execution without much reference to his politics, or to the question of "SJW" comics. In other videos, he discusses a comic that, by his own admission, he was expecting not to like, and that he bought to "roast" (his preferred term, though it often covers the use of insults on the basis of gender presentation, sexuality, and physical attractiveness), but that he has decided is good, or at least tolerable. But in many of his videos, Meyer offers what he is best known for: discussions of "SJW" characterization styles, character identities, plot arcs, and political messages to which he objects.

In these videos, Meyer often focuses on what he claims is implausible or false character construction. For instance, he has claimed that representations of Muslims in the Marvel title *Ms. Marvel* (2015–2019) are unrealistic because too many of the characters are peaceful or tolerant. Other times, he complains about a character's lack of physical attractiveness. He believes too many women in Marvel superhero comics have short hairstyles (what, for a time, he referred to as "mental illness haircuts"[6]), or look masculine, or otherwise do not have body types he finds attractive. The reasons Meyer gives for his objections can vary quite widely. Sometimes he claims that a given character's unattractiveness is disappointing to the consumer – basically, that the body of a character, typically a woman, is not the kind of body that readers like him want to see in comics. Other times, his objections to a character seem rooted in humanistic claims that the character is too heavily defined by an aspect of their identity (typically of gender, race, sexuality, or religion), and that this two-dimensionality is dehumanizing. Such discussion typically features what Meyer terms "roasting," which often consists of remarks about individual comics creators that take some aspect of their gender, race, sexuality, or religion as an occasion for insult; sexist and transphobic remarks are especially common. As mentioned already, Meyer sometimes vocally supports specific instances of the kinds of "SJW" comics he usually despises, but he has repeatedly caused, or catalyzed, or encouraged, or abetted, online harassment of creators he claims are bad for comics.

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6 This phrase occurs numerous times in numerous videos, many of which are no longer available on Meyer's channel.

Aside from the obvious offensiveness and destructiveness of much of what Meyer says on his channel, what might strike the scholar surveying his content is how incoherent it is when taken as a whole. It is one thing to say that a character is flat and two dimensional in ways that deny complex humanity (a legitimate point, on its own, to make about many characters in corporately produced serial narrative, regardless of medium), and that portraying identity categories well is a difficult task demanding artistry more than dogmatism. It is quite another thing to assert that a particular character is ugly and that the customer is always right. If any comics fans watch enough of Meyer's videos, they will eventually discover moments and utterances with which they agree in isolation. But there is no unifying value or harmonious set of principles that can explain why one comics reader could make all the utterances Meyer makes; too many of them seem to invalidate others. At the risk of stating this problem more fastidiously than might be necessary, it is hard to see how, if Meyer is a humanist who wants three-dimensional characterization, he has made a point of so much body policing. It is likewise difficult to understand how, if Meyer genuinely wants to encourage comics artists to understand page design and narrative flow better, he makes transphobic remarks about some of them, and/or mocks their appearance, and/or calls their identities inauthentic, and/or accuses them of exploiting their identities, or performing sex acts, to get into the comics industry.[7]

Perhaps the most obvious thing to say about this incoherence is that the humanistic discourses Meyer offers can function as putative justification for the "roasting." But here, I turn to the central source of complexity in Meyer's work, which is less easy to police: The range of discourses Meyer produces, however incoherent it may be, is nonetheless brought into relation by his body in a way that, to any comics reader, feels quite comprehensible. While Meyer has made videos in a few different ways, the most distinctive ones simply record him holding single issues on his lap, or sometimes on a piece of furniture, and leafing through their pages as he discusses what he is reading. These videos are obviously either minimally rehearsed or completely unrehearsed. In most cases, they are also unedited; any errors, whether physical or discursive (coughing, hesitating, fumbling the recording device, misremembering a plot point and having to correct a previous summary) are left in. Because Meyer simply talks, uninterrupted by edits, while keeping the camera focused on the comic as he pages

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7 Meyer uttered this last remark, aimed at comics creators who, he claimed, had performed sex acts to get work in the comics industry, in a private video that was later made public and is known as "The Dark Roast." For a discussion of its content, see English (2019a).

through it, his videos are readily keyed to a fan's phenomenological sense of the act of comics reading.

This is not controlled analysis of comics pages artfully displayed, which is common on other, larger comics-centered YouTube channels. Rather, it is a vision of the corporeally rich inter-animation of body and book that is native to the physical act of reading comics. Meyer's unstudied camera records, and in a sense mimics and extends, the flexible reading protocols, the many, often competing, vectors of visual attention, and the constantly shifting perspective that are usually part of comics reading. Meyer might say that his method of presentation has no special meaning, and that he simply does not have the time or resources to make more conventionally polished YouTube content. But however contingent its causes, this method aids Meyer by giving his commentaries phenomenological coherence and thus readerly authority (at least for many of his followers).

Like any scholar currently exploring phenomenological aspects of comics reading, I am indebted both to scholars who have glanced at this issue briefly but tellingly, including Charles Hatfield (2005, 58–64) and Roger Sabin (1993, 52), and to those who have given it more concerted attention, including Pascal Lefèvre (1998), Katalin Orbán (2014), Ian Hague (2014), and Karin Kukkonen (2015). But in this discussion of Meyer, I will first discuss some aspects of the phenomenology of comics reading that have been underexplored in the context of fandom, and then contrast my discussion with a recent, much differently situated vision of comics reading by Eszter Szép (2020).

One way to connect comics reading to comics fandom more generally, I suggest, is to develop a richer phenomenology of possession. It is notable that Meyer only films himself reading comic books he has actually bought; the video is, in effect, proof of purchase. The purchase itself is not shown; there have been no "visits to the comic store" videos on Meyer's channel, so far as I have been able to determine. Thus, as the video begins, the work of individual creators and the intellectual property of the corporation for which they work have already been brought into a corporeal encounter where the reader is in control. The connection between possession and embodied reading is crucial here; the act of holding and perusing what is now Meyer's property generates purchase in the sense of advantage and empowerment. In each video in which he reads a comic book, Meyer brings us into a bodily possession-action – more precisely, a tactile and ocular possession-process – whose goal is to judge the value of what is owned apart from the act of exchange that acquired it.

Thus, in these crudely filmed videos, we see the material and embodied traces of a struggle between reader and publisher in which there is a maximum contrast between what the reader has not been able to control and the ways the reader can now respond. The various stamps of the entities determining what

the reader can obtain from week to week and month to month (corporate logos), along with the other signs of commercial exchange (ad pages) and the labor of the creators who have made the comic (scripting, but also material, often embodied elements such as linework, inking, and color) all enter a readerly tribunal that has declared itself sovereign. Among the most striking features of the videos I am describing are the endings, in which Meyer typically decides either that the comic is valuable enough to keep or that it is bad enough to destroy. Often, if he decides the latter, Meyer physically rips the comic into pieces on camera, affirming the reader's power in the clearest material and bodily terms. Of course, this requires a sacrifice of some aspects of the collector's ethos. Yet, this sacrifice solidifies the reader's position as sovereign judge, not only of what is worth keeping, but also of what should, or should not, have been produced.

It is easy to point out that insofar as this affirmation of readerly empowerment is being filmed, it is still a performance, however raw and unscripted. It is likewise worth noting that, over time, some of Meyer's frequent talking points and turns of speech seem influenced by livestreams in which he reads comics while stating what is fed to him by his followers' comments. However, these clearly theatrical aspects only seem to further the conviction of Meyer's fans that what happens in these videos is no mere performative critique. This is not the action of the reader's body rehearsed, revised, or re-contextualized. The reader's body is itself the context, and in this context, a modicum of performance is permitted in the process of asserting agency and authority.

Thus, these videos claim a sort of primal critical authenticity, which is reconfirmed by the bodily judgement typically rendered at the end of each video. The possibility that the comic book may be torn to pieces seems to validate those occasions when it is not, and if Meyer occasionally decides to credit or even praise a comic he bought to "roast," his approval is understood to be as authentic as his attacks on the comics creators he despises. In one sense, Meyer's apparent freedom to defeat viewer expectation – not to mention a willingness to destroy a very recently purchased comic book – can indeed suggest the possibility of honest critical judgment. But the belief Meyer and many of his fans seem to have that his project is culturally and ethically coherent derives at least partly from a mythical sense that, in taking hold of a comic book and doing as he sees fit, Meyer as an embodied reader cannot act amiss. It is, apparently, irrelevant that making transphobic insults about a comics creator conflicts with offering constructive suggestions about different ways of writing and drawing characters. In the vision of comics reading Meyer embodies, so long as the reader is at the center, and so long as the reader's bodily agency is absolute, nothing the reader does can be wrongly destructive.

In a telling moment in one of his early videos, Meyer says of his developing channel: "I have this philosophy [. . .] that I always win. That I either legitimately like something or I have fun roasting it. So it's always win-win for me."[8] This is a strikingly utopian vision of comics consumption. Here, I use the term "utopian" in the broad sense proposed by Ernst Bloch (1986), in which any human cultural expression has a constructive and hopeful facet, no matter how destructive it is. Meyer offers a dream of a liberated agency existing outside the circulation of commodities and apart from cultural and moral norms for ordinary human interaction. In this mode of agency, one can advocate for humanistic values and complex representation in comics one moment, and be cruelly prejudiced the next, and there is no contradiction. Like the proverbial customer, the religious pontiff, or the absolute sovereign, the comics reader's body is always right. This body projects a sort of consumer's Cockaigne, in which almost all comics reading answers to the imperatives of enjoyment, and in which enjoyment, like virtue, is its own justification and its own reward.

Thus, Meyer provides an extreme contrast to the vision of comics reading recently offered by Eszter Szép in *Comics and the Body: Drawing, Reading, and Vulnerability* (2020). As this title might already suggest, Szép works from a scholarly discourse on drawing as bodily marking, connecting it to a discussion of comics reading and basing this connection on "the essentially embodied nature of both drawing and reading comics" (2020, 2). Focusing on non-fiction autobiographical comics, Szép argues that the material and embodied link between creator and reader is a site of vulnerability, and thus of ethical possibility: "Vulnerability allows for an ethical encounter with the Other, and this encounter [. . .] can also happen via the way embodied practices around comics allow performing vulnerability" (Szép 2020, 9). When the bodily record of drawing is encountered in the embodied act of reading, there is the possibility of "dialogue in which one's and the Other's vulnerability can be experienced and performed" (Szép 2020, 13). Such a dialogue can, Szép suggests, be transformative, "chang[ing] the parties involved" and offering "new ways of embodied understanding of not only the subject matter of a given comic but also the experience of vulnerability" (2020, 13). In offering this ethical possibility of mutual vulnerability, Szép deemphasizes the question of what enjoyment readers can or should experience. Whether the encounters that comics can encourage are pleasurable or not, their ethically transformative potential is what matters.

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8 In the video in question (*Comics MATTER w/Ya Boi Zack* 2017), Meyer observes that the particular comic he is discussing has in fact thwarted his "win-win" approach; however, the channel's basic premise is that this kind of loss is rare.

It is easy to see how the dynamic of comics production and consumption that Szép envisions might resonate with, and strengthen, the reformist aspects of fan studies as described by Deller. A fan community of shared vulnerabilities would presumably try to avoid marginalizing any of its members. It would thrive not on boundary policing to enforce norms, but on an acceptance of Otherness. Likewise, it would insist on being open to ongoing transformation of its values. But such a community would not be open to all fan values. Presumably, that of nostalgia would have to be sharply downgraded, since it would likely interfere with the reform or abolition of any conventional fan discourses not aligned with the principle of mutual vulnerability. Nor would such a comic reading community be able to do without boundary policing altogether; it would presumably reject readers like Richard C. Meyer.

Admittedly, this is a hypothetical without much application. Meyer seems to have little to no interest in the kind of non-fiction comics Szép discusses, or in the kind of experiences she argues they can enable. Likewise, Szép's model of vulnerability is simply less relevant to corporate comics consumption, since readers of mainstream superhero comics are often heavily invested in nostalgia, and are at the mercy of shifting corporate priorities. Mainstream comics publishers are vulnerable to lagging sales if they alienate fans, but because these publishers control the intellectual property to which fans want access, a genuinely equitable and mutual vulnerability between fans and publishers is not possible. And given these conditions, the appeal of Meyer's utopian projection of readerly sovereignty is clear. To a follower of Meyer, promoting the idea of a community of mutual vulnerability encompassing readers, creators, and publishers presumably looks far too much like being a docile consumer who will accept whatever a corporate publisher wants to sell next (it is no accident that Meyer refers constantly to putatively inferior, sycophantic, or otherwise dependent categories of subjectivity, particularly of male subjectivity: the "simp," the "beta cuck," the "purse puppy," etc.). For such readers, the moral incoherence of Meyer's videos, in which differing, often incompatible values clash, can easily be taken as a sign of readerly freedom from corporate control.

Meyer offers an enclosed, intra-bodily world where it does not matter what is lost, ethically speaking, so long as the reader, as consumer, can claim a win. It is striking that at least some of his followers are able to take this world as utopian – and thus implicitly as collective – despite being constantly presented with glaring signs of exclusion in many of his observations. Likewise, it is fair to observe that supporting Meyer means willing oneself not to see, or at least not to discuss,

his moral incoherence.[9] But it is also worth admitting that the alternative offered by Szép is far more persuasive if moral coherence can be found in the comics with which the reader is interacting, and if mutual vulnerability is possible between creators and readers. Short of these conditions, a call for readerly ethics – especially in the absence of an ability to make corresponding demands on publishers – is not fully extricable from the traditional delinquency policing that has so often been a part of critical approaches to comics. In the case of Meyer, I do not find this a distressing fact. But it does help to explain why his followers, if faced with the ethical imperatives suggested either by Deller or by Szép, might so easily interpret them as corporate propaganda or inauthentic and meddlesome activism. Such fans are right, or at least not completely wrong, to see reformist fan studies scholarship as part of a history of policing delinquent fans, though this scarcely proves the coherence or value of their agendas and tactics.

Meyer's observations about the positives and negatives of various comics titles are occasionally, at least to this reader, justifiable. For instance, sudden thematic shifts or changes of narrative direction, which are very common in mainstream superhero comics, sometimes do undermine meaningful interaction with a title, defying plausibility and, on occasion, moral coherence. When Meyer focuses on these problems and critiques corporate cynicism in narrative construction, what he says is sometimes no different from what fans who have no identification with Comicsgate, or with any corporate comics narrative universe, might say. Of course, there is bitter irony in the fact that many of the values Meyer supports – such as conventional standards of physical attractiveness for women characters – seem to come from his own consumption of corporate comics; the cynicism of their traditional visual fetishism regarding women's bodies is not a serious concern for him. Indeed, Meyer evidently believes comics should actively serve conventional standards for gender appearance and presentation, which he thinks of as "normal" – though he cannot, or at any rate does not, explain why these standards should then need constant reinforcement, or how they can so easily be threatened. In short, behind the utopian freedom Meyer seems to assert is a will-to-convention that clashes badly with his moments of critical insight and with his repeated, sometimes nearly hysterical, complaints that "SJW" superhero comics are "not normal." Likewise, the act of tearing a new comic book into pieces seems like a compulsive and fetishistic cover for a will-to-consume that can only be satisfied by a constant

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9 Here, I am obviously leaving aside followers who, judging by their comments below Meyer´s YouTube videos, are conscious and avowed racists, misogynists, Islamophobes, and transphobes; these readers see the moments when Meyer values the occasional "SJW" title either as a cover for his real agenda, or as a disappointment.

supply of new comics. Practically speaking, only corporate models of comics creation can supply this need; single-creator work of the kind Szép discusses cannot produce the volume that Meyer, who sometimes posts multiple reading videos a day, seems to demand.

I make these observations not to question Meyer's authority as a comics reader. I do not foresee that I can change the minds of his supporters and, frankly, the rest of comics fandom requires no further arguments against him. Rather, I want to emphasize that the harmfulness of the way Meyer reads comics is impossible fully to disentangle from its utopian aspects, and that this entanglement, far from being universal, is symptomatic of corporate comics production and reception in particular. The sovereign body Meyer projects when he films himself reading comic books arises precisely in the shadow of corporate media production. In a different reading scenario, with different relations between reader and producer, it might appear less attractive to at least some of his followers. There is nothing unusual about a consumer advocacy movement – which, despite larger humanist claims, is all that Comicsgate can claim for itself – engaging in bullying and bigotry, either as a tactic or (depending on actor and context) as its real purpose. But the aggressive and self-contradictory fetishism of Meyer's way of reading, its enactment of sovereignty on the ground of irrepressible need, is specific to corporate comics consumption. Meyer's body asserts itself in a context where – and partly because – Meyer as a reader is vulnerable both to corporate priorities and to charges of delinquency that have a long and monotonous history in both public and scholarly discourse on comics.

In studying the body of Richard C. Meyer, I have tried neither to suggest that he deserves more sympathy than he has received, nor to claim that traditional discourse on delinquent comics fans has at last found an appropriate target. Rather, I have attempted to articulate the aspects of Meyer's existence and actions that raise specific dilemmas, whether old or new, for the scholar of fan studies. Inspired by the ethical critical program sensitively articulated by Deller, and/or by the compelling vision of comics production and consumption expressed by Szép, we can offer Meyer's followers a way out of a cycle of outrage and disappointment that (barring a complete takeover of corporate comics that Comicsgate followers cannot achieve) will presumably never end. Yet, we can already anticipate how this offer will be received even by followers who approve some of what Meyer says without fully embracing his bigotry: either as "simping" for cynical and indifferent corporations that control the intellectual properties they love, or as high-minded policing of their freedom as readers, or both.

A fair amount of scholarly work in fan studies has at least one thing in common with Comicsgate: an unjustified assumption that when fans engage with corporately produced art in unconventional ways that highlight their agency,

they are, by default, doing something good. In the case of fan studies, however, this assumption has more tangled implications. If it is fair to note that Meyer's apparently incompatible critical and fan impulses make his YouTube content incoherent at best, it is also important to admit that fan studies has difficulty reconciling an impulse to promote and defend fan cultures with an accompanying impulse to right their wrongs. Thus, I must emphasize not only that the ethical call I have imagined offering to Comicsgate adherents is not fully extricable from the delinquency assignment and policing that have often been aimed at comics reading, but also that such policing is already in the background of any fan studies discourse that expects fan activity is, or should be, socially productive. My judgment of Meyer and my imagined invitation to his followers both purport to make the comics readers I am discussing more vulnerable. But neither gesture makes me more vulnerable to them, at least not within the terms of the scholarly discourse I am wielding. Fan studies scholars cannot be critical adjudicators only – not without also, in one way or another, being the police.

Thus, looking at Meyer's actions and my critical account of them together, we can see two irresolvable tensions. One is a tension between ethics and policing; the other, between fan agency and commerce. When we consider the harm Meyer has done to others in fandom and in comics production, along with the fact that he seems compelled to buy what he often hates and destroys, we may be tempted to decide these tensions only become real problems because comics fans like Meyer exist. But this would be too simple; Meyer's destructive presence in comics fandom simply makes certain pre-existing difficulties in fan studies more glaring. And in focusing on Meyer's body in particular, I have attempted to show the fraught roles that embodied reading continues to play in comics fandom.

Only Meyer can be responsible for his actions. But what his body means, as a reading body that consumes and judges comics, is as old as the anti-comics crusades of the mid-twentieth century and as ambiguous as the various impulses (to collect, to discard, to venerate, to destroy) of comics fandom itself. For the length and breadth of this complexity, there is, as of yet, no fully responsible accounting. Going forward, however, an even fuller sense of complexity will likely be necessary. When we consider the new possibilities for vulnerability among creators and consumers suggested by Szép, we can see even more clearly how, in the context of comics, the body remains an especially sensitive site of potential pleasure, violence, tenderness, and otherness. And if this irreducibly phenomenological site is what often divides comics culture in sadly conventional ways – through racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia, among other things – it is, however painfully, also a potentially unifying factor in our consideration of comics culture as such.

Coda

The discomfiting link between fan studies scholarship, however ethically attuned and socially productive, and traditional delinquency assignment and policing should not keep us from noting other aspects of Comicsgate that have received only intermittent attention in much of the foregoing discussion. One such aspect is that, as Aaron Kashtan (2018) rightly observes, the difficult relationship Comicsgate followers have with the corporately controlled products they consume can take the form of bigoted hostility towards other comics fans. Further, as Megan Condis and Mel Stanfill (2021) argue, such hostility has, in some instances, ironically resembled the bigotries of mid-century anti-comics discourse.[10] Moreover, such bigotry can be connected to larger sexist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, and white supremacist discourses and movements – and in any such case, it is probably tied less to anger at corporate media than to these discourses and movements.[11]

An obviously related fact is that, in the context of online fan discourse and online social and scholarly life in general, Comicsgate and related movements are not distant phenomena that all scholars can take up or dispense with at will. Quite the contrary; there are scholars who have paid a price, in threats to their well-being or other harassment, for daring to disagree with Meyer and others with similar tactics and agendas. And this, in turn, reminds us of how complicated the valences of cultural policing can be. To claim authority to speak to fans, and to appeal to them to change their conduct, is not in itself either a wrong act or a praiseworthy one, and its functions can alter widely from one context, and one scholarly subject position, to another. I have not (to date) been targeted by fans through online harassment or other means. But scholars who have been so targeted, particularly after speaking to matters such as Comicsgate, might relate quite differently to their scholarly authority. Most obviously, they might see it either as a site of immediate personal struggle, since to exercise it further is to risk further harassment, and/or as a potential defense or amelioration, if there is consolation or empowerment in speaking back to one's aggressors with authority. And further, they must invariably consider such harassment in relation to any hostility directed at them on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, or other factors. Thus – as if the entire question of Comicsgate were not already discomfiting enough – many scholars might, in

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10 Perhaps even more ironically, some Comicsgate proponents express bias or bigotry that Fredric Wertham, the most infamous of mid-century anti-comics crusaders, condemned in his own day; see again Condis and Stanfill (2021, esp. 15–19).

11 See again Blodgett (2020).

conscience, rightly be compelled to a "Back the Blue" attitude of support for fellow scholars of fandom who are victimized by some of the fans they study. At any rate, a full understanding of the complex valences of policing in the context of fan studies can usefully chasten any fantasies we might have (if indeed any such fantasies remain) that scholars of fandom can achieve positions of neutrality or objectivity outside the groups they study.

With this in mind, I turn back briefly to Natasha Whiteman's (2018) consideration of self/other relations, especially in the context of online fan studies. Whiteman's account of this issue is admirably broad and complex, noting the various factors at work in the choices scholars make either to treat fans with sympathetic identification, as if they are subjects with valued status, or to treat them with critical distance, as if they are problematic objects. Whiteman explores not only "the ways valued [sic] judgments about social categories and groupings may be used as the basis for the justification of ethical decision-making in online research" but also "how naturalized and common-sense distinctions can come undone when they are put under pressure" (2018, 521). However, one distinction that does not "come undone" in Whiteman's discussion is the idea that critical identification and a sense of shared worldview, on the one hand, and critical distance and moral repugnance, on the other, tend to be mutually exclusive.

This assumption seems logical, but it works best when the question of self/ other relations is a somewhat abstract matter of shared (or disparate) concepts and values. It is less functional when this question is shaped by immediate concerns like personal safety, social and political power and, along with the foregoing factors, shared identity markers. I find it pointless to see Richard C. Meyer as a repulsive object, but this is partly because, seeing him as a subject with standing in comics fandom and an agent making his own choices, I affirm that he should be held responsible for what he says and does. And here, assuredly, some of the scholar's most typically reliable distinctions collapse – in my view, productively so. If my desire to understand Meyer is inseparable from a moral imperative to object to what he has done, partly because I am a fan myself, this is not due to an imbalance between critical distance and group identification, much less because of some inappropriate mix of the "scholarly" and the "personal." Scholarly rigor is precisely what demands an understanding of Meyer's body as contiguous with my own, and thus as a vector of responsibility to which I should speak. The fact that Meyer and I are white men overlaps this demand without being identical to it, just as, in the context of fandom, the gendered and racial markers of any comics reader's body are often neither totally incidental nor finally determinative. And all these complex realities likewise overlap, but do not totally coincide with, the histories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and political and cultural policing that have shaped comics culture.

At any rate, and to repeat the burden of this discussion, it should not surprise us that at the center of such a dense nexus of concerns, where relations between scholar and fan, reader and text, subject and object, critical authority and social well-being, political power and cultural validity all seem to waver, there is the body itself as a site of empowerment and disempowerment, intimacy and cruelty, intellectual understanding and affective intuition. If, as Alain Badiou has argued, the twentieth century was an era of "the unfeeling manipulation of human material" (2008, 7), in this new century there is the challenge of achieving an understanding of the body that is simultaneously more "feeling" and more critically aware than many of us may find comfortable. To anyone living through the realities of (for instance) racism today, this is perhaps not much of a discovery. But to a great deal of scholarship on comics, and on fandom, it is an abiding challenge.[12]

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12 On the difficulties of bringing matters of race into fandom studies, see Woo (2017), Pande (2018), and Stanfill (2018).

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Matthew J. Smith
Pilgrimage to Hall H
Fan Agency at Comic-Con

Several years ago, I found myself waiting in one of the ubiquitous lines that one must endure as part of the Comic-Con International experience in San Diego, California. I had been leading a student-centered field study for over a decade by that time and enjoyed my share of chance celebrity encounters throughout the convention center (including everyone from "Bright Knight" Adam West to, of all people, CNN's Larry King). However, the most remarkable of these took place while I was waiting to see a DC Universe panel in Room 6DE, one of the cavernous halls that host thousands of excited fans. By way of definition, a "panel" at Comic-Con is a program with topic experts, oftentimes celebrities, industry insiders, or fans themselves, presenting to an audience. Because of the panelists' recognition – or the juicy insights they promise to tease – there are typically more people who want into a panel than can fit even into these unusually large rooms and so lines form to access these experiences. Such lines can stretch on for some length and often there are disappointed attendees who never make it into a given panel. Thus, Comic-Con regulates these lines with some effort, carefully marking where they form and policing adherence to obeying the rules of staying within them through line managers. In this instance, I had worked my way up to the very front of the line, just before the panel presentation was about to commence. With several hundred additional fans at my back, I patiently awaited an open seat that would allow me to enter the room. Suddenly a hefty middle-aged man approached the gatekeeper from the opposite direction and asked to be allowed in. He explained to the Comic-Con volunteer who stood guard at the door that he was on the upcoming panel. Incredulously, she declined to let him in. At a loss, he pulled out his business card, flashed it, and said, "I'm Mike Carlin with DC." She was unresponsive to his identification. He looked deflated, and in that moment, I stopped being a silent observer and became a vocal advocate. As a longtime reader of DC Comics and a dedicated Superman fan during Carlin's run as editor of the series in early 1990s, I recognized the man even before he had introduced himself. "Ma'am," I addressed the gatekeeper. "This gentleman is Mike Carlin. He's a vice president with DC Comics." I no sooner finished my testimonial then she waved Mr. Carlin right in. In gratitude he handed me his card with a buoyant "Thank you" piercing his lips as he rushed in to join the panel. (I subsequently made good use of that card and had the opportunity to interview Mike for several projects.)

