

# Comics and Power



# Comics and Power

## *Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities*

Edited by

Rikke Platz Cortsen, Erin La Cour  
and Anne Magnussen

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Comics and Power:  
Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects and Communities

Edited by Rikke Platz Cortsen, Erin La Cour and Anne Magnussen

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## INTRODUCTION

Many introductions to comics scholarship books begin with an anecdote recounting the author's childhood experiences with comics: how and where they used to read them, a particular title that made a lasting impression, or how reading comics shaped their life in some way or another. These sorts of stories testify to the power of comics in engaging readers and also connect with an aspect of comics and power that has frequently played a role in the history of comics: how comics impacts young readers. However, comics and power are intertwined in a number of ways that go beyond the concern for children's reading habits. Since the beginning of the medium's modern history at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fascination for comics has been combined with its cultural marginalization. From this position, comics have played with (and in some cases have questioned) existing power structures, which—in combination with their mass appeal—have made them the subject of continuous institutional efforts to regulate their content. As with any other critical medium, comics are both shaped by and participate in shaping identities, communities, and ideas about art and culture, but *how* comics engages with these topics is unique due to both its societal position and form. The chapters in *Comics and Power* represent very different ways of studying this complex and diverse relationship between comics and power.

The importance of comics' influence—and society's perception of this influence—is changing due to the developments within both the study of comics and the medium itself. *Comics and Power* explores these changes within its three sections. The first, *Power and Institutionalization: Shifting Cultural and Medial Perceptions*, is concerned with comics' position within institutionalized discourse on art. The chapters in this section address the question of the medium of comics in its relationship to other medial forms, including art, online gaming, and literature. They illuminate the complexity and criticality of the form of comics and thereby assert its power as a specific art form. The second, *Power and the Subject: Exposing the Politics of Subjectivity and Identity*, offers a series of examples that illustrate the enormous potential of comics as an art form in its own right. The section explores how comics challenge the conventions of identity imposed upon (and taken up by) the subject through state, culture, gender, and religious apparatuses. In specifically looking at various genres

concerned with identity—including documentary, (auto)biography, and autofiction/false memoir—the chapters in this section offer a critical look at and a questioning of societal norms and power relations as they relate to the individual. The third and final section, *Power and Society: Reproducing and/or Contesting National Communities and Ideologies*, broadens the scope of the previous section to consider and contribute to debates about national and cultural identities and struggles. The chapters in this section span time and place to offer both a historical and contemporary look at how comics site-specifically navigates existent power relations and thereby enter into the discourse on national and cultural ideology.

Taken together, the three sections reveal the complexity of comics—how in strikingly varied and intricate ways comics is both the result of societal and cultural processes, and is a critical contributor in modifying these processes. The focus on the analysis and discussion of specific works in each chapter underlines the range of critical voices within the medium of comics and reveals the need for refined analytical tools to address this art form. In bringing together these critical investigations, *Comics and Power* suggests that the power of comics lies in the medium itself and in its formal and contextual engagement with institutional, subjective, and societal power structures.

## **Comics and Power: Historiography**

The chapters in *Comics and Power* have as their point of departure two basic ideas. First, they all understand power as a dynamic concept in which comics takes part, whether through potentially challenging specific power relations or participating in the reproduction of them. As a second point, the chapters all consider these processes to be complex societal and cultural networks involving text genres, readings, social practices, institutions, and relationships of power. Within this overall framework, the chapters subscribe to different theoretical frameworks and concepts of power, and they focus in their analyses on different parts of the processes and networks involved. As will be apparent below, this common framework relates to comics research both by drawing on existing arguments and conclusions—and by shaping them in new ways.

What can be considered a first phase of research into comics and power had a decidedly one-dimensional focus, namely the way in which comics more or less directly influenced young readers. In the 1950s neither comics nor its reception were considered especially complex: both were based on the idea of a direct *effect* from comic to reader that was

most famously elaborated upon by American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham in his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*.<sup>1</sup> Even though Wertham's study has been simplified more than it rightly deserves, it nevertheless saw comics' influence on young Americans as a relatively straightforward process of effect, according to which the readers uncritically took in the content and copied the ideas, values, and actions represented in them.<sup>2</sup> The view of comics having this kind of (negative) power was influential far beyond academia; it defined the agenda in public debates about children and media in many parts of the world beyond the US. Indeed, *Seduction of the Innocent* had an important impact in Europe generally and in the Scandinavian countries particularly.<sup>3</sup>

