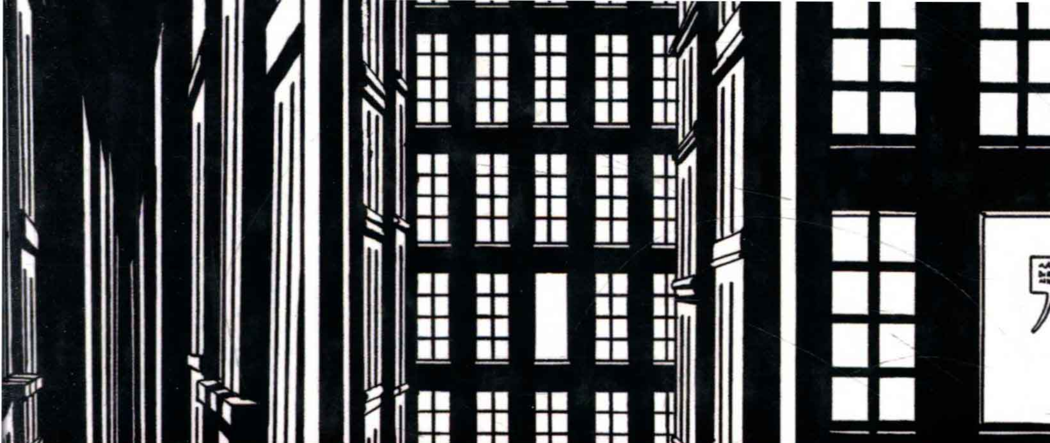

COMICS AND THE CITY

Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence

EDITED BY JÖRN AHRENS AND ARNO METELING

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Introduction

JÖRN AHRENS AND ARNO METELING

IN RECENT YEARS COMICS HAVE received broader acknowledgment within the context of modern culture as well as in academic debate. This tendency has successively been underpinned by the global reception of singular achievements in comics, for example, the American comic books *Maus — A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman, *The Dark Knight Returns* by Frank Miller, or *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, all published in 1986, "our favorite year" (Jones and Jacobs 1997: 296–311).[1] But even before, one could observe an adult approach to comics, a discourse slowly leaving the narrow confinements of comic book culture. In Europe, especially in Franco-Belgian comics culture, but also in Italy, with artists like Moebius, Jacques Tardi, Hugo Pratt, and Enki Bilal, and in the U.S.A., this discourse usually conferred on certain comic artists the status of auteur. These artists represented art and high culture, or at least economic and political "independence," or sub- or counter-culture (e.g. Robert Crumb or the Hernandez Brothers). Today, the cultural and academic reception of comics has expanded and is no longer limited to its avant-garde products. Art history, literary criticism and cultural studies are interested in comic books as an important part of a global popular culture, and these disciplines analyze the structure, aesthetics and discourses of comics as well as the practices of fan culture and the transmedial effects comic books initiate.

I

Without any doubt, comic books, their characters, and their formats are by now deeply engraved in America's, Europe's, and Japan's cultural memory and exert their influence on cultural communication and dynamics. Apart from the mythical heroes of ancient Greece and Rome

and national popular heroes, characters like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Superman, or Batman can be considered to be the most popular and most iconic fictional characters in the Western hemisphere, at least. This is supported by the fact that at the present time Hollywood's block-buster and the independent cinema have been revived by topics and aesthetics that pertain specifically to comics. This is not only true for animated pictures, but also for real-life movies, like the superhero movies since the 1990s (*Blade 1–3, Spawn, X-Men 1–3, Spider-Man 1–3, The Hulk, The Incredible Hulk, Daredevil, Iron Man, Batman Begins, Superman Returns, The Dark Knight*, or *Watchmen*) and more or less independent comic book movies like *Road to Perdition, Constantine, Ghost World, American Splendor, From Hell, A History of Violence, Hellboy 1+2, V for Vendetta, Sin City, 300* or *Wanted*. Not only do the numerous screen adaptations of comic books emphasize the cultural influence comics have, but the specific aesthetics and narrative style of comics modify the global universe of signs.

