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## Comics Studies in Germany, Seen Through an American Studies Looking Glass

*This article examines the state of comics research in Germany with a focus on “Qualifikationsschriften” (dissertations and habilitations/second books) published by scholars working in the field of American Studies. The point of this examination is to trace the ongoing institutional integration of comics research into German academia and also to acknowledge the thematic and methodological breadth as well as the analytical depth of these select publications. The article updates the author’s earlier assessment of Comics Studies in Germany, offered in 2011, by suggesting that several of the trends diagnosed then – a looming increase in studies published in English and in international journals or book series by leading publishers; a growing number of comics-centered dissertations and habilitations – have come to fruition and that comics research by scholars based in Germany now garners wide-spread international recognition. The article suggests that these developments have been facilitated substantially by the framework and activities of the Society for Comics Studies (ComFor).*

### Introduction: Topic and Scope

This essay constitutes my second attempt to take stock of Comics Studies in Germany, after an initial foray titled “Comics Studies in Germany: Where It’s At and Where It Might Be Heading,” published in English on the Comics Forum website in 2011 and then a year later in German on the website of the Society for Comics Studies (ComFor) (cf. Stein 2011; 2012). While this first account was intended as a preliminary survey and covered quite a range of topics – publications, conferences, institutions, scholarly networks, external funding, and the role of the ComFor –, it included a significant disclaimer. “I want to make clear that I cannot speak for the many German scholars now working on various aspects of comics,” I wrote, adding: “Rather, I will present a more personal and selective view of my own experience with and understanding of, Comics Studies in Germany.” It felt necessary to provide this caveat in 2011 because the field of German Comics Studies – which I understand, for the purposes of this article, as academic research on comics of all kinds by scholars based or publishing in Germany – was al-

ready burgeoning to the point where it could not be easily subsumed into anything resembling a comprehensive survey. More than a decade down the road, this situation has exacerbated, so that it is even more important to declare that what follows cannot and does not aim for comprehensiveness. Any attempt to do justice to comics scholarship in Germany would have to entail a much more systematic and much more sustained inquiry than I can offer here. But I still hope, as I did in 2011, that my personal perspective may add something of worth to our understanding of the state and dynamics of comics research in Germany.

In lieu of such a systematic and sustained inquiry, I will start my observations with a short recap of my initial presumptions about the future of Comics Studies in Germany and will then gauge where my past sense of future directions might have been apt and where it was wrong-headed. The bulk of this essay, however, will be devoted to a discussion of eight monographs published by comics scholars that originated as “Qualifikationsschriften” (e.g. dissertations and habilitations, or second books) in the German, Austrian, and Swiss systems, all written in English and hailing from my own discipline, American Studies.<sup>1</sup> This focus is motivated by a desire to respond to a sentiment I expressed in 2011:

[T]he study of comics is still considered a fringe endeavor in most disciplines, and even though disciplines like my own (American Studies) are increasingly aware of comics, I still think that those who do their major research projects on comics – the dissertation and the “Habilitation,” a second book project in which scholars demonstrate a broad knowledge of their discipline in order to be eligible for professorial positions – will have a much harder time to justify their choice of subject than those working on canonical literary authors or more established media like film and photography (Stein 2011: n.pag.).

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1 The majority of the authors are members of the ComFor, which underscores the continuing significance of the society for comics researchers. Christina Meyer is currently president of the ComFor; others have presented at ComFor conferences and contributed to conference proceedings.



Comics Studies is arguably no longer on the fringe of American Studies in Germany, as the works discussed in the following indicate. Alongside other significant advancements – e.g. the number and visibility of publications more generally, the frequency and prominence of conferences, successes in obtaining external financing by major funding institutions – these monographs offer compelling insights into a thematically and methodologically diverse field of interdisciplinary research located between Comics Studies and American Studies. To be clear: I am not suggesting that these eight monographs are the only comics-themed German “Qualifikationsschriften.” Indeed, fellow comics researchers in other disciplines – Media Studies, German Studies, Romance Studies, History, etc. – have published dissertations and habilitations on comics, but I want to limit myself to an American Studies framework because this is the area with which I am most familiar and where I am most comfortable when it comes to making assessments. Moreover, this focus makes an otherwise sprawling array of publications manageable by narrowing down the number of works to a single-digit corpus. It also promises some understanding of how comics research is perceived through the looking glass of one particular discipline, and it allows me to ponder whether comics have become a legitimate topic for scholars planning academic careers in American Studies in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

One major difference between my initial perspective in 2011 and today is that we can now rely on an even broader array of studies that provide introductory perspectives on comics, such as the German-language *Comics und Graphic Novels: Eine Einführung* (Abel/Klein 2016) and *Comicanalyse: Eine Einführung* (Packard et al. 2019) or the English-language *Comics and Agency* (Ossa et al. 2023).<sup>3</sup> More-

2 There is also the AG Comicforschung (Committee for Comics Studies), which is part of the Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft (Society for Media Studies).