Another seminal work in the history of research on comics and power is Ariel Dorfman's and Armand Mattelart's study of Donald Duck that was originally published in Chile in 1971 and later translated into *How to Read Donald Duck* in 1975.<sup>4</sup> Here, too, the focus was primarily on the effect that comics has on the audience—in this case *Donald Duck* comics and Latin American audiences. From the 1970s, a Marxist perspective shaped important parts of academia, and Dorfman and Mattelart argued that *Donald Duck* had the power to induce a young audience with US capitalist ideas and values. The book became a key study in the criticism of the social oppression that resulted from the relationship of power between the US and Latin America, or in broader terms, between the so-called first and third worlds.<sup>5</sup> Parallel to Wertham's analysis, the comics in themselves were seen as means of communication of simple, clear-cut messages—in this case not of violence and anti-social behavior as in Wertham's study, but of capitalist ideology. Dorfman's and Mattelart's study involves two dimensions of interest here. For one, they see the Disney comics as mirrors of specific US capitalist values, and second, they argue that the readers in Latin America took over these values more or less uncritically.<sup>6</sup>

By contemporary comics scholarship standards both Wertham's and Dorfman's and Mattelart's studies can be viewed as too simplistic or too narrow-minded in their analyses of the connection between readers, comics, and society, and fortunately the study of the reception of comics moved away from this simplified idea of direct causal effect. This is one of the main arguments that Martin Barker makes in his important study on comics, ideology, and power from 1989.<sup>7</sup> Barker represents a new development in comics research that, since the late 1980s, has focused on comics themselves, as well as the relationship between comics and their readers, as complex phenomena.<sup>8</sup> The new development within comics research understood the reading of comics as a far more complex process

that required a more sophisticated analysis of both comics and their reception and audience. The studies of superhero comics and comics as propaganda especially followed this focus on the dynamic relationship between power and comics and of studying comics as part of more complex societal networks. However, when looking at comics research from the 1980s and 1990s, what stood out more than a focus on the relationship between comics, readers, and society, was an interest in comics as an art form and/or as a unique form of expression. A considerable part of the research zoomed in on comics as a complex means of communication with its own codes, aesthetics, and narrative patterns, which were worthy of analysis in and of themselves.

The focus within comics research on *works* was closely related to developments within the comics medium itself, which saw the emergence of new comics genres, themes, and aesthetics. In the US the *Underground* comics from the 1970s were a case in point, and in the European context, comics concerned with erotic and/or intellectual and political themes became more and more visible in countries such as France, Belgium, and Italy. Both developments were accompanied by new generations of cartoonists, or *auteurs*, and small and independent publishers. The new study of comics as an art form and means of communication in its own right was especially strong in the Franco-Belgian comics research tradition; Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle and Francis Lacassin started out in the 1970s, paving the way for researchers such as Thierry Groensteen, Benoît Peeters, Philippe Marion, and Jan Baetens. The increased interest in comics as an object of study was accompanied by the inclusion of the medium in literature and art courses, and by the emergence of more and more specialized comics magazines, journals, seminars, and conference sessions. The focus on comics aesthetics and narrative was decisive for the furthering of comics as an art form and questioned, of course, the historically dominant idea of comics as simple, easily understandable messages, as was implied in the study of the comics' effects on its audience. It was also an important development in terms of comics' cultural status and significance and, in this sense, added a new dimension to the relationship between comics and power: comics began to be seen as questioning cultural hierarchies.

The above description of comics research historiography indicates two major strands in comics research that to some extent are also regionally defined: an Anglo-Saxon focus on comics, ideology, and society, and a Franco-Belgian interest in comics aesthetics and narrative. To an increasing degree, today's comics research cuts across the two strands, most conspicuously in textbooks and general introductions to the comics

medium, which typically include chapters both on comics aesthetics and form and on comics in society.<sup>9</sup> With few exceptions, though, scholarly work that bridges the two in particular studies about comics and power are hard to find.<sup>10</sup> As will be apparent in the short section descriptions below—and in the chapters themselves, of course—the chapters in this anthology stand on the shoulders of earlier developments, combining the two major strands described above in new ways. They recognize comics as complex *works*, while at the same time emphasizing the way in which they interact in power relations in society. It is important also that the chapters consider society to be highly complex, involving institutions and a broad range of media, and investigate power relations on many levels, from interpersonal and medial relations to national and cultural identities. In this context, *Comics and Power* stands out as one of the few anthologies that highlights the role of power in different and interrelated ways, and through various genres, from superhero comics and manga to newspaper strips and thematically more challenging graphic narratives. *Comics and Power* thereby represents the new generation of comics research.

