
COMICS & POLITICS – 7TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE SOCIETY FOR COMICS STUDIES (COMFOR)

by Linda-Rabea Heyden





INTRODUCTION

From September 27–30, 2012 international comic scholars were invited by ComFor member Dr. Stephan Packard from the University of Freiburg to discuss and investigate how comics interact with politics and the political.

Since 2006 the German Society for Comics Studies (Gesellschaft für Comicforschung/ComFor) has held an annual conference at alternating universities and with a different topic each time. The society's goal is to promote comics scholarship, and its yearly conferences offer an opportunity for scholars to exchange and connect. Since the society is focused on comics research in the German language, its conferences have mostly appealed to scholars from German-speaking countries. This year's conference, however, took a more international approach, inviting comics scholars beyond German-speaking countries by adding a call for papers in English. Furthermore, a big contribution was made by members of NNCORE (Nordic Network for Comics Research), who joined the ComFor conference this year. Despite most papers still being given in German this is a very positive step towards an internationally oriented comics research network that should be pursued in following years.

OPEN WORKSHOP

At some of ComFor's conferences, and this year as well, an additional open workshop is offered. Here, scholars can present their off-topic research. It is a nice way to present work in progress and receive feedback in the following discussions. Due to the workshop being open, the topics' range was considerable – starting off with two classics: Linda-Rabea Heyden presented comics adaptations of Goethe's *Faust* and Daniela Kaufmann examined how the anthropomorphic depictions in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* are connected to historical drawings that were used to show the gradual metamorphosis of the man/animal distinction. Kathrin Klohs examined how *phdcomics* uses scientific charts to transport meaning, while the following discussion focused on whether these strips actually parody science or academic life (*Wissenschaft vs. Wissenschaftsbetrieb*).

Two presentations dealt with Italian comics. Barbara Uhlig argued that Mattotti uses colour schemes to produce narrative meaning or even ambiguity. As for Elena Potapenko who uses the Comic Book Markup Language (CBML) tool for her *fumetti neri* studies, the audience (mainly literary and art scholars) had some difficulties acknowledging her linguistic approach instead of embracing her input from a different field. Christophe Dony concluded the workshop with the



only project focused on a non-European topic: the publishing strategies of Vertigo Comics that capture the mainstream and independent/alternative market.

COMICS AND WWII

The theme of the conference probably suggests it, and indeed a lot of papers discussed the connection between comics and war. The presentations on the first day were mostly overviews of the relation between politics and comics about or produced during WWII. Kees Ribbens and Michael Scholz examined this relation for European (Ribbens) and Swedish (Scholz) comics. Comics series set in WWII would often portray stereotypical images of the enemy – a topic that would come up again during the conference.

While propagandistic views that featured in fictional wartime stories were part of the entertainment industry, Ralf Kauranen presented Finnish comic strips that were used as official propaganda tool during WWII. Most of them would not so much denounce an enemy but instruct their readers on decrees and laws during wartime. Louise C. Larsen gave a talk on Danish cartoons in the pre-WWII period, which commented on the political development in Germany. Rikke Platz Cortsen on the other hand covered not the pre- but post-war period. She argued that the series *Rasmus Klump* (*Barnaby Bear*) implicitly commented on the cold war era by contrasting it with a complete lack of any conflict inside the fictional world.

GERMAN STEREOTYPES IN COMICS

Another popular theme at the conference was the depiction of Germans in war themed comics. Since many papers were focused on comics about or produced during WWII, there seemed to be quite some concern with German stereotypes while other stereotypes (e.g. the bestial depiction of the Japanese) in these series or other comics received little attention. Unfortunately, Florian Hessel's paper that could have brought some further insight was cancelled.

Two papers focused on the depiction of Germans specifically and, along the way, shed some further light on those comic book covers that feature an American superhero battling Hitler. Matthias Harbeck talked about how the depiction of Germans changed in American superhero comics before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Harbeck concluded that while there are German stereotypes (eating *Wurst*, being efficient, etc.), Nazi Germans were not only popcultural sensations but they and “new (post 1989) Germany Germans” are also used as a foil to discuss politics and xenophobia inside the USA.



