



## Mediality and materiality of contemporary comics

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## INTRODUCTION

### Mediality and materiality of contemporary comics

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During the past few decades, the interdisciplinary field of comics studies has matured considerably, resulting not only in a growing number of dedicated conferences and journals but also in a multitude of methodologically different approaches to the study of comics, including various types of formal, semiotic, and narratological analysis as well as historical, political, and cultural investigations (for a selection of pertinent examples, see Beaty 2007; Carrier 2000; Chute 2010; Duncan and Smith 2009; Gabilliet 2010; Gardner 2012; Groensteen 2007; Packard 2006; as well as the contributions in Chaney 2011; Ditschke, Kroucheva, and Stein 2009; Eder, Klar, and Reichert 2011; Heer and Worcester 2009; McLaughlin 2005; Meskin and Cook 2012; Pustz 2012; Smith and Duncan 2012). According to Jared Gardner and David Herman, a core reason for this renewed vigour of a field that was initially hampered by ‘a defensive relationship to the academy at large’ can be seen in a number of recent ‘alliances with other, more recognizable fields’ such as ‘autobiography studies, sexuality studies, postcolonial studies, etc.’ (Gardner and Herman 2011b, 6). Since comics can be considered a fundamentally narrative form, Gardner and Herman may have good reasons to focus on the interrelation between comics studies and narratology (see also, for example, Groensteen 2013; Schüwer 2008; as well as the contributions in Gardner and Herman 2011a; Stein and Thon 2013). It seems striking, however, that they largely omit media studies from their discussion.

Indeed, the relationship between comics studies and media studies appears to remain a comparatively uneasy one, despite a number of works that are located precisely at this intersection (see, for example, Bachmann 2016; Berndt 2015; Sina 2016; and the contributions in Chute and Jagoda 2014). Among other things, this may have to do with the rather contested question of to what extent, or in what way(s), comics can appropriately be described as a medium. Of course, media studies itself is – and will likely remain – a long way from any collectively shared conceptualisation of the term ‘medium’, but the latter tends to be understood as referring to a complex multi-dimensional concept, which allows one to distinguish between at least a communicative-semiotic, a material-technological, and a conventional-institutional dimension of media and their mediality (see, for example, Ryan 2006; Schmidt 2000; Thon 2014, 2016). If Hillary Chute, on the one hand, describes comics as a medium ‘that doesn’t blend the visual and the verbal – or use one simply to illustrate the other – but is rather prone to present the two nonsynchronously’ (Chute 2010, 452), she emphasises the communicative-semiotic dimension of mediality, while de-emphasising the material-technological dimension (though she also discusses publication formats in some detail); if Christian Bachmann (2016), on the other hand, examines ‘metamediality’ and ‘materiality’, he emphasises the material-technological dimensions of different publication formats, while de-emphasising their communicative-semiotic

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dimension (though he also discusses the verbal-pictorial hybridity of comics in some detail).

Despite the constitutive vagueness inherent in the fundamental question of how comics can be conceptualised as a medium, the fact remains that they are generally treated ‘as conventionally distinct means of communicating cultural content’ (Wolf 2005, 253) and, hence, can be considered to be media that are ‘*conventionally perceived as distinct*’ (Rajewsky 2010, 61, original emphasis), even though – or, rather, precisely because – their mediality is ‘not entirely predictable from semiotic type and technological support’ (Ryan 2006, 23). If we thus foreground the conventional-institutional rather than the semiotic-communicative or the material-technological dimension of comics’ mediality, it becomes clear that the ‘social fact’ of their conventional distinctiveness cannot be treated in a transhistorical or transcultural manner. Accordingly, such an approach is not so much interested in (the mediality of) any single comic, but in the forces shaping our understanding of the conceptual borders that define comics as a part of the medium of comics in the first place. Even if such a culturally ‘qualified medium’ (Elleström 2010, 44) can only be identified in relation to certain communicative-semiotic and material-technological properties, comics’ mediality must be thought of as the result of conceptual distinctions between heterogeneous medial configurations (see, for example, Bolter and Grusin 2000; Paech 2008; Schröter 2012). Not least with regard to the mediality of contemporary comics that most (though not all) articles collected in the present issue focus on, discourses about what is considered prototypical for a comic should be of particular interest to comics and media studies alike (see, for example, Gunning 2014; Kirchoff 2013; Wilde 2014, 2015).