### **Comics and Power: Representing and Questioning Culture, Subjects, and Communities**

The first section in *Comics and Power* includes studies of comics as part of broader medial and cultural processes. Referring back to the emergence of new comics genres and audiences in the 1970s, in this section power is addressed in relation to comics' changing position within and outside of cultural hierarchies. In the 1970s, the combination of new themes and aesthetics in comics, the development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the analysis of individual comics, and the construction of an academic infrastructure were crucial features in furthering comics studies because they also challenged existing cultural hierarchies. Today, debates about comics as an art form and the power of comics in relating to its cultural status are still ongoing. The focus of the first section of this anthology: *Power and Institutionalization: Shifting Cultural and Medial Perceptions* contributes to this important discourse. It approaches the relationship between comics and power in terms of its institutionalization (or lack thereof) and how comics as a form of expression challenges other art forms and the discourse surrounding them. The chapters in this section discuss how the nature and characteristics of comics' influence (and societal institutions' perception of this influence) have changed over time depending on developments both in society and in the comics medium itself. The discussion of power in this section is twofold: one points from

comics outward, dealing with its relationship to other media and art forms, and the other points inward, debating the way comics is considered an art form in its own right and how the notion of *what comics is* is constantly challenged by experiments, developments in production, and the evolution of the medium.

As mentioned above, the focus on comics aesthetics and narrative in the 1980s and 1990s brought with it an interest in the analysis of individual works, which resulted in studies related to power and society being quite marginalized, if not entirely missing. This phase of comics research was nevertheless important for the development of a more sophisticated and multifaceted perspective on comics and power: it paved the way for studies about power relating to interpersonal psychological struggles. Such aspects of power are targeted in the chapters in the second section of the anthology, *Power and the Subject: Exposing the Politics of Subjectivity and Identity*, with explicit efforts to bridge the divide by pointedly broadening the discussion to include societal and cultural contexts. The individual chapters explore specific comics from various genres, including documentary, (auto)biography, and autofiction/false memoir, in order to expose how comics can provide a space for a critical look at and questioning of societal norms and power relations. Their aim is thus twofold: by focusing attention on the relationship between power dynamics in personal and cultural spaces as well as the spaces created in the form of comics, they assert that comics can challenge, expose, and/or critique the conventions of identity imposed upon (and taken up by) the subject through state, culture, gender, and religious apparatuses.

In recent years there has been an increase in studies on comics and ideology in a broad sense. Many of the studies that focus on comics, power, and society are concerned with US and British comics—including studies on superhero comics as propaganda, which is the case of Christopher Murray's work, and on comics' effects on youth culture, as is explored by Bradford W. Wright.<sup>11</sup> More recently, studies that analyze comics in former European colonies have emerged, which often focus on the very interesting intersections between the former colonial powers and the new nations.<sup>12</sup> The chapters in *Comics and Power's* third section, *Power and Society: Reproducing and/or Contesting National Communities and Ideologies* belong to the group of studies about comics and power as part of broader societal, political, and national processes. This section is focused on power dynamics on a "grand scale" in that they relate to national, transnational, or regional communities and the role that comics have in questioning and/or reproducing the power structures of such communities. The chapters in this section all study comics and/or

caricature examples that primarily question existent power relations in specific communities or societies, and together represent an amazing variety when it comes to time and place: they span from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 2000s, and are about Europe, the Nordic countries, Senegal, the US, and Japan.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This anthology is the result of the emergent cooperation among Nordic comics scholars. Since 2000, and especially within the last couple of years, Nordic comics research has taken off. We have seen the growth of both a series of Nordic and international conferences as well as the creation of the Nordic Network for Comics Research (NNCORE).<sup>13</sup> Within the framework of comics and power, the Nordic cooperation can be seen as an example of how comics research is becoming more spread out geographically; the institutionalization and visibility of Nordic research, together with strong academic comics research fields in Germany and in the Asian countries, has begun to nuance the US/British and Franco-Belgian comics research traditions.<sup>14</sup>

*Comics and Power*, with its three particular perspectives, also exemplifies the way in which comics research has broadened its scope. Combining the study of comics as artworks with institutional, identity, and societal perspectives on power offers a plurality of analytical perspectives that mirrors the plurality of comics themselves as well as comics readership. If this development continues, in the near future comics research may have reached a status similar to that of other media and art forms, making it unnecessary to introduce a comics study similar to this with a reference to its cultural marginalization. With this anthology we hope to contribute to the ongoing development of the field, and especially to the complex and fascinating study of comics and power.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart and Company, 1954.

