
EDITORIAL: FROM THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN - NORDIC HISTORY AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN COMICS

by Katja Kontturi, Martin Lund, Leena Romu, and Fredrik Strömberg





PREFACE: SJOCA REDUX

At long last, the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* returns from its extended hiatus. Because of the vagaries and vicissitudes of life and the world of academia, almost the entire editorial staff has changed. Fredrik Strömberg remains the journal's anchor, while former editors Erin La Cour, Ralf Kauranen, and Rikke Platz Cortsen have all moved on to other projects. Rikke and Erin, for example, recently co-edited a comics studies anthology titled *Comics and Power* that highlights the current state of comics studies in the Nordic countries, and which we strongly encourage our readers to seek out.¹ Following the original team's departure, a new group has stepped in to fill the hole they left: Katja Kontturi, Martin Lund, and Leena Romu. We all hope that we are equal to the task of taking over from our predecessors. The editorial team would like to particularly extend our deep thanks and appreciation to Frederik Byrn Køhlert, who was an integral part of the team during a crucial time in the journal's redevelopment, but who had to leave us to concentrate on other things.

Some things have changed since the last issue. Some of what is new will be evident already in this issue, such as changes in how we handle notes and references and our switch from British to American English conventions, while other changes will emerge only over time. When *SJoCA* was established, the idea was to concentrate primarily on Nordic comics or comics studies by Nordic scholars. As can be seen in this issue and as will become evident as we publish the issues that we are currently putting together, this editorial guideline is no longer as strong. We still stress the Nordic perspective, but we strongly encourage an international focus in contributions and we welcome non-Nordic contributors with open arms.

Still, most of journal operations remain the same. Foremost among the continuities – aside most obviously from the retention of the triple text-type format of articles, book reviews, and forum texts (although none of the latter are included in this issue) – is that the new editorial team is as dedicated as our predecessors to presenting quality research into the comics medium in its many different forms, studied by scholars engaged in the widest possible range of disciplines. Together with our contributors and anonymous reviewers, we have worked hard to ensure that this issue will not disappoint, and we will continue to dedicate ourselves to quality in the months and years to come. We encourage you, our readers, wherever you may be reading this, and whatever discipline you might be working in, to send your articles, reviews, and debate pieces and musings to us, so that together we can help move the interdisciplinary field of comics studies into the future.

¹ Magnussen, La Cour, and Cortsen, *Comics and Power*.



With all of that said, the editorial team would like to welcome our readers new and old to the new *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* and this, the first issue of the second volume. We hope you enjoy it!

COMICS, MEMORY, AND THE NORDIC PAST AND PRESENT

This issue contains three articles that deal in their own ways with Nordic cultural memories and history. The past is all around us, not least in our entertainments. It is also a highly malleable thing that can be molded and shaped to tell us who we are, who we should be, and where we came from. The myriad ways in which conceptions about the past can be informed by contemporary concerns and the ways the past can be used to legitimize present practices and ideas have been ably charted by scholars in the rapidly growing field of memory studies.² Although highly interdisciplinary, comics studies has yet to truly enter this field, despite the fact that its subject matter provides ample opportunity for studies of representations of history and memory.

Nordic comics history and comics that represent the past and present of the Nordic countries provide one of many possible inroads into these fruitful lines of inquiry. For example, Nordic comics, from early comics strips through locally produced contemporary comic books, like the Swedish funny animal series *Bamse*, Norwegian humor series *Nemi*, the Finnish *Moomin* stories, Danish strip *Poeten og Lillemor*, and many more, all provide a vast and still largely unstudied archive of historical perspectives and attitudes. In addition, varying degrees of adulation or criticism inform biographical and historical comics and graphic novels about personages like Swedish writer August Strindberg; compiler of Finland's national epic *Kalevala*, Elias Lönnrot; or Norwegian painter Edvard Munch.³

Similarly, Nordic comics creators, like "Team Fantomen," who have produced the majority of Phantom stories for regional publication since the 1960s, make frequent use of the Nordic past as a setting or story element. This is the subject of this issue's first article, historian David Gudmundsson's "The Ghost who Walks Goes North: Early Modern Sweden in *The Phantom*, 1987–2008." In his article, Gudmundsson discusses Team Fantomen's representations of early modern Swedish history in several stories, grounding his analysis in theories of the uses of history

² For some important inroads to the field, see Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*; Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*. See also Olick and Robbins, "SOCIAL MEMORY STUDIES," on some of the problems with memory studies.

³ See, for example, the exhibition "Livet är inget för amatörer – svenska serieskapare tolkar Strindberg" [roughly: "Life is not for amateurs - Swedish cartoonists interpret Strindberg"]; Ranta, *Kajana*; Kverneland, *MUNCH*.



and discussing how the comics both engage with contemporaneous historical scholarship and long-standing stereotypes and received wisdom.

It should be noted that the Viking Age and conceptions about its culture and beliefs have been a particularly inspiring topic for comics creators, spawning among other titles Marvel's character Thor, who reshapes Norse myths for an American audience and like his superheroic compatriots does so with a potboiler feeling for the state of American culture; Brian Wood's 2008–2012 anthology series *Northlanders*, which strikes a balance between historical representation and modern sentiment; Peter Madsen's long-running and often ideologically anachronistic *Valhalla*; several adaptations of Swedish writer Frans G. Bengtsson's *Röde Orm* (*The Long Ships* or *Red Orm* in English) that retell the same story to different ends; and, in 2013, the Swedish-created but superhero-inspired character, *The Norseman*. The Viking Age has been particularly important in comics' making Nordic history and memory international imaginative currency. In these comics - which in addition to the titles mentioned above also include for instance Japanese Manga like *Viking Saga* and *King of Viking*, and Franco-Belgian album series like *Asterix*, *Thorgal*, and *Johan and Peewit* - the creators use a past not their own to speak to and about their own time and place and, often alongside other forms of popular culture, serve to establish and recycle certain common images of Vikings and Norse culture. This is addressed in the issue's second article, literary critic Asuka Yamazaki's "The Body, Despair, and Hero Worship: A Comparative Study of the Influence of Norse Mythology in *Attack on Titan*." In her article, Yamazaki studies the use of Old Norse tropes and topoi in a contemporary manga, highlighting how the modern text uses old figures to consider and critique contemporary Japanese society.

Finally, in recent years, Nordic-produced comics themselves have increasingly appeared in translation, perhaps most notably in such anthologies as *Kolor Klimax*, *From Wonderland with Love*, and the United States' 2010 "Swedish Invasion." In various ways, these comics contend with preconceived notions about the Nordic countries and Nordicness or Scandinavianness. The issue's last article, Rikke Platz Cortsen's "Stockholm/Copenhagen/Oslo: Translation and Sense of Place in Martin Kellerman's Comic Strip *Rocky*" touches upon these issues. Discussing the original Swedish version of cartoonist Martin Kellerman's strip *Rocky* and juxtaposing it with its Danish and Norwegian translations, Cortsen shows how Kellerman constructs place in his strip, how the strip's translators work to adhere to this construction of a sense of place, and how these processes highlight a common Scandinavianness, but also how comics help construct a progressive sense of place.



In addition to these articles, we are pleased to publish three insightful book reviews by media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest, English-scholar Eric Berlatsky, and art historian Fred Andersson. So, without further ado, we give you “From the Land of the Midnight Sun: Nordic History and Cultural Memory in Comics.”

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THE GHOST WHO WALKS GOES NORTH:
EARLY MODERN SWEDEN IN *THE*
PHANTOM, 1987–2008

by David Gudmundsson





INTRODUCTION

Ever since its first appearance in 1950, the Swedish edition of Lee Falk's *The Phantom* (Swe. *Fantomen*) has been one of the most popular comic magazines in Sweden. The size of the print run reached its peak in the 1970s and 1980s, and each issue today is printed in 22,000 copies, with an estimated 71,000 readers. It is primarily read by male readers (60–80%) between the ages of 12 and 50.¹

Some of the most active contributors to *Fantomen* in recent decades have been the Swedish and Nordic comics creators who make up the so-called “Team Fantomen” (including editor and writer Ulf Granberg, writers Janne Lundström, Lennart Moberg, and Claes Reimerthi, and artists Kari Leppänen and Hans Lindahl). Characteristic for “Team Fantomen” is their many historical stories. Since the key concept of the Phantom legend is that the role of the Phantom has been inherited in the Walker family since the mid-16th century, history holds a central place in *Fantomen*'s world. Numerous adventures situate the Phantom in a well-known historical context, where he meets famous figures such as rulers, scientists, writers, and criminals. As a result, many *Fantomen*-readers have acknowledged the importance the comic has had for their interest in history. The perhaps most well-known professional historian in Sweden today, Dick Harrison, has pointed out that the comic clearly reflects values typical for its own time, suggesting that it would be possible to write a modern history of mentalities based on *Fantomen*.²

The present article, however, is not a history of mentalities. Rather, its approach is that of historiography, cultural memory, and the uses of history. This article is about *Fantomen*'s depiction of early modern Swedish history, or, to be more precise, of the 17th and 18th centuries. The aim of the article is to analyze how this period is represented in nine issues of *Fantomen* from 1987 to 2008, and to relate this to general and recent trends in Swedish historiography. How are rulers, wars, religious beliefs, and well known events depicted in *Fantomen*? How does fiction relate to facts? How are language and images used to create an historical atmosphere?

CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE USES OF HISTORY

A basic premise of this article is that our conception of history is continuously negotiated, reshaped, and used. According to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs' influential research

¹ According to the publisher Egmont: <http://www.annonsinfo.se/ea/upload-material/egmont.annons.upload-material.fantomen> (Accessed August 4, 2015), and *Orvesto Konsument* 2014:1 http://www.tns-sifo.se/media/512210/orvesto_konsument_2014_1_rackvidd.pdf. On Rolf Jansson, one of the initiators of *Fantomen*, see Nellinge and Strandberg, *En bra bok till Rolf*.

² In *Från lila våldnad till blågul hjälte*, 51.



in the 1920s, individual memories of history depend on social frames and are transformed into *collective memories*. That is, our understanding of the past depends on the groups and societies to which we belong. Thus, collective memories are a bridge between identity and history.³ This notion has inspired Aleida and Jan Assmann to develop the concept of *cultural memory*. The cultural memory reflects a cultural remembrance and performance of the past. Memories can be shared through, for instance, rituals and texts, and are activated through reading, writing, criticizing, appreciating, and so on.⁴ In a recent companion to cultural memory studies, cultural memory is defined as “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts.”⁵ This does not mean that history and memory are the same. In the words of the historian Jay Winter, memory is a faculty, something we live with; history is memory seen through and criticized with the aid of documents of many kinds.⁶ In the present article, writing and reading comics is recognized as acts of sharing memories, and comic magazines as documents through which these shared memories can be studied by historians.

The notion of cultural memory can be related to the Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson’s typology of different *uses of history* (Swe. *historiebruk*). These are the scientific, existential, moral, ideological, political-pedagogical, commercial, and non-uses of history. They answer to different needs. The scientific use is the professional struggle to reconstruct the past. The existential use is that of collective or individual reminiscence. The moral use seeks to rediscover and rehabilitate hidden groups, people, etc. The purpose of the ideological and political-pedagogical uses is to make comparisons for present purposes. The commercial use is of particular interest in this article, since it recognizes history’s value to popular culture. The non-use of history, finally, is a deliberate forgetting of history. These uses are ideal types, and sometimes they overlap each other. Thus, Karlsson has modified his typology several times. The commercial use was made a category of its own in one version, only to be included under other uses, especially the existential use, in his latest model. Applying Karlsson’s typology helps operationalize the overarching idea of cultural memory and identify in what ways a cultural memory is activated in the *Fantomen*-stories.⁷

³ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

⁴ Assmann, “Re-Framing Memory,” 43–44, 49–50. Cultural memory studies today forms a vast field of research. See e.g. Erll and Nünning, *Cultural Memory Studies*; Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*.

⁵ Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies,” 2. A further development of the cultural memory concept is found in Karin Kukkonen’s concept of popular cultural memory, which combines social, material, and mental dimensions of reading popular material, such as comics. See Kukkonen, “Popular Cultural Memory.”

⁶ Winter, “Re-Framing Memory,” 12.

⁷ Karlsson, “Historiedidaktik,” 56–69; “Historia, historiedidaktik och historiebruk,” 70–80. The typology is applied by Ulf Zander in his dissertation on uses of and debates on Swedish history during the 20th century in Fornstora dagar. For other approaches to the uses of history, see e.g. Aronsson, “Historiekultur, politik och historievetsenskap i Norden”; Historiebruk; Nordbäck, “Den heliga historien”; “Kyrkohistorisk historiebruksforskning.”



The analysis consists of four parts. The first three parts are chronologically arranged analyses of values, facts, and fictions in the *Fantomen*-stories as well as in the comic books' "facts-pages." The latter, often following after the stories, are explanatory texts about important themes in the stories. Finally, I will analyze how images and language are used to create an historical atmosphere in the stories and to reproduce memory. The article ends with a short conclusion.

THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR, GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS, AND THE JESUIT ORDER

The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) is much debated in Swedish historiography. For a long time, Sweden's involvement in the war was basically regarded as a glorious struggle to save Protestantism. Out of national and religious sentiments, the Swedish cause was thought of as intertwined with the Lutheran cause. Later, other reasons for entering the war have been highlighted, such as commercial advantages or a lust for power and prestige. The devastating effect of the war on German civil society is commonly acknowledged, as are the great trials the war brought to the Swedish population through conscriptions and taxations.⁸

In the epic story "Dödens ring" ("The Ring of Death," 17+19/1998), the fourth Phantom is drawn into an attempt by the Jesuit Order to assassinate the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus (r. 1611–1632). His involvement in this causes the Phantom to lose his ring with the skull-shaped Evil Mark, and puts him in Magdeburg in Saxony when the city was sacked by Catholic Field Marshal Tilly's forces in 1631, as well as at the battlefield of Breitenfeld the same year. In this story, the afflictions of war are clearly expressed. "On our way to the Protestant city of Magdeburg, we encountered cruel testimonies of the devastating war," the narrator-Phantom tells us, while he and his travel company pass a tree with four hanged men.⁹ Later, they walk into a village sacked by Croatian soldiers, its inhabitants lying dead and bloody with crows circling above. "This senseless war has been going on for twelve years," the Phantom says, his female travelling partner Lady Kristina adding that it is always the innocent and defenseless who suffer the most.¹⁰

⁸ Oredsson, *Gustav Adolf, Gustav II Adolf*, 327–360; Englund, *Ofredsår*; Zander, *Fornstora dagar*. The title of a new Swedish monograph on the Thirty Years' War is actually a contemporary quotation saying: "A great suffering has come upon us." (See Harrison, *Ett stort lidande*.)

⁹ All translations by the author.

¹⁰ FA 17/98, 16; FA 19/98, 18–19. The Thirty Years' War is the setting of many *Fantomen*-stories, often describing the horrors of war in a similar, but rarely as explicit way. See also FA 25/95; FA 20/98; FA 10/05. A subject which is approached with a surprisingly unaffectionate tone is the African slave trade. A few pictures in "Min swenske fiende" illustrate the inhumanity and degradation of slavery. The facts-pages, on the other hand, are dispassionate and give an informative sketch of the Swedish slave trade in Africa. FA 9/07, 12, 17, 40–41. The story and facts are written by Janne Lundström, who has also written the comic *Johan Wilde* – a devastating reckoning with the entire slave trade.



The notorious sack of the Protestant city of Magdeburg by Field Marshal Tilly's forces in 1631 is at the center of the story. "Magdeburg became a chaotic nightmare," the Phantom tells us. The pictures show civilians being killed, a church set aflame, and finally the whole town ablaze. We are also told that a similar scene has taken place before, when Tilly himself mentions the sack of the city Neubrandenburg. In a footnote, the author explains that Tilly burned Neubrandenburg and slaughtered thousands of its townspeople.¹¹

Even by Thirty Years' War standards, the sack of Magdeburg was exceedingly cruel. The event was heavily used in Protestant propaganda and became a synonym for atrocities committed in the war. Today, the sack of Magdeburg is not a commonplace in general knowledge of the Thirty Years' War. In a very accurate facts-page, the event is set in its greater context, relating it to the subsequent battles of Breitenfeld in 1631, where Gustavus Adolphus won his greatest victory, and Lützen in 1632, where he was killed.¹²

Gustavus Adolphus is described as a capable ruler, who reformed the Swedish civil service and army. Here, the traditional, basically positive, and readily recognizable conception of Gustavus Adolphus and his reign is followed, although different opinions have been voiced.¹³ This seems natural, when, in the words of Klas-Göran Karlsson's typology of the uses of history, Gustavus Adolphus is adopted in a commercial use of history.

The battle of Breitenfeld in 1631 is the climax of "Dödens ring." The battle is described with great accuracy: troop movements and deployments, battle cries and commanders, weapons and uniforms are all detailed and correct. On more than three pages the battle is depicted, until – and here we leave history as we know it – Gustavus Adolphus, shouting "God is with us! Away, thou dark vulture!" overruns a Jesuit who is trying to shoot the king with a blunderbuss loaded with the Phantom's ring.¹⁴ This scene calls for further examination.

¹¹ FA 19/98, 6, 13–14.

¹² FA 17/98, 32–33. On Magdeburg, see Ericson Wolke, Villstrand, and Larsson, *Trettioåriga kriget*, 200–225.

¹³ Oredsson, *Gustav Adolf; Gustav II Adolf*, 327–360; Zander, *Fornstora dagar*. A positive view of Gustavus Adolphus is found in the third part of popular historian Herman Lindqvist's best-selling series about the history of Sweden from the mid- to late 1990s, when several of the *Fantomen*-stories analyzed here were produced. In contrast, Gustavus Adolphus most recent biographer, Professor Sverker Oredsson, holds a much less positive and admiring view than what is usual in Swedish historiography. See Lindqvist, *När sverige blev stormakt*; Oredsson, *Gustav II Adolf*, 360–361.

¹⁴ FA 19/98, 22–26.



Figure 1. Gustavus Adolphus and Jesuit Pater Emanuel Capistrano at the battle of Breitenfeld. Leppänen, Kari, *Fantomen* nr 19: *Dödens ring* del 2, Egmont Serieförlaget AB, 1998, p. 26. © King Features Syndicate Inc./distr. Bulls/EGMONT.