While I have looked back fondly upon that episode in the years since it happened, I had not previously reflected on the importance of what had transpired in terms of fan agency until I began to write this contribution. The volunteer corps who help manage lines – and so many more tasks that enable Comic-Con to run smoothly – are primarily made up of fans. In exchange for several hours of service, these volunteers earn admittance to Comic-Con activities on the other days of the week. The Room 6DE gatekeeper probably knew a lot about different aspects of popular culture, but she perhaps did not possess an encyclopedic knowledge of comic book executives, and so she had little reason to otherwise trust a random person approaching her out of line. In fact, her job was to maintain order. But she clearly took a fellow fan's endorsement over some business-card touting man. My credibility seemed to be vested in little more than my willingness to make my way through the snaking line that led to her door, but that was just enough to win her approval and, consequently, Mike Carlin's passage. Like the volunteer gatekeeper, I was a fellow fan, and I believe she likely perceived my credibility to supersede that of some random guy trying to cut the line at Comic-Con. On that day, my fandom gave me a persuasive power that no business card could supersede. In the 9–5 world a business card might open doors for you, but at Comic-Con it is your time in line that makes your credible. While this encounter with Mike Carlin was a memorable moment in my history as a fan, it also proved to be a memorable moment in my exercising fan agency.

Fandom at Comic-Con

This chapter reflects on the state of research into fan agency, notably as it grapples with issues of self-identity, power, and gender, all as practiced at San Diego's Comic-Con International, the largest tradeshow and fan phenomenon in North America. Over the course of its fifty-year history, San Diego's Comic-Con International or SDCC, as it is often abbreviated, has grown to become the premiere pop culture event in North America. Although Comic-Con has focused on comics, film, and science fiction fandoms since its inception, San Diego's geographic proximity to Hollywood has made it a particularly convenient destination for high profile representation from the film industry in recent decades. But it is the capacity crowds of 130,000 attendees each year that have amazed me since my first trip to the legendary show in July 2006. That visit inspired me to begin to offer a field study program for students interested in examining the dynamics between the cultural industries and the fan communities they cater to, and I have had the honor of seeing Comic-Con through the eyes of well-over 100 student

participants over a decade and a half of annual journeys, or as I like to think of them, pilgrimages. I mean no disrespect to any religion in selecting that term, but the comparison is an apt one in my experience: Fans travel to San Diego filled with every bit of zeal and through every kind of challenge to have an experience that for many is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Like other pilgrimages, the journey to Comic-Con may change the pilgrim traveler, giving them a heightened awareness of their role in popular culture; or it may merely reify their participation in the religious consumption of products and intellectual property offered up by the cultural industries. Of course, the global COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancelation of SDCC in 2020 and 2021 (as events switched to a series of "Comic-Con @ Home" programs online). Up until that point, students from across the country (as well as a few from Canada and India) helped me appreciate multiple aspects of Comic-Con, from the rigors of line culture via the joys of cross-gender role play (or "crossplay") to some of the most obscure subcultural aspects embedded within and around the San Diego Convention Center (e.g., Disney pin collectors crashing the Con).

When Jan-Noël Thon, Vanessa Ossa, and Lukas R.A. Wilde invited me to speak about "Agency in Fan Cultures" as a part of the 2020 ComFor (the German Society for Comic Studies) conference, I began to think not only about what I have learned from my students' experiences but also about the growing body of published work examining San Diego Comic-Con as a cultural phenomenon in and of itself. My colleague Ben Bolling and I contributed to this trend back when we published *It Happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic Essays on a Pop Culture Phenomenon* with McFarland in 2014. In it we share select essays by students who participated in the first several years of my field study program. The book examines everything from the etiquette of waiting in line to the rhetorical choices comic book publishers make when addressing their fans. But even before we published these initial reflections on the phenomenon of fandom, the godfather of fandom research, Henry Jenkins, had already offered his initial reflections as a participant observer a few years earlier. As Jenkins (2012) defined it, Comic-Con is each of the following: an invasion, a homecoming, a publicity event, a jury, a consciousness-raising session, a costume party, a networking event, a marketplace, a life support system, a classroom, and a ritual. It is "a gathering of tribes" (Jenkins 2012, 23), and is far more than the homogenous cosplay exercise so often portrayed in the mass media. (One of my student participants once estimated that merely one in ten attendees participated in costume play.) Rather, Comic-Con is the "meeting point between transmedia commercial culture and a grassroots participatory culture" (Jenkins 2012, 23). That is, Comic-Con creates the intersection point between the cultural industries and the fans who consume, adore, and adapt their intellectual property.

Jenkins characterization of Comic-Con as a "gathering of tribes" (2012, 23) is an apt metaphor. Over the years, my students and I have been repeatedly asked if the Con has strayed too far from the comics that gave the event its namesake. Longtime attendees who clearly evidence a bias towards comics will ask us if the attention of Hollywood in particular has diluted the Con's perceived purpose to service comics fandom. However, I respectfully point out that the convention's founders stated at least three fandoms were being honored from the start, namely comics, film, and science fiction. This, in fact, is in keeping with the vision of one of SDCC's founders, Shel Dorf, who had been an organizer for the Detroit Triple Fan Fair prior to his relocation to Southern California (Comic-Con 2009). The "triple" fandoms in question were of course comics, film, and science fiction. Clearly, servicing a multitude of fandoms was baked into the mix from the start. Implicit in the question, though, is a regret that the Con has somehow sold out to Hollywood at the cost of depriving comics of their due.

While it may be true that the audiences for film programs at SDCC are among the largest, there are quantifiably more slots given to the comics panels than any other genre at the convention. Starting with the publication of its 2011 paper program, SDCC organizers began to color-code a scheduling grid to indicate whether panels were targets for comics, animation, movies, television, games, book/genre fiction, or other popular art forms. While functionally this is an eye-catching way to guide the average readers towards their favorite programming, at the time I could not help but read this move as a rhetorical retort to the naysayers who claimed Comic-Con had strayed too far from its namesake. A quick scan of the last available programming book from 2019 shows that the convention continues to devote a majority of panels to the comics industry (e.g., "Comic Creator Connection All-Stars") and comics-related topics (e.g., "Breaking Borders: Chicano Popular Arts and Comics") (Sassaman 2019). But this colorful patchwork image also supports Jenkins's claim that this is a single event serving more than one fandom; it is not the gathering of *a* tribe but the gathering of tribes.

Fandom and Agency

Given the widespread media attention it has won, Comic-Con is likely the most visible outward display of fandom's social tendencies. Media outlets from *Entertainment Tonight* to *Conan* telecast from the site, and magazines like *TV Guide* and *Entertainment Weekly* publish special editions to honor it; and while celebrity news may be the cornerstone of their coverage, the interaction with

and among the fans is also spotlighted. In his recent book *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture*, Benjamin Woo (2018) points out that fans are drawn to social activities. While geeks may value the acquisition of knowledge and the building of collections as defining characteristics of their status, they also regularly seek out social interactivity. For Woo, one "gets a life" by participating in such social activities. Indeed, much of the Comic-Con experience is about meeting, sharing, and celebrating with others among one's tribe or tribes. I certainly saw this in the panels designed to reunite communities, such as the "Annual Jack Kirby Tribute Panel." Year after year, I would observe familiar faces gathering to remember one of comics' greatest creators, Jack Kirby, co-creator of many of comics' most enduring icons – from Captain America to the X-Men. My students also informed me about some of the late night, off-program gatherings that they attended. Some participants were motivated by a desire for chance celebrity encounters, while others simply were driven by the joy of hanging out with people who shared their interests. SDCC ongoing popularity is further evidence of a desire among fans to socialize beyond what they may do within their local communities or even online. The convention first sold out admission passes in 2007 and has consistently done so each year through 2019. But the social aspect is really only half of the equation when it comes to Comic-Con.

While the opportunity to engage with one's fellow fans may be a significant draw for many participants, the tradeshow aspects of the Con are also appealing. As Jenkins explained, Comic-Con positions fans at the forefront of producers' promotional campaigns; they are empowered to become media influencers, as those in the cultural industries seek the Comic-Con "bounce" (Jenkins 2012, 27), the bump in favorable public perception that comes from discerning favor of the Comic-Con crowd. This much is evident to even the most casual visitor to San Diego during SDCC each summer. Pole banners proudly proclaim the convention's arrival on every lamppost leading from the airport to downtown; television networks like Fox purchase "wraps" that encircle and cover the trolley cars to promote their latest television series; and film companies commission customized window clings to transform downtown hotels into twenty-story billboards for upcoming film releases – all to win convention attendees attention and favor. The fans favorable reaction and subsequent word-of-mouth (or word via tweet) promotion are believed to help drive a contagious popular reaction to forthcoming properties.

Melanie Kohnen (2019) provides a particular perspective into how fan agency is exercised in examining the social media bloggers who write about the SDCC experience. In an in-depth case study of two such blogs, the *SDCC Unofficial Blog* and *Crazy 4 Comic-Con*, Kohnen notes that "[t]he ever-shifting experience of SDCC is the text of which con-bloggers are fans" (2019, 93). In other words, these

bloggers are not focused on passing along the industry buzz – or promoting the cultural industry's anticipated "bounce" – so much as documenting how fans go about gaining access to the Comic-Con experience, or as some have phrased it, a quest to navigate "line-con." Kohnen notes that while most other fan studies look at the relationship of fans to texts, Comic-Con is about space and time, and more like a pilgrimage likened unto music and film festivals. These blogs focus on mastering space and emphasize memory-making (e.g., getting into Hall H, a venue where some of the most high-profile panels are featured). Bloggers are good examples for considering fan agency as they can be affirmational fans (those that, say, celebrate their favorite creators) as well as transformational fans (those that use the blog to launch their own careers like Tony Kim's fashion line, Hero Within).

Indeed, the body of scholarly work into Comic-Con demonstrates that fans are far from mere dupes for the cultural industries. They are active receivers – and in turn shapers – of meanings from the event. Agreeing to attend Comic-Con is far from agreeing to surrender one's sense of perspective or ability to re-shape the materials produced by the cultural industries, although that power is not *always* equally distributed between the parties.

Power Redistributed and Reified

Although some bloggers have proven capable of capitalizing on their expertise thanks to the Con, Erin Hanna cautions that, for most members of the fan community, this collaboration between cultural industries and fans exhibits an uneven power dynamic, which falls decidedly in favor of the media industries:

> [I]n bringing audiences ever closer to the media they consume, these interactions also perpetuate an underlying power structure that allows the media industries to capitalize on an increasingly engaged consumer base while reaffirming their own economic and cultural power as producers. (Hanna 2014, 12)

According to Hanna, the cultural industries seek to deploy the fans as a part of their shadow labor economy, and fandom itself is defined not necessarily by *in*clusivity but *ex*clusivity: "[E]xclusivity is not defined by the presence of a special experience or a special group, but by the power to produce absences, and by what and who is excluded" (Hanna 2014, 80). For its part, SDCC has sold out of event tickets for much of the past decade, clearly creating a limited experience when compared to demand. The lucky attendees overcome exclusory boundaries to participate in Comic-Con, and become "tastemakers" accordingly.

In further support of a perspective on unbalanced power, Ann Gilbert (2018) argues that Comic-Con reinforces the role of conspicuous consumption among fans. The industry practices "hail" consumers and affirms that the *good* fan is the *consuming* fan. Participation in SDCC is actually consumption, and fans reinforce the promotion of the industry. This is evident in the way programs are scheduled at Comic-Con. The successive panel line-up, which one is often obliged to sit through in order to access one's preferred panel, introduces fans to other properties of the sponsor, encouraging audiences to consume more media. For instance, there were several years where I would show up at Ballroom 20 several hours early for a presentation about my favorite CW television series such as *Arrow* or *Flash*, and consequently was party to preceding panels for other Warner Brothers content beforehand. As established in my opening anecdote, if I chanced waiting until the CW panel I was interested in was scheduled to start, I might find a line dozens deep of other fans hoping to see their favorite show that was scheduled later in the same room. It is a very circular experience: You wait to see shows you are not interested in while the person next to you sits through the program waiting for their favorite. In these programs, the panelists on stage praise fans for their loyalty and reward them with exclusive access. Attendees have the privilege, as one fellow fan put, to breathe the same air as the celebrities; they also have access to more information than other fans. (Admittedly, the internet and the increased coverage by media has made the latter increasingly less coveted.) Moreover, the trade floor is a series of storefronts, where fans are given promotional items to "wear, carry, or collect" (Gilbert 2018, 325). But these giveaways aren't replacements for the products they are asked to buy; rather, by brandishing these giveaways, attendees become walking advertisements. Such exclusives "are rewards that cannot be bought, but must be earned through loyalty, devotion, and luck" (Gilbert 2018, 327). For example, the Lego Group has not only sold Comic-Con exclusive sets over the past decade on the tradeshow floor, but they have also distributed exclusive mini-figures to fans. These mini-figures cannot be purchased in any other venue (save the resale market), and so accessing them is uniquely a reward for Comic-Con attendance.

Gilbert (2017) also speaks of this asymmetrical power imbalance, but recognizes that fans are not mere dupes. Comic-Con can represent an allocation of authority in the producer/fan dynamic; both parties have complimentary interests. The power is uneven, but all sides see the benefits: "[P]articipants of SDCC are cognizant of the roles they play in rearticulating dynamics of fan/producer relationships" (Gilbert 2017, 357). Buying and acquiring are a part of fan identity, with Comic-Con exclusives bringing with them a particular "cachet" for attendees. Almost all of the exclusive information made available to attendees quickly comes out online, but the thrill of being present matters: "[L]ive experiences bear greater

symbolic capital" (Gilbert 2017, 362). Gilbert goes on to explain that Comic-Con is populated by paratexts that help market the cultural industries' products. These paratexts are there to test audience engagement *and* promote long-term marketing. Fans are perceived as bellwethers for how audiences will receive new media products, and so producers want to enlist fans in becoming marketers themselves. In exchange, fans get to pursue fannish pursuits like cosplay and commerce instead of mundane responsibilities like housework and office paperwork. Of course, producers downplay what they reap, and fresh content is a reward for fans.

By way of example, I point to copious amounts of Con-related swag that has, regrettably, accumulated in my basement after 15 visits to San Diego. Among the items that I have been freely gifted, perhaps the most relevant to Gilbert's (2017) point are the wearable items, which can transform wearers into walking billboards during and after the Con. The most prevalent and utterly shameless of these are the "swag bags" given away by Warner Brothers at check-in since 2010. The bags are 22 inches tall and 19 inches wide and feature a host of different Warner Brothers properties on them each year (e.g., various permutations of the *Batman* franchise, *The Big Bang Theory*, or *Supernatural*). Tens of thousands of Comic-Con participants strap these monstrosities on their backs and wander the San Diego Convention Center and through the city's Gaslamp District for the duration of the event, openly marketing whatever selection of intellectual property is pasted on the obverse side of the bag. But even here, we see fandom reassert its potential power to reshape media content, literally. Early on in the distribution of the bags, a number of talented tailors began to take the raw material of these bags and refashion them into dresses overnight. Young women would show up the second day of the convention adorned in a mini-dress made of the bag's raw materials. In later years, I saw all manner of repurposing of this material into items worn or carried by fans, from handbags to full-on suits. There's also a very active culture of trading the unaltered bags among attendees that I, too, have participated in. Admittedly, fans may well have found new ways to repurpose Warner Brothers' giveaways, but that did not necessarily diminish the impact of having Warner Brothers' brands exposed by an agreeable fandom.

The Feminist Critique

As some scholars have noted, the rewards of attendance and participation are not equally distributed because not all fans are equally valued, and most especially female fans. As Kohnen (2014) has indicated, industry panelists often reassure the audience that they are fans, too; however, many of these insiders are

fanboy auteurs who service "affirmational fandom." That is, they affirm those who support the dominant, typically masculine narrative. Fans who challenge the dominant reader, notably feminists, are not welcomed and some are even mocked. In one of saddest instances in Comic-Con history, male protestors vocally discouraged fans of the romantic vampire film series *Twilight* from participating in the 2009 Con, confronting *Twilight* fans with negative signs and verbal taunts as the *Twilight* fans waited in line to see the cast of the popular films. One of my student participants, Melissa Miller (2014), wrote about the backlash she observed at the 2011 event and the media framing of it, noting strategies that *Twilight* fans used to reframe the narratives told about them. Likewise, other fans who would adapt a given narrative (e.g., fan-fiction writers) are often encouraged to stay out at the margins rather than be considered one of the tribes welcomed into the convention.

Suzanne Scott (2019) has written at length about the growing industrial and fan-cultural efforts to marginalize female fans over roughly the past decade. In her book *Fake Geek Girls*, Scott examines

> how the mainstreaming of fan culture has been marked by a backlash from (predominantly white, cishet) male fans, reflecting the growing cultural influence of the alt-right and Men's Rights movements, and refracting the media industry's gendered messaging about which 'fans' they value within convergence culture. (2019, 4)

Some male fans claim the culture is purely male and some marketers want the gendered differences to persist. Scott points out that Jenkins's *Convergence Culture* (2006) highlights that intellectual property owners sometimes chide fans for creative impulses, but that he neglects to define that exercising creativity can be one of the ways female audiences most often interact. As Scott (2019, 10) notes, it is a trope in fandom literature to knock down the Frankfurt School for dismissing fans as dupes of the cultural industries.

Certainly, there are numerous elements of SDCC that can be read as perpetuating a masculinist culture. The regularity and numerousness of young women portraying "Slave Leia" in their cosplay selections underscores a climate that objectifies women for the viewing pleasure of men. (The costuming involves the bikini-like outfit Carrie Fischer wore in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi* [1983] while a prisoner in chains of the crime lord Jabba the Hutt.) In fact, numerous cosplayers are dressed to draw attention to their bodies in ways that fulfill stereotypical expectations about gender objectification. In seeming opposition to fulfilling the culture's expectations is the subversive efforts of "crossplayers" who costume play a character that is typically not the same gender as they are. Thus, a man might portray the female character of the Black Widow or a woman might dress as the male character Captain America. Such creative exploration of the meaning

of the original characters calls into critique our collective gendered expectations (Thomas 2014), but it is certainly beyond what the intellectual property owners would sanction. Marvel would be unlikely to embrace or endorse this transmutation of its intellectual property.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to articulate here, the dynamics of fan agency at Comic-Con are complex. Like Chaucer's mythical travelers on their pilgrimage to Canterbury, the stories of the pilgrims on their way to San Diego Comic-Con are varied, interesting, uniquely tailored to their personalities, sometime bawdy, and worth reconsidering. As a growing body of literature can attest, Comic-Con provides a forum for the exercise of agency, but that exercise can be co-opted by corporate interests that seek to exploit it, or it may be pushed back upon by chauvinistic voices shouting down its free and innovative practice. There is clearly more yet to learn about these practices, as they are exercised and as they continue to develop, and that is why I am pleased to be a part of a forthcoming research initiative called "Storming the Con." Coordinated by Ben Woo at Carleton University, the research team will pull on the expertise of scholars like the previously cited Gilbert, Hanna, Kohnen, Scott, along with Shawna Kidman and games studies expert Felan Parker to explore producer-intermediary-audience relations in the mainstream commercial arts through the lens of San Diego Comic-Con. Plans are to conduct a group ethnographic investigation of Comic-Con in 2023 and expand our understanding of fan phenomena in the context of its largest gathering. I look forward to supporting the work that my collaborators will generate from this initiative and return with greater details about those findings in subsequent ComFor presentations. Ideally, those travelers will shed even more insights into the pilgrimages to Comic-Con.

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Mel Gibson

Librarians, Agency, Young People, and Comics

Graphic Account and the Development of Graphic Novel Collections in Libraries in Britain in the 1990s

In the mid to late twentieth century in Britain, the comics medium was often wrongly characterized as only aimed at and suitable for children and young people. Equally inaccurately, the medium was simultaneously seen by many adults, whether parents or professionals, as sometimes dangerous for that audience. When combined, these contradictory views created tensions around understandings of both childhood and comics. These tensions can be understood in various ways, but in this chapter the approach is to describe a series of interrelations and shifting networks of relationships between groups of actors, in line with actor-network theory as developed by Bruno Latour and others (Law and Moser 2002). These actors include people in various roles, objects (comics and graphic novels), institutions (whether government, the library, or the family), and concepts (childhood, morality, and literacy). Initially, agency was located with adult professionals in this evolving media configuration, but as the chapter explores, this becomes a network where "it is no longer easy to determine the locus of agency, to point to one place and say with certainty that action emerges from that point rather than from somewhere else" (Law and Moser 2002, 3). Both agency and network can be argued to have shifted in response to the various actors involved in the assemblage *Graphic Account* (Barker 1993), where the action emerged from a number of points, both human and textual.

In Britain, the initial distribution of agency around comics in general extended through the 1950s and onwards, as various actors, both individuals and groups of professional adults, sought to ban or censor comics. This included teachers and librarians arguing that the medium had a negative impact on literacy, including George Pumphrey (1954, 1955, 1964). There were also broader concerns about comics undermining the morality of young people through their form and content (a variant of media effects and moral panics incorporating what John Locke termed a "tabula rasa" or blank slate understanding of the young [Kehily 2015, 5]), and so in turn impacting upon a dominant cultural construction of childhood relating it to innocence (Kassem et al. 2010; Kehily 2015). Another key actor was the British Communist Party, which characterized comics from the USA as an aspect of American imperialism (Barker 1984). Finally, even home-grown humor comics actually

aimed at children, such as *The Beano* (D.C. Thomson 1938–), were criticized, mainly for their anti-authoritarian tendencies, although George Gale in an article in the *Times Educational Supplement* notably described the characters in them as "violent and deformed" (1971, 6).

Constructions of childhood and youth (and actual young people) are part of this interaction, along with comics, as the above suggests, but as elements typically seen as non-agentic, or as unable to be agentic without experiencing corruption (and so in need of protection). That agency is attached unproblematically to adults and seen as inappropriate for the child or young person may be read as being about resisting potentially challenging alternative readings of comics, as medium and as individual items, and resisting alternative understandings of childhood and youth. In this complex network of materials, activities, and persons, then, power is distributed across the "intersecting performance of multiple discourses and logics" (Law and Moser 2002, 6), yet there are voices and objects that are excluded.

Graphic Account: Contributors as Actors and Professional Agency

The discourses about comics outlined above, and the perspectives on childhood that were linked with them, were inherited by later professionals. However, as noted above, this chapter discusses a set of actors that challenged these dominant discourses and aimed to destabilize them. It may be read as an attempt to resist hegemonic meanings and readings of the comics medium in relation to childhood and youth. Edited by Keith Barker (1993) and published by the Youth Libraries Group, *Graphic Account: The Selection and Promotion of Graphic Novels in Libraries for Young People* (hereafter the title is shortened to *Graphic Account*) took a positive view of the newly developing trend for publishing graphic novels, seeing them as suitable for inclusion in the collections of both school and public libraries. It also served to produce subjects in complex ways and distributed power and agency differently. For instance, the contributors located themselves as engaged with the medium of comics, some as fans, thus crossing boundaries between professional and personal expertise and becoming a different kind of actor.

Professional agency could be seen as being at stake in this context, something revealed in relation to the language used around an interest in the medium. For instance, John Wilkins, one of the contributors, said that an exhibition he was involved in had the result that "a number of members of library staff 'came

out' as enthusiasts" (Barker 1993, 19). What the use of the term "came out" suggests is a professional view of engaging with comics as transgressive. Further, professional agency was also destabilized and decentralized in the way contributors positioned young readers as stakeholders and actors, potentially changing the complex circuits of exchange between adults and children. Thus, children and young adults might be agentic regarding collection development, rather than simply the beneficiaries of decisions made in their best interests by professionals. Services, as Wendy Stainton Rogers (2015, 101–119) states, that operate in the best interests of the child may not involve consultation, or notions of voice. This dismisses young people as agentic or as actors in the sense of entities that catalyze or cause chains of action.

In discussing reader engagement in a way resistant to media effects theory, the *Graphic Account* contributors also addressed the dominant discourse and social construction of childhood and youth as a time of vulnerability and inexperience. In a library context, children and young people are typically constrained as actors, for instance by only being allowed to borrow from the children's library, where stock considered suitable to the age group by adults is located. However, *Graphic Account* argued that they should be enabled to change that environment to better meet their aspirations rather than adjust their aspirations to the space, thus moving beyond "bounded agency" (Evans 2002, 262). The contributors argued that this could involve contributing expertise in selecting stock or driving change via the requests system. To request a book, one would fill in a form and pay a small fee, but this can involve groups of people consciously working together, indicating through the quantity of requests that there is a desire for specific titles, or media. The process would then be that library staff would decide if a book or other object might be purchased and then loaned to the individual, and then either put into stock, or sent to a central repository. Alternatively (with less impact) a requested book might be borrowed via Inter Library Loan.

Objects and Spaces as Actors

It can be argued that the development of graphic novel collections across British public library services was stimulated by *Graphic Account* as a catalyst causing chains of action (although other factors, such as changing government policies, also played a part). The use of advisory texts is especially important in relation to the possible inclusion of new stock and services, particularly those seen as potentially problematic, or troubling of previously existing systems. In

Graphic Account, the contributing authors, as part of that object as well as independent entities, advocated for the medium, trying to encourage and enthuse, so becoming entangled with other actors in the form of people, institutions, and texts. As one of the human actors involved, I hope to give some indication of what kind of interest and issues the publication stimulated.