<sup>2</sup> See Beaty, Bart. *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See Kauranen, Ralf. "Serier Och Makt." *Valör*, no. 2011/2 (2011): 6-16. See also Kauranen's chapter in this anthology.

<sup>4</sup> Dorfman, Ariel, and Armand Mattelart. *How to Read Donald Duck. Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. New York: International General, 1975 (1971 in Spanish).

<sup>5</sup> An example in point is the following quotation from the book: "Underdeveloped peoples take the comics, at second hand, as instruction in the way they are supposed to live and relate to the foreign power center" (Dorfman and Mattelart, p. 98).

<sup>6</sup> Other critics can be said to belong to this group, including critics of gender representation in comics. For a discussion of several of these critics and their analyses, see Barker, Martin. *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Barker, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Another example is Jim Collins' work on comics, e.g. in "Appropriating Like Crazy: From Pop Art to Meta-Pop". In: *Modernity and Mass Culture*. (Ed. by J. Naremore & P. Brantlinger) Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991, and Collins, Jim. "Batman: The Movie, Narrative: The Hyperconscious." In *The Many Lives of the Batman. Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media*, edited by Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio. London and New York: Routledge, 1991, in which he argues how comics readers are sophisticated semioticians.

<sup>9</sup> This is the case in monographs such as Sabin, Roger. *Adult Comics. An Introduction*. London & New York: Routledge, 1993; Hatfield, Charles. *Alternative Comics. An Emerging Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005; Smith, Matthew J., and Randy Duncan, eds. *Critical Approaches to Comics*. New York & London: Routledge, 2012; Duncan, Randy, and Matthew J. Smith. *The Power of Comics. History, Form & Culture*. New York & London: Continuum, 2009; Heer, Jeet, and Kent Worcester, eds. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009; Magnussen, Anne, and Hans-Christian Christiansen. *Comics & Culture. Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> An exception is McAllister, Matthew P., Jr. Sewell, Edward H., and Ian Gordon, eds. *Comics & Ideology*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001, that has certain similarities with *Comics and Power* in the choice of main theme. That being said, it has a considerable representation of gender, sexuality, and nationality, and not the three dimensions of power represented in *Comics and Power*.

<sup>11</sup> Murray, Christopher. *Champions of the Oppressed? Superhero Comics, Popular Culture, and Propaganda in America During World War II*. Cresskill: Hampton

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Press, Inc., 2011; Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation. The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Examples of monographs: Fernández L'Hoeste, Héctor, and Juan Poblete, eds. *Redrawing the Nation. National Identity in Latino/O American Comics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; McKinney, Mark. *Redrawing French Empire in Comics*. Ohio State University Press, 2013;

<sup>13</sup> The Nordic Network for Comics Research (NNCORE) received a two-year grant from the Danish Council for Independent Research, 2011-2013 and has been organizing a series of seminars and conferences in the Nordic countries. It is continuing as an association of comics scholars after the funding period.

<sup>14</sup> Japanese research, especially focused on manga, has evolved considerably, and Kyoto Seika University has a center for manga research (<http://www.kyoto-seika.ac.jp/eng/edu/manga/> (January 16, 13)). In Germany, the research network *ComFor* has been crucial in making visible a very lively German comic research field.



**PART I:**

**POWER AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION:  
SHIFTING CULTURAL AND MEDIAL  
PERCEPTIONS**

# CHAPTER ONE

## COMICS: THIS BITTER ART

### ØYSTEIN SJÅSTAD

*If you must go to art school for God's sake, make the most of it... Seldom if ever again in life will you be afforded the chance to scrutinize such an array of losers in an environment that actually encourages their most pretentious inclinations!*

—Daniel Clowes, *Art School Confidential*<sup>1</sup>

*People always make the mistake of thinking art is created for them. But really, art is a private language for sophisticates to congratulate themselves on their superiority to the rest of the world. As my artist's statement explains, my work is utterly incomprehensible and is therefore full of deep significance.*

—Calvin in Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes*<sup>2</sup>

*I do like to communicate clearly. It's a pleasure. And as soon as one is involved with communication, one's already suspect in High Arts.*

—Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*<sup>3</sup>

### **Comics and the Modern System of the Arts**

The main character in Eddie Campbell's comic collection *Alec: "The Years Have Pants"* (2009) asks: "Can you be an artist not connected with any 'Art World'? Can you be one if nobody ever knows it?"<sup>4</sup> One of the book's chapters opens with a visual description of the art system and the caption reads: "The map of the history of Art is like any other map. There are main roads and side streets; old masters and lesser masters."<sup>5</sup> The question of the place of comics in the system of the arts becomes a central theme in the *Alec* comics, wherein comics are bitterly looked upon as a side street to real Art and the comic book artist as a lesser master compared to the "real" Artist. This segment from Campbell's comics

perfectly sets the stage for the following discussion of the power relationship between art and comics.

