

Editorial



Fig. 1: The truth about comics still needs to be uncovered. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994 (1993), 211.

“The truth about comics can’t stay hidden from view forever”, argues Scott McCloud in his comic book about comic books.¹ In a way, this short quotation expresses the rich, ambivalent, and fascinating history of the medium that is the comic book. The comic book has been polarising opinions for more than 120 years: some have considered it a threat to the intellectual development of the younger generation, as venomous for the reigning moral standards in society, as cheap – and morally dubious – entertainment, as escapism, or as the reason for the demise of language. Others have praised the comic book for its creativity, for its ability to put children in touch with the pleasure of reading, or for its contemporary and innovative expression. The comic book has also been a popular medium for political, ethical and economic manipulation.²

The comic transcends the merely entertaining, and fans of comics become engaged and invested in the field through a range of activities. Major cities host regular comic conventions, attracting hundreds of thousands of attendees each year, who search for special issues of their favourite comic book series, meet artists, attend workshops and buy merchandise.³ Many fans do not stop at just attending conventions; they do so dressed as their favourite comic characters

1 McCloud 1994, 211.

2 See the article by Christian Wessely in this issue, 17–44.

3 See, for example, the MCM comic con in London (<http://www.mcmcomiccon.com/london/> [accessed 11.4.2017]), the New York Comic Con (<http://www.newyorkcomiccon.com/> [11.4.2017]), and the Vienna Comix (<https://viennacomix.at/> [accessed 11.4.2017]).

or wearing badges, buttons, T-shirts or sweaters with images of those characters on them. In other words: many fans do not merely consume comic books; rather, they arrange a considerable part of their lives around them and in some cases even embody their heroes, that is, they copy their behaviour and their language.⁴ The comic universe, the comic books and the range of activities emerging out of them and around them become a *meaningful* universe for fans.

As a site that can give rise to meaning, comics are not a religion-free zone. Religion emerges in and from comics in a variety of ways. Many comic book stories draw on the vast pool of narratives and imagery from religious and mythological traditions. The endless fight of good versus evil, the quest for purity and truth, the development of the virtues of the main characters, the initiation rites these characters have to go through – all these various elements connect the heroes and their narratives to a longing for that which transcends the ordinary,⁵ a human longing of which Sallust said, “Now these things never happened, but always are.”⁶ Today, we can also find explicitly religious content being mediated through comic books, and Davide Zordan has argued that the medium “comic” is particularly apt to communicate religious narratives: “Now, even if comics is a popular medium considered mainly as a type of entertainment and, until very recently, without any societal relevance, it is characterised by this formal predisposition for religious subjects.”⁷

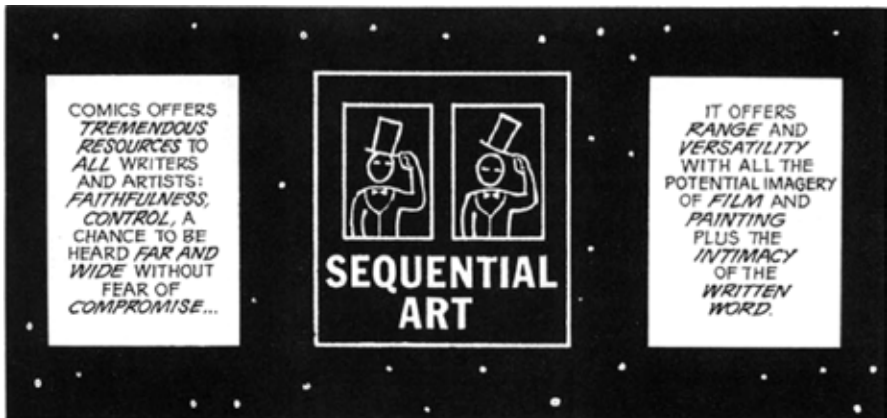


Fig. 2: A small part of the specific abilities of comics. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1994 (1993), 211.

- 4 It is fascinating to see this behaviour used as a cross-media-reference: in the popular sitcom *THE BIG BANG THEORY* (Chuck Lorre, USA 2007–), the main characters share a fascination for comics and consequently spend considerable time in comic shops, at comic cons and talking about their favourite characters and series.
- 5 Chidester 2005, 1.
- 6 Salustios, *On Gods and the Cosmos* 4, in: Murray 1943, App. 205.
- 7 Zordan 2015, 150.