I would add that a collection of object-actors may also function similarly to a single object as actor, or as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Creating a graphic novel collection in any kind of library may be the preserve of people, but I would argue that, once in situ, the collection itself has an impact on the distribution of power and agency. A collection of graphic novels in a library can be a catalyst in several ways, including through signage. This acts as an anchor, labelling and stating the existence of materials of a particular type. This notion of the assemblage can also be extended in the circulation of stock within library systems (with texts being moved to other public libraries across a county-wide service, for instance). This circulation, traditionally seen as extending the life of stock and refreshing collections, especially in smaller service points, might also enable different value systems to be shared about who readers are or might be, and what stock is appropriate in a library. The collection as actor can form an argument in those two fields. Circulation beyond the library is also significant, as the texts loaned out are consumed by individuals who themselves become actors in a wider community-based assemblage. Here, the individual texts are shared around friendship groups and appear in homes cementing the idea of a reading community.

To return to the library and the space within it, as the point about signage suggests, this may be a catalyst according to how it is laid out, what stock is available, and who, in a sense, it welcomes in. Thus, the examples in the following images, whilst both library spaces for young people, are institutional and spatial actors of very different kinds. The library in Figure 1 was specifically aimed at young people and was part of a public library. This space was redesigned in a collaborative project between library staff and young people. The artwork changed over time, amended according to the taste of the young people, as did the music played in the library. All of these elements were intended to create a sense of ownership through the agency afforded to young people.

It was intended to attract back those who had moved away from using library services, and word-of-mouth promotion amongst young people was key in re-engaging them. It incorporated a mixture of materials and book collections, including an extensive graphic novel one, a centerpiece to the service, co-selected by staff and young library users. Indeed, because of my involvement with *Graphic Account,* the team called on my support in relation to their purchasing and then enhancing of a graphic novel collection, so I became, in a sense, an assemblage,
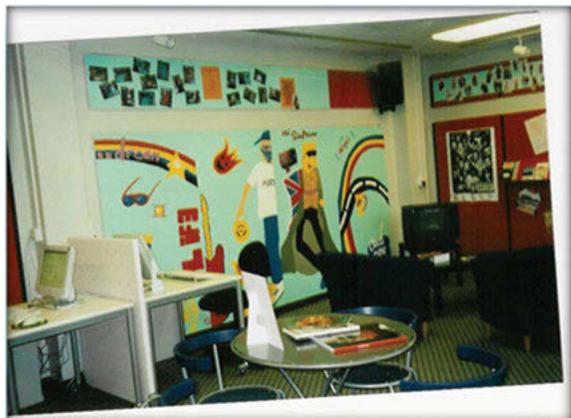
Figure 1: Specialist youth library setting (copyright by the author).

part human, part book, and part of their network. I will return later in the chapter to this idea of myself as part of an assemblage, allowing for more than one element could achieve alone (Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

In contrast, the library as institutional actor in Figure 2 is one where tradition, the adult with agency, and the young person as problematic are all visible. It is a school library, but the difference between the two is not about the institution, as I know of school libraries that have much more in common with the kind of services offered in the library in Figure 1. Materialities such as the physical barrier between sections, the closed cabinet for more valued stock, and the exhortation for quiet painted on the wall create a space that suggest the young person is not welcome, despite it being theoretically a space for young people. Of course, in both cases, wider issues around funding, staffing, training, and community are also part of the overall network, but the difference between these settings in terms of how the young person and the book stock are seen (as manifested in the use of space) reflects ideologies and dominant discourses about both.

Education and Libraries in Britain in the 1990s

At the time Barker floated the idea of the *Graphic Account* project, massive changes had been underway for several years in both education and library services. Both are relevant here and flag up the role of government in relation to the networks of power and agency involved. In education, the first version of the

Figure 2: School library setting (copyright by the author).

National Curriculum had been introduced by the *Education Reform Act* (1988). Programs of study were published in 1998 and 1999, and the teaching of some elements began in September 1989. It was described by Richard Daugherty, for instance, as creating "radical changes to the education system" (quoted in Whitty 1993, 264). This was amongst the first steps in standardization and amounted to a large intervention in what was taught and how and so in turn had an impact on resources, including school libraries.

It has been argued that these changes (and the recording and documentation that accompanied them) made it more difficult for innovative teaching and learning to occur. For instance, whilst there were some early references to visual literacies in relation to reading, such as in the Cox Report (1989), *English for Ages 5 to 16*, these were not helpful regarding graphic novels or comics. Picture books were included, but the emphasis was more on image as support to word reading development than on images containing meaning in themselves. Further, although the Cox Report argued that pupils should "be guided so as to appreciate the significance of print and the fact that pictures and other visual media can also convey meaning" (1989, 27), it then went on to mention road signs and logos rather than comics or picture books.

The shifts in what was taught meant that a game of catch-up emerged as teachers implemented the changes and school libraries took the curriculum into account, which limited the funds that could be spent on additional wider reading materials. The overall thrust could be seen as moving towards teaching to the test, a model of young person as pupil rather than an agentic individual with their own interests and drivers, and a more traditional model of education.

In this context, materials like graphic novels were largely ignored unless as a support for what those who either struggled with reading or were "reluctant readers," who had the skills to read but preferred not to (Chambers 1969). Additionally, there was some hostility towards graphic novels along with some other media forms, as outlined above. Finally, earlier attempts at including both comics and magazines in education, such as the English Centre's *Comics and Magazines* (Hemming and Leggett 1984) teaching resource on gender, were forgotten.

In contrast, public libraries were subject to cuts rather than being reformed. Given the neo-liberal ideology of central government under the Conservatives between 1979 and 1997, they were perceived as inessential. The financial pressure from central government upon local government led to the loss of both funding and staff in an effort to protect other council services. In addition, it is worth noting that funding was weighted in relation to issues per book. This had various consequences, including a cull of less popular books, although they might have been significant or of interest to smaller numbers of readers, leading to several well publicized controversies about the disposal of stock that was not seen as "in tune with public need and demand" (Bowman 2006, 438). These cuts were, ironically, combined with demands that libraries widen their provision of other technologies, such as computers available for use by the public and materials like CDs and videos. Simultaneously, libraries were meant to fulfil their legal obligation to free book lending and offer new services that could be charged for. These shifting relationships drove libraries towards narrower collections consisting of popular titles and material that could bring in income. However, despite these drivers, a dominant discourse of libraries as outdated emerged.

Simultaneously, the need for libraries to be relevant to all in any given community created a tension, in that attracting new users often meant having to take risks purchasing book and other stock that might not prove popular, so potentially increasing pressure on limited funding. One of the groups that were often implicated here were young people, especially boys and young men, who were seen as using libraries less than older people. However, some groups of users who had a sense of ownership of the services were unhappy about any influx of less traditional users. Indeed, in one library I worked in, stock like magazines and graphic novels were unwelcome, as they "attracted the kind of people into libraries that you wouldn't want to see there."[1] After a little further

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[1] Interviews with library users about the services they were offered took place across Northumberland Libraries in autumn 1992, as part of a county-wide project on service development. All the contributions were anonymized. Interview by author.

questioning, these "unwanted people" turned out to be the young, exemplifying the tensions in offering services to the whole community, and the ways that including young people might have an impact on how power and agency may be distributed across an organization.

Finally, revealing further tensions across both the education and library sectors, there was a perceived crisis in boys' reading. In the 1990s, reading was increasingly seen as feminized in the school context, something used by government as a way of criticizing education and labelling it as failing boys. Although some, like Debbie Epstein and colleagues (1998), argued that the debates were too simplified, that several complex factors were at play, and that the gender of teachers was not relevant, the notion of crisis remained in place. Similar arguments were made about libraries. In a sense, these areas and types of work were in upheaval, with a shift in ideology emerging over what libraries and education were, and who they were for.

Looking More Closely at *Graphic Account*

In this section, I analyze what the publication offered, but before that, I want to make some points about the cover as a part of the work's paratext, because it too expresses aspects of the overall assemblage, whilst also flagging up tensions around how the publication was understood (see Figure 3).

The main reference point on the cover is *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1986). The illustration (which does not mimic the imagery of the graphic novel, but does give a sense of urban unrest) and the quotation from it refers to a scene in which the character of the Comedian says to Nite Owl: "My government contacts tell me some new act is being herded through. Until then, we're society's only protection. We keep it up as long as we have to." Nite Owl responds in sheer disbelief: "Protection? Who are we protecting them from?" (Moore and Gibbons 1986, 2). In this context, the image is a direct reference to the fears some library staff had about the content of graphic novels, which the text addresses. The cover-as-paratext operates, as Gerard Genette argued, as "a threshold [. . .] that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back" (1997, 2). However, it was not solely into *Graphic Account* that the reader would be stepping, but into an engagement with another medium, one explicitly referenced on the cover by the speech balloon, even if the reference is one that the reader was unfamiliar with. The central quotation is recontextualized to make a point about protectionist discourses around childhood innocence and vulnerability. It also acts as a question about the social
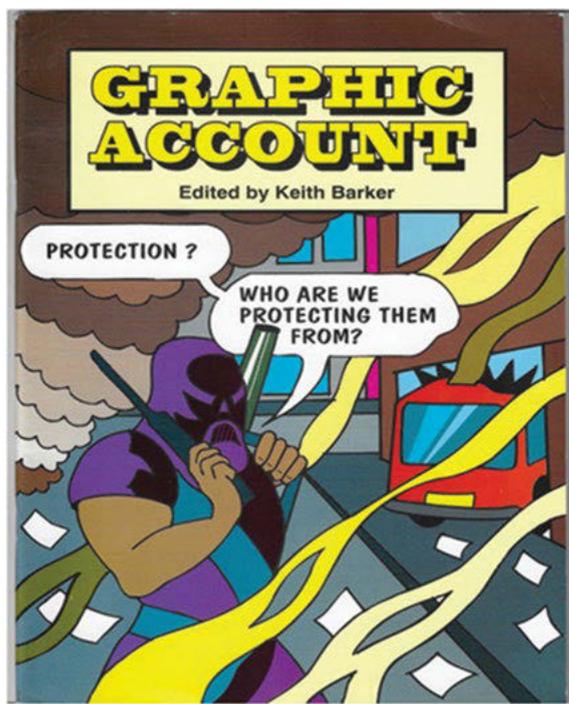
Figure 3: Cover image for *Graphic Account* (copyright held by the contributors, including the author).

role of the librarian, and the power and agency such a role might contain. The quotation is also repurposed to flag up that young people do not need protection from graphic novels and those who make them, and further, that they do not need protecting from their desire to read works in that medium. Thus, it was included to make a point about both the intended audience for graphic novel collections and the books themselves, reflecting and critiquing British perspectives on library stock and users. However, the cover design was double-edged, as it was also possible to read it as simply an evocation of violence, one of the issues that made some librarians unwilling to stock graphic novels in the first place.

Graphic Account included three essays, of which two were by librarians. Wilkins had surveyed comics and magazines for Camden library services in 1988, taking a feminist and anti-racist approach, so he had a long-term engagement with comics. His essay focused on stock selection and his recent collaboration with Paul Gravett. Gravett had curated *Strip Search*, the largest exhibition on comics to appear in the country at that point, which was launched alongside a

collection in the library it was initially displayed in. The other piece was by my-self, in my role as librarian in charge of a dual use service point in Northumber-land, meaning it was both a school and public library. I talked about how and why I had developed a small collection working with school pupils as well as with both education and library staff. This idea of involving readers in stock se-lection and the way that it could develop a sense of ownership of both collection and library was also considered a non-mainstream approach. The final piece, in contrast, talked about the grammar of comics, how they and graphic novels have been received and the significance of the medium. It was written by internation-ally renowned author Philip Pullman whose inclusion was significant because he was seen as someone with authority by librarians, and his support for comics might convince some of those otherwise skeptical about their validity in a library context.

These essays were accompanied by an annotated bibliography of titles cre-ated by Andy Sawyer, who was working for Wirral Libraries at that time. Sawyer began by flagging up key issues around selection, content, and the location of collections, supporting points made in the essays. The listing contained books largely published in the late 1980s and onwards, but also included some earlier work. Sawyer flagged up that there were creators typically thought of as picture book makers who engaged with comics, citing Shirley Hughes's *Up and Up* (1979) as an example. However, as he explained, most librarians had some con-fidence with picture books, and so the bibliography was intended to support a broader understanding of the comparatively new form of the graphic novel. The bibliography was international in scope and included non-fiction as well as fic-tion. This too was a claim about the medium intended to counter the commonly held notion of the time that comics were a genre. It also incorporated titles that were intended to shift thinking about pre-existing library stock, recategorizing some books considered to be picture books as graphic novels. These included the *Asterix* and *Tintin* series and some of Raymond Briggs's work including *Fun-gus the Bogeyman* (1977), *When the Wind Blows* (1982), and *The Tin-Pot Foreign General and the Old Iron Woman* (1984).

Graphic Account acted as a catalyst in relation to political and professional contexts. Given the publisher, librarians generally assumed that the focus was on collections for younger people in public libraries and in the secondary school sector. However, this publication argued that the texts chosen would fit in collections in both child and adult sections of public libraries, straddling the divide between them. This was intended to provoke discussion, just as the cover was, as most library authorities in Britain were divided in terms of both staff and funding into separate adult and children's services. The age at which one could borrow from adult library collections varied from 12 to 18 years,

depending on any given library authority's policy, whether there was a clause that allowed a younger person to borrow from an adult collection with permission from their parents or carers, or even at the behest of individual librarians, depending on their views about childhood and youth.

In *Graphic Account*, Wilkins said that in his library authority, Camden, "all libraries have teenage collections sited in the adult library, aimed at older teenagers, with small 'taster' collections of material for younger teenagers in children's libraries" (Barker 1993, 22). This could also be seen as easing the transition from child to adult library in a way that would mean teen readers maintained a reading habit. However, whilst it may not sound radical, this example, and the proposal that other library services follow suit in starting to dissolve the boundaries between adult and child services was largely resisted by library authorities, again possibly to maintain the production of readers as subjects in particular ways.

In part, this was about the practice of separate funding, a question of who would pay for this potentially unpopular type of stock. Despite the essays by Wilkins and Gibson both stating that issues of graphic novels were comparable with other popular stock categories, the fear of being criticized for wasting public money was a dominant element of the discourse in the profession. However, there was also the ideological divide in relation to constructions of youth and childhood to contend with, where the content of much of the adult library was assumed to be problematic for younger readers. To ensure there were no complaints from the wider adult public about what young readers might access, physical boundaries between the child and adult collections were added to the financial ones for stock. Again, the essays addressed this with Wilkins stating that there had been no complaints or protests about either exhibition or collection (Barker 1993, 22). However, graphic novels collections, in attracting younger readers into the adult library, were seen as potentially undermining these structural divides. Even more radically, Wilkins argued that age related sections should be phased out and integrated collections developed including material for all ages (Barker 1993, 22). In effect, graphic novels were actors in relation to potentially changing the overall structure of library services and funding. However, this was largely resisted and library services in Britain continue to have separate sections divided by age today.

Discussing and highlighting material aimed at young people, a group theoretically included in both services' provision, but often in neither, was deliberate on the part of the editor, Keith Barker, who could be seen as another key aspect of the assemblage. Underlying the argument about the medium, then, was one that this age group was liminal and tended to fall between services, thus needing to be better addressed and supported. Teenagers, in addition,

were often "othered" (Jones 2009, 36–37) by library services and seen as problematic, whether through not using libraries or from being seen as disruptive presences when inside them. I would add that this was also a gendered liminality, in that it was specifically boys and young men who were seen as difficult to reach, and sometimes, simply difficult.

Simultaneously, the graphic novel, a term now frequently seen as a marketing tool to promote book-length works in the comics format, was also considered liminal in the library context. The term was an attempt to move away from comics' connotations given their history in Britain, especially in relation to young people and moral panics regarding media effects, as noted earlier. The longer graphic novels, whilst more acceptably book-like in format, were still seen as a challenge in terms of content, especially given assumptions about the accessibility of images, an inheritance from this earlier discourse around comics and childhood.

Graphic Account both worked with and critiqued the connection made between younger readers and comics. The tendency to see comics as a medium for younger children is quite an embedded one in Britain, possibly due to the longstanding dominance of children's humor titles like *The Beano* and *The Dandy* (published by D.C. Thomson 1937–2013). This perceived connection meant that some gatekeepers found graphic novels shocking, and considered the perception that they addressed themes and issues more commonly associated with adult audiences to be troubling. The bibliography was intended to change understandings of what the comics medium was capable of and broaden ideas of audience, but was in tension with this construction of comics as texts of childhood.

There was also another issue involved, that of saying that collections of graphic novels would appeal to young adults, especially males. On the one hand, this was a positive driver to help make the argument for collections in libraries. Once in place, they were usually found by several potential audiences, but the concerns around the perceived crisis in boy's reading could be persuasive to both front-line staff and the management who controlled funding. On the other hand, however, this could result in the stereotyping of both graphic novels and their readers. Hence, *Graphic Account* unintentionally reinforced that these books were for predominantly younger male readers, which meant that the graphic novel could sometimes be understood as a problematic medium for problematic people.

On Becoming a Catalyst/Assemblage/Actor

As a result of contributing to *Graphic Account*, I became positioned as an aspect of it within the evolving media configuration of graphic novels. For instance, I was asked to run training for the various branches of the Youth Libraries Groups around Britain, as well as continuing to work directly with young people. Many of the staff involved found that an outside voice was an effective catalyst for change and new collection development. This led, in turn, to work with the branches of the School Libraries Association and School Libraries Group, alongside book and educational organizations in Ireland, so I became entangled with various networks as a nodal point of complex discourses and practices.

As my work continued, I became entangled with other institutional actors and their changing views of comics, including literacy charities such as The Reading Agency[2] and The National Literacy Trust,[3] in addition to art galleries, museums, and The British Library.[4] In these cases, I was involved in supporting exhibition and collection creation and developing staff knowledge, reading lists, and school resources. This was at a step away from working directly with agentic young people in relation to institutions, but underlying most of these initiatives was an attempt to engage with younger audiences, to be seen as relevant. These actors were responding to the increasing seriousness with which the medium was taken, sometimes combined with an educational slant where comics supported (rather than undermined) the development of a range of literacy skills, another shift. This meant that the links between children, young adults, and comics continued, but with a more positive charge.

One event, for example, involved me as a kind of picture interpreter positioned by some of the works of William Hogarth in the Tate Britain,[5] talking about the relationship between them and the comics I had taken with me. There was no formal talk involved, but rather, it was a day long drop-in during which I would chat with visitors. On that occasion, the Tate staff member accompanying me commented that the vast majority of the visitors who engaged were young, knowledgeable, and wanted to share their expertise rather than passively listen.

To run events or training such as this one, I usually had a collection of around 70 graphic novels with me, in addition to having access to whatever

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2 See https://readingagency.org.uk (acc. 8 January 2022).

3 See https://literacytrust.org.uk (acc. 8 January 2022).

4 See https://www.bl.uk (acc. 8 January 2022).

5 See https://www.tate.org.uk (acc. 8 January 2022).

was already stocked by any given institution. The content I carried varied according to the brief, for what I nicknamed my big bag of books sessions. In a sense I became part of an assemblage, the books supplementing me, with us collectively achieving more than I could alone (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). I could also be understood as a collection of actors in that I was always accompanied by multiple texts as well as by my evolving knowledge of the medium. Adding to this assemblage or collection, I also created other texts, including two bibliographies, and wrote for a diverse range of publications, including *Inis* (published by Children's Books Ireland) and the professional journal of the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE), *NATE Classroom*.

Finally, my involvement became increasingly international, in that I contributed to websites and discussion groups, especially the women and comics groups Friends of Lulu (1993–2011) and *Sequential Tart*.[6] Here I joined other actors/catalysts, for as Kimberly DeVries states about *Sequential Tart*, "[b]ecause at the time these women felt that breaking into the established discourse in either fan communities or the industry itself was impossible, they decided to create their own space" (DeVries 2010, 72). In contributing to this space, I authored articles on how British librarians and teachers were using comics as classroom resources, thus sharing experience and best practice whilst seeking to discover what worked best elsewhere. I also discussed my approach to what is called *booktalking* (discussing books with an audience) and working with gatekeepers. This was both an expression of agency and an opportunity for me to get feedback from peers beyond the librarianship.

Conclusion

In summary, the publication of *Graphic Account* in 1993 was a moment where a range of actors of various kinds came into contact and functioned as catalysts for complex change and the reconfiguration of how graphic novels were understood, leading to more physical collections and to a shifting understanding of comics as a medium in various professions and institutions. As one of the actors involved, I found the experience personally transformative, as well as experiencing the assemblage's potential, in conjunction with constructions of childhood and youth, to disrupt and trouble institutions, professions, and adult agency. This was accompanied, for some, by an embracing of the expertise of younger readers, via encouragement to find out who the experts were in their

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6 See http://sequentialtart.com (acc. 8 January 2022).

settings and seek their advice. I was very conscious that many pupils and younger readers would know more than the adults and argued that the adults had to become part of a reading community, not lead it, thus letting go of a little power and agency in order to acknowledge young people's voices.

The chain of effects could reach beyond comics when the child or young adult was integral to the discussion. As noted earlier, the idea of graphic novel collections as part of young adult services was significant in flagging up issues around institutional policies and structures. For example, one training day with Birmingham library services proved transformational. What started as training about comics and manga became an acknowledgement and recognition of issues around all services to young adults, especially around funding stock and locating materials. The proposal carried forward from the day was that all funding and services needed revisiting to ensure parity for young people.

However, despite the impact of the publication and the practical support I came to offer as an extension of *Graphic Account*, wider cultural shifts meant that these changes were not necessarily permanent given the ongoing context of service cuts and the impact of the national curriculum.

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Cathérine Lehnerer
Learning from Pupils about Conviviality

Tickling Turtle

A turtle tickles the speech bubble coming out of a giant mouth-creature while a sparrow flies by to reach the crown forest (see Figure 1). The drawing was created in the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," which took place in January 2021 online via Zoom and lasted 90 minutes. Thanks to the online setting, the participants could get in touch with each other on their screens from different locations. While verbal communication was taking place, they were primarily supposed to communicate through written or pictorial signs. The aim of our workshop was to deconstruct existing hierarchies between teachers and learners, while at the same time to enable a sensitive and convivial engagement with the traumatic experiences of the terrorist attack in Vienna on 2 November 2020.[1]
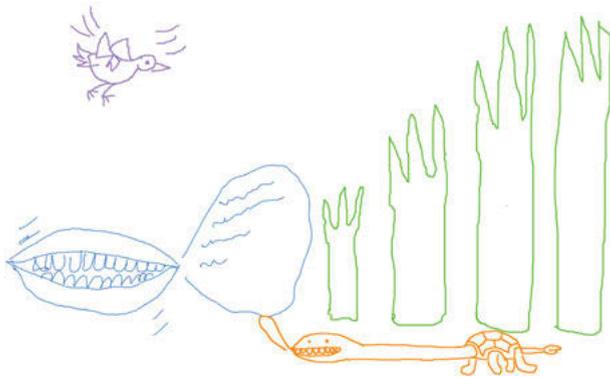
Figure 1: A turtle tickles the speech bubble coming out of a giant mouth-creature while a sparrow flies by to reach the crown forest. From the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," online event, 2020. © Cathérine Lehnerer and the participants.

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1 Starting in the following paragraph I will be using the first person plural "we" by which I mean myself Cathérine Lehnerer – the initiator of the project – and the three pupil collaborators Rawan Almohamad, Munar Khalid-Biiq, and Arabina Amedoska.

Special about this situation was that the three participating pupils Rawan Almohamad, Munar Khalid-Biiq, and Arabina Amedoska designed and led the workshop themselves (see Figure 2). Our collaboration began three years ago during a language course when the four of us realized that we all shared a passion for comics. At that time, when I developed the idea of organizing a comics workshop, the three pupils had moved on to secondary schools and I was no longer their teacher. Gradually they took on the role of teachers and guided the participants. Due to my profession as a teacher, I was able to help them planning, but our workshop ultimately turned out to be a collaborative project during which we continuously learn from each other. Generally, our workshops cover topics such as diversity, mindfulness, and living together in a democracy.

Figure 2: From top left to bottom right: Self-representations of Rawan Almohamad, Munar Khalid-Biiq, Arabina Amedoska, and Cathérine Lehnerer. From the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," online event, 2021. © Almohamad, Khalid-Biiq, Amedoska, and Lehnerer.

Self-Conscious People

Fundamental to our workshops is the idea that hierarchies between institutions and their members ought to be questioned. This is here primarily achieved by drawing comics, which can provide a playful form of expression for conversations. As different perspectives of people are connected through the creation of comics, a contextual approach can be practiced in terms of the concept of *situated knowledges* (Haraway 1988). It is impossible to speak for all people and yet, in a democratic society, as many individuals as possible should be heard. As the OECD's

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) proves, students and pupils are often the object of research rather than actors in their own rights.

In order to avoid an essentialist and Eurocentric perspective, there is an urgent need to test new forms of research informed by the basic idea of *participatory action research* (PAR) that "self-conscious people [. . .] will progressively transform their environment by their own praxis" (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991, 13). In the context of radical pedagogical practice, dialogue as a problem-formulating method can become (political) action through dialogue, as Paulo Freire designed it in the 1970s in his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. If transformation wants to happen in dialogue, the spoken and written word must be used in practice. Otherwise, language will merely lead to empty verbalism. Essential for Freire is the word, which he divides into action and reflection. Both are "in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers" (Freire 2000, 87).

Critical pedagogy is about social change, emphasizing the reciprocity of pedagogical processes in which the teachers also learn. Critical pedagogy aims to dissolve the boundaries between art, culture, and everyday life. In this context, comics workshops are a means of self-empowerment, but also of self-reflexive and critical cultural participation. Of particular interest is an interdisciplinary approach to comics' research that combines intersectional, intercultural, and pedagogical approaches. The process of the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality" is presented in the following section and also serves as an example of critical, social practice in relation to theoretical reflections, which was designed to reflect and show what participation can look like in practice.

