

## Introduction

### Post-comics: a certain point in time

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In introducing the neologism 'post-comics', I am not suggesting that such a thing exists as a distinctive entity. In this volume, we use the term essentially to indicate some relatively recent evolutions and singular trajectories discernible in comics at large. As an ephemeral phenomenon or as a historical snapshot, the concept of post-comics allows us to comment and reflect on various aspects concerning (alternative) comics and (experimental) graphic novels from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Only recently confronted with their own 'avant-gardes', comics and graphic novels have engendered new, autonomous practices that echo revolutions in arts and media from the last 100 years.

### Post-medial abstractions

In 2019, the French centrist magazine *Marianne* published an article conveniently titled 'La bd est-elle devenue intello?' or, 'Have comics become highbrow?' The author Thomas Rabino (a historian, specializing in the French Resistance) claims that a more intellectual kind of comics has arisen, targeting mostly highly educated adults and slowly supplanting the more popular comics that Rabino finds more aesthetically pleasing. (Rabino 2019) On *du9.org*, a website devoted to (alternative) comics, Xavier Guilbert dismantles the sociological typologies Rabino applies to intellectual comics and the historian's aesthetic assumptions. (Guilbert 2019) Guilbert concludes by describing Rabino's position as a 'good old reactionary one, the kind one would've presumed is impossible to hold nowadays.' Rabino's question does indeed raise more than one eyebrow: comics and graphic novels have undergone thorough transformations over the past *decades*. If comics have become 'nerdish', it did not happen in one day! Since the 1950s and 1960s, with, amongst others, academics like Umberto Eco and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, and consistently since the 1980s, a vast field of 'comics studies' has carefully examined the many facets of comic making and its reception.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, reflection on such objects by comics makers and the development of more **research-driven creations**, have given shape to experimental and by now well established movements like potential comics (OuBaPo) in the 1990s, abstract comics in the 2000s, different kinds of digital comics since the 1990s and, more recently - or already in *parallel* with previous movements - what we might call 'post-comics'. Besides, cartoonists and commenters have, since the early days of comics, reflected upon the medium, which has often resulted in deconstructive or self-reflexive puns. The often cited episode of Winsor McCay's *Little Sammy Sneeze* from 24 September 1905 is a perfect example of such reflexivity. Comics have

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<sup>1</sup> For a good introduction see for example Miller & Beaty 2014 or Baetens & Frey 2014

always had a propensity for 'intellectual' forms and even formal(ist) play. If one can only find humor in these long gone puns, he or she might also be taking more recent propositions a bit too seriously...

Of course, things *have* changed in the field of comics and graphic novels over the last few decades. As this publication shows, post-comics are first of all an **expansion** of 20<sup>th</sup> century comic making. But they are not highbrow distortions of an originally popular medium. A dogged populism inhabits not only (or not exclusively) mainstream comics: even so-called advocates of the (middlebrow) graphic novel often find themselves resting on the same tacit presupposition. Comics - and their prolongations, graphic novels - aren't 'essentially' lowbrow. To continue thinking they are doesn't ensure the 'authenticity' of comics. On the contrary, it only reveals the apologies of comics to be essentialist and even retrograde. Thierry Smolderen, for example, has convincingly traced the *diverse* origins of comics. (Smolderen 2014) Even claims that comics are a mass-medium, essentially narrative or sequential by nature are easily refuted by examples from comics history. Comics' mixed **genealogy** encompasses William Hogarth's print series (which are related to the novels of Sterne and Fielding), poor man's bibles and almanacs, mediaeval stained glass or the tapestry of Bayeux, to name a few. Only in *some* contexts made for the poor and the illiterate - as is also the case for certain modernist woodcut novels - they are generally made by well-trained artists from the (lower) middle class. This composite lineage has fostered a marked hybridity on formal and thematic levels, which has increasingly included more adventurous and experimental works. The graphic novel came along with a growing self-awareness of the (medium)specificity and the history of comics, spawning in its turn a 'detached' offspring we can call post-comics here.

So, what are post-comics? As several contributors in this volume show, they are not only related to the formal aspects of (alternative) comics, but they generally reflect an outspoken *artistic* take or even a full-fledged *avant-gardist* vision on the graphic novel. They also entail a good deal of **abstraction**, without necessarily fitting into the 'genre' of abstract comics. If anything, these post-comics extrapolate the artistic potential of 'the ninth art' towards new objects and practices: one can call them transmedial, interdisciplinary, meta-medial... depending on what is being stressed. These objects are often books but not the kind that are easily identified as comics or graphic novels. Akin to artist's publications, post-comics question the boundaries of what is a comic, an illustrated book, a piece of visual storytelling and so forth. Post-comics also come as expositions, installations, performances or participative designs. Moreover, they are not solely a complementary activity of comics makers nor are they merely expanded objects made to comment upon the medium of reference or point of departure, even though they *also* indulge in some reflexive commentary on comics. Post-comics often intensify or deterritorialize comics practices, methods and reflexes within a **post-media** artworld in an attempt to generate new autonomies: hence their recurrent problems concerning context and situation. Thierry Groensteen called comics a 'uco' or an 'unidentified cultural object'. (Groensteen 2006) But

even if they are still partly misunderstood, comics and graphic novels are by now culturally well appreciated. Against this background, post-comics appear as the kind of creations that are not easily situated, at least from a conventional comics' point of view. Since the post-comics presented here mix several genealogies (art, comics, literature, cinema and so on) is it still valid to call them post-comics? Aren't they just artworks and practices that *incorporate* comics traditions? The reader will notice that the stress is put on the makers: all artists involved deploy an oeuvre that can't be resumed to graphic novels alone. At the same time, all share a background that is explicitly linked to comics, *bande dessinée* and illustration. We hope that the neologism 'post-comics' might help tease out the singularities of the discussed works while emphasizing their critical contribution to comics and related fields, ranging from the graphic novel to installation art.