One of the classic discourses in the history of aesthetics is the relationship between the arts. The questions posed not only include: *What should be recognized as an art?* and *Is there an essence of art?* but also, *How should the recognized arts be differentiated and ordered?*<sup>6</sup> The different dialogues between the various art forms have been an aesthetic concern since antiquity, and in the last few decades comics has entered the art scene to create further cultural clashes. The first question was if comics actually is an art, and then, if so, where comics should be placed in a system of the arts. In this essay I want to explore some of the aspects of the relationship between the comic-world and the artworld—from the comic-world’s perspective—and, towards the end, dwell on the artworld as a motif in comics. I take it for granted here that comics are art, in the same way that literature and cinema are arts.

Paul Oskar Kristeller, in his classic 1951 article, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics,” devised the idea that the modern system of art consists of five arts: painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry. In a way, this has been, from the eighteenth century onward, the core of our commonsense understanding of the categories of art (with other, more unstable art forms being added to these five from time to time, such as landscape design, dance, theater, opera, engraving, etc).<sup>7</sup> Kristeller’s presentation is a debatable construct, and it is certainly not the only way to tell the story of aesthetics,<sup>8</sup> but his article demonstrates the instability of both the definition of, and the relationships between, the arts since humans started creating dramatic and visual representations.

Today there is an understanding that different art forms exist, and that each of these has its own “world” or field of meaning-production. At the same time, the art forms share certain aesthetic qualities and areas of interest. Studying the relationships between the arts has proved to be an important part of the history of the arts, and interesting meeting points can be observed between the art forms. Dialogues are created between them, and one can also find “aesthetic crossings” or hybrids. This also means it is possible to conceive of different art forms as autonomous entities, and in this context it would make sense to talk about different *artworlds*.

The vocabulary people use to talk about the different arts and their respective worlds is confusing, so in this essay I will introduce the following model: the different “worlds” all belong to the “system of the arts.” The artworld, comic-world, literature-world, film-world, etc., all take part in this system of the arts. (In “artworld,” the word “art” is used in its narrow meaning: *fine arts*). These different worlds are relatively

autonomous but they do share certain properties. As the sociologist Howard S. Becker explains: “[...] art worlds typically have intimate and extensive relations with the worlds from which they try to distinguish themselves. They share sources of supply with those other worlds, recruit personnel from them, adopt ideas that originate in them, and compete with them for audiences and financial support.”<sup>9</sup> The worlds communicate with each other, through dialogues, disputes, “wars,” cooperation, etc. An observation here is that the relationship between the artworld and the comic-world is quite different from the relationship between the comic-world and the literature-world; it seems that comic book artists relate more to the artworld than to the literature-world or cinema-world—or at least that they relate to these other worlds in a different way. In the visual culture of late nineteenth-century modernism, comics and avant-garde painting represented opposite poles. To paraphrase critic James L. Hoberman, comics and avant-garde art “arrive on the same train at the same station and the same historic moment in response to the same historical processes—industrialization, urbanization, the development of the mass market, and the rise of the mechanical reproduction.”<sup>10</sup> Art historian Thomas Crow also comments on this polarity in visual culture: “From its beginnings [the nineteenth century], the artistic avant-garde has discovered, renewed, or re-invented itself by identifying with marginal, ‘non-artistic’ forms of expressivity and display—forms improvised by other social groups out of the degraded materials of capitalist manufacture.”<sup>11</sup>

It should then be clear that comics are not *part* of literature or fine arts. Different genres have developed within the comic-world, such as super hero comics, detective comics, romance, funny animal, and others. Comics have evolved into an autonomous world worthy of a place in the system of the arts. Critic Douglas Wolk offers arguments for why this is so:

Comics are not prose. Comics are not movies. They are not a text-driven medium with added pictures; they’re not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of film. They are their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators, its own clichés, its own genres and traps and liberties. The first step toward attentively reading and fully appreciating comics is acknowledging that.<sup>12</sup>

### **Comics as *Unpopular Art***

Roger Sabin writes this about how comics should be considered within this system of arts: