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# EDITORIAL: COMICS ACTIVISM

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





Dear reader,

The theme for this issue is Comics Activism, using comics in various ways to communicate political ideas, trying to change the world with the power of words and images combined. In the Forum text, “Comics Activism, a (Partial) Introduction”, Martin Lund gives an overview of this fascinating and potentially vast topic, with a short historical background and an attempt at defining different types of activist comics.

In the article “Socialist Thought and Comics Form – Narrative and Rhetorical Strategies in Kate Evan’s *Red Rosa*”, Magnus Nilsson dissects the graphic novel *Red Rosa*, a biography in comics form of the socialist Rosa Luxemburg, and a book that, Nilsson shows, was published in order to promote the very same ideas that Rosa once fought for.

In the Forum text “Comedic Heresy in the Humor of *The Boondocks*”, Mikko Poutanen discusses the American comic strip *The Boondocks*, using the term cultural heresy to define the way in which its creator Aaron McGruder has attempted to change the status quo of race relations in the US.

Finally, this issue ends with a thorough review by Katja Kontturi of *Disney Comics. The Whole Story*, a dictionary of all things Disney Comics. The book represents a fresh look at the international history of these comics, which are incredibly popular all over the globe, and has also been purported to be the bearer of political, capitalist ideas.

Comics activism is an intriguing field of study within the broader scope of comics studies, and with this issue we hope to have contributed to a discussion that will continue and intensify in the future.

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SOCIALIST THOUGHT AND COMICS FORM  
– NARRATIVE AND RHETORICAL  
STRATEGIES IN KATE EVANS' *RED ROSA*

by Magnus Nilsson





*Red Rosa* is a graphic biography of the socialist politician and theorist Rosa Luxemburg, written and drawn by the Canadian-British comics artist Kate Evans. It was published in 2015 by Verso, a left-wing publishing house affiliated with the socialist journal *New Left Review*, and formerly known as New Left Books. Its publication received support, “financially and by advice,”<sup>1</sup> from the New York office of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, a transnational alternative policy group affiliated with the German socialist party Die Linke. This support is motivated by the claim that Luxemburg’s works have “much to say to our contemporary world.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, for the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, *Red Rosa* is viewed as a means of promoting the socialist ideas and ideals that Luxemburg expressed in her works. And this view is probably shared by Verso, which, although being an actor in the book market, primarily has ideological ambitions: it aims to disseminate left-wing thought.

Evans’ *Red Rosa* is far from the only contemporary graphic novel to promote left-wing ideas and ideals. Other examples include several works published by Verso, such as *Che: A Graphic Biography* (2008) by Spain Rodrigues; *Wobblies: A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (2005), edited by Paul Buhle and Nicole Shulman; and Evans’ *Threads: From the Refugee Crisis* (2017); as well as Variety Artworks’ *Capital in Manga* (2012) and Corinne Maier and Anne Simon’s *Marx* (2014), published by Nobrow.

Although all the above-cited examples are of recent vintage, the use of comics to promote left-wing thought is not a new phenomenon. As has been demonstrated by visual culture scholar Sharon Kinsella in her book *Adult Manga*, already in the 1920s, Japanese comics artists with “Marxist leanings” produced a “range of publications containing political cartoons and comic strips,” including *Workers’ News* and *Laborers’ Manga*.<sup>3</sup> In the 1960s, manga (especially the genre of *gekiga*) once again “became linked to political radicalism.”<sup>4</sup> One example of this was the launching in 1964 of the manga magazine *GARO*, which aimed at promoting a “Marxist historical perspective” to schoolchildren.<sup>5</sup> In the U.S. too, comics have long been used to propagate left-wing ideas and ideals. In the 1930s, for example, the New York *Daily Worker*, which was published

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<sup>1</sup> Scharenberg 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Scharenberg 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Kinsella 2000, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Kinsella 2000, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Kinsella 2000, 31.



by the Communist Party USA, contained several socialist comics.<sup>6</sup> There are also many examples from communist countries such as China,<sup>7</sup> Yugoslavia,<sup>8</sup> Poland,<sup>9</sup> and East Germany,<sup>10</sup> of how comics can be used to propagate socialist thought.

As Germanist Silke Horstkotte has pointed out, “[t]elling a story through a series of discrete images accompanied by textual elements is an old and efficient method of addressing, and entertaining the illiterate or semi-illiterate.”<sup>11</sup> This possibility of reaching out to new audiences – in this case audiences made up of people who, although not illiterate, are nevertheless unlikely to be reached by more traditional political (print) media, such as books, journals, or newspapers – has probably been an important reason for the historical use of comics to disseminate left-wing ideas and ideals. As indicated by its title, for example, one of the most well-known examples of a comics work with this aim – *Marx para principantes* (1972, in English as *Marx for Beginners*, 1976) by Eduardo del Río (better known under his pen name “Rius”) – seeks to introduce Marx to an audience not yet acquainted with him or his writings. Evans and Verso’s motivation for publishing *Red Rosa* seems to have been similar to del Río’s. In 2013 Verso began publishing *The Complete Works of Rosa Luxemburg* (which also received support from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung). Thus, they are at the same time presenting Luxemburg’s ideas and ideals in a form that she herself used – that of the traditional book – and in a new form: comics. That the latter could effectively serve as an introduction to the former, or as a way of disseminating Luxemburg’s ideas and ideals to those who might not read her complete works is not a far-fetched idea.

Socialist thought has thus, for a long time, traveled across media, for example from books to comics, as in the examples above. However, these travels result in change. This is stressed by scholars within the “project,” as they themselves call it, of “narrative across media,” such as literary critic Marie-Laure Ryan, who argues that “the intrinsic properties of the medium shape the form of narrative.”<sup>12</sup> In this article, I will take a first step towards an analysis of how the

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<sup>6</sup> Brunner 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Seifert 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Dobrivojevic 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Timofiejuk and Szostak 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Scholz 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Horstkotte 2013, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan 2004, 1.



medium of comics may shape socialist thought, by analyzing how the ideas and ideals formulated by Luxemburg (and, to some extent, by Marx) are affected when expressed in comics form by Evans.<sup>13</sup> However, I will not limit myself here to looking only at *narrative* structures, but also include *rhetorical* structures in the analysis. Furthermore, I will not only study how the medium of comics may shape socialist thought, but also how it might be affected when it is used to present and disseminate such thought.

However, before turning to the analysis itself, it is prudent to give a brief presentation of Kate Evans and Rosa Luxemburg. Evans presents herself on her webpage as a cartoonist, artist, activist, author, mother, and public speaker.<sup>14</sup> She is the creator of several non-fiction graphic works on social and political topics, such as environmental activism (*Copse*, 1998; *Funny Weather We're Having at the Moment*, 2006), breastfeeding (*The Food of Love*, 2008), and the refugee crisis (the already-mentioned *Threads from the Refugee Crisis*). *Red Rosa* is by far her most successful work. Among other things, both the *Observer* and the *Independent* newspapers selected it as a “graphic book of the year,” and it sold out in Britain on the day of its publication.<sup>15</sup>

Luxemburg was born in Poland in 1871, as Rozalia Luxenburg, and is considered one of the most important theorists and politicians of all times within the socialist labor movement (as evidenced, for example, by the fact that Verso is collecting and publishing her complete works). Today, she is best known for her anti-war activism, her theory of imperialism, and her critique of both reformist social democracy and Leninist communism. She was one of the founders of the Spartacus League, which eventually became the German Communist Party. She was murdered by right-wing militia in Berlin in 1919 in the aftermath of the German revolution. Since then she has been viewed as a socialist martyr, and in January every year, thousands of people take part in marches in Berlin commemorating her death.

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<sup>13</sup> In a note to the reader, it is stated that *Red Rosa* is “a fictional representation of factual events,” and that its text and images are based on “[p]hotographic source material” as well as “Luxemburg’s writings” (unpaginated page preceding page 1). The source material – which also includes works by Karl Marx – is presented in a notes-section encompassing more than thirty pages.

<sup>14</sup> Evans 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Evans 2017.



## NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

The most fundamental, and also most obvious, difference between *Red Rosa* and the sources on which it is based is that, whereas many of the latter – for example Luxemburg and Marx’s writings – are mainly verbal, the former, being a comic, has a strong visual component. However, verbal discourse is given an almost surprisingly prominent role in *Red Rosa*. For example, Evans’s first attempt at representing socialist thought takes the form of a scene depicting how Luxemburg presents some of Marx’s ideas to her brothers. This presentation encompasses – as *Red Rosa*’s notes point out – a summary of “the opening chapter of *Das Kapital*,” a “simplified” version of the argument in chapters two and three in the same work, and an explication of “Marx’s incomparably original contribution to economic thought”: the labor theory of value.<sup>16</sup> In this seven-page scene scene, speech (by the character Luxemburg, interpreting Marx’s writing) is represented in 45 out of 47 panels. The role played by images in this scene, on the other hand, is limited. What is described visually is mainly how Luxemburg lectures to her brothers and uses everyday objects to illustrate Marxist concepts, for example declaring that the “pepperiness” of pepper constitutes its “use-value.”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, since the medium of comics is not an exclusively verbal one, but one that combines verbal and visual elements, and even though Evans gives communicative priority to verbal discourse, she must also narrate visually, or at least, as in the scene described above, supplement her verbal narration with images. Her main strategy for doing this, when it comes to representing left-wing thought, is to mimetically represent realistically motivated speech (i.e., speech by characters that is integrated into the plot) in the form of scenes in which Luxemburg is presented in conversation, lecturing, or telling someone something – a representational strategy common also in other visual media, such as film and theatre. The scene described above is a prototypical example of this. Others include scenes representing Luxemburg conversing with fellow activist Clara Zetkin,<sup>18</sup> giving a lecture at the social-democratic party’s school in Berlin;<sup>19</sup> or explaining the “problem of accumulation” to her cat.<sup>20</sup> There are also examples of realistically motivated writing,

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<sup>16</sup> Evans 2015, 180–181.

<sup>17</sup> Evans 2015, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Evans 2015, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Evans 2015, 94–101.

<sup>20</sup> Evans 2015, 107.



such as descriptions of Luxemburg debating in writing with Eduard Bernstein<sup>21</sup> or penning propaganda.<sup>22</sup>

In these scenes, verbal discourse predominates, since the imagery mainly depicts the act of speaking (or writing) or illustrates concepts and ideas already formulated in writing (as in the case of pepper illustrating the “use-value” of “pepperiness”), without adding much new information. Here, then, images play an even less important role than in the “word specific” mode of combining verbal and visual storytelling described by Scott McCloud,<sup>23</sup> since they do not, mainly, illustrate the text’s content, but rather its enunciation (characters’ talking and writing) of this content. According to McCloud, “the more is said with words, the more the pictures can be freed to go exploring.”<sup>24</sup> But Evans does not use this freedom here. Instead, the visual storytelling is subordinate to verbal narration. Nevertheless, comparisons with Luxemburg’s written works show that the comics form as used by Evans does result in changes to the narrative structure.

One example of this is that, in *Red Rosa*, the narrating character Luxemburg becomes more overt than the narrating author in Luxemburg’s books. Take for example the scene in which Luxemburg lectures at the party school. Just like the lectures given by the historical Luxemburg, it is based on an unfinished manuscript from 1909–1910, later published as *Introduction to Political Economy*. In this manuscript, the narrating author has a relatively high degree of visibility:

Since it is the custom for these learned gentlemen to work with definitions, that is, to reduce the nature of the most complex things to a few well-ordered sentences, we shall seek by way of example to find out from one official representative of political economy what this science is basically about. Let us listen first of all to what the doyen of the German professorial world, the author of countless frightfully thick textbooks on political economy, the founder of the so-called “historical school,” Wilhelm Roscher, has to say on the subject.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Evans 2015, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Evans 2015, 59–60.

<sup>23</sup> McCloud 1994, 153.

<sup>24</sup> McCloud 1994, 155.

<sup>25</sup> Luxemburg 2013, 89.