Thanks to my professor Dr. Marina Gržinić, who made it possible that we offer the workshop through the Academy of Arts, many different people – who had become aware of it on our website – took part. Among the participants were students, schoolteachers, pupils, cultural mediators, and professors from different cities and countries.

Welcome, Everyone!

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop had to be held online via Zoom. The advantage of this was that the participants came from different cities and countries. This situation allowed different perspectives on the November 2020 attack to become visible. The terrorist attack in Vienna occurred on 2 November 2020 in the center of Vienna in a popular local neighborhood. Four people were killed and 23 were seriously injured.

It turned out that the format of comics was well suited to express feelings and perceptions for which we lack words due to their overwhelming nature. In regular online meetings, Rawan, Munar, Arabina, and I developed the design of our workshop starting in November 2020. Inspired by a conversation with my professor, I suggested the terrorist attack as the main topic because I was surprised to see that in Vienna the prevention education programs offered mainly focused on possible future perpetrators rather than on discussing the consequences for all members of the society. In designing the workshop, we were particularly concerned not only to deal sensitively with the traumatic events, but also to draw attention on the associated effects on young Muslim pupils. The young teachers wanted to use the workshop to draw attention to the experiences of discrimination they had to go through as a result of the attack. Munar wears a headscarf and she told us about incidents in the subway where she was directly insulted by people. Rawan is from Syria and does not wear a headscarf, but she too noticed the aggressive mood. Personally, I was very interested in how to counteract the racism that is omnipresent in Vienna. Arabina suggested that we prepare little cards with sentences that served as suggestions for the conversations for the discussion round at the end of the workshop. Particularly important was the sentence: "Islam is not Islamism."

We wanted to have an open discourse about this to enable an exchange about our different perspectives. We were looking for a framework to share our own experiences with others, to exchange ideas and learn from each other, because new knowledge is always created in community and exchange. But we quickly became aware of the dilemma that *naming* the differences inevitably reproduces differences. So, what should we do? We wondered if it would be possible – with the help of our comics avatars – to question concepts of identity based on gender, age, skin color, or class origin. What are the possibilities of playing with fixed external attributions in order to deconstruct them? These were the questions occupying us. In pursuing them, we were first inspired by a famous comics cat!

Fluid Self-Concepts in Comics

The protagonist of George Herriman's comic strip *Krazy Kat* demonstrated non-binary gender identity over a hundred years ago in the surreal world of Coconino County. In a comic strip from March 20, 1921, the following is written in the middle panel (Figure 3): "Kuriosity [sic] has led our heroine thus far – but seeing what he sees 'kuriosity' no longer impels her – he is now actuated with a sweltering suffusion of benevolence" (Herriman and Casey 2020, 128).
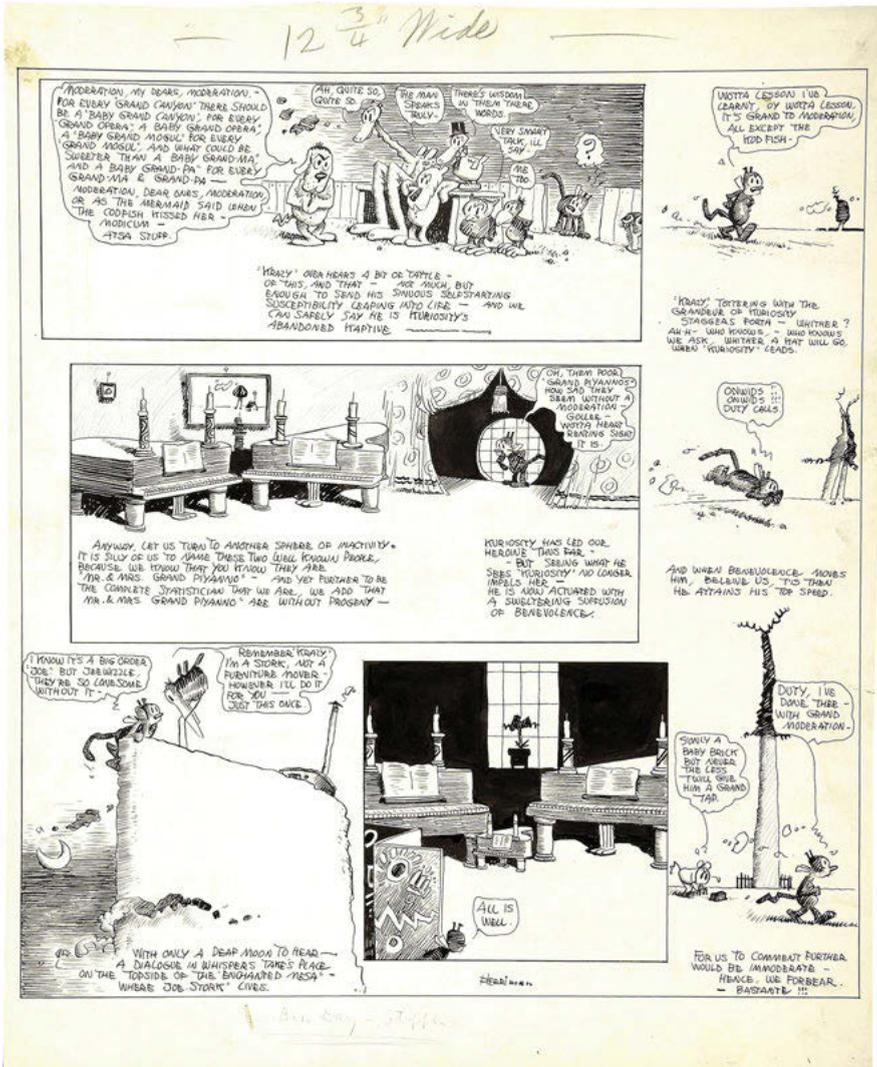
Figure 3: A strip of Herriman's Krazy Kat (Herriman 2020, 128). © Scan of the original art from Krazy Kat strip by George Herriman, 20 March 1921. Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Krazy_Kat_1921-03-20_original.jpg (publ. 20 March 1921, acc. 9 May 2022).

As if to prove the point, the cat's pronouns can change up to four times within a sentence. George Herriman's genderfluid protagonist is crazy about Ignatz the mouse and keeps trying to win his affection. Unfortunately, the mouse always throws a brick at the loyal cat's head as a thank you. This repetition becomes a habit and is found in almost every comic strip. While Krazy does not seem to fit into the heteronormative norms of a binary gender identity, societal norms are parodied. The cat performs a flexible identity that is not reducible to a fixed core. Through the stylized repetition of comics characters' actions, such as throwing the brick, the attributions from the outside that the cat encounters are highlighted. Comics have the power to show, through their parody, that identity without an original is merely an imitation (Frahm 2010, 36).

In gender and queer studies, the concept of *performativity* refers to the permanent citation of hegemonic norms and gender identities. According to Judith Butler, gender is neither a stable identity, nor is it a fixed site of action from which various actions emanate. Identity is rather constituted through a stylized repetition of action:

> Sociological discussions have conventionally sought to understand the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning.   (Butler 1990, 16)

A particular strength of comics is their ability to playfully break gender norms and social conventions and to combine different perspectives. The fact that we were able to transform ourselves into comics characters helped us not being judged through superficial attributions based on our appearances and visible backgrounds. Identity is not something fixed, set-in stone, but subject to constant change and in the infinite process of becoming and reinventing itself. Identity is changeable and Krazy Kat is a "symbol for the *malleability of the self*" (Bellot 2017, n.pag., emphasis added).

In our workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," we used Krazy Kat's fluid self-concept by having all participants transform into a cartoon character at the very beginning of the workshop, thus unleashing the potential of mutable identity affiliations. Thus, the first drawings were immediately used as so-called *avatars* – as shown in Figure 4. The ability to act and make free choices, regardless of gender, social class or ethnicity, can be called *agency*: "Agency is the capacity of a person or a group of people to act independently or to make choices. It refers to their particular way, and to carry out their chosen action" (Hines 2018, 17).
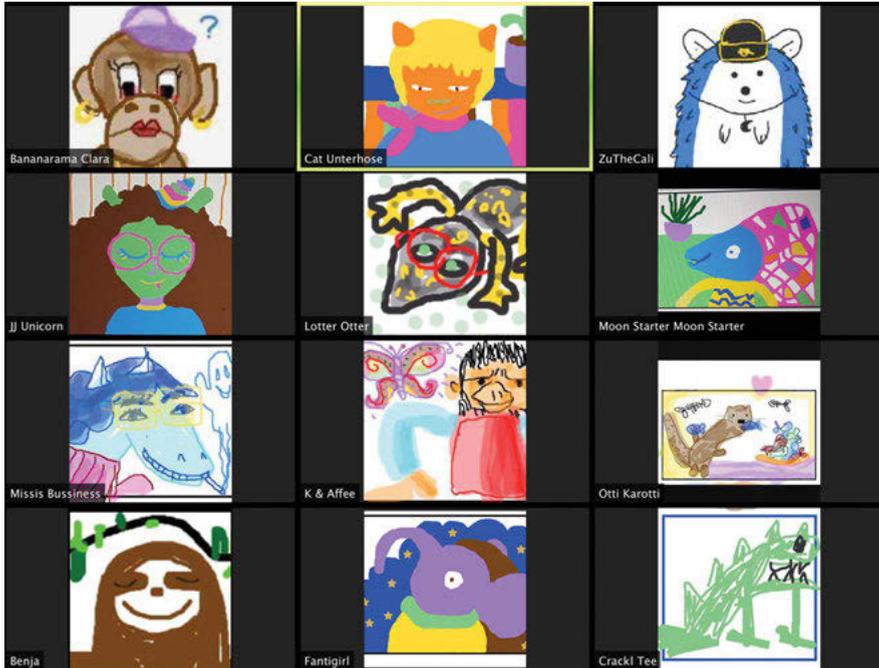
Figure 4: Participants transform themselves into comics characters and use their drawings as avatars. From the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," online event, 2020. © Cathérine Lehnerer and the participants.

Comics as Agents of Agency

In *Games: Agency as Art* (2020), C. Thi Nguyen points to the special ability of games that allows us

> to be fluid with our agency and submerge ourselves in alternate agencies by another. In other words, we can use games as to communicate forms of agency. [...] Just as novels let us experience lives we have not lived, games let us experience forms of agency we might not have discovered on our own. (2020, 3)

This can also be applied to the medium of comics, especially when one is in an educational setting and using drawn avatars. In this context, the agency that can emerge through a collective comics practice is a way to creatively intervene in shaping the environment. Stuart Hall emphasizes that, by using the term "agency," he expresses "no desire whatsoever to return to an unmediated and transparent notion of the subject or identity as the centred author of social

practice" (1996, 2). However, the question of identity arises as soon as the relationship between subjects and discursive practices is reconceptualized. Identities are constructed within discourses and are therefore located in institutional sites in the play of specific modalities of power. Identities are positions that the subject must take, even if they are only representations. Moreover, identification is a process of articulation in the sense of a union, a superordination rather than subordination. Stuart Hall describes this relation as follows:

> This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the "positive" meaning of any term – and thus its "identity" – can be. (Hall and Du Gay 1996, 4)

In theorizing identity, both the necessity and impossibility of identities play an important, political role. Moreover, the connection of the psychic and the discursive must be recognized in their constitution (Hall and Du Gay 1996, 16). The agency of the workshop participants shows that they can effectively intervene in social relations by challenging and reshaping gender norms and hierarchies. In this way, it is possible to resist the power through which they themselves are constituted. Naming difference is what generates reflection on difference, so we decided to play with it and slip into new roles with avatars in the form of comics animals.

Art Spiegelman uses animal characters in the graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor´s Tale* (1986) to tell the story of his father Vladek, who survived Auschwitz. In an interview in *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman describes the use of masked characters in his famous graphic novel and says that "this de-individualization brings about empathy – it allows us to identify, and then you have to deal with your corrupt and damaged humanity" (2011, 132).

One's own entanglement in racist structures must be recognized and reflected upon without sinking into guilt. The young women were all affected by overt Islamophobia, which intensified after the Viennese terrorist's attacks. We wanted to convey these experiences without foregrounding the students' backgrounds or religious affiliation. However, hiding differences trivializes the structural racism that unfortunately exists and is based on those differences:

> Racism's de-individualizing effects can be adequately countered with large doses of individualism, its antidemocratic results repudiated with infusions of a generic democratic energy that need not or rather should not be made specific. (Gilroy 2004, 14)

The comics characters draw attention to the de-individualizing effects of racism – which is why it is so important to deconstruct its mechanisms. Furthermore, the personal stories can create counter-narratives to counteract the de-individualization with the individual.

Scratch the Surface

> It was racism and not diversity that made their arrival into a problem. This is more than just a question of perspective. (Gilroy 2004, 165)

Norms and standards inhibit dynamic development and self-reflection. Identity is also ascribed by norms and rules from the outside, so that people know their way around and do not have to think too much. Is there a way to scratch the surface of prejudice in order to get to the underlying wounds that create this prejudice so that healing can subsequently take place? We are talking about the healing of minorities, but also about healing the unquestioned discriminatory prejudices of the majority. Majorities are equally wounded by not seeing and not thinking. Through laughing, crying, and talking together, the comics workshops found new ways to engage with and critique multiple concepts of identity. As seen in Figure 5, gender assignments can be blurred by comics characters. While gender characteristics such as clothing and hairstyles were still partially recognizable in our workshop, this example shows that they can almost dissolve. Only the names still suggest a clear assignment.

Figure 5: Drawings created by participants. From the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," online event, 2020. © Cathérine Lehnerer and the participants.

Moreover, in addition to the deconstruction of gender norms, the workshop also allowed the expression of feelings. One of the tasks was to express one's own feelings with the Zoom drawing tool – as seen in Figure 6. Since this is also a difficult task for many adults, a playful setting was developed. Via chat, the players were sent a term that they had to draw on the whiteboard without talking – similar to the well-known board game "Activity." The terms given all covered the area of feelings and perceptions. Since nine people took part in the

Figure 6: Drawings created by participants. From the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," online event, 2020. © Cathérine Lehnerer and the participants.

workshop, they were divided into three groups and sent to their own digital space, the so-called "breakout rooms." Each student thus led a small group of three participants.

In contact with other people, by sharing our feelings and experiences, ideas can be put up for discussion with fellow human beings. For, as Krazy Kat shows, there is no fixed framework that determines which gender or national identity we belong to, there are always forms in between that contradict heterogeneous attribution. Confronting racist structures is nevertheless a painful process for all involved.

Un-Learning

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to "unlearning one's privilege as one's loss" (Spivak 1996, 4). Viewing privilege as a loss means that the perceived advantage creates a disadvantage at the same time because it prevents the privileged from thinking outside the box. An English native speaker, for example, will not be forced to learn another language to survive their everyday life and for this reason it's impossible to understand an Arabic poem, which is a loss. *Critical whiteness reflection* can only take place when people who are read as white are honest with themselves and allow the agonizing self-knowledge of the effect that their behavior has on other people, even if it is done unconsciously and perhaps even with good intentions. Then it hits the privileged full force and leaves a bruise, but it opens the door to genuine empathy, which is the basic requirement for a convivial society. When young Muslim women, such as the leaders of the comics workshop,

report racist assaults immediately after a terrorist attack, it affects all of us as a civil society and we all share responsibility for preventing such a behavior.

The workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality" provided a digital space where an exchange between the different participants could take place at eye level to enable mutual understanding.

Un-learning, just like learning, is an open process and in constant exchange with other people, literature or even comics. The comics workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality" has the potential to question one's own role and is therefore mainly aimed at adults who are sometimes unaware that they can still learn something. Teachers, in particular, are often so caught up in the role of a facilitator that they forget that they can also learn from pupils and, furthermore, unlearn discriminatory behavior. However, it must be emphasized that the participating teachers were all very open to learning from the pupils about conviviality and were following their instructions. Now let's imagine the teachers in the workshop sitting together with pupils, students and professors discussing the terror attack. What impact will it have on their pedagogical practice? Will they tell their colleagues about it? In addition to the importance of community, collaboration among teachers from diverse backgrounds is an important component of the pedagogy of hope advocated by bell hooks.

Theory is always connected with one's own life. Therefore, in this workshop, it was especially important to include the personal experiences of the participants. Educator bell hooks (2003, 3) emphasizes the importance of thinking together about different relations of oppression, a process in which the transmission of knowledge plays a central role. In this process, teachers and learners are equally challenged and encouraged. Subjectivity is often accused of being unscientific, but it is an "important dimension of marginalized discourses and a creative form of decolonization" (Kilomba 2016, 50). hook's work, directed against all forms of oppression and discrimination, was set back considerably after the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001. The mass media was full of anger and fear against people of different skin color and/or religious affiliation:

> No matter the overwhelming majority of people of color whose lives were tragically lost on 9/11, the more than sixty countries represented, every religion in the world represented, innocents of all shapes, sizes, colors, the newborn and the old – cruel Western cultural imperialism reduced this brutal massacre to the simply binary of "us/them," of United States citizens as "the chosen people" against a world full of "unchosen" people.
> (hooks 2003, 9–10)

Part of the public increasingly reacted with an imperialist, nationalist, and patriarchal anger against people with darker skin or women with headscarves.

This blind hatred turned into an everyday racism directed against people of color from different backgrounds and Muslim women from all over the world. Unfortunately, we saw similar tendencies in Vienna after the attack. It is only when we recognize the extent to which we are implicated in and reproduce discriminatory structures (often unconsciously and even with good intentions) that we can reflect on them in exchange with others in order to establish and communicate counter-ideas. Besides drawing comics and dealing with the terrible events, our aim was to create a convivial space. Paul Gilroy suggests that migration should not be used as an explanation for conflict: "The problem is not migration, the problem we have to deal with is racism!" (Gilroy 2004, 165). It is the responsibility of all of us to stand up against any kind of racism and look out for each other.

What Does Conviviality Mean?

Paul Gilroy uses the term conviviality "to refer to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (2004, xi) and he points out that conviviality "does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance. Instead, it suggests a different setting for their empty, interpersonal rituals" (Gilroy 2004, xi).

In the book *Tools for Conviviality,* Ivan Illich refers to conviviality as the autonomous and creative exchange between persons and the interaction of persons with their environment. It is the opposite of purely industrial productivity, as it denotes individual freedom realized in an interdependent manner. Conviviality is thus an "intrinsic ethical value" (Illich 2009, 24) that motivates communal thought and action. In a convivial society as Illich envisions it, access to tools must be provided to every member of society and secured through social agreements. Social justice can only be implemented in a participatory and distributive way that prevents forced labor and forced learning (Illich 2009, 26). Illich did not provide an idealized utopia in the 1970s, but concrete instructions for action for a convivial transformation of society. The ability to imagine a communal world is almost lost today. What is important for conviviality is the equal power of all to activate, to co-create a world and to interact with it. People are needed who sense when "enough is enough!" and when it is no longer necessary to keep being productive, but instead only produce enough to make a *good life* possible for as many people as possible. The gap between rich and poor is a

sign of social injustice, but ultimately keeps everyone from living more sustainably and convivially.

By living together free of assimilation and integration requirements, new rules and interpersonal rituals emerge. Central to this is the absence of a belief in "races." The existence of racism is not denied, furthermore it is addressed as a serious structural problem. Gilroy notes:

> Multicultural society seems to have been abandoned at birth. Judged unviable and left to fend for itself, its death by neglect is being loudly proclaimed on all sides. The corpse is now being laid to rest amid the multiple anxieties of the "war on terror."   (Gilroy 2004, 1)

In contrast to multiculturalism, a term for how different people from different cultures live together, conviviality refers to the process of how people interact and communicate with each other. The workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality" tried to create a convivial setting in which personal experiences about the traumatic event of the terror attack in Vienna could be shared. If traumatic topics such as the attack and also the discriminatory consequences for Muslims are to be discussed, a protected space is needed. Of course, meeting online in a virtual setting is quite different from a face-to-face, physical encounter. We have all certainly had many different experiences with online encounters in the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sometimes the video chat can feel amazingly close, even though the person on the video may be miles away. Yet, there is always a social distance that is not just physical. Reading gestures and facial expressions is more difficult, and smells and other sensory cues are completely absent. Drawings have a language all of their own, and especially with traumatic experiences we often lack words. In addition to drawing, listening to the pupils and reading the signs of the drawings was very important in this workshop. Artist Lynda Barry, in her recent work *Making Comics*, tried to describe the special kind of 'magic' to be found in hand-drawings of children: "Adults are surprised when what look like meaningless scribbles turn into something as the kid describes what´s going on in the picture" (Barry 2020, 6).

The participants were asked to choose a particularly memorable situation they had experienced on 2 November 2020 and express it in a sketchy drawing. Afterwards, each drawing was discussed in detail and the drawings provided a good opportunity to talk about feelings and fears. The focus was not on the person, but on the experience itself. Dealing with thoughts and feelings was as important as sharing personal experiences. The very fact that pupils take the position of mediators opens up a space where they are listened to, and their experiences are valued. Nevertheless, the question arises how it can be possible to be strategically solidaristic without speaking for (the so-called) Others (Kazeem-Kamiński 2018, 138). The categories of "us" and "the others" no longer work once we bring

decolonial practices into focus. Comics characters have the potential to enable such distancing, and they indirectly refer to these very mechanisms of identification when we "identify" with the hero while reading, even if they are of a different gender or ethnicity. Throughout the workshop, the comics avatars offered protection from prejudice and attribution. In addition, the participants were respectful and interested in the conversations and shared their concerns and fears with each other. With the help of their fluid identities, individual narratives could be recognized as part of a structural problem referred to by the term racism.

Convivial Togetherness in the Workshop

The time is ripe for a dialogue about how we want to live with one another and what a more just life for all people, and a life in which not only a few benefit from the exploitation of the many, might look like. When I hear the term conviviality, I think of a large table and it is set with plates, glasses, and cutlery, inviting to linger. Conviviality, however, is not simply a naïve idea of peaceful coexistence without conflict. This is shown by the work "Coloniality / Conviviality" by Joëlle Sambi Nzeba and Nicolas Pommier, which was on view at Weltmuseum Wien during the exhibition "Stories of Traumatic Pasts." It shows that in convivial encounters the colonial past is always present. In addition to empty plates and glasses, we also recognize some overturned chair in the installation (see Figure 7). Perhaps someone got up in a rage and left the conversation?

The artists Sambi Nzeba and Pommier clearly criticize the "apparent obliteration of domination for the benefit of a friendly façade" (2020, 87). As can be seen well in their installation, conviviality requires sitting down at a table to talk to each other. But the fallen chairs point to a conflict. If we look closer, we can see chopped-off hands between the plates (see Figure 8). Congolese hands. The two artists wonder if it is possible to sit down to eat at a table when so many Congolese hands have been cut off in the name of a so-called "civilization" (Sambi Nzeba and Pommier 2020, 92). In a shocking way, the drawn hands refer to the mass mutilation and killing by the concession companies of eight to ten million Congolese. To date, there has been no recognition of the massacres and no reparations between Belgium and Congo.

In that instant, coloniality has to be considered and must not be swept under the carpet. With the chopped-off hands the artists refer to the destructive regime of the colony and the basic trauma it inflicted. Can we imagine a serene or friendly discussion taking place at this table? The hands remind us of the pain and trauma, raising the question of whether it will even be possible to

Figure 7: Joëlle Sambi Nzeba and Nicolas Pommier, *Convivial Table*, 2020. Exhibition view, "Stories of Traumatic Pasts," Weltmuseum Wien, 8 October 2020–3 April 2021. Photograph by Sophie Uitz, courtesy of the curators of the exhibition.

Figure 8: Joëlle Sambi Nzeba and Nicolas Pommier, *Congolese Hands*, 2020. Exhibition view, "Stories of Traumatic Pasts," Weltmuseum Wien, 8 October 2020–3 April 2021. Photograph by Sophie Uitz, courtesy of the curators of the exhibition.

silence the pain and ignore the trauma? Yet, a chair has been knocked over. Perhaps one of the participants in the conversation got up in a rage and left the table. Can a conversation start between victims and perpetrators? The artist duo stresses that we often sweep conflicts under the carpet like dust, hoping

they will disappear. And they point out that it might still be possible to sit down at a table and to enter into a convivial dialogue. They try to overcome this dilemma with political art and workshops held for this purpose:

> What is possible to overcome in such conditions? Peace is not the absence of bloody cannons and battlefields, it can have the appearance of "living together" and yet claim as many victims as war. Peace is not the opposite of war. Silence is death. The negation of the other is death. The continuous erasure of the history, identity and even of the very humanity of people is leading to war. We are at war in our bodies, in our minds even in (the absence of) our representations. (Sambi Nzeba and Pommier 2020, 92)

We do not always need to be in any particular position of power to be heard, do we?

So Please Take Your Seats

With this knowledge in mind, the pupils and I tried to deal with the terrorist attack sensitively for the workshop "Learning from Pupil about Conviviality," allowing a place for conflict and anger as well. When dealing with a subject as horrific as a terrorist attack, it quickly becomes apparent that conviviality may not always be cheerful. In a discussion round towards the end of the workshop, we therefore designed a small card that read: "Islam is not IS!" and put this up for discussion alongside other statements. It was particularly important in the conception of the workshop that the pupils' experience can be heard and that, at the same time, there was a space in which everyone could participate in the discussions.

Conviviality is a process but no fixed product. It is no commodity that can be serially produced and sold, like a comic book. At the same time, we did not want to just scratch a friendly, happy surface, but to address serious issues and to go in depth. If multiculturalism focuses on "culture" and "identity," whereby members of a minority are culturally determined and marked, conviviality is a process of exchange. In this way, any essentialization of "cultural identity" is prevented, since conviviality takes into account the fact that groups are heterogeneous. However, conviviality goes beyond this by not obscuring discriminatory structures. Through multiple affiliations, rigid attributions are constantly challenged. Islamophobia is a reiteration of old racisms or xenophobia and there is a link to the refugee crisis and the colonial past. What the experience of the attack and subsequent racist experiences have in common is that they are traumatic – and as Grada Kilomba points out, the word trauma comes "from the Greek word wound or injury" (2016, 132).

Respect Human Rights!