The main character in “Dödens ring” is actually the fictitious Jesuit Pater Emanuel Capistrano.¹⁵ In the beginning of the story, Capistrano meets with the Superior General of “the feared Jesuit Order” in Rome. The General orders Capistrano to kill the “Antichrist from the North,” the leader of the “heretic Lutherans,” Gustavus Adolphus. In order to achieve this, Capistrano must use the Phantom’s ring, which, we are told, was originally forged from the nails used at the crucifixion of Christ.¹⁶ Capistrano’s hatred of the Lutherans is immense and personal. After the battle of Lutter am Barenberge in 1625, Protestant pikemen had carved the letters IHS on his forehead (for Iesus Hominum Salvator, found on the order’s emblem). “I have no compassion for enemies of the Holy Catholic Church,” he clearly states. Capistrano’s methods are harsh: he threatens to cut the throat of Lady Kristina if he does not get the ring, and when he gets it, he says that a promise to a heretic (that is, to the Phantom to release Lady Kristina) is not binding, leaving her at the mercy of his

¹⁵ In the history of Christianity the name Capistrano is known through the Franciscan friar Saint John of Capistrano (1386–1456), “the Soldier Priest,” patron saint of military chaplains and jurists.

¹⁶ FA 17/98, 6–9.



mercenaries. In Magdeburg, he cold-bloodedly shoots the Phantom in the head. Luckily, he is a poor shot and only slightly wounds the Phantom. Finally, on the Breitenfeld battlefield he does not manage to load his rifle in time to shoot the king, and is trampled under the king's horse.

The evil and crafty Jesuit is one of the classic stereotypes in Swedish literature. Pater Capistrano seems to be closely modelled after the infamous Pater Hieronymus in the Finnish author Zacharias Topelius' epic tale *Fältskärens berättelser* (Vols. 1–5, 1853–67, transl. "The Surgeon's Stories" or "Tales of the Barber Surgeon"). There, Hieronymus first appears when he is captured by Swedish soldiers at Breitenfeld, who discover a hidden dagger in the Jesuit's crucifix. Later he is at the German castle Marienburg, which is besieged by the Swedes, where he somehow manages to forge a piece of gold from Virgin Mary's cloak into a cannonball, which he fires against the king.¹⁷ The Jesuit's schemes continue even after the death of Topelius' hero, the great warrior king Gustavus Adolphus, establishing Hieronymus as the evil, scrupulous, fanatic model-Jesuit.¹⁸

Much consideration has been put into the historical environment in *Fantomen* in general, and in "Dödens ring" in particular by writer Ulf Granberg and artist Kari Leppänen. The character Capistrano, however, is evidently more fictional than historical. Maybe it was the need for a clear-cut character that activated this stereotype – the Jesuit as the national and religious enemy. Of course, few people read *Fältskärens berättelser* today, and most readers of *Fantomen* surely would not recognize Hieronymus in Capistrano. But, in accordance with Klas-Göran Karlsson's typology, this modern-day commercial use of history could be seen as a reproduction of a latent cultural memory of the evil Jesuit, leading back to existential, ideological and political uses of history with national sentiments in late 20th and early 21st century Sweden.¹⁹

CHARLES XII AND THE FALL OF THE SWEDISH EMPIRE

Charles XII (r. 1697–1718) is by far the most controversial and debated ruler in Swedish history. Was he personally the cause of the fall of the Swedish Empire? Was he an immature, war-mongering oppressor, or a heroic ruler, losing his kingdom due to misfortunes and unstoppable

¹⁷ Topelius, *Fältskärens berättelser* I, 24, 47–48.

¹⁸ Topelius' view on Gustavus Adolphus is analyzed in Forsgård, *Femte inseglets tecken*, 222–228.

¹⁹ On the latter, see Zander, *Fornstora dagar*.



changes in the European power-balance? Entire “schools” have been formed around such questions.²⁰

In the 1699-set “Vraket i Bengalibukten” (“The Wreck in the Bay of Bengali”), the character of Charles XII is not clear-cut.²¹ First he is rather touchy and jealous, supposedly because Chris Walker (the future eighth Phantom) has taken an interest in the same girl as Charles, the noblewoman Ingrid of Holstein. (This is in itself quite interesting since Charles never married and rarely showed any interest in the opposite sex.) When on a bear hunt, equipped with thick sticks instead of rifles, Charles first acts rather foolhardy and is mildly injured by a bear. Chris throws himself into the fight, causing the king to return to the struggle, which ends with Chris too being wounded while killing the bear. Through this act of courage, Chris earns the king’s respect and friendship. Charles shifts his mind into kindness and generosity towards Chris, finally blessing his betrothal with Ingrid.²²

Charles’ physical courage, not least in combat, is well known. It is often said that the line between courage and foolhardiness is thin, and Charles XII often crossed it. In this story he reveals both qualities, just as he acts both rashly and kindly. It is a surprisingly complex portrait of the young Charles XII we meet in *Fantomen*; surprising, because Charles has often been either glorified or demonized (in a much more polarized way than Gustavus Adolphus), although later biographers tend to be more ambiguous.²³

In another story, “Tre Kronor brinner” (“Castle Tre Kronor is burning,” 26/1997), Charles XII only appears in one scene, not saying anything. His brief appearance, however, is nonetheless noteworthy and will be discussed later. In the story, crown prince Charles (XII) is the target of a 1697 assassination conspiracy instigated by the nobleman Johan Reinold Patkul.²⁴ The historical Patkul was a leading opponent of the reduction of the nobility’s estates – or “theft” as Patkul describes it to the Phantom – instigated during Charles XI’s rule (r. 1672–1697).²⁵ Set against this background, a fictitious assassination attempt takes place in the royal palace. When the Phantom

²⁰ An extensive analysis of Charles XII in Swedish 20th-century historiography and public debate is found in Zander, *Fornstora dagar*. Also Oredsson, “Karl XII och det svenska stormaktsvåldet”; Liljegren, *Karl XII*, 358–375.

²¹ Originally published in 7/1995, but my notes reference the reprint in the 2013 Christmas album [Swe. “Julalbum”].

²² FA 2013, 10–15.

²³ Herman Lindqvist, who wanted to rehabilitate the Age of Greatness, is positive to Charles and his reign. Sverker Oredsson on the other hand, is critical of Charles, and holds him responsible for the fall of the Swedish Empire. A similar view is held by Charles’ recent biographer Bengt Liljegren, who thinks that Charles XII clearly failed his task to preserve and provide for the Swedish realm and people. See Lindqvist, *Storhet och fall*, 674–681; Oredsson, “Karl XII,” 69; Liljegren, *Karl XII*, 382.

²⁴ Patkul is one in a series of scheming noblemen in *Fantomen*, like Adolf Fredrik Munck in “Guldmakaren” and the fictional character von Mansdorf in “Kungen är död.”

²⁵ FA 26/97, 7.



is fighting the assassin in the castle's attic, a fire starts which finally leads to the destruction of the palace.

A fire did blaze in the royal palace, Tre Kronor, in Stockholm in 1697. The exact reason why the conflagration started is not known. This lacuna in historical knowledge is creatively exploited by the comic creators. As far as the historical record tells us what happened, every detail is correct in the comic, down to the names of the fireguards in the royal palace. But to connect the fire with Patkul is an effect of the writer's "overheated imagination," and nothing else, as the writer himself states on the facts-page.²⁶ The facts-page itself paints a very dark picture of the 1700–1721 Great Northern War between Sweden and a Russian-led coalition, and the reign of Charles XII: With the coronation of Charles XII, the darkest period in Swedish history since the Black Death was at hand. One catastrophe succeeded another, and plague, war, famine, and death harassed the realm. After the Great Northern War, the impoverished and devastated country returned to its role as a minor European state.²⁷ This description follows a general view on the later years of the Swedish Age of Greatness in modern research published around the time the comic was published.²⁸

Like no other Swedish historical figure, Charles XII has been used and abused by posterity. Long used as a source of national pride, the conceptions of Charles XII and the Swedish Age of Greatness today are varied and most often sober. A living interest in the king and his age ensures that he remains a part of Swedish cultural memory, not least activated through commercial uses of history in popular culture – such as comics.

ENLIGHTENMENT, NATURAL SCIENCE, AND GUSTAV III

Shortly before the peace treaty of Westphalia was signed in 1648, ending the Thirty Years' War, the Swedes occupied Prague, where in the comics the Phantom's ring turns up and is taken to Stockholm. This causes the fifth Phantom to go to Sweden, where he meets the famous philosopher René Descartes, who historically actually had come to Stockholm around this time at the request of Queen Kristina. In "Sekhmets stjärna" ("The Star of Sekhmet," 20/1998), Descartes plays a central role in the Phantom's attempt to regain his ring. His presence renders historical substance to the story. He discusses the refraction of light in prisms with the Phantom and makes trigonometric calculations on a blackboard, but his skills in optics and mathematics are soon

²⁶ FA 26/97, 35.

²⁷ FA 26/97, 34.

²⁸ E.g. Oredsson, "Karl XII"; "Karl XII och det svenska stormaktsvåldet"; Liljegren, *Karl XII*.



turned into mysticism and occultism. Still, science as a means of providing contemporary color is used in many stories. Even more so when we enter the Enlightenment.

In “Igeldammens hemlighet” (“The Secret of the Leech Pond,” 26/2008), natural science does exactly this. The reason for the tenth Phantom’s travel to Stockholm in 1751 is to deliver a stock of African plants to the famous natural scientist Carl Linnaeus. (The leech pond in the story’s title was kept by a pharmacist to produce leeches for medical treatments, but also, as it turns out, to drown the victims of his schemes and to hide their bodies.) There was also a great interest in natural curiosities at the time. In the comic, Linnaeus exposes an alleged hydra as a hoax. By doing this he acts just as he could be expected to – as an enlightened and rational scientist who does not believe in mythological creatures such as hydras.

Alchemy plays a part in the intrigue of “Guldmakaren” (“The Gold Maker,” 15/1999). When the modern-day Phantom is asked by his children what alchemy is, he explains that it is a “concoction” of science and mysticism, which, amongst other things, aims at transforming lesser metals into gold. The story is followed by a facts-page which deepens the thread on alchemy. These facts are most enlightening, but also difficult for a young reader to understand, since they are written with several old and difficult words.²⁹

The alchemy track turns into a plot involving counterfeit Russian currency and Swedish emergency money used in the 1788–90 war between Sweden and Russia. Here, King Gustav III (r. 1771–1792) is introduced into the story, which poses questions about his role in some illegal affairs with emergency money. Were these affairs the doings of the nobleman Adolf Fredrik Munck, or were they orchestrated by the king, acting behind the scenes with Munck as his tool and scapegoat? The story concludes that Gustav had decided to blame Munck and order his arrest. On the facts-page this question is developed further, stating that it probably was the king’s doing, but that we will never know for sure, which is also the opinion of historians today.³⁰ Here the complexity of history comes to the fore. The line between heroes and villains, most often so clear-cut in *Fantomen* (remember Capistrano), begin to blur.

Munck escapes due to the assassination of Gustav III, which is the historical background for “Kungen är död” (“The King is Dead,” 26/1987). This story too starts with the 12th Phantom delivering plants to Europe, this time to the Linnean Society of London, in 1792. There, he is drawn into the plot against Gustav III. He manages to stop a fictitious pretender to the throne of the house of Vasa from blowing up the entire Swedish elite gathered at a royal masquerade ball.

²⁹ FA 15/99, VI–VII.

³⁰ FA 15/99, VII. Landen, *Gustaf III*, 334–335.



However, he fails to stop the assassination of Gustav III, who was actually shot at a masquerade on March 16, 1792, and died from his wounds thirteen days later.

Gustav III is probably best known for his great interest in theatre. Accordingly, when he first appears in the story it is at his theatre at Drottningholm, a royal palace. There, Chief of police Liljensparre warns him that a conspiracy against his life is at hand, and tries to dissuade him from attending his upcoming masquerade ball. The king's reaction is to dismiss the threats and take Liljensparre for a dance on the theatre floor. "Enjoy life! Dance! Laugh!," Gustav tells Liljensparre.³¹ Not even a last minute warning letter, claiming that there will be an assassination attempt the same night, can stop the king from going to the ball. But now he gives a more rational explanation for turning a blind eye to the threats: He does not want the whole of Stockholm to think him a coward – a well-known utterance and one which could hold elements of both vanity and sound reasoning.

Next to Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XII, Gustav III is one of the Swedish rulers to whom historians have given most attention. Opinions have differed considerably. Many have adopted a critical attitude towards him. He is often subjected to emotional judgments – not least because he himself is rendered as an emotional character.³² Even influential modern biographies tend to be quite psychological.³³

Gustav III only appears briefly in "Kungen är död." There is no room for (or point in, for the sake of the story) providing a deeper or broader image of him. Accordingly, by placing him in his most famous environment – the theatre – giving him a distinctly light-hearted personality, a comprehensive and well-known part of Swedish cultural memory is activated: Gustav III as the "Theatre King." This simplified image of the king seems reasonable in a commercial use of history. Still, this does not have to contradict a scientific understanding of the king. On the contrary, the short appearance of Gustav III in "Kungen är död" fits very well with the interpretation put forward by his most recognized biographer, the historian Erik Lönnroth, that one consequence of Gustav's great interest in theatre was that he thought of himself as the director of his life as a king.³⁴

³¹ FA 26/87, 28.

³² Landen, *Gustaf III*, 372–395.

³³ As in Hennings, *Gustav III*. Herman Lindqvist devotes a whole book in his series on the history of Sweden to "the days of Gustav," giving an overall positive evaluation of the king. Gustav III's most recent biographer Leif Landen has a sober and objective tone, alternating between pointing out the king's strengths and weaknesses. Lindqvist, *Gustavs dagar*; Landen, *Gustaf III*, 404–421.

³⁴ Lönnroth, *Den stora rollen*.



IMAGE AND LANGUAGE

Considerable effort is made to get the historical details correct in the *Fantomen* drawings. Clothes, weapons, ships, cities, buildings, and artefacts of all kinds, are generally very true to the period. Famous historical figures such as Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, René Descartes, and Carl Linnaeus are portrait-like in their appearance.

Charles XII makes for an especially interesting case. Most of the contemporary paintings depict him dressed in a blue Carolinian uniform with yellow sleeves and details, his hair cut short. This is how Charles himself wanted to be depicted, and, for most of history, has been – looking as he did several years after the outbreak of the Great Northern War in 1700. This is by far the most widely and readily recognizable image of Charles XII. But this also means that it is nearly impossible to depict him in any other way today. Even when a modern-day portrait is supposed to depict the young crown prince or king in 1697 and 1699, it is the older, soldierly dressed Charles that is depicted, despite the existence of contemporary portraits that show him as an ununiformed young man wearing an allonge wig. Consequently, the familiar image of the somewhat older, uniformed, and short-haired Charles appears both in Johan Fredrik Höcker's famous painting "Slottsbranden i Stockholm 1697" (1862–66), supporting his grandmother on the castle stairs, and in the *Fantomen*-issues, hunting bear with Chris Walker in the woods of Kungsör in 1699. Interestingly, the author of "Tre Kronor brinner" and the following facts-page points out the great importance paintings such as Höcker's "Slottsbranden" have had, and how they have shaped Swedish understandings of the events they depict.³⁵ That is, Swedish cultural memory of Charles XII is so intimately associated with his soldierly appearance, that it is very difficult to think of or represent him in any other way.³⁶

³⁵ FA 26/97, 34.

³⁶ As a contrast to the concept of popular cultural memory, which according to Karin Kukkonen "works through imagination and appropriation rather than through research and historical exactitude" ("Popular Cultural Memory," 265.), the artists drawing *Fantomen* strives for and generally comes close to historical exactitude, although sometimes in a somewhat simplified manner. On Carolinian portrait ideals and especially the depiction of Charles XI and his generals, see Olin, *Det karolinska porträttet*.



Figure 2. Crown prince Charles (XII). Lindahl, Hans, *Fantomen nr 26: Tre Kronor brinner*, Egmont Serieförlaget AB, 1997, p. 26. © King Features Syndicate Inc./distr. Bulls/SEMIC.

Regarding uniforms, the artists have not entirely resisted the temptation to dress early 17th-century Swedish soldiers in the yellow and blue Carolinian uniform, introduced only in the late 17th century. The Stockholm city guard, for example, did not wear the uniform already in the 1650s, as they do in “Sekhmets stjärna.”³⁷ And normally, Swedish soldiers did not wear blue and yellow uniforms during the Thirty Years’ War, as they do in “Sekhmets stjärna” and “Dödens ring.”³⁸ Rather than providing a historically correct depiction, then, a more familiar, traditional memory of the period is reproduced.

Still, “Dödens ring” contains a more problematic use of images. Again, it is the depiction of Pater Capistrano, and this time, literally speaking, his image. Capistrano has a typical Mephistophelian look, very suitable for a man with a character as that described above. Often drawn with an evil grin or fanatic expression on his face, his clear-cut features are distinguished by a black beard ending in a sharp point on his chin. He wears a black coat, a black hood and a sword – just like

³⁷ FA 20/98, 23.

³⁸ FA 20/98, 4–5; FA 19/98, 24–25.



Pater Hieronymus in *Fältskärens berättelser*.³⁹ His evil look signals his evil character in an over-explicit way that is typical for the whole depiction of the figure Capistrano.

Pater Capistrano is interesting also for his frequent use of Latin phrases. We will return to him shortly. First, it needs to be noted that the historical stories in *Fantomen* often include an element of archaic language, obviously intended to strengthen the historical atmosphere. In “Min swenske fiende” (“My Swedish Enemy,” 9/2007), set in the Swedish fort Carolusborg on the West African Gold Coast in the 1650s, Chris, the future sixth Phantom, clashes with a Swedish lieutenant who calls him “fördömda bälghund” (roughly: “damned rascal”) – an insult known by hardly anyone today.⁴⁰ But by virtue of its unfamiliarity, it immediately signals an old, “historical” language (as does the archaic spelling “swenske” instead of the modern “svenske” in the story’s title). In “Vraket i Bengalibukten” Chris is presented as a “studiosus” in Uppsala.⁴¹ This was the word used at the time, but it would have been quite correct to speak of him as a “student.” A similar signal is sent by using the Latinized name Carolus for Charles XI and Charles XII, instead of the standardized modern Swedish spelling “Karl.”⁴²

While there are not many Swedish archaisms in “Dödens ring,” Pater Capistrano more than makes up for this with his frequent use of Latin. Often used in affect, Capistrano excels in Latin imperatives. He calls the Phantom’s Protestant travel company “Maledicti haeresi!” (“Damned heretics!”). “Abi a me, male spiritus!” (“Go away from me, you evil spirit!”), he says to the Phantom. “Vos comburat ignis sempiternus!” (“May you burn in the eternal fire!”), he exclaims to an officer, a phrase which is also uttered by the wounded Jesuit Hieronymus in *Fältskärens berättelser*.⁴³ Pater Hieronymus, then, the prime Jesuit stereotype of Swedish literature, is cited to the very word. Capistrano of course says the Lord’s Prayer in Latin, and he even speaks Latin to the soldiers in his raiding party before infiltrating Magdeburg: “Se quere me!” (“Follow me!”), he says. And yet again, to the sentries who stop him from leaving camp the night before the battle of Breitenfeld: “Noli me tangere!” (“Do not touch me!”).⁴⁴ Capistrano’s Latin outcries are probably not so much archaisms as stereotypes, adding another element to his foreign appearance, and thus activating the cultural memory of the national and religious arch-enemy the Jesuit.

