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## Introduction: Comics Studies and Literary Studies

### 1. Literary Comics Studies?

This special issue emphasizes the literariness of comics, and the ways in which the comics medium deserves the attention of literary criticism. It highlights comics' potential beyond the works of Alan Moore, Frank Miller, and Art Spiegelman. These authors, probably more than any others, have become household names even outside the circles of dedicated comics critics. Moore and Spiegelman's central works, *Watchmen* and *Maus*, are still being critically analyzed in a number of recent monographs, more than twenty years after their publication.<sup>1</sup> Together with Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, they have been acknowledged not only as 'great' comics, but as well-crafted literary works deserving the critical attention of literary criticism, and have become the centerpieces of university comics classes. Their importance has been recognized outside academia as well: *Maus*'s Special Pulitzer and the inclusion of *Watchmen* on Time's 100 Best Novels list (*The Dark Knight Returns* at least made it into the ten best graphic novels section) are ample proof of that. What has gained them their deserved renown is their literariness, a quality which is not alone restricted to those three comics but can be found in a number of other works deserving the attention of literary and comics studies, such as those discussed in the following pages.

While it is true that "there is as yet no tradition of comics studies" (Berninger, et al. 2010, 3), a large number of works exists on what comics do and how they do it. Three main trends of scholarship can be identified: first, there are formal studies identifying the ways in which the comics medium works, what its constitutive parts are, and how these parts comprise the organic whole of a comic, which today largely recur to Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), and more importantly, Scott McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics* (1992). Other books have followed in their wake in attempting something akin to a narratology of comics. Foremost among those studies are, in the United States, Robert C. Harvey's *The Art of the Comic Book* (1996) and McCloud's own revisions of his 1992 volume, *Reinventing Comics* (2000) and *Making Comics* (2006); in France, Benoît Peeters's *Lire la bande dessinée* (2003) and Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* (2007) are noteworthy; and in Germany, Dietrich Grünewald's *Comics* (2000),

<sup>1</sup> In Germany only, monographs include Ole Frahm, *Genealogie des Holocaust* (2006) on *Maus*; Karin Kukkonen, *Neue Perspektiven auf die Superhelden: Polyphonie in Alan Moore's Watchmen* (2008); Hans-Joachim Backe, *Under the Hood: Die Verweisstruktur der Watchmen* (2010).

Stephan Packard's *Anatomie des Comics* (2006), Jakob Dittmar's *Comic-Analyse* (2008), and most notably, Martin Schüwer's *Wie Comics erzählen* (2008) have approached comics from a narratological perspective. These studies aim at a general description of how meaning is created in comics. They discuss the interrelation of the constitutive codes of comics, the written and the pictorial, including the particulars of graphic design and the inclusion of the verbal, the ways individual panels of a comic combine to form the larger structures of the page and the entire work. In doing so, they spend a lot of time analyzing comics with the tool kits they have created, thus offering both formal theory and critical practice.

The second trend of scholarship situates comics in their historical and social contexts, offering broad vistas of comics' relevance to cultural developments or histories of the comics medium. Joseph Witek's *Comic Books as History* (1990), M. Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* (1990), Matthew J. Pustz's *Comic Book Culture* (1999), Bradford Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2001), or, translated from the French, Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men* (2010) unfold historical and cultural perspectives on comics, focusing specifically on the ways in which comics have changed, and been changed by, cultural events. In Germany, Andreas Platthaus's *Im Comic vereint: Eine Geschichte der Bildgeschichte* (1998), Stephan Ditschke, Katerina Kroucheva and Daniel Stein's *Comics: Zur Geschichte und Theorie eines populärkulturellen Mediums* (2009), or Mark Berninger, Jochen Ecke, and Gideon Haberkorn's *Comics as a Nexus of Cultures* (2010) have offered their own takes on the cultural importance of comics.

The third direction of comics studies lies between the cultural and formalist poles. On the one hand, there are studies of comics aesthetics, such as Paul Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) and Michael Hein, Michael Hüners and Torsten Michaelsen's *Ästhetik des Comic* (2002), which evaluate the comics medium's capacity for artistic expression at the same time as they analyze its formal aspects and the historical origins of the medium. On the other, there are also numerous collected volumes of broad topical range, such as the *Text+Kritik* special *Comics, Mangas, Graphic Novels* (2009), Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest's *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature* (2010), or Dietrich Grünewald's *Struktur und Geschichte der Comics* (2010) which collect a large and often heterogeneous variety of original essays.<sup>2</sup>