Before we conclude, let us briefly point out the connection between racism and sexism. To ensure that equal agency of all individuals and groups does not remain an empty promise, it is important to reflect about different forms of discrimination in terms of intersectionality and to stand up against them. Munar, one of the pupils, wears a headscarf and so should her comics character, because it belongs to her, and she is proud to wear it. In the graphic novel *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi (2003, 5) reveals her own experiences about the oppression of women in Iran and Austria. Satrapi experienced the change of government that introduced the state compulsion to wear a headscarf. For her mother, this paternalism by the state was a break she could not bear, which is why she took to the streets to demonstrate for her freedom (see Figure 9). Satrapi then had to wear a headscarf at school and later at university. During her stay in Vienna, she then noticed that women were also wearing headscarves here.
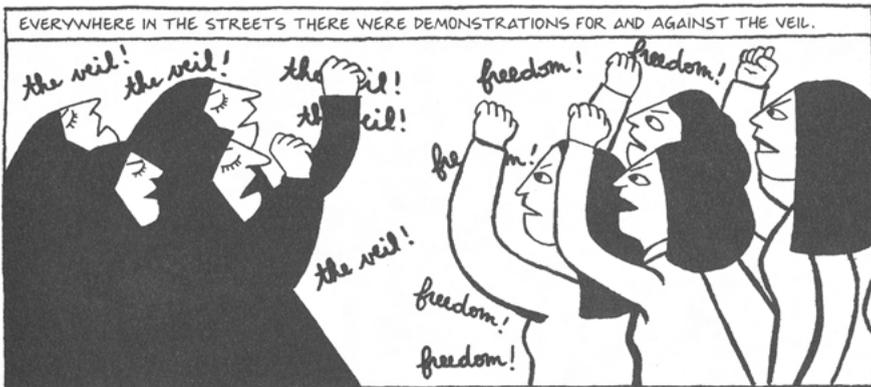
Figure 9: An extract demonstrating the polarization of the veil (Satrapi 2003, 5). © Scan of the original art from *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi.

Today's "headscarf debate" across Europe seems to be taking place under opposite auspices. There are serious discussions about whether schoolgirls should not be allowed to wear headscarves at school, or whether teachers and professors can do their job properly if they wear headscarves. All this is done under the pretext of "liberating" women from oppression. Often, however, there are xenophobic motives behind it, which are about anything but the welfare of women. It is especially important to talk about these issues now. As a teacher, I was confronted with many grievances from my pupils about what it is like to wear a

headscarf as an emancipated young woman. In fact, for many the headscarf has become a new symbol of contemporary feminism. While Satrapi says in an interview that she herself does not like to wear the headscarf, she also refers to the meaning of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says that everyone has the right to believe in what they want, to dress as they want – and to live as they want (Hummitzsch 2021).

Finally, I would like to point out that all terrorist attacks, whether by neo-Nazis as in Hanau, Germany, or by fanatical Islamists against freedom of expression as against *Charlie Hebdo*, have something in common: They strike innocent members of civil society. All our sympathy goes to the victims of terrorist attacks and above all, to their families. It is important that they cannot also attack our cohesion.

Taking Part in the Convivial Future

In conclusion, it can be said that through the comics workshop the different perspectives of the participants on the terrorist attack in Vienna in 2020 can be brought together – as can be seen in Figure 10. Some participants heard about the attack from the media because they come from other cities or countries. Their perception differs, for example, from the participant who was in Vienna and had to directly experience a helicopter rotor passing in front of her window. As the participants were asked to draw the moment they learned about the attack, the combination shows a "summary snapshot" of a concrete situation from different
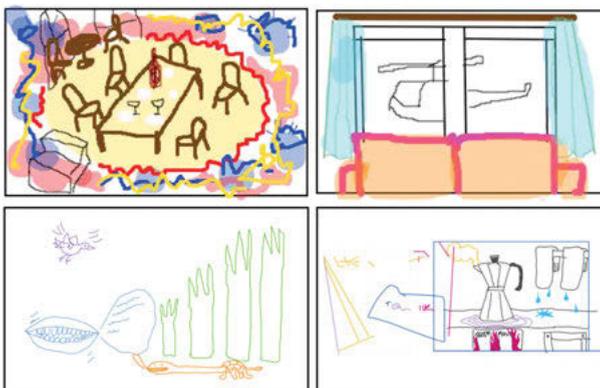
Figure 10: Drawings created by participants. From the workshop "Learning from Pupils about Conviviality," online event, 2020. © Cathérine Lehnerer and the participants.

perspectives. In the workshop, each individual picture was discussed in detail and so there was a direct exchange about what had been experienced. At the end of the workshop, Rawan, Munar, and Arabina talked about their experiences after the attack, where they faced hostility because of their appearance. In contrast to the rest of the workshop, where everyone discussed animatedly with each other, now all participants listened attentively and with concern.

With the aim of developing skills and knowledge necessary to engage critically with the world, the conditions of participation are explored in order to deepen a discussion of power relations and alternatives in educational work. In this way, new habits of thought and action can be negotiated in the sense of democratic participation, in order to shape one's own lifeworld in a critical relationship to the Eurocentric perspective. The focus is thus on an aesthetic-philosophical analysis on comics as a form, which is combined with insights from the tradition of critical pedagogy. Since comics are capable of questioning existing states of affairs and enabling new perspectives, it opens up a symbolic space in which concepts and definitions can be critically considered and reflected upon. Moreover, the comic enters the stage as an actor in its own right.

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Jörn Ahrens
Ada in the Jungle and *Aya of Yop City*
Negotiating "Africa" in Comics

The following chapter reflects on two comics that are as different in content as they are in style. At first sight, seemingly no connection exists between Italian artist Francesco Tullio Altan's graphic novel *Ada dans la jungle* [*Ada in the Jungle*] and Ivorian/French writer Marguerite Abouet and French artist Clément Oubrerie's series *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya: Life in Yop City*]. The connecting element between these comics is that they both unfold counter approaches in dealing with the representation of cultural clichés and stereotyping. What makes both productions so interesting and, as is my thesis, successful in their respective approaches, is the fact that these comics do not go by the book in their unfolding of forms of didactical communication. Both works do not ostensibly perform against a dominating cliché. On the contrary, as visual and narrative media, these comics artifacts pursue, to different degrees, a strategy of the visualization of cliché as literal "image." As Erving Goffman (1967) has shown, strategies of image production are essential parts of any social interaction. As much as, especially, individuals try to build an image of themselves in their particular life-worlds, the social environment is also producing images that can be applied to people, nations, cultures, etc. (Goffman 1967). Stereotype and cliché are idiosyncratic forms of cultural image. As Timothy Mitchell argues,

> the construction of colonial order is related to the elaboration of modern forms of representation and knowledge. [. . .] The Western artistic and scholarly portrayal of the non-West [. . .] is not merely an ideological distortion convenient to an emergent global political order but a densely imbricated arrangement of imagery and expertise that organizes and produces the Orient as a political reality.   (Mitchell 1998, 293)

This applies just as aptly to the stereotyping of African culture and societies, powerful imagery that is still effective today. As Stephanie Zehnle (2015) has shown, the average representation of "Africa" and "the Africans" in comics is also following such firmly established clichés. The cultural imaginary (Taylor 2004) of which such representations are an essential part has emerged as an overall coding that does by far not only affect comics, but the semiotics of culture as such. Africa as a whole, and foremost its people, are thus represented as typifications of imagined characters. However, in the cultural discourse, these imaginations are being translated into its realities and turn into Barthesian "mythologies" (Barthes 2000). Cultural stereotypes are consequently dealing with their addressees as objects. As such, they are making it almost impossible for these objects to change or subvert

these images, images which are normally exclusively communicated within the dominant, stereotyping cultural communities and which leave no option for interaction with the stereotyped object. As Daniel Mengara argues, such stereotyping has emerged from consequent actions "to re-map, re-shape, re-name Africa according to a European view of the world" (2001, 3), in accordance to colonial regimes. Starting from post-medieval European art, representations of Africans made them appear as stereotypes (Itandala 2001, 69). Nevertheless, both comics this contribution draws on apply, beside the form of the narrative, their iconographic approach as an instrument to reflect exactly those clichés which they are seemingly depicting on the surface layer. As both comics are presented in a humorous, caricatural style, one might consider Jakob Dittmar's remark "that there is a close relation between the genre of a comic and the way it is visually represented: a distorted, caricatural representation is expected in humouristic comics" (2020, 30). As the "design of figures in comics is usually based on types" (Dittmar 2020, 30), the combination of narrative and image consequently responds to a cultural ideology of stereotyping which is neither limited to comics nor have comics in most cases been the medium via which such stereotypes have been established. However, as is well known, comics have, from their beginnings, made specific use of the respective imagery; cases like Hergé's today rather bizarre looking *Tintin au Congo* [*Tintin in the Congo*] from 1930/31 have been widely examined (McKinney 2011; Wanzo 2020).

In contrast to such works that are affirming stereotypes, the interest of this chapter is to reflect on contributions that are obviously dealing with the established cliché and stereotype, but, in doing so, provide an analytical approach (Ahrens 2019a, 84–115). The question then is whether such formalizations of comics voids any chance for self-referentiality and the subversion of cultural coding, or whether the medium also facilitates the critique of such modes of image production, stereotyping, and cliché. Only recently, Ole Frahm has shown that the form of comics is in fact an "Unform" [anti-form] (Frahm 2021, 68), only established by the perception and reception of an estranged reading by its audience (and by comics studies), when in fact the comics' form as anti-form is reflecting the symbolic violence of an unambiguity of classification and symbolization. Hence, the aim of this chapter is to show that one of the particularities of comics is their capability to visually stem against cliché and stereotyping not by avoiding or clearly correcting such discourses, but through their showcasing of them. The flipside of this aesthetic capability of comics then is that by no means must recipients trust the surface of representation in comics as their visuality is based on the performativity of deception and illusion.

Being about 25 years apart in terms of production, both works are linked to extremely different contemporary tendencies. Otherwise best known for his

children's series *Pimpa* about a red-spotted dog, in *Ada,* Altan consequently integrates the European comics avant-garde as it emerged in the early 1970s. In contradistinction, Abouet's *Aya* represents a more contemporary approach of reflection on comics as an instrument for social critique and the depiction of daily life. Even if this series is marked as fictional, it is overtly related to recent approaches comics have made with regard to reportage, documentary, and personal memoirs. Moreover, it avowedly plays with the biographical experiences of writer Abouet. In many ways, the two works are entirely opposite: On the one hand, the mildly ironic depiction of social life-worlds in Ivory Coast that, in fictional disguise, aims to represent social reality in *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya: Life in Yop City*], and on the other hand, the radically burlesque exaggeration of adventure into the "dark continent," consequently detached from any burden of reality in *Ada dans la jungle* [*Ada in the Jungle*]. Nevertheless, the remarkable interface of both productions is to be seen in their systematic response to a sustained cultural imagery of Africa as it has been established within the cultural iconography of (colonial) modernity. In a way, both comics discussed here subvert and deconstruct such imagery. But whereas *Aya* seems to be a correction of a cliché by the means of authenticity, *Ada* is practicing the exact opposite, the radicalization of cliché and utilization of stereotyping-as-burlesque.

Ada & *Aya*

Altan's *Ada dans la jungle* [*Ada in the Jungle*] was first published at the end of the 1970s in the Italian comics magazine *Linus* and in 1982 as an album by the publisher Casterman (the illustrations in this chapter have been taken from the German edition from 1985; no English translation is available). In this story, Altan stages the young, rich, and wicked English lady Ada Frowz and her journey into the African jungle at the end of World War II not only in search of her cousin, who has been lost for 20 years, but also in the hunt of a sizable inheritance. Altan's comic only barely corresponds to any particular aesthetics or genre. It is a mixture of adventure, comedy, underground, avant-garde, and the exposure of cliché in genre and cultural discourse. First of all, Altan's comic is characterized by its special use of black and white drawings, as was fashionable in French avant-garde comics of the time – with *A Suivre* magazine programmatically publishing exclusively black and white. No less importantly, though, Altan's drawings depict characters that appear both grotesque and deformed.

The often small panels are chock-full of obscure details, everything looks filthy and rotten, and Altan's greatest pleasure seem to come from the men's bizarre

noses. He also adds a sort of metaleptic commentary as an ongoing supplement to the graphic layer. Thus, Altan is continuously commenting on his own story and images by mixing reflection, undermining efforts, and deconstruction of whatever has been left in classical plot structure and graphical coding (see Figure 1). In Kai Mikkonen's view, in this comic the narrator "performs the role of a kind of viewing persona, [who] continuously comments on the ways in which the characters behave, speak, or appear in the images" (2015, 103–104). Accordingly, he considers *Ada* to point out "the interdependence between images and words" (Mikkonen 2015, 103–104) as far as words are used in comics. The plot itself is ambiguously crafted. On the one hand, it mimics classic conventions of the adventure genre, such as the search for the lost cousin or an expedition through the antagonistic jungle. On the other hand, it introduces such elements with a bold exaggeration that is strictly working against any serious notion of storytelling – like when the cousin gets lost by being thrown out of the plane by his father, who prefers spending time with his wife alone, and the son then being eaten by gorillas. That way, Altan's book seems to be set between satire and the provoking affirmation of any stereotype possible. The latter becomes even more obvious in the way the comic's images represent any visual stereotype possible, ranging from the depiction of lesbian love in an upper-class boarding school for girls to naked Africans sitting in their kraal. The ostentatious exaggeration of cliché in narrative and drawing references a visual strategy of representation that is unfolding its satirical approach exactly through a superficial affirmation of stereotypes. Thus, Altan employs a scheme of "affirmative Subversion" [affirmative subversion] (Ahrens 2019a, 87) that is particularly deploying the difference between the symbol and its referentiality. Accordingly, it undermines the superficial layer of meaning enforced by the stereotypical representation, which is at the same time exposed by its grotesquely exaggerated depiction. When Thomas Becker speaks of "aesthetic delimitation" (2011, 278), he is making a similar point about the ability of comics to denounce the semiotic level of what they are visually representing. The truly accurate depiction of stereotype and cliché alone is close to its denunciation. However, Altan combines this strategy with the plastering of postmodern ironic comments in the gutters on his pages.

About 25 years after the publication of Altan's *Ada*, between 2005 and 2010, Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie produced their series *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya: Life in Yop City*] (2012) and *Aya: Love in Yop City* (2013). Though the stories are loosely based on the personal experiences of the author in Ivory Coast during the 1970s, they are set among teenage youth at the end of the 1970s. Thus, the story's protagonists must be about 5–10 years older than Abouet (born in 1971), which distances them from a clear mode of biographical identification. Stylistically, *Aya* fits into the fashionable new wave of Franco-Belgian comics since the

Figure 1: Hyper-commentary and grotesque art in Altan's *Ada in the Jungle* (Altan 1985, 39).
© Francesco Tullio-Altan & Quipos s.r.l.

1990s – with artists like Joann Sfar, Jean-Christophe Menu, and Christophe Blain among the main protagonists, and centered around author-owned publishing house L'Association. In Abouet's graphic approach, the illustrations are kept rather

clean, but yet again, are a little sketchy. The coloring is set in exclusively pale colors that might indicate the nostalgia and historiography of the stories, but might also simply fall in line with contemporary fashion in Franco-Belgian auteur comics. The *Aya* series has evolved into a roughly 700-pages long work with young Aya at its center as the oldest daughter of an average, yet exceptional, Ivorian household. Similar to contemporary TV shows that establish a broad variety of different characters, the way the story follows its various protagonists allows for manifold aspects of the shape of Ivorian culture and society to be covered (McCabe and Akass 2007; Rothemund 2013). Due to this approach, it is possible, although Aya is positioned as a sort of main character, to have the series follow different characters of its "cast" and their particular fate – like Aya's friend Adjoua, who is becoming a single mother, young and gay Innocent who migrates to Paris, or Aya's parents' struggles with their marriage.

Opposite to *Ada*'s celebration of the extraordinary, it is the adventures of daily life that propel *Aya* and make the series both funny and convincing. The particular potential of the series can be attributed to its capacity for the depiction of daily life practices in a modern African society during the late 1970s. On the one hand, the series unfolds a clearly fictional narrative with fictional characters, loosely based on the author's experience, but, on the other hand, it crafts a seemingly accurate depiction of the Ivory Coast society of the time. That way, it ostentatiously plays with the general ambivalent "balancing acts of documentary comics" (Mickwitz 2019, n.pag.) that are consequently forced to refer to fictional modes (Ahrens 2019b). However, in *Aya* this relation is reversed, as it is not a documentary comic that also lends itself to fiction, but a fictional comic that also profits from its aura of authentication and quasi-documentary style. Paired with its easy readability, Abouet and Oubrerie present a panorama of how social life has been experienced throughout society, with a special focus on young women. In fact, the series still stands out, not only but especially in comics, by its emphasis on encounters in daily life. In this way, it links to what Charles Hatfield has deemed to be Harvey Pekar's achievement with *American Splendor*, namely "to have established a new mode in comics: the quotidian autobiographical series, focused on the events and textures of everyday existence" (Hatfield 2005, 109). While not unfolding an autobiographical narrative, *Aya* nevertheless is following its "inquiry into the underpinnings of daily life" (Hatfield 2005, 110). Eventually, *Aya* also clearly connects to what Benjamin Fraser calls the "representation of a variety of human passions through urban comics" (2019, 51). Like Fraser's statement about Will Eisner, Abouet and Oubrerie are also mainly interested in the "interior lives and the daily struggles of [their] protagonists" (Fraser 2019, 65), even if their consequently sober style of representation contrasts with Eisner's elaborate page architectures and parable-like aesthetic compositions (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Aya* and everyday calamities in 1970s Yopougon (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, 15). © Reprodukt.

Throughout, *Aya* is set in pages that contain six panels of exactly the same size, organized in three strips with two panels each, only rarely intermitted by a splash panel. The coloring is kept in light colors throughout that do not communicate the character's inner feelings. The latter is only performed by the characters' rather lively facial expressions and gestures.

Both comics could not be more different, and yet are both strongly referring to a contemporary indexicality: Altan's *Ada* is featuring a postmodern, alienating, and ironic aesthetic. As such, it is driven by what Wolfgang Welsch (1993, 5) calls the emergence of a dominance and the obligation of a plurality of patterns of meaning and action. From then on, truth, equity, and humaneness were only defined by plurality (Jameson 1986). Contrastingly, Abouet and Oubrerie's *Aya* unfolds a fictionality that aims for a representation of daily life that tries to authentically depict the aspects by which the society in question is genuinely characterized. Against this background, both productions can be seen as sort of media interventions as they are aiming at an established culture of representation by making use of the medium of comics. As with probably any medium, comics also position themselves within the social field from which they emerge. As a medium of communication via narrative and aesthetics, comics as cultural artifacts intervene into social contexts and thus contribute to the dynamization of inherent interaction, conflict, etc. (Ahrens 2017, 69).

What might the initially seemingly obscene view of Africa in Altan's *Ada* have in common with the seemingly historically accurate depiction of a postcolonial social reality in Abouet's *Aya*? Are the underlying concepts of a media performativity of comics contradictory to one another? Or do they rather share the quality of media agency by which comics locate themselves within the public sphere? Such a quality is foremost defined by comics' narrative structure and graphic aesthetics. How do both comics make use of the African setting? How do they integrate Africa as a setting, but also as a cultural and iconographic cliché in terms of the aesthetics and dramaturgy applied? It is, at first glance, rather surprising that both works are focusing on similar problems when their access to their respective subjects is obviously radically different: Both deal with female characters and their identity; both evolve around Africa as a space for imagination and possibilities; and, not least, both works unfold as a statement about the possibilities of comics as a medium. Eventually, both works do intensely and pointedly negotiate possibilities to depict performative competences in comics and their transfer towards an aesthetic mode of representation. Additionally, they approach the media agency of comics and play with the media characteristics of comics.

Altan's *Ada* and Doing Africa

As a continent, Africa has continuously been a space of unlimited imagination, especially invented by a "Western gaze, and subsequent imaginaries and constructions of Africa" (Gabay 2020, 1), even if Clive Gabay is a little skeptical about such positions. The assumption that "Africa is held to be in a directly negative hierarchical relationship with the West" (Gabay 2020, 1) is a rather powerful reference to Chinua Achebe who notes that Africa has been set up "as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar" (1983, 2). Not only is this Western gaze streamlining the diverse continent of Africa into one coherent and uniform object, it also strongly refers to racial notions and categories when it comes to the stereotyping of what is represented as African culture. In the imaginary of European societies, Achille Mbembe (2014, 12) argues, race and racist attitudes against black people are still one. As Mbembe states, the West is super-elevating itself as the distinctive cultural realm in which public rights, humanity, reason, and dignity have emerged. Whereas the rest, as figures of difference, the Other, and of evil powers, emerged as expressions of being an object per se. Africa in general, and black people in particular, have thus been represented as perfect signifiers of such a constrained life (Mbembe 2014, 30). This argument about the objectivation and, thus, the subjugation of Africa and "the Africans," simplified as one exhaustive character, by the power of an image-producing Western gaze, is in parts proliferated by Timothy Mitchell's position that the colonial world can be mastered in terms of the features of "essentialism, otherness, and absence," and that "colonial mastery will, in turn, reinscribe and reinforce these defining features" (1998, 293). Such a colonial, imperial gaze is, eventually, functioning as a "representation of [its] own otherness" (Mitchell 1998, 294). Interestingly, this colonial gaze does not unfold as one, but as at least three different types: the good and idealized savage of the Americas and the Pacific, the ambivalent, but exotically fascinating Oriental, and the disturbingly evil African savage.

Evidently, the interface of all these three types is enormous as the savage's happy life is based on the lack of everything that defines the essence of life in Western societies (Kohl 1986, 23). Nevertheless, the imagery of African culture and societies as designed by the Western gaze, although based on the same strategies for a production of Otherness, is definitely not in accordance with Said's influential term of "Orientalism" (2003, 3). At first, it seems that a statement like the following was only calling for the supplementation of the terms "Orientalism" and "Orient" by "Africanism" and "Africa": "Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 2003, 3). However, such Africanism or visual colonialism has successfully pushed rather different types of

the African Other into the Western imagination than Orientalism has ever done. The fascination and excitement for the exotic Other in Orientalism is replaced by an anxiety of the vital menace by imaginations of the African Other, by dangers of the jungle and an essential threat spread by the so-called primitive cultures as such, and the Africans as "wild beasts and evil" (Itandala 2001, 66). Still, the perception of Africa as a continent is dominated by the persistence of a negative perception of Africa throughout (Poncian 2015). Long before evolution theory claimed to have found the cradle of mankind in Africa, as a positive marker of origin, Africa itself served as a sort of absolute metaphor for the savage state of human beings before the rise of culture, as a negative marker of what Western civilization has overcome. The stereotyping that results from such a framing of Africa as an atrocity and, paradigmatically put by Joseph Conrad in his 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness* (2014), as the "dark continent" is still at work in a manifold of contemporary cultural artifacts and views on Africa (Achebe 1983).

Unsurprisingly, Altan already refers to the image of African wilderness in the title of his album, *Ada in the Jungle*, with the cover showing Ada as a stylish white beauty in front of an unnamed jungle devoid of civilization (see Figure 3). The Africa represented in Altan's iconography is the realm of the imperialistic scramble, even if, in the 1940s, at its last gasp. In Altan's Africa, everything is there that the persistently negative perception of the continent still imagines – a corrupt colonial administration; an underdeveloped continent, bare of civilization with a blossoming jungle wilderness; and eventually, the black savages living naked in shacks (see Figure 4). Yet, the African characters also prove to be the most intellectual ones in this comics album – with the only exception being the white, but proletarian Pilic. Throughout the whole book, Altan is exploiting the Western imagination of Africa and its whole range of stereotypes, clichés, and prejudices. Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985), produced only a few years after the publication of Altan's comic, is similarly borrowing its aesthetics from a well-established iconographic cliché of Africa. The only difference, albeit a major one, is that Pollack's film neither applies irony nor cynicism when its images seem to depict an unshattered world. As will be shown below, in *Ada*, this approach of cultural coding is constantly undermined when Altan produces an imagery that is unmistakably stereotyping the stereotypes and that also falls victim to the constant practice of unveiling commentary in almost each panel.

In her analysis of colonial comics, Zehnle (2015, 94) criticizes that, although comics were making use of stylistic devices of (graphic) exaggeration, the long-lasting practice of ridiculing Africans for being primitives or even wild cannibals cannot be explained by media specific characteristics and requirements. Even more, the Franco-Belgian comic, she says, was especially profiting from the Western concept of Orientalism (Zehnle 2015, 96). This is undoubtedly true, and the

Figure 3: *Ada* as show casing of exotism and cliché (Altan 1985, cover page). © Francesco Tullio-Altan & Quipos s.r.l.

longstanding tradition of stereotyping and colonial cliché is by no means to be neglected. However, exaggeration is an important formal strategy at comics' disposal to transcend and to uncover such iconographic epistemologies of stereotyping. As such, it is not the depiction of stereotypes which is the exaggeration (like the iconic fantasy of the African with big red lips), but the consequent radicalization of such depictions. Such radicalization as exaggeration of stereotyping then turns into exposure. It is in this sense that, in *Ada*, Altan radically stresses the comics medium's detachment from a proper depiction of reality. As Douglas Wolk rightly

Figure 4: Counter-production of the stereotyped African in *Ada* (Altan 1985, 49). © Francesco Tullio-Altan & Quipos s.r.l.

insists, comics do not, like film or photography, "intrinsically claim to be accurate documents" (2007, 118; see also Ahrens 2021). Looking at comics, one is fully aware that the image is only representing the represented object and that one is not looking at the actual object. As Wolk points out, however, comics are "drawn narratives that require the reader's imagination" (2007, 141). The capability of comics to on their graphic surface act as affirmative representation for the exposure of cultural practices of hegemony is what Christopher Pizzino calls the *delinquency* of comics (2020). This, he claims, would "violate the reader's intra- and extrabodily communion with the comic book by disrupting its sense of its own self-fulfillment and sufficiency" (Pizzino 2020, 24). Exaggeration as a formal element of comics, as understood in this chapter, is then synonymous with graphic delinquency as a critique of an iconographic and epistemological hegemony.