³⁹ Topelius, *Fältskärens berättelser I*, 47, 67.

⁴⁰ FA 9/07, 9. SAOB, “bälghund.”

⁴¹ FA 2013, 10. The word “studiosus” is also used in “Dödens ring” for “scientist.” FA 19/98, 7.

⁴² FA 26/97, 7, 27. One story more than others makes use of such archaisms, viz. “Igeldammens hemlighet,” where we meet old Swedish words and sentences such as “luguber” (gruesome), “bortom stadens hank och stör” (outside the city gates), “dennes” (this month), and “hornpär” (the devil). FA 26/08, 9, 14, 23, 28. See SAOB.

⁴³ FA 17/98, 15, 28, 30. Topelius, *Fältskärens berättelser I*, 25.

⁴⁴ FA 17/98, 27; FA 19/98, 8, 23.



Figure 3. Capistrano and the Phantom. Leppänen, Kari, *Fantomen nr 17: Dödens ring del 1*, Egmont Serieförlaget AB, 1998, p. 27. © King Features Syndicate Inc./Bulls/EGMONT.



CONCLUSION

The past is important in *Fantomen*. Exciting fictitious intrigues are woven into real historical events. The historical atmosphere is reproduced through a high degree of accuracy in details, a use of archaic language, and references to well-known pictures of the past. Generally, events and rulers in early modern Swedish history are depicted in an objective and modern way, especially in the informative facts-pages. Here, problems discussed and opinions found in recent historiography are accounted for. Sometimes a more “streamlined” and traditional historiographical pattern is used in the stories, according to which, for example, Charles XII has to have a certain appearance and Gustav III must be the lazy Theatre King. A striking exception from the generally objective tone of the stories is the evil Jesuit Pater Capistrano in “Dödens ring,” who is delineated from a tenacious negative stereotype in Swedish literature, originating in nationalistic and religious sentiments.

In this article, writing and reading comics are recognized as acts of sharing memories, reflecting a cultural memory of the past. The *Fantomen*-stories become part of – and help form – Swedish cultural memory. With comics being a popular medium, the use of history in comics such as *Fantomen* is primarily commercial – it appeals to a great interest in history in modern society, which helps sell more copies of the comic. That is why the *Fantomen*-stories involve famous rulers such as Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, and Gustav III. In the case of Capistrano, the commercial use of history leads to the adoption of themes and characters found in earlier ideological and political uses of history. No wonder, then, that Klas-Göran Karlsson in his latest revision of his typology subordinates the commercial use to other uses.⁴⁵ Still, Capistrano is an exception. And, more important, there is a difference, I would argue, in using an historical theme with ideological and political purposes, or with the purpose of presenting an exciting character for commercial uses. If the purpose – that is, what need the specific use of history answers to – is the important factor, then, the commercial use deserves to be a category of its own in Karlsson’s useful typology of the uses of history.

A consciously applied commercial use of history has contributed to the successes of *Fantomen* in recent decades. The comics’ creators have effectively addressed a common interest in history in modern-day Sweden and, more important, by doing so, they have also helped enhance this interest in history. I hope that the Phantom, the Ghost Who Walks, continues to go north, in the past and in the future.

⁴⁵ Karlsson, “Historia, historiedidaktik och historiebruk,” 72, 78. Zander also makes the commercial use a subordinate category, in Zander, *Fornstora dagar*, 57.



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THE BODY, DESPAIR, AND HERO
WORSHIP – A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
THE INFLUENCE OF NORSE MYTHOLOGY
IN *ATTACK ON TITAN*

by Asuka Yamazaki





INTRODUCTION

The popular Japanese comic *Attack on Titan* (進撃の巨人 *Shingeki no Kyojin*), written and illustrated by Hajime Isayama (諫山創), began to appear serially in the monthly comic magazine *Bessatsu Shōnen Magazine* (別冊少年マガジン) in October 2009.¹ At this time, Japan was suffering from worsening economic conditions due to the global financial crisis, which brought about a sense of political, economic, and social stagnation, as well as a shared pessimistic view on life among its people.

In a period when the Japanese people already shared a sense of insecurity and anxiety about the future, their inner and outer lives completely collapsed with the shock of the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011. More than 18,000 people died in this powerful earthquake, which also brought about unprecedented catastrophe in the form of a tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It was an apocalyptic crisis on a scale the modern Japanese people had not experienced since the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and they shared a feeling of loss and hopelessness due not only to the delayed reconstruction of the disaster area, but also a collective post-disaster trauma.²

Simultaneously with these disasters, *Attack on Titan* had been intensifying its view of the apocalyptic and mythological world, and became increasingly popular after an animated TV show based on it premiered in 2013. The series has sold over forty million copies in just five years³ and as of 2014 it has been translated into numerous European and Asian languages, rising to a worldwide popularity that crosses generational and national boundaries. It has found a large number of dedicated readers, especially in the United States, after partnering with the comics publisher Marvel Comics, which has released every translation of the series almost concurrently with the Japanese original.⁴

The worldview of *Attack on Titan* is closely linked to a popular contemporary genre of Japanese fiction called *seikaikei* (世界系 or セカイ系), which was a common trend in the second half of the 1990s through the early 2000s in particular. *Seikaikei* combines close social relationships with the apocalyptic and mythological imaginations of young people who embody the postmodernized

¹ Isayama, *Attack on Titan*. References to the series are abbreviated *AT*.

² Shiozaki, *Futtukou (Sagai)*, i–iv, 53–194.

³ Isayama, “First Akira Oodera Interview,” 16.

⁴ Itsuko, “Attack on Avengers.”



individual and a desolate society.⁵ It has become a social phenomenon that spans different media, including animation, comics, light novels, video games, and websites. The subculture scholar Ken Maejima points out that this phenomenon has its roots in the comic (1994–2013) and animation (1995–1996) *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (新世紀エヴァンゲリオン), which gained long-term popularity in Japan and inspired a great number of other works.⁶ According to scholar of modern Japanese literature Motoko Tanaka, *seikaikei* works are typically framed by an apocalyptic crisis, or even a threat to the entire universe.⁷ However, these large-scale conflicts are intertwined with the actions, loves, and crises of the male protagonist and heroine, without any intermediary community or social organization.⁸

Since *Attack on Titan* describes the crisis of humanity's potential imminent annihilation, this dark apocalyptic fantasy can be considered a *seikaikei* comic. Isayama himself has confirmed in an interview that not only did he once have a desire to see the world destroyed, but also that he was addicted to *Evangelion's* view of the robotization of the modern world and unique mode of expression.⁹ However, *Attack on Titan* takes place not in the modern world, but in an anonymous European country in the Middle Ages, and presents a more than century long battle between the human race and the Titans, whose ruthless hunting and devouring of human beings has forced the last remnants of humanity into a fortress surrounded by three layers of enormous, high walls.

In this comic, many mythological motifs adapted from Norse mythology play very important roles in terms of literary strategy, lending a mythological and militant tone to the apocalyptic crisis, despite the Japanese word “巨人” (*kyojin*) being translated as the Greek term “Titan,” rather than the more appropriate “giant.” Since European mythology, novels, and movies have had a strong influence on this work,¹⁰ this article studies the influence of Norse mythology. Literary theorist Lubomir Doležel has studied the subject of influence as intertextuality, or the multiple, bidirectional relationships between texts that allow them to mutually illuminate one another.¹¹

⁵ On *seikaikei*, cf. Maejima, *Sekaikei Toha Nanika*, 27; Tanaka, “Apocalyptic Imagination.”

⁶ Maejima's study investigates the *seikaikei* and post-*seikaikei* genres, and how the animation *Evangelion* has influenced fans and other works, and changed the entire business model for these genres. Cf. Maejima, *Sekaikei Toha Nanika*, 13.

⁷ Tanaka, “Apocalyptic Imagination.”

⁸ Tanaka, “Apocalyptic Imagination.”

⁹ Isayama, “Tamaki Saito Interview,” 121, 123.

¹⁰ Isayama, *Outside Kou*, 22f.; “Daisuke Tanaka Interview.”

¹¹ Lubomír, *Heterocosmica*, 199–202.



In the sharing of intertextual meaning, fictional worlds enrich literary semantics in a way that transcends their chronological order. This study uses such an intertextual analytical method, based on mythological research, to examine the literary structure and components of *Attack on Titan*. It also investigates how certain Norse mythemes function in popular modern Japanese comics. Because the different ideological and cultural realms of Northern Europe and Japan are connected through this mythology, this study examines their literary synchronicity and continuity. From an analytic standpoint, it seeks to extract common phenomena from each source and to understand their common features and meanings. In this intertextual approach, the aesthetic and philosophical views of modern mythological studies are used to assist examination of *Attack on Titan*'s adaptation of Norse mythology.

According to archaeologist Lotte Hedeager, material evidence suggests that Norse mythology can be traced at least back to the fourth century, and that it prospered until the thirteenth century.¹² This mythology not only held religious and literary dominance across Scandinavia, but also had a profound influence on the vast geographic and cultural arena of the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon people after the Viking expansion.¹³ These Old Norse tales left us with much, including a grand imagery of nature, majestic and attractive characters, events beyond our imagination, and abundant poetic topoi or narrative models. As is well known, these fascinating cultural topoi can be seen in many famous literary works, operas, and works of art up to the present day. Norse mythology also contains a cosmic worldview and addresses the mystical theme of the origin and end of the world; *Attack on Titan* transplants the grand worldview of these noble old tales into its narrative background, in order to adopt a grand, many-layered, and universal perspective on the apocalypse. This results in a setting beyond time and space, and a global poetic or artistic quality. By importing this ancient and fertile fantasy, the mythological elements of the twenty-first-century comic and those of the old tales become unified. Thus, we can investigate how the contemplative experience of *Attack on Titan* brings the mythological violence of the modern era to light.

First, this paper will attempt to analyze the intertextual relation between *Attack on Titan* and the Norse stories about giants, in order to clarify the adaptation and modification of the ancient tales for the present day. It will investigate similar hierarchical structures between the Titans and giants, which take on a special significance in the natural order depicted by the comic. Focusing on the motif of the wall, this article demonstrates the striking disparity between the original and

¹² Hedeager, *Iron Age Myth and Materiality*, 1–3.

¹³ Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology*, 8–26. Mai Elisabeth Berg (“Myth or Poetry,” 35) suggests that mythological poems, as literature, could be written products of the eleventh century. Cf. Clunies Ross, “Old Norse Mythology.”



modern wall, and considers how the protagonist, Eren, who is representative of a contemporary mindset and has the cursed ability to transform into a Titan, is aware of society's despair and hopelessness. Finally, the warrior cult of old tales and the militant worldviews of the comic will be taken into full account in order to highlight the differences between the texts. Because the violent and unforgiving world of Norse mythology has had a remarkable impact on *Attack on Titan*, it is important to investigate how the comic series strengthens its storytelling framework through different components such as hero worship and images of the dismembered body.

THE GIANT LEGEND: HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE AND IDENTITY CRISIS

Focused on a more than century long battle between human beings and Titans, *Attack on Titan* depicts a minimized community of humans, the last in the world, living in a city surrounded by high walls. The city is structured according to a view of primitive society as consisting of three basic populations: rulers who govern the city; warriors who fight the Titans; and citizens who produce food or machinery. During its intense and violent war with the Titans, the human population has already been reduced and is on the verge of being annihilated. The origin of the Titans and the reason for their existence, including why they eat people, remains a mystery to the humans. However, according to an ancient document handed down by humans as historical memory, the existence of Titans who ate human beings was already confirmed in ancient times.¹⁴ Based on this characterization of Titans, the tale displays a supernatural and mythological worldview from the beginning. *Attack on Titan* features the common mythological trope of a violent world in which chaos, disorder, and horror are dominant, set against the backdrop of humanity's struggle to exist. This crisis is brought on by the bloodthirsty Titans, who are swayed by their primitive emotions.

Attack on Titan's mythological imagination can be connected to Norse mythology. According to *Poetic Edda* and *Prosa Edda*, the world was created and is supported by the huge world tree "Yggdrasil," whose roots unify all of the nine worlds. These worlds are further divided into a three-layer structure: there is the world of gods, the Aesir, or fairies; the world of giants and human beings; and the underground world, inhabited by monsters and dwarves.¹⁵ In the second world, according to both *Eddas* and the *Norse Sagas*, not only do gods and giants continuously carry on their grand battle for world domination on a cosmic scale, but human beings join the

¹⁴ AT, vol. 1, 55.

¹⁵ Holander, *The Poetic Edda*, 2–13; Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 11–16.



battle on the invitation of the father of gods, Odin.¹⁶ In Old Norse tales, human beings repeatedly attack the huge creatures as they struggle to exist and, in some cases, to find honorable deaths in battle.¹⁷ In this sense, Norse mythology and *Attack on Titan* share a dynamic structure that creates a constant state of war between two different creatures.

In addition to the similar figures of giants and Titans, *Attack on Titan* also features characters that correspond to specific characters in the *Eddas*. The most significant of them is a Titan called Ymir. At first, she appears as a young female human soldier who battles Titans, as does the hero, Eren, and others. Ymir is a mysterious person of unknown background who adores her young female friend, a descendant of a noble human family named Christa. Ymir always accompanies Christa as if they were one flesh, and keeps her out of harm's way. Ymir is depicted as almost gender-neutral and featureless. However, the tenth volume shows that she has adopted a human appearance and hidden her identity, until she transforms into a Titan and reveals her true self.¹⁸ With this power of transformation, Ymir belongs to those who are supernatural or mythological in nature and can change into immortal Titans, like Eren and several others.¹⁹ Ymir's Titan identity is ambiguous, as shown when she protects humans from other Titans, who are defined by their cruelty.

It can be helpful with regard to Ymir's supernatural and binary presence to consider psychoanalyst Carl Jung's analysis of mythological motifs, according to which the archetype of the young hero and savior who obtains mythological transcendence should be recognized as a hybrid of god and human.²⁰ Ymir is also portrayed not only as a transcendent, heterogeneous being, with powers bestowed by human and Titan genes, but also as a middle person who transcends the boundary between life and death. However, thanks to her biological ambiguity, she is more impersonal and monstrous than Eren and becomes a key plot figure, because she seems to know the Titan's mysterious origin.

Ymir the Titan can be directly connected to an important creature in Norse mythology: the giant Ymir. According to a description of the origin of the world in *Völuspá* in the *Poetic Edda* and in

¹⁶ See, for example *Grettis saga*, chapter 66, which depicts the fighting prowess of the great hero Grettir, who defeated a giant in a cave (Jónsson, "Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar," 267f.) and *Kormáks saga*, chapter 27, which depicts the hero Kormák, who fell in furious battle against a giant in Scotland (Sveinsson, "Kormáks Saga," 99).

¹⁷ Of course, Greek mythology also has a well-known giant-episode known as Gigantomakhia, wherein gods and Titans, both supernatural beings, fight a grand battle, but this is not a battle between human beings and Titans or giants. *Attack on Titan* is therefore closer to the view of Norse mythology.

¹⁸ *AT*, vol. 10, 90f.

¹⁹ *AT*, vol. 3, 152.

²⁰ Jung, "Der Begriff Des Kollektiven Unbewußten," 58.



“Gylfaginning” in the *Prose Edda*, the earth was created from chaos and emptiness, before the giant Ymir was born as a result of a meeting between “icy rime and warm wind”. “Gylfaginning,” stanza 5, reads as follows: “The likeness of a man appeared and he was named Ymir. The frost giants call him Aurgelmir, and from him come the clans of the frost-giants.”²¹ The Germanist Rudolf Simek and scholar of medieval Scandinavia John Lindow regard Ymir as a proto-giant and progenitor of the race of giants.²² This archetypical giant is recognized as having an indeterminate gender, being both male and female,²³ and it is to Ymir, from whom they were born, that all giants trace their origin. However, Ymir is murdered by the first gods, who create the world, including the ground, sky, mountains, and clouds, from his corpse.²⁴

²¹ Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 13f. Snorri also quotes the Shorter *Völuspá*, which says: “All the seeresses are / from Vidolf, / all the wizards / from Vilmeid, / but the sorcerers are / from Svarthofdi / and all the giants / come from Ymir” (p. 14).

²² Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 377; Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 323.

²³ Etymologically, his name closely corresponds to the Old Norse words for “mixed” and “hermaphrodite being,” which share an origin with the Sanskrit word “yama,” or Vedic “yima,” which mean something like “doubled,” and with the Latin word “geminus,” or Middle Irish “gemuin,” which mean “twin,” from the Indo-Germanic root “-iemo,” meaning “twin” or “hermaphrodite.” Cf. Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 377; Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 325; Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology*, 236.

²⁴ Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 16f.



Fig. 1. Isayama, Hajime, *Attack on Titan* 5, 13. © Hajime Isayama and Kodansha 2011.



The structure of *Attack on Titan* is based on a similar hierarchical and generational structure as that of the race of giants in Norse mythology, of which the original, androgynous Titan, Ymir, is at the top. In the comic's fifth volume, a female soldier accidentally encounters a Titan, who mistakes her for Ymir and says "I'm...Ymir's...people....," as if she were his ruler (fig. 1). The Titan kneels down before her and shows his dutiful respect, "You are... miss Ymir..." He then expresses his appreciation to her for coming to him.²⁵ Here, it is revealed that not only do Titans have the ability to communicate, but also, through the obedience of this confused giant who worships her, that Ymir is regarded as an authoritative and sacred being who holds power over other Titans.²⁶ Based on religious historian Catharina Raudvere's analysis of how rituals frame specific social and ritualistic positions in *Völuspá*,²⁷ we can here see a mythological and primitive hierarchy of supernatural beings, according to which the world is governed by a violent order. In *Attack on Titan*, excluded from this invisible, natural order of the Titans, human beings are seized by a sense of incompetence and inability to deal with their tragic situation.

Like those of giants and humans in Norse mythology, the habitats of Titans and humans in *Attack on Titan* are separated, in order to create the structure for dynamic racial confrontations between them and to recall the mythological cycle of violence. However, in Norse mythology, the identities of main figures like Ymir, Odin, or Thor do not change, because these personages are defined as archetypes and embodiments of universal consciousness, with the exception of Loki, who has the ability to change shape and identity.²⁸ The Icelandic scholar Kirsten Hastrup calls them "cultural heroes" in the cosmological view of the Old Norse world.²⁹ In comparison, in *Attack on Titan*, modern figures such as Eren and Ymir, who have the power to cross-racially transform into Titans, suffer from a distorted identity that is somewhere between human and monstrous creature. This is demonstrated in the scene wherein Eren is bewildered and cannot reply when a commander asks: "What is your true identity? Human or Titan?"³⁰

Eren faces personal disintegration due to his transformation into a Titan, through which he becomes unified with an enormous being. In fact, volume three reveals that Eren's human body

²⁵ *AT*, vol. 5, 12–14. All *Attack on Titan* translations in this article are the author's.

