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Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Image & Narrative

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

La Cour, E., & Spanjers, R. (2016). Ingratiation, Appropriation, Rebellion: Comics' Sociability in the Milieux of Art and Literature. *Image & Narrative*, 17(4), 1-4.

<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/imagenarrative/article/view/1312>

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Ingratiation, Appropriation, Rebellion: Comics' Sociability in the Milieux of Art and Literature

Erin La Cour and Rik Spanjers

Comics have become sociable. This does not mean, of course, that comics—in whatever shape or form—have not always been created and read in various social settings. Rather, this statement points to a consideration of the ways in which comics participate in different milieux. Until rather recently, both mainstream and underground comics culture have been relatively isolated from literature, art, film, and academia. Now, with increasing frequency, comics are discussed in the literature sections of newspapers, win literary prizes, are exhibited in museums and galleries, are sold in major auction houses, inspire blockbuster multimedia franchises, and are featured in university courses in disciplines as diverse as literature and medicine.

Comics' newfound sociability has gone hand-in-hand with academic discourse on the position of comics within these cultural institutions. Often, comics research has gravitated towards art, literary, and film theory, ingratiating comics into the respective norms of these disciplines. Here, the term “graphic novel” immediately comes to mind, as do the increase of monographs on specific comics artists, exhibitions on the history of comics, and the rise of applying auteur theory to comics. And yet, fervent rebellion has also been a part of discourse on comics' sociability, where comics studies is positioned as capable of carving out a place for itself within academia by standing outside of or in-between art, literature, and film. Often socio-historical in nature, these perspectives tend to revisit the high/low divides that foregrounded comics' exclusion from these milieux to assert that comics studies does not need to be folded into an already well-established discipline, but become a discipline in its own right.

The six collected articles in this issue of *Image [&] Narrative* seek to contribute to the discussions on comics' sociability in two of these milieux: art and literature. The articles arose from the inaugural conference of Amsterdam Comics, Comics Interaction, which hosted 60 participants from 1-3 July 2015 at the University of Amsterdam and The Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies. Comics Interaction brought together comics scholars from several disciplines, comics artists, publishers, and cultural workers from museums and other heritage sites to open a dialogue among these divergent fields and thereby to explore new ways of thinking about the position of comics within and outside of various milieux. Focused on three themes of comics interaction: Comics in Art/Art in Comics, History and Trauma in Comics, and Comics as World Literature, the conference presented keynote lectures from Jan Baetens, Bart Beaty, and Joyce Goggin, and round table discussions with comics artists Joost Zwarte, Typex, Eric Heuvel, and Marcel Ruijters; cultural workers from the Anne Frank House, the Tropenmuseum, the Van Abbemuseum; and scholars of art history from universities and art institutes.

During the conference, two clear trends emerged: a large number of the papers, lectures, and round table discussions endeavored to combine methodologies from different disciplines in their approach to comics

studies, and many offered socio-historical perspectives on the position of comics. The wide scope of methods and theories presented during the conference is reflected within this issue, which is interested in exploring the ways comics navigate, appropriate, are ingratiated, are appropriated, and rebel against disciplinary boundaries—all of which make comics scholarship an interesting, continuously developing, and multidisciplinary field of study. Rather than neatly housing comics in a particular academic niche, this issue aims to underscore the productiveness of comics' academic homelessness. While this undoubtedly goes hand in hand with pressing issues for comics scholars, including the lack of teaching and research positions within universities, its intellectual advantages can be seen as outweighing its disadvantages; comics' growing sociability has forced comics scholars to engage with the productive messiness that is culture without allowing for any easy reestablishment of discipline.

In the first article, "Misrecognizing Misrecognition: The Capacity to Influence in the Milieux of Comics and Fine Art," Simon Grennan highlights the complex social relationships at play in the environments in which art and comics are produced, used, and discussed. He argues that any assumed difference between what is classified as comics or art can only be understood through an analysis of their social constructs, the manner in which these constructs create cultural and economic value, and their relationships to other such constructed systems. Grennan's theoretical approach offers a provocative consideration of the function of institutions that contributes to previous socio-historical discussions on the cultural and economic position of comics by delving into the underpinnings of their systems of classification and their perpetuation through what he terms a "misrecognition."

Moving from a broad theoretical perspective to a focus on how comics reproductions are entangled with strategies of the art market, in "Reading Facsimile Reproductions of Original Artwork: The Comics Fan as a Connoisseur," Jean-Paul Gabilliet explores the diversity of comics readership from the most casual to the most highly sophisticate. Through an exploration of the recent French and American phenomenon of reprints of "classic" comics in actual-size facsimile reproductions, he demonstrates that there are manifold ways in which the comics market caters to its diverse audience, and how readers both respond to and at times dictate new ways of consuming and valuing comics. Moreover, in explicating how lavish reproductions both fetishize the original artwork and the author, he points not only to the practices of the art market, but also to the ways in which literary scholarship underscores the importance of an original work of art created by a single "auteur."

