Reviews

Book Reviews

Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon, eds, *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative* (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2013). 416 pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-028181-1 (hardback, €99.95, $140.00)

From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels is the thirty-seventh instalment in German publisher De Gruyter's Narratologia series, and the first to be wholly dedicated to comics and graphic novels. The book comprises sixteen essays by an internationally distributed selection of authors, along with an introduction by editors Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon. The articles are broken down into four sections: 'Graphic Narrative and Narratological Concepts'; 'Graphic Narrative Beyond the "Single Work"'; 'Genre and Format Histories of Graphic Narrative'; and 'Graphic Narrative across Cultures'. In their introduction, Stein and Thon establish both the context and the aims of the book thus:

> [A]s Jared Gardner and David Herman write in their introduction to a recent special issue of *SubStance*, we can detect 'emerging connections between comics studies and narrative theory' that may eventually converge into a 'new, hybridized field of study'. . . . Gardner and Herman christen this field-to-be 'graphic narrative theory', and the aim of the present volume is to explore new ways of thinking about the narrativity of comics from this theoretically as well as methodologically refined vantage point. (2)

Importantly, the book's aim is emphatically not to grapple solely with the narrativity of comics or of graphic novels in their limited forms, but to deal with *graphic narrative,* a term that the editors describe as 'much

more inclusive', being 'capable of encompassing different forms, formats, genres and storytelling traditions across cultures and from around the world' (5). A second stated aim is to follow Gardner and Herman in striving towards a medium-specific narratology of these graphic narratives, rather than falling into the '"alliances . . . with fields such as autobiography studies, sexuality studies, postcolonial studies etc."', which have in some cases 'endorsed a medially unspecific and narratologically questionable literary approach to graphic narrative' (3).

The first of these aims, the consideration of graphic narrative, is achieved extremely effectively within the book. Rather than ignoring the more restrictive forms of comics and graphic narratives, some of the best essays in the volume look in detail at the distinctions between graphic narrative as a broad concept and more specific formats or traditions in order to assess the value that specificity might bring or the challenges it might pose. Greg M. Smith, for example, looks in his essay 'Comics in the Intersecting Histories of the Window, the Frame and the Panel' at the historical tradition of presenting views in windows and images in frames and panels. Smith argues eloquently for a rehabilitation of the window and frame as means for understanding the image in comics, suggesting that while the window and the frame have 'dominated our understanding of how pictorial media narratively present space and time', it is the panel that has been at the forefront of our understanding of comics. 'Examining comics as the *other* modern arrangement of the intersecting logics of window, frame, and panel', he goes on to say, 'helps provide theoretical alternatives to the cinematic tradition of realistic image capture that dates back to the Renaissance' (220). The subsequent discussion of the relationships and histories of windows, frames and panels does not fall into the trap of talking through precursors to comics as if they were comics, or were consciously directed towards the development of comics; rather, it provides an overview of the historical traditions of graphic narratives that includes (but is not limited to) comics and related forms. The value of comics as a vital and advanced mode of graphic narrative is made clear here, and Smith makes a strong case for the understanding of comics as a significant but often overlooked element of the expression of modernity that came under the scrutiny of thinkers such as Deleuze and Benjamin in their considerations of the cinematic image. The article represents a valuable addition to the work undertaken by Jared Gardner in his excellent book *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty-First Century Storytelling*. Gardner himself follows Smith in this volume with

an article entitled 'A History of the Narrative Comic Strip', which also expands further on elements of that text.