Incidentally, stressing the importance of the conventional-institutional dimension of comics’ mediality does not at all imply that less attention is to be paid to comics’ communicative-semiotic and material-technological dimensions. On the contrary, the manifold distinctions that allow for various different and sometimes competing conceptualisations of comics as a medium usually aim at either communicative-semiotic or material-technological aspects. With regard to the former, many attempts to define comics’ mediality (such as Chute’s approach to the medium of comics mentioned above) focus on the (semiotic) multimodality of comics (for further discussion, see, for example, Bateman 2014; Elleström 2010; Kress 2010), that is, the characteristic combination of words and pictures (see, for example, Carrier 2000; Rippl and Etter 2013; Varnum and Gibbons 2001), as well as the arrangement of framed pictures into sequences of panels within page layouts of varying regularity, flexibility, and density (see, for example, Groensteen 2007; Horstkotte 2013; McCloud 1994); with regard to the latter, recent years have witnessed a move beyond the discussion of various publication formats (see, for example, Couch 2000; Hatfield 2005, 7; Lefèvre 2000) and towards broader considerations of comics’ materiality. While ‘materiality as a whole remains a relatively neglected area of comics scholarship’ (Hague 2014, 23), a number of more recent studies have begun examining the material-technological dimension of comics in more detail (see, for example, Jenkins 2013; Kashtan 2013b; Priego Ramirez 2011). As its title already suggests, the current issue aims to connect this focus on (contemporary) comics’ materiality to broader discussions of their mediality.

Accordingly, Sebastian Bartosch’s article ‘Understanding comics’ mediality as an actor-network: some elements of translation in the works of Brian Fies and Dylan Horrocks’ pursues the intersection between the semiotic-communicative, material-technological, and conventional-institutional aspects of comics’ mediality by conceptualising the latter ‘as a dynamic network formed by heterogeneous actors’. Such ‘actors’, as prominently described by Bruno Latour (2005) and others, can be understood as materialised entities, which only emerge in relation and distinction to other actors and are only

identified and assembled in processes of ‘ongoing transformations’. Elaborating his ‘actor-network account’ of comics’ mediality via in-depth analyses of Brian Fies’ *Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow?* (2009) and Dylan Horrocks’ *Sam Zabel and the Magic Pen* (2014), Bartosch argues that the metareferential and self-reflexive strategies of these works can be understood as fundamentally engaging comics’ ongoing transformations of heterogeneous agential roles, ‘ranging from comics’ writers and artists to their readers, but also from pens, papers, and printing technologies to computers, software, and screens’. Bartosch thus invites us to conceive the materiality of media (such as comics) not as a cluster of inert, material objects that stand opposed to a subject; instead, materialisation appears as a dynamic process wherein objects, bodies, and subjectivities only emerge as relational effects, ‘as products of an ongoing materialisation – i.e. a reciprocal “intra-action” of agencies’.

Further zooming in on the question of to what extent the materiality of specific production processes (and the ‘human and non-human actors’ involved in them) are relevant for an understanding of comics’ mediality, Anne Rüggeheimer’s “‘Posing for all the characters in the book”: the multimodal processes of production in Alison Bechdel’s relational autobiography *Are You My Mother?*” examines the complex representational strategies that Alison Bechdel (2012) pursues in *Are You My Mother?*. ‘Exploring a third space: between self and other, between biography and autobiography’, Bechdel’s artistic process entails her ‘posing’ for all the characters represented in *Are You My Mother?* (which most saliently include her own former self and the former self of her mother), making photographs of these poses via the camera’s self-timer, and finally using these photographs as models for the hand-drawn pictures (and, to a smaller extent, the hand-drawn words that become particularly noticeable ‘when she starts to learn her late father’s handwriting to be able to reproduce his letters to her mother’) that are eventually put into print. As a consequence of this sophisticated production process, Bechdel’s highly metareferential graphic ‘auto/biography’ not only combines words and pictures that are arranged in sequences of panels within various page layouts but also evokes different modes of representation, which ‘materialise various modes of experience’, in turn. Arguing ‘that Bechdel uses her own body as a medium of experience and interconnection’, Rüggeheimer concludes that the highly self-reflexive materiality to be observed in *Are You My Mother?* allows Bechdel to work ‘towards an intersubjective representation of the past’.