²⁶ As of volume fifteen, there have been no further revelations about Ymir, her background, her double identity, or her position as a high-ranking Titan. However, it has been disclosed that there is a country of Titans somewhere in the world, to which she is heading with her two companions, who are also hybrid beings. *AT*, vol. 12, 186–189.

²⁷ Raudvere, "Fictive Rituals," 104.

²⁸ According to Davidson (*Gods and Myths*, 176–178), Loki has an ambiguous character and is connected with the darker elements in the Norse mythical world.

²⁹ Hastrup, "Den Ord nordiske Verden."

³⁰ *AT*, vol. 3, 48.



remains intact inside of his Titan body when he transforms.³¹ This unification is similar to the central characters in *Evangelion*, who must synchronize with gigantic robots in order to operate them. Eren's identification with such huge robot-like but living creatures and his possession of a cursed body indicates his temporary death as a human, or the seeming death of his mind, which creates his ambivalent consciousness. In this crossing of racial boundaries, we can recognize both the demolition of a human-Titan dualism and the literary deconstruction of the giants in Norse mythology. However, this comes at the cost of Eren's individuality, ordinariness, and mortality. We can thus say that *Attack on Titan's* dark apocalyptic fantasy is profoundly constituted by individual tragedy and a modern mythological violence that has cursed the protagonist Eren.

THE MOTIF OF THE WALL: EREN'S SKEPTICISM TOWARDS HIS SECURE WORLD

We can also examine *Attack on Titan's* references to Norse mythology in the motif of the wall. In the comics, the firm walls surrounding the humans' city were erected to protect it against a Titan invasion. The method of the walls' construction is shrouded in mystery for the population, as is the identity of its builders. According to modern German literature scholar Stefanie Stockhorst's interpretation, the wall in European literature symbolizes secure defense against a foreign enemy through its function of separation.³² However, the meanings of the enormous walls in *Attack on Titan* are multiple and contradictory.

Certainly, the defensive fortress ensures human safety from the Titans by separating them from the outside world of death, where humans are fully exposed to danger. At the same time, it puts them in a difficult situation as 家畜 (*kachiku*), the Japanese word for *livestock*. This is a key concept for the comic's description of the hopelessness and despair of the human race, which, as livestock for the Titans, they experience in confronting the possibility of being slaughtered in their cramped, walled-in city. Eren, in particular, experiences this depression. When asked by a friend why he volunteers for the army, he pessimistically answers that "we can make a living, if we only eat and sleep, but we cannot escape the wall during our lives.... So....then...aren't we just like livestock...?"³³ But Eren dreams of leaving the walls and seeing the outer world.³⁴ According to

³¹ *AT*, vol. 3, 32–35.

³² Stockhorst, "Mauer."

³³ *AT*, vol. 1, 24.



“The Book of the Outside World,” secretly possessed by Eren’s friend Armin, fantastic scenery, including a boundless ocean, fire water, lands of ice, and sand-covered snowfields, are spread throughout the outer world.³⁵ It seems that these landscapes are transplanted from the imaginative and mysterious descriptions in *Gylfaginning* stanza 5, in the *Prose Edda*. Here, a king describes the archaic landscape existing before mankind, where such contradictory elements as “icy rime and warm wind” exist as components for creating life.³⁶

In *Attack on Titan*, to talk about the walls in everyday life or to investigate their secrets is a serious taboo, since freedom of speech has been taken away by the government in order to keep the walls’ origins a complete mystery. If anyone violates the taboo, they are quietly erased. Moreover, there is a religious group that worships the walls and believes they are three divine goddesses, as if the walls have a supernatural power.³⁷ This fanatic group objects to both strengthening the walls and constructing an underground passage beneath them. This religious faith in the wall is reminiscent of fetishism in mythology or in ancient societies.³⁸ Moreover, this type of fetishism can be seen also in the modern era, as for example the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is seen as a religious object in Judaism. In such holy things, people have found eternal life and what is believed to be a transcendental power. Consequently, we can claim that the walls in *Attack on Titan* are similarly fetishized, in that they are treated as sacred and significant architecture, and used as both emotional and practical tools by the people dependent on them. They have isolated humans, who as a result are desperately hanging in a balance between life and death. In this regard, the wall resembles a graveyard, with the traditional connotation of separation between this world and the beyond.³⁹

³⁴ There is a personal dimension to this characterization. In the context of Eren’s desire to escape, the motif of the wall, the author Isayama has said, reflects his childhood longing to escape the countryside for the city. Isayama, “Onsen Shukuhaku Shisetsu ‘Hibiki No Sato.’”

³⁵ *AT*, vol. 1, 83f.; vol. 4, 12.

³⁶ Sturluson, *Prose Edda*, 13–14.

³⁷ *AT*, vol. 8, 100f.

³⁸ Cf. Kohl, *Die Macht Der Dinge*, 13–115.

³⁹ Stockhorst, “Mauer.”

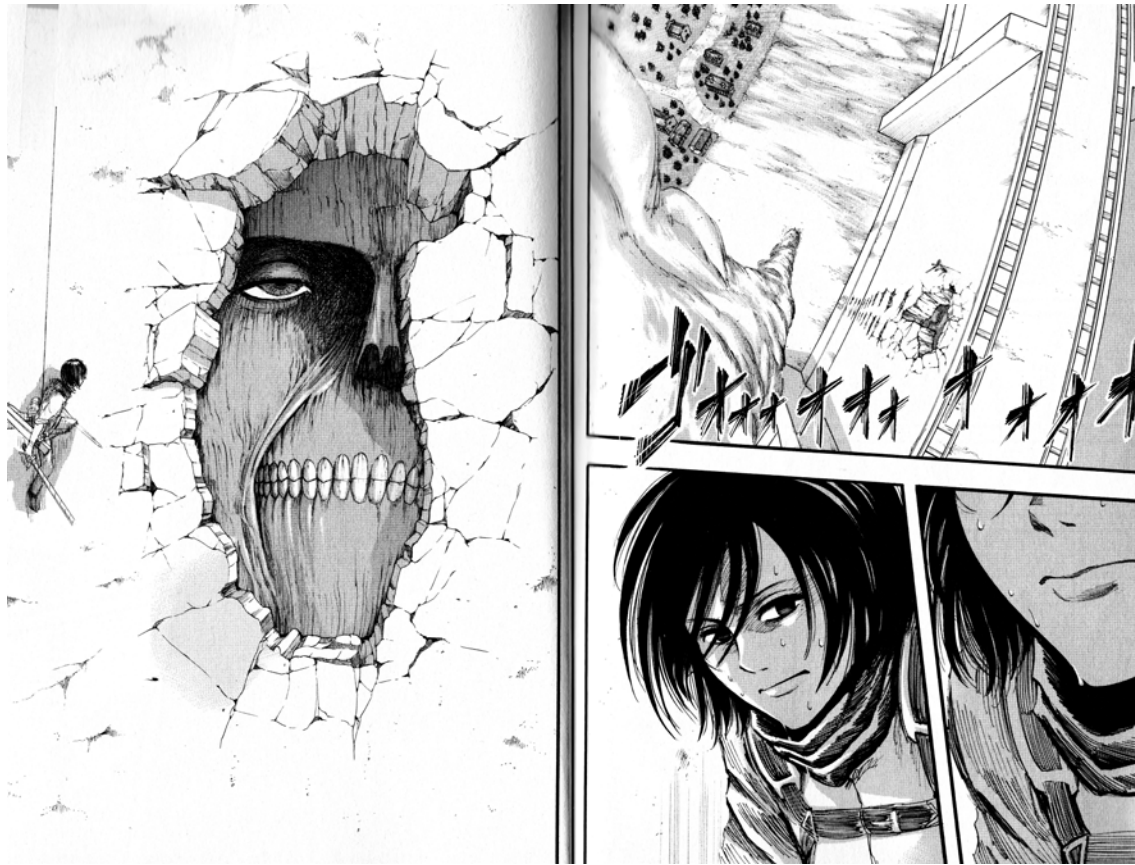


Fig. 2. Isayama, Hajime, *Attack on Titan*, 8, 150. © Hajime Isayama and Kodansha 2012.

However, the large eye of a Titan can be seen inside one of the huge walls (fig. 2).⁴⁰ Because this enormous creature inside the wall is still alive and can only move when exposed to sunlight, the people have to cover the eye with a curtain. This discovery has a large impact on the reader, since the Titan buried inside suggests that the walls might have been built from Titans' live bodies. Moreover, volume sixteen suggests that an unknown Titan with a special power might have built the three, huge, concentric walls a hundred years before the start of the story, in order to protect humans from other Titans, and then manipulated the collective memory of humanity to forget.⁴¹ The following quotation presents the words of a man descended from a royal human family who alone knows a closely guarded secret about the Titans:

This cave was built by a certain Titan's power a hundred years ago. The three-layered wall was also built by that powerful creature. By building the huge wall, that Titan protected human beings from other Titans. This was not the only benefit of the Titan. He wished that

⁴⁰ *AT*, vol. 8, 149–156.

⁴¹ *AT*, vol. 16, 86f.



the human survivors should live peacefully and so he affected people's hearts and manipulated their memory.⁴²

As this scene shows, humanity is both secretly controlled and forbidden from knowing the history of the Titans or of the world prior to the past century. There is a similar motif of constructing enormous walls in the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*.⁴³ According to *Völuspá*, stanza 4, and *Grimnismál*, stanza 42, Búrr, ancestor of the gods, made a huge wall to defend human beings from the giants. This wall consisted of the eyelashes of Ymir, the first living creature.⁴⁴ The humans lived inside this firm wall, Miðgarðr, which they also used as a fortress.

Moreover, a grand war for survival such as that between humans and Titans, a battle over living space and hegemony over the new world, symbolizes confrontation between nature and civilization. This decisive mythological structure involving a wall in both *Eddas* is shared with *Attack on Titan*. However, we here see a paradoxical phenomenon: although human beings are constantly menaced by Titans or giants and try to defend against this threat, they live in an area surrounded by high walls, whose building materials were taken from the body of antagonistic nature itself. We can interpret this primitive use of nature by humanity, especially in Norse mythology, as the establishment of the first kind of economic and technological system, and as a shift from barbaric to civilized thought. On this point, in both *Eddas*, the human beings benefited significantly from the wall, Miðgarðr. Thanks to their defensive barrier, humanity was able to possess “protected land”⁴⁵ and managed to change a barren land into a “green land.”⁴⁶

In comparison to the wall in Norse mythology, the city walls of *Attack on Titan* have a similar function as a sanctuary, but they also symbolize a cage or prison, as shown by Eren's sense of being unfree “livestock.” We can interpret this impression as the result of a skeptical philosophical attitude towards “being protected,” which directly connects to the humans' state of hopelessness and despair. In contrast to the ancient Norse tales in which there is no inconsistency in the connotation of the wall, *Attack on Titan* reflects Eren's refined critical and independent thinking, which leads him to develop a skeptical attitude towards his immediate environment — going beyond the limited self-consciousness of a typical *seikaikei* protagonist — that comes to be mixed into the definition of the wall.

⁴² AT, vol. 16, 96f.

⁴³ See Lindow, *Norse Mythology*, 228f.; Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology*, 234–238.

⁴⁴ Holander, *The Poetic Edda*, 2.

⁴⁵ Page, *Norse Myths*, 58.

⁴⁶ Pálsson, *Odinism and Eddas*, 144.



The motif of the wall in *Attack on Titan*'s dark fantasy, then, is connected not only to Norse mythology but also to the reality of the twenty-first century. We can consider this second connection to be based on the postmodern individual's experience of emptiness in the face of such large-scale threats as war, nuclear disaster, terrorism, or natural catastrophe. Rather than face the imaginative and total apocalypse predicted by Norse mythology, we share a fragile, dystopian, everyday global reality, in which regions can be suddenly seized through military force or violently destroyed; we live in an uncertain reality with dimming prospects. Moreover, Isayama himself possesses such a dystopian, apocalyptic vision: "There is a common thinking, in which people feel the world is secure, but suddenly one day, they notice that it is not safe."⁴⁷

This modern cultural pessimism and epistemological skepticism towards the security of the world is adopted by *Attack on Titan*, as Eren is suspicious of both the walls, one of the most important pieces of Norse mythology, and of the universe of human beings. The introduction of critical thinking into the violent mythological structure of *Attack on Titan* is a countermeasure against the logic of primitive violence, inherent in most mythology. Surely, this skepticism towards the wall is a deconstruction of mythology.

THE MILITANT WORLDVIEW AND SELF-SACRIFICIAL SOLDIERS

The story in *Attack on Titan* involves an archaic view of society as consisting of such professions as ruler, warrior, and citizen. Thanks to this well-known grouping pattern, it is easy for readers of *Attack on Titan* to understand the classic function of the characters and to place themselves in the story.⁴⁸ The most active citizens are the warriors that play a central role in the battles with Titans. However, in most cases, the soldiers become innocent victims preyed on by the huge creatures. The comic devotes many pages to cruel and miserable battle scenes that give the reader an impression of extreme barbarism.⁴⁹ According to author Isayama, his interest in martial arts is especially reflected in battle scenes against the Titans.⁵⁰

Below, the following components of *Attack on Titan*'s militant worldview will be investigated: soldiers' hero worship; self-sacrifice; and strong loyalty. These are also important components in

⁴⁷ Isayama, "Second Akira Oodera Interview," 55. Author's translation.

⁴⁸ This structure and aspect of society could also be seen as reflecting Plato's views of the ideal city in Plato, *Republic*, 44ff.

⁴⁹ Due to these depictions of bloody, shocking violence, the animated adaptation of the comic book was broadcast in the late evening.

⁵⁰ Isayama, *Outside Kou*, 29.



Norse mythology, and create complex narrative content, which promotes the militant imagination of readers. In *Attack on Titan*, young soldiers join the army in childhood in order to prepare for the battle against the Titans and receive strict training as warriors. Meanwhile, they show absolute loyalty to the organization and learn a military salute in which they put their right hand on their heart. This gesture is a statement about oneself: "I publicly devote my heart."⁵¹ This expression, "devote my heart," is a powerful metaphor for human sacrifice in battle. It means that one's life will be given up for the organization. For example, when a senior officer appeals for complete obedience from his troops, he shouts as follows: "Gentlemen, sacrifice your life and fight against the threat of Titans! Devote your heart!!"⁵²

This powerful salute and oath is repeated many times when soldiers are compelled to express their loyalty.⁵³ Here, we can clearly recognize a militant political ideology related to the enthusiastic worship of death and a strong awareness that soldiers are predestined to become victims of war. Such a vehement depiction of soldier's loyalty, daring to risk their "hearts," their own lives, refers to mythological ritual. In archaic societies, the idea of a murderous human sacrifice in the context of "devoting the heart" was carried out, above all, with prisoners, and in ritualistic fashion.⁵⁴

On this point, we must examine the similar ritual in which a heart is offered as sacrifice to a mystical being or victor in Norse mythology. In *Eiríks Saga rauða*, for example, Thorkell was the chief of wealthy farmlands, to which he invited the prophetess Thorbjorg so she could divine his destiny and the future of his lands. At the ritualistic dinner for her on that day, Thorkell had his servant cook the hearts of all manner of living creatures.⁵⁵ We can here see the ritualistic experience of offering hearts to a transcendent being.

According to mythologist H.R. Ellis Davidson, in the Norse heroic poetry and sagas, not only are animals, but also human victims, sacrificed after victory in battle in a ritual associated with the

⁵¹ *AT*, vol. 4, 61.

⁵² *AT*, vol. 1, 92.

⁵³ In another case, when people begin to realize that Eren is a Titan, they fear him, and so the army tries to kill him. The weakest soldier, Armin, gives a salute and takes a striking oath in military fashion. He shouts that Eren is not an enemy of humans and that he does not attack them, and says: "I, as a soldier, took an oath to devote my heart to the reconstruction of human life!! If I follow my belief, I am satisfied with ending my life for it!!" (*AT*, vol. 3, 107).

⁵⁴ As Georges Bataille's famous study *La Part maudite* shows, for example, in ancient Aztec society, people performed a religious ritual in which prisoners' hearts were extracted and devoted to the sun god. See Bataille, "La Limite de L'utile (Fragments D'une Version Abandonnée de 'La Part Maudite')," 193f.

⁵⁵ Sveinsson, "Eiríks Saga Rauða," 175.



cult of Odin.⁵⁶ Especially in the *Völsunga Saga*, there are many depictions of a hero's sacrifice or the glorious dead in war being offered to Odin, the patron of warriors, as well as depictions of enemies and prisoners having their hearts extracted, all of which belong to a militant conception of the world. Take, as an example, the hero Sigurd who slew the dragon Fáfnir, his most powerful supernatural enemy, and ate his heart, and in this way received mystical power.⁵⁷ Davidson emphasizes that, from the view of mythological typology, the hero Sigurd entered into the supernatural world of ravens and Valkyries, where defeat and victory are predestined.⁵⁸ We can consider this brutal action, "heart extraction," to be his initiation into great skill. As this event indicates, the hearts of losers in battle are thought of as holy spoils for the winner.

It is significant that an episode similar to this ritual occurs in *Attack on Titan's* backstory for the heroine Mikasa, Eren's friend, who was once an ordinary girl and citizen. However, one day, when her family was murdered before her eyes by a band of criminals, she suddenly heard her heart beating and her inner voice tell her to "Fight!" She was driven to stab one of her assailants through the heart from behind with a knife, killing him.⁵⁹ At this moment, Mikasa awoke to her fighter's consciousness and obtained a new identity as a warrior of great skill. The cruel action in this scene is staged as a brutal ceremony, her initiation as a fighter. As in various mythologies, the severed heart of the enemy here symbolizes the side of the executioner: conquest, triumph, and rebirth.

Aside from such sacrifices of prisoners or enemies, the idea of ceremonial self-sacrifice, "devoting the heart," is notable in *Attack on Titan*. This ritualistic experience functions to express a militant view of the world, and a remarkable enthusiasm for fighting and those killed in war. In the comic, the strong loyalty of the soldier who salutes makes his troop sacred, a holy group, in which soldiers are free of the fear of death. This is like the slain fighters, "einherjar," selected for Valhalla in both *Eddas*, where they continue to battle each day, and are restored to life in the evening to fight anew the next morning.⁶⁰ This is described in a scene in *Vafþrúðnir*, stanza 41, in which the giant Vafþrúðnir says: "All the einherjar in Othin's garth slay each other with swords: fighting they fall, then fare from battle and drain goblets together."⁶¹ Or we can consider the Scandinavian "berserks" of many Sagas, like *Hrafnsmál* or *Ynglinga Saga*. The berserks are the fearless warriors

⁵⁶ Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, 45–68.

