

Foreword

Why do we need post-comics?

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Whether we need the special *kind* of comics called post-comics is one question, which the essays in this volume address and answer in very convincingly affirmative ways. Yet whether we need the term, that is the label and the *concept* of post-comics, is another one. But here as well the answer can, I would like to argue, only be positive. The making of concepts is part of thinking, and thus we need new concepts to grasp what is really going on in the works under scrutiny in this collection. The price to pay for the refusal of new concepts would be blindness, in the metaphorical as well as in the very literal sense of the word, as repeatedly argued by James Elkins in books such as *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (1996). In his *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (2003), Elkins also complains that much work done in this fashionable discipline proves too easy: it leads to blindness by not asking new and difficult questions – and this is what post-comics, the concept as well as the new ways of drawing, help us do.

But what does the notion of post-comics refer to? The easiest way of answering this question would be to try to define – and thus perhaps safely corral – a group of works that no longer obey the traditional rules of comics making, provided one agrees on what these rules may be (most adepts of post-comics seem to have quite strong ideas on this point, but that is another story). This approach, which at first sight seems to be quite an easy one, is however deceiving in more than one way. It first suggests that it is actually possible to do so, for instance by defining Frans Masereel as a comics artist and Oliver Deprez as a post-comics one. Yet deconstructing this kind of dichotomies is as easy as producing them - and, yes, there would be a lot of post-comics aspects to discover in Hergé, the usual Clear Line suspect of all those who want to get rid of the ancient models. The idea that the difference between comics and post-comics can be described in terms of differences between works, styles, techniques, perspectives, etc., is also deceiving for another, more important reason. By focusing on the distinction between two types of making comics, one overlooks a more crucial shift that has to do with the *status* of comics and post-comics as media. And here, the differences go much beyond changes in style, subject matter and narrative, non-narrative or anti-narrative qualities.

What actually changes in the case of post-comics – which as the notion of post-modernism should not be reduced to a historical or chronological period – is something that touches upon all aspects of comics, no longer seen as merely an object or a body of works, but as a cultural practice. This practice involves not only creations, but the many ways in which these are produced, funded, reproduced, stored, distributed, sold and bought, discussed, ignored, analyzed, taught, collected, reappropriated,

transmitted, canonized, adapted, remediated, transmedialized, reworked, transformed, forgotten, rediscovered – or not (the negation does of course not only apply to the last item of this list).

It would therefore be a mistake to position post-comics in terms of 'serious', 'abstract', 'difficult', 'adult', 'theory-conscious', etc., for each of these terms is in danger of implicitly imprisoning post-comics within the conventional framework of high versus low culture, with conventional comics occupying the pole of 'low' culture and post-comics that of 'high' culture. In our omnivorous times, this distinction is running out of steam – and this also means that post-comics should have the ambition to start making 'popular', 'commercial', 'entertaining' works (this is clearly not yet on the current research agenda, but it would be a mistake, both theoretical and artistic, not to think in this direction *as well*). Clearly, something else is going on here, and the difference that post-comics are making nowadays has not only to do with the eventual reuse - after one century! - of various avant-garde techniques in an allegedly conservative comics medium. (A closer look at the history of comics would however have no problems in dismantling that illusion.) Also, and more crucially, the difference post-comics engender concerns the way in which these works appear, circulate, migrate, and in short *function*. Even if characteristics of style and subject matter, that is of new styles and new subject matter, continue to play a central role in the reading and writing of post-comics, other and more far-reaching changes appear at the level of the medial and cultural practices these objects involve. In this regard, post-comics are much more than just another way of making or telling comics. What post-comics are doing is *transferring* the art of comics to different fields, different contexts, if not different artistic, cultural, technological and industrial worlds. These new environments may challenge post-comics the same way they themselves have challenged their initial comics setting.

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