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What Was, Is, Will Be Comic Studies – to Us?

Introduction

The (German) Society for Comic Studies (ComFor) has been established on February 11, 2005, in Koblenz. Its purpose was and still is the promotion and networking of interdisciplinary research on the media of comics in German-speaking countries, on German-language comics and other forms of graphic narrative, on works originating from German-speaking countries or translated into German and, more generally, all scholarship on comics at German, Austrian and Swiss universities and other educational institutions. Since 2006, ComFor has been organizing annual academic conferences which continue to be held at varying universities. A second central part of the Society's activities consists in the ComFor website www.comicgesellschaft.de with its own, volunteer editorial team, which processes and disseminates weekly information about new calls for papers (and panels), conferences, workshops, publications, or seminars and lectures related to our field of research and teaching. ComFor understands comics (in a necessarily open list, cf. Wilde 2024) as a medium, as an art form, a means of expression, a commodity, generally as a hub for historically evolving aesthetic and socio-cultural practices, industrial infrastructures, as a material object, and as an inter-medial interface to other drawn popular visual media forms such as political cartoons, picture books, or animated films.

On April 11, 2014, the Society was reconstituted as “ComFor e.V.” at Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main. In 2024, we, i.e. the members of ComFor, can therefore look back on the tenth anniversary as a legally registered association. With currently about 167 active members from various countries (from Italy, Austria, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the US, amongst others and different subject areas and disciplines such as Literary Studies, Art History, Media Studies, Sociology, Japanese Studies, and many more, the Society has grown since 2014 into one of the largest, internationally recognized institutions of interdisciplinary comics research, which is also manifested by the impressive number of publications and conferences with increasingly international participants (from early career scholars to full professors); hence, this bilingual introduction (cf. Meyer et al. 2024).

Perhaps unlike in the early years, many of our colleagues' projects today are collaborations, and the last ten years of ComFor's activities cannot really be retold without also referring to the Committee for Comics Studies (AG Comicforschung, <https://ag-comic.net>) of the German Society of Media Studies (GfM), which, as if by chance, also came together for a first workshop in April 2014. The Committee for Comics Studies has been awarding the annual Martin Schüwer-Publication Prize for Outstanding Comics Research, endowed with €1.000 annually, together with ComFor since 2019, and is also continuously present in comics research at German universities (just now in September, for instance, with an impressive international conference on “Thinking (in) Motion – Comics and Film” at Freie Universität Berlin). As a further, delightfully momentous coincidence, the first issue of *Closure: Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung* was published in 2014 as well, since then certainly an internationally renowned journal for scholarly articles on comics – and with issue #9:1, *Coherence in Comics* (Krieber et al. 2023), also the site of publication for the proceedings of the 2021 ComFor annual conference.

Over these past ten years, the field has thus become very diversified, professionalized, and evolved. Even though there is no independent *discipline* of Comic Studies, as there is, for example, American Studies, Media Studies, or Pedagogy, to name but a few here, comics have become an established subject of research in the humanities, both in Germany and internationally (cf. for an overview Abel/Klein 2016; Smith 2017; Aldama 2018). Comics have also become increasingly important as *graphic medicine* in the natural and medical sciences in the last ten years (also the overarching topic of this year's ComFor annual conference, which will take place for the first time in Groningen, the Netherlands, from October 23 to October 25, 2024); furthermore, important advances have been made in empirical-quantitative comics research (cf. Dunst et al. 2018).

Comics are analyzed in particular with regard to phenomena of popular and participatory culture; interest in *graphic novels* has led to intersections with narratology, aesthetics, literary history and theory. Recent developments in media ecologies also grant



comics special relevance for practices of transmedia storytelling and media convergence in globally marketed franchises. For the past decade, groundbreaking publications have taken on the task of precisely describing the functioning of comics as a narrative medium and deriving a systemic set of analytical tools. This period also brought a great number of introductions, handbooks, and readers that aim to provide an overview of the diversity of comics and comics research and their methodologies (in addition to those mentioned above, cf. also Packard et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2019; Giddens 2020). In this context, it is possible to distinguish between currents that are more closely aligned with Cultural Studies and those that are more oriented toward Literary Studies. The former focus on superhero comics, *shōnen* or *shōjo* manga, globally marketed franchises, or other (semi) fictional forms, and are more concerned with characters, motifs, and seriality, as well as the cultural work that these perform. The latter, on the other hand, explore established literary genres and have a special interest in autobiographical, documentary, and journalistic comics. This difference often correlates with another ‘tension,’ namely, between text-centered understandings of media on the one hand and practice-focused understandings of media on the other. Philological, hermeneutic, and, above all, literary traditions and methods often stand in contrast to the more Media Studies-oriented research on comics, focusing mainly on the conditions of comic production, distribution, and reception (cf. Burke et al. 2020; Woo/Stoll 2021; Brode 2022). The growing interest in comics by Fan Studies could also be located in the latter tradition (cf. Einwächter et al. 2020).

Comics – understood as a heuristic umbrella term for all sorts of popular drawn still images – therefore do not exist outside of media contexts; they are significantly enmeshed in media ecologies, social-systemic institutions, and participatory networks in which they are, on the one hand, incessantly ‘formatted’ by human agents, technologies, and institutions into various forms and formats and, on the other hand, are themselves involved in the shaping and transformations of these communities and (sub)cultures (cf. Ossa et al. 2023). They create idiosyncratic relationships between the mediated and mediating agency of the respective actors involved and generate their own forms of a mediated public sphere.