In recent years, turning comic books into movies and television shows has become a popular and financially lucrative endeavour. The cinematic adaptation of a written text is a complicated task and more interpretation than simply the transfer of content from one medium to another. The screenplay writer has to choose which parts of the storyline to pick and which to leave out, acting as both interpreter and censor.⁸ The artists drawing the storyboard are limited in their freedom to sketch the pictures because they have to cater to the pictorial literacy of the viewers and their cultural context. Compared to the adaptation of just-text, the adaptation of a comic book appears much simpler because it provides the artists involved in the adaptation process not just with the (written) narrative but also with rich visual resources. But, in fact, a comic book adaptation is even more complicated. The visual universe of the comic offers only so much help, because the drawn image and the animated image are quite different. A character that is very popular in a comic book may lose much of its appeal when translated into an animated character. Some of the challenges of this translation have to do with the expectations and the imagination of the audience. They may already have formed a mental image of an animated character, with their ideas of how a drawn character walks, moves, behaves and interacts with other characters. The animation provided by the studio might then be at odds with the audience's imagination or expectations.

Sound, too, is challenging to translate from a comic book into an animated movie. Some comic book fans can be quite disappointed when they hear the animated version of their favourite comic books for the first time and when they hear how their familiar characters sound. In a comic book, the "audio track" is represented by visual means such as speech bubbles or written sound (e.g. "CRASH!", "ZIP!" or "GULP!"), again leaving room for the individual imagination. Last but not least, the comic book – even though on average it consists of only 40–70 pages – contains far more material than can possibly fit into a feature film-length work. Further, a comic book contains not only what is visible but also what is invisible. Scott McCloud emphasizes the importance of the space between the panels, where the mind of the reader (re)constructs considerable parts of the story that are only insinuated by the authors. As such, comics encourage a high level of audience engagement and involvement, and the audience becomes co-creator and co-writer of the story. It is then challenging to translate and transfer both the space-in-between and the level of audience engagement from comic books into movie adaptations.

Adapting a comic book into a live-action movie, rather than an animated movie, can be highly controversial. Some artists are sceptical about – or reject

8 The length of a screenplay is roughly calculated with a one-page-per-film-minute formula, limiting it to 90–120 pages, whereas the underlying novel might consist of three or four times that number of pages.

outright – any adaptations of their works because they consider the characteristics of the medium a crucial part of the narrative and their narrative style.⁹ Audience satisfaction and identification form a crucial issue, too. Live-action movies have to cater to a larger non-hardcore fan audience (or a dual audience of fans and non-fans).¹⁰ Most importantly, however, the translation of the unique visual style of comics into photographic and live-action images poses a challenge: as Pascal Lefèvre has observed, “The different visual ontology may also be the reason why it is extremely difficult to adapt a strongly stylized or caricatured drawing into a photographic image.”¹¹

In short, comic books not only are part of cultural history but also have produced a vibrant material and visual culture. They participate in and contribute to socio-cultural discourses around, for example, ideas of masculinity, the value of art, adult versus youth entertainment and consumption, and identity negotiation. Most importantly, the comic universe is engaged in the production of meaning, the discussion of ethical questions and moral order, and questions of ultimate concern. This issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* addresses some of these topics.

In his introductory paper to the thematic section of this issue, Christian Wessely looks at the history of the comic from a European perspective as well as its unique characteristics as medium. In particular, he is interested in the genre’s ability to manipulate, and he considers parallels in the development of the visual culture of the comic and the visual culture of interactive media. He argues that research should adapt the advanced tools and methodologies employed in the study of visual culture, in film studies and the study of comic books for example, to the study of interactive media such as Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp. He suggests that these tools are particularly helpful in generating better understanding of leading forms of communication that rely on visual language and the compression of language.

The topic of violence is obviously important for comic book screen adaptations. Although brutal scenes are widely accepted in comic books, they are a problem in their respective movies. Theresia Heimerl analyses the role of (sexual) violence comparing Japanese movies (especially *anime*) and Hollywood productions. She shows that there exists a strong relationship between a positive or negative portrayal of the protagonists and the staging of their (hidden) sexual desires.