⁵⁷ Finch, *Volsunga Saga*, 33f.

⁵⁸ Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, 86.

⁵⁹ *AT*, vol. 2, 62f.

⁶⁰ Davidson, *Gods and Myths*, 149–153.

⁶¹ Holander, *The Poetic Edda*, 49.



of Odin, who entered states of hyper ecstasy that made them forget about the possibility of death and injury in battle. In Simek's investigation of the "dedication to Odin" in Old Norse literature, it is almost a stereotypical feature of heroic poetry that Odin protects his warriors in battle and gives them victory, and that they are then finally dedicated to him.⁶² Also, Davidson points out that these dedicated warriors spent their lives in the service of Odin.⁶³ Keeping in mind such warriors devoting their lives to the war god and overcoming fear of death, we can understand the militant political system of heroic self-sacrifice that drives soldiers to battle Titans. Such a metaphor, based on the religious and militant rituals of the age of myth, is certainly an emotional and ideological instrument with which the soldiers resist the mythological violence brought about by the supernatural existence of Titans.

However, in the face of this extraordinary situation, in which many anonymous soldiers appear one after another and soon fall victim to hordes of bloodthirsty Titans, the reconnaissance troop captain, Levi, speaks to his companions pessimistically: "What do you think you will be doing tomorrow? Do you think that you will eat a meal tomorrow also? [...] Will the fellows... who are next to you live tomorrow too? I don't think so."⁶⁴ Enough has been said about the soldiers' involvement in this violent cycle, wherein humans are constantly faced with barbarous and impersonal annihilation. Through this figuration, the comic thematizes the uncontrollable cycle of death, in which the excessive physical violence of human bodies being consumed by Titans is considered normal and natural.

The circular structure of mythological violence developed in *Attack on Titan* involves another motif: the dismemberment of the body. First of all, the maimed body is used in this comic as a tragic metonymy suggestive of both human sacrifice and the misery of war. In the first chapter, this phenomenon can already be recognized in the appearance of an arm belonging to a soldier who has fallen in battle.⁶⁵ In this small dead object, a compressed metonymy for the human body, which the soldier's commander has brought to the soldier's mother, she finds both an identification of her son and a sense of loss. We can here see *Attack on Titan's* somber atmosphere, which is partly built on such representations of the maimed and imperfect body, through which the reader experiences a sense of death and despair.

⁶² Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*, 59.

⁶³ Davidson, *Myths and Symbols*, 80.

⁶⁴ AT, vol. 14, 70f.

⁶⁵ AT, vol. 1, 30f.



Regarding this symbolic language of the dismembered body, it is worth noting that in *Attack on Titan*, the leader of the reconnaissance troop and military strategist, Erwin, has his right arm bitten off in battle against a Titan.⁶⁶ This severe injury to a hero means not only the loss of his combat abilities, but also a shock to his identity, his *raison d'être*. This is revealed in the conversation between him and the captain Levi, in which Levi expresses his regret over the event, and Erwin answers: "Can you imagine how many hundreds of people I have allowed to be eaten by Titans up until now? I blame myself, and it is completely insufficient that I lost only one arm. In the hell to which I go one day, I could justly pay a great price for my guilt."⁶⁷ This can also be seen when Erwin meets his old friend Nile, a military policeman, who ironically talks about the loss of his arm: "I thought you would surely die early... you must have thrust only your right arm into the beyond."⁶⁸ These conversations show how the story treats this leader as a half-dead person. However, even after losing a body part, Erwin remains a charismatic individual, respected and adored by many of his subordinates and companions. Because he is a great leader, still capable of directing military action, he retains his command.⁶⁹

According to archaeologist Paul Treherne, in Bronze Age Europe, there was a "beautification of death" in battle. The warriors achieved immortality by attaining excellence or glory in life and especially in death.⁷⁰ Erwin's injury on the battlefield, and his half-dead state, as a result of his bravery in battle, means that he has acquired this honorable state. Therefore, his disabled upper body gives him a mythic and graceful aura (fig. 3), and suggests to us the fine sculpture of a torso, which is given a great value in traditional, occidental aesthetics.⁷¹ Besides, such an imperfect thing, according to the aesthetician Winfried Menninghaus, is appreciated in romantic aesthetics.⁷² In *Attack on Titan*, in spite of such remarkable damage to Erwin's body and its imperfect physical appearance, injury affirms a romantic and enthusiastic view of the hero, and symbolizes the strong fighter who possesses a spirit of self-sacrifice.

⁶⁶ AT, vol. 12, 115.

⁶⁷ AT, vol. 13, 29.

⁶⁸ AT, vol. 13, 123.

⁶⁹ AT, vol. 14: 5–24, 97–117, shows Erwin preparing for a military campaign and exerting his strong presence.

⁷⁰ Treherne, "Warrior's Beauty," 123f.

⁷¹ AT, vol. 14, 95.

⁷² Menninghaus, Ekel, 189–224.



Fig. 3. Isayama, Hajime, *Attack on Titan* 14, 95. © Hajime Isayama and Kodansha 2014.

In relation to the image of the injured body, we can also look to Norse mythology, which presents heroic ideas of the damaged body. Many gods and heroes were injured or lost body parts. In the Icelandic Sagas especially, there are many cruel scenes of the dismembered body. In *Egils saga*, chapter 30, Thorgils Yeller wields his sword against Thorgeir and cuts off his hand;⁷³ or, in *Eyrbyggja saga*, chapter 62, the strider Thrand is almost attacked by a bandit with a spear but Thrand, the strongest of men, uses his axe to cut off his enemy's hand.⁷⁴ The *Poetic Edda* provides us with an influential example of the injured body in Týr, one of the Aesir, losing his hand to the monstrous wolf Fenrir.⁷⁵ When Týr bound Fenrir, he inserted his right arm into its mouth in order to reassure it that the god's would not trick him, and would release him soon. However, Fenrir bites off Týr's right hand after it sees through the gods' trick. Although Týr loses his hand, his bravery is nonetheless still admired by the gods.

In the sense that this old tale praises the disabled body in a militant context, *Attack on Titan's* great one-armed human leader Erwin can also be regarded as based in the cult of war in mythology. Erwin is the only main human character in the comic who survives being violently amputated during battle. Erwin, the sacred human whose body is romanticized, is in a state of "living death," in the spirit of myth. Therefore, he can still control military troops and deploy them against Titans. In contrast, when Eren's arms are severed by a Titan, Eren temporarily loses

⁷³ Jónsson, "Egils Saga Skallagrímssonar," 30.

⁷⁴ Sveinsson, "Eyrbyggja Saga," 523.

⁷⁵ Holander, *The Poetic Edda*, 98.



his abilities until they are regenerated by his supernatural power. The illustration depicts this episode ingloriously (fig. 4).⁷⁶



Fig. 4. Caption: Isayama, Hajime, *Attack on Titan* 11. © Hajime Isayama and Kodansha 2013.]

⁷⁶ AT, vol. 11, 142f.



It can be said that the power of Erwin's half-dead body, granted by his disability, is to express his heroic nature and charismatic leader qualities, just as Týr, the one-handed deity, was adored by other gods in old Nordic tales. We can interpret this mythologization of the human body as the hero worship of a militant worldview. However, we must understand this consumption of bodies as the result of the barbarism and victimization of the war against the Titans. This is the mythological violence and brutality that *Attack on Titan* implies in the following words, "only the winner is allowed to live. It is a severe world."⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

In Norse mythology, actions and events develop within a circular time and space, or *l'éternel retour*, as investigated by philosopher Mircea Eliade.⁷⁸ Mythological time progresses from chaos to the twilight of the Gods, and from this apocalyptic end comes a new world. In the endless passage of time, human beings and giants carry out never-ending battles for survival and world domination. The dynamic confrontation between supernatural beings and fragile human creatures was structured according to this circulation of time. In this timeless world, the endless conquest and the attempt to secure victory over the enemy can lead to neither hope nor despair, because this noble mythology represents a universality that is generalized from actual material phenomena.

Adopting both the apocalyptic, militant worldview and circular structure of Norse mythology, *Attack on Titan* reproduces this violent mythological viewpoint. However, this dark, modern fantasy does not present an eternal time, because, as Isayama says, he has looked ahead, and has already conceived of the series' ending.⁷⁹ This narrative limitation of time and space in *Attack on Titan* means that the fantasy develops according to a modern conception of linear historical time that moves forward towards an endpoint. Although the confrontation between human beings and Titans, like that between humans and giants in Norse mythology, repeats continuously throughout the comic, there is an ambiguous boundary between them that is profoundly contextualized by the destabilization of characters' identities and their skeptical attitudes towards the mythological violence inherent throughout the story.

⁷⁷ AT, vol. 2, 70.

⁷⁸ Eliade, *Eternal Return*, 73–92. Also, Davidson (*Gods and Myths*, 212) points out the idea of continual reenactment in the picture of gods and monsters in Norse mythology.

⁷⁹ Isayama, "Second Akira Oodera Interview."



Therefore, *Attack on Titan* does not depend on the simplistic structure of militant confrontation between two different creatures, as in Norse mythology. In fact, since volume thirteen, the series has attempted to bring a human civil war to the fore. It is said that this work represents a confrontation between “hope” and “despair.” Eren is repeatedly called “everyone’s hope”⁸⁰ because of his supernatural powers, and, thus, this modern fiction depicts humanity’s struggle to realize its final “hope.” More precisely, in the demythologized temporal structure of Isayama’s dark fantasy, *Attack on Titan*’s dynamic concepts move from despair to hope, and point towards the future.

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⁸⁰ E.g. *AT*, vol. 3, 37; vol. 5, 35.



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STOCKHOLM/COPENHAGEN/OSLO –
TRANSLATION AND SENSE OF PLACE IN
MARTIN KELLERMAN'S COMIC STRIP
ROCKY

by Rikke Platz Cortsen





INTRODUCTION

Martin Kellerman's newspaper strip *Rocky* is considered a very important part of Swedish and particularly Stockholm culture. It is an autobiographical comic strip in funny animal style that began publication in the free newspaper *Metro* in 1998. The strip centers on Kellerman's alter ego Rocky's troubles with women, his job as a cartoonist, his friends, and the everyday life of partying and being bored. Kellerman has won the Bellman prize, which celebrates an artist's "ability to bring forth Stockholm in an artistic perspective" as well as the Bern prize, which is given every year to someone who "has made a valuable contribution to the rendering of Stockholm's nature and culture."¹ As such, there seems to be something very Stockholm about his strip.

However, when the strip was translated into Norwegian (by Dag F. Gravem in *Dagbladet*, from 1999) as well as into Danish (by Nikolaj Scherfig in *Politiken*, from 2004), the setting was changed from Stockholm to Oslo and Copenhagen respectively, and Rocky changed his passport rather seamlessly. To some members of the audiences in the other Scandinavian countries, Rocky appeared to be inherently native and readers are sometimes surprised to learn that Rocky is in fact "as Swedish as surströmming [sour herring] and Systembolaget."²

The strip's easy transition from one Scandinavian country to another poses certain questions concerning the translation of strips, how text and image collaborate in making place, issues of representation, as well as questions about cultural differences and similarities. Is there something distinctively Scandinavian about *Rocky* that allows the strip's main character to change nationality as well as home town when he crosses the border? Or, is it the non-specific place markers of the strips that allow this transition to happen so smoothly?

This article examines the *Rocky* universe through a comparative analysis of the different Scandinavian translations that explores how a sense of place is constructed in the strips. The article discusses the function of *Rocky*'s many different places in local, inter-Scandinavian, and global relations. The strips have been analyzed with a specific focus on how place is presented and this article discusses both the most typical examples and the more exceptional ones.³

¹ Bellmanpriset: <http://www.stockholm.se/KulturFritid/Stod/Kulturpriser/>. Bernspriset: http://www.svenskapen.se/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=107&Itemid=33&lang=sv, author's

² Skotte, "Oversætteren," author's translation. Surströmming is a fermented fish product and an acquired taste, and Systembolaget is the specific government controlled place to buy alcohol, both considered distinctly Swedish to a Danish audience.

³ The material for this analysis is the Norwegian, Swedish and Danish versions of the strips up until strip number 1549 which is the last strip in the Danish translation published in book format (Kellerman, *Rocky 6* (Scherfig Trans.)).



The importance of the comic strip format as a structurally limited space should be noted, since in the small panels of the strip, there is not much room for visual information, such as backgrounds, site-specific cues, or direct mimetic reference. How the artist chooses to make use of this restricted space then becomes very relevant for its anchoring in specific places or just the opposite, its unmooring: the visual aspects of the strip can cut the story loose from its setting and make it more easily transposable to another context.

Using geographer Doreen Massey's concept of a "progressive sense of place," in combination with formal comics theory on text, image, and their mutual relation, I will offer possible answers as to why Rocky can at the same time be distinctively Swedish and simultaneously inhabit the Scandinavian sister capitals without necessarily causing the reader to stop and wonder. How is a sense of place constructed in the strips and how can this be matched with a different cultural context?

ROCKY AS SWEDISH IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

The newspaper strip is a comics format with a long tradition in the Nordic countries, and it is still very popular. Some of the region's most prolific and popular comics artists, like Frode Øverli, Nikoline Werdelin, or Tony Cronstam, work in this format, often commenting on local and national events and making jokes that relate to the specific national context. The humorous newspaper strip is the standard: a few panels worth of build-up and then a joke to end the strip. Rocky and his friends are at the center of the strip and it is often their relationships and personalities that coax the loudest laugh from the reader, through a sustained acquaintance with their ups and downs, especially as strips in more recent episodes connect over days to form longer narratives. *Rocky* is meant to be a funny strip, but it does not always have a hilarious point to end the last panel. The humor is not necessarily easy to pin down and can be vulgar, pointless, sarcastic, aggressive, or very subtle, but also sometimes bordering on cliché.

Interestingly, when Rocky was translated into English and published by Fantagraphics in 2005, the Swedish setting was kept, which suggests that the Scandinavian aspect of the strip was an important part and would perhaps not have made sense if transferred to an American scenario. In "a note from the American publisher," it is pointed out how some things have been preserved whereas others have been left out:

The original *Rocky* strip bristles with contemporary pop-culture and local reference, many of them very specific to Sweden. We have tried to maintain this European flavor, while



tweaking, dodging and weaving as necessary in order to insure that certain punch lines or sequences are not indecipherable to English-speaking audiences [...] We should note, however, that thanks to the bullying hegemony of American culture, many of the references (Tarantino, *Seinfeld*, *The Godfather*, *Rambo*, hip-hop, etc.) are actually in the original *Rocky* strip to begin with – as is the character's Monty Python obsession. When Swedish text (signs, newspapers, etc.) is simply background material, it has been left alone, but when it actually serves a narrative purpose, it has been translated. [...] A few strips (such as in-depth discussion of Swedish rap-stars) were excised from the book as being too hopelessly Swede-centric.⁴

This quote touches upon many of the aspects of the strip I will analyze, which are directly related to the way place is conveyed: the strip's general global cultural content, specific Swedish references made in the speech balloons and diegetic text, and the possibility of some Swedish aspects of the strips that might appear indecipherable to readers outside a Swedish context. Notably, the publisher's comment discusses only the textual aspect of the strips, and this foregrounds one of the conclusions in this article: that text plays a very significant role in anchoring the strip in a certain national context.

Rocky is a very dialogue-driven strip, a point noted by several scholars, including Kristy Beers Fägersten, who in her analysis of the use of English words in the original Swedish-language specifically mentions the emphasis on dialogue as a motivation for her linguistic analysis of the strip.⁵ In her conclusion, Fägersten discusses the ways in which code switching to English is used in *Rocky* and mentions the expression of cultural alignment with American hip-hop culture as one of the reasons for the use of English in the strip.⁶ This underlines how through shifts in language and via direct reference, *Rocky* moves in an intercultural and intertextual web which is also the reason the American publisher can leave many references in the text unexplained. Although filled with specific Swedish references, *Rocky* is also an expression of a globalized cultural field and its protagonist frequently travels to other countries. Most strips take place in a Scandinavian setting, but the scene changes regularly and many of the everyday situations are recognizable to readers outside Sweden, in Scandinavia as well as globally.

⁴ Kellerman, *Big Payback* (Thompson Trans.).

⁵ Fägersten, "English in *Rocky*," 240.

⁶ Fägersten, "English in *Rocky*," 260–261.



PROGRESSIVE SENSE OF PLACE

Rocky's frequent use of English, extensive references to foreign TV-series, movies, and music, as well as its characters' many travels across the globe, are an effect of globalization and a global exchange of goods and cultural products. Globalization is not always seen as positive and can be viewed as a process which threatens the local character of places. In response to this concern, Doreen Massey offers concepts of space and place which emphasize the effects of globalization as something that can help us conceive of place as progressive. One response the threat of globalization is to return to a sense of place as something safe, something with a stable and recognizable identity, but Massey contests this idea in her analysis of four qualities of place in a globalized world. "First of all, it is absolutely not static. If places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not a motionless thing, frozen in time. They are processes."⁷

In Massey's understanding of place it follows that places are in a constant flux, continuously being created and re-created by the interactions that take place in them and in relation to them.

"Second, places do not have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures."⁸

Here, Massey emphasizes that places do not need borders to define them, that they are in effect just as defined by their links with their surroundings and are not necessarily threatened by outsiders crossing over these border and supposedly penetrating the place's "true" identity.

"Third, clearly places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of inner conflicts."⁹ So we might also want to pay attention to these conflicts in trying to understand a place and get a sense of it, whilst being acutely aware that there is no such thing as *one* identity of a place.

Fourth, and finally, none of this denies place nor the importance of the uniqueness of place. [...]

There is the specificity of place which derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations. There is the fact that this very mixture together in one place may produce effects which would not have happened otherwise. And finally, all these relations interact with and take a further element of specificity from the accumulated

⁷ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 155.

⁸ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 155.

⁹ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 155.



history of a place, with that itself imagined as a product of layer upon layer of different sets of linkages, both local and to the wider world.¹⁰

This notion of place emphasizes the way places are a mixture of many different aspects, layer upon layer of different signifying as well as social practices. It is both specific to *this* place but continuously changes and is recreated anew when this particular place is linked to other places or is in conflict within itself. Place in this sense is a conglomerate of the physical reality of the place, its histories, the way it interacts with other places, and also the many imaginations that are being made in relation to this place. This includes artistic representations of a place, the stories told, the images, the photographs, all the many ways in which our imagination connects with a certain place.

As such, *Rocky* both contributes to our sense of a place (Stockholm/Sweden/Europe) through its portrayal of everyday life in the city and its links with other places, and is in itself a network of references which consists of numerous internal conflicts, oppositions, and links that constantly change and reassert their place as both specific and interrelated. It represents a place identity that is special and fluid at the same time, place as process being constructed as time passes.

When Massey emphasizes that a new conceptualization of space “inherently implies the existence in the lived world of a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in various relations of paradox or antagonism,”¹¹ she points to a complicated notion of space that can be analyzed in comics through their combination of image and text and the way they refer to their surroundings and audiences.

Comics and place, and the connections between geography and comics, is a growing field in comics scholarship and there are many fruitful recent combinations of geography, human geography, cartography, and comics studies.¹² Studies of the ways comics interact with and use space and place to address issues of autobiography, socio-economic debates, health problems, and political discussions all make important contributions to the interdisciplinary field of comics and geography. The field is still young, however, and there are numerous theoretical and methodological ways of approaching space and place in comics yet to be explored, which may yield important contributions to the discussion. This is why I find that Massey’s concept of a “sense of place” is useful in approaching the issue of place in *Rocky*, because a sense of place is

¹⁰ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 156.

¹¹ Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 3.

¹² See for instance the aptly titled *Comic Book Geographies* (2014) edited by Jason Dittmer or Holland, “Mapping Bosnia”; Donovan, “Graphic Pathogeographies.”



what the translators are trying to recreate in their versions of the strip. When Dag F. Gravem searches for a parallel to Upplands Väsby where Rocky grew up, it is important to find a municipality with the same sense of place and which is situated in relation to Oslo in the same way Upplands Väsby is to Stockholm, both geographically and in terms of the associations the places invoke.¹³

The *Rocky* strips create a sense of place that contributes to our understanding of place in general, and, in the case of places that have an actual reference in our experienced world, also become part of the web that signifies the place in question – *Rocky's* Stockholm may impact our sense of how Stockholm is as a place. American readers of *Rocky* will add to their imaginative impression of the Swedish capital and its inhabitants, and construct an image of Sweden and Scandinavia in general that is tinged with a *Rocky* flavor.

As geographer Jason Dittmer has noted, there are several kinds of spaces and places at stake in the medium of comics, one of which is “place in comics’, [which] refers to the role of comics’ representation in the constitution of particular places.” A crucial aspect of this representation is the role of what Dittmer calls “space in comics,” that is “the way that images and text in comics are alchemically set in relation to one another and therefore compose a topological space.” We will begin by examining how “place in comics” is influenced by the “space in comics” in this particular strip.¹⁴ The following looks at how *Rocky* constructs the places its main characters inhabit through the use of specific structural elements in comics.

TEXT, IMAGE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF PLACE

I will focus here on the ways in which *Rocky* makes reference to existing places and constructs a sense of place by looking at three specific structural elements: diegetic text (within the narrative), speech balloons (dialogue), and image (visual components of the panel), and specifically the ways in which these contribute to either specify a particular place or generalize it. As translation scholars Frederico Zanettin and Nadine Celotti both stress in *Comics in Translation*, it is crucial to pay attention to the images in the translation of comics and a verbal and visual interpretation is key to a successful translation.¹⁵

¹³ Gravem, “Lost in geography.”

¹⁴ Dittmer, “Introduction,” 16–17.

¹⁵ Celotti, “Translator as Semiotic Investigator”; Zanettin, “Comics in Translation Overview.”

Several scholars have pointed towards the anchoring function of text, as proposed by semiotician Roland Barthes, as an aspect of comics that can help specify an otherwise “floating chain” of plural possible signifieds in the image.¹⁶ This anchoring function can also be used to place the action in a specific (geographical) context. Whereas the image adds visual information about the surroundings, the text can provide additional information or even make very specific reference to guide the reader’s understanding of exactly *where* the action takes place. As mentioned, Kellerman uses text rather extensively in his strips and there are particularly two ways that text serves an anchoring function in relation to a particular place: through texts that are part of the narrative, such as signs or posters, and through the references to place names in speech balloons. These two uses of texts in the strip play a role in the substitution of places in the process of translation.

SIGNS TO SHOW THE WAY

The use of text within the narrative – on for example signs, posters, shops – is perhaps the simplest way to point to a specific setting. In her discussion of four different verbal kinds of text in comics, Nadine Celotti terms this verbal content “linguistic paratext” and points out the different ways this can be dealt with in.¹⁷ As *Rocky*’s American publisher notes, the strip’s texts serve the purpose in the English translation to give a sense of the surroundings’ Swedishness and are only translated when the story depends on their content for the execution of the strip. A strip where Rocky has just returned home from New York shows how this use of diegetic text can easily be replaced for translation purposes and changes the setting through the indicative reference of signs:



Figure 1. Kellerman, Martin, *Martin Kellermans Rocky*. Volym ett, Kartago, 2008, p. 24 © Martin Kellerman and Kartago Förlag.

¹⁶ Barthes, “Rhétorique de L’image,” 44–45. See for instance Groensteen, *Système de La BD*, 153–154 and *Reading bande dessinée*, 100.

¹⁷ Celotti, “Translator as Semiotic Investigator,” 38–39.



Figure 2. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky the big payback*, Politisk Revy, 2006, p.25 © Martin Kellerman and Politisk Revy.



Figure 3. Kellerman, Martin *Rocky the big payback*, Schibsted Forlagene, 2005, p.36 © Martin Kellerman and Schibsted Forlagene.

In the Swedish version, Rocky and Gonzo travel from panel to panel via the T-bane (underground) train, from the stop Slussen via Mariatorget, Zinkensdamm, and Hornstull, which makes it possible for the reader to place them geographically and follow their conversation as it moves along the red line on the map of the metro.¹⁸ This scene corresponds in the Danish version with a trip on the S-train from Enghave via Dybbølsbro to Vesterport and Nørreport stations,¹⁹ all recognizable and easy to place within specific coordinates in Copenhagen's Vesterbro district, just as the Norwegian trip takes the friends from Jernbanetorget via Stortorget and Nationalteatret to Majorstuen stations in central Oslo.²⁰ The substitution of signs is a very direct method for switching the reference to place, but it also relies on the content of the images and the general similarity between the places that are being swapped. Part of the success of this change of scenery, several hundred kilometers away, is that Kellerman's images do not contain site-specific information. He draws in a clear style, without much detail, and the generic interior in this example makes the train coach plausible as a representation of the inside of a train in many other countries. Most major European cities have some sort of public transportation train passing

¹⁸ Kellerman, *Rocky* vol. 2 (Swedish), 28.

¹⁹ Kellerman, *Big Payback* (Scherfig Trans.), 25.

²⁰ Kellerman, *Big Payback* (Gravem Trans.), 36.



through its center, and the Scandinavian capitals share a number of other physical, geographical, and societal similarities, which makes the transition from Stockholm to Oslo and Copenhagen go over without too much trouble. If Martin Kellerman had used a realistic style and with meticulous detail visually described the specific transport system of Stockholm, it would have been less convincing to transform it into the Norwegian tunnel train system.

Kellerman's use of signs to point to specific stations outside the window of the coach also indicates the way, temporality works in comics.. Just as with spatial cues, temporality can be introduced through text as well as the succession of images in comic strips, but in this case, there is a marked discrepancy between the temporality of the panel sequence and the dialogue between Rocky and his friend Gonzo. This discrepancy arises exactly from the use of signs to indicate the stations the characters pass on their way.

In reality, there are at least a few minutes between the stations on the route, regardless of what city the strip depicts, but the dialogue is linked from panel to panel and suggests that the characters' exchange is of much shorter duration. As comics scholar Thierry Groensteen notes, speech balloons inscribe temporality to the panel, for instance when a question is posed and answered.²¹ In this example with the coach ride, the temporality of the conversation is at odds with the passage of time outside the conversation as it is linked to place. In order to explicate the sense of place as one being travelled through, the strip departs from a realistic depiction of conversation and creates a comic strip temporality which is possible because of the combination of speech balloons, diegetic text, and images.

TALKING ABOUT THAT PLACE

The above-discussed examples also show another way in which text is used in the strips to ground the narrative in a site-specific setting: direct reference to named places through text in speech balloons. Arrived home after the fiasco of his New York trip, Rocky points to his locality by insisting that he would much rather be in Stockholm/Copenhagen/Oslo over the summer. This situates the conversation at very specific geographical coordinates, and the particularity of the setting is expanded, as Rocky maps out destinations within the city to the reader. For those readers familiar with the place names Reimersholme (Israels Plads/Marienlyst) and Långholmen (Islands Brygge/Bygdøy), their mention will help create a map of each of the cities. The structure of this map is similar enough that, if painted in broad strokes, the change from one city to the other is not a problem: all the capitals have city basket courts, water, and places to swim close by.

²¹ Groensteen, *Système de La BD*, 158.



The social map of the city traced by the movements of Rocky and his friends, then, connects physical sites in a network that can look very similar from one city to the other.

The smoothness of the transformation of *Rocky* from Stockholm to Oslo and Copenhagen requires the translator to be very familiar with both the primary city and the city it translates into. Both Dag F. Gravem and Nikolaj Scherfig have discussed extensively how they acquaint themselves with Stockholm in order to give the places the same connotations in the translated versions.²² This study is not about the technicalities and art of translation, however, but the way that Kellerman's speech balloons refer to Swedish places which are then translated into similar Norwegian and Danish places (areas of the city, specific bars, suburbs) is an important aspect of how a sense of place is created in this strip, even if this translated version of Oslo or Copenhagen is in fact a version of Rocky's Stockholm.

When Doreen Massey underlines internal conflicts and antagonisms as part of a place, this can be seen as one of the ways in which Stockholm is transferred to another context, because the relations and oppositions between social groups within a geographical area is one element that is retained in the translation of Rocky. Social differences are often connected to imaginations about how certain places "are" – their place identity – and in relation to this, what kind of people live there and how they act, and what their values are. Much of *Rocky's* humor is related to prejudice linked to a certain area, and this prejudice can resonate with the reader and point to the specific imaginative geography of these cities.



Figure 4. Caption: Kellerman, Martin, *Martin Kellermans Rocky Volym två*, Kartago Förlag, 2008, p.20 © Martin Kellerman and Kartago Förlag.

This conversation between Rocky and his friend Tommy centers around the dynamics of city life, and particularly how some people complain about noise coming from bars at closing time. This conflict between the partying segment of the city-dwellers and the people who want quiet nights in the Swedish capital is just as familiar a problem in Copenhagen and Oslo. Rocky and Tommy set up a spatial division between the happening St. Eriksplan versus the smaller city of Borås or

²² Skotte, "Oversætteren."



the suburbs, where the pair suggest the complainers should move. Here, the conversation is again dominant and the dialogue contributes to our sense of place through an enactment of absurd suggestions from fictive curmudgeons. This strip also points to how Stockholm as a place is, to speak with Doreen Massey, constantly being changed and does not have a single, unique identity. It changes over time, but its “identity” is also dependent upon who interacts with it or observes it – for Rocky and his friends, the city is a place to be loud and have parties in, whereas the neighbors of the bars consider it a space for living and getting a good night’s sleep, regardless of what bar lies next door.

DRAWN PLACES

As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons it does not pose a greater problem to transfer *Rocky* from Sweden to another Scandinavian country in Scandinavia is the lack of visual information pointing specifically to Stockholm/Sweden. In a review of *Rocky 6: single og sur (Rocky 6: Single and Sour)*, Christoffer Zieler criticizes the change from Sweden to Denmark in the translation and mentions that “Denmark is drawn so it looks like Sweden.”²³ On close inspection of the strips, however, the Swedish origin of the strips cannot always be determined from the drawings. Very often, interiors or exteriors are generic, with no specific national landmarks or architecture, and could just as easily be from Denmark or Sweden. As Kellerman has noted, in an interview about the Norwegian version of the strip: “The strip takes place in Stockholm, but I don’t exactly draw Rocky in front of the City Hall – it is more a question of small details you will recognize, if you know the city really well. It should be easy to transfer to other cities”.²⁴

Reading through the many strips it is noticeable how the background scenes in the strip show scenery which could be anywhere, and how a strip will often repeat the setting from panel to panel, as seen here in an example from the Danish translation:

²³ Zieler, “Medrivende tomgang”, author’s translation.

²⁴ Kellerman, *Rocky 5 (Gravem Trans.)*, 105, author’s translation.



Figure 5. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky 2. Don't call it a comeback*, Politisk Revy, 2007, p. 15 © Martin Kellerman and Politisk Revy.

A contrast is established between the two bars Stereobar (Sw: Sjögräs) and Louises (Sw: India Star), where the interiors do not exactly *look like* the actual Copenhagen bars. On the other hand, the panels do suggest the mood of the places and resembles bars of that particular kind. The strip contrasts a hip bar with a dive bar; we get what the background and people are there for. The contrast between the two bars, which is a point in the strip, is based on lighting, which in the panels is shown through a change of background color from white to black. Even if the images of places in Stockholm does not correspond 1:1 to their Copenhagen and Oslo counterparts, they still work as representations of these places because of their lack of specificity. The visual part of the strips often contributes to the general mood of the places they happen in, aids in setting the scene, and conveys certain aspects of the surroundings that help suggest the *where* of the narrative.

Sometimes, however, the drawings show elements that are very Stockholm-specific or particular to Swedish culture and society:



Figure 6. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky 2. Don't call it a comeback*, Politisk Revy, 2007, p. 118 © Martin Kellerman and Politisk Revy.

In this Danish version of a notably text heavy strip, the text contrasts with the images in the first panel. The weather man is pointing to what is clearly a map of Sweden as he mentions how the

fog has moved on to Denmark's Funen and Jutland. The general point of the strip is the bad weather in Sweden, which is something that is also debated widely in Denmark and Norway, but it is not enough to simply change the TV-station's logo to the Danish TV2 and alter the areas to Danish ones in the speech balloons, when the image is so specifically of Sweden. A map is one of the most concrete visual means with which to anchor a narrative in a specific place, so this cartographic information needs to be translated as well, if the strip is to make any sense. As it stands now, we are left to wonder why the Danish TV station uses a Swedish weather map to show how the weather is in parts of Denmark. It is very illustrative in this strip how the already-limited space of the four panel strip is even further limited by the sheer amount of space taken up by the speech balloons, leaving very little space in the panel to visually define the place the characters act and speak in.

Another example of how place-specific visuals can change the meaning of the strip is seen in a strip from a sequence where Rocky helps his little brother move to a house in the countryside:



Figure 7. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky 4. På ferie*, Politisk Revy, 2009, p.34 © Martin Kellerman and Politisk Revy.]



In the Danish translation this place is (in previous strips) specified as Lolland, which to Danish readers has the right connotation of being far away from the capital and a rural area. All the more surprising then, when a moose is shown to be what frightens Rocky's younger brother in the strip! In Norway and Sweden, this is a realistic scenario; in either country the humor comes from the kid scared by an animal in its natural habitat. The strip still works in Danish, but the appearance of a moose adds a certain surrealism to the strip. The moose has either crossed the water from Sweden, heading for Lolland (which has happened), or Rocky's brother is imagining that all kinds of wild animals, including ones not native to Denmark, are roaming the forest, but the joke works just the same – he is scared to be alone at his desolate farm. Translating the strip into Danish despite the presence of the moose is not necessarily a mistake, because even if *Rocky* is primarily a realistic autobiographical strip, Kellerman sometimes chooses to use visual metaphors or exaggerate the actions shown to underline the joke.²⁵

SWEDEN, SCANDINAVIA, AND THE WORLD

In *Rocky*, there are three notable kinds of places. First, there are Swedish places with Stockholm at the center. Second, there are inter-Scandinavian places, as for instance when Rocky goes to the Roskilde festival in Denmark or visits his brother in an Oslo prison. And finally, there are international destinations, pictured when Rocky travels to places like Thailand, the USA, or Japan. The way these places are constructed, and how the strips contribute to imaginations of them, are not necessarily the same, especially because the places change in translation from Swedish to Norwegian and Danish locations.

When the strip is translated, the Swedish places are transferred to Norwegian or Danish counterparts. As we have seen, Stockholm is often constructed through dialogue, and is shown from different angles when the friends walk through the city, hang around in bars, or travel across town. In addition to showing antagonisms between real city people and suburbanites, *Rocky* also illustrates a marked difference between the city and the country. The Scandinavian countries (and many others for that matter) have a tradition of owning summer cottages where people can spend their weekends and holidays away from the city. When Rocky goes to a house like this in one of Kellerman's strips, it is not exotic when the strip is translated to the other Scandinavian languages, because this practice is well known there. The silliness of the inexperienced

²⁵ Klaus Kaindl has noted how images will be "interpreted or 'read' only within a functional context, which may in turn be cultural specific" ("Multimodality in Translation," 189) and links this to the way images are perceived in comics, underlining how important it is to consider images when translating comics.



Stockholmers when they go to the country and are afraid of the dark or the wildlife is more a question of an opposition between city and non-city than a national matter.

Rocky is a very Scandinavian character also in the sense that he often visits the other Scandinavian countries, and in the strip there are many jokes that make reference to the love-hate relationship between Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes. So when the strip is translated into another Scandinavian language and simultaneously moved there, some of these inter-Scandinavian jokes have to be changed or otherwise adapted to their new setting. Despite their similarities, some customs are distinctly national and as such, not all references or scenes in the Swedish version can be directly transposed. In this strip, Rocky and his crew are at a Swedish *kräftkalas* (crayfish party), which is visually so distinct that the Danish translator had to circumvent the scene and change the narrative:



Figure 8. Kellerman, Martin, *Martin Kellermans Rocky Volym två*, Kartago Förlag, 2008, p.23 © Martin Kellerman and Kartago Förlag.

In the Swedish version, the conversation revolves around the customs of this Swedish tradition, how much the characters hate the *snapvisor* (drinking songs) sung at parties, and the inevitability of ending up under the table at these gatherings. Because it is customary to wear hats and decorate the surroundings at a Swedish *kräftkalas*, several strips in this scene were changed in the Danish version so that a *Swedish* friend had invited Rocky and friends to a *Swedish* crayfish party, and the songs they hate are *Swedish* drinking songs. This changes the strips' content from a reflection on Swedish, and Kellerman's own, national identity and traditions, to the way the Scandinavian neighbors regard each other's traditional ways. Where the original strip paints a picture of Sweden from within, the Danish version offers a view from outside and constructs the for Danes familiar stereotype of the drunken Swede and his exotic traditions.

When Rocky and his friends travel to other Scandinavian countries, the translation often just changes the destination to one of the other Scandinavian countries, as in this example:



Figure 9. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky 3*, Egmont serieforlaget, 2007, p.14 © Martin Kellerman and Egmont Serieforlaget.

In the Danish version, the gang visits their friend in Oslo, but in this Norwegian version, they go to Copenhagen, which in both cases allows for inter-Scandinavian comparisons and interactions with the brotherly Danes/Norwegians. The drawing in the last panel makes more sense in the Norwegian version, because the person approaching them seems to be wearing a Danish (or perhaps Swedish) flag shirt. Not much in the surroundings definitively designates this place and the travels throughout Scandinavia can be changed to fit the translation's origin country and its relationships with the neighboring countries.²⁶

When Rocky visits a Scandinavian country other than his home, there is not necessarily a big difference visually between the countries, and when a strip takes place in mountains (which are not part of Danish landscape), this is easily changed in the Danish context to a trip to either Norway or Sweden. But when the strip moves outside Scandinavia, sometimes the visual content of the strips becomes more pronounced and provides more information about the place visited. It is difficult to imagine these strips outside of their geographical location, translated into other places:



Figure 10. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky 4. På ferie*, Politisk Revy, 2009, p.5 © Martin Kellerman and Politisk Revy.

²⁶ Dag F. Gravem has discussed some of his rationales for the inter-Scandinavian travels in his column "Lost in Translation," in the Norwegian *Rocky Magazine* ("Lost in Oslo"; "Lostivalguiden"; "Lost på hytta"; "Rauky på Gutland").

Often in the strips, foreign, non-Scandinavian surroundings become a reservoir for amusing sequences. Definable space is here at the center of the jokes, as is the case in the above strip where Rocky desperately tries to buy a train ticket in Japan. The Japanese signs, the Japanese-looking animated figure on the display, and the massive rack of technologically advanced machines anchor this strip in Japan, and the otherness of the environment is what causes the laughable frustration Rocky experiences. Here, the drawn content of the strip fills up with references to Japan, thereby anchoring the image very squarely at these particular coordinates, setting the strip markedly apart from the Swedish/Norwegian/Danish hometown scenes. No matter which Scandinavian version of the strip you are reading, Japan is shown as visually different and exotic compared to the dreary everyday surroundings of bad-weathered Scandinavia.

The way non-Scandinavian places are imagined also draws heavily upon our collective imagination, and stages them as stereotypically “Japanese” or “Thai.” Complaining about things is the motor in much of *Rocky*’s humor, and just as the protagonist moans about Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, the places they live in, and the problems of getting around in Japan, Thailand gets its own dose of criticism when Rocky visits his girlfriend in her Thai-style hut, made of bamboo and with hammocks for beds:



Figure 11. Kellerman, Martin, *Rocky 4. På ferie*, Politisk Revy, 2009, p.27 © Martin Kellerman and Politisk Revy.

What Rocky’s girlfriend considers to be a cozy hut with a cute dog, is to Rocky a flea-ridden and horrible place with a mutt that stinks and bad, depressing movies on TV. Here, the sense of place as specific to Thailand comes just as much from the imagery as from the text. International destinations are often expressed more vividly and specifically in the images, but whether in Sweden or abroad, Rocky can always find something to complain about.



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Because it is an autobiographical strip situated in an empirical world that the reader is acquainted with, *Rocky* creates places through drawings and written text in ways that connect the places mentioned with places that can be located on a map. In the strip, a certain sense of place is created throughout the many strips as Stockholm, Sweden, the Scandinavian countries, and a number of international destinations are continuously shown and talked about in the panels.

Rocky impacts the reader's imaginative construction of how these places look and what the people there are like because places, if looked at through a progressive sense of place, as Doreen Massey suggests, are constantly changing, always in process. This is also influenced by cultural representations, like for example comic strips. A progressive sense of place also emphasizes that places do not have a unique place identity fenced off by borders, and that their specificity arises from the constellation of multiple place identities within a geographic area. In this sense, the Stockholm outlined by *Rocky* is one that is mapped out by its relation to other parts of Sweden, the dynamics of opposite movements within the city, and the ways in which the characters pace the streets of various areas of the city. If we consider places as multiple, processes that do not have borders, and that are characterized by their relations to other places, what is also translated in the strips from Swedish to Norwegian and Danish is a certain sense of place which is shared by the three countries.

The newspaper strip is spatially challenged, compared to graphic novels or comic books because it rarely has more than a few panels to show where the action takes place, and if too much detail is shown, the panel gets too cluttered and might come off as illegible. As a newspaper strip, *Rocky* therefore does not have much room to show surroundings and place-specific cues. In addition to this, *Rocky* is a very text-heavy comic strip where much of the content is generated by static characters in conversation. Much of the creation of the site-specific sense of place happens in the text, either as signs in the background within the diegesis, through direct reference in speech balloons, or indirect conversations about places that do not necessarily anchor them with a place-name.

Rocky's reliance on text makes it easier to transpose the strip from a Swedish context to Denmark and Norway through a translation of the text. Sometimes, however, this translation clashes with the images and creates either unintended expansions of the jokes or makes the meaning of place break down, because the difference between the two countries is realized as a clash between text and image. The text is Danish/Norwegian and refers to Danish/Norwegian cultural events, but



the drawings betray their Swedish origin.

Also, the Scandinavian capitals and countries share many geographic, linguistic, and cultural similarities and so, as long as the visual reference is not clearly identifiable as Stockholm or Swedish, it will not be noticeable that the place has been changed. It is possible to draw maps of Copenhagen, Oslo, and Stockholm using the paths and positions of bars, apartments, stores, and hangouts from *Rocky*. Laid on top of each other, they will geographically be very different, but structurally, they will illustrate the same sense of place, created through social relation and lived life.

The strip's crossing of Scandinavian borders also offers up material for jokes based on the differences between the neighboring countries, but these also work in translation so long as the very national-specific visual cues are integrated into the narrative in some other way. Looking at the relationship between text and image in the construction of place, the visuals play a larger role when Rocky travels outside of Scandinavia, where environments are often drawn to suggest the foreignness of the site, which is often mentioned and discussed in the strips. In this sense, *Rocky's* general point of view is Scandinavian, and the translated versions are told from the same perspective. It is the similarities between the Scandinavian capitals that make this possible, but it is their differences which sometimes disrupts the illusion of *Rocky* being Danish/Norwegian, when the reader spots a Swedish visual reference that points to Södermalm and not Vesterbro/Grünerløkka.

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ADRIFT IN THE URBAN MAZE

by Dan Hassler-Forest





Ahrens, Jörn and Arno Meteling (eds.). *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence*. New York, Continuum, 2010. ISBN 978-0826440198. 288 pages.

Throughout its history, the comics medium has maintained such a central and defining relationship with urban environments that it is surprising how little published scholarship addresses this intersection directly. Both comics studies and urban theory have emerged in recent years as dynamic and widely-discussed academic fields that have attracted scholars from a broad variety of disciplines. The publication of an edited collection dedicated entirely to the relationship between comics and the city was therefore a long overdue and much-needed addition to both fields' scholarly resources.

As the first major academic book dedicated to this specific topic, *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence* certainly offers a wide variety of critical perspectives. The sixteen contributors to the volume discuss the work of well-known comics authors like Alan Moore (who appears repeatedly) and Will Eisner, as well as more obscure figures like Jacques Tardi and Enki Bilal, who will be unfamiliar to all but the most dedicated connoisseurs of European comics. This diversity works well in a collection of this kind, as it supplies a nice balance between comics familiar to most readers alongside discussions of works that will be intriguing new discoveries to many.

A similarly broad approach governs the collection's overall structure as well, grouping individual essays together into five sections with broadly conceptual titles such as "Retrofuturistic and Nostalgic Cities" and "Locations of Crime." Of these five, "Superhero Cities" is the only section that brings together more than three essays. While most of these sections articulate specific themes that are relevant and worthwhile for the volume's topic, it is also difficult to identify a logic that defines them in anything other than the broadest of concepts relating to comics and cities.

The introduction, written by co-editors Jörn Ahrens and Arno Meteling, offers no clues as to how or why these specific sections were defined and organized to lend structure to this collection. The introduction in fact does little more than describe the relationship between comics and the city in rather general terms, and subsequently summarizing the individual sections' essays one by one. A more detailed discussion of the editors' reasons for focusing on these five topics would have strengthened the book's sense of cohesion enormously, and could have helped the reader understand how to make sense of the volume's overall structure.



This problem of a seeming arbitrariness is aggravated by issues of style and consistency that plague the volume throughout. The majority of the contributors are German, including both editors, and many of the essays as well as the introduction are in bad need of a further revision by a good copy editor: the many instances of awkward phrasing, non-idiomatic turns of phrase, and frequent long and impenetrable paragraphs will pose a severe challenge to many readers. This applies as well to the many redundancies and inconsistencies in referencing quoted sources, and a sometimes wildly divergent tone, ranging from the drily academic to the overly colloquial.

As maddeningly inconsistent as the collection can be in style and tone, the assembled collection of contributors is simultaneously homogeneous in a way that regrettably confirms one of the more unfortunate prejudices in comics studies, as all but one of the sixteen authors is male. The general absence of a female perspective is one of a few baffling oversights in such a broad-ranging collection of essays, especially because gender and race (another topic left sadly unexplored) have in recent years been central issues both in comics studies and in urban theory.

Indeed, *Comics and the City* gives a perspective on both fields that is disappointingly Eurocentric, with an all but exclusive focus on English-language and francophone comics. While it may seem unfair to criticize a collection like this for what it fails to include, the volume's ambitious title and wide-ranging approach to its topic do promise more than this blinkered view of what basically amounts to an all-male, all-white world of comics authorship and readership. For instance, the complete absence of an author like Marjane Satrapi is quite telling in this regard: her widely read *Persepolis* seems like an essential text for a collection like this, but it is not referenced even once.

A similar kind of male-centered stodginess defines many authors' use of urban theory, with a tendency to lean quite heavily on an older guard of continental philosophers: Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, Georg Simmel, and Fredric Jameson are by far the most frequently cited authors, placing the volume's theoretical emphasis rather strongly on an overly familiar and fairly predictable humanities perspective. While this rather classical approach is clearly an important core element for a volume such as this, the interdisciplinary nature of these intersecting fields does clearly invite a larger variety of theoretical perspectives. Especially disappointing is the relative paucity of scholars from fields such as human geography, sociology, or globalization studies, where some of the most exciting academic work both in comics studies and in urban theory is currently being done.

These criticisms aside, there are certainly some very worthwhile scholarship to be found scattered throughout this collection. The first section in the book, entitled "History, Comics, and the City," is perhaps the book's most compelling and consistent grouping of essays. This is in part because its focus on Western comics' historical origins at least partially justifies the focus on European



and American urban contexts, as the authors bring to bear a largely Benjaminian perspective on early comics, an approach that works well with both the objects discussed and the late-19th century period. Jens Balzer's perceptive writing on representations of urban life in Outcault's "Yellow Kid" comics, which first started appearing in 1895, is particularly good, contributing valuable new research to comics historiography.

The second section, "Retrofuturistic and Nostalgic Cities," makes for a slightly jarring transition from the preceding section, grouping together three essays that give detailed analyses of comic books that foreground their cities' ambivalent sense of pastness. The prolific Henry Jenkins, easily the most widely recognizable authority in the book, contributes the first and best essay to this section, finding a welcome balance between textual analysis of a trio of primary texts on the one hand, and a broader engagement with fantasy representations of futuristic cities on the other. The other two essays focus rather exclusively on their objects of analysis, limiting their accessibility and appeal substantially for readers unfamiliar with the works they discuss.

"Superhero Cities" is the only section than contains four essays, starting off with William Uricchio's "The Batman's Gotham City™: Story, Ideology, Performance," a beautifully written analysis of one of comics' best-known cities. Uricchio's compulsively readable paper however adds surprisingly little to the conclusions the author reached over two decades ago in *The Many Lives of the Batman*, the collection he co-edited with Roberta Pearson way back in 1991. Like the three other essays in this section, quite a lot of time is spent describing the often byzantine complexities of superhero continuity and cross-media franchising, but the essay ends without fully developing a strong conceptual point. This problem is even more evident in Jason Bainbridge's essay on New York City and the central position it has maintained in the Marvel Universe, especially from the Silver Age onward. While informative about Marvel's history, the reader is continually sidetracked by endless examples from superhero comics, while the essay's more theoretical elements remain strikingly underdeveloped.

Section four, "Locations of Crime," marks the point in the volume at which the relationship between the section titles and the essays they contain becomes somewhat tenuous: the section's first essay, on Will Eisner, presents a formalist analysis of the comic legend's visual style and its indebtedness to the vaudeville tradition. Most of this essay is purely descriptive, often in vaguely worded phrases such as this: "These lighting effects eventually take on a kind of tangible form" (194). The essay's references to Eisner's urban setting remain superficial, and its implied connection to the section's theme of criminality is never explained.

Finally, "The City-Comic as a Mode of Reflection" groups together three very disparate essays that connect in different ways to the section's obliquely worded title. André Suhr's essay is one of the



most explicit attempts to engage directly with the conceptual relationship between comics aesthetics and the city, and his analysis of Antoine Mathieu's "Acquefacque" books includes panels that vividly illustrate his main points. Andreas Platthaus's comparison between Carl Barks's well-known comics city of Duckburg and its German version "Entenhausen" is one of the volume's rare instances of cross-cultural intersections, though the author ultimately limits himself to broadly phrased descriptions and a series of highly debatable value judgments.

Therefore, while comics scholars will certainly find valuable research in this collection, *Comics and the City* still constitutes something of a missed opportunity. The essays' limited engagement with contemporary urban theory makes the book eminently skippable for those working primarily in urban studies, and the sometimes arbitrary-seeming collection of sections and essays will frustrate readers looking for a coherent and clearly structured textbook on the subject. Instead, Ahrens and Meteling's edited collection is best described as a well-meaning but maddeningly inconsistent publication on a topic that begs to be explored in more breadth as well as depth.

FORM AND FUNCTION – A REVIEW OF *FROM COMIC STRIPS TO GRAPHIC NOVELS*

by Eric L. Berlatsky





Stein, Daniel and Jan-Noël Thon. *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative*. Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 2013. ISBN 978-3110281811. 416 pages.

Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon's new collection of essays, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels*, is part of a recent trend that brings together comics studies and narrative theory. This trend is best represented by Jared Gardner and David Herman's recent special issue of *SubStance* (2011), a volume cited frequently in this collection. Indeed, perhaps the greatest strength of *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* is its copious bibliography, Works Cited pages, and thorough referencing of sources. Twenty years ago, finding a rigorous academic collection on comics was almost as difficult as uncovering a living dodo bird, but, as *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* clearly indicates, a new collection in 2013 is hardly a cause for shock. Rather, it enters a robust conversation that changes rapidly, with new publications and new approaches dividing and subdividing like single-celled organisms in a petri dish. That *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels* makes a brave effort to be an expansive overview of the field is to its credit, though its length and breadth are also indicative of the typical weaknesses of books that try to do too much.

Certainly, at least for me, the pursuit of the intersection of comics and narrative theory is a welcome one, as these fields have much to say to one another and several strong essays in the collection hew fairly close to that intersection. For example, there is much to be appreciated in Silke Horskotte's opening essay, which challenges some conventional wisdom on the linear progression of panels and the ways in which readers make meaning by "closing" the gaps between contiguous panels. At the same time, Horskotte's ultimate conclusion that, in comics, meaning is not made through linear progression, but through a "simultaneous reading that takes into account the size and positioning of the separate elements within the page layout" (p. 38), seems a bit hasty and overdetermined. Her claims that "linear reading [...] has to be discarded as a myth" and that comics have "infinite possibilities" (p. 38) in arranging panels, frames, and scenes, seem both too bold and not sufficiently excavated. As several theorists have previously insisted, it seems possible that comics typically *both* require a linear reading (to make sense of a progressing plot) and a "simultaneous" one (or, in the words of Gerard Genette, a "tabular" one), and to simply eliminate one of these from possible readerly or critical approaches seems hasty. Likewise, although the idea of "infinite" combinations may have some literal truthfulness, the actual practices of comics artists are typically more circumscribed (perhaps because of the necessity of attention to linear reading options). Finally, though Horskotte does an excellent job of pointing to several comics pages that exploit "simultaneous" reading practices, she rarely does so in the



service of an argument that reveals something new and interesting about the texts she is examining (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen*, Neil Gaiman, et. al's *Sandman*, and Charles Burns' *Black Hole*). When she does briefly discuss the ways in which the positioning and coloring of repeated panels reveal characters' personalities and motivations, and how these in turn contribute to the overall meaning of the texts, the essay reaches its high point. I simply wish such moments had been more frequent.

Horstkotte's essay thus exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the collection as a whole. While there are many essays that explore and expose comics' unique formal properties (and their relationship to narrative), or open up new possibilities for doing so, they often stop short of applying this formal insight to the realm of meaning and interpretation. While it is not perhaps necessary in all cases to do so, ultimately the naming and delineation of formal properties has little utility unless it helps us to understand both comics as a whole, and the specific ones under investigation.

Karin Kukkonen's essay on an "embodied" approach to comics' interpretation (through an examination of Winsor McCay's "Dream of the Rarebit Fiend") has similar strengths and flaws. By tracing the disposition of lines and depicted bodies in McCay and other comics, and highlighting recent research in cognitive psychology, Kukkonen argues that readers typically connect their own bodies to those depicted in comics, becoming physically engaged through identification with characters and, particularly, their movements. Again, the engagement with cognitive research is a popular recent avenue for narratological research (and comics studies) and here it yields some interesting possibilities. Again, however, the question of why such knowledge (of the physical engagement of readers' bodies) is important is left open.

Particularly interesting, though plagued by some of the same difficulties, is Jan-Noël Thon's classically narratological essay on narrators in comics. As he accurately notes, the typical notion of narrators as dictated by prose fiction is complicated by the disjunction between "pictorial" elements, "verbal-pictorial" depiction, and traditional narration in comics (and, to some degree, film). While the relationship of implied authors, narrators, and actual authors is a notoriously thorny one in prose (not to mention the idea of heterodiegetic, homodiegetic, intradiegetic, and extradiegetic narrators), the introduction in comics of pictorial representations and even accompanying captions that may not fall comfortably into any of these categories makes things only that much more complicated. Thon's discussion of these issues is thorough and compelling, although again there is little direct engagement with how these additional complications concretely impact a specific text or group of texts. While Thon convincingly demonstrates how all of the above elements contribute to the construction of an "implied author," or even "hypothetical



author collectives,” there is little suggestion of how that authorial construction has a significant impact on the meaning of the text itself and how the reader is encouraged to read a text based on his or her view of the hypothetical author.

Kai Mikkonen’s examination of varying approaches to ocular and cognitive perspective in comics works similarly. It details a number of practices and possibilities in the depiction of character subjectivity in a variety of comics, but it does so without burrowing deeply into the motivation behind some specific choices, or how they generate meaning. Mikkonen offers that merely delineating the formal options and choices of comics artists in depicting subjectivity will help us “better understand how minds and worlds are created in comics” and “allow[] us to recognize some of the formal options and narrative devices that are available to graphic narratives” (p. 107). There is little to argue with here, but, again, I find myself wanting a more full investigation and interpretation not only of what formal options are available or how minds are created, but why they are created in this fashion, and to what meaningful end.