The mocking tone, for example in the description of Roscher as an author of “frightfully” thick books, or in the claim that academics “reduce” complexity to “a few well-ordered sentences,” draws attention to Luxemburg, as does the distance she establishes between herself and the “official representative of political economy.” (A few pages later, this distance is further increased through the following formulation: “Let us try to translate this learned ‘definition’ into the language of ordinary mortals.”<sup>26</sup>) In other words, the narrating author’s discourse in Luxemburg’s *Introduction to Political Economy* is indexical, giving indirect information about the author. However, in the scene in *Red Rosa* in which the lecture at the party school is represented, Luxemburg, who is here a narrating *character*, is directly visible, and hence a more overt presence than she is *as an author* in *Introduction to Political Economy*.<sup>27</sup> After all, being a narrating character in a graphic biography generally means – since the medium of comics is in part visual – to have, quite literally, a high degree of visibility.

In *Red Rosa*, the narrating author (Evans) is – generally speaking – less visible than the work’s protagonist (Luxemburg). And, of course, she is visible only in a metaphorical sense. But she is far from invisible. Evans’s narration is perceptible, for example, in the introduction of the scene at the party school. This introduction has the form of a caption, which is not placed in a textbox, but distinguished from Luxemburg’s direct speech, which is not placed in speech bubbles, by the use of a different font. Here, Luxemburg is referred to in the third person: “Autumn 1907. Rosa is employed to lecture in political economy at a new institution: the SPD Party School.”<sup>28</sup> This is also the case in the narrative caption that describes Luxemburg as “an inspirational teacher” who “never stops learning.”<sup>29</sup> This clear distinction between the narrating character’s (Luxemburg) discourse, and the narrative voice in the captions draws attention to the fact that the latter should be attributed to the narrating author (Evans).

In addition to this, Evans herself appears as a character in *Red Rosa* (see Figure 1).<sup>30</sup> This appearance – which, in the narratological terminology developed by Gérard Genette, constitutes a

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<sup>26</sup> Luxemburg 2013, 94.

<sup>27</sup> Following Richard Walsh (2007, 78), “the narrator is always either a character who narrates, or the author.”

<sup>28</sup> Evans 2015, 96.

<sup>29</sup> Evans 2015, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Evans 2015, 101.



“metalepsis”<sup>31</sup> – is self-reflexively described by Evans as an “authorial intrusion.”<sup>32</sup> One effect of this intrusion is that it draws attention to the kind of narration that is sometimes, mainly within French comics theory, attributed to “an implicit higher level ‘mega-narrator’” or “fundamental narrator.”<sup>33</sup> According to media studies scholar Jan-Noël Thon, narrators of this kind “tend not to be represented as being in control of the selection, organization, and presentation of the verbal-pictorial elements of the overall narration.”<sup>34</sup> Hence, he argues, comics’ “verbal-pictorial mode of representation” can usually “be understood as a form of *non-narratorial* representation.” In *Red Rosa*, however, the authorial narrator is made visible as a character. Thus, the work highlights that its verbal-pictorial mode of representation is narratorial.

Evans, the intrusive author, comments upon, erases, and alters figures that the character Luxemburg has drawn on the blackboard. To be more specific, she – the Evans character – alters Luxemburg’s visual representation of capitalists. Evans motivates the change by arguing that “capitalists no longer wear top hats,” as they do in Luxemburg’s drawings on the blackboard.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, however, Evans claims that, on a fundamental level, the capitalist system is “still the same.”<sup>36</sup>

This brings to the fore an important distinction within Marxist theory, which has been conceptualized by political scientist Michael Heinrich as one between class in a structural sense and class in a historical sense. A class – for example that of capitalists – is determined structurally by its “position in the social process of production.”<sup>37</sup> Historically, however, the same class manifests itself as a social group that “in a particular historical situation” understands itself as a class “distinct from other classes,” distinguishing itself “by means of a common ‘class consciousness.’”<sup>38</sup> In other words, historical manifestations of a class may change over time (after

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<sup>31</sup> Genette 1980, 234–235.

<sup>32</sup> Evans 2015, 101.

<sup>33</sup> Mikkonen 2013, 111.

<sup>34</sup> Thon 2013, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Evans 2015, 101.

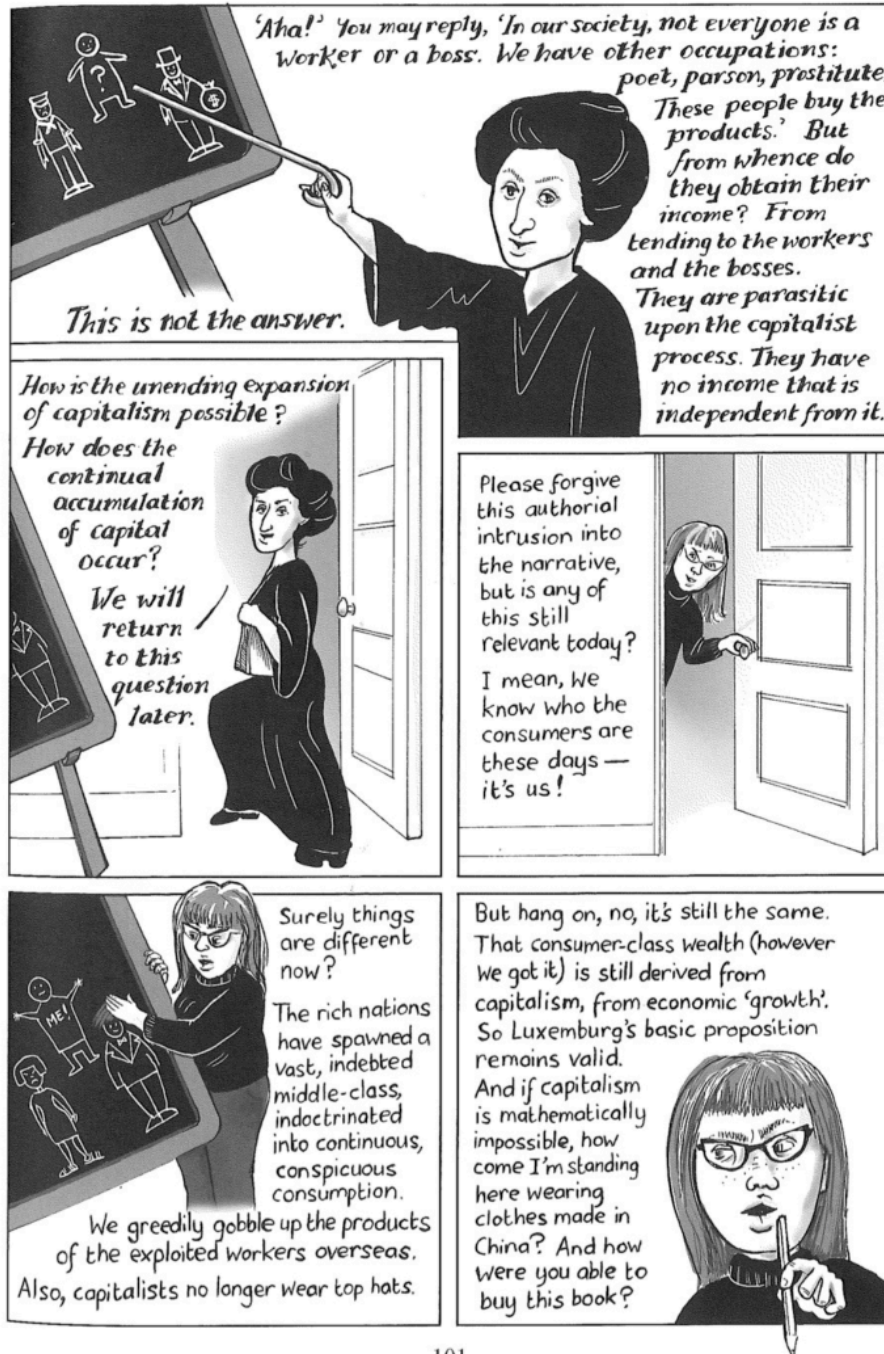
<sup>36</sup> Evans 2015, 101.

<sup>37</sup> Heinrich 2012, 192.

<sup>38</sup> Heinrich 2012, 192.



all, that is what makes them historical), while the class in a structural sense remains relatively stable (as long as the mode of production by which it exists lives on).



101

Figure 1. Kate Evans, *Red Rosa. A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg*, Verso, 2015, p. 101. © Kate Evans



These two aspects of the concept of class are brought to the fore by the intrusive author, who argues that even though capitalists no longer wear top hats, the economic mode of production of capitalism – and, hence, also the capitalist class – still functions by the same logic. In other words: the capitalist class still exists in a structural sense, even if, in a historical sense, it has been radically transformed. But the authorial intrusion also highlights how the character Luxemburg's *visual* representation of the capitalist (as someone wearing a top hat) may obscure the economic role assigned to the capitalist class in Marxist theory.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that we may be held captive by (metaphorical) images in our language.<sup>39</sup> Here, however, it is *real images* (pictures, not verbal imagery) – in the form, for example, of the character Luxemburg's drawings on the blackboard of capitalists wearing top hats – that risk holding us captive, by pushing petrified *historical* manifestations of class into the foreground and thereby obscure the *structural* relationship between labor and capital. In the historical Luxemburg's written work, the capitalist remains an abstract, structural phenomenon (when discussed as such). In *Red Rosa*, the *visual* representation of capitalists risks rendering them concrete and historical, or at least directing the reader's attention toward their historical manifestations. That this is a problem typical for visual storytelling – and, thus, for comics – has been pointed out by many commentators. One example can be found in Will Eisner's *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*: “Static images have limitations. They do not articulate abstractions or complex thought easily.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, the intrusive author Evans' critique is not directed primarily at the historical Luxemburg, but at the author's own creation: the narrating character Luxemburg who propagates socialist ideas and ideals in visual narrative form, and thereby – at least indirectly – at the visual mode of representation that constitutes an integral part of the medium of comics.

## RHETORICAL STRATEGIES

The appearance in *Red Rosa* of an intrusive author, who emphasizes the importance of not viewing class (only) as a concrete and historical phenomenon, can be viewed as an attempt at overcoming a potential problem when expressing left-wing ideals and ideas – or indeed

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<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein 2003, 41.

<sup>40</sup> Eisner 2008, 10.



conceptual discourse in general – in visual form, namely that there is a risk that these ideas and ideals become too concrete or tangible and, thus, invite new kinds of meaning production (in this case: directing attention to the historical, rather than the structural aspects of class). However, using the medium of comics to disseminate left-wing thought necessitates not only the development of different *narrative* strategies – for example the use of metalepsis to comment upon a character’s visual narration – than those used in verbally dominated media, but also the elaboration of new *rhetorical* approaches. Above all, a comparison between Luxemburg’s writings and *Red Rosa* shows that they rely on different strategies of *persuasion*.

Following Aristotle, modern rhetoricians distinguish between three modes of persuasion: *ēthos* (“the projection of the speaker’s character”), *pathos* (“awakening the emotions of the audience”) and *logos* (“logical argument”).<sup>41</sup> The distinctions between these modes are, however, analytical, and in her written work, Luxemburg relies on a combination of all of them. As has already been pointed out, in Luxemburg’s *Introduction to Political Economy*, there is a narrative “voice.” And as Aristotle, perhaps somewhat pleonastically, puts it, “whenever the speech is spoken,” there is persuasion “through character” – *ēthos*.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, as has also already been pointed out, the mocking tone in the presentation by the narrating author Luxemburg of various academic authorities within the field of political economy does indeed project a specific image of its speaker’s character, at the same time as it awakens emotions. But Luxemburg also relies heavily on logical reasoning, as indicated by the following excerpt from a passage summarizing her answer to the question how “the capitalist economy” can “exist and function as a whole” despite “its total lack of planning” and “its lack of any conscious organization.”<sup>43</sup> This happens, Luxemburg claims:

By the capitalist law of value, which on the one hand automatically takes care that wage workers never rise up from the proletarian state and escape labor under the command of capital, while on the other hand making possible an ever greater accumulation of unpaid labor into capital, and thereby ever greater concentration and extension of means of production;

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<sup>41</sup> Aristotle 1991, 37–39; Kennedy 1991, ix.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle 1991, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Luxemburg 2013, 293.