Micha Johann Gerstenberg's examination of the Justice Society comics added further insight into the matter. Gerstenberg pointed out that 1940s superhero comics were excluded from official propaganda media yet sometimes propaganda posters (e.g. advertisement to buy war bonds) would be placed on the comic covers.

COMICS AS A MEANS OF EMPOWERMENT AND RE-TELLING THE PAST

The other main block of the papers looked at comics that take the opposite position: comics not as a means for official propaganda purposes by the state, but as a political tool to contest official (master) narratives. Manuela Grünangerl had a look at the Portuguese comic magazine *Visão*. The stories would appropriate and often parody political symbols and rhetoric or reflect on more serious subjects like traumata from the Portuguese colonial war – a topic that before had only been treated by state propaganda or otherwise been a taboo.

Hartmut Nonnenmacher gave insight into the Spanish magazine *El Jueves* that uses satire for its political messages. According to Nonnenmacher, the strips comment on current political events (e.g. economic crisis) without leaning to one political side. While they balance stereotypical portrayals of regionalists and centralists, the continuing strip *Martinez el Fancha* exposes fascists as anachronistic. Christian Knöppler talked about conspiracy theories in several of Warren Ellis' comics. Knöppler summarised these comics as an anti-authoritative reflex keeping the memory of negative examples in American political history alive to prevent a repetition.

Political violence was the subject of Catherine Michel's paper that discussed comics that depict the violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Michel pointed out that the various approaches to the conflict in the comics could even have a positive impact in so far as to broaden the view of 'the others'. Quite a few comics with this subject matter are created both in and outside the Middle East and they take all kinds of perspectives. However, since many of these are not translated, it is hard to get their critical messages to the desired audience. Kalina Kupczynska's paper examined rhetorical pathos and pathos gestures in three Polish *Solidarność* comics, all produced in retrospect. The first comic from 1984 featured almost no pictures but long text passages. Kupczynska interpreted this as critique and suspicion of pictorial symbols which were often used for propaganda purposes by the state.



MEMORY COMICS

A specific type (or genre) of comics that allow for empowerment by re-telling the past was the subject of Anne Magnussen's keynote: Spanish memory comics. Most of these deal with the Franco regime or the time after and challenge the official version of the Spanish past. While early Spanish memory comics were mostly set in abstract places or time, later ones would make more references to Spain specifically. In one example, Magnussen showed how the specific structure of comics can depict the contest of various narrations by underpinning it with a different version of the truth in the pictures. Thus memory comics can discuss the problem of telling/not-telling with its specific political implications. Marc Blancher discussed a memory comic that deals with the theme of imprisonment in Morocco by Abdelazis Mouride. Blancher showed how the inmate's experience of violence is juxtaposed with a cold and report-like style in the text.

COMICS AND RIGHT-WING PROPAGANDA

Giovanni Remonato presented a striking case from Italy. The neo-fascist group CasaPound organised a lecture on why Corto Maltese is indeed a fascist and therefore one of them. Remonato presented their unlikely argument which reduces Pratt's apolitical and ambiguous character to a few characteristics in order to fit their case.

The 'black rat' is a further example where rightwing extremists appropriate a comics character for their own ideological uses. The 'black rat' originally appeared in a *Chlorophylle* story by Raymond Macherot but it was adopted into the propaganda strip *Les rats maudits* by Jack Marchal who made the rat symbol and role model for the right-wing extremist group *GUD (Groupe union défense)*. Ralf Palandt demonstrated that the appearance of the 'black rat' on flyers and in booklets throughout Europe beyond those by *GUD* points to the interconnectedness of extremist right-wing groups.

THE POLITICS OF DEFINITION

Ian Hague gave a paper that took somewhat a meta-perspective. Hague pointed out that prevalent comics' definitions are all ocularcentric, defining comics only by their visual elements, while comics' readers would engage with the medium also by touch and smell. His argument was to include these properties of comics in their definitions as well as the academic research on them. Thus, his lecture reminded the audience that defining comics is implicitly a (political) act of inclusion and exclusion.