In his article entitled “The Problem of Evil in DC Universe Animated Movies”, Toufic El-Khoury uses Leibniz’s theodicy to critically analyse productions from

9 Lefèvre 2007, 1.

10 Burke 2012.

11 Lefèvre 2007, 9.

the DC Multiverse in the period 2007 to 2016. He is particularly interested in moral questions, in how the DC Multiverse imagines evil and explains its existence, and in the DC Multiverse's possible answer to the problem of evil. He argues that the question of evil actually helped the comic universe to mature, but proposes that such growing-up also poses challenges for superheroes, both male and female: "These protagonists are stuck in an infinite vicious circle, where their heroic actions (fighting against the forces of evil) are incompatible with their identity (forces of evil define them as heroic protagonists)."

In his article "Shadows of the Bat", Simon Philipp Born looks at the question of good and evil in Tim Burton's and Christopher Nolan's Batman productions. Due to the popularity and sheer number of superhero movies that have been released since the beginning of this century, he calls the 21st century the "Golden Age of superhero movies". In his contribution, he is particularly interested in the worldview that is enacted in superhero movies. While on first sight it seems that these movies promote a dualistic or Manichaeic worldview, Born argues that Burton's and Nolan's films "disclose and willingly subvert the clear-cut dichotomy in favor of a more complex and sophisticated viewpoint". As such, Born argues, Burton and Nolan uncover the socially constructed nature of "good" and "evil" that allows to exert control and power.

Thomas Hausmanninger approaches CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER¹² from a Judaic perspective in his article "Deconstructing *gilgul*, Finding Identity". Hausmanninger applies a Judaic and Kabbalistic lens to his interpretation of this movie. He is particularly interested in the portrayal of the characters Captain America and Bucky. Hausmanninger argues that these two characters are "temporally displaced" and that this temporal displacement is more than a narrative tool, for he shows that the temporal displacement bears resemblance with the Judaic concept of *gilgul*, the transmigration of the soul. He argues that the concept of *gilgul* is crucial in portraying Captain America's identity negotiations and his quest "to become whole": "Captain America can only find his identity and become whole where he is able to name the reason for his existence in the present world."

The team around Ken Derry explores the complicated relationship between Netflix's 2016 series LUKE CAGE and religion in his paper "Bulletproof Love". Drawing on a rich range of disciplines, such as Black Theology, Hip Hop studies, gender studies, and the study of African American religion, Derry argues that the show LUKE CAGE (2016) "is both progressive and reactionary; emphasizes community and valorizes an individual; critiques and endorses Christianity; subverts and promotes violence". Derry argues that religion – or, better, theological thinking – is a key ingredient of the show: LUKE CAGE (2016) discusses things

12 CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER (Anthony and Joe Russo, US 2014).

of ultimate concern. As such, the series can be seen as a piece of popular culture but also as a theological text.

The Open Section features an article by Michael Heim, the technophile philosopher and translator of Heidegger's works, on the renewed interest in virtual and augmented reality, for example, GoogleGlass, HoloLens, Sony PSVR, and Samsung Galaxy Gear. He is interested less in the technological aspects of augmented reality than in the anthropological questions the technology raises: What conditions and prerequisites ensure humans experience virtual and augmented reality as natural, familiar and inhabitable environments? In his article Heim argues that virtual and augmented realities can transcend the ordinary of the here and now and thus further develops his *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*.¹³

Between 2010 and 2017, many comic book movie adaptations found their way to movie theatres and onto TV screens, with more to come.¹⁴ Even as we write these lines, Disney/Marvel have announced 26 October 2017 as the U.S. release date for THOR: RAGNAROK (Taika Waititi, USA 2017).¹⁵ Other announcements happen almost weekly, and the website www.sciencefiction.com, with a dedicated section to comic books, keeps track of some of these developments. The scene – and the business – is thriving, and research on comics, their movie adaptations and their religious motifs will provide a rich field of research for the disciplines of both theology and the science of religion over the coming years.

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13 Heim 1994.

14 E.g. THOR (Kenneth Branagh, US 2011); DUCK TALES: THE MOVIE (Doug Walker, US 2011); ASTERIX AND OBELIX: GOD SAVE BRITANNIA (Laurent Tirard, FR 2012); X-MEN: APOCALYPSE (Bryan Singer, US 2016); BAT-MAN VS. SUPERMAN (Zack Snyder, US 2016).

15 See <http://orf.at//stories/2387132/> about the trailer which is said to be record-breaking.

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