The present special issue likewise situates itself somewhere between the two poles of a strict formalism and a broadly cultural approach. At the same time, the volume engages not with a larger conception of how the comics medium should be understood, but how individual examples of literary comics can be read. What unites the essays in this volume, and in this it also differs from the volumes noted above, is a shared interest in particulars: in particular works, such as the biography of Louis Riel, or particular writers/pencillers, such as Edwin Brubaker and Sean Phillips, but also an interest in the particulars of these works' poetics. The contributions in this volume stress the literariness of comics in two ways: first, by

<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough review of contemporary trends in comics studies, see Jochen Ecke in this volume.

recognizing the validity of literary classification systems, such as genre, and forms of literary analysis and theories, such as narratology and psychoanalytic criticism, for comics. Chester Brown's biography of *Louis Riel*, Jason Lutes's historical fiction *Berlin*, Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips's noir crime stories and thrillers, and Charles Burns's psychological coming of age narrative *Black Hole* become part of their specific generic traditions: they cannot be grasped by either a purely formalist or cultural approach to comics alone. In Jonathan Culler's words, the term 'literariness' suggests a

continual exploration of and reflection upon signification in all its forms: an interpretation of experience; a commentary on the validity of various ways of interpreting experience; an exploration of the creative, revelatory, and deceptive powers of language; a critique of the codes and interpretive processes manifested in our language and in previous literature. (Culler 2002, 40)

In Culler's definition, the literary is not defined as the output of a particular medium, or imbued with axiological connotations, but stands as a form of narrative or poetics that transports sense and meaning through verbal codes, visual codes, or as in the case of comics, through a combination of both. The four practical essays in this volume are concerned with the poetics of comics as works of art, and address the question of how comics are literary. They establish "some grasp of the various styles, techniques, and purposes found in the art form, as well as a broad grasp of how to evaluate the variety of elements" (Meskin 2007, 376) on the level of the individual work. As the essays collected here show, the comics medium rewards an approach which neglects neither its medial specifics – its marriage of verbal and pictorial signs, to name just the most fundamental one – nor the broad applicability of literary theories, methodologies, categories, and approaches.

John Lowther's essay on Charles Burns's *Black Hole* offers a psychoanalytical reading which, recurring to the notion of abjection and the Lacanian concept of the symptom, also takes note of the pictorial level of the comic, and nods towards the possible historical and cultural moments which may have inspired the book. Tim Lanzendörfer's essay on Chester Brown's *Louis Riel* makes use of concepts from prose narratology, comics narratology, and ideas from reader-response theories to offer a reading of the biography which emphasizes the biography's insistence on portraying just one version of events, its insistence, as the essay says, on its own narratedness. Jared Gardner's article on Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips's crime comics uses a historicizing perspective which relates Brubaker's and Phillips's comics genealogically, to the crime comics which were made impossible by the US comics industry's Comics Code in 1954, but at the same time, relates these historical traces to the formal realizations of the individual works, to questions of panel arrangements and graphic realizations. Matthias Köhler's essay on Jason Lutes's *Berlin* likewise pays close attention to how words and images are effectively organized in panel sequences to create meaning. It takes a close look at comics' inherent difficulties of marrying written and pictorial codes, allegorized in the two central characters of the novel, and examines the various functions these codes have in *Berlin*. Furthermore, this metafictional reflection calls efforts to force static categories on comics into question.

In the concluding essay, Jochen Ecke traces both contemporary trends in comics scholarship and offers a view on some of the controversies and a number of desiderata for the field. The essay is indicative of the ongoing discussion about the conflicts between literary criticism and comics studies, and highlights the ways in which this volume is intended to encourage discussion on the limits and possibilities of comics studies. Centrally, perhaps, the final essay cautions that critics need at all times to be aware of the limitations of the theories they have selected, and to constantly question and revise them. Ecke's own cautionary view of literary comic studies can serve as a contrast to the four previous essays' more optimistic view of the literary potential of comics.