Ole Frahm, too, talked about the politics of inclusion and exclusion but from a very different angle. Frahm argued that even a simple line is already a regulative gesture defining unities by exclusion. The assessment of the gesture according to a value system, however, is a second step. The gesture itself is at first ambiguous. Frahm explained his argument mostly with the example of brick throwing, mainly with examples from *Krazy Kat* but also from slapstick movies. The frozen flight of the brick (a line on the page) is thus a gesture without purpose that, frozen in time, is still ambiguous and only then put in relation within a system (e.g. by the appearance of a policeman symbolising order).

CALLING THE READER TO ACTION

Dietrich Grünewald led the audience through his interpretation of the political fable *Au pays de la memoire blanche* by Stéphane Poulin (2011). For the purpose of demonstrating the reader's ability to make sense of the wordless pictures, Grünewald left the text aside which he found to be reductive as to the story's meaning. According to Grünewald's interpretation the fable's message was at the same time universal and, with its (intertextual) references to real places, anchored in reality.

Along with Frahm's, Hans-Joachim Backe's paper on Brian K. Vaughan's comics series *Y - The Last Man* and *Ex Machina* was among the most surprising. Backe used terms and tools from political science for his interpretation of Vaughan's political comics. He also applied ideas about the autonomous individual from Jürgen Habermas' *Glauben und Wissen*. Against this foil, Vaughan's comics read like a reflection of Habermas' text. Rather than giving a definite answer to contemporary political problems, these comics would leave the reader to decide in the face of various political perspectives.

ARTISTIC INPUT

Really nice additions to the academic papers were the artists' talks on two evenings of the conference. After the open workshop, Uli Knorr showed parts of his latest project *Herzlicher Gruß*. The comic tells his family's story during WWI by means of authentic (and also very gruesome) postcards which have been sent home from the front. These are combined with background stories of the family members. This interesting project is still in progress and should be published in the commemorative year of 2014.

Peter Brandt is working on the project *Hanisauland* which is aimed at school children and which is organised by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für Politische



Bildung/BPB). Its purpose is to teach school children about political concepts in a simple and comprehensive way. On Saturday, Simon Schwartz presented a PowerPoint reading of two of his works (*drüben!*, 2009, and *Packeis*, 2012, both at avant-verlag). Like Uli Knorr's project, *drüben!* also focuses on his family and German history but is more autobiographical. In Schwartz's own words it is less about an East-German family moving to West Berlin than it is about a family incapable to communicate in the face of their political differences. Schwartz also presented his biographical comic on Matthew Henson, the first (and unacknowledged) black man to reach the North Pole, but there seemed to be more interest in the east/west German conflict.

I have seen artists' talks at the International Comics Conferences in England (Manchester and Bournemouth), but it was the first time in Germany. I think it is a very insightful addition because it offers a non-academic and different perspective and I hope the next ComFor conference will follow this example.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This year's ComFor conference was a first and very much appreciated step to link German comics researchers to an international network of comics scholars who arrived from all over Europe. Papers covered comics from many European countries, but left non-European comics underrepresented (except for the few American superhero comics as well as Catherine Michel's and Marc Blancher's papers). Still, the combination of all papers provided an interesting overview of the interactions of politics and comics. Surprisingly, or maybe not, for a German comics conference no academic paper covered German comics. This lack was however counterbalanced by the artists' talks.

In general, there seemed to be much concern with comics on war themes and wartime and thus many papers had a historical focus. As Stephan Packard mentioned in his closing speech, not one paper discussed the censoring of comics, or comics that negotiate between subculture and mainstream, for that matter. This is indeed surprising because often the comics discourse still implicitly reacts to such censoring actions like the Comics Code. The success of this four-day conference is much owed to the diligent organisation by Stephan Packard and his team. The atmosphere was welcoming and the papers offered many starting points for further discussion. My hope is that with a stronger networking the focus will be broader too. So please join!