By the industrial reserve army, which provides capitalist production with a capacity for extension and adaptation to the needs of society;

By equalization of the rate of profit, which governs the constant movement of capital from one branch of production into another, and thus regulates the balance of the division of labor; and finally

By price fluctuation and crises, which in part daily, and in part periodically, lead to a balance between blind and chaotic production and the needs of society.<sup>44</sup>

Here, the “speaker’s” character is not very visible, and little is done to awaken the reader’s emotions. Instead, Luxemburg uses logical reasoning, arguing, for example, that the “capitalist law of value” lends stability to the capitalist system by reproducing its basic classes (and even increasing the division between them), that the “equalization of the rate of profit” makes sure that capital can be accumulated in all sectors of the economy, and that crises, contrary to popular belief, actually result in the emergence of “a balance” within the capitalist economy.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the same question that Luxemburg discusses in the passage analyzed above – how the capitalist economy can exist and function despite a total lack of planning and conscious organization – is posed also in *Red Rosa*, where it is phrased as follows: “How is the unending expansion of capitalism possible? How does the continual accumulation of capital occur?”<sup>45</sup> Here, however, no answers are given. And the question is if providing answers would even be possible without radically downplaying the visual aspect of the medium of comics. How, for example, could concepts such as “the capitalist law of value,” “accumulation of unpaid labor,” “means of production,” “the industrial reserve army,” “rate of profit,” “price,” or “crises” be defined and discussed visually with logical stringency?

Still, it is not in any way unthinkable that strategies for logos-based persuasion in comics form could be developed. For example, McCloud’s argument, that by “de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form, the cartoon places itself in the world of concepts,”<sup>46</sup> indicates that the distinction between verbal/conceptual and visual/concrete

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<sup>44</sup> Luxemburg 2013, 293–294.

<sup>45</sup> Evans 2015, 101.

<sup>46</sup> McCloud 1994, 41.



representation, upon which the association between verbal and logos-based argumentation rests, is not absolute. However, developing strategies for logos-based persuasion is not what Evans does in *Red Rosa*. Instead, she presents and propagates Luxemburg's (and Marx's) socialist ideas and ideals by relying more on *ēthos* and *pathos* than on logos-based reasoning.

The shift of focus in *Red Rosa* away from logos-based persuasion toward persuasion based on *ēthos* and *pathos* is not the result only of a *problem* (i.e. that it is difficult to communicate logical arguments visually). The medium of comics also *invites* these kinds of strategies of persuasion. The emphasis in *Red Rosa* on *ēthos*-based persuasion, for example, is facilitated by the fact that Luxemburg is a narrating character that is represented visually. Since she is visible in a concrete and direct way in *Red Rosa*, the character Luxemburg is always more overt than the narrating author in the historical Luxemburg's written works. Furthermore, Evans not only presents Luxemburg's ideas and ideals, but also describes her life, thus providing the reader with more information about the narrating character Luxemburg than Luxemburg's own works give about their author.

When reading the scene in *Red Rosa* that describes Luxemburg's lecturing at the social-democratic party's school, for example, readers have already been presented with an image of her as someone who studies hard;<sup>47</sup> who mesmerizes the other delegates at the Socialist International with her speeches;<sup>48</sup> and who has published a doctoral thesis on the industrial development of Poland,<sup>49</sup> and so on. Thus, her *ēthos* is already established. However, it is also further developed in this scene, where Evans argues that Luxemburg is "an inspirational teacher because she never stops learning."<sup>50</sup> This could be interpreted as an emphasis on one of the three aspects of *ēthos* defined by Aristotle: *aretē* ("virtue").<sup>51</sup> But a teacher who never stops learning does not only display a (teacher-specific) virtue. Since she lets her students (and the readers of *Red Rosa*) benefit from her learning, she also displays "good will," which, according to Aristotle, is another aspect of *ēthos*: *eunoia*.<sup>52</sup> A teacher who is dedicated to learning will also acquire wisdom of a

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<sup>47</sup> Evans 2015, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Evans 2015, 41.

<sup>49</sup> Evans 2015, 43.

<sup>50</sup> Evans 2015, 100.

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle 1991, 121.

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle 1991, 121.



kind that, for teachers, is very practical indeed. Thus, the characterization of Luxemburg in this scene also highlights the last aspect of *ēthos* defined by Aristotle: *phronēsis*, which means precisely “practical wisdom.”<sup>53</sup>

There are many scenes in *Red Rosa* that may stir up feelings in the reader – such as the one showing Luxemburg being abused, killed, and dumped from a bridge by members of the right-wing Freikorps<sup>54</sup> – but these are seldom *directly* connected to the promotion of Luxemburg’s socialist ideas and ideals. In some cases, however, her ideals are represented in a way that does give priority to pathos over logos. The perhaps best example of this is the image on the cover of *Red Rosa* (which also appears in the book) of Luxemburg carrying the theatre of war on the back of her head (see Figure 2). This display of Luxemburg’s devastation – the war seems to literally weigh her down, and the expression on her face indicates that she is tormented by the fact that soldiers are marching toward their death on the battlefield – might very well move the reader into sympathizing with Luxemburg’s anti-militarist ideals.

However, the same image may also be criticized for corrupting Luxemburg’s view of the war. Luxemburg was a fierce opponent to World War I, and the description in *Red Rosa* of her devastation when it broke out is probably true to the historical facts. However, the pathos-laden picture of the war weighing her down has an abstract character that is foreign to Luxemburg’s critique of the war. It shows Luxemburg lamenting soldiers marching to the battlefield where they are killed by exploding bombs. But it does not show *why* she reacts the way she does. Luxemburg was not a pacifist. She was a revolutionary socialist who wanted to overthrow the capitalist state by mass actions that did not exclude armed force. In an infamous formulation in an article published in *Die Rote Fahne* (*The Red Flag*) – the central organ of the organization of which she was a founding member; the Spartacus League – on November 24, 1918, for example, she argued that whoever stands in the way of the socialist revolution will be left lying on the ground with crushed limbs.<sup>55</sup> Thus, it was not the fighting as such that she opposed, but the fact that workers marched out to fight each other, instead of turning their weapons against their

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<sup>53</sup> Aristotle 1991, 121.

<sup>54</sup> Evans 2015, 167, 172.

<sup>55</sup> Luxemburg 1979, 414. The original quotation reads: “Wer sich dem Sturmwagen der sozialistischen Revolution entgegenstemmt, wird mit zertrümmerten Gliedern am Boden liegenbleiben.” It has often been used to undermine Luxemburg’s *ēthos*, thereby discrediting her critique of the Bolsheviks’ use of terror and their lack of respect for political rights such as the right of expression and political democracy.



capitalist oppressors. This is not shown in the image, which, hence, evokes feelings in the readers, but does not properly connect these feeling to the reasons behind Luxemburg's lamentation.

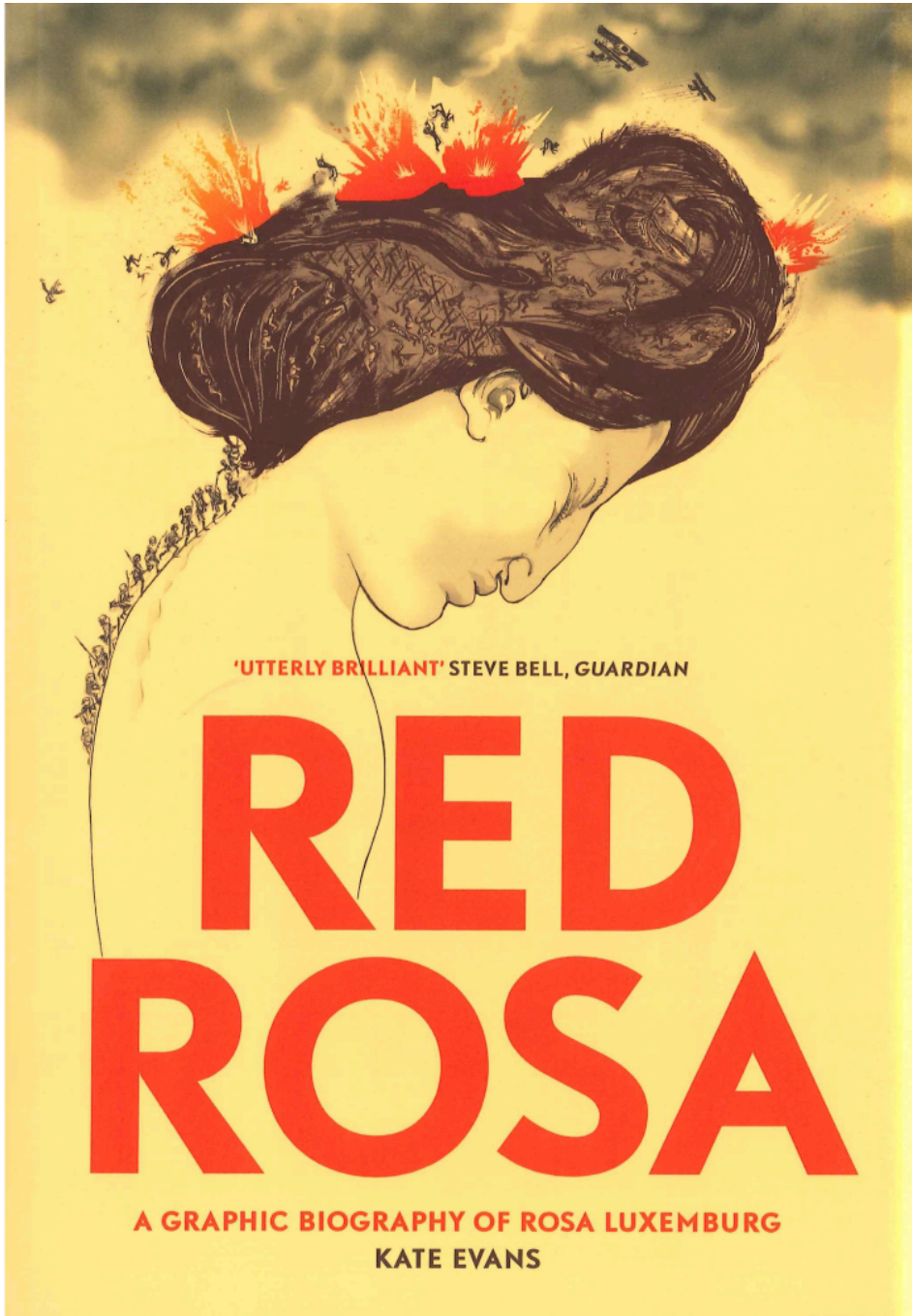


Figure 2. Kate Evans, *Red Rosa. A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg*, Verso, 2015, cover. © Kate Evans



Another interesting example of the emphasis on pathos in *Red Rosa* can be found in the description of Friedrich Ebert. He was the leader of the German Social-Democratic party from 1913, and after World War I he became Germany's first president. In these capacities, he played a key role, first in supporting the German war effort, and thereafter in striking down the revolutionary movement after the war. Thus, he represented a tendency within the labor movement diametrically opposed to the one to which Luxemburg belonged. However, in *Red Rosa*, this opposition is not only described in terms of political differences, but also as a difference between two personalities, and whereas Luxemburg could be said to be idealized – through, for example, Evans' praise of her, or the omitting of her support of revolutionary violence – Ebert is definitely caricatured. As a student at the party school, he is portrayed as being totally incapable of abstract thinking, and hence of understanding the concept of dialectics. "How can something contain its opposite?" he asks, and continues: "It makes my head hurt. I like things to be straightforward, either black or white."<sup>56</sup> As president, he is portrayed as a slob who is so fat that he cannot button his shirt, who stands at strict attention when receiving orders from general Ludendorff, and who talks while shoveling food down his throat.<sup>57</sup>

This caricaturing is an example of argumentation by way of pathos, since it aims to evoke negative feelings toward Ebert. (It can of course also be understood as persuasion through *ēthos*, since it undermined Ebert's political ideals by questioning his virtuousness.) Examples of a similar strategy can be found in Luxemburg's written works, for example in the mocking tone she uses when describing professor Roscher (see above). But whereas in *Introduction to Political Economy*, caricature – and, hence, pathos (and/or *ēthos*) – works in tandem with logos-based argumentation demonstrating the differences between Luxemburg's view of political economy and the dominant academic view, in *Red Rosa* it constitutes a *central* strategy for establishing an opposition between Luxemburg and Ebert.

Many commentators have pointed out that comics and other forms of visual narrative often tend toward simplification. The literature scholar Nina Ernst states, in her doctoral dissertation about graphic autobiographies, that simplifications and exaggerations are necessary for the creation of visual narratives,<sup>58</sup> and Eisner even goes as far as arguing that stereotyping is a fundamental

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<sup>56</sup> Evans 2015, 99.

<sup>57</sup> Evans 2015, 151–152.