### **Possible points of departure?**

Post-comics seem to push their miscellaneous legacies into the vast zone of **contemporary art**. Clear examples of this are Ilan Manouach's activities on Ubuweb, Benjamin Monti's exhibition in MAC's Le Grand Hornu<sup>2</sup> and Jochen Gerner's winning the Drawing Art Now prize (Paris, 2016). Even if post-comics seem especially inclined towards to rearranging *formal* and *aesthetic* qualities of comic making, they often also investigate the more experimental side of comics' literary affinities. In such cases, they exceed the conventional, even ossified conceptions of and around **literature**, retained by most graphic novels. By thinking through the historical specificities of comics and other media along original trajectories, post-comics tend to go beyond the graphic novel as we know it. The work of Olivier Deprez is emblematic of such post-comical tendencies: after his groundbreaking woodcut 'adaptation' of Franz Kafka's novel *The Castle*, Deprez has expanded his explorative practice towards a fascinating collaboration with outsider artist Adolpho Avril, leading to animations and meticulously curated exhibitions, as well as more interdisciplinary projects, such as his printing performances with the actor Miles O'Shea. These diverse opportunities for symbiosis allowed Deprez to further probe the possibilities of graphic narration. Among the more recent post-comics artists, Tom Lambeens and Felipe Muhr examine underexposed aspects of visual storytelling. With *Front/Back* (2009) for example, Lambeens deploys an almost choreographic narrative involving colored squares (as 'characters') and diverging types of paper (functioning as 'stages'). With *Blindsight* (2016), Muhr ventures into the haptic qualities of graphic poetry. In earlier projects, such as *How to Draw Donald Duck* (2015), Muhr had already deconstructed the language of classic comics, which is comparable to the many re-appropriations of graphic idioms in works by Manouach and Gerner, amongst others.

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Monti, *The need for repetition*, Musée des Arts Contemporains de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, from the 13th of March until the 3rd of July 2016.

Post-comics are, therefore, never completely *beyond* the issues at stake in graphic novels though they might touch upon some 'beyond' (see Pylyser) or an 'other' of comics (see Ahmed). They keep being 'haunted' (see Carneiro) by the specters of comics, cinema, literature... to the extent of a sublime 'melancholy' (see Andrieu de Levis) or attempts at resistance by echoing lost or unheard-of creations within the highly digitalized context of late capitalist standardization (see Crucifix). To do so, post-comics lean towards tactics of erasure and retraction, techniques of collage and *détournement*, of citing, (hysterical) montage (see Op de Beeck) and joyfully jamming - or even saturating - the prevailing codes (see Rommens). This necessity to **mingle, remix and dissolve** isn't solely resulting from our hyper-liquid metamodernity. In the case of post-comics, a resolution of comics' undeniable bonds with the simultaneously sticky and traumatic object and companion of childhood and adolescence (e.g. Menu 2011:15-28 and Tisseron 1987) is involved. Mature artistic propositions ask for more than just themes for grown-ups: ripened discourse supposes full-grown forms, risking what for some will seem a 'denaturation' or 'defiguration' - so it goes in all art and poetry. How hardwired some of these post-comics might seem (depending on your point of view), they are never devoid of humor : it's not a heritage one would truly want to discard! But comics are definitely evolving into something new here, often self-reflective and critical, possibly... breaking out?

Ilan Manouach's *Shapereader* (2014) might be a symptomatic post-comics achievement: extracting the logics inherent in comics making and graphic design, the *Shapereader* is an open, multifunctional tool that has been used in participatory projects.<sup>3</sup> With its expandable set of 'tactigrams', you can shape your own (abstract) comics, play a Pictionary-like game or facilitate interactions between deaf persons and visually impaired people. *Shapereader* is the result of a highly atypical extrapolation of manipulating graphic information, which is, paradoxically, intuitive for a comic maker: the tactigrams, for example, have been developed along a general idea of sufficient yet minimal differences concerning touch and look. Just like typified comics characters, their patterns are simple and thus easily recognizable, though they are closely related and graphically formatted. But the *Shapereader* is clearly no longer a comic, it also isn't necessarily art or literature (though it can be used for artistic and literary purposes). As a post-comic it shows that *abstraction* doesn't only apply *within* comics - thus concerning the iconographic and narrative aspects - but also *to* comics as a language and as a way of thinking. For graphic novelist and editor Jean-Christophe Menu *bande dessinée* is more like a second language than a medium. (Menu 2011) I can only agree and have elsewhere compared comics to a **mode**: in philosophy, a *modus* is not a substance nor an attribute or a property but more of a quality, a condition, a (transient) state. (Conard 2016:111) More than a means or a vessel, one can consider comics as a way of thinking, creating, perceiving and understanding, leading to formal propositions of different kinds. Abstracting comics in this sense, post-comics show

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<sup>3</sup> See [shapereader.org](http://shapereader.org)

that 'comics' can follow diverse vectors: beyond (sequential) narrativity it can become a tool for artistic reflection, for interactive projects, for notation, planification and so on. As a mode, it lends itself to purposes beyond fiction or documentary. What seemed to be only a subcultural 'genre', affirmed itself as a strong narrative medium and evolved into a distinctive artistic form. Post-comics show how comics are a versatile graphic device and a creative language - supposing its own learnings and ways of 'talking' and making - that allow very divergent trajectories.

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(fig 1: Little Sammy Sneeze)

(fig 2: a rope-ladder bleeding of the high end of the last page...)