Following this approach of exaggeration, Altan unravels a blunt play with all sorts of clichés about Africa by immediately turning these into their opposite. On her search for the lost English boy in the jungle who is said to have become an "animal man," Ada finally ends up with a black Tarzan who is in fact the spoiled kid of her dead uncle's former mistress (therefore her half-cousin) and who is then making her his mistress for a time. Thus, Altan does not even shy away from letting the real cousin, whom Ada yearns to recover in the jungle, die right after his father kicked him out of the plane and he touched ground in the jungle. In a classically clichéd iconography, Altan explains that the child has become prey to gorillas and consumed alive (see Figure 5). That way he establishes a play not only with the historically rather old Western fantasy that these vegetarian creatures were wild man-eating monsters but also with the racist colonial analogy between apes and anthropophagic Africans that is excluding Africans from the entirety of mankind. "Human civilization," explains Valentin-Yves Mudimbe about the colonial agenda, "was Western in the eyes of the colonizers, and Africans were [. . .] not quite human" (1988, 69). That way, Altan invents a chain of clichés that are multiplying until they terminate in obvious absurdity, therefore exposing the usual codes for cultural representation. Then again, Ada's spoiled black cousin turns out to be a follower of pan-African ideas and, even if historically a bit too early, of Kenyatta. Here, the cousin adheres to a concept of African identity and wholeness (Serequeberhan 2015) that is no less generalizing the otherwise diverse African continent from the positive angle of unification than it does the colonial gaze from a negative one. Entranced by this ideology, however, the cousin stands up against Nazi soldiers who are, historically mistakenly, on a mission in British East Africa.

Again, from the infinite reservoir of a coding for prejudices, Altan is producing a compilation of an imagery of Africa that reaches far beyond the simple reproduction of cliché. Instead, his art of rearrangement creates an ambiguous

Figure 5: Cannibalism performed by Gorillas (Altan 1985, 91). © Francesco Tullio-Altan & Quipos s.r.l.

picture that consequently makes use of the colonial imagination of Africa in a way that produces both alienation and symbolic suppression. Regarding an iconography and narrative of exaggeration like Altan's *Ada*, it becomes immediately apparent "that colonialism has depersonalized Africans and that therefore the end of colonialism should promote the self-fulfillment of Africans" (Mudimbe 1988, 93). Following this graphic and narrative strategy, Altan unveils the inner logic of the colonial view, including its absurdity and stupidity by direct confrontation. Hence, Altan is in fact constructing a decolonial view of Africa that is also fully aware of such deconstructions, for it knows that the critique of colonialism from within colonial societies can only be realized via a practice of camouflaging the codes of colonial representation. This is achieved best by visual strategies that turn the Western, colonial gaze not only into the opposite of its original meaning, but also into a visually performative critique of the underlying discourses by means of exaggeration and the grotesque. By deploying such an approach to the coding of stereotyping, Altan manages to unveil the underlying "Epistemologie des Vorurteils" [epistemology of prejudice] (Ahrens 2019a, 95). In sum, Altan is making use of a Westernized "doing Africa" that refers to a well-established set of multiple stereotypes and clichés which are respectively combined in performative acts as constructed pastiche.

Abouet and Oubrerie's *Aya* and Imparting Africa

Abouet choses an ultimately different approach from Altan's radicalization of Western stereotyping. In contrast to his play with a generalization of the representation of an Africa as such, the African society in Abouet's *Aya* unmistakably represents the essential image of one specific African society. At first, it seems that this could be just any society, but in fact the opening of the series already makes clear that the plot is set in a rather particular society, the Ivory Coast of the late 1970s, and that its narrative can only unfold here. However, it is exactly this approach of specification and individualization of the social realm in *Aya* which is also imparting the series' readership with a visual and narrative correction of their image of Africa as such. As Anna Gavalda is mentioning in her foreword of the German edition, *Aya* shows that Africa is different to its usual clichés (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, 5) (see Figure 6). Similarly, Susanna Hoeness-Krupsaw states that one of *Aya*'s advantages is that Abouet "wants to acquaint the reader with a positive image of Africa that is unlike the information we receive from the news and history books" (Hoeness-Krupsaw 2012, 167). Obviously, next to the fact that Abouet is inventing an extremely entertaining story, put on

the scene by her husband Oubrerie's light and fine drawings, this comic's intention is educational as it teaches its readers about the multifaceted everyday life in Ivory Coast they have barely heard about before. Particularly with regard to a graphic representation of Africa, Sally McWilliams is speaking of pronounced difficulties concerning the medium of comics due to its constant reference back to iconographic cliché. However, she considers Abouet and Oubrerie to have solved the problem by the bold use of "visual and narrative strategies based on hybridity, contrasts, and contingency" (McWilliams 2015, 46).
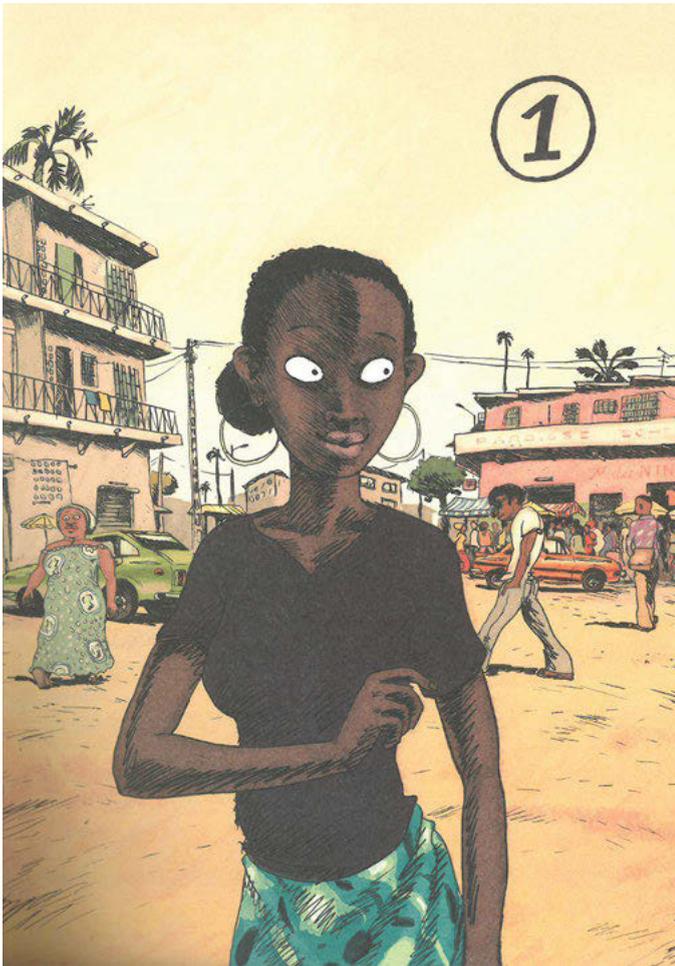
Figure 6: Aya as the young woman in the city (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, 7). © Reprodukt.

The combination of a depiction of everyday life in Ivory Coast and education about African reality stands out in Abouet's *Aya*. "Strictly speaking, 'everyday life' does not exist as a comic genre" (Lüthy et al. 2020, 95), Corinne Lüthy and her co-authors remark. Nevertheless, as they see it, comics can reveal "new and vivid aspects of everyday life in Africa" (Lüthy et al. 2020, 95), and *Aya* takes an important position here, as it "illustrates everyday life in a memorable way" (Lüthy et al. 2020, 95). Abouet and Oubrerie are following their protagonists through their daily challenges and adventures, as the plot of this urban story centers on "four attractive single African women" (Harris 2009, 119), their dealings with men, their job aspirations, and their confrontations with the restrictions and possibilities of the social codes of their society and time. The story unfolds calmly and, as outlined above, by a rather standardized visual framing with six panels per page, thus underlining the dramaturgic ubiquity of the depicted endeavors. It is exactly this quality that makes *Aya* so fascinating as a contemporary portrait of a modernist African society and the daily encounters of its individuals. As Marla Harris concludes, it is its setting in Ivory Coast that sets the series apart, since the Africa shown in this comic is probably "not the one familiar to most Western readers" (2009, 121). As Harris emphasizes, one of the merits of this series is that it consequently recovers "ordinary Africans as individuals rather than as symbols or statistics, and to educate readers in the process" (2009, 133). That way *Aya*, as much as *Ada*, is acting out against prevailing stereotyping and eventually aims at their relativization, or even abolition. However, much more than grotesque *Ada*, mildly ironic *Aya* is implementing corrections of the widely established image of Africa when "little that is 'known' about Africa today originates from Africans themselves" (Mengara 2001, 9), and when the series makes clear that it is providing images from within an African society and by means of first hand expertise. It is Gabay who diagnoses that, throughout the twentieth century, "major transitions [would] have occurred which have reset" (2020, 3) the dominating white imaginaries of Africa. In Gabay's view, this stands for a tendency to "place Africa in superior relation to the West" (2020, 3). As in cultural modes, a self-conscious series like *Aya* is definitely sharing in this tendency.

Noticeably, almost all readings of *Aya* stress the emphasis on the depiction of everyday life and an ostentatious individualization of the characters. Only the interpretation by Richard Oko Ajah is diverging here when he argues *Aya* galvanizes "juvenile nationalistic consciousness through age-long African communal identity" (2017, 97), a thesis which he unfolds with a special emphasis on the meaning of family and community. In his view, the series' characters are not represented as "individualized entities, but as [an] integral part of family entities" (Ajah 2017, 88). Ajah sees the latter as clear indicator of an African

identity and African nationalistic message. Apart from the fact that Ajah stands alone with this position, his claim is also not convincing. On the one hand, Ajah misses the fact that, in her storytelling, Abouet turns to present modes of narrative style in TV shows, as has been mentioned above, and therefore refers to a whole cast of characters while only loosely foregrounding Aya as the main protagonist; on the other hand, his reading reinstalls exactly the kind of generalization of characters, even if by positive intent, that corresponds with the hegemonic and typifying Western view of Africa. Whereas, as all other articles dealing with the series stress, in *Aya*, Abouet is emancipating her characters from the colonial impossibility of being "individualized entities." It is against this background that McWilliams notes *Aya*'s greatest strength in style and approach was its "interrogative power of humor" that was aiming at a destabilization of the "postcolonial social order itself" (2015, 47).

As there still is a "lack of representations showing Africa and Africans to be more than victims of colonialism" (McWilliams 2015, 46), inner African conflict, poverty, failed economies, etc., *Aya* seems to open up a possibility for the implementation of such a newly crafted imagery. Following Felwine Sarr (2019, 11), this might be absolutely necessary, as Africa depicted as the continent of the future would still be deemed to exist as a void in the present. This is what Gabay intends to demonstrate in his study about altering processes in *Imagining Africa: Whiteness and the Western Gaze* (2020): The twentieth century in particular has produced major shifts regarding the given "idealisations about Africa in Western imaginaries [. . .], as well as a rupture in the relationship between phenotypically white exclusivity and civilizational prowess" (Gabay 2020, 28). Sarr (2019, 12), instead, continues arguing that there was no scarcity of images under which the African continent would suffer, but that there was indeed a scarcity of its own, African ideas and the emergence of its own metaphors of the future. In fact, Altan's *Ada* and Abouet and Oubrerie's *Aya* might be seen as examples for exactly such processes of an emergence of new images, even if they emerge from within the Western societies themselves in the case of *Ada*. While the imagination of African cliché is relentlessly dismantled and deconstructed in *Ada*, a series like *Aya* is finding new representations for an African modernity that has been emerging since the 1970s. Although set in the recent past, Abouet and Oubrerie's *Aya* might succeed in implementing a new imaginary of African social reality (see Figure 7). For, as Sarr points out via reference to philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, societies are constituting themselves on underlying imaginaries, and a comic like *Aya* is probably proliferating such an emergence. Not least when keeping in mind that Mbembe is likewise calling for the "poetic productivity of remembrance" (2016, 65), *Aya*'s staging of a lively past as a parable for the present might turn out to be

effective and eventually serve as part of what Sarr calls the "Afrotopos" (2019, 14), another Africa whose arrival, he says, needs to be accelerated.

All in all, as McWilams concludes, the reader's "prescriptive images of Africa as 'Other'" will soon disappear, "as the novel's transcultural humor of social comedy reverberates" (2015, 59). It is only after gay hairdresser Innocent's migration to Paris as metropolis of the Northern hemisphere, that eventually a representation of the social Other emerges in *Aya*. Significantly this is not the stereotyped image of Africa via the Western gaze. After Innocent has reached Paris,
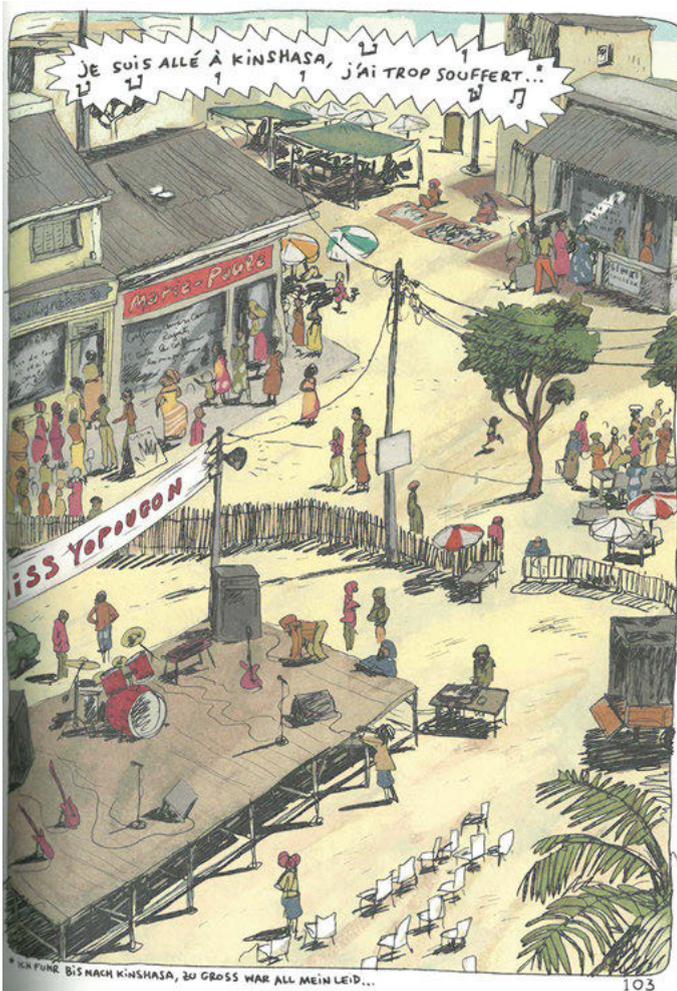
Figure 7: Depiction of a society by *Aya* (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, 211). © Reprodukt.

the series insistently emphasizes that he does not obtain any competences for the recognition of and dealing with cultural difference. The irony in this situation is that he, as postcolonial subject, is literally iterating the habits of a colonial gaze when he now tries to impose his Ivorian cultural self-understanding on the Parisians. What happens here is a sort of externalization of the Other by transferring it from Africa to Paris. As Gabay argues, in the twentieth century, the image of Africa was, at least in parts, turning into the representation of "a place where White civilizational vitality might be saved from a degrading West" (2020, 56). As such, a character like Innocent is representing exactly this shift within "articulations of White colonial-aesthetics" as an "idealization of African 'culture'" (Gabay 2020, 55). In this way, such an attitude is now turned back on the white society by the self-esteem of a black subject. The African gaze is turning Paris into exactly the Other as which Africa has always been seen under the colonial gaze – a social Other that must be ruled by domination and by the transfer of imposed cultural norms. For example, Innocent is, with sufficient self-esteem, not shy about reprimanding the Parisians for bad behavior and lack of manners when they are, e.g., kissing in public, remain seated in the Metro when an elderly person is standing right in front of them, or when they are singing songs about Africa that Innocent feels are inappropriate (see Figure 8).

Beyond his intervention and scolding, Innocent even threatens Parisians with a beating and needs to be informed by his friend that such behavior itself is inappropriate in France. The latter, as the education of the black ignorant into civilized custom by his white mentor, is of course a cliché itself, which is likely not given such prominence in the comic's narrative by chance. The information leaves Innocent puzzled when he can barely understand that Ivorian conventions would not be respected in France. For one, through these acts, he mimics the attitude of colonists in Africa who expected the African people to adopt the imported European norms, values, and habits. Innocent produces an absurdly turned-around culturalism when he leaves no room for cultural difference. From these sequences results the enlightenment that the stereotyped view barely corresponds with truth, which is turned by Abouet from the Western to the African view and its correction. Via this strategy, she not only communicates that stereotyping is also an integral element of diversity but also finds a fresh approach to the subject. Hence, by this turning around of the inspecting gaze, Europe is becoming the space of awkwardness which is in the wrong shape and must be corrected by an African view.

However, such attitudes can only partially be understood as a decolonial African view of Europe when they are so consequently mimicking the derogatory framing of African culture and societies by the Western imperialist colonizers. As Hatfield emphasizes via reference to Art Spiegelman, "sustained comics narrative has the power to individualize the stereotype, dismantling it in whole or in part"

Figure 8: Innocent turns the African gaze upon the Parisiens (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014b, 156). © Reprodukt.

(Hatfield 2005, 115). Even if comics at first reiterate the logic of stereotyping, particularly because, as a graphic medium, they are making use of iconographic clichés that are especially condensed in the style of cartooning, they are also able to transgress these pejorative images by strategies of radicalization, exposure, and irony. Therefore, *Aya* deconstructs a view of the African society from the inside when it aims at a graphical normalization of African society and its everyday life. At this point, Hatfield's conclusion "that comics, with their hybrid, visual-verbal nature, pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of 'nonfiction'" (2005, 112) seems convincing. Comics, Hatfield continues, can "hardly be said to be 'true'" (2005, 112). The reversal of stereotypes in *Aya* communicates exactly this. At the same time, an external view of the cultural Other is implied in *Aya* when this comic makes the African view of Western society follow an agenda of practices for cultural Othering that is itself imitating an alienated European ideal that aims at the pureness of "primitive" culture.

Conclusion

Both comics discussed in this chapter can be seen as examples of the capabilities by which the medium of comics is able to transgress established cultural discourses that emerge as stereotypes and clichés. It is of particular irony that comics as a visual medium are ostensibly affirming such stereotyping discourses. However, by particular means of aesthetics and narrative, the medium articulates a critical perspective and an analytical potential. This is not primarily due to the means of narration, scenario, or dialogue, but mainly based on choices of aesthetic arrangement and the application of a metaleptic meta-level that, within the medium, responds to the formal characteristics of comics. By means of a strategic depiction of stereotype, like, e.g., in *Aya*, it is possible, as Dittmar argues, to make use of "established types and stereotypes [. . .] in ways that ridicule and question these" (2020, 38). As such, he says, the "difference between individualised figures and typical or stereotypical reduction can be used to represent opposing concepts and to criticize the state of things in society" (Dittmar 2020, 29). The question, however, is how such media characteristics as irony and the grotesque can be dealt with – stylistic elements that are ostentatiously operating on the performative attitude of stereotyped discourse, even if by mocking intent. Altan's approach in *Ada* shows that a gross and offensive representation can indeed be suitable for exposure when laughing here means laughing about the depicted stereotypes themselves, not about the stereotypes that are inherent to these messages. Such an approach might be part of what Hatfield calls "ironic

authentication" (2005, 126), even if he develops this term specifically with regard to autobiographically oriented comics. But of course, his interpretation that the exaggeration of irony helps to unveil the truth of stereotyping and cliché for establishing hegemonic orders of power can be easily attributed to any other genre in which specific styles of such exaggeration are established. "Comic art, after all," Hatfield summarizes, "is a potentially complex narrative instrument, offering forms of visual-verbal synergy in which confused and even conflicting points of view can be entertained all at once" (2005, 126–127). Just as such use of exposing forms of exaggeration and irony is not limited to one specific genre, it does not only apply to alternative comics. Of course, this approach can also be applied to the broad field of mainstream comics, as this segment of comics especially is ceaselessly trafficking cultural stereotypes in narrative and depiction, thus contributing to the production of effective cultural pathos formulae. However, the use of cliché alone does not necessarily result in an unmasking of doing cultural stereotypes. To give only one classic example: André Franquin's series *Spirou et Fantasio* [Spirou and Fantasio] is decisively communicating humanistic values to its readers. Nevertheless, the depiction of Africans in episodes like *Le grorille à bonne mine* (Franquin 1959) or *Tembo Tabou* (Franquin 1974) is proliferating cultural stereotypes of Africans as immature, foolish, and dependent. Hence, what is needed is the clear agenda to transgress such practices of doing cliché and to transfer such reflection into a strategic mode of depiction. As a medium, comics obtain the immanent capacity of doing so; however, this capacity is not self-evident and needs to be programmatically applied. Examples for the successful implementation of such approach in mainstream comics are Yann and Conrad's series *Les innomables* (1996–2004) or, at least in parts, Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso's *100 Bullets* (1999–2009) (Ahrens 2019, 84–115, 116–152).

With Hatfield, we can say that Altan radically deforms his drawings for the purpose of unveiling the reality of cliché by a radically exaggerated depiction. With the bizarre noses of his male protagonists and his love for slackness, shabbiness all around, and cockroaches populating nearly every panel of the album, he reaches far beyond caricature, but establishes a graphic representation that falsifies its illustrations and therefore irritates its readers (see Figure 9). In comics there is always a "tension between fact and fiction" (Ahmed 2016, 52) remaining, and it is, according to Maaheen Ahmed, exactly this tension which eventually leads to the medium's "openness when used suggestively or figuratively" (Ahmed 2016, 52). By employing such an approach, comics are definitely "mirroring a world that is dominated by images in varying forms and combinations" (Ahmed 2016, 166). Even more, the personalities of Altan's characters are no less deformed than his drawings when they are radically and brutally reduced to genre clichés. These are no longer persons, but explicitly designed formulas of genre personage,

Figure 9: Irritation in *Ada* by shabby luxury and bizarre noses (Altan 1985, 40). © Francesco Tullio-Altan & Quipos s.r.l.

templates in motion though a story that is systematically making use of any cliché possible regarding colonial adventures. Therefore, they unfold flexibility and self-reflexivity, as argued by Ahmed, when they manage to integrate the capabilities of the form "within a structure guiding the narrative" (2016, 150). By these means, Altan is continuously commenting on the medium and the narrative that he himself applies. There are only a few panels in the whole album that are not equipped with a deconstructing commentary that, next to the stylization of ugliness, underscores the story, but even more so, underscores the power of unrestricted representation. Through this, a simple reading of the comic as comic is not possible anymore. The usual flow of images, and in fact any illusion of sequentiality, is subverted by metaleptic commentary, and the reader is constantly forced to reach out for the meta-level of ironic deconstruction in Altan's work. As such, closure is not possible anymore when it continuously remains unclear on which level such a procedure should take place – the metalepsis or the story reading.

Unlike Altan, Abouet and Oubrerie do not refer to grotesque exaggeration or metalepsis. At first sight, their approach is much more modest, or at least rather different, but no less impactful. It traces, with great sensitivity, a recent social reality in Ivory Coast that, in its representational timelessness, appears to be rather contemporary. Abouet foremost uses the means of social portrait, an approach that is emphasized by Oubrerie's artwork in light colors and lucid organization of the page with the limited capacity of a maximum of six panels. The comic's aesthetics are unagitated and relaxed, an effect that is not least achieved by its page architecture. Such a consistent formal approach communicates a vast naturalness of what is represented. This graphic approach clearly communicates the normality of the depicted. In fact, the society represented in *Aya* is absolutely not at issue as it is in *Ada* (see Figure 10). On the contrary, what Oubrerie's images are communicating is that this society is far from being exotic. This is the Africa of mass culture normalization and *Aya* is meant to be a confirmation of such a society. Even if drawn in a caricature-like style, the images in *Aya* are transporting an implicitness that seems to perfectly capture the performative and cultural moment which they are simultaneously depicting and producing. Whereas Altan's exaggeration and deformation cries out that everything in his story, and especially in his images, is unreal, Oubrerie's style is communicating that things could have been exactly the way his art is depicting.

Instead of employing stylistic obstruction, Abouet enriches her production of social portraiture through the constant use of irony, especially, but certainly not exclusively, in the depiction of male behavior. Irony as a tool for the correction of cultural framing is the formal element in this comic that constantly flows through the narrative and also the images. Insofar, *Aya* can be regarded as a model of what Augustine Okereke calls the "direct or indirect attempt to correct

Figure 10: The dramas of the ordinary in *Aya* (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014b, 151). © Reprodukt.

the misrepresentation and the distortion of the African continent and its people by foreign writers" (2001, 338), even if, in *Aya*, the irony as the carrier of correction partly undermines the representational power of the images. Yet, it does this only insofar as it unfolds the correction of the hegemony of a canonized social reality by a sort of Nietzschean perspectivity, making clear that the young women, or Innocent, or their parents' generation, or the Parisian society have vastly different views of the world. Following Altan, diversity might be a grotesque performance of unrealness. Following Abouet, it is a Nietzschean project for individual emancipation.

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Greice Schneider
Telling Stories with Photo Archives
Intermedial Agency in Documentary Comics

With the emergence of monster archives (Nora 1972) and the acceleration of image production, visual journalism struggles with the excess images in an incessant flux. One way of dealing with such an excess of pictures and halt the flow is to narrativize visual archives, organizing, sequencing, plotting, and administering information and reader expectations to confer meaning and contextualize these stories. Endowed with an extraordinary malleability, photography has frequently been accommodated in various forms, from golden age magazine picture stories to multimedia reportage. This chapter's point of departure is to approach intermedial agency in the way photographic archives can be remediated in documentary comics, a phenomenon growing in recent decades, revealing very sophisticated forms of combining photographs sequentially. The aim here is to explore the potential of comics as a site for exercising archival remediation and how agency is distributed along these various medial instances. What happens when an archive from a classic photojournalism work is organized in comics format? How do different contexts of circulation and social-institutional frames may impact the reception? And what would be the most suitable formal strategies to remediate these materials? In the following pages, I will try to discuss this reconfiguration of photographic images through the perspective of intermediality (Thon 2016).

These documental photo narratives will be approached considering the medium-specific potentialities of the fixed photographic image and how they come up in different media. The materiality of photography will be a crucial aspect that contributes to shedding light on the specific ways photographic material can be selected from the archives and recombined as representing events arranged in a coherent plot. It is thus not the aim here to discuss single-picture narrativity, but to concentrate on the juxtaposition of archival photographs deliberately re-organized to tell a story. Nor is it the goal to investigate conceptual documentary photography based on the seriality of lists and inventories, but to reflect on the narrative potential of the documentary format.

> Photonarrative is much more than the display of a preformatted or underlying script that is illustrated by a set of images representing each successive step of action. It is first and foremost an invitation to rethink the narrative dimension of photography itself completely, not by internal manipulation of the single image [. . .], but by the exploration of what it means to insert photography in a framework of spatial and temporal montage.
>
> (Baetens and Bleyen 2010, 181)

Besides the cases of photonovels and *cine-róman* [cine-novel] (Baetens 2010, 2019b), the relation between comics and photography is a privileged space to investigate these hybrid formats (Pedri 2015; Schmid 2016; Flinn 2018). Despite growing recognition, I would like to focus on stories composed of images that were not originally produced in the comics medium, but that were later refashioned and repurposed (Bolter and Grusin 2000) to create compelling visual narratives. Although not new, digital technologies have undoubtedly increased the "fluidity" (Gervais 2016, 7) of photographs, and expanded the practice of incorporating and recombining archival material. I will discuss this repurposing of photographic archives in documentary comics as an example of intermedial agency, considering the distribution of agency between the various (human) actors assembling these comics, the materials, and technologies, the forms and distinctions of/between media as conceptual entities. Also, I will approach the different regimes, reading habits, and constraints involved in each field and institutional values, from artistic documentary practices to everyday visual journalism.

One of the most remarkable and often discussed examples of this is probably *Le Photographe* [*The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors without Borders*], by Guibert, Lefèvre, and Lemercier (Picado 2015; Schmid 2016; Barbieri 2017; Egger 2018), a book compiled from an archive of more than fifteen thousand photographs taken by the protagonist Didier Lefèvre during a mission of Doctors without Borders in Afghanistan in 1986, combined with drawings by Emmanuel Guibert and page design by Frederic Lemercier, forming a complex and elaborate triple presence of the photographer, the cartoonist, and the designer.

Yet, in this chapter, I will take as a case study the book *La Grieta* [The crack], by Carlos Spottorno and Guillermo Abril, which focuses on the crisis of immigration in Europe. The work has circulated and won multiple prizes in different domains, from more traditional journalistic vehicles to comics institutions. Unlike *Le Photographe*, however, *La Grieta* is composed only of photographs digitally altered to *look* like drawings – the mixed-use of photographic images and comics conventions already places it in a challenging border zone between formats and shifting institutional values. I will look at *La Grieta* from a formal perspective, exploring how some of the main aspects of comics can work when dealing with archives. Furthermore, I will consider the specific temporalities of publication and circulation. In the face of the frenetic flow of pictures mentioned above,

long-form visual storytelling could be seen as a form of slowing down the process, taming enormous archives (Farge 2013), bringing to a halt the unrelentless stream of images. Indeed, it was only through a retrospective remediation process, involving selecting the 750 photographs (taken from an archive of twenty-five thousand photos) and re-organizing the pictures in a book format, that *La Grieta* came to be published.

Comics and Agency Remediating Archives

The first important point in discussing the combination between agency and archives (Mademli 2021) is to understand the role of comics' affordances in this process of archival remediation. While many storytelling devices draw from archives (which have a non-narrative character) to develop all kinds of narratives, comics can be seen as an especially suitable site to deal with the complexity of enormous archives in the context of media convergence and intermedial adaptations. Jared Gardner notes an expressive number of comics that feature archives as essential themes in the stories, even calling for an "archival turn in the contemporary graphic narrative" (2006, 788):

> It is the comic form that might be best suited to articulating the complex demands of the present new media age in relation to the media of the past. Perhaps ironically, given the avowed antipathy of many comics creators to new media technologies, the comic form is ideally suited to carrying on the vital work Benjamin called for generations earlier: making the present aware of its own "archive," the past that it is always in the process of becoming. (Gardner 2006, 803)

Hillary Chute goes beyond this, developing the idea of an "archival drive" (2012, n.pag.) behind comics grammar and emphasizing the dynamic features of archives instead of the static repository. As a collection of panels, the very comics medium already presents a particular "inclination to document" (Chute 2016, 2).

> Comics makes the process of selecting, ordering, and preserving intelligible in a way few formats can: its very narrative syntax is an interplay of presence and absence, in which moments of time are selected and boxed (separated conventionally by bands of white space called "the gutter"). The actual juxtaposition of frames on the page calls overt attention to the basic grammar of comics as selection – to the rhythm of the displayed and the evacuated, and how they constitute each other. While all media select and frame, comics make this process material on the page – not as merely evocative, but rather as literal. (Chute 2012, n.pag.)

Comics offer a wide range of medial affordances that can accommodate archives and hold an intimate relationship with the practice of archival research

and the relation with manifestations of memory in general (Ahmed and Crucifix 2018). In addition, formal strategies, and material constraints – such as the multiple tensions between image and text, the coexistence of different temporalities on the same page, as well as the combination of numerous types of signs, styles, and materials – make comics a particularly privileged medium to exercise agency over archives and bring life to these visual narratives.

In this specific case, it is critical to recognize how these various technological, institutional, and semiotic medial affordances (Ossa and Wilde 2020) shape the tensions that arise when mechanic-based photographic archives are reassembled and framed as comics, which are usually composed of hand-made drawings. Furthermore, this clash should be addressed from the perspective of the specific consolidated constraints and reading expectations proper to the established genre of the documentary (Nichols 1991) as well as the interplay between opacity and transparency: On the one hand, we have the discussion around narrative immersion and graphic transparency (Marion 1993; Gaudreault 1999; Schneider 2012); on the other hand, the mythological quest for photographic realism and transparent pictures (Walton 1984).

News Pictures and the Present

Before advancing to a close reading of *La Grieta*, it is also crucial to consider how institutional agencies and social practices of picturing the news affect how temporalities are modeled (and how comics might propose alternatives). In an era of inflation of monster events, when we live in a perpetual state of super information, there is an urgency of an ever-present mediatization. Unlike art, news pictures' relation to its public "is structured around the temporality of the short-term" (Hill and Schwarz 2015, 5). They are the "fastest possible clip given the historical conditions of circulation at any given moment" (Hill and Schwarz 2015, 5). In such a context, photography seems like the natural medium to cultivate this relation to the present. It speeds up the image-making process, allowing for diminishing times between the click and the publication.

> News pictures might be understood to visually construct every notion of contemporaneity that we might presume to enjoy. Breaking stories streaming through our smartphones operate in a different temporal register than long-form investigative pieces in the pages of weeklies and monthlies. All these temporalities, however, stand for "news time," which also stands for what we can know of our present moment.   (Hill and Schwarz 2015, 8)

One of the elements that can shift the particular sense of temporality and determine its relative social force is the support (Hill and Schwarz 2015), the different

rhythms involved in the production and consumption of each publication type. From a production point of view, making comics usually takes a more extended period, which already distances the event from the publication. Hence, the temporality here is not tied to the imposed actual presence, but is determined by playing with possibilities of setting the pace, slowing down, going backward, and re-reading. Even when thinking of examples in documentary comics, the temporalities found in reading comics obey different rules. Accordingly, the slowness and endurance proper to the medium becomes an asset, a way of imposing a more reflexive pace (Schmid 2021, 227):

> Documentary graphic narrative books set the materiality and traditional social prestige of the book and its gatekeeping institutions against the incessant flux of news and entertainment online, decelerating both the creation and the reception process. (Schmid 2021, 49)

Remediating photographs in a comic book hardcover form would be one of the many ways to slow down the urgency for live reporting and allow for other rhythms of publication outside the logic of instant publishing, allowing time to linger, reflect and transform events into intelligible narratives. It enables us to take things out of the flux, slowing down and shaping the event. Such a move helps to halt the unrelenting repetition of events.

From Photojournalism to Documentary Comics: Looking at *La Grieta* between Publishing Contexts

Between 2014 and 2016, photographer Carlos Spottorno and reporter Guillermo Abril – both from the newspaper *El País* [The country] – covered the immigration crisis in Europe, depicting three years of exploring the European Union's external borders from Africa to the Arctic. This material took several forms – it was first published in the magazine *El País Semanal*, then as a long-form multimedia reportage, containing online galleries and a short web documentary. Later, some of this material was repurposed and released as a book (which, by its turn, also became an exhibition on museum walls).

In a way, the concept of borders is central not only as the main theme of *La Grieta* – an attempt to focus on the cracks in immigration (hence the title) – but also as a way of looking at the book itself, as a migrant that aims to cross frontiers, to visit the margins (and to identify possible cracks). In this sense, the book is also a very curious object that complicates established production, distribution, and reception practices. First, the material aspects of the book – especially the tension between the use of photographic images and formal comics conventions – already

places it in a challenging border zone between formats. This ambiguous status is also evident in the definition published on Spottorno's website, in which the book is described as something "halfway between a photobook and a graphic novel" (Spottorno n.d., n.pag.).

Moreover, the book has been circulated in various fields, which guides the reading expectations and shapes how this object will be recognized, read, and classified. Depending on the institutional field in which it was released, *La Grieta* has been labeled as a "photo book," a "photo novel," a "photo comic," and a "photojournalism essay." The work has circulated and won multiple prizes in very different domains, from more traditional journalistic vehicles (like the prestigious *World Press Photo*) to comics institutions (it obtained the Prix Atomium de la BD reportage) and more artistic spaces (it won a Juror's Special Mention in the Aperture PhotoBook Awards, from a photography magazine). While the journalistic field will generally reward the quest for authenticity and spectacular, extraordinary events, contemporary photography magazines tend to call attention to its aesthetic features. Furthermore, the photobook category stands for another cultural object with its own constraints and set of reading expectations. In any case, regarding the editorial frames of circulation, *La Grieta* is published by publishing houses known for releasing comics in the editorial market: Astiberri (Spain), Gallimard Bande Dessinée (France), Avant Verlag (Germany), and Add (Italy).

Paratexts are also decisive elements that offer visual cues to help the reader to frame the book as a documentary, awakening a set of reading expectations (Genette 1997). The cover of *La Grieta* (see Figure 1) already evokes an implicit genre indication (Schmid 2021, 72): A rescued girl looks at us readers reminding us of canonical photojournalistic portraits (Nijdam 2020). Furthermore, a round sticker placed at the bottom of the cover announces a World Press Photo award in 2015, a sign of cultural prestige and a marker of journalistic belonging.

Another critical point is the temporality involved in this process. The series was not originally planned to appear as a comic, which means the images were not explicitly conceived to fit that format. Spottorno received a grant from the BBVA Foundation for a long-term project, during which he has curated and edited photos in this book format after these three years. So, instead of pictures published in the heat of the moment (and journalism, as we keep being reminded, is connected to the present tense and is close to a certain sense of urgency), here he had time to look back and organize, contextualize these macro events, challenging the rhythms of everyday journalism. In the following sections, I will look at this peculiar work from the perspective of very well-known formal constraints, which are typical of comics storytelling, and examine how they can be connected to the concept of archives: First, I will address the tension between linearity and tabularity, then the notion of graphiation, and finally the relation between image and text.
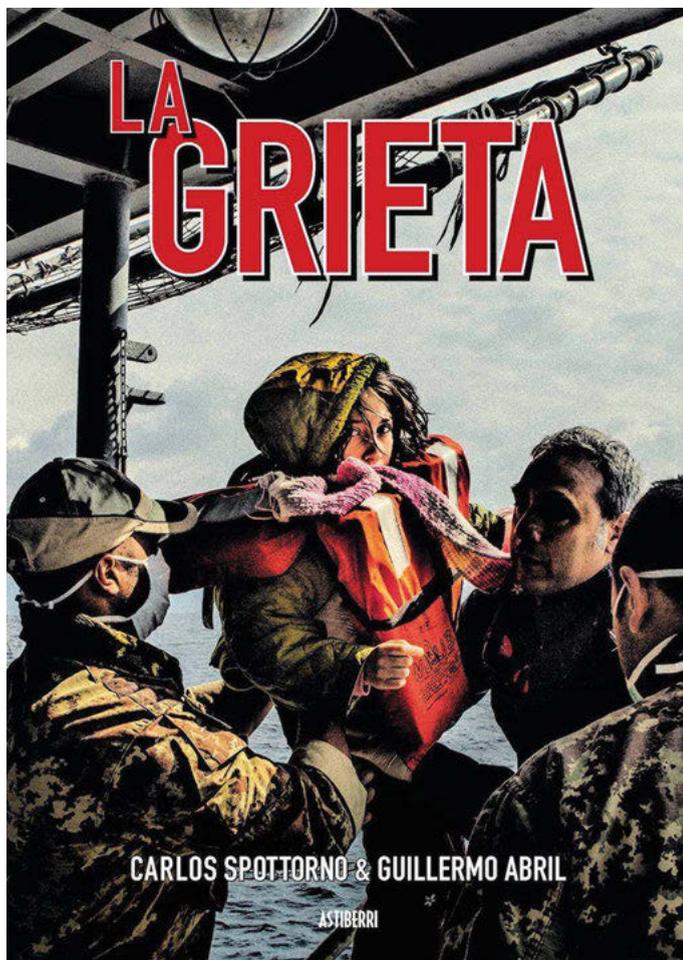
Figure 1: The cover of *La Grieta* (Spottorno and Abril 2016, cover page).

Boxing Documents in Containers

One of the most central features for thinking of archives and comics is the co-presence of images occupying the same space, but at the same time arranged in sequence. In other words, the tension between linear and tabular (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976), between sequential and synoptical readings of these materials. The comics page offers a way to slow down the flux of images, organize, order,

propose connections within intertwining page layout (*mise en page*) and panel breakdowns (Hatfield 2005).

Instead of following an archival logic of organizing historical materials in a chronological sequence of consecutive accumulated events, or in the form of lists, inventories, and collections, the use of the page layout can propose other logical connections plotting the configuration of events, modulating tension and shaping expectations, guiding the reader. The coexistence of multiple pictures arranged sequentially will provide the opportunity of a double reading – always both sequential and synoptical. Panels are never read in their isolated form, but in interaction with surrounding panels displayed in the layout, in what Groensteen (1999) calls *iconic solidarity*. Although such tension is not exclusive of comics, the reading habits of the comics page layout are so firmly rooted that it serves as a frame to comment on other formats, such as particular works of sequential photography:

> Les images d'une séquence peuvent être placées sur une page les unes à côté des autres, ou encore disposées de manière tabulaire. L'observateur possède une conscience globale de la page. Son oeil peut vagabonder d'un cliché à l'autre à la vitesse qui lui convient. [. . .] Le spectateur calque ainsi sa conduite sur les habitudes de lecture du texte écrit ou de la bande dessinée.

> [Images in a sequence can be placed on a page next to each other, or they can be arranged in a tabular fashion. The observer has a global awareness of the page. His eye can wander from shot to shot at any speed that suits it. [. . .] The spectator thus traces his behavior on the reading habits of the written text or the comic strip.]   (Méaux 1997, 78)

The idea of boxing documents in containers finds resonance in the panel distribution of the comics page and the frontiers and panel borders in the process of worldmaking, not unlike what happens with the comics grid. It is possible to see panels as containers, following an archival logic of organizing and juxtaposing historical materials in a chronological sequence of consecutive accumulated events or in the form of lists, inventories, and collections.

This is the case with a double-page spread from *La Grieta*, for instance. We see a collection of objects found on the beach, the remains of shipwrecks from migrants, affected by time and destruction. Here, the panels almost work as archival containers – it is not a linear sequential logic that is at play, but an inventory logic. The absence of text also helps to highlight the coexistence of these objects and reinforces their potential connections.

Nevertheless, the use of the page layout can also, at the same time, propose other logical connections plotting the configuration of events and modulating narrative tension. For example, one strategy that enables a series of images to be read as a sequence is the homogeneity provided by the recurrence of its

characters and setting. That is what allows events to be read as change over time (Méaux 1997). Another strategy used in *La Grieta* is zooming in and out the scene, framing the same settings from varying distances. Page 100 shows, for example, an open shot, progressively closing to human portraits. In many cases, though, we are left with long sequences of different photographic essays with a weak sense of plotting.

Disguising Photographs as Drawings

A second dimension that deserves attention is the graphic style, a subject that has been widely explored by Phillippe Marion (1993). Marion introduces the concept of the *graphiateur* [graphiator] to discuss instances of graphic enunciation, conceived in degrees that range from a "human" calligraphic or manuscript trace to a trace produced by a machine. On the one hand, we could find an unstable, ratty line that denounces the presence of a manual gesture. On the other hand, we might encounter a regular trace that would presumably have less human interference, such as in a typewriter or a camera.

This discussion can further nuance the old debate about drawn opacity versus photographic transparency in our particular case. This approach may be helpful to shift the problem of indexicality from photography to the materiality of the archive. First, the intimate relation between photography and documentary practices results from a belief system that grants the status of visual proof to technical images. However, in the light of a skeptical age, when photography seems to abuse our credulity (Lavoie 2017), graphic truth-telling is considered an alternative in a thriving genre of documentary comics (Mickwitz 2016, 3) in which the testimonial quality of drawings, alluding to their own making, is considered more potent than the photographic. Given such skepticism of the photographic image, the wide use of photography in comics should not be seen as a simple matter of authenticity, but as fulfilling a narrative function, as a way to "get the business of storytelling done" (Pedri, 2015, 2):

> Documentary (as an adjective and a noun) is about the presentation of evidence. In its succession of full frames, comics call attention to themselves, specifically, as evidence. Comics make a reader access the unfolding of evidence in the movement of its basic grammar by aggregating and accumulating frames of information.   (Chute 2016, 2)

Second, in the case of archives, traditionally oriented towards the past, it would be fruitful to think of indexicality in terms of its material residual traces – the marks and scratches we find are not necessarily left by a recognizable *sujet graphiateur* [graphiator subject], but are shaped by the passage of time. This enduring

aspect of physical handling might intensify the effect of authenticity. In the visual materiality of the archives, authenticity does not lie in the supposed photographic indexicality. However, it can appear in the form of visual marks of physical duration, such as traces left by the handling of photographs.

When we look at *La Grieta*, the first thing that calls our attention is its relationship between photographs and drawings. Here we are neither dealing with drawn photographs (as in the famous examples of Spiegelman's *Maus* [1980] and Bechdel's *Fun Home* [2006]) nor with a combination of two medial formats on the same page (as in the combination of drawings and photographs in Guibert's *Le Photographe*). What happens is that these mechanically produced images are digitally altered in post-production in an attempt to make them look like drawings, maybe to disguise these photographic traces from their technical genesis. There are several strategies involved here: the use of solid contrast highlights the contours and efface details of the surface, the level of grain is increased, and a pastel color palette combines different images in a homogeneous tone. Spottorno also flattens differences in shadow and light, removing details and revealing more schematic shapes.

Beyond the usual corrective adjustments used in photojournalism practices, these dramatic changes fulfil several roles. First, they make the page layouts more cohesive, contributing to the sensation of consistent world-building. Second, these modifications also make the pages more readable by removing details and revealing schematic shapes. Yet, the main reason for interfering, according to Spottorno, is that "photography is way too concrete, too real" (2016, n.pag.). Instead of employing a realistic style, Spottorno disguises photographs as drawings in order to add another tone to the story. Furthermore, there is an attempt to create distance from melodramatic photonovels, which reveals a particular prejudice towards the format (Baetens 2019a). Spottorno also seems worried about the effects of photographic realism and, as a reaction, deliberately tries to approximate his book to the experience of reading comics.

El material gráfico era limitado, ya que si nos faltaba una foto no podíamos sustituirla por nada. Pero conseguimos encontrar un método para enlazar las historias: no hemos hecho un guión, sino un diario siguiendo los acontecimientos como acontecieron. No quería utilizar fotografía pura porque es demasiado concreta, demasiado real, te lleva al mundo de la revista o, peor aún, al de la fotonovela, y no quiero que se asocie a esto. Quiero que el lector no interprete, y para eso hay que transformar la foto. Aún siendo fotos con este efecto pierden ese carácter realista de la fotografía directa, y al hacerlo como una ilustración entras más en la idea de que estás leyendo un comic.

[The graphic material was limited, since if we were missing a photo we could not replace it with anything. But we managed to find a method to link the stories: We have not made a script, but a diary following the events as they happened. I did not want to use pure

photography because it is too concrete, too real, it takes you into the world of the maga-
zine or, worse still, that of the photonovel, and I don't want it to be associated with this. I
want the reader not to interpret, and for that you have to transform the photo. Even
though they are photos with this effect, they lose that realistic character of direct photog-
raphy, and by doing it as an illustration you get more into the idea that you are reading a
comic.]   (Spottorno and Abril, quoted in Martin 2016, n.pag.)

What is rather intriguing in this movement is that, although the pictures are
graphically altered to tone down the photographic texture, the authors still stress
the claim of photographic evidence and authenticity in an acknowledgment
placed at the bottom of the last page that explains that all the events represented
in the book took place and that no element has been added or removed, clarify-
ing which aspects were digitally altered (colors, horizon, optical distortions, etc.)
and which were not. According to the description in the press release, "the end
result is not a story based on actual events: these are actual events" (Astiberri
2016, n.pag.).

Narrating the Click

A third aspect that needs to be addressed is the convergence between photography
and other media, manifested, for example, in the tension between showing and
telling, image and text. I will rely on the concept of segmentivity, developed by
Brian McHale (2010) to talk about narrative poetry and applied to comics as an an-
alytical tool by Steven Surdiacourt (2015). The notion of segmentivity is helpful to
understand how we dismember texts to modulate the pace and distribute informa-
tion on the comics page. Furthermore, text fragmentation helps organize the pages
in a modular structure, assembling images in a maze of possible connections,
bringing potential meanings to several archives.

What is striking about *La Grieta* is that all text is structured as a field journal
and then fragmented into several blocks across panels and pages, pacing the read-
ing, breaking down the flow into chunks, imposing a wandering rhythm along
with the images. However, the text of this field journal works independently from
the images, which assume a more illustrative function anchored by the text – in-
stead of being integrated in a more interdependent relation.

Another tricky point here is the complicated metatextuality found in *La
Grieta*, something typical of documentary graphic narratives that are frequently
occupied with representing the fact-finding process (Schmid 2021, 20). We re-
construct Spottorno and Abril's journey through the perspective of a field jour-
nal. What moves us forward in the narrative is not necessarily the immigration

crisis, but the hunt for these pictures, the journalistic missions, and challenges after which specific images are presented as trophies. Their value depends on the level of contravention and risk involved in the photographic act, which breaks the transparency pact. This becomes clear, for example, when Spottorno and Abril are narrating the difficulties in their journey to enter the European Union in a car rented in Turkey. The caption calls attention to the clandestine action of taking a picture of the border post – resulting in an image of that building that occupies the entire page.

In the end, we are left with this strange disconnect between what we see and what we read, in an ambiguous game of concealment and revelation, opacity and transparency. While the photographic qualities are concealed and disguised as drawings, the text is often more concerned with calling attention to the photographic process itself and disclosing to the readers the investigative hunt for the forbidden and unique click.

Closing Remarks

In the previous pages, I've tried to look at the affordances and complexities of distributed intermedial agency in *La Grieta,* especially with regard to how it uses photographs that were remediated in a comic book. My aim here was to analyze *La Grieta* using a set of concepts and tools typically found in comics studies, and to see how the book explores the potentialities of the medium and provides an opportunity to exercise agency over photographic archives. *La Grieta* is an intriguing work that addresses the subject of immigration and the tensions of borders and frontiers. Still, at the same time, it can become a curious point of departure to discuss the issue of these migrating photographs and the semiotic, institutional, and technological tensions and cracks that appear when we cross medial borders.

Placed in these confusing and malleable border zones, in between formats and contexts of circulation, *La Grieta* highlights the retroactive component of comics, slowing down the flux of images and adjusting the fast temporalities of journalism. It works inside the frames of corporate media, but it also transitions to areas outside of that realm. In the end, despite the rich experience and challenging attempt to transform a massive archive and slow down the flow, the process of remediation reveals many underexplored comics potentialities as well as a certain tendency to replicate values and conventions already present in journalism circles. Considered as a transmedial journalistic experiment that brings "more of the same" (Baetens 2019a, 90) or an "awkward mobilization of

the comics medium" (Nijdam 2020, n.pag.), *La Grieta* is, still, a fascinating, unique book that allows us to better understand the limits of and tensions between photojournalism and documentary comics.

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Hans-Joachim Backe

Who Controls the Speech Bubbles?

Reflecting on Agency in Comic-Games

Digital games that strive to explicitly and deliberately evoke comics face one challenge right off the bat: movement. Since their beginnings, commercial digital games have been characterized by their use of moving images, usually displayed on a single screen, which connects them more to the tradition of animation than to that of comics. Hence, to be comic-specific in a formal-aesthetic sense – as opposed to the adaptation of the content of comics – digital games need to find ways to include some comics characteristics. Daniel Merlin Goodbrey's (2017) groundbreaking study of the intersection of comics and games lists seven such characteristics: space as time; simultaneous juxtaposition of images; closure between images; spatial networks; reader control of pacing; tablodic images; word and image blending (Goodbrey 2017, 44). An artifact that exhibits all of these characteristics would be a comic; to judge whether it would be a digital game as well, Goodbrey turns to Jesper Juul's (2005, 36) classic game model and its six characteristics of rules, quantifiable outcome, valorization of outcome, player effort, player attachment to outcome, and negotiable consequences. Both definitions include a number of complex categories that would need unpacking, but precisely this complexity as well as the sheer number of factors already illustrates the challenge: Few artifacts fully qualify as, in Goodbrey's term, *hybrid game comics.*

Despite my great appreciation of Goodbrey's work, I have recently taken objection to his strong reliance on the concept of hybridization (Backe 2020). To conclude that some games – i.e., those that exhibit a majority of the aforementioned traits – belong to a category of hybrid game comic is, at best, an intermediary step. As soon as such a category is established – in a process that is necessarily based on interpretation, taste, and some unarticulated heuristics – it provokes the question of how the examples within the category relate to each other, which runs the risk of exposing differences between cases which might ultimately call into question whether they were part of a unified phenomenon to begin with. Furthermore, examples that exerted great influence on later games without belonging into the category itself would run the risk of being excluded from analyses – such as Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* (2012) or *The Wolf Among Us* (2013).