Jaqueline Berndt's article 'Ghostly: "Asian Graphic Narratives", *Nonnonba,* and Manga' is also effective in its articulation of the problem of 'graphic narrative' as a general term in contrast with more specific traditions of production, in this case Japanese manga. While it is tempting to think that the study of graphic narrative enables one to speak broadly about a wide range of examples, Berndt makes clear in her article that this is not always the case, and that it is important to be wary of speaking too widely when we discuss or criticize works: '[A]ny attempt to generalize "Asian" comics reveals itself to be a projection', she writes, 'a ghost haunting contemporary criticism in the wake of Western orientalism' (364). Berndt marks up the problem of employing texts such as Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* in a Japanese context, given that it focuses largely upon works that are unavailable to Japanese readers and that it is reliant upon 'assumptions derived from a fundamentally different comics culture' (364). It is worth noting here that this problem also arises, albeit with different implications, in relation to the employment of Groensteen's work in the Anglo-American context. Berndt then considers in some detail the example of Mizuki Shigeru's manga *Nonnonba* and the discussions that surrounded it when it won the Grand Prix for Best Album at Angoulême in 2007. Berndt's article is challenging but important. More than simply a rebuke against generalization, in her argument that '[t]he real challenge [manga presents] is to equilibrate apparent universals and particularities' and that manga culture 'calls for [a] revisiting [of] evaluative criteria based on modern notions of authorship, work, and aesthetic sophistication' (367) it provides a practical framework for addressing the problem, a framework that she begins to flesh out in the discussion of *Nonnonba* that takes up the majority of the article. This combination of theoretical sophistication with practicable suggestions for future developments means the article is highly recommended.

The book's second aim, that of developing a medium-specific narrativity that does not rely upon alliances with other fields or upon a literary approach to graphic narratives, proves more challenging in those articles that do address it explicitly. Jan-Noël Thon is one author who approaches this problem head on in an article entitled 'Who's Telling the Tale? Authors and Narrators in Graphic Narrative'. Following an overview of narratological studies of film and literature that pay particular attention to the concept of the narrator, Thon outlines three types of narration that he feels can be identified in comics:

> [F]irst, *narratorial representation* as referring to the kind of verbal narration attributable to a more or less explicitly represented (usually fictional) narrator-as-narrating character that is distinct from the author, second, *authorial representation* as referring to the kind of verbal narration attributable not to such a narrator but rather to an authoring character that functions 'as narrator', and, third, *non-narratorial representation* as referring, for example, to the kind of verbal-pictorial representation in panels or sequences of panels, which is evidently also the result of a process of creation but whose 'source' is usually not – or at least not explicitly – represented and whose multimodal configuration prevents us from attributing it to a 'speaker' as readily as is the case with exclusively verbal forms of narration. (70–71)

Thon goes on to consider Philippe Marion's concept of graphiation as one possibility for addressing the third of these categories, but his emphasis is upon the first, and he draws upon examples that include *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, The Sandman* and *Habibi* in discussing this aspect of graphic narrative. Importantly, though, this is only an *aspect* of the broader subject, and it would be difficult to argue that the first and second of the three categories Thon presents are specific to graphic narratives. Thon gets around this by considering how graphic narratives employ them in specific ways, but the core problem remains and is magnified if we consider the third category, which, unless I am misreading Thon's argument, implies that the sequences of panels (and in fact images in general) in graphic narratives either do not narrate, or do narrate but do not have a narrator/narrating instance. Instead, it would seem that the burden of narration is placed squarely upon the shoulders of the text, which is problematic for at least two reasons: (1) if this arrangement is indeed viable, then the concept of graphic narrative is surely redundant since graphics, according to the author, cannot narrate, and (2) it assumes that text and images are separable in graphic narratives. These problems are not unique to Thon's article, and other chapters of the book that aim to address the medium-specific narratology of comics, such as Gabriele Rippl and Lukas Etter's 'Intermediality, Transmediality and Graphic Narrative', also indicate the role of text as the driver of narrative within graphic narratives at the expense of the image. Yet as recent scholarship such as Charles Hatfield's *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* has emphasized, graphics may indeed serve narrative functions in comics (Hatfield describes Kirby's art as a 'narrative drawing').[1] Furthermore, while the idea that text and image are separable in comics (or at least

1 Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 66–68.

can be analyzed separately) is a commonly accepted one, ideas such as Thierry Groensteen's assertion that it is the panel, not the smaller components that sit within the panel (such as individual units of text), that should be taken as the minimal narrative unit in comics would seem at least to complicate, if not wholly to overturn, this notion.[2]