Comics Studies often utilizes the strengths of these institutionally barely anchored, but, all the more, lively interdisciplinary and international fields in order to focus – and reflect – on the diversity of the specific perspectives involved. The field is currently consolidated in particular through a large number of German-language and international handbooks and overviews (cf. just in the last couple of years Hatfield/Beaty 2020; Domsch et al. 2021; Fawaz et al. 2021; La Cour et al. 2022; Pedri/Howitt 2022; Ahmed 2023; Baetens 2023 as well as, forthcoming, Blank et al. 2025).

The rapid growth in the number of so-called ‘Qualifikationsschriften’ (qualifications such as dissertations, recently, for instance, Eckhoff-Heindl 2023, Hochschild 2024, or Bartosch 2024, as well as ‘Habilitationen,’ the qualification for obtaining the *venia legendi* in Germany, for instance Meyer 2019) has also contributed to this consolidation (cf. also the present contribution by Daniel Stein 2024 for further information about this). ComFor has also produced extensive publications and contributed to the growth and consolidation of comics scholarship: a total of 14 printed conference proceedings and three online collections of articles have been published by the Society – some in English and with strong international participation, such as the recent open access volume *Comics & Agency* (Ossa et al. 2023; cf. for an overview ComFor 2024).

To mark the tenth anniversary of our Society as a registered organization, we have dedicated ourselves to a critical (self-)reflection of this period of comic research. The preparatory 18th ComFor annual conference, which was intended as a kind of ‘think tank’ for the members of our Society, took place from December 11–13, 2023 at the Waldschlösschen Academy Foundation, Gleichen, which is near Göttingen. The aim was not only to bring material- and text-based, social science- and context-oriented as well as fandom- and participation-oriented comics research into further discussion with one another. We also wanted to take a critical look at how comics research has developed and transformed (according to our own understandings and biographies) during this period of its increasing consolidation. Questions we put into focus during this conference included: Which recurring, but also new inquiries and approaches can be identified since 2014? Which disciplines have not only created important impulses, but have also notably integrated approaches from



Comics Studies? Which disciplinary ‘dead angles’ need to be addressed in the future, across disciplinary boundaries? Such reflections must necessarily remain highly selective and deliberately avoid any claim to completeness or representativeness. “What Was, Is, Will Be Comic Studies – to Us?” is therefore not meant exclusionary, in the sense of a linguistically, geographically, or nationally constructed ‘we,’ but addresses quite literally the members of our Society, with their personal, often interdisciplinary, meandering research biographies, interests, and focal points. This publication is therefore divided into four sections.

The first part of our collection, “Reflection Papers,” offers spotlights from esteemed colleagues who have been working in the field for several decades and who were asked for their personal reflections on their individual ‘research biographies’ – with freely chosen focal points (Sylvia Kesper-Biermann also contributed for that in Gleichen during the meeting). Accordingly, we find reflections from the perspectives of American Studies (Stein 2024), Japanese and Manga Studies (Berndt 2024), and Semiotics (Packard 2024). The subsequent main section, “Current Research Perspectives,” offers insights into contemporary questions, topics, and concerns that are motivating newer members and early career scholars of our Society in particular within their current research projects. Even if the papers found here represent only a small selection from the conference contributions, some outlines can still be identified: for example, that the topic of “pictorial narrativity” (represented here by Veits 2024) can certainly be regarded as established by now, after it has previously been understood as two different, perhaps even contradictory aspects of comic aesthetics (cf. the 2009 ComFor annual conference: “Narration in Comics” vs. the 2010 annual conference: “Images of Comics”); it can also be noted that questions of intersectionality and intersectional approaches to comics analysis have been firmly established since our 2018 annual conference (“Interspaces – Gender, Diversity and Identity in Comics”), represented here through two innovative, but quite differently focused articles by Macé 2024 and Kuschel 2024. A third overarching conference theme centered around interdisciplinarity and interdisciplinary reflections of methods. Bärtschi 2024 opens up this discussion here – perhaps as an extenuation of critical intersectional perspectives – about the role of comics in and for

Classical Philology, while Wilde 2024 outlines a praxeology of Comics Studies from the perspective of Media Studies. Finally, the concluding contribution by Wambsganß 2024 once again represents a quite different understanding of comics research that is not strictly disciplinary-academic, but rather essayistic-personal, for which ComFor has also always provided space. The fourth section “Focus on Comic Exhibitions” was initiated and organized by Dietrich Grünewald (2024), the former first chairman and one of the founding members of ComFor, in order to shed light on the often-neglected issue of comic book exhibitions and their means of communication. With Barbara M. Eggert, Ralf Palandt, Christine Vogt, and Iris Haist, Grünewald was able to win over leading experts to reflect (richly illustrated) on their exhibition practices over the past decades. Our anthology is rounded off by 80 pages of documentation from the republished ComFor-*ComicForum.org*-columns, written between 2014 and 2023 (Aust et al. 2024), a total of 36 texts by 9 authors, which record and narrate the past ten years.

As always, after the anniversary is also before the anniversary – in this case particularly imminent: in the coming year 2025, ComFor will be 20 years of age, not as a registered association, but, certainly much more importantly, as a research community! With this in mind, the present publication highlights almost 20 years of comics research, which was, is, and (hopefully) will remain one thing above everything else: in transformation!



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