## 2. Comics and Popular Culture

Much of the recent critical effort which has been directed at comics studies misconceptualizes the field rather than furthering the understanding of comics. To a certain extent, the efforts at situating comics within the academic discourse are operating at cross-purposes and not all are equally likely to provide insight into comics. Studies of comics theory such as Martin Schüwer's and Stephan Packard's seek to give comics studies a theoretical base from which critics can construct meaning or explore avenues of sense-making. Compared to this generally helpful groundwork, more culturally ambitious studies are sometimes problematic. A good case in point here is Stephan Ditschke, Katerina Kroucheva and Daniel Stein's *Comics: Zur Geschichte und Theorie eines populärkulturellen Mediums* (2009). The volume is of considerable merit in its individual articles, but its conception of comics as a serial, heteronomous, and popular medium, is not completely sound. The volume's introduction does not theorize the key terms which seem to shape its conception of comics, and the epistemological value of the categorizations is left unclear: seriality to the editors is a historically determined fact of comics' existence, "even for comics which are not serial *per se*" (14; our translation), yet what this means for the analysis of comics is left unaddressed.<sup>3</sup> This lapse is, however, of far less consequence than their insistence on comics as a popular medium. Although there are understandable institutional reasons for the editors' decision to tie comics closely to popular culture, the choice is problematic on several levels. Their conception of popular culture remains vague. Frank Kelleter and Daniel Stein offer the volume's only attempt at a definition in their article, and argue that popular culture is "understood as a modern, industrialized, shamelessly commercial, but all the same uniquely flexible and inventive culture" (Kelleter / Stein 2009, 114). What they refer to here as flexibility and inventiveness in fact ties comics to historical origins and cultural influences which the term popular culture cannot readily grasp, and which is at odds with the volume's assumption of the fundamental heteronomy of comics. Hillary Chute has emphasized this hybridity of the comics medium, the fact that "comics was both a mass-market product and one that influenced and was

<sup>3</sup> For a take on how seriality might be usefully incorporated into an analysis of comics, see Jared Gardner in this volume.

influenced by avant-garde practices, especially those of Dada and surrealism” (Chute 2008, 455). Kelleter and Stein use George Herriman’s seminal strip *Krazy Kat* (1913-1944) as one of their examples. But, as Jean-Paul Gabilliet shows, the success which *Krazy Kat* achieved had very little to do with Kelleter and Stein’s particular conception of popular culture. It was a “fundamentally anticommercial product” (Gabilliet 2010, 287), founded not on its economic value to the paper, but on the aesthetic appreciation of its readership, and drew its revolutionary formal appeal from its freedom of artistic expression. If, as the editors of *Comics* claim, the historicity of comics is inescapable, it is also more complicated than at first apparent and not thoroughly theorized under the rubric of popular culture.

The approach through popular culture reinscribes comics in a paradigm which it was just on the verge of escaping. In this paradigm, the ‘popular’ stands against ‘quality,’ ‘art,’ and ‘high’ culture (see Storey 2009, 8). Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein sustain and reinforce the socially constructed differences between these implied categories instead of questioning them and give, perhaps unintentionally, new emphasis to the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, a distinction which has rightly been noted to be “hopelessly blurred” (Sarchett 2006, 128),<sup>4</sup> the consequence of which should be to “do away with the ‘high’ vs. ‘low’ distinction with regard to culture” (Kramer 2009, 28). Comics, but also much recent comics-inspired prose fiction, has already started making that move, and purposely conflated the alleged ‘popular’ of comics with the ‘high’ of the literary canon. In prose, two Pulitzer Prize winners, Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2001) and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) draw motives, allusions and even stories from comics and comics history. Chabon is himself also an author in comics, with *The Escapist* (2004-6), a series based on his 2001 novel. Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) – Lethem, too, is a comics author, having written *Omega the Unknown* (2007-8) – Tom De Haven’s *It’s Superman!* (2006), Perry Moore’s *Hero* (2007), and Austin Grossman’s *Soon I Will Be Invincible* (2007) are further examples of novels which allude to and make use of the superhero topos in complex prose narratives. And even earlier, Jay Kantor’s *Krazy Kat: A Novel in Five Panels* (1987), a high-postmodernist piece of fiction, can be grasped only very imperfectly by recurrence to the notion of the ‘popular.’ The same holds true in comics: Alan Moore and David Lloyd’s *V for Vendetta* (1990), to pick just one example, is set in a fascist England in which all forms of cultural expression have been, as the eponymous protagonist V explains, “eradicated” (18.4).<sup>5</sup> The book explicitly celebrates the simultaneity and equality of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture: V is introduced quoting from *Macbeth* (11.10), and equally capable of adopting phrases from Christopher Marlowe and William Blake (43.3, 48.3). His bookshelf preserves the works of Goethe, Cervantes, and much of the English literary canon (18.5). But at the same time that he perpetuates these canonized works, he also keeps the films of Bela Lugosi (9.7) from the oblivion of state-mandated destruction,

<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Stephan Packard has divided 9/11-related comics into “‘advanced’ and ‘popular’ comics” (Packard 2008, 319).