Thus, Thon's article, while useful on its own terms, does not fully address the complicated notion of who narrates graphic narratives. Instead, it embodies some of the central complexities that arise when we attempt to establish a medium-specific narratology for graphic narratives. That these complexities are not totally resolved in any of the sixteen essays in the volume is perhaps somewhat to be expected given the length of each individual chapter and the scale of the task at hand. Nevertheless, the book does serve as an excellent contribution to the field of graphic narrative theory precisely because it begins to map some of the connections between narrative theory and graphic narratives. Not all of the essays here do explicitly address the notion of a medium-specific narratology for graphic narratives, but it is nonetheless a strong collection of articles that will enhance even the most expert of scholars' understandings of narrative in comics. In addition to the articles already discussed, there are valuable contributions from writers including Karin Kukkonen, Kai Mikkonen, Daniel Stein, Henry Jenkins and others, which I do not have space to discuss here. I commend the editors for pulling together such a useful and worthwhile book and recommend it to readers.

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Barbara Postema, *Making Sense of Fragments: Narrative Structure in Comics* (Rochester, NY: RIT Press, 2013). 188 pp. with colour illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-9333-6095-9 (paperback, $29.95)

With *Making Sense of Fragments,* Postema joins other comics theorists who have spent time on the importance of the gap for the reading of comics. Adopting an approach inspired by narratology and semiotics, she traces the importance of the gap at all levels of signification, from the panel to the page layout, from the sequence and series to the inter-

2 Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics,* trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3–7.

action of word and image to narrative. Postema tackles sophisticated issues, such as the formal elements of comics, the way they function to create meaning and how reading comics unfolds, presenting them with a clarity that is to be admired.

Her first chapter offers a critically astute exposition of how we read comics images, individually and sequentially, and glean narrative from them. It provides a detailed account of the codes that come into play when reading comics panels, stopping on denotative and connotative codes as well as psychological, symbolic, pictorial, intertextual, narrative and temporal codes. Based heavily on semiotics, this chapter couples a detailed examination of the comics codes of communication with considerations of the role of implication and elision in the signifying process of comics. In it Postema emphasizes how the absence of detail coupled with a concentration of signification is central for reading meaning in the comics panel.

From the comics panel, Postema moves to an analysis of page layout. Asking how the connections between panels in a given page layout establishes the conditions for reading, she focuses on the ways in which content is impacted by layout. She stops on the basic elements that comprise page layout and provides readers with a taxonomy of layouts, drawing from a large variety of comics with an eye on how each type of layout functions to impact meaning. Postema closes chapter 2 with a strong discussion of why the gutter should be privileged over the frame as the operative principle in the narrative function of the comics sequence. This chapter serves as a link between Postema's discussion of panels in chapter 1 and sequence in chapter 3.

While expanding upon and refining definitions of sequence proposed in the work of structuralists and comics scholars, Postema delves into a sophisticated analysis of how a sequence of images functions, asking what it is or does. In chapter 3, she asks how panel sequences work to signify action, how action relates to movement and how the gap is central in pushing the narrative forwards. She explores questions of cohesion between panels and of elision and repetition and examines reading practices and their impact on narrative significance. As in other chapters, she does so through detailed visual analyses of the visual track, drawing examples from a variety of genres and from both alternative and mainstream comics.

Chapter 4 broaches the issue of narrating with both words and images. Postema explores the ways in which verbal text fills in the gap left in the image, the layout and the sequence. Although she privileges the

image in her analysis, as she does throughout the book, she works hard to show that images often function like words and words like images. Nonetheless, she also keeps the two narrative modes separate. Understanding that the notion of the gap is least evident when examining the narrative interplay of words and images, Postema specifies that '[t]he gap at work at this level is the gap between the verbal and the visual as signifying systems, a gap that is never quite bridged, no matter how visually expressive text in comics sometimes becomes, and no matter how abstracted and cryptic some images become' (82).

The comingling of word and image is further explored in the closing chapter, but with a focus on how they work together to narrate. Although chapter 5 is the book's most theoretically engaged chapter, it is as clear and reader friendly as the other four. In it, Postema draws important connections between the narrative elements – panels, sequences, layout – explored in previous chapters. Her synthesis not only helps readers recall important observations made throughout the book, but also serves to highlight once again that '[i]n comics, the use of gaps and fragments is important at all levels of signification' (123).