So, the medium "comics" is not only reflected in the plethora of film adaptations or in the ever growing global fan culture, but also in the ubiquitous use of comic contents, icons and aesthetics in all aspects of modern life. Comics can be understood as one of the decisive pictorial elements of popular culture since the second half of the twentieth century. The contribution of the comic book to a cultural self-understanding of modern mass culture, its mythologies, and its perceptions of the self, thereby becomes more and more evident. Although there is a significant output of academic books on comics (see "Further Reading" below), there is still no such thing as an academic discipline called "comic book studies" within the framework of graphic art, literary, cultural, or media studies. This lack is highly conspicuous because the border between high culture and popular culture was breached long ago and other modern arts and media, such as photography, motion pictures, television series or video games are widely accepted by now and have become the subject of academic research. Yet comic books, which are already more than 100 years old, still remain only of marginal interest to the academic world. For this reason, anyone opting for the serious treatment of comics is forced to legitimate himself. This may be explained by the still-existing condescending judgment of the artistic qualities of comics or their status as ubiquitous mass media. Above all, the still prevalent academic disregard of comics seems to be motivated by two main factors: First, there is a general ignorance of the variety

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of the topics and subjects comic books offer, which coincides with the belief that comics are the province of children and semi-alphabetized adults. The second factor can be traced back to the specific nature of this medium, for comics are a unique hybrid media that combine words and pictures in a spatial sequence.

This combination of traditionally quite differently coded media means that, on the surface, comics appear to be simple and easily comprehensible. The merging of pictures, words and sequences evidently symbolizes an immediate nature. Therefore, comic book techniques are used for instructions, danger signs, or advertising graphics. But if a critic or researcher wants to have a closer look at comics and analyze them, as well as the interactions and mechanisms of this combination of codes, he runs into difficulties because he is in need of a comprehensive descriptive and analytical apparatus. Such an apparatus would have to contain concepts and information relating to the study of literature and of graphic art. So, on closer inspection, comics are confusing to readers of linear texts as well as to contemplative viewers of paintings and photos.

From a historical and formal point of view, the comic book perspectives used in the pictures or frames ("panels") can be described by camera positions ("zoom," "sequence shot," "pan shot," "tilt shot," or "jump cut") used in film-making. But comics remain — in stark contrast to film — a purely spatial medium. Its elements, such as panels, picture strips or pages are static. So, whereas the *mise-en-scène* can be analyzed as an arrangement of narrative space and layout of the comic book page, editing (*montage*), which marks the transition from one scene to the next and therefore indicates a lapse of time, is confined to film-making and has only a metaphorical function for the comic book. In this connection, the temporally and spatially indeterminate white borders (the "gutters") between the pictures are of special interest because they have been breached — abundantly in recent comics but even in very early comics, for example, those by Winsor McCay. To sum up: Comics are definitely part of the "Gutenberg galaxy of books" (see McLuhan 2002). The reader still has to leaf through the medium and read it, while her gaze alternates constantly between fast cursory reading and stataric viewing of pictures.

II

From an historical point of view and against the backdrop of the modern age, comics are inseparably tied to the notion of the "city." The history of comics begins — not taking into consideration the long history of combining pictures and words since Ancient times and the tradition of illustration, caricature, and picture stories in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (William Hogarth, Wilhelm Busch, Rodolphe Töpffer) — with the emergence of comic strips in American newspapers around 1900. The first contributions of cartoonists appeared in magazines such as *Puck* (1877), *Judge* (1881), or *Life* (1883), but the rivalry between the New York newspapers (or rather their publishers), between Adolph Ochs's *New York Times* (1851), Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* (1860), and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* (1895), all of which put great emphasis on illustrations and an illustrated Sunday supplement, caused a dramatic development in the importance of comic strips. On February 17, 1895, a crucial event in the history of the comic strip took place in the *New York World*: The renowned artist Richard Felton Outcault introduced the character "The Yellow Kid" in his comic strip *Hogan's Alley*. From then on, this strip, which features naturalist and partly satirical street scenes as well as background descriptions as social commentary of New York City street life, developed into one of the crucial selling points for the newspaper. Shortly afterwards, star artist Outcault switched employers, taking with him his "Buster Brown" character, the American model for all rascal comics, and started working for Hearst's newspaper the *New York Herald* (1835). Other successful comic strips that appeared in newspapers are Rudolph Dirk's *The Katzenjammer Kids* (1897), *The Captain and the Kids* (formerly *Hanz and Fritz*) (1918), and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* (1913). Common to all these comic strips is that the characters are influenced by the incredible speed of life in the New York City metropolis and that speed determines the rhythm of the city's newspapers and comic strips. As the expansion of comic strips led to them taking up whole pages, the space reserved for the city in the comics also expanded. Winsor McCay, for example, used the whole page as the basis for his comic strip *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1906) in order to create fantastic worlds and real cities.

