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# CONFERENCE REPORT: NNCORE 2015 – IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OSLO ON JUNE 12–13, 2015

by Essi Varis & Katja Kontturi





The Nordic Network for Comics Research (NNCORE) held its second international conference in the surprisingly balmy suburbs of Oslo in June 2015. Funding troubles had left the numerous participants of the 2013 Helsinki conference hanging for two years, but where there's will, there's always a way. So it came to be that on June 12, 2015, Rebecca Scherr and her organizing assistants opened the heavy glass doors of the Georg Sverdrup building on the University of Oslo's leafy Blindern campus and invited about thirty comics scholars inside. The ensemble consisted of established comics researchers, PhD candidates, and MA students hailing from different parts of Northern and Western Europe. The Nordic countries were, of course, well represented, but the NNCORE had not lost its wider appeal either, as evidenced by the many attendees from France, Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the Benelux countries.

Some might have been lured in by the conference's distressingly topical theme: "War and Conflict in Sequential Art." Bleak as the topic was, it nonetheless prompted a thoroughly enjoyable, intimate event with 21 papers featuring a considerable range of perspectives and target texts. War, especially the World Wars, have clearly had an impact on comics, from the superhero genre and Disney stories to newspaper strips from across the globe. One session even focused entirely on manga. Many presenters perceived comics as a mouthpiece for war propaganda, while others considered whether the medium could be used to record or process these painful phases of history. About half of the papers diverged into the hateful mechanics and consequences of personal or national conflicts: violence, trauma, and the construction of the Other. Apparently, when the borders are drawn in blood, it is often women or ethnic minorities that are left in the gutter.



Image 1. The University of Oslo welcomed comics scholars to the conference (with a bang)! Photo: Essi Varis

## WARS AND COMICS DO MIX, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

Michael Scholz (Uppsala University) seized the titular war theme right away: his keynote lecture, which explored how comics were used as propaganda during the Second World War, opened the event. Scholz approached the topic mostly by mapping the interests of different publishers and by pointing out the diversity of the target audiences. While Walt Disney and other US publishers supported America First Committee's endeavours to keep North America away from a European war, the military department of Germany recruited cartoonists to illustrate their own doctrines. Different comics, then, spread different ideals either overtly or covertly to the especially eager readerships of military bases and camps, as well as to audiences of all ages on the home fronts. As is well known, the emergent superhero genre was consciously used to boost morale and cement patriotism among American soldiers, but the range of propagandist notes was, of course, much wider than that: now forgotten magazines like *True Comics* (1941–



1959) and *Real Heroes* (1941–1946) suggested more realistic aspirations for the troops, while other publications were merely designed to school the civilians to stay alert.

Perhaps the most striking idea Scholz presented was that the attitudes and morals of the fictional heroes might have impacted the real soldiers' very real codes of conduct: the fact that US troops were much less reluctant to execute the guards of concentration camps at the end of the war than their British colleagues could well be rooted in the discourse of evil and the desire for punishment so prominent in the comic book narratives overseas. This theme of righteous, American superheroes fighting unquestionably evil Nazis was picked up again by Markus Streb (Ruhr-Universität Bochum), who zoomed in on the early representations of concentration camps in Golden Age comic books. He noted that while Nazis soon became shorthand for an evil enemy, any and all depictions of their regime were less than realistic in superhero comics, which must have had an ambiguous impact on the public perception of the atrocities.

As in so many other discussions pertaining to comics, the question of realism was prominent across several other papers as well. Most speakers seemed to agree that a comic's visual style is closely tied to its message and tone. Both Rik Spanjers (University of Amsterdam) and Anna Hoyles (University of Lincoln) underlined the strong anti-war message of their respective target texts, Shigeru Mizuki's semi-autobiographical manga *Onwards Towards Our Noble Deaths*, and the so-called "gullible worker" comic strips of the early 20th century newspapers. However, while Spanjers emphasised the way varying degrees of visual realism can be used to illustrate the horrors of the battle front, Hoyles' target texts hammered their point home through unrealistic, blockheaded caricatures. She believed that stereotypically stupid, comedic characters were the most effective tool for discussing the economic troubles that the war efforts left in their wake. Since humor is not only a social glue but also a means of catharsis and





subversion, it could rally the readers around the strips' anti-war ideals. In other words, comics might be able to make their readers averse to war either through scare tactics – as in Mizuki's war memories and other realistically slanted comics – or through ridicule.

While Hoyles' gullible workers laugh at the absurdities of war rather indirectly, Katja Kontturi's (University of Jyväskylä) presentation suggests that warfare itself is not too taboo a subject for parody either. During her twenty minutes in the spotlight, Kontturi catalogued the exaggerated, parodic war imagery in Don Rosa's Duck comics, noting that they exemplify the subversive power of laughter: when war is not seen as entirely serious, paranoid attitudes towards the supposedly evil adversaries begin to diminish. Being critical of capitalism in general, Rosa plays his jokes as much on Scrooge McDuck's excessive, overly militaristic defence tactics as the barely competent Beagle Boys, whose hopes of robbing him are manifestly optimistic. By contrast, Roger Sabin (Central Saint Martins London) analysed the way Ally Sloper, *Punch* magazine's silly, heavily merchandised antihero, was suddenly transformed into an armed "super-patriot" during the Boer War. While Disney's Ducks seem to be able to bring a serious subject matter into the realm of comedy, comics' first superstar lost his comedy as a reaction to more serious times; while Rosa's tactics are paradoxically disarming, Sloper's fate reeks of pro-war propaganda.

Indeed, different shades of propaganda became a pervasive motif in the conference, and subtle brainwashing might well be the hidden agenda lurking behind most war-themed comics, but some presenters still attempted to bypass such issues and find alternative perspectives. Anne Magnussen (University of Southern Denmark), for example, indicated that, biased as they might be, comics are a type of documents – snapshots of their time – and could therefore serve as valuable historical source material. On the other hand, the target texts of Maaheen Ahmed (Ghent University), Francesco-Alessio Ursini (Stockholm University), and Pascal Lefèvre (LUCA School of Arts & University of Leuven)



transported wars and conflicts into the worlds of dream, fantasy and what-if. While speculative fiction often relates to real issues and moulds real attitudes – one only needs to remember the numerous superhero comics delivered to the frontlines of WWII – devices like surrealism, alternative histories, post-apocalyptic dystopias or monsters allow the readers to take distance and reconceptualize.

## GRAPHIC VIOLENCE AND SERIALIZED TRAUMA

Some participants interpreted the theme of conflict somewhat more liberally and, as a result, complemented the discussions on war tales and propaganda with an even more difficult question: what purpose does comic book violence serve? Most people read comics for pleasure, so why do so many of them include so much of something as unpleasant as violence?

These questions were addressed especially candidly by Joseph Trotta (Gothenburg University), who explained that overt signs of fictionality make even the most violent of comics feel “safe” for the reader. Different semiotic strategies such as variations of colors or inclusion of photos can be employed to discern legitimized, daylight war violence from personally motivated, emotionally fuelled violence. Similarly, Ian Horton (London College of Communication) argued that British war comics did not turn more violent in the 1970s, as is often claimed, but more realistic: the same acts of violence felt more graphic to the readers simply because they were depicted through new, more evocative conventions. Essi Varis (University of Jyväskylä) arrived to parallel ideas from the opposite direction in her treatment of the new Vertigo series, *The Unwritten* (2010–). According to Varis, the series justifies its substantially violent scenes by victimizing overtly fictional characters: metatextual breaks and authors “killing off” their characters are verbalized as being violent, but can violence against something that does not



really exist – really exist? Further, to what degree could something that does not exist be unethical or upsetting?

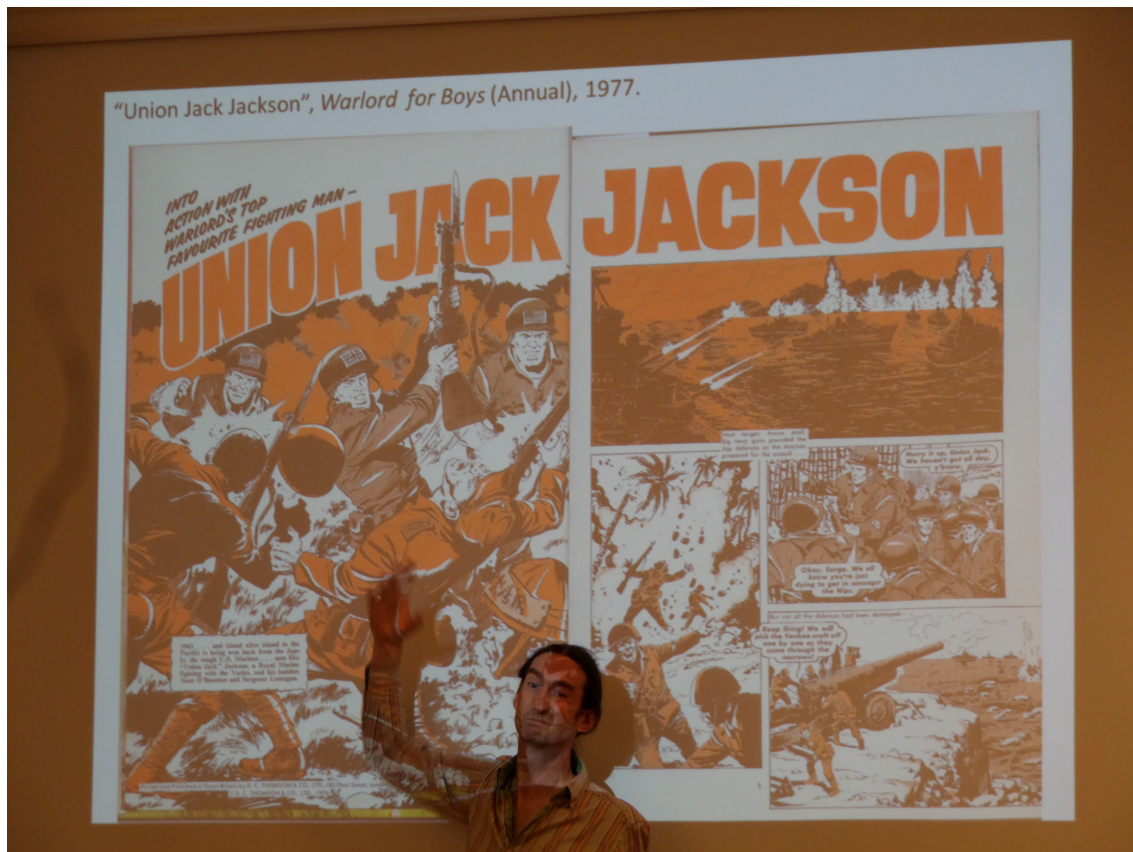


Image 2. Ian Horton talking about representations of violence in British war comic books. Photo: Katja Kontturi.

In sum, comics storytelling has devices for making violence either entertaining or disturbing. These effects seem to hinge largely on the semiotic choices and perceived ontologies: cartoony, clearly fictional violence is so “okay” that it can even be used as a gag in children’s animated shows, but since violence is not “okay” in real life, violence that reads as realistic evokes an entirely different emotional reaction. In other words, the discussions about violence pointed towards the same questions of tone, realism and function as the discussions about war comics, only in a slightly wider context.



It was perhaps for the best, then, that a handful of presenters preferred to skip over the actual punches thrown and focus on the troubles violence causes. For example, some presentations suggested that reading and making comics could be a way of processing a national or a personal trauma. Tilmann Altenberg (Cardiff University) discussed Argentine comics about Falklands War from this perspective, and was echoed by Joanna Elantkowska-Bialek (University of Warsaw), who discussed Hanneriina Moisseinen's autobiographical comic *Father* (2013). Moisseinen's account of her father's mysterious disappearance during her childhood and the following trauma is illustrated in the comic with embroidery as an expressive technique. Elantkowska-Bialek pointed out that the photocopies of the time-consuming, sometimes unfinished holy cloths embody the holistic process of grieving.

A few others took their ponderings a few steps further still, indicating how violence creates social binaries and manifests through them. Leena Romu (University of Tampere) introduced the topic of gendered violence in her presentation, which focused on Ulli Lust's autobiographical work *Today is the Last Day of the Rest of Your Life* (2013). Romu felt that the retrospective mode of narration prevented the writer's accounts of sexual abuse from appearing too didactic, but noted that certain metaleptic devices, such as the cover image staring at the reader, still delivered a political message: "this comic depicts something real and painful." Houman Sadri (Gothenburg University) continued the feminist line of inquiry in his presentation on Wonder Woman, whose relationship to gendered violence is empowering in a very different way. According to Sadri, Wonder Woman is a liminal character that reconciles both the masculine and feminine aspects of warfare: her creator, W. M. Marston believed women made stronger warriors than men because of their caring, submissive demeanour, their "faith in the strength of others."

The violence in wars is, however, usually based on ethnic, rather than gendered otherness, and many papers focused on comics that depict the war-ridden





relations between different cultural groups. Margareta Wallin Wictorin (Linnaeus University) considered comics' potential for evoking sympathy towards immigrants. Chantal Catherine Michel (Université Montpellier III Paul Valéry) noted the increasing number of comics about Arab-Israeli conflicts, but wondered about their reluctance to concentrate on specific eras or events. Kristina Mejhammar's (Uppsala University) target text, Joakim Pirinen's *Bars Fight: The Indian Attack*, on the other hand, describes a specific incident of racial violence originally recounted in Lucy Terry's ballad "Bars Fight". Finally, Johannes Poulsen (Aarhus University) grasped the questions of otherness from a posthumanist perspective. He argued that the ethically challenging encounters between humans and non-humans do not merely comprise a trendy academic topic but even teenagers have discussed them for decades, as prompted by such comics as *X-men*.



Image 3. Carsten Fogh Nielsen analysed media discussions around the Charlie Hebdo tragedy. Photo: Katja Kontturi.



Violent reactions to cultural differences were, of course, the cause behind the terrorist raid to Charlie Hebdo's Paris headquarters as well. Since the tragedy took place only six months before the conference, many believed it had influenced the choice of theme. However, only one presenter was brave enough to pick such a fresh wound: Carsten Fogh Nielsen (Aarhus University) recapitulated the public outrage evoked by the strike and called after a more critical and, first and foremost, more carefully contextualized mode of discussion. Nielsen himself managed to ignite a rather lively conversation, which concluded the conference on a fitting, critical note.

## AN ARTISTIC TOUCH, OR HOW WE STILL MANAGED TO HAVE FUN

Comic research is often seen somewhat separate from comic book cultures and industries. While purely theoretical perspectives on the medium or analytical looks at individual works are important, collaborating with people who actually produce and peruse them would perhaps provide the field with new possibilities. NNCORE seized the opportunity and welcomed the second keynote lecture which was held by comic artist Ed Piskor.



Image 4. Ed Piskor gifted free issues of his *Hip Hop Family Tree* to the participants. Photo: Essi Varis.

Having earned his ink-splattered spurs in the alternative and underground comic scenes of the United States, Piskor gave his academic audience a brief overview of the connections between the North American comic book and hip hop cultures, based on his own background work and experience. The US hip hop and comic book scenes are both distinctively urban movements that bloomed in the mid-1900s. Further, both owe much to the ragged cultural topography of New York City. Piskor concentrated especially on the cross-pollination between comics, street art, and album covers, three visual traditions he has remixed into his own ambitious comic saga, *Hip Hop Family Tree* (2013).

As the title suggests, *Hip Hop Family Tree* explores the roots of North American hip hop culture. Not only is the content well researched and the visuals drawn in vintage style, but Piskor has also put much thought into the overall design of the work: the sample issues he kindly gifted us looked charmingly yellowed and



second-hand, complete with little, anarchistic scribbles in the margins. In other words, *Hip Hop Family Tree* comics are immersive artistic artefacts.

Piskor's appearance was an offshoot of his promotional visit to Oslo Comic Expo, which happily, and probably not-so-coincidentally, took place on the same weekend. After a long day of presentations, most of the attendees still had the energy to take a tattered tram to the neighborhood of Grünerlokka, where the main venue of the OSX, Deichmanske Library, was tucked away on the idyllic Schous Square.



Image 5. The Oslo Comic Expo took place in the neighbourhood of Grünerlokka. Photo: Essi Varis.

The many charms of the quaint little library became obvious soon enough: not only is the building covered with owl reliefs and quirky moments of contemporary art, but it also hosts a separate comic library, or the Serieteket, upstairs. There, a familiar-looking collection of comic theory leads the visiting connoisseur into a spacious hall filled with graphic narratives of all imaginable



genres. Racks of local zines give way to shelves upon shelves of Vertigo, superhero, and horror comics, and in the corners, little storage cupboards are stuffed with manga and Disney. With the collection of approximately 10,000 titles and a multitude of cozy little corners to indulge in them, Oslo's Serieteket could only be described as a piece of heaven for comic book scholars and hobbyists.



Image 6. Open doors invite the visitors to get lost in the Serieteket. Photo: Essi Varis.

Needless to say, we were almost reluctant to drag ourselves outside, despite the large marquee under which vendors and organizations sold mainstream, independent, and second-hand comics, with stray figurines, plushies, and collectibles sprinkled in between. From the varied selection, a certain native work deserves a special shout-out: a graphic biography of Norway's most revered painter, Edvard Munch! Illustrated and written entirely by the artist's countryman Steffen Kverneland, *Munch* (2013) boasts ambitious 271 pages of



appropriately expressionistic, colorful art – and is now finally translated also into English.

Of course, the festival program included a handful of panels and performances as well: entrepreneurs from different countries discussed small-print publishing, and artists from different fields performed a multimedia reading of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, for example. Most of the troupe was, however, distracted by the other offerings of Grünerlokka and crowned their Oslo comics experience with hearty dinner discussions over pizza slices and pub food. The final night's impromptu excursion to the sloping roof of the famous Opera House was also a great testament to the conference's collegial atmosphere: the chilly evening winds, the stunning sceneries, and tourists with their selfie-sticks superimposed a surreal after-image on the trip we are happy to include in our resumes.