Making Sense of Fragments closes with an appendix on comics terminology and one on a brief comics history and generic overview. While Postema's attention to detail, where she meticulously walks the reader through each example, and her balanced use of theory makes this an excellent book for young scholars of comics, her sophisticated analysis of the gap also makes it an important resource for established scholars.

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Shane Denson, Christina Meyer and Daniel Stein, eds, *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). ISBN: 978-1-4411-8575-4 (hardback and e-book, $120, £65)

This useful and penetrating collection of essays by a suitably international array of scholars seeks, in the words of its editors, to 'chart the ways in which graphic narratives have been shaped by aesthetic, social, political, economic and cultural interactions that reach across national boundaries in an interconnected and globalizing world' (1). It does that and more, presenting sixteen insightful analyses situating the practice

and circulation of graphic narrative within a 'global flow' of cultural processes that privileges hybridity and the porousness of borders.

In their introduction, Denson (a post-doctoral researcher at Leibniz University, Hanover); Meyer (Assistant Professor and Research Associate in the English Department, also at Leibniz); and Stein (Assistant Professor at the University of Göttingen) outline the good reasons to look at the U.S. comics industry trans-nationally, that is, as ceaselessly in dialogue with trends, political events and economic forces from beyond its shores.

Making reference to the writings of social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, literary scholars Shelley Fisher-Fishkin and Günter Lenz, and others, the editors argue that the trans-national turn in American studies does not – or need not – supersede the work of scholars examining the graphic narrative productions of single countries (e.g., France, Japan). Rather, these studies serve as the basis for comparative explorations, with the caveat that 'the multidirectional transactions uncovered by a transnational perspective problematize the foundational role of discrete national units; though not effaced, the particular is thus rendered internally multiple as the traces of exchange are discovered *within,* and not merely *between,* national cultures, traditions and identities' (3).

Such observations – to some extent drawn from comparative literature, post-colonial theory, critiques of U.S. imperialism and other approaches – resonate throughout the collection's three sections: 'Politics and Poetics'; 'Transnational and Transcultural Superheroes'; and 'Translations, Transformations and Migrations', devoted to innumerable authors, characters, genres and individual works. Its focus, though, rarely veers from the U.S. as 'an exemplary field of transcultural exchange' (3) – to the disappointment, perhaps, of those hoping for a wider scope.

The contributions, by specialists in English, American studies, media studies and communications, are consistently illuminating and well written. Standouts for this reviewer included 'Batman Goes Transnational: The Global Appropriation and Distribution of an American Hero' by Katharina Bieloch and Sharif Bitar, with its focus on the recent series *Batman Incorporated* and its trenchant reminder that the French for Batman is 'Le Batman' (115); 'Cosmopolitan Suspicion: Comics Journalism and Graphic Silence' by Georgiana Banita, who concludes through an examination of works by Guy Delisle and Joe Sacco that 'comics journalism is per se a transnational genre and does not exist outside of a dichotomy that pits the "home" against "abroad"' (51)

(though one wonders if works like Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* might complicate that thesis) and persuasively argues for the 'silent' panel sequence as a site of resistance to such 'Manichean ethics' (56); and 'Staging Cosmopolitanism: The Transnational Encounter in Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza*' by Aryn Bartley for its attention to how graphic reportage's verbal/visual poetics can foster a 'cosmopolitan vision' of regional conflicts. In their turn, 'Spider-Man India: Comic Books and the Translating/Transcreating of American Cultural Narratives' by Shilpa Davé and 'A Disappointing Crossing: The North American Reception of Asterix and Tintin' by Jean-Paul Gabilliet both illustrate the potential and pitfalls of corporate brands crossing cultural, linguistic and national frontiers.

This book continues Bloomsbury Press's streak of important comics studies works that include Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith's *The Power of Comics,* Ben Saunders's *Do The Gods Wear Capes?* and *Black Comics,* edited by Sheena C. Howard and Ronald Jackson II. With a foreword by John Lent, publisher of the *International Journal of Comic Art* (whose every resplendent volume in a sense validates the thesis of this study), *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives* advances a very welcome interdisciplinary, cross-border perspective to the study of graphic narrative.