The second section of the book departs somewhat from typical narratological concerns and several of the essays in the section are among the book’s most compelling, though their connections to each other seem tenuous. Nancy Pedri’s look at graphic memoir, and particularly at Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, and Lynda Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* does an excellent job of looking at the ways in which the formal properties of these particular comics contribute both to the establishment of veracity in the particular “true” stories they are telling and to the self-reflexive disavowal of said truthfulness. Daniel Stein’s overview and analysis of the construction of authorship in early *Batman* comics (initially Bob Kane’s and eventually that of fan communities) is also fascinating and is a significant contribution to the study of the ways in which superhero comics companies, in particular, have long blurred the lines between the author’s role and the reader’s.

Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter’s account of the various “intermedial” relationships comics have to other media is one of the longest and most comprehensive essays in the book. Its attempt to define and delineate similar terms like intermedial, transmedial, and hybrid media is somewhat trying at first, but it yields some fascinating fruit, particularly in the authors’ discussion of specific examples of the intersections between seemingly separate media. The brief discussion (and images from) Jason Lutes’ *Berlin: City of Smoke* is a particularly compelling example of the ways in which one medium (comics) can highlight and emphasize what is unique and peculiar to another (music), both capturing its distinctive elements and spectacularly failing to do so. While Lutes’ work highlights the “rhythm and musicality” (p. 199) of a jazz clarinetist, his comic is, of course, literally silent, and thus the opposite of music in fundamental ways. Rippl and Etter’s



depiction and discussion of computer games' depiction in comics is similarly enlightening and fascinating.

Building on the strength of the Rippl and Etter essay, Greg Smith's account of the historical distinctions between frames, windows, and panels is perhaps the strongest piece included in the book. In particular, his insight that film, for instance, has historically taken the screen to be a window whose size and shape cannot be manipulated is an important reparative to the many critical parallels drawn between film and comics. While the "placement of the camera" is (at least metaphorically) important to both media, the "size and shape of the camera" appears, at least to the viewer, to be static in film, while in comics, of course, "that frame changes size and shape as the expressive/narrative needs of the comic varies" (p. 231). While Smith does not make the comparison between the screen and the page (since, historically, the page has been more rigid in size and shape and therefore more similar to the cinema's screen in some ways), his probing of notions of "window" versus "panel" is an important reminder of the differences between the media. Likewise, his claim that comics serve as predecessors to the "Windows" of the computer revolution is helpful, given the tendency for one computer screen to contain multiple "open" windows, whose juxtaposition can contribute to the creation of new meanings. In this, computer usage is more similar to that of comics than to the static single "screen" of film.

This second section of the book is its strongest, as it combines formal analysis with historical context and interpretation. The last two sections, on the other hand, drift even further from the book's narratological *précis*, and provide less frequently compelling interpretation. The third section leads off with brief histories of different comics traditions. While these are educational for those uninitiated in those histories, they are necessarily brief and therefore serve as only the tip of the iceberg of what would constitute a proper history. Jared Gardner's history of the American "narrative comic strip" is a familiar one for American comics fans, but it reorients typical histories into a narratological perspective, pointing to the ways in which newspaper strips eventually oriented themselves toward lengthy sustained narratives in adventure strips, and how and why that vogue inevitably subsided. Gardner's concentration on the reasons for these shifts is compelling and might even provide a useful reading for undergraduates being introduced to the history of American comics.

Pascal Lefèvre's account of the "dual system of publication" of Flemish comics is, by contrast, almost completely unfamiliar to me, and, for others like me, it has the value of providing new knowledge. His account of the conversion of two tier daily newspaper installments into lengthier albums (always of a length that was a multiple of 8 pages) is fascinating, and his claim that the rigid codification of certain formats could not help but influence, if not determine, the kinds of



stories that could be told, seems incontrovertible. At the same time, his application of this thesis to his example of choice, *Suske en Wiske*, is not always convincing. He describes *Suske en Wiske* in great detail and provides some canny reading of its form and meaning, but rarely is it clear why and how the “dual publication system” actually determines (or influences) these meanings. Instead, we seem to get two interesting accounts, one of the dual publication system, and one of *Suske en Wiske*, while their intersection is less sufficiently explored.

Christina Meyer’s account of Michael Carey’s *The Unwritten* and Henry Jenkins’ treatment of Art Spiegelman’s *In the Shadow of No Towers* engage with “history” in a different way, as both articles excavate the ways in which the texts in question depict and recirculate comics history, *The Unwritten* in a wide-ranging way and *In the Shadow of No Towers* through engagement with early American newspaper strips. Meyer’s article focuses on exploring *The Unwritten*’s metafictional components, its self-reflexive interest in the ways in which stories work (drawing not negligibly from its Vertigo predecessor *Sandman*), and its intertextual games. Meyer never settles securely on the purposes of these “postmodern” games, but she does suggest the ways in which we all see our lives as a series of narratives, and the ways in which self-conscious narratives like the *Unwritten* can then lead to introspection about the narrativizing of our own lives. While she may give too much credit to the groundbreaking and innovative nature of *The Unwritten* itself, her conclusions go beyond a formal preoccupation with comics and towards an engagement with the world itself. Similarly, Jenkins’ treatment of *No Towers* is interesting in its willingness to note the ways in which Spiegelman’s redeployment of classic comics function both as politically antagonistic toward Bush II-era foreign and domestic policy, and the ways in which nostalgia for such strips can serve a conservative and escapist function. That is, while interested in the history of comics and their formal qualities, both Meyer and Jenkins are also usefully interested in the way comics speak to us in our daily lives.

The final section of the book is devoted to “graphic narratives across cultures,” though this heading is so broad as to be difficult to pinpoint. The first essay reads much like the histories of the previous section, with Julia Round’s account of the late 1980’s-early 1990’s “British Invasion” comics being familiar if only because of its relatively recent subject matter. While the history itself provides few revelations, Round’s claim that the explosion of productivity and talent from the likes of Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Garth Ennis, Neil Gaiman, et. al. arose in response to Thatcher-era politics is both compelling and convincing. Jan Baetens and Steven Surdiacourt’s history of European comics (from Töpffer, through Hergé and the *ligne claire*, and beyond) is, like some that precede it, a useful overview for the uninitiated, but it seems to offer little in the way of new insight.



Jacqueline Berndt's reading of ghost stories in Japanese manga seems out of place next to the overviews that precede it, not least because it is the only example of manga criticism in the book. Nevertheless, Berndt's examination of the intentionally inconclusive narrative of Mizuki Shigeru's *Nonnonba* and the ways in which it is typical of the manga ghost story does a convincing job of drawing connections between cultural traditions and aesthetic ones. In particular, Shigeru's engagement with Bart Beaty's 2007 excoriation of *Nonnonba* in *The ComicsReporter* provides an interesting clash of aesthetic sensibilities and reading practices.

The final essay in the collection is probably the least interesting, and it is unfortunate that the book ends on such an indifferent note. Monika Schmitz-Evans' discussion of whether or not comics can or should be considered "World Literature" is simply an exercise in nomenclature with a distant connection to Goethe's discussion of the same concept. Schmitz-Evans ranges from a listing of various graphic adaptations of classics of world literature to a discussion of the increasing popularity of comics in recent years (a questionable claim not substantiated by compelling evidence), to a look at the cross-pollination of various national comics' traditions. The most interesting assertion she makes is that images can be "globally" understood by people of different cultures in more or less the same ways (p. 386–87), giving comics an advantage over purely linguistic representations in their ability to cross cultural lines. While she acknowledges that different cultures have "highly different cultural codes and traditions", she argues that comics readers have a "strong inclination" to learn and "transgress cultural borders" (p. 386–87), and that learning those visual codes is somewhat easier than acquiring a new language in all of its intricacies. Whether this is true or not is an open question left largely unpursued and undocumented, but it is a provocative claim and an idea worth exploring further. Unfortunately, the essay largely goes in different directions.

Ultimately, then, the book engages with many interesting critical conversations central to comics studies. It begins with a series of essays on the formal intersections of comics and narrative more widely conceived before branching out into presentations of historical narratives both of national traditions and formal properties, examinations of genres and relationships to other media. The breadth of the book is a strength, as there is something in it for nearly any comics scholar, but it is also a weakness, as there are many essays whose connection to narrative theory is tenuous, and whose relationships to those surrounding it are not always immediately clear. This, of course, is a complaint common to almost any collection of essays, but the sheer length of this volume makes the problem a bit more pronounced. Likewise, as mentioned above, a little less in the way of definition and elucidation of terminology, and a little more in the way of interpretation of texts and their meaning would have strengthened the book. Nevertheless, it does provide many



avenues for additional conversation and discussion, taking steps in productive directions for comics studies and narrative theory alike.

CHOOSING THE EASY WAY OUT – NEIL COHN AND HIS VISUAL LEXICONS

by Fred Andersson





Cohn, Neil. *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Visual Images*. Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1-4411-7054-5. 221 pages.

Neil Cohn's theory of visual "language" in comics is rather well known by now. *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Visual Images* is the most unified and accessible explanation of the theory this far. It was published in 2013 and received considerable attention, even in "mainstream" media such as *The Guardian*. There are some unresolved contradictions in the book. Already in the introduction, Cohn repeatedly insists that he does not claim that comics are "a language." As for myself, I basically agree with Cohn's definition that visual language is "a biological and cognitive capacity that humans have for conveying concepts in the visual-graphic modality" and that comics are "a socio-cultural context in which this visual language appears" (p. 2). However, the title of the book is still *The Visual Language of Comics*, which says exactly the opposite of what the author claims. *Visual Language in Comics* would have been a less problematic title. Interestingly, Cohn claims that there are regional "visual languages" such as AVL (American Visual Language) and JVL (Japanese Visual Language). In the last chapter, he also analyzes the ancient "language" CAVL (Central Australian Visual language). This is problematic. On the one hand, Cohn claims that there is a universal "biological and cognitive capacity" called visual language. On the other hand, he claims that there are different visual languages. What are the exact criteria for separating the latter from the former? This is never clarified in the book.

Another salient contradiction of Cohn's theory is his attitude to linguistic analogy. Obviously his whole project is based on analogies between words and pictures – even to the extent that they are not treated as analogies but simply stated as objective facts. Still, he rejects the dominant tenet of linguistic analogy in pictorial semiotics, i.e. the one developed within the tradition of Structuralist and Saussurean "semiology." According to Cohn, the "semiological" conception of signs and Language is erroneous and outdated. As outlined by Ferdinand de Saussure and developed by Louis Hjelmslev, structural linguistics upholds a strict separation between Signifier and Signified, Denotation and Connotation, Form and Substance, System (or "paradigmatics") and Process (or "syntagmatics"). This means that certain operations must be made in order for the analysis to hold. For example, distinctive features must be identified. It must be shown that distinctive features such as "B" and "F" can be substituted, and that this results in a change of semantic content. Example: "BAR" changes into "FAR." If such "commutation" (i.e. simultaneous mutation) cannot be proved, the message cannot be a sign according to the structural definition, but merely an element of "symbolic language." Linguistic analogy in generalized "semiology" has often



consisted in identifying certain visual or “plastic” features in pictures, pretending that these features are genuinely distinctive, and then claiming this as a fact.

Chomskyan linguistics rejects the structural dogma of arbitrary selection. Instead of seeing the “lexeme” (i.e. the “word” or “term”) as a fixed bundle of semantic and phonetic features, a Chomskyan analysis treats both “semantics” and “grammar” as collections of cognitive categories, which can be systematized as “lexicons”. Consequently, the Latin alphabet is seen as a grammatical lexicon, which every child must learn in order to write English. One semantic example would be that all associations between color terms in a language could be regarded as a semantic lexicon. The grammatical and semantic dimensions are seen as independent, *malgré* Structuralist priorities, as famously exemplified by Chomsky’s phrase “colourless green ideas sleep furiously.” Here, the phrase is grammatically correct – and therefore a normal example of the “lexicon” of English syntax – but semantically nonsensical. With such wide definitions of the terms grammar, semantics, and lexicon, a scholar of visual communication can easily find “visual lexicons” at various “grammatical” and “syntactic” levels, ignoring the analysis of Signifier and Signified. In this rather loose manner, Cohn seems to conceive of visual language as a variety of Chomskyan universal grammar, thus embracing linguistic analogy while at the same time rejecting it.

The general argument and disposition of Cohn’s book follows his theoretical orientation. He sets out to prove that panels in comics are grammatical units, comparable to words and phrases. If they are grammatical units in a Chomskyan sense, it must be proved that readers can register the systematic order between panels as normal even if the semantic content is scrambled and nonsensical. This is attempted empirically, by means of EEG (electroencephalogram) and VEP (visually evoked potentials) in an experimental setup known from psycholinguistic studies. Before launching these tests in Chapter Six, however, Cohn spends the first half of the book explaining his theories. Most of the speculations in these chapters are not relevant for the empirical question. In the first chapter, Cohn defines the general structure of visual language, especially with regard of “navigational structure” within the strip or page in a comic. The second and third chapters deal with two levels of “the visual lexicon,” i.e. the morphological level and the level of panels, respectively. Here, Cohn also reviews the contrasting semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, and rejects two hypothetical objections against the idea that panels can be lexical units. Cohn rejects the first objection – “Panels are not arbitrary signs” – simply by stating that the whole notion of arbitrary signs is an outdated dogma. The second objection – “There is no systematic lexicon of panels” – is rejected with reference to cognitive linguistics. Cohn admits that the number of conventionalized panels is small, but adds that “we find even more systematic patterns in the components that make up panels and the broader



sequences in which they are placed” (p. 22). For Cohn, a visual lexical unit is essentially a pattern which is stored in visual memory and therefore repeated.

Cohn then defines the elements of visual morphology and syntax, inventing a number of idiosyncratic neologisms. Cohn’s rejection of the notion of arbitrary signs means that certain criteria for identifying morphemes in Language are abandoned. This is obviously the only justification for Cohn’s broad claim that there *are* indeed morphemes in visual language, and that there are both “open-class” and “closed-class” morphemes. Open linguistic classes are those which are relatively flexible and variable, as when new synonyms are added to a vocabulary. Closed classes, such as markers for case and gender, will only change over long spans of time. When Cohn simplistically tries to demonstrate that “graphic schemas” of “basic objects” are open-class morphemes, he does not see the fuzziness of pictorial categories in comparison to linguistic ones as a problem. Instead, he tries to show that pictures are not very different from spoken languages in this respect, as there are both “analytic” languages like English and “synthetic” languages like Finnish and Inuit. For example, an Englishman needs three words in order to ask the same thing that a Finn asks in one: “ymmärrätkö?” (“do you understand?”). That such merging or “agglutination” may be observed both in language and in pictures does not however presuppose that the constituent elements are in any way similar. Thus, Cohn again justifies his brand of linguistic analogy by ignoring analytical levels favored by other linguistic analogies.

As regards closed-class morphemes, Cohn thinks that elements such as speech bubbles and speed lines are equivalent to prepositions and affixes in Language. Speech bubbles are called “carriers”, their connectors are called “tails” and the speakers/thinkers are called “roots.” If someone in a comic says something that other characters can hear, it is said to be a combination of “root awareness” and “adjacent awareness.” For example, a question mark or a light bulb appearing above a character’s head is called “upfix”; speed indicators replacing body parts or the whole body are called “umlaut” or “suppletion”; a repetition of body parts or contours to indicate movement is called “reduplication.” As regards whole panels, Cohn does not locate them specifically at the morphological level or the syntactical level, but regards them as “constructions.” They are treated as “attentional units,” framing certain objects, characters and events at the same time as providing orientation within the spatial setting of a scene. Thus, they are categorized as to whether they are “macro” (several characters), “mono” (one character), “micro” (detail of character), or “amorphic” (inanimate detail). As “filmic shots,” they are categorized as Long Shot, Full Shot, Medium Shot, Close Shot, and (extreme) Close-Up.

For Cohn, narrative structure is the site of “Visual Language Grammar” proper. It is defined in Chapter Four. Lay-out, designated with the acronym ECS (External Compositional Structure), is



the topic of Chapter Five. It is odd that whilst Cohn defines and analyzes five categories of whole page ECS, the only cases considered in the chapter on narrative structure are those of single strips. The importance of page breakdown and braiding for narrative structure, as convincingly shown by Thierry Groensteen, is completely ignored by Cohn. The problem of reading order is addressed in the chapter on ECS, but this chapter remains isolated from the main argument.

Cohn's conclusions are based on very simple cases of narrative visual sequences, cases which are also used as stimuli for the tests described in Chapter Six. The cases are actually pure "constructions," drawn by Cohn himself. Examples from the work of other artists are scarcely used and comparative approaches are absent. Applying the diagrammatic approach of Chomskyan syntactic analysis, Cohn states that "visual narrative grammar" is structured as an "arc" involving all or some of the following panel types in the following order: Orienter, Establisher, Initial, Prolongation, Peak, and Release. Sometimes, modifications or Refiners will also appear. As the terms indicate, this taxonomy best describes straightforward event structures in which an action or conflict is anticipated, launched, continued, reaching climax, and resolved. None of the test cases are longer than six panels. In the tests, Cohn proves with some reliability that panels showing stages of the same event but in the wrong or fragmentary "grammatical" order produce a positive signaling change 600 milliseconds after the onset of the stimulus. This is the so called "P600" effect known from violations of grammar in psycholinguistic experiments. Similarly, it is shown that panels in correct "grammatical" order but taken from different events produce the "N400" effect known from violations of semantic order.

These tests may be thoroughly controlled and the results may be fully reliable. But what do they actually prove? They obviously prove that we expect simple things to happen in a certain order and that it would be highly confusing if persons and objects were suddenly replaced during an event. This is nothing new, and there is nothing here that specifically characterizes drawn events as opposed to real ones, not to mention "Visual Language Grammar." What Cohn manages to prove, then, is already known by common experience.

The rest of his theory of "Visual Language" remains purely speculative and, indeed, arbitrary. This is not least true about the last three chapters and their analyses of the regional "languages" AVL, JVL and CAVL. Here, Cohn enumerates standardized graphical features and figurative "morphemes" in a way strangely reminiscent of the Structuralist analyses which he believes himself to have rejected. As for CAVL, the ancient Australian practice of accompanying a verbal narrative with markings in the sand has a multimodal structure very different from modern comics. If Cohn wants to define universal traits of all visual Language, his arguments are constantly disproved by the empirical facts of many different languages. In the end, the narrow



significance of Cohn's psychological experiments and his reluctance to consider other examples than those invented by himself gives his project a very limited scholarly value.