<sup>5</sup> The citation format (explained in greater detail below) is page-dot-panel.

quotes Enid Blyton (99.3-6), and introduces his guest Evey to Motown records (18.8). Moore and Lloyd's book undermines the assumption of a fundamental axiological distinction between Blyton and Blake in the face of the repression of *all* cultural expression that is not state-sanctioned: in *V for Vendetta*, 'popular' and 'high' culture are equally worthy of protection; or more precisely, the book makes clear that there is no distinguishing between the two when they cease to exist as separate social categories and find themselves combined under the rubric of the undesirable.

Popular culture is only of limited value for comics studies. There is little doubt that Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein recognize the problem: they explicitly affirm that they do not "assign comics generally and always to the domain of popular culture" (Ditschke, et al. 2009, 15). But just as their definition of popular culture remains unclear, so does the way in which a decision could be made as to which comics should, or should not, be part of the domain of popular culture. Even if it were possible to make the term popular culture useful and show what the distinctions between it and those elusive other kind(s) of culture(s) are, the basic question of why we should read comics as part of popular culture would remain: what is the epistemological benefit? Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein note that "without recognizing comics' origin in a genuinely heteronomous area of cultural production, the development of the medium and the consequent differentiation of the comics field cannot be understood" (*ibid.*). But readings of artistic works do not necessarily recur to the development of their medium, or any understanding of the process of its differentiation. More to the point, as Thomas Becker shows in his contribution to the volume, it is precisely because of their relative autonomy that many of the most interesting contemporary comics are artistically successful (see Becker 2009, 241), a point which Bart Beaty has also raised (see Beaty 2007, 6), and which goes to the heart of the matter: if comics are truly heteronomous, this severely limits their ability to intervene in the social, cultural, and finally historical fields into which Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein seek to place them. As the examples of the novels of Chabon and Díaz show, however, comics have managed to intervene, and have managed to inscribe themselves culturally beyond their alleged heteronomous "origin" in a commercial market.

This special issue does not propose that comics should be read without reference to their history: too much good work exists which does exactly that. Indeed, the essay by Jared Gardner in this volume embeds comics in a cultural context in its attempt to trace the genealogy of crime comics from their historical origins, while at the same time, it pays due attention to the particular poetics of Ed Brubaker and Sean Phillips's works. Instead, we hold that the comics medium should not be limited artificially by labeling it popular, with all the attendant inescapable baggage of the term. By refusing the historical odium of the term popular culture, we do not wish to suggest that all comics are great literature. In the words of Art Spiegelman, "[i]f you were really left with the warehouse of everything that's been painted, man, it would take a while before you got to Vermeer" (qtd. in Witek 2007, 271), or in the humbler terms of Sturgeon's Law, ninety percent of everything is crud. As noted above, *V for Vendetta*, among other comics, emphasizes

the social construction of the term ‘popular culture’ in a way which is missing in much of the scholarly engagement with comics. Valuable (meta-)criticism could be produced, of course, by stressing the way in which comics have been read *as part of* popular culture, or the ways in which the current engagement with comics as popular culture limits our ability to come to terms with the comics medium. But comics *are* not a popular medium until we *make* them one, and there are no good reasons to limit ourselves in that way. As Geoff Klock has noted in his *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, “[s]uperhero comic books do strange and wonderful things when exposed to literary and psychoanalytic theory” (Klock 2006, 1), and so, indeed, do many other kinds of comics. What makes them worth looking at is not a vague relationship to previous culture(s), whether high or popular, but their “capacity to receive the sustained attention” (Carrier 2000, 63) of critics. What we wish to emphasize is that comics can be literary works of similar merit to more securely established forms of artistic writings, and deserve our attention as literary scholars for that reason.

This volume as a whole is meant to open the discussion, and not least about its own terms. Whether its notion of comics’ literariness will be sufficient to make the boundary between traditional literary studies and comics studies more permeable, while at the same time its offer of a reflected use of theory from both disciplines will be honored, is now in the hands of the readers.

### Editorial Note

Quoting comics is often a problem, because in many instances, pagination is not available, and even where it is available, it is often desirable to also specify the exact panel from which one quotes. In this volume, as far as possible, citations are in the form of page-dot-panel, if necessary with a closer specification of the edition or work quoted from. The working assumption here is that the majority of readers will have access to one of the omnibus or collected editions of the comics, which we realize have usually been published serially before. As John Lowther’s article on *Black Hole* shows, however, comics even complicate citation conventions – there, a specific solution to the problem of citation is offered.

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