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Mélanie Van Der Hoorn, *Bricks and Balloons: Architecture in Comic Strip Form* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2012). 224 pp. ISBN: 978-9064507960 (hardback, €39.50)

The inspiration for this groundbreaking work comes from a lucky encounter between Mélanie Van Der Hoorn (cultural anthropologist and essayist) and Joost Swarte (Dutch graphic designer and cartoonist, and one of the few artists of the ninth art professionally involved in architectural design). In 2004, as the author was about to finish her earlier book, *Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of Undesired Buildings,* she asked the artist to create a cover that would illustrate the contradiction built into the title.[3] Swarte's contribution led Van Der Hoorn to pur-

3 Mélanie Van Der Hoorn, *Indispensable Eyesores: An Anthropology of Undesired Buildings,* Remapping Cultural History 10 (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

sue the line of enquiry that led to the publication of her more recent volume.

Bricks and Balloons describes the important research done by the author between 2004 and 2012. The conversational but precise style is very effective and often contextualized with unpublished contributions collected by the author. Those aspects make the reading extremely pleasant and interesting, even for non-experts. They also allow the author to offer a focused, clear and in-depth enquiry into different uses of comics in architecture. The author also delineates a framework of analysis that tries to give an effective key of comparison for the analysis of different comics from the perspective of graphic quality and narrative structure. The chapter 'Exploring the Interaction between Man and Building in a Poetic-Philosophical Way' focuses on the comic works of authors who deal more or less explicitly with the theme of architectural representation. While this is the less innovative part of the book, this introduction is necessary inasmuch as it allows the neophyte to acquire some basic references. From this point of view, the chapter provides a simple and concise treatment of the wealth of possible examples, thereby evincing an ability to synthesize that is often missing from essays and discussions by experts in the field of comics.

The following chapters ('Showing a Subjective or Deliberately Built View of Reality' and 'Assuming a Critical Position on Supposedly Wrong Tracks in Architecture') form the core of the book and focus on the ways in which a comic can tell and convey a specific idea about built space. Specifically, Van Der Hoorn is interested not in architectural artefacts (or their representations) but in the extent to which the idea of architecture (or city) can be conveyed by means of a comics-like narrative object. Later chapters, 'Presenting the People and Ideas behind the Designs' and 'Conveying Lively and Lived-In Designs to the Public', deal with the ways in which architects have used the language of the ninth art to communicate the stories and theories behind a particular project or to make public statements on larger design issues.

The comic book, intended as an empathic and popular communication tool, is conceived as a useful means to bridge the gap between architects and the public. The examples chosen by Van Der Hoorn highlight the communicative power, but also the limits, of these hybrids tools, which consist of comics and materials taken from architectural projects. In many cases some comics paradigms are adopted in the architectural representation just to facilitate the public's comprehension. This simplification imposes narrow boundaries to those 'archicomics':

the end result is often just an approximation to the language of comics when not a merely formal mimesis of the same. Bjarke Engles's *Yes Is More* is a clear example of this approach: trying to repeat the structure of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics,* the book reads like a sequence of renderings and photographic images, combined with balloons here and there, rather than a real comic.[4]

The chapter 'Creating Comic-Strip Architecture' and the 'Conclusions' present the theory that has shaped the monograph and point to its inherent value: Van Der Hoorn's text is a fundamental contribution to a topic that has long been of interest to critics and authors in the world of comics (as, most recently, in the large exhibition on comics and architecture featured in the 2013 edition of the Naples Comicon), but has not yet been discussed adequately and exhaustively (with the exception, to mention the two most comprehensive contributions, of Alberghini and Ahrens and Meteling).[5] The value (but at the same time, the potential limit) of *Bricks and Balloons* lies in its exploration (which forms the bulk of the volume) of an important facet of the relationship between comics and architecture: the relationship that architects have with the comic form (especially with respect to architects who have used cartoons throughout their career). As such, it is an important extra-disciplinary contribution that comic critics can draw upon to set up a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary discourse about spatial representation.