In their own way, the articles by Bartosch and Rüggeheimer reinforce the observation that ‘comics have been, for the longest time, produced by hand on paper’ and that, ‘even as digitized production techniques have become widely available, many comics still take their shape and form through the visible slant of the creator’s hand’ (Stein 2015, 425; see also Etter 2016; Gardner 2011; Wilde 2016). At least in the context of the current issue’s focus on the mediality and materiality of contemporary comics, though, the tendency to limit examinations of comics’ ‘material richness’ (Kashtan 2013a) to the domain of print comics seems rather unfortunate, not least as one of digital comics’ most promising potentials lies in the opportunity to ‘think comics theory differently’ (Reichert 2011, 138, our translation from the German). Addressing this desideratum, Markus Oppolzer’s ‘Reaching an audience: the publication history of David Hine’s *Strange Embrace*’ reconstructs the decades-spanning publication history of David Hine’s *Strange Embrace*, treating it as a mirror of recent developments in the comics industry that include the move to digital distribution as well as the development of advanced digital reading technology. Oppolzer describes the substantial changes between the six editions of *Strange Embrace* as being at least partially motivated by marketing considerations. Initially sold as ‘as an idiosyncratic art comic in the early 1990s’ (see Hine 1993),

Hine's work was targeted at a more widespread audience during the 2000s (see Hine 2003, 2007–2008, 2008), only to be rebranded as 'a sophisticated graphic novel for connoisseurs of comics in 2014' (with the differences between the 2011 *Comixology* and the 2014 *Sequential* edition of *Strange Embrace* being particularly instructive; see Hine 2011, 2014).

Daniel Stein's "'Mummified objects": superhero comics in the digital age' takes a different approach to investigating the impact of digital technologies on the ever-evolving and diversifying business strategies of the two major comics publishers DC Comics and Marvel Comics. Instead of focusing on the 'immediate' impact of digital production and distribution technologies on contemporary comics, Stein investigates how digital tools allow for the creation of retroactive accounts of comics history. Analysing the museum-in-a-book-format of publications such as *The Marvel Vault* (see Thomas and Sanderson 2007) and *The Batman Vault* (see Greenberger and Manning 2009), Stein draws on historian Andreas Huyssen's theories of musealisation (see Huyssen 1995, 2003) to explain how these museum-books use technology to simulate the tactile pleasures and potentially 'auratic' qualities of earlier forms of comic book production and reception. In promoting notions of historical accuracy, authorship, specialised knowledge, and cultural relevance, Stein argues, these museum-books can be comprehended as bulwarks against cultural anxieties about the changes that digitisation has brought. If digitally produced copies of artefacts 'with no stable origin' can provide such ambivalent reassurance, Stein concludes with Huyssen, it is because digitisation tends to 'lend an aura and reenchant objects beyond any instrumental function they may have had' (Huyssen 1995, 33). Read together, then, the article's by Oppolzer and Stein serve to remind us of the diversity of effects that digital technologies may have on contemporary comics, with neither their mediality nor their materiality being reducible to a simple opposition between print and digital.