Eventually, comics outgrew the newspaper world. When the new format of the comic book was established as an independent publication, new characters filled the new comic book cities with life, such as Will Eisner's *The Spirit* (1940), which started out as a comic strip in

newspapers; Superman, who inhabits Metropolis (1938), and Batman, who fights crime first in Manhattan (1939) and, from 1941 on, in Gotham City. Various distinctive comic book series at the end of the 1930s thus explored the city as living space and origin of modern myths. In particular, the characters of the superhero comics and the detective comics delved deep into the aesthetic, atmospheric, and scenaristic possibilities of the city. From then on, the city acted even more as the foremost setting for comics in all genres and stylistic variants. The city functioned as an important plot element, even an atmospheric, and symbolic protagonist, and suddenly became the focus of attention in many genres.

III

There is undoubtedly a link between the medium of comics and the big city as a modern living space. This emphasizes the need to investigate how specifically urban topoi, self-portrayals, forms of cultural memorizing, and variant readings of the city (strolling, advertising, architecture, detective stories, mass phenomena, street life, etc.) are on the one hand being incorporated in comic books, and the need to investigate if comics have special competences for capturing urban space and city life and representing it aesthetically because of their hybrid nature consisting of words, pictures, and sequences on the other. Does the spatial inertia of the sequences in contrast to film, video, or television result in retardation in order to ease the saturation that has been attributed to the big city since 1900?

Since the 1930s the authors and artists of comic books have continued to incorporate urban space into their narratives again and again. In doing so, they have referenced the whole repository of iconography from other media and occasionally exceeded and expanded on that cultural history. In the U.S. the works of Frank Miller (*Daredevil, Ronin, The Dark Knight Returns, Sin City*), Alan Moore (*V for Vendetta, Watchmen, From Hell*), Warren Ellis (*Transmetropolitan*) and Dean Motter (*Mister X, Terminal City, Electropolis*) exert their influence on cinematic settings (*Blade Runner, Batman, Batman Returns, The Fifth Element, The Matrix, Sin City*). An analogous interaction between comics and cultural history can be found in the influential science fiction and fantasy comics in France and Belgium, for example, in the works of Moebius (*La cinquième essence/The Incal, Le garage hermétique*), Enki Bilal (*Nikopol*), Marc-Antoine

Mathieu (*Acquefacques*), Pierre Christin and Jean-Claude Mézières (*Valérian, agent spatio-temporel*), and François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters (*Les Cités Obscures*). In particular, the earlier Franco-Belgian École Marcinelle opened up the urban space for the so-called "semi-funnies" (André Franquin, Maurice Tillieux). Yet Japanese manga cultivated such approaches as well — still most famously in the work of Katsuhiro Otomo (*Akira, Domo*) but also in works by Jiro Taniguchi or in science fiction manga by Masamume Shirow (*Ghost in the Shell, Appleseed*).

IV

Comics employ a certain self-reflexivity. As a genuine medium of urban modernity they do not only mirror different aspects of modern life, but also adopt its formal aesthetics and cultural prerequisites. By now, every modern metropolis in the world has been made the subject of comics: Berlin, Paris, London, Tokyo and, time and again, New York City. At the same time, many fictional cities from comics have found their way into the global cultural memory: Superman's Metropolis, Batman's Gotham City, the New York City of Spider-Man, Daredevil, the Avengers or the Fantastic Four, Tokyo and the post-nuclear Neo-Tokyo of manga, or even the Duckburg of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. This demonstrates how important comics are to modern culture since they enduringly form people's perceptions of cultural, social, and political patterns and strongly influence what Roland Barthes has called "mythologies" (of the ordinary) (see Barthes 1972). The main premise of this book is the strong interaction between comics and the urban space as the center of modern culture and daily life in the twentieth century. The competence of comics in capturing urban space and city life can be found within the cityscape itself, for example, as combinations of words and images in the form of signage and graffiti, which are deeply influenced by the aesthetics of comics. Providing a broad range of subjects, perspectives, and interests within its focus on comics and the city, this book deals with the relationships between comic books, mass media, modern culture, and urbanity. It addresses a range of international key comic authors and works, such as Richard Felton Outcault, Winsor McCay, Walt Disney and Carl Barks, Jacques Tardi, Enki Bilal, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters, Will Eisner, Alan Moore, Dean Motter, Jason Lutes, as well as crime and superhero comics.