On the whole, however, this book will probably be of greater use to architects than to professionals in the field of comics. The examples and documented interviews cover a very broad spectrum of instances of architects using comics – from self-conscious approaches (Jean Nouvel) to disruptive and irreverent uses (Archigram) – and include an instance of collaboration between professional cartoonists and architects (Joost Swarte and Mecanoo Architects). Although some examples of the ninth art are top-notch (as in the case of Gerner, Schuiten, Mathieu, Ware and Bezian, among others), from a linguistic point of view, the analysis stops at a more superficial level and does not close the circle. This may well be intentional on the part of the author, but it means the book barely touches upon reflections that could lead to the identi-

4 Bjarke Ingels, *Yes Is More* (Copenhagen: Taschen, 2009); Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993).

5 Andrea Alberghini, *Sequenze urbane: La Metropoli del fumetto* [Urban Sequence: The Metropolis of Comics] (Rovigo: Edizioni Delta Comics, 2006); Jorn Ahrens and Arno Meteling, eds, *Comics and the City: Urban Space in Print, Picture and Sequence* (London: Continuum, 2010).

fication of a much wider range of instruments (a comparison between different script strategies, for example) related to a most appropriate use of comics (or sequential narrative images) in communicating architecture.

After reading this fascinating volume, it is clear that the two worlds of 'bricks' and 'balloons' are meant to interact and have been doing so for a long time, as Van Der Hoorn documents. The questions that this text implicitly addresses to the critics (and authors) who work on the ninth art are numerous and challenging. Which narrative syntax (as a set of syntactic elements that defines the comic as such) is more effective in narrating the built space? Do narrative rules change according to the scale of the architectural object? How are the stylistic and formal aspects (the authorial signature) involved in the storytelling of the built space? I believe that the next phase of comics and architecture research should focus on those questions, in order to indicate a path that could lead, thanks to the synergy between 'bricks' and 'balloons', to the creation of excellent comics.

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Thomas Hausmanninger, *Verschwörung und Religion: Aspekte der Postsäkularität in den franco-belgischen Comics* [Conspiracy and Religion: Aspects of Post-Secularity in Franco-Belgian Comics] (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013). 522 pp. ISBN: 978-3-7705-5508-6 (hardback, €59.00, £45.77, SF 76.00)

Le Troisième testament [The Third Testament], *Les Immortels*, *Qumran*, *Le Triangle secret*, *Le Linceuil* [The Shroud] – since the 1990s a large number of French and Franco-Belgian comics have addressed religion in new and unusual ways. The Catholic theologian Thomas Hausmanninger, who holds a chair in social ethics at the University of Augsburg, has now made the new religious trend in comics the subject of an exhaustive study. Hausmanninger observes that the 'religious wave' in French and Franco-Belgian comics is consonant with recent enquiries into the continuing relevance of religion in modern societies in social studies, in public media and in theology itself; indeed, he argues, comics constitute an important discursive element in the process of a 'return of religion' and the shift to a post-secular age. Following scholars of secularism and post-secularism such as Talal Asad, Hans Joas and especially Hans-Joachim Höhn, Hausmanninger describes the re-

ligious and spiritual situation in the contemporary West as one that takes leave of a more dogmatic and ideological secular worldview and acknowledges religion as a continuing possibility in an open and pluralistic society. According to such a post-secular framework, religion is no longer expected to necessarily die or disappear, but it has lost its normative and definitive force. Religion can be considered something of an anthropological invariant, but how it is adopted and practised is becoming a matter of highly individual, even fanciful, choice. This is especially true in France, with its strong laicist tradition of restricting religion to the private sphere, and to some extent also in Belgium.

What part do comics, a product of popular culture, play in the process of renegotiating religion in a post-secular situation? Hausmanninger proceeds from the observation that the majority of comics in the 'religious wave' employ a very specific pattern of thinking about religion: the conspiracy theory. In a series of detailed analyses, he describes how the *Le Troisième testament* series – his main reference text – and other comics in its wake generate a tension between references to popular conspiracy theories (such as Lincoln, Baigent and Leigh's *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*) and what he calls 'verschwörungstheoretisches Erzählen' [conspiracy theory narrative], a mode of self-consciously fictional narrative that uses motives and patterns taken from existing conspiracy theories in order to create an open, pluralistic and highly individualistic discourse about religion.

Because Hausmanninger's argument hinges on this distinction between conspiracy theory itself and its derivative use as a narrative pattern in popular fiction, he spends a great deal of energy on expounding the nature and history of conspiracy theories. Like the over-long discussion of post-secularity in different Western countries (including countries like the U.S. that are not the focus of this study), this dimension of the book makes for some very dull reading and could have benefited from substantial streamlining. A conspiracy theory, according to Hausmanninger, is a narrative discourse with a central actor (the secret group) and a closed system of argumentation, often by analogy rather than reasoned deduction, that reduces large and contingent historical processes (or even all of history) to one single explanation. Its driving motivation is simplification: by explaining all processes and events of reality out of one single driving principle (the conspiracy), it achieves a degree of coherence not available to reality with its manifold processes. However, the seeming rationality with which conspiracy theories convince their adherents is based on a mixture of unproven facts,

reference to obscure, unavailable or forged documents, arguments from other conspiracy theories and often simple invention. Because it reduces everything to the machinations of a small clique of conspirators, conspiracy discourse is inherently anti-religious: it simply does not allow for non-immanent causation. The very fact that fully blown conspiracy theories emerged for the first time in the second half of the eighteenth century suggests that they are a product of the Enlightenment's critique of religion and of the subsequent secularization of intellectual elites.

Besides *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail,* which has already inspired a large number of popular thrillers, including Dan Brown's best-selling *The Da Vinci Code,* the Qumran scrolls, their probable Essene provenance and the sensationalist rumours surrounding their deciphering provide a second important source of inspiration for the comics that Hausmanninger analyzes. Like the supposed bloodline of Christ, the conspiracy theories around the Qumran scrolls centre on a counter-canonical interpretation of the person, life and message of Jesus Christ. First developed by John Allegro, a member of the original Qumran research team led by Roland de Vaux, the Qumran conspiracy theory claims that Jesus was a member of the Essene community and that Christianity therefore developed out of Essene spirituality, but that its inner-worldly origins and originally purely political aspirations were later silenced and suppressed by the official church. As is often the case with conspiracy theories, the Qumran theory promises to reveal an older, hidden truth that threatens to shake the foundations of a very powerful organization, the Catholic Church.

What makes such theories attractive for popular fiction, graphic or otherwise, is the fact that they operate within a hermeneutics of suspicion; both the struggle to decipher a previously hidden message and the need to do so in a time race against an overpowering adversary make for a thrilling tale. Indeed, mystery fiction and conspiracy theory co-evolved out of the late eighteenth-century gothic novel, responding to an increasingly literate population's appetite for a fast and thrilling read. In the contemporary comics wave too, finding and deciphering hidden documents that reveal a hidden truth is a prominent motif and a driving force of the narrative. Moreover, the comics that Hausmanninger analyzes all refer directly or indirectly to well-known conspiracy theories like the Qumran theory or the esoteric theories around the book of Henoch. What distinguishes these comics from other conspiracy fiction, especially Brown's *The Da Vinci Code,* however, is the fact

that they do not reference these theories in earnest: we are not meant to believe that the conspiracy is real, as many of Brown's readers have done. On the contrary, the conspiracy theory structure is here used in a self-consciously fictional 'as if' mode; moreover, it is usually associated with the worldview of particular characters out of which a fuller, polyperspectival view of reality can be negotiated by the reader. Comics like *Le Troisième testament* do not aim to propagate conspiracy theories, but use elements from conspiratorial narrative in order to generate new forms of knowledge about religion. This new knowledge is highly individualistic, in part because none of the authors are closely affiliated with an existing faith, but it does bring religion into play in new ways.

At this point, the author's argument becomes slightly desperate, for he assumes that these comics can provide a model for religious communities' negotiating of a post-modern situation (495). While I have every sympathy for his goal to find new and unconventional ways of spreading the Gospel, I am not convinced that these French comics can serve as a useful mission tool. Their (intended as well as actual) readership, I suspect, is just as unaffiliated with any existing faith as most of their authors. More than anything, these comics seem to me to indicate a desire on the part of secular comics artists and audiences to move past the hostile fight against religion per se and into a space where ideas about the transcendent are being renegotiated through a bricolage of existing discourses and images. Thomas Hausmanninger's study is an important book because it raises scholarly awareness of these phenomena, but it leaves open many questions regarding the aesthetic and narrative mediation of these comics, which others will now hopefully address.

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