Still, it is irrefutable that a printed comic, an interactive comic, and a comic-based digital game are related without being the same phenomenon. So, how do

we discuss this relationship more precisely, without recourse to blanket categories like that of the "hybrid"?

In the following pages, I want to examine the usefulness of the game studies concept of *agency* in this context. A distinct theoretical concept in the study of games, related but not identical to agency in the more common sociological sense, it is used to characterize the particularity of actions players take, as opposed to real-life actions and low-level interactions. It is, therefore, one of the central criteria for the discussion of the "gameness" of digital games, and could be considered as a candidate for reducing the whole issue to just one dimension: the absence or presence of agency, absolute or gradual, as a measuring stick for the "gameness" of an example. In practice, though, agency manifests in countless different ways, suggesting that any such categorization of artifacts would not result in a linear spectrum-scale, but an at least two-dimensional (and potentially much more complex) continuum.

To illustrate these reflections, I will briefly introduce the concept of agency, formulate some explicit criteria for analysis, and apply them to a small corpus of recent examples that appear *prima facie* pertinent because of their recourse to aesthetic markers of comics: the print formats of strip or page, speech bubbles, thought balloons, sound-words and other emphasized typography, and maybe most importantly the panel and the gutter between panels. The goal of these analyses is to evaluate whether some aesthetic principles or forms of agency reoccur within the corpus, and whether we can hence consider these games as a somewhat coherent hybrid sub-genre or should rather see them as a diverse collection of different alternatives to the interactive comic format.

Agency in Digital Games

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck,* one of the foundational texts of game studies, Janet Murray (1997) defines game-specific agency as a particular kind of engagement, distinct from and more complex than interactivity, and as such as one of the central properties of digital games. To her, agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997, 126), affording us "the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials" (Murray 1997, 153). This definition highlights what needs to be given for a game to provide agency: Players need to be able to act upon choices, choices need to appear meaningful, and the effects of actions need to be noticeable.

Murray distinguishes agency from participation and interaction. A participant in a process can be active, yet still be little more than a bystander in terms

of outcomes. If we are only acting when prompted, following instructions or a script to help produce outcomes that are predetermined and out of our hands, we do not have agency over what happens, or even over our actions. The term interaction neither has the same meaning. If I click a nicely animated button on a website, but nothing happens, I have been part of interactivity, yet without agency. Or to take a less extreme, but more pertinent example: Following a completely linear hypertext by clicking on the only offered hyperlink to traverse the text is interactivity – the whole of the text would not be visible to me without my interaction – but I would not have agency over the outcome.

This hypertextual perspective was theorized prominently by Espen Aarseth with his concept of the *ergodic*, "which implies a situation in which a chain of events (a path, a sequence of actions, etc.) has been produced by the nontrivial efforts of one or more individuals or mechanisms" (1997, 94). While Aarseth discusses several forms of "ergodicity," he stresses the universal significance of choices: "Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed" (Aarseth 1997, 10). And just like Murray, he is skeptical towards the term "interactive," which to him "connotes various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing" (Aarseth 1997, 55).

This resistance against the term "interactivity" is at least partially due to Brenda Laurel's use of it a few years prior to Murray and Aarseth. For Laurel, the subject of interaction is an "agent," understood as "one who initiates action" (1993, 4) – in other words, her understanding of interactivity is closely related to agency. Laurel's work is relevant insofar as she offers a typology of agency (by the name of interactivity), something later research has eschewed in favor of a recipe for "[d]esigning experiences toward the satisfactions of agency" (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009, 7). Laurel posits that "interactivity exists on a continuum that could be characterized by three variables: frequency (how often you could interact), range (how many choices were available), and significance (how much the choices really affected matters)" (1993, 20).

Laurel's distinction between variables of agency underlines that a quantitative approach to the phenomenon is fruitless. Game designer Paolo Pedercini puts it like this: "As long as the players feel in control of movements in space, even the most linear narrative and the most constrained level design will provide enough agency. In a way, that's what we've come to expect from mainstream games" (Pedercini, quoted in Sicart 2013, 104). While Pedercini's critique is directed at mainstream games where the countless moment-to-moment actions of blowing up things and shooting enemies never leave room for any meaningful changes to world or narrative that have not been pre-scripted by the designers,

the same is true for the recent narrative game genre of the walking simulator, where movement through an environment with little or no possibility to make meaningful changes is the whole game concept. Similarly problematic is the correlation that some theorists perceive between agency and both choices and the visible effect of actions. As Miguel Sicart (2013, 87) makes clear, there is an expectation of clarity of action possibilities and outcomes, but this can easily be overdone. When the long series of simulated social interaction and real-time achievement players attain throughout *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011) culminates in pressing one of four buttons with clearly spelled-out consequences, it is agency, yet only nominally so. This choice is palpably artificial compared to what has come before, and illustrates why some scholars categorically reject the term because all actions in narrative games are always somewhat predetermined (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007). Yet, despite its problems, agency is a powerful concept for analyzing the extent and the quality of activity players of digital games have. It has been applied to player modifications of games (Poremba 2003) and specified for particular types of games, e.g., narrative games (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2010). Recently, C. Thi Nguyen (2020) has proposed agency as the central aesthetic property of digital games. He considers the agency of games as being layered on top of real-life agency, relating to and commenting on each other. Thus, while agency isn't something we encounter only in games, games are all about agency, and for an artifact to be considered a game, it needs to provide ludic agency.

Agency in Comic-Games

As I have previously argued, the analysis of the relationship between comics and digital games is a process that is challenged already at the simple nominal level (Backe 2020, 61). Speaking of "game comics," as Goodbrey does, implies that the phenomenon is, ultimately, rather a comic than a game; compounding both terms to, e.g., "gamecomic" would indicate a complete fusion of both forms, the hybrid Goodbrey expects them to form. In choosing the carefully hyphenated "comic-game," I want to stress that I study examples which *prima facie* appear as digital games and have a demonstrable relation to comics. Furthermore, I am interested more in the aesthetic dimension than the content-level; an argument for unique properties of comics adaptations compared to, e.g., adaptations of dramatic texts would require a different line of reasoning.

In the brevity of a chapter, it is obviously impossible to qualitatively analyze a broad, potentially representative sample. Instead, I have selected a small

corpus of examples based on some formal criteria. First, examples need to exhibit close adherence to the initially formulated comics characteristics, i.e., they need to include or allude to tablodic presentation (panel and gutter), speech bubbles, thought balloons, captions, or sound-words. Second, examples should come from different game genres to at least partially account for the diversity of games. Third, mostly for pragmatic reasons to further delimit the field, only recent (2017–2020), independently published games from small developers were considered. Even with these criteria in place, a number of examples could not be examined because of the limited space, including *Deep Sky Derelicts* (2017), *Lovecraft Quest – A Comix Game* (2018), and the "Barbara" episode of *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017). The four examples that I ultimately decided represented the breadth of the field best are the Polish side-scroller *Liberated* (2020), the Croatian point-and-click adventure *All You Can Eat* (2017), the Ukrainian visual novel and match-three game *Metropolis: Lux Obscura* (2017), and the Australian first-person shooter *Void Bastards* (2019).

Based on the brief overview of agency in the previous section, the core questions to ask about this dimension are: What do we have agency over? How, and how frequently, do we exert agency? And, as an additional dimension, is agency thematized in the narrative of the game? Additionally, the fashion in which comics are paid homage to or imitated need to be taken into account, which results in four heuristic questions I will submit all examples to:

1. What is the gameplay? What traditional game genre serves as a basis for the game, and what are the recurring play activities (the core gameplay loop)?
2. What specific comics aesthetics does the game include? Which elements of comics (panel and gutter, print formats of strip or page, speech bubbles, thought balloons, sound-words, etc.) are used, and how are they modified to facilitate play?
3. What is the topic (with particular attention to agency)? Is the plot concerned with agency, are choice and consequence a theme, do dialogues touch upon the topic?
4. What kind of agency is found in the example? Are effect and consequences of actions clear, how frequently do players get to exert agency, what elements of the game are under their control?

To contextualize both the (lesser known) examples and this analysis framework, it makes sense to have a cursory look at two better-known and influential earlier games. Telltale Games' aforementioned *The Wolf Among Us* (2013) is one of the developers' early iterations on their signature formula of an adventure game with a twist, namely an emphasis of character- and dialogue-driven narrative instead of the traditional creative manipulations of environmental objects. Like the other

Telltale games, it adheres only in the vaguest sense to comics aesthetics by using flat textures alluding to hand-drawn illustrations, which gives it much more similarity to animation than comics. While the game's narrative could be said to touch on agency – a central plot device is a ribbon that deprives young women from speaking the truth – it is hardly a central element of the game or gameworld. But the game regularly communicates the importance of player decisions by claiming that other characters will remember their actions, while, at the same time, including reflex-based activities for variety's sake, yet allowing to retry them without negative consequences. In sum, *The Wolf Among Us* manages to infuse its decision-making with a feeling of consequence not only by thematizing the potential consequences of actions but also by complicating these decisions through constant time pressure and offering a multicursal narrative structure that reflects player decisions in the plot.

Applying this heuristic of gameplay, comics aesthetics, topic, and implementation of agency to the second better-known example, *Framed* (2014), it becomes apparent how different a successful combination of comics aesthetics and agency can be. *Framed* is maybe the best example for what might be considered a comic-game in a strict sense. The title is, of course, already a pun on its style and subject matter: It tells the story of a thief who is framed for murder and has to run from the police, and it uses comics frames both as its central narrative device and its core gameplay principle. Framed presents the player with a varying number of frames on a screen in horizontal orientation, with the first and the last frame usually forming fixed starting and end points of the playable figure's movement "across the page." Upon entering the page, the player sees the playable figure progress through the panels, until they meet an obstacle (e.g., a waiting police officer). The player then has to re-arrange the panels so as to create a path that bypasses the obstacle, sometimes by re-ordering them, sometimes by turning them.

What makes *Framed* a standout example for the combination of comics aesthetic and gameplay is how it manages to keep the gutter relevant despite animations within panels. In many other examples (like *Liberated*, which will be discussed below) all relevant action happens within panels, and the gutter is reduced to a break in narrative and ludic progress. It becomes a mere caesura, instead of being the indicator for instances where the reader has to mentally construct closure between the separate events of consecutive frames (McCloud 1993, 60–92). In *Framed*, however, important action happens between frames, across gutters, and the puzzle-solving challenge for the player is to identify which events happen between two specific panels.

The panel's prominent role is further emphasized through the user-interface layout: The game signals to the player which panels are locked in place and

which can be manipulated through a simple formal language. The former have no sharp borders, but appear as if painted on a page. The latter have a black frame and a slight drop-shadow to suggest that they are floating over the page and can still be moved. Panels that the playable figure has already moved through turn from color to grayscale (see Figure 1). In this fashion, *Framed* not only draws on comics conventions when communicating the game state to the player but also highlights the importance of the frame and the different styles and types of frames we might find in a comic.
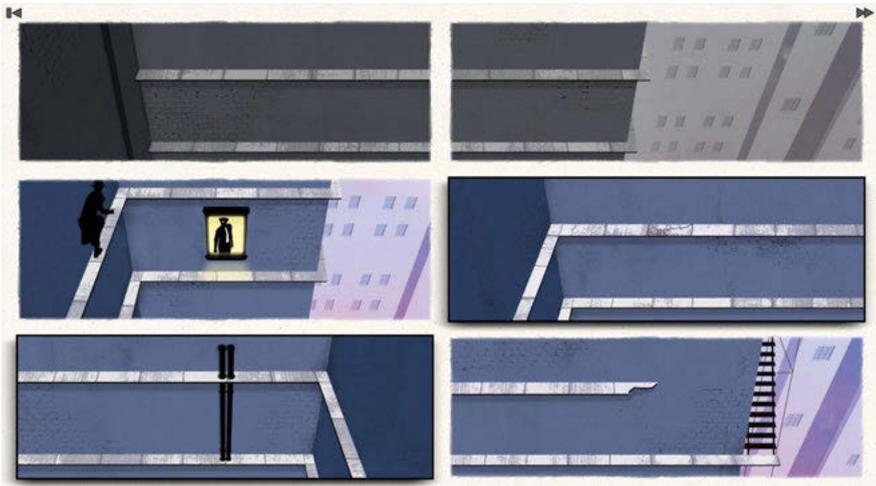
Figure 1: *Framed* (2014) works with the rearrangement of frames, highlighting them with color, frame design, and drop shadows.

Agency is, however, often limited to a binary in *Framed*. The player has to plan and make decisions and will see unequivocally and immediately what consequences their actions had. And while there are some non-interactive sequences, the player exerts agency continuously throughout most of the game. But by virtue of being a puzzle game with limited elements and minimal context, players can successfully resort to trial and error, and the game's feedback about consequences always pertains only to the result itself, not to the reasons for success or failure. Moreover, the narrative is completely fixed and linear, limiting agency to the ludic domain.

Analyzing the Corpus

Against the background of *The Wolf Among Us* and *Framed*, the four more recent examples selected for the main corpus of this study emerge as calculated explorations of tendencies already present in this previous generation of comic-games.

Liberated (2020) is possibly the most directly inspired by *Framed*, down to its title, which might be taken as an oblique reference to the older game. An ambitious attempt at creating what Goodbrey would consider a true "hybrid," *Liberated* has varied gameplay, drawing mostly on side-scrolling platformers and stealth shooters, which includes not only staples of this genre (such as timing puzzles during which periodic bursts of hot steam must be avoided), but minigames like lock-picking puzzles, quick time events, and access to backstory via data files scattered throughout the gameworld.

In terms of comics aesthetics, the game includes the whole range of medium-specific characteristics. Instead of levels, the player chooses to play issues of a comics series, which then flip open and guide them through extensive comics sequences across whole pages set up in an expert layout of frames, gutters, and splash pages, filled with atmospheric high-contrast greyscale art. The frame content is often subtly animated, with speech-bubbles fading in and out, and accompanied by detailed soundscapes and dialogues, but only to a degree found in virtually all current comic-games. Narrative and gameplay are, on a formal level, perfectly integrated: When a narrative sequence ends and gameplay commences, the virtual camera moves from one panel to the next, only that the new one is fully animated and rendered in 3D graphics.

The narrative of *Liberated* deals with a surveillance state, where the government used an act of terrorism to institute a totalitarian regime based on constant monitoring of citizens through their smart devices and social media activity. The first "issue" presents an exposition of this system and its antagonists, focusing on the son of the prime minister, who becomes a part of the resistance, while the second "issue" presents the cause from the opposing view of a high-ranking police officer who hunts resistance fighters despite his misgivings about the system. In this fashion, the narrative engages with societal agency in a very foregrounded manner. The repressive government's infringement on the freedom of the individual is shown as an inability to act (or not act) out of one's own volition, and the resistance fighters discuss at length how they need to act violently to take back the people's self-determination.

Liberated thus sets the stage for an in-depth engagement with comic-game-specific agency. The execution ultimately falls short of the sophisticated goals, as reviews scathingly point out:

> Really, the comic book presentation of *Liberated* makes the gameplay portions feel like an afterthought, shoehorning some weak gunplay into a tale that's really more about political intrigue and moral quandaries of balancing safety against the preservation of personal freedoms. (Hornshaw 2020, n.pag.)

Or, put more simply: "Liberated isn't a terrible game, but it's a painfully average one" (Vincent 2020, n.pag.). In the moment-to-moment activity, minimal strategy and planning is required, with a shooting gallery of enemies lined up on a string and simple puzzles (see Figure 2). The player has no agency on the plot-level either; the narrative proceeds linearly. The "hybridization" of comics panels and game elements also produces problems, as long stretches of gameplay are often located in single frames (within which many individual actions happen and a lot of space is depicted through scrolling), which makes the gameplay-panels appear more like arbitrary rectangular windows into a 3D world than like the carefully composed panels of a comics.

Figure 2: *Liberated* (2020) sets all actions in a static frame and extensively uses soundwords.

In sum, *Liberated*'s ambitious combination of game and comic produces many interesting effects, and ultimately, it is often unclear whether these effects are intended or not. The best example is the execution of a flashback in the second "issue." When opening the "issue," the first several pages appear blank and are skipped. Towards the end of the episode, the protagonist reminisces, which prompts an automated flipping back in the issue, where the player then is presented with a flashback printed on the first, previously skipped pages of the

issue. Whether this is a very involved commentary on the nature of time and memory that recontextualizes the comic as a character's manifest biography, or a flashy stunt rooted in a misunderstanding of the nature of flashbacks is impossible to say.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of ambition, so to speak, we find *All You Can Eat* (2017), a short, experimental game. *All You Can Eat* is little more than a prototype for executing the venerable ludic format of the graphic adventure as a three-panel funny strip. Mechanically, the game is completely conventional: The player controls a single character, who wants to prevent the imminent foreclosure of his favorite pizza place. To this end, the player navigates a small number of locations and has conversations with a single character at each place, learning about the world and collecting items, which are stored in an omnipresent inventory at the bottom of the screen and which can be used on objects, persons, or on each other (to create new objects).

The comics aesthetic of *All You Can Eat* is very sparse, but consequent. The layout of the three-panel funny is adhered to almost without exception, with the crude black-and-white drawings remaining un-animated and without voiced dialogue. Whenever a line of panels is filled, the virtual camera moves downward, with a fringe of the previous frames still visible at the top and a suggestion of coming panels at the bottom of the screen, thus constantly suggesting an endlessly scrolling page of a comics. This strict adherence to comics aesthetics is even more strongly emphasized when, at the end of the short game, the player is offered to export a PDF of the comic resulting from their personal playthrough (see Figure 3). This in itself quite simple reframing of the game as a comic produces a surprisingly deep reference to the history of graphic art, because it essentially recaptures a three-frame newspaper format as a book in much the same way that reprints of early funnies did.

As much as the farcical tone and brevity of the narrative allow for such a judgement, *All You Can Eat* deals with issues of agency: The pizza parlor is threatened by the seemingly overwhelming economic power of the (unsubtly named) "Megaslime Corporation"; the owner feels helpless, and the protagonist only succeeds through a combination of sheer luck and blackmail. The player has, however, rather little agency in the game, or just as much as is customary in the graphic adventure genre. The milestones in the genre require much lateral thinking, not the least because they confront the player with a large collection of items, characters, and places, and therefore often require ingenuity or trial-and-error to solve the puzzle of what fits where with what effect. In *All You Can Eat*, this challenge (and thus the emphasis on making meaningful choices that bear consequences) is greatly reduced by the very limited scope. And while there is no way in which the player can influence the linear plot, the final rendering of the

Figure 3: The interactions of *All You Can Eat* (2017) are presented in a three-panel comic strip format, which can be saved on collated pages after play.

game as a comic emphasizes how many variances there are in the narrative satellites based on the simple choices the player is allowed to make.

Void Bastards (2019) takes a completely different route than the other games presented here. In its core gameplay, it is unquestionably a first-person shooter, albeit one with a number of unusual features. Set in the future in deep space, the game justifies the death and rebirth of the avatar in an unusual

fashion: The playable figure is working together with (or maybe rather for) the artificial intelligence of a prison spaceship. When the ship needs spare parts, a prisoner is sent to derelict ships drifting in a nebula to find the missing equipment. The player controls these prisoners, and whenever one of them dies, the next one is released to the player's control. The new prisoner – or, in the corporate-speak language of the game, "client" – inherits the spare parts to repair the mother ship or to craft new, more efficient tools and weapons. In this fashion, *Void Bastards* integrates elements of the rogue-like genre into the first-person-shooter formula, and further adds elements conventionally associated with the survival game genre, particularly an extreme scarcity of resources (including oxygen and bullets). The result is a series of short supply runs to spaceships overrun with mutants and murderous robots, which are a success if the playable figure makes it back to their shuttle with some loot, even if they have no chance to survive the next encounter.

Void Bastards already evokes comics on the menu screen, which is executed as a facsimile of a comic book issue. It uses secondary colors with very flat shading throughout, with a narrative arc and characters reminiscent of Jodorowski and Moebius's *The Incal* (2014) and art that eerily resembles Dave Gibbons's style. The narrative passages are executed as comics pages with a quasi-narratorial voice-over of the monologue of the ship AI, and they are seamlessly integrated with the game's menus (see Figure 4). The gameplay is presented in a familiar first-person-shooter configuration with only two, albeit very fundamental, aesthetic evocations of comics: The flat lighting and the desaturated secondary colors carry over from the comics segments to the ostensibly unmediated perception of the gameworld, and all sounds in the gameworld are visualized as floating sound words in different locations and sizes, to indicate the position of hostiles. In this fashion, what could have been a token reference to comics aesthetics (as the same practice might be seen in *Liberated*), *Void Bastards* finds a way to utilize a comics convention to support its gameplay (because there are even sound words in cases where there is no sound per se, as in "float") while constantly reminding the player of the importance of comics for the game.

In terms of topic, the game saliently deals with the loss of agency. The prison system is a fully commercialized part of a cynical corporate dystopia, where dehumanizing practices and the disregard for the wellbeing of clients are couched in corporate lingo (e.g., "blunt force therapy"). All visited spaceships bear witness to a world in which every part of society exists only for the enrichment of corporations, and where the function of the individual is exclusively to serve as a consumer. Administration complexes only produce more bureaucracy, hospitals offer only bizarre cosmetic surgery ("Mucuous Membrane Makeovers"), and at every milestone, the futility of the playable character's

Figure 4: *Void Bastards* (2019) uses comics aesthetics to create pastiches of concrete artists and narrative conventions of surreal science fiction.

actions are made clear. At some point, they are ordered to forge an identification card, a contribution to the ship's mission that awards them a reduction of their sentence that is smaller than the additional sentence for forging the document. In short, *Void Bastards* portrays a world in which individuals no longer have social agency, and where even their utmost struggles to effect change only lead to more or less predictably cynical ends.

The ironic treatment of agency continues in the gameplay. The game gives the player agency on different levels by integrating an element of strategic decision-making in practically all aspects of the game. These decisions are often deeply entwined with the narrative: Every new "client" has random positive or negative abilities, making some of them highly valuable and others utterly useless, which means that sometimes, it would be strategically best for the player to kill off a character and hope for better odds next time, aligning their interests and their own ruthlessness with those of the evil corporation they play against.

Metropolis: Lux Obscura (2017), my final example, combines a decision-based, branching hypercomic with the casual-game staple of match-three mechanics (as popularized by *Bejewelled* [2000] and *Candy Crush Saga* [2012]). The hypertext results from simple and binary choices: visit one place first or the other, be forceful or friendly in a conversation, hand over an object or keep it. The game combines this interactive comic format with an unusual application of the match-three genre. It uses a 7 x 8 playfield and eight different token

objects to represent fights: three physical attacks, two special attacks (poison and a taser), first aid, rage, and police interference (see Figure 5). The inclusion of the last two token types infuses this interpretation of the match-three principle with a degree of strategy: Collecting "rage" tokens results in a damage multiplier for attacks, while the police tokens must be avoided, lest the player character suffers additional damage. Opponents differ not only in their strength and endurance, but attack in different patterns that leave more or less time for preparation and healing – and after each fight, the player chooses a modifier for the player character, leveling him up in one of twelve skills.

Figure 5: The match-three puzzles of *Metropolis: Lux Obscura* (2017) are used as a strategic fighting minigame.

In style and content, *Metropolis: Lux Obscura* implements digital comics aesthetics with a version of the "guided view" technique found in mobile comic reader apps: While we do not see whole comic pages, the images are explicitly presented as framed and often organized around gutters. A virtual camera pans over images, suggesting a reader's gaze, accompanied by the soundtrack of dialogue, music, and foley noises. The art style is vaguely reminiscent of "adult oriented" American comics in the vein of early Image or Top Cow publications. The game is also full of textual references to relevant comics: Goldie the stripper and the governor's pervert son reference Frank Miller's *Sin City* series (1991–2000), Mob boss Falcone references Batman history, and the introductory fight between

an aging hero and some thugs stealing the rims off an expensive car is unquestionably a nod towards James Mangold's film *Logan* (2017).

In terms of agency, the relative simplicity of the hypertextual structure is effective, because moments of decision are frequent and their consequences initially very immediate, insinuating that the following ones will be, too. Once the player reaches one of the game's four endings, they are informed how many more are left, implying what led to this outcome and what can be done differently. While the player is given agency over the plot in this fashion, this agency is limited, because the decisions are not informed but rather based on speculation, which also goes for the consequences. Still, the minimal branching structure and the casual gameplay together form an artifact distinctly more game-like than an interactive comic, demonstrating that comic-games do not depend on the elaborate game design found in some of the other examples.

Conclusion

The analysis of a small selection of recent examples presented here shows the diversity of comic-games quite clearly. Beyond the rather well-known examples of the Telltale-style interactive narratives and the puzzle gameplay of *Framed*, we find adherence to comics principles – from situating play in page-layouts with frames and gutters (*Liberated* and *All You Can Eat*) to functional integration of stylistic elements into gameplay (sound words in *Void Bastards*) – combined with very sparse (*Metropolis: Lux Obscura*, *All You Can Eat*), innovative (*Void Bastards*), or eclectic (*Liberated*) gameplay and narratives that all touch in some form on the topic of agency.

What this brief survey of agency in comic-games shows is that there is no "natural" form of agency that is inherent to or suggested by comics aesthetics. Quite the contrary, the implementations of comics aesthetics in different game genres and the resulting forms of agency employed in them are much more diverse than one might imagine. And while agency still remains a somewhat unspecific and evolving concept – with some research identifying (inter)passivity as a significant factor in the enjoyment of digital games (Fizek 2018) – it allows to distinguish between the ways in which players act in these games in non-obvious and non-trivial ways. A broader, more systematic study of these phenomena, particularly in a more longitudinal, transhistoric perspective would, of course, render the diversity and intricacy sketched here in greater detail. Yet, it should already have become clear that there is not one form of agency typical of comic-games – there are many.

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Index