<sup>58</sup> Ernst 2017, 35.



feature of the art form of comics: “Comic book art deals with recognizable reproductions of human conduct. Its drawings are a mirror reflection, and depend on the reader’s stored memory of experience to visualize an idea or process quickly. This makes necessary the simplification of images into repeatable symbols. Ergo, stereotypes.”<sup>59</sup> However, it would, of course, not have been impossible for Evans to describe the opposition between Luxemburg and Ebert in a more analytical way, or to be more precise regarding the representation of Luxemburg’s critique of World War I. This is indicated not least by her nuanced discussions about the capitalist class in a structural and historical sense, as well as her rather detailed explication of ideas from Marx’s *Capital*. The caricaturing of Ebert in *Red Rosa* is, in other words, not *determined* by the medium of comics. However, when compared to Luxemburg’s written works, the comics form used by Evans seems to *invite* a move away from logos to *ēthos* and *pathos*, and this move may, at least to some extent, effect the representation of Luxemburg’s socialist ideas and ideals.

## CONCLUSION

As was stated in the introduction to this article, the possibility of reaching out to new audiences has probably been an important reason for the historical use of comics to disseminate left-wing ideas and ideals, and this is probably also one of the motivations behind the publication of *Red Rosa*. The fact that Evans’ graphic biography has been a success both in terms of critical reception and in terms of copies sold indicates that the strategy has been a good one. However, as I have hoped to demonstrate above, the migration of socialist ideas and ideals from the verbal media in which they were originally formulated to the medium of comics, which combines visual and verbal communication, results in an interplay between left-wing thought and the medium of comics, which has consequences for both.

On the one hand, the medium of comics seems to invite certain narrative and rhetorical strategies that have specific effects for the interpretation of left-wing ideas. The shift in focus described above, away from logos-based toward *ēthos*- and *pathos*-based persuasion, which may obscure the specific socialist character of Luxemburg’s antimilitarism, is an example of this. On the other hand, the ambition to stay true to left-wing ideas and ideals also has consequences for how the medium of comics is used. One example of this is the fact that Evans often gives priority to verbal

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<sup>59</sup> Eisner 2008, 11.



discourse, for example by representations of realistically motivated speech and writing. However, a more interesting example is her introduction of an intrusive author, which not only self-reflexively thematizes and discusses the relationship between abstract concepts and visual narration, but also emphasizes – by drawing attention to authorial narration – the narratorial aspects of its visual representations.

Thus, a comparison between Evans' *Red Rosa* and Rosa Luxemburg's written work shows that Evans' use of comics form does indeed condition her representation of left-wing ideas and ideals, but that those ideas and ideals can also function as catalysts for the development of new narrative and rhetorical strategies. Hopefully, this can serve as a starting point for a more systematic analysis of the relationship between socialist thought (as well as other ideas) and the medium of comics.

Other questions that are brought to the fore by my analysis of the migration of socialist thought from predominantly verbal media such as those used by Luxemburg and Marx to the medium of comics – but which have not been analyzed here – include the possibilities to use comics to disseminate political ideas in social spheres in which more traditional media might not be very effective, and perhaps even to contribute to the deconstruction of the borders between both social spheres and media. The long history of comics promoting socialist thought – ranging at least from the Marxist comics published in Japan in the 1920s to the contemporary works by Evans and other socialist comics artists – indicates that this has probably already happened. Analyzing this – which requires a shift of focus away from texts to audiences, media, and public spheres – should be an important task within the field of comics research.



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COMEDIC HERESY IN THE HUMOR OF *THE*  
*BOONDOCKS*

by Mikko Poutanen





## INTRODUCTION

This forum text approaches the concept of comedic heresy as a style of humor in the syndicated comic and animation series *The Boondocks*. *The Boondocks* follows the lives of two African American teens, Huey and Riley Freeman, living in a suburban home in the predominantly white community of Woodcrest, with their grandfather, Robert Freeman. The last name of the family is hardly a coincidence. The comic, written and originally drawn by Aaron McGruder, appeared as a syndicated comic from 1996 to 2006 in over three hundred newspapers.<sup>1</sup> The comic, having initially enjoyed very limited distribution for three years in various small outlets, made its debut in national syndication in 1999, and became both popular and controversial due to its humor, which focused on political issues and race relations in the United States. The comic was followed by an animated TV-series that ran for four seasons between 2005 and 2014 on the Adult Swim network. Both the comic and the show elicited controversy as their humor was often judged to be unsophisticated and crude.

While the focus of the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* is largely on comics in particular, the animated TV series also deserves attention here, since it allowed McGruder to shift from topical comic strips commenting on the news of the day<sup>2</sup> to broader, more enduring issues of race and politics in US culture. The satirical edge of the comics was rerouted to more complex issues that would have required episodic treatment in one-to-four-panel comic strips. The animated series thus also displayed the evolution of McGruder's comedic style.

In this forum text the particular style of humor espoused by *The Boondocks* is regarded as an act of cultural heresy that seeks to break through the status quo of race relations in the United States. Writing specifically on the cultural impact of *The Boondocks*, communications scholar Jennifer Heusel offers cultural heresy as a way of explaining how a comedic aspect should be understood as a particular way of signaling subversive intent against prevailing cultural, societal, and political orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Cultural heresy is similar to, yet distinct from, the concept of culture jamming, which

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<sup>1</sup> Timmerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 170.

<sup>2</sup> One of McGruder's typical set-ups for his strip is to have the characters sit in front of a TV and react to topical news or cultural commentary.

<sup>3</sup> Heusel 2014.



is also often associated with satirical humor that seeks to undercut the established modes of representation (e. g. comedic fake news outlets criticizing feckless mainstream media).<sup>4</sup>

Given how strongly embedded a cultural and political orthodoxy can be, a heretical style of humor can be considered to have close affinity with social movements that equally problematize the status quo of race relations, such as Black Lives Matter. McGruder points out problems and very real discrepancies in the way that life in the black community in the US is perceived. That said, McGruder's humor is not exclusively racial, relating also to asymmetries of social and financial power in general.

The purpose of this forum text is to define the conditions for socio-political orthodoxy (i.e. the status quo) and heresy (radical change movements), and argue that the style of humor represented in *The Boondocks* can be conceptualized as an expression of the latter. Elaborated instances from two selected episodes of *The Boondocks* animation series ("The Return of the King": S1E09 & "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman": S3E01) will be used to illustrate the argument put forward in this text to provoke a spirited discussion on the nature of conservative and radical societal forces and drives being expressed through the medium of humor. The first episode relates directly to the historical persona of Martin Luther King Jr., and the latter to the election of Barack Obama. A further discussion would seek to also encompass the comic strips to expand on the scope of this argument.

## ORTHODOXY, HERESY AND CULTURE JAMMING

In the context of societal orthodoxy heresy offers emancipatory critique<sup>5</sup> that seeks to challenge its readers and viewers to not simply accept the status quo as it is represented, but to question it actively, to the extent of seeking to overturn the dominant representations of cultural orthodoxy.

McGruder's critique of the problems facing black culture could fall into this comedic style; ideally McGruder would like to see a more honest reckoning of the reality and challenges facing black American culture, for which purpose he was willing to re-appropriate the figure of Dr. Martin

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<sup>4</sup> Warner 2007.

<sup>5</sup> As heresy tries to overcome the restrictions set on thinking and individuals by the orthodoxy, the critique it offers against the orthodoxy could be seen as emancipatory critique.



Luther King Jr.<sup>6</sup> The civil rights struggle led by Dr. King relied heavily on the ideal of equality, which is perhaps why McGruder chose to use his figure to deliver his own message. Given the revered status of Dr. King, utilizing his persona as a platform would amount to heresy.<sup>7</sup> However, Heusel and other commentators have pointed out that the revered status of Dr. King has in fact been appropriated for the “post-racial” orthodoxy.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the radical side of Dr. King has been marginalized in favor of a canonized figure of “consensus and conciliation.”<sup>9</sup>

When comedic heresy targets the socio-political orthodoxy, the style of humor is inherently political. A serious argument being couched in entertainment is by no means a new phenomenon in the United States,<sup>10</sup> as audiences are attracted to humorous situations because they anticipate an “affective payoff”<sup>11</sup> for dealing with serious matters in a way that is not entirely serious. Popular culture as political commentary stands a high chance of fostering “accidental” knowledge acquisition.<sup>12</sup> Comedic heresy can include this positive payoff, as it undercuts the orthodoxy that more diverse audiences also on some level recognize.

While humor can be utilized to “transcend recurring arguments or patterns because messages with humor can get people to laugh at contradictions as a way to accept their existence,”<sup>13</sup> heretical humor or satire might arguably be less interested in motivating the acceptance of this existence, and more in challenging it. In other words, “while there is the possibility of reaffirming the stereotypes in this process, there is also the promise and possibility of creating a perspective that while not eliminating the stereotypes or their history, does hold out hope for moving beyond them.”<sup>14</sup> At its best, satire and humor built on race relations can effect “a liberating sabotage of the past’s hold on the present.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lee 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Especially as McGruder had MLK use the n-word several times, to which many in the African American community took offense, see Heusel 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Heusel 2014; Terry 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Terry 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Baum 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Young 2008, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Feldman 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Meyer 2000, 329.

<sup>14</sup> Tinnerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 171.

<sup>15</sup> Carpio 2008, 15.



This established representation of for example race relations in the United States is what we characterize as the orthodoxy. In short, orthodoxy can be understood as the dominant set of circumstances of the moment. Orthodoxy is exemplified in “common sense,” and it often fits in the understanding of the world as is held by those in a position of relative power. In this form orthodoxy can be understood as nearly synonymous with hegemony, or hegemonic representations. As such, it is often in the interests of the (hegemonic) orthodoxy to secure its position, for example by pre-emptively defusing critique and legitimizing its existence and power structures.<sup>16</sup> Orthodoxy seeks naturalization through its practices and institutions, making agents complicit in it. Accordingly, orthodoxy entails conservatism, as change would endanger the status quo. Orthodoxy is the currently prevailing hegemony, but it is by no means eternal; it is, in fact, constantly assaulted by competing worldviews, which appear heretical to the hegemony. In other words, the normal state is a contest between heresy and orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup> A powerful form of heresy can overturn the previous hegemonic orthodoxy and become installed in its stead.

Within this chosen perspective, heresy is the primary mode of attacking orthodoxy. Heresy seeks to delegitimize orthodoxy and deny it its reason for existence. Heresy, to put it bluntly, finds the orthodoxy unjust as it directly serves the limited interests of those who reproduce the notion of orthodoxy. In so doing heresy often ends up also attacking those agents who either have a stake in the preservation of the orthodoxy, or are so captured by it that they do not truly appreciate the possibility of alternate – and definitely not of better – social arrangements. We should note that being labeled a heretic does not so much mean rejection of the orthodoxy as it does being rejected by the orthodoxy. Comedic (or satiric) heresy can therefore be understood as reactive rejection of the orthodoxy’s implicit or explicit claim to authority and, in so doing, enabling new perspectives.<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to heresy against the media orthodoxy, professor of political science Jamie Warner sees satirical programs like *The Daily Show* as an instrument of culture jamming, i. e. of using mainstream techniques in a form of rhetorical sabotage, creating and disseminating “dissident interpretations of current political events, potentially jamming the transmission of the dominant

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<sup>16</sup> Howard 2010, 321–323.

<sup>17</sup> Kurtz 1983.

<sup>18</sup> Tinnerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 171, 173.



political brand message.”<sup>19</sup> This is a conceptualization of culture jamming that bears close resemblance to that of heresy, and to how *The Boondocks* relates to racial issues in socio-political context. It is possible for socio-political commentary delivered through the vehicle of humor to endow entertainers with the roles of blasphemers, who refuse to take claims favoring the status quo seriously.<sup>20</sup> In the case of racial heresy in particular, it bridges the gap between racial ideology and humor that has resulted in part “because of a tendency to restrict public discourse on issues of ethnicity and race to polite but ultimately disengaged exchanges that suppress true feelings.”<sup>21</sup>

For McGruder himself, the comic strip shows a sharpening of his heresy, naming not the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 as his point of radicalization, but the change in national discourse that followed, when “[j]ournalists stopped being journalists. All this cheerleading started.”<sup>22</sup> He adds that by observing these issues, his comedy started to write itself, and he became a political cartoonist. McGruder’s heretical swipes at patriotism, however, were not unproblematic: the comic was often pulled from circulation out of fears of offending the nation’s sensibilities. Once radicalized, however, the heretical voice would spread from one field of cultural commentary to another.