Yet, of course, digital production and distribution technology allows for a fundamental broadening of how comics can be conceptualised that goes considerably beyond the still comparatively 'conservative' forms discussed by Oppolzer and Stein (see, for example, Hammel 2014; Kirchoff 2013; Wilde 2015). Perhaps most saliently, 'motion comics' or various kinds of animated content within digital comics are beginning to 'blur the lines' between comics and film (see Dittmar 2012), and the increased use of interactive and participatory elements in what is sometimes called 'game comics' connects comics to video games (see Goodbrey 2013). It should be noted, however, that this 'blurring of the lines' is far from new, and certainly not limited to digital comics (see, for example, Gardner 2012 for an in-depth discussion of the interrelation between comics and early film). Indeed, comics have repeatedly been described as fundamentally intermedial phenomena (see, for example, Etter and Thon 2016; Rippl and Etter 2013; Stein 2015). While the term 'intermediality' is commonly used to refer to the combination of words and pictures that defines prototypical comics' semiotic multimodality, then, we would like to emphasise that our understanding of comics' mediality also stands to benefit from a closer examination of their location within broader media ecologies (see, once more, Bolter and Grusin 2000; Paech 2008; Schröter 2012). This is particularly true with regard to contemporary media culture, as film adaptations of popular comics enjoy increasing commercial as well as critical success (see, for example, Burke 2015; Gardner 2012, 2014; Thoss 2014), and comics are also increasingly integrated into more encompassing transmedial entertainment franchises (see, for example, Johnson 2013; Packard 2015; Thon 2015, 2016).

As Christina Meyer's article 'Medial transgressions: comics – sheet music – theatre – toys' convincingly shows, however, comics' mediality and materiality has been defined within inter- and transmedial contexts from the very beginning. Meyer chooses the emergence

of the Yellow Kid in the final decade of the nineteenth century as a starting point for her analysis of the 'unstable medial status of comics characters'. While the medial transformations of the Yellow Kid are usually discussed with reference to competing comics series published by rivalling newspapers (the *New York World* and the *New York Journal*), multiplying versions of the Yellow Kid also spread quickly into diverse theatre adaptations and musical compositions, as well as into various kinds of advertising and merchandising. The 'serial unfolding' on which the success of the Yellow Kid at the turn of the century rested, Meyer argues, is thus constituted not only by a cyclic repetition in the Sunday newspaper supplement pages but also by an expansion beyond the realm of the newspapers. The identifiability of the two-dimensional drawings, which 'allowed for multiple reiterations in different medial forms', essentially rested on a pronounced iconicity of the character of the Yellow Kid, which enabled various creators and producers to reiterate a stock repertoire of actions and attitudes in ever-changing narrative settings and medial contexts. Against this background, Meyer proceeds to trace how these 'movements and migrations' between medial forms and formats were self-reflexively negotiated within the Yellow Kid comics and their surrounding media products.

Bernard Perron's 'Wandering the panels, walking through media: zombies, comics, and the post-apocalyptic world' wraps up the present issue by applying a formalist approach to the narrative affordances of comics storytelling against the backdrop of convergent media culture. Focusing on transmedial entertainment franchises such as those based on *Night of the Living Dead*, *28 Days Later*, *Resident Evil*, and *The Walking Dead*, Perron investigates in what ways the specific material affordances of comics influence and shape some of the basic elements of zombie narratives: the forms of movements through post-apocalyptic worlds, both with regard to the undead and the survivors, as well as the key moments of struggle between them. To Perron, it is primarily the way comics panels are laid out on the page, the importance of the spatial coexistence of pictures, that defines the medium-specific representation of these elements in a wide variety of zombie comics. Hence, he foregrounds genre conventions such as the demarcation of spaces, the definition of borders, and the movement between these locations, emphasising that 'the frames in *The Walking Dead* are continually crossed by fences, gates, hedges, palisades, and walls', before examining in more detail how these core elements of post-apocalyptic zombie worlds connect to comics' layout and the 'gutter' between panels. Further underscoring the heuristic value of an intermedial perspective for the analysis of contemporary (zombie) comics, Perron finally compares the ways in which zombie movement and the 'pregnant moment' of the zombie bite is represented in comics and films, stressing both similarities and differences between the representational strategies employed by these two closely interrelated media.

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