V

The first section, "History, Comics, and the City," examines the historical background of the fundamental connection between the rise of comics and urbanity. The origins of this new kind of media are to be found in the emergence of mass societies and mass cultures at the turn of the twentieth century, especially in the context of modern newspapers. One important aspect of this relationship is the meaning of space in regard to political sovereignty and a "structuring gaze." This structuring gaze of comics implements a topographical reading of the cityscape, which is led by the point of view in frames, panels and sequences. The urban landscape is similarly structured by panel-like blocks and grids. For the purpose of individual adaptation the modern city demands certain capacities to direct and organize the gaze as modernity's central sense of perception. Also, the depiction of such a gaze always includes political implications, for example, in the division of the gaze between a pedestrian watching the sky and a superhero looking down on the city while in flight or while standing on a skyscraper. Jens Balzer's essay on the gaze and the invention of comics in New York City gives a possible answer to the question: What is it that defines the comic? By examining this question the answer comes as a tautology: The distinction between comics and pre-modern picture stories is the very modernity of comics, that is, the medium's urbanity. Comics do not demand the contemplative as well as the fixed gaze of the classic central perspective. Instead, they demand the loose and moving gaze of the urban *flâneur*. They transport the text into the vertical and therefore decentralize the image. Just how comics achieve this and what this process means are explained by Balzer using the example of Richard Felton Outcault's Yellow Kid character who first appeared 1895 in the *New York World* newspaper. Its decentralization and abstraction demonstrates the image of perception of an integral restlessness that is characteristic of the structural gaze in the metropolis of modernity.

Ole Frahm's essay on the urbanity of early comic strips discusses the "will" to see the city from a higher point, taking a panoptic and projective view that became popular in the late eighteenth century and is still popular today. This is the effect of the desire not to get in touch with the difficulties and contradictions of city life in the streets and thus to ignore the complex urbanity of the city. In contrast to this "will," the French theorist Michel de Certeau proposes that the practice of walking through the city provides a different and productive view that

"reads" and "writes" the city with all of its contradictions. Frahm's essay proposes that early Sunday pages reflect these two modes of viewing and constellate these different desires in different ways. It analyzes comic book-pages by Richard Felton Outcault, Winsor McKay, and George Herriman in regard to this concept, using the central metaphor of the "window" for the comic book-panel.

Following Jared Gardner's claim that graphic narratives embody Walter Benjamin's concept of the archive as an assemblage of modern mass media that breaks down the barriers between word and image, Anthony Enns's essay on Jason Lutes' comic book series *Berlin* (1996) explores the ways in which these assemblages are also indelibly linked to the experience of the metropolis. Benjamin employed the city as an allegory for modernity and in doing so he was largely based on Charles Baudelaire's experience of nineteenth century Paris and his claim that "memories are as heavy as stone." Enns's essay explores the connections between modern media, historical memory, and the experience of the metropolis through a close reading of *Berlin: City of Stones*, the first part of an epic trilogy that traces the end of Germany's Weimar Republic from 1929 to 1933 by referring to contemporary photographs, paintings, and drawings from the period. By drawing on this repository of cultural history and iconography, Lutes constructs an intermedial text that captures both the stories and images associated with the city.

VI

The second section, "Retrofuturistic and Nostalgic Cities," examines the phenomenon of "nostalgia mode" (see Jameson 1991), which can be observed in the U.S.A. as well as in Europe. "Nostalgia" means a certain way in depicting history as being better than it really was. It is only interested in transfiguring the past into some perfect and idyllic epoch, a lost Golden Age that can never be attained again. "Retrofuturism" is a very specific variety of "nostalgia mode." Retrofuturistic literature, movies or comics create imaginations of the future that refer to futuristic designs from the past, for example, utopian and science fiction designs in the 1950s and 1960s (the "ray gun gothic" in William Gibson's words), the World Fair aesthetics of the 1930s, or the *belle époque* around 1900. In this way, the comic comes across as an interesting mode of reflection about the meaning of history and the contemporary as well as the role of the city as a life-world that takes up particular modern phantasmagorias

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