## POST-RACIAL HERESY AND ORTHODOXY IN “THE RETURN OF THE KING”

As political comedy, *The Boondocks* offers political commentary about events and social and cultural underpinnings that may be omitted from the usual cycle of political debate, emphasizing the African American experience in particular. Of course, the animated show could not react to topical events as immediately as the syndicated newspaper strip could, which would suggest that *The Boondocks* as a television series could take aim at more overreaching, even systemic issues with more expansive treatments and thematic emphasis than the comic strips. This is why, for this forum text, we will primarily discuss the comedic heresy expressed in the animated series, rather than the more reactive and specific instances covered in the topical comics.

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<sup>19</sup> Warner 2007, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, Baym, and Day 2012, 37–38.

<sup>21</sup> Entman and Rojecki 2000, 160.

<sup>22</sup> Braxton 2004.



In both terms of topics and form, *The Boondocks* arguably sees itself within the American comedic context as an outsider, and thus it feels entitled to criticize its cultural hegemony. In *The Boondocks* this question is delivered notably through Huey Freeman, who is depicted as a child. Thus the perceived innocence of children is co-opted for delivering heresy, as children are understood as speaking truth to power without concepts of censorship, which are later socially learned. This is evidenced by *The Boondocks'* unwillingness to immediately share the assumed ideals underlying its fictional narratives. The fictionality of the show is very visible in the episode "The Return of the King," where instead of being murdered, Dr. King was shot and fell into a coma and woke up in the year 2000. While controversial, the episode won the Peabody Award in 2006.

The resurrection of Dr. King in the animated episode marked a clear departure from the distanced – even alienated<sup>23</sup> – memory of Dr. King described in the comics;<sup>24</sup> alienated in the sense that Dr. King's message has been largely reduced to a ceremonial remembrance of something that used to be. Typically references to Dr. King in the comics were related to Martin Luther King Day, a national holiday in the United States, or the celebration of Black History Month in February.<sup>25</sup> The animated episode, presenting a walking and talking Dr. King in 21<sup>st</sup> century world, emphasized this disconnection.

The episode's implicit references to Dr. King's famed "I have a dream" speech make fictionality strongly present. Literary scholar Henrik Skov Nielsen and his colleagues note that the original speech itself operated as a fiction where "today's dream is imagined as tomorrow's reality, and King asks his audience to see today's inequality through the lens of the imagined racial equality of the future."<sup>26</sup> In her discussion on orthodoxy and heresy, Huesel discusses the form and idea of Dr. King's "beloved community,"<sup>27</sup> which could be interpreted as a sort of social justice utopia,

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<sup>23</sup> Riley Freeman does not even know who Dr. King is, despite being given ample hints at school. When asked which King suggested one should "turn the other cheek," Riley answers "Rodney King," an infamous subject of police brutality, "accidentally" doubling down on his heretical ignorance (McGruder 2003, strip 4, p. 49).

<sup>24</sup> McGruder 2003, strips 2–4, p. 49 and strip 1, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> McGruder 2003, strip 2, p. 53 and strip 2, p. 251; McGruder 2007, strip 1, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Nielsen and Walsh 2015, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Huesel 2014. Dr. King notes that lasting improvements also necessitate concrete resources: "The changes [so far] are basically in the social and political areas; the problems we now face – providing jobs, better housing and better education



where post-racial social relations would be reality. In self-serving political rhetoric, this utopia is often depicted as already reached, a notion that *The Boondocks* challenges.

For the orthodoxy a radical figure like Dr. King is dangerous, as his personality allows for a platform of heresy, for example in his opposition to the Vietnam War at a time when popular support for the war was of crucial interest to the orthodoxy of power in the United States.<sup>28</sup> After his death Dr. King's legacy has been excessively reinterpreted and reappropriated to suit new social and political agendas,<sup>29</sup> reducing him from a social activist to an ideal or idol, with his rhetoric reduced to something that is read about, as opposed to something that still depicts and challenges social reality.<sup>30</sup>

Heusel remarks how heresy became a necessary tool to "expose how postracial acculturations of MLK's iconography and the beloved community narrative are devoid of MLK's dynamism."<sup>31</sup> Professor of sociology at Georgetown University Michael Eric Dyson comments further: "[Dr King] has been made into a metaphor of our hunger for heroes who cheer us up more than they challenge or change us."<sup>32</sup> In the heretical reimagining of Dr. King in *The Boondocks*' "The Return of the King" his figure finds his heretical voice both in social and linguistic terms: while Dr. King deplores the state of the civil rights struggle – and doing so, notably, from the pulpit<sup>33</sup> – he also overtly uses "the n-bomb," which was upsetting for many African American audience members.<sup>34</sup> In other words, *The Boondocks* sought to jolt the viewer out of complacency, and out of the understanding of MLK as a quiet, distant figure.

Comedic heresy takes the part of social activism here and denies the orthodox line which holds that Dr. King's goals have already been met, and that the United States as a nation has transcended racial divides. In contemporary US society, with mounting tensions between the police and black communities due to systemic tendency towards egregious police brutality, this

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for the poor throughout the country – will require money for their solution, a fact that makes those solutions all the more difficult" (King 1986, 321).

<sup>28</sup> King 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Bostdorff and Goldzwig 2005, 684–685.

<sup>30</sup> E. g. Dyson 2000, 4; King 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Heusel 2014, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Dyson 2000, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Tinnerman, Gussman, and King 2012, 181.

<sup>34</sup> Heusel 2014, 24, 26, 33.



heresy seems very aptly placed. To summarize the problem of (progressive) heresy being reappropriated by the (conservative) orthodoxy as a vehicle for the perpetuation of the status quo, the canonized form of Dr. King is “devoid of the dynamic characteristics necessary for addressing current racial and economic challenges in light of past achievements and failures.”<sup>35</sup>

*The Boondocks* episode emphasizes that the dream is unrealized, and that Dr. King’s speech has been largely co-opted by the status quo to cover for very real – nonfictional – problems in contemporary society. Instead, the episode in the animated series deconstructs the speech and figure of Dr. King to what McGruder offers as a radical and revolutionary heretical message – truer to Dr. King’s original form. *The Boondocks* seems to argue that whatever damage its claimed disrespect has done to the idol of Dr. King is offset by the ongoing damage done to Dr. King through his idolization. Contextualizing the key heretical moment of the episode, Huey remarks that “Dr. King looked out at his people and saw they were in great need. So he did what all great leaders do: he told them the truth, but not just any truth, he told the ugly truth that gets people angry.” Engaging in heresy on a topic this sensitive, then, is no joke: McGruder emphasizes that most of what he writes about is not actually funny to him, but extremely serious.<sup>36</sup> At the end, however, the entire episode is revealed to be a figment of Huey’s imagination but, as he notes, “it’s fun to dream.”

## POST-RACIAL HERESY AND ORTHODOXY IN “IT’S A BLACK PRESIDENT, HUEY FREEMAN”

In our second example, the represented orthodoxy can be exemplified by the oft-claimed “end of racism” with Barack Obama’s election as President of the United States in 2007. It should be pointed out, that even though McGruder’s attention had started to shift from the comic strip to the animated series, the strip still extensively covered the 2004 presidential campaign between George W. Bush and John Kerry, siding with the Democratic nominee, but finding the whole contest rather meaningless and Democrats as a party utterly feckless.<sup>37</sup> Without a cause or conviction, heresy finds no effective ground to argue from. The 2007 election was only covered by

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<sup>35</sup> Heusel 2014, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Braxton 2004.

<sup>37</sup> McGruder 2005.



the animated series, which took a distinctly heretical tone when it came to the first black president.

The orthodoxy, by definition conservative in nature, seeks to undercut further calls for reform or progressive policy by claiming that, surely, the goal has already been reached. If an African American man can become president, then this must be taken as clear indication of the post-racial maturity of the United States. This is a dangerous assumption, glossing over several persistent and institutional problems relating to race relations in the United States, such as the comparatively extremely high incarceration rates of black men.<sup>38</sup> In the foreword to Michelle Alexander's book, Cornell West argues that the so-called Age of Obama can be characterized as a time when racial symbols breached political surfaces, but sometimes only to keep covered the systemic problems of both black and poor communities still devastated by mass unemployment, social neglect, and police surveillance.<sup>39</sup>

The language of colorblindness is often understood as a step forward, as post-racial progress, but critical scholars again argue that it is in fact an expression of disinterest: "We recognize that mobility may be difficult, but the key to our collective self-image is the assumption that mobility is always possible, so failure to move up reflects on one's character."<sup>40</sup> In theory, perhaps, colorblindness is a fine idea, but not while established structures of racial discrimination exist.<sup>41</sup> The illusion of mobility is leveraged to create legitimating camouflage to the socio-political orthodoxy, while it frustrates the heretical observer.

In the episode "It's a Black President, Huey Freeman" McGruder demands that the audience reflect on what, truly, has changed for the better; while Obama's electoral victory is a momentous occasion, it has neither stopped nor rewritten history.<sup>42</sup> Critical scholars have warned against interpreting advancements especially in race issues in the United States too positively – individual advancements have to be read in the context of enduring systemic injustice.<sup>43</sup> In this, the episode attacks the complacency and conservatism of orthodoxy head-on. McGruder's heresy suggests

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<sup>38</sup> Alexander 2011; Roediger 2008.

<sup>39</sup> West 2011, x.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander 2011, 13.

<sup>41</sup> Roediger 2008, 180.

<sup>42</sup> Kang 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Roediger 2008.



that the celebration of Obama's electoral victory by white Americans was, to them, a celebration of the end of racism, and the end of white guilt. Alexander further comments that the current "system of control depends of black exceptionalism; it is not disproved or undermined by it."<sup>44</sup> In other words, while the election Obama was highly symbolic, it could not turn back decades of institutionally embedded social practice.<sup>45</sup> Seeking to be perceived as a unifying, rather than a polarizing figure, President Obama signaled his willingness to work with the orthodoxy. As a political move it was an understandable one for a mainstream politician, but at the same time it lessened much of the potential for heresy or radicalism that had been attached to Obama's candidacy.

This explains why in the episode Huey comments upon seeing people celebrating Obama's election as the birth of a new era in a frustrated and lackluster way: "what is the point of talking if no one understands?" Huey expresses a deeper understanding of the social issues plaguing the black community that are not – and cannot – be offset by the inauguration of just one man. Indeed, Obama can be accepted by the orthodoxy – as long as he does not directly challenge it – because his success can be represented as proof of the impartiality of the system and the equality of potential. Decidedly going against this view proffered by the orthodoxy, Huey Freeman, the self-proclaimed black freedom fighter, finds nothing to celebrate in Obama's inauguration.

With the benefit of hindsight from the year 2018, this attitude appears accurate, if not prescient. The mass protests against entrenched police violence from which people of color suffer disproportionately signaled that Obama's election and two terms did not radically alter race relations and power dynamics in the United States. To enter political office in the United States demands a de-radicalization of any African American, considering how often Obama – a senator and a law professor before his campaign – still had to distance himself from any such affiliations as president.<sup>46</sup> The struggle of the Black Lives Matter movement, which proposed the heretical message that, in the culture and experience of everyday life in the US, black lives accounted for very little, was met furiously by the status quo, from which screeching proclamations that "All

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander 2011, 14, 248.

<sup>45</sup> David Roediger (2008, xi-xii) writes that "[r]ace defines the social category into which peoples are sorted, producing and justifying their very different opportunities with regard to wealth and poverty, confinement and freedom, citizenship and alienation, and [...] life and premature death."

<sup>46</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor makes a more vocal indictment by stating that "[t]he Black political establishment, led by President Obama, had shown over and over again that it was not capable of the most basic task: keeping Black children alive" (2016, 152).



Lives Matter” soon rang loud. The latter slogan reinterpreted the Black Lives Matter movement’s message that “black lives should matter too” as instead meaning that “only black lives matter,” thus casting the heresy in the most damnable light. The All Lives Matter countermovement was specifically a restatement of the status quo that defuses the critique of heresy.

Finally, the campaign and subsequent election of Donald Trump in 2016 showed that socio-political progress is not linear, and when the status quo is upset, heresy can be mounted on both sides. Trump’s version of heresy could be described as “reactionary,” considering that political commentators like Ta-Nehisi Coates have pointed out that Trump’s electoral victory would not have been possible had he not been preceded by an African American president.<sup>47</sup> In other words, while Trump’s rhetoric is heretical in nature, it is contextualized as a response to previous heresy, and thus in favor of the orthodoxy of white supremacy in the US. Trump’s presidency is, in fact, “All Lives Matter” made concrete.

## DISCUSSION

It seems clear that achieving social acceptability is not the goal of *The Boondocks*, even though it might eventually succeed in attaining acceptability as orthodoxy changes and adapts to incorporate the critiques voiced through heresy. These power structures are not, after all, fixed, though they are durable and show high resistance to change. To bring about change, comedic heresy requires a disavowal of easy escapism in favor of self-reflection and critical thinking through popular culture. While some voices might argue for a more prudent approach, especially when it comes to dealing with race,<sup>48</sup> such careful navigation seems anathema to effective heresy. Heresy is not interested in “opening a dialogue” or any similar form of discursive domestication, understanding inherently that suppression or redirection of heresy is in the interests of the orthodoxy. Heresy contests the political space to criticize the orthodoxy’s control of and through discourse. However, that dialogue may open as a byproduct of heretical critique.

Thus the critical scrutiny performed by scholars like Alexander or Roediger of the argument over the existence of true colorblindness in the US is fraught with controversy: in the ears of those who have sincerely attempted to establish an orthodoxy of social support over decades of social

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<sup>47</sup> Coates 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Rossing 2014, 302.



programs specifically aimed – or at least interpreted by their promoters as aiming – to reduce discrimination, arguments that claim the continued existence of discrimination both politically and economically is the very definition of heresy. We should thus understand, once again, that heresy can attack the carefully built self-image of quite a few social and political actors, who will, quite naturally, respond to heresy with ire.

*The Boondocks* delivers its heretical messages because McGruder assumes – very plausibly – that other societal actors co-opted into the orthodoxy would have little interest in doing so. Instead of branding heretical interventions in popular culture as cynical, they should perhaps be recognized as idealistic, pointing out acute points of social and racial problems in a way that is more accessible to some audiences than traditional sources of political commentary. While the power of satire to facilitate and guide political learning is too broad for this forum text, it is nonetheless worth considering.

*The Boondocks* animated series should be treated as an extension – if not an expansion – of a particular brand of cultural heresy that McGruder began with his syndicated comic strips. The transfer between media shows how cultural heresy displayed in comics can gain a foothold in popular culture and gather power in the form of controversy and attention, audiences and acclaim. This forum text has situated *The Boondocks* – comic strip and animation – within a hopefully growing body of culturally heretical works and illustrated the value of cultural heresy as a way of looking at competing works of cultural hegemony. Although McGruder has since discontinued his work on the comic strip and the subsequent animation, *The Boondocks* elaborates on the relations of class and race in the United States. One potential direction – too extensive to be covered here – would be to investigate how *The Boondocks* represents the accessibility of other culturally salient artifacts, such as the American Dream, to African Americans. With US orthodoxy on matters of race as deeply embedded as it is, and with *The Boondocks* having pulled few punches, the litany of McGruder's heresies remains to be read in full, but read it must be, for it has much to teach.



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# COMICS ACTIVISM, A (PARTIAL) INTRODUCTION

by Martin Lund





The medium of comics has a nearly limitless communicative potential, at least theoretically. Most, but by no means all, definitions of comics agree on this. Specifically, for this forum text, I am basing my understanding of comics on creator and theorist Scott McCloud's definition of the medium:

**com·ics** (kom'ics) **n.** plural in form, used with a singular verb. **1.** Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.<sup>1</sup>

To briefly unpack this definition, comics are pictures placed in relation to one another, the "other images" being words in speech bubbles, and caption boxes, as well as various other elements of composition, such as stylized onomatopoeic sound effects. The pictures are organized in deliberate sequence to be read, most commonly (but not necessarily) in the form of a narrative. Like all forms of media, comics are produced to convey information, i. e. to carry a message, which can be of an entertaining, didactic, ideological, or, as in the case of this text, activist nature – and sometimes all these at once. Often, this message is coupled with an attempt to elicit a response from the reader.

McCloud's definition, then, introduces a medium that can be filled with different contents by writers and artists, rather than trying to limit it to specific forms or contents.<sup>2</sup> As McCloud puts it: "The artform – the *medium* – known as comics is a *vessel* which can hold any *number* of *ideas* and *images*."<sup>3</sup> When filled, the medium often veers into political territory, whether intentionally or not. Political, ideological, and cultural hegemonies are often reproduced in comics that are not primarily about such issues, but what I am interested in discussing here is what we can label, quite simply, "activist comics" and their corollary, "comics activism." Both terms are fairly self-evident, but it is nonetheless worth unpacking what is meant by their use here, before moving on to examples.

These labels are potentially controversial, and I use them with a measure of reluctance. After all, the words "activist" and "activism" carry baggage. To a certain degree, I am sympathetic to community organizer Jonathan Smucker's criticism of "activism" as a term that says little: labels

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<sup>1</sup> McCloud 1993, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of limiting definitions include Waugh 1947, 14; Inge 1990, 3; Rhoades 2008, 2.

<sup>3</sup> McCloud 1993, 6. Emphases in original.



are useful, he notes, but as a broad category, “activist” speaks of nothing, as opposed to labels like “suffragette,” “abolitionist,” “populist,” or “socialist,” which point to specific content; it is “an apparently ‘content-less’ label that now traverses political issues and social movements.”<sup>4</sup> Further, the term “activist,” Smucker rightly points out, has the air of an individually self-selected affinity that is not all that different from any other kind of hobbyist’s. I also agree that a “fledgling movement that attempts to attract only individuals as individuals, one at a time, will never grow fast enough to effect big systemic change.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, it is also probably true, as Smucker writes, that the label “activist” causes some people to shut down or at least become less receptive to the message of people so labeled, and that some see activism as a clearly delineated compartment from which they can exit when entering certain situations and contexts and re-enter later on. One need look no further than a facile slogan that has popped up sporadically since around the election of Donald Trump – “protest is the new brunch” – to see how easily political participation can be bracketed off as a thing you do every now and then.

Valid though these criticisms may be, they still do not warrant throwing the word “activism” out with the bathwater. Indeed, what Smucker sees as a weakness in practical organizing (where abandoning the “activist” label in most cases might indeed be warranted), I see as a strength in theorizing: the term makes a distinction “between the active social change participant and the society.”<sup>6</sup> And while Smucker is right that it “lets everyone else off the hook,” the distinction is crucial: the reality is that there are those who are actively working for social change and – in far greater numbers – those who are not, in every realm of social and cultural life, including comics. For that reason, some labeling is necessary, and it happens here with two caveats: 1) I make no claim that the definition below captures the “essence” of the nebulous collection of phenomena and ideals and practices labeled “activism,” but use it only to clarify and frame the thinking that follows; and 2) the terms “activism” and “activist” are used as heuristic categories that include many subdivisions that are related more concretely to identifiable ideological content (“feminist activism,” “socialist activism,” “identity politics,” etc.).

Although I know it makes me guilty of making recourse to hackneyed writing tropes, I must present a dictionary definition of activism: Merriam-Webster defines “activism” as “a doctrine or

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<sup>4</sup> Smucker 2017, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Smucker 2017, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Smucker 2017, 32.



practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue.” Following this definition, at its absolutely simplest articulation, the term “comics activism” refers here to the practice of creating comics in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue, and the term “activist comics” to comics that are created specifically and explicitly to present the creator(s)’s given politics on a specific issue. The comics discussed here do not simply allow individual readers to passively pat their own backs for feeling a certain way about an issue or make a splash only to shrink away from it by the end of the story or by the beginning of the next, status quo invisibly reinstated.

For Smucker, the goal of strategic engagement in the terrain of politics is to “contribute to the politicization of presently de-politicized everyday spaces; to weave politics and collective action into the fabric of society.”<sup>7</sup> Counterintuitive though it might seem, since Smucker articulates this goal as an alternative to the “make-believe world of activism,” this is why I use the recognizable category of “activism” here, for all its faults. In the sense outlined above, “comics activism” and “activist comics” delineate and identify those within the largely de-politicized<sup>8</sup> field of comics who are working towards its politicization, as creators and as critics, as makers and as readers, and the comics they produce and read.

What follows is a condensed report from an ongoing research project in the early stages. By necessity, it is incomplete. There is not enough space here to cover all the ground a term like “comics activism” frames. Nor is there room to discuss examples from more than one context. All examples are taken from the US comics field. The purpose is to offer an initial, albeit imperfect, attempt at theorizing and exemplifying a heretofore largely invisible field of comics, in the hope of sparking interest in others about the theory and practice of comics activism.

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<sup>7</sup> Smucker 2017, 38.

<sup>8</sup> As noted, all comics are in some ways already and always politicized. “De-politicized” is used here as a reference to the frequent – but by no means total – absence of acknowledgment of this fact and of a contestation of “the cultures, beliefs, narratives, and common sense of-and from within” (Smucker 2017, 38) comics as a cultural field, industry, and institution.



## A (VERY) BRIEF PRE-HISTORY

The graphic arts are no stranger to voicing political support or opposition, whether to the reigning orthodoxy or to progressive or radical critique of that orthodoxy. Woodcuts and broadsheets were used for these purposes from the very beginning of mass print, shortly after the invention of the printing press.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps no story better illustrates the legacy of the cartoon arts as political tools in America than the famous, and possibly somewhat overblown, story of the corrupt New York political player “Boss” Tweed’s fall from grace in the 1870s. According to the story, cartoonist Thomas Nast supposedly played a crucial role in Tweed’s downfall. When Nast launched a campaign against Tweed, to publicize the politician’s gross malfeasance in cartoons, the boss is supposed to have responded by saying that they “need to stop them damned pictures! I don’t care much what the papers write about me—my constituents can’t read. But—dammit!—they can see pictures!” Tweed eventually had to flee the city and a lengthy jail sentence, but he was apprehended in Spain and sent back to the US; apparently, he was identified by Spanish authorities through a Nast cartoon.<sup>10</sup>

By Nast’s day, the comic strip had begun slowly taking shape, at a lumbering pace morphing and melding into a form similar to what we recognize today. Political cartoons remained a commonplace in many publications, but more and more magazines and papers added comic strips to their repertoire, some of which were of an activist bent. As the 1930s dawned the comic book, a format that had similarly been taking shape in fits and starts over a long time, finally found a form that it would continue to have, with only minor changes, until the present. While activism was not unheard of in these early comic books, it was not overly common; the form would rather focus on propaganda during the World War II years, first against the fifth column of spies, infiltrators and saboteurs that was supposedly undermining the US, and later directly in favor of the American war effort.

After the war, changes in US culture eventually led to the emergence of a counterculture, and with that, the dawn of underground comics, or comix. Many of these undergrounds were oppositional, but more to cultural mores than to political circumstances; they were long on sex, drugs, and profanity, but in general short on politics, with important exceptions, particularly

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<sup>9</sup> For an in-depth history, see Kunzle 1973; 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis 2005, 350, 356.



when it comes to anti-war undergrounds. As a phenomenon, the undergrounds were by no means apolitical, but their politics were, in many cases, unfocused.<sup>11</sup> That changed in the early 1970s, with the emergence of women's comix, which heralded a doubly activist turn: first, it marked the first time women were truly able to produce comics stories on their own, a prerogative that had to be actively taken;<sup>12</sup> and second, it is probably the first time in American comics history that any organized sense of group movement and belonging fueled comics creation in a sustained way. More feminist comics would follow in the succeeding decades, and more and more forms of comics activism would appear.

## (SOME) TYPES OF COMICS ACTIVISM

This short text cannot cover all varieties and variations of comics activism, but will restrict itself to comics that deal with issues of gender, police brutality, and ethnoracial identity. As befits the historical narrative sketched above, it begins with feminist comics.

The idea that the personal is political, a phrase popularized by Carol Hanisch in 1970, was born out of a feminist response to claims by others that women's discussion groups were focusing on personal issues rather than structural ones. The phrase was meant to articulate that the oppressions suffered by women – and, by extension, by people of color, LGBTQ, and other disenfranchised groups – are not simply individual problems to be tackled by that individual alone, but patterns that are part of larger structures and that require concerted, collective action and opposition.<sup>13</sup> In more recent years, notes Smucker, the phrase has been put to use to mean its opposite: that uncoordinated individual action can be and is political intervention.<sup>14</sup> However, writes Smucker, “with its original meaning, the phrase *the personal is political* spoke to the process of fragmented and isolated individuals coming to identify as a group with common–or *political*–grievances and goals, rather than merely personal problems or shortcomings. This is the

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<sup>11</sup> Sabin 2001, 92–104.

<sup>12</sup> Sabin 2001, 104.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Crenshaw 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Smucker 2017, 72–73.



process of *politicization* in a nutshell.”<sup>15</sup> When it comes to American comics, this process seems to have taken its start at the margins of the underground comix movement.

As cartoonist Trina Robbins describes the situation in the underground, “[t]he big problem, if you were one of the few cartoonists of the female persuasion, was that 98% of the cartoonists were male, and they all seemed to belong to a boy’s club that didn’t accept women.”<sup>16</sup> Teaming up with fellow cartoonist Barbara “Willy” Mendes, Robbins co-edited the first known all-female comic book, the 1970 underground anthology *It Ain’t Me Babe Comix*. The cover, which featured a group of well-known female comics characters marching, called for “Women’s Liberation!” Its contents were similarly radical. *Babe* was quickly followed by a number of comix by women, such as the anthology *Wimmin’s Comix* (1972–1992; originally *Wimmen’s Comix*), which was designed by Robbins and her co-creators to provide a platform for new comics creators, while Joyce Farmer and Lyn Chevli’s *Tits and Clits Comics* (1972–1987) was meant to “bring a sense of humor to the women’s movement.”<sup>17</sup>

Having started as a response to the misogyny and sexism of the underground and provided a forum for women to speak, explicitly and politically, about issues that affect women,<sup>18</sup> feminist comics have kept inspiring women to make comics and to speak out even as society and the comics industry have remained mired in the same problems. Although the anthology format has become less common over the years, the spirit of the early activist feminist comics remains very much alive today and finds expression in many and varied ways. It is impossible to here chart the history of this subfield of American feminist comics, but a few examples of more recent vintage must at least be introduced briefly, in order to show the breadth of contemporary feminist comics activism.

One key recent example is Leela Corman’s *Unterzakhn* (2012). Set in New York City’s Lower East Side in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Unterzakhn* follows the lives of two Jewish American twins as their paths diverge widely.<sup>19</sup> In the comic, Corman addresses historical American attitudes towards

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<sup>15</sup> Smucker 2017, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Robbins 2016, vii.

<sup>17</sup> Sabin 2001, 105.

<sup>18</sup> McAllister, Sewell, Jr., and Gordon 2001, 8–9.

<sup>19</sup> Corman 2012.



Jews and immigrants and discusses issues of class, but perhaps the most pronounced thread deals with perceptions of the place and proprieties of female sexuality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Particularly palpable are the problems attached to female sexuality, contraception, and abortion, themes that are notably similar to contemporary debates on reproductive rights and “slut-shaming” discourses, down to the still often attendant double standards connected to both. Two years after *Unterzakhn*, in December 2014, writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and artist Valentine De Landro launched their ongoing series *Bitch Planet* with Image Comics.<sup>20</sup> Set in a future where “non-compliant” women are sent to a prison colony on a different planet, *Bitch Planet* is a feminist pastiche of the “women in prison” subgenre of exploitation films with a large dose of dystopian science fiction that takes critical aim at the treatment of women and patriarchal ideas about what a woman should be and do. The relentless satire is visible on the comics page itself, as well as in satirical advertising pages and in full-page spreads such as the “Is She a Feminist” page (Figure 1) that purports to identify signs that a woman is “dangerous.” These warning signs are all-encompassing and laden with condescension, making existence in the public sphere a no-win situation for women and thus putting the satire very close to reality:

Look at how she carries herself: is she stooped over, weighted down by concerns that her female brain is not equipped to handle? Or does she stand tall, defiant, perhaps bolstered by a dangerous and incendiary temper?<sup>21</sup>

What all of these comics have in common, and what they share with many others not mentioned here, is that they are all rooted in a shared desire to expose and thus hopefully change ingrained cultural patterns of patriarchal oppression and the marginalization of women, to counteract violence against women in whatever form it might take, and to promote real gender equality. In other words, although they differ in many ways, and are more than “just” their politics, they are all feminist comics.

Like misogyny, racist formations and stereotypes of blackness have been part and parcel of American comics since their beginnings, and attempts to counter them, or to create comics free from them, have been made since at least the 1940s, but they have come to wider attention only more recently. From 1947’s *All-Negro Comics*, a one-shot small-print comic book that is the first

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<sup>20</sup> DeConnick and De Landro 2015; 2017.

<sup>21</sup> DeConnick and De Landro 2017, np.



known comic written and illustrated exclusively by black creators, to *Black* (Sept. 2016– ), a superhero series by Kwanza Osajyefo, Tim Smith 3, and Jamal Igle about a world in which only black people have superpowers, black comics creators have carved out spaces in the historically overwhelmingly white field of American comics and highlighted the realities of being black in a nation founded on white supremacy.

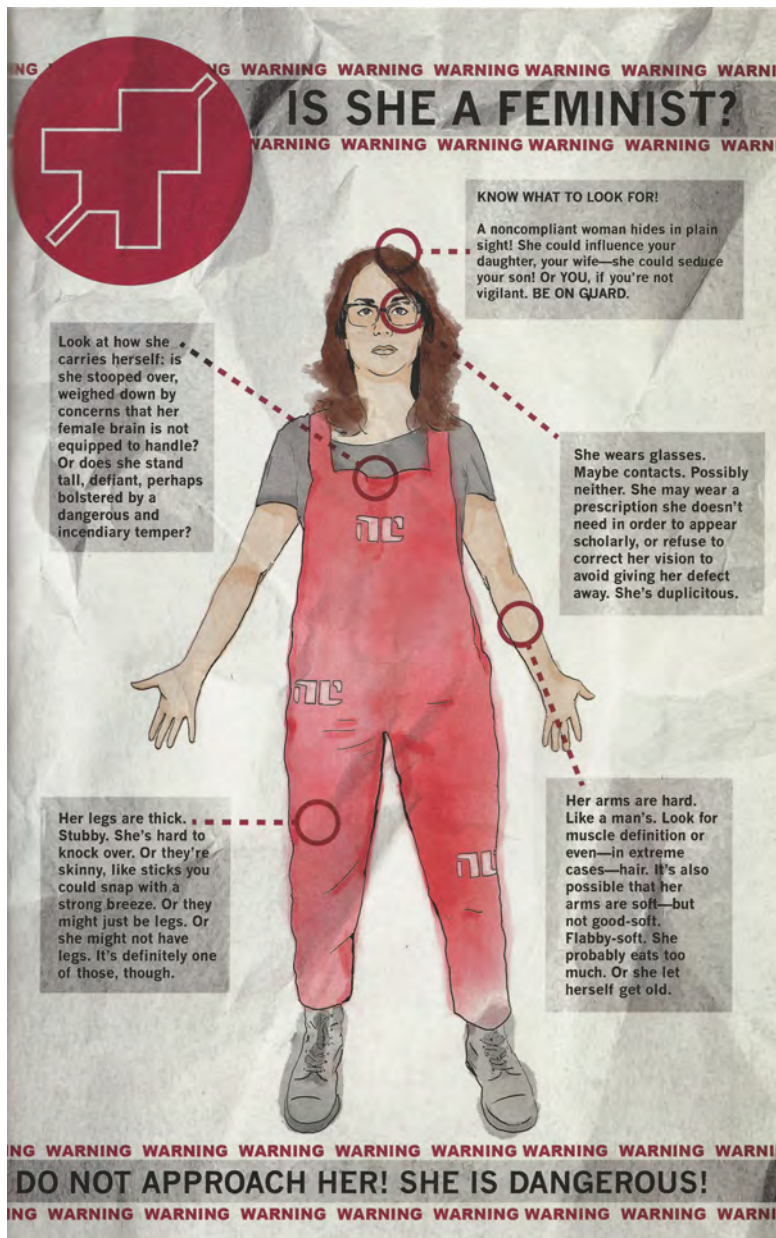


Figure 1. De Landro, Valentine, *Bitch Planet: President Bitch*, Image Comics, 2017, np. © Image Comics.



An important structural element of American life, culture, and society is the distinction between whiteness and blackness, and especially the construction of the latter as inferior. This idea was crucial to the maintenance of the institution of slavery; to the emergence of the Jim Crow system of racial oppression that replaced slavery after its abolition; and to the racially oriented system of mass incarceration and militarized policing of black bodies in the wake of the initial decade of the Civil Rights movement. Today, this form of systemic racism manifests in many ways, including in police brutality and in the increasingly more visible killing of unarmed black Americans by police.<sup>22</sup>

It is this last feature of racial formation in American life that I want to focus on here. It is at the heart of *Black*, the first issue of which reveals the existence of superpowers when the protagonist Kareem Jenkins is racially profiled and shot by police, only to discover that he has survived the encounter.<sup>23</sup> As such, *Black* starts off as a power fantasy in more than one way, tied intimately to present realities. But, although it is one of the most recent accountings in American comics of the skewed racial power dynamics of the US and of the oppression and violence that continue to result from them, it is far from the only one. For example, Keith Knight's weekly comic strip *The K Chronicles* (1993– ) that blends observational and often autobiographical humor with social commentary, and his *(th)ink* series of political cartoons, have repeatedly broached the topic of police brutality. In 2015, Knight self-published a 38-page collection of his strips and cartoons on the topic, titled *They Shoot Black People, Don't They?*<sup>24</sup> On the dedication page – “to the countless victims of brutality at the hands of those hired to serve and protect” – the cartoonist explained the origin of the collection:

As I was drawing a cartoon about the goings-on in Ferguson, Missouri, this past summer, I realized I'd been drawing cartoons about police brutality of black and brown people for damn near 20 years. Here's what I've been churning out, from the Rodney King beating on....

The collection provides a look back at the recent history of racialized police brutality in the US, the message of which is clear: nothing will change unless police face real consequences for their

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Roediger 1999; Painter 2011; Alexander 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Osajyefo, Smith 3, and Igle 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Knight 2015; a comprehensive collection of Knight's strips from 1993 to 2004 can be found in *Complete K Chronicles* (Knight 2008).



actions. Connecting Knight's comics activism to other realms of protest and struggle, his police brutality collection includes links to the ACLU, Black Lives Matter, and Cop Watch, and comes with an insert containing contextual and sometimes humorous notes about the strips and cartoons included, as well as a text by journalist and cultural critic Chuck "Jigsaw" Creekmur about "15 Ways To Stop Police Brutality."<sup>25</sup> Further, Knight offers a slideshow and lecture on the topic.



After this **(th)ink** panel ran, a few editors called me and to say that people were calling and complaining that it was a racist cartoon. I always ask editors if they could tell what race the callers were. As far as they could tell, they were white people. Black people are too busy experiencing this shit to complain about a cartoon. The cartoon isn't racist—the act that it is portraying is racist. I told my editors that if white people complained as much about profiling and brutality as this cartoon, there might be something done about it.

Figure 2. Knight, Keith. *They Shoot Black People, Don't They?*, self-published, 2015, p. 5. © Keith Knight.

<sup>25</sup> Creekmur 2014.



Similarly connecting comics activism with other forms of activism and advocacy is Rosarium Publishing's *APB – Artists Against Police Brutality* (2015), edited by Bill Campbell, Jason Rodriguez, and John Jennings. Born out of anger at the “utter predictability”<sup>26</sup> of the court’s decision to not put the officers responsible for the death of Eric Garner on trial, and the history of oppression that preceded it and made it, and countless deaths like it, possible, the anthology contains short comics in a wide variety of styles, from the brutally realistic to the caustically humorous, as well as cartoons, pin-ups, prose pieces, and essays. While the contributions express many things – anger, fear, sorrow, despair, hope – a common thread winds throughout the anthology, a desire to highlight “the human cost of the police brutality in a way that statistics cannot.”<sup>27</sup> Still, *APB* ends with a three-page list in miniscule font containing every person killed by police in the US (881) between the day the book was announced (Dec. 15, 2014) and the day it went to print (Sept. 11, 2015). Combined with the specific and personal narratives, the statistics attain even more force. The proceeds from *APB* went to the Innocence Project, a non-profit dedicated to exonerating wrongfully convicted people.

