



CALL FOR PAPERS
ACME+COMICS SYMPOSIUM

COMICS ON THE OUTSIDE

June 3-4 2021, Free University of Brussels, Belgium

In his doctoral dissertation *La Bande dessinée et son double*, Jean-Christophe Menu puts forward the notion of a “*corpus hors-champ de la bande dessinée*” to describe “an entire corpus of works that undoubtedly belong to the field [of comics] but is not integrated into its History, and hence is not recognized as an integral part of the field” (2011, 432). This conference aims at seizing this complex and hard-to-translate notion of the *corpus hors-champ*, locating an ‘outside’ of comics. Beyond its specific use in Menu’s theoretical discourse, this notion can facilitate the convergence of various research interests to bring forward objects for scrutiny that were held at the margins of comics studies.

EXPANDING A CORPUS

The ‘outside’ invites us to expand our usual corpora to a wider range of objects, works, and practices positioned at the limits and margins of what has been established as ‘field.’ While the effects of demarcation, hierarchization and legitimization linked to the “constitution of the comic strip field” (Boltanski 1975) have been quite clear, its constitution has also been nuanced (Maigret 1994) and the unity of the field itself is not necessarily self-evident. Rather than trying in vain to redefine the parameters of the field, this symposium invites a broad and changing understanding of the ‘field’, where its ‘inside’ (*champ*) and ‘outside’ (*hors-champ*) are caught in a dynamic tension. For all its spatial connotations, the ‘field’ appears as a moving target: a work, a practice, an object can slide from center to periphery and vice versa. The chosen focus and approach, together with the methods applied for analysis, fully participate in the construction of this *corpus hors-champ*.

Following in the tracks opened by Jean-Christophe Menu, comics on the outside could include unpublished works, produced in an intimate or private sphere or distributed through underground channels. The “mutual kinship” between outsider art and comics (Dejasse 2020) provides a point of departure for such an inquiry. This kinship emphasizes production contexts and creator profiles at the margins of common professional and social trajectories. It can also circumscribe affinities with graphic productions that privilege ‘unstudied drawing,’ made without training or through a process of un-training or “deskilling” (Roberts 2010). Such kinship can also be extended to children’s drawings, such as those that Lynda Barry (2014;2019) “saves from the trash” to compose her how-to-cartoon manuals. Stick figures, doodles, and graffiti are moreover repeatedly invoked in Rodolphe Töpffer’s theoretical considerations, of which Thierry Smolderen (2009) has shown the relevance for the longer

history of comics. Child productions, scribbled albums, marginalia and doodles, teen zines extend the pleasures of comics reading through appropriation and prolongation but have remained largely invisible in comics studies because of the difficulties they generate as objects of inquiry, especially regarding access and methodologies.

Comics can also be found in circulation networks and distribution channels outside its main cultural industries, where they inhabit a modest and discreet, peripheral position: professional magazines, information bulletins, church tracts, music album covers, political pamphlets, queer and feminist zines, posters and print ephemera. We could also think of comics that remain as “orphan works,” an ambivalent legal status given to works whose copyright owners are unknown. Other practices, finally, thrive through their outsider position: pirate publishing, counterfeit, plagiarism, and such extralegal enterprises moreover use to their advantage their situation in particular geographic or legal zones. The typology elaborated by Tanguy Habrand (2016) to describe a variety of publishing practices outside the traditional publishers’ market can be a helpful inspiration to describe and qualify the specific gestures and techniques, settings and contexts of such initiatives.

RETROSPECTIVE ADDITIONS

Besides identifying new works, objects and practices usually located on the outside of the comics field, we should also consider their annexation, recuperation or integration, processes that unfold over time and distance. One of the objectives of this symposium is to trace the processes through which comics on the outside are moved, displaced, reframed, centered or sent back to the margins. Those movements in and out of the field raise important questions of methods, confronting us with our own disciplinary assumptions.

From a historiographic perspective, Sylvain Lesage has shown the extent to which the album and the construction of comics as “ninth art” has had the effect of sending to the “cultural inferno” a range of productions that were nevertheless at the heart of its cultural life, such as “comics for girls, horror pocket books, ‘drawn novels’, daily strips” (Lesage 2019, 419). If retracing the processes of legitimization and canonization can help us understand the construction of a field (Beaty and Woo 2016), approaching the history of comics from the perspectives of those left at its margins can also be a productive way of interrogating our usual definitions as much as highlighting the blind spots of a retrospective look.

The constitution of a *corpus hors-champ* thus invites an enhanced reflexivity, thinking from particular cases and choosing the right focus and tools to assess its particularity (Becker 2016). The identification of ‘comics on the outside’ and the recontextualization or appropriation of these objects can also raise difficult but important stakes when it comes to ethics, politics, and ideology.

By casting light on works that are never or rarely taken into account in comics studies, we hope to enrich the spectrum of realizations that are susceptible to be discussed in the field. However, our hope is also that the singularity of these new, unusual, unknown or forgotten objects—their esthetic, circulatory or authorial specificities— encourage us to reevaluate the methods of analysis, the theoretical frameworks and the disciplinary habits used to study

comics. Livio Belloï and Fabrice Leroy have for instance shown how much the work of Pierre La Police appears as a “wrong object,” a kind of “anti-comics” that “nevertheless forces us to double our efforts in terms of conceptual inventiveness” (2018, 214). This conference can thus be taken as an invitation to bring together wrong objects asking us the right questions.

PRACTICALITIES

This symposium invites papers on particular case studies and telling examples, without geographic or temporal restrictions and with a particular interest in comparative and intermedial perspectives. Abstracts (max. 300 words) should be sent before January 25, 2021 to the following e-mail address: erwin.dejasse@ulb.ac.be; benoit.crucifix@ugent.be

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