Adding to the discussion of auteur theory in comics scholarship is Joseph Witek's article, "If a Way to the Better There Be: Excellence, Mere Competence, and the Worst Comics Ever Made." In his consideration of the criteria for labeling certain comics "graphic novels," which are commonly praised for being the product of a highly original, sophisticated, and consistent author—yet, as he argues, aesthetically under-evaluated—he points to the lack of critical reflection on both sides of the high/low divide. By examining the works of Lee Sherman, Don Sherwood, and Enrique Nieto, all of whom have been relegated to "the lowest circles of the commercial comics industry in the United States," he posits a development of a historically-based aesthetic evaluation of comics based on both production practices and challenges. In so doing, he insists on a reexamination of the artistic practice of comics that would see certain works not as anomalies on either side of the cultural divide, but in congruence with the development of comics and comics discourse.

In a close-reading case study, "Hidden Art: Artistic References in Mattotti's *Docteur Jekyll & Mister Hyde*," Barbara Uhlig explores the manner in which Lorenzo Mattotti relates his adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's novella to classical art and expressionist film. She argues that in his use of both "filtered memo-

ry” and “direct reference” Mattotti speaks to far more than a desire to bolster the cultural capital of his work. In her evaluative aesthetic examination of his intricate reference system, she argues that Mattotti’s craft lies in his underscoring the cultural and artistic shifts of the adaptation’s new setting in Weimar Berlin. Thus, she posits, Mattotti does not aim to appropriate avant-garde artistic movements, but rather activates them to offer a new interpretation of an older work, thus doubling the meaning of his adaptation. She argues that in so doing, Mattotti disregards the high/low divide by collapsing the perceived boundaries between appropriation and adaptation, and art and comics.

In the second close-reading case study presented in this issue, “Wartime Weddings: Realism and War Representation in Shigeru Mizuki’s *Onwards Towards Our Noble Deaths*,” Rik Spanjers builds upon discussions of comics’ ability to reference historical moments by positing a new critical analytical vocabulary. In combining Fredric Jameson’s concept of realism as being constructed from antagonies with Ernst Gombrich’s art historical theses from *Preference for the Primitive*, Spanjers offers a dialectical reading of the graphic style of comics that shows the different preconceptions related to schematism and photorealism and historicizes them. His analysis of Mizuki’s comic thus works to demonstrate how different forms of realistic representation are constructed through various combinations of graphic styles that produce various effects. He argues that it is precisely through the ways in which visual styles contrast one another that differing preconceptions about the realistic are both invoked and critiqued.

In the final article in this issue, “Comics as a Minor Literature,” Erin La Cour returns to the high/low divide upheld by advocates for the term “graphic novel” and the notions of a comics “auteur.” She argues that while such terminology allows for an easy folding of certain works into the literary canon, and thus houses the potential to gradually culturally elevate all comics as a medium—which, like any other, has its “greats” and “lowest cultural denominators”—that comics has a political potential that reaches further. In positing that comics can be considered what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term “minor literature,” she argues for a critical rethinking of comics that displaces the question of value attributed to cultural objects and fields of study. Thus, rather than a socio-historical approach to the position of comics within various milieux, which could aid in establishing comics as its own discipline outside of or in-between art and literature, she suggests a nomadism of comics scholarship that is disinterested in disciplinary boundaries.

Taken together, the articles attempt to gauge the ever-expanding sociality of comics and comics scholarship. While this issue focuses on the two milieux in which comics are most social and most studied—art and literature—it aims to prompt further investigation into the ways in which comics are ingratiated into, appropriated by, and rebel against other milieux. In its critiquing easy equations of the comics milieux with those of other media, showing the diversity of comics reading and marketing practices, uncovering the preconceptions that govern the critical discourse surrounding comics, and challenging the idea of the social in multiple ways, this issue sets the stage for further research into this multidisciplinary, highly sociable medium.

Erin La Cour is a lecturer in Comparative Literature at Utrecht University, Netherlands. She holds a PhD from the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam and is the co-founder, with Rik Spanjers, of the independent research consortium Amsterdam Comics (www.amsterdamcomics.com), which promotes comics research in the Netherlands. She acted as project advisor for the 2013 sequential art exhibition “Black or White” at the Van Abbemuseum, is a former editor of the *Scandinavian Journal of Comic*

Art, and is a member of the Nordic Network for Comics Research. Her most recent publications include the co-edited anthology *Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects, and Communities* (Cambridge Scholars 2015) and “Social Abstraction: Toward Exhibiting Comics as Comics” in *Abstraction and Comics* (UP Liège, forthcoming 2017).

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Rik Spanjers is a PhD student at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. His thesis, *Imagining the Past: The Historical Comic and the Maus Event*, focuses on historical representation in comics. Spanjers is a lecturer in the Contemporary Dutch Literature department at the University of Amsterdam and co-founder, with Erin La Cour, of Amsterdam Comics (www.amsterdamcomics.com), an independent research consortium that organizes academic conferences, master classes, and lecture series.

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