One final example: *#BlackLivesMatter: The Comic Book 2015*, is a comic of much smaller scale than the previous examples, but an important one nonetheless. Produced in 2015 as part of The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem’s Junior Scholars Program, it recognizes the ability of comics “to convey a large amount of information in a short time” and the medium’s “power to connect humanity.”<sup>28</sup> The comic, which focuses on police targeting people of color and, in echo of the social movement from which it takes its title, offers a call to understand an indisputable but under-acknowledged fact: that black lives matter. It also serves an important dual purpose: on the one hand, it helps bring attention to a gross miscarriage of justice and a structural inequality in American society; on the other hand, it teaches children that they can oppose these structures and that there are many different ways of doing so.

Finally, comics autoethnographies are texts in which the marginalized (in the original usage colonized) represent themselves “in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms.”<sup>29</sup> The concept regards ethnography as one group’s representations of its Others to itself, and frames

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<sup>26</sup> Campbell 2015, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Chambliss 2016, 95.

<sup>28</sup> Abdullah et al. 2015, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Pratt 1992, 7. Emphasis in original.



autoethnography as a way for those represented as Other to respond to or enter into dialogue with ethnographic representations. Thus, autoethnography involves a grappling with and partial appropriation of the majority's idiom for speaking about the minority while also transcending it. In short, autoethnography as the term is used here is a way for members of marginalized and minority groups to challenge stereotypes and faulty representations of the group and to offer a counter-representation, whether collective or individual.

The past fifteen years or so have seen a flood of comics autoethnography, the range and variety of which is breathtaking. The category, broadly defined, includes such works as Will Eisner's *Fagin the Jew* (2003), in which the author challenges anti-Semitic representations by giving the eponymous protagonist Fagin, a character from *Oliver Twist*, a past and a life of his own that was denied by his original author, and then having him challenge Charles Dickens directly for his representations of Jews.<sup>30</sup> It includes Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* (2006), which combines three seemingly unconnected narratives – one about the mythological Monkey King, one about a second-generation Chinese American teenager, and one about a white teenager and his walking stereotype cousin from China – into a single, highly reflective narrative about Chinese American identity formation in the US.<sup>31</sup> And it includes Toufic el Rassi's *Arab in America* (2007), in which the author tells about a life lived in the shadow of anti-Arab and Islamophobic sentiment, propaganda, and foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> Although these comics could not be much more different from each other in tone and style, they all serve to challenge representations and prejudices about social, cultural, and ethnoracial groups that are regarded as different from the implicit white norm of who is (and is not) an American.

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<sup>30</sup> Eisner 2003.

<sup>31</sup> Yang and Pien, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> El Rassi 2007.



## ACTIVIST COMICS WILL NOT CHANGE THE WORLD – BUT COMICS ACTIVISTS SHOULD NOT STOP TRYING TO

No comic will ever spark a revolution. No comic will ever single-handedly change the world. That is not how the world works, and it is not how comics work, no matter how immediately or with how much force they communicate. Rosarium's founder Bill Campbell writes eloquently about this fact and why, in the long run, it does not matter:

Like the Vietnam protestors back in the day, nobody involved in this project thinks that when *APB* is released, the justice machine will suddenly see the error of its ways, things will be reformed, and we will all live happily ever after. This ain't no Tom Cruise movie.

However, what we desire is to simply further the dialogue, make some people see this debate in a different light, perhaps change a mind or two, and, most importantly, exercise our freedom of speech in honor of all those who have had their voices silenced.<sup>33</sup>

There is a realistic sense of pessimism here, but also hope. The central ideas speak to what Mikko Poutanen notes in his text in this issue, that orthodoxy dies hard, but that it can be challenged, and that only through challenge will there ever be hope for change. Put differently, there cannot be a revolution before there is what organizer Saul Alinsky called a "reformation": "Any revolutionary change must be preceded by a passive, affirmative, non-challenging attitude toward change among the mass of our people. They must feel so frustrated, so defeated, so lost, so futureless in the prevailing system that they are willing to let go of the past and chance the future. This acceptance is the reformation essential to any revolution."<sup>34</sup> Whether you call it a "reformation," or heresy, or consciousness-raising, or a hope to "change a mind or two," the basic understanding is the same: new ideas take time to introduce and find acceptance. And for that to happen, they must be spoken about, often, and in ways that people can understand intellectually, morally, and emotionally. Comics is uniquely well suited for that task.

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<sup>33</sup> Campbell 2015, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Alinsky 1989, xix-xx.



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# A GREAT COMPANION FOR THE I.N.D.U.C.K.S. SEARCH ENGINE

by Katja Kontturi





Review: Alberto Beccattini: *Disney Comics. The Whole Story*. Theme Park Press, United States of America, 2016. ISBN 978-1-68390-017-7, 449 pages.

In the foreword to Alberto Beccattini's 2016 book, *Disney Comics: The Whole Story*, historian Didier Ghiz writes that "if Disney history is only understood as the history of American cartoons and theme parks, you are missing a large part of Disney's creative history" (p. viii). As a Disney comics scholar, I could not agree more: Beccattini's book is a much-needed attempt to make the comics branch of the Disney phenomenon known worldwide. It is an encyclopedic guidebook to Disney comics published globally that offers useful references to even the rarest pieces of work published under the Disney label.

Alberto Beccattini is an Italian Disney historian, whose previous works have mainly been published in Italian and include, among others, the unofficial biography of the Disney artist Don Rosa, titled *Don Rosa e il rinascimento disneyano* [*Don Rosa and the Disneyan Renaissance*.] (1997). His most recent work is *Guido Martina e l'età d'oro Disney in Italia* [*Guido Martina and the Golden Age of Disney in Italy*] (2017), which concentrates on the noted Italian Disney artist Guido Martina, who specialized in parodic and Disneyfied interpretations of various literary classics. None of Beccattini's work has been translated into English before, so it is a cause for celebration that it has finally been made available to a broader range of scholars and is able to serve the interest of a wider readership.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *DISNEY COMICS*

The most (in)famous among available studies of Disney comics remains the pamphlet *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, published in 1971 by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart. Although their reading and analysis of the Disney comics has unquestionable value, the reference system is poorly executed, and the authors fail to mention their source comics, which damages the depth of the work. In addition, their studies are solely based on translations of the original comics. *How to Read Donald Duck* accuses Walt Disney personally for the capitalist and imperialist values in Disney comics, even though Disney himself



did not have much to do with the comic branch of his company.<sup>1</sup> The field of Disney comics studies needs more critical scholarly approaches.

Conversely, *Carl Barks and the Disney Comic Book: Unmasking the Myth of Modernity* (2006) by Thomas Andrae, has been by far the most promising work amongst Anglophone Disney scholarship written in this century, a field that has otherwise offered up work ranging from good to middling. However, whatever its quality, much of this work has a glaring blind spot: it is exclusively focused on American-made Disney comics. It is high time for Anglophone Disney studies to open its eyes also to Disney comics from Europe and beyond. Becattini's book, which was originally published in Italian in the mid-1990s and has finally been translated into English and revised to be up-to-date with the comics published since its original publication, can serve as an invitation to expand this horizon, and that is one of its primary strengths.

It is unfortunate that the English language dominates academic research on Disney comics, yet it is also pertinent to bring discoveries made in various European countries written in their own languages available for wider academia. The translation of Becattini's book was undertaken not (only) to provide a curiosity or resource for Disney comic collectors, but it also serves as proof that Disney comics are valued elsewhere than in the US, especially in Europe, a fact that should be noted in the field of comics research as well. Hopefully, Becattini's *Disney Comics: The Whole Story* will serve as a wake-up call for Disney comics scholars globally to bring their research to the Anglophone table.

## THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DUCKS, MICE, AND ADAPTATIONS

Becattini's book is divided into twelve sections, structured mainly around country of publication. He has done a tremendous job by listing both popular and rare comics published not only in the United States, Italy, and South America, but in European countries with smaller readership and circulation.

The majority of the book is primarily dedicated to US Disney comic books, and secondarily to Italian Disney comics. The former focus is based on the works and significance of Carl Barks (1901–2000). By far, Barks has been the most-studied Disney artist among comics scholars and

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<sup>1</sup> Kontturi 2014, 22-23.



fans. “The good artist,” as he is called by Disney fans and scholars, is claimed to be one of the most popular storytellers of his time:<sup>2</sup> “His stories reflected traditions and contradictions peculiar to the United States yet at the same time dealt with universal themes – which is why they have been so popular all over the world” (p. 39). Though Becattini notes that there were other American comic artists working during the time of Carl Barks, they were largely left in the shadow of the master after his name was made world-famous.

The inclusion of a large Italian Disney comics section is explained not only by the fact that Becattini is himself Italian, but also by the statistics: the major part of the Disney comics industry is today concentrated in the Italian market, which produces comics for the magazines all over Europe. The Italian *Topolino* magazine (from the Italian name for Mickey Mouse) has a long-standing history: it was issued on the last day of the year 1932, making it the first Disney comics magazine outside the United States. Notable about the Italian Disney comics, is the influence of the country’s culture and history: even in their early years, the milieu in Italian Disney comics was more Italian than American. And since Guido Martina introduced parodies of literary classics with “L’Inferno di Topolino” in 1949, literary adaptations have been a typical trope in Disney comics of Italian origin. However, as Becattini notes, Martina got the inspiration for the comic from the Sunday strip “Mickey Mouse vs. Robin Hood” (1936) by the American Floyd Gottfredsson (p. 167).

## SMALL FACTS AND SOME FICTION

Alberto Becattini has not only managed to compile a massive encyclopedia of Disney comics, but his book also includes some interesting anecdotes. Even in the early 1940s, the American artists included quite a lot of inside jokes into their works. For instance, Al Taliaferro used his own phone number in the Donald Duck strip, as Donald’s number, and received a great number of phone calls as a result (p. 22). And Jerry Siegel, the co-creator of Superman, apparently worked for *Topolino* between 1972 and 1979, scripting 155 comics (p. 185-186)!

Despite the detailed work and research put into Becattini’s book, however, there are some obvious shortages. Firstly, even though the significance of Carl Barks is addressed, his follower,

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<sup>2</sup> Andrae 2006, 6



Don Rosa is not discussed in equal depth. Becattini fails to mention that Rosa is in fact the only Disney comic artist ever to receive a highly valued Will Eisner Award (twice, in fact), or that the main reason for his retirement was not his eyesight (p. 270), but his problem with the Disney industry.<sup>3</sup> Also, *BOOM! Kids* (an imprint of the BOOM Entertainment publishing house) comics' listing (p. 105) does not include the unfinished Don Rosa collection (*Walt Disney Treasury: Donald Duck vol 1 & 2*, 2011).

Some minor details also caught my eye. The book remarks on seventy-six years of Disney comics history (p. x), although it would make eighty-six years from the first Mickey Mouse strip (13<sup>th</sup> of January 1930) to the publication of the Becattini's book (2016). Perhaps he has based his numbers in the first issue of the comic book *Mickey Mouse Magazine* published in September 1940. The title of the chapter "Scandinavian Way" is misleading, since Finland is not part of Scandinavia, but rather a part of the Nordic countries. In addition, although Finnish Disney artists are listed in the book, Finnish Donald Duck fan culture is not discussed at all. As a citizen of a nation that claims to read the most Disney comics in the world per capita, the comparison between the comics readerships in different countries would have been an interesting subject to consider, since Becattini brought it up concerning the Netherlands, where their weekly had 236,000 readers – including subscribers and sales in 2014 (p. 331). According the latest (2016) KTM readership survey of the magazine readership in Finland, the weekly *Aku Ankka* magazine had 674,000 subscribers. It was the third most read magazine in the country.

## CONCLUSION

*Disney Comics: The Whole Story* is indeed an encyclopedia, not a study or a detailed analysis of the comics listed, but it does not promise to be anything else. The amount of detail and the focus on publication years make the book a great companion for the I.N.D.U.C.K.S. search engine, an online Disney comics database. What is indeed unfortunate, however, is that the Walt Disney Company seems not to have granted the author permission to reproduce, which means that there are no reference images, panels, or cover art present in the book.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosa 2013



Furthermore, I would have liked to see a concluding chapter that summarizes the book's most important observations: what is the readership of Disney comics in general and what is the difference between the comics' popularity in different countries. All in all, *Disney Comics: The Whole Story* is not perfect, but it is a more than adequate tool for the collector or researcher who needs an overall idea of Disney comics globally, or who wants to know some minor details of a certain rare comic.



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