3 See also recent work on comics and visual art (Grünewald, *Grenzverkehr: Comic und Bildende Kunst*, 2024) or various conference volumes from the ComFor, e.g. on the history of comics (Dolle-Weinkauff/Grünewald, *Studien zur Geschichte des Comic*, 2022), on the relations between comics and natural science (Heydenreich, *Comics & Naturwissenschaften*, 2019), on formal and thematic issues (Harbeck et al., *Comics an der Grenze: Sub/Versionen von Form und Inhalt*, 2017), on comics and diversity (Gundermann, *Zwischenräume. Geschlecht und Diversität im Comic*, 2021), and

over, there is now foundational work grounded in American Studies, including three publications from the early 2010s that I was fortunate to be part of and that arguably impacted the perception of comics in my discipline. The first is a special issue on *American Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (Stein et al. 2011) in *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, the journal of the German Association for American Studies. The issue was co-edited with Christina Meyer (now Hamburg) and Micha Edlich (now Lüneburg), included a long introduction on the history and media specificity of US-American comics, and, together with the articles assembled, brought comics into the scope of German American Studies.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, two essay volumes furthered this Americanist interest in the medium, the first – *Transnational Perspectives on Graphic Narratives: Comics at the Crossroads* (Denson et al. 2013) – making the case for extending the transnational turn in the humanities and social sciences to include comics, and the second – *From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic Narrative* (Stein/Thon 2013) – providing input on the historical and theoretical foundations of comics, or graphic narratives, as we decided to call them (following Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven). Both volumes were reviewed quite broadly and have been acquired by more than 1.200 and 1.700 libraries around the world, respectively, suggesting that German comics research can become recognized internationally.

My main argument in 2011 was based on a distinction between comics research (*Comicforschung*) and Comics Studies (*Comicwissenschaft*). I suggested that while there was lots of great comics research in Germany, there were only slight indicators that Comics Studies as a discipline in any institutionalized shape or form might become a possibility. Looking at the state of the field now, I would still maintain that there is no such thing as a discipline called Comics Studies in Germany, but I would nonetheless argue that, at least in American Studies, comics research has become more visible, more accepted as a viable

on comics and popular culture (Trinkwitz/Lohse, *Der Comic und das Populäre*, forthcoming).

4 It would take over a decade for the second comics-themed special issue to appear in *Amerikastudien/American Studies*: Dustin Breitenwischer, Jasmin Wrobel, and Robert Reid-Pharr’s *Archives of Resistance: Picturing the Black Americas* (2022), which broadens the scope to include work on Latin American graphic narratives.



endeavor, and more respected for its thematic and methodological offerings. But even beyond American Studies, it is fair to say that we have been witnessing a notable increase in scholarly monographs, essay volumes, special journal issues, and individual articles written by scholars based in Germany within established disciplines as well as from interdisciplinary standpoints. Indeed, the very fact that German scholars now contribute to some of the leading Anglophone publications in the field – such as *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (Baetens et al. 2018), *The Cambridge Companion to the American Graphic Novel* (Baetens et al. 2024), *The Cambridge Companion to Comics* (Ahmed 2023)<sup>5</sup> – and edit special issues for international journals – such as the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics (Mediality and Materiality of Contemporary Comics)*, Thon/Wilde 2016), the *International Journal of Comic Art (Transnational Graphic Narratives)*, Stein et al. 2018), or *Punctum: International Journal of Semiotics (The Social, Political and Ideological Semiotics of Comics and Cartoons)*, Packard/Wilde 2021) – indicates that comics research in Germany has extended its reach beyond the German context, one precondition of which has been the growing tendency to publish in English (which is also the case for all eight monographs discussed below).

### Reading Eight Comics Studies Monographs

As noted, I subscribe to a somewhat narrow focus by looking only at comics research published in the field of American Studies in Germany, all of it recent and all of it initially conceived as “Qualifikationsschriften” – dissertations, habilitations, or second books.<sup>6</sup> Of

5 See, for instance, Jaqueline Berndt’s “Manga: An Affective Form of Comics” and my own “Racialines: Interrogating Stereotypes in Comics” in *The Cambridge Companion to Comics* (2023) and the co-written chapters “Great American Graphic Novels: Canon Formation and Literary Value” in *The Cambridge Companion to the American Graphic Novel* (2023, with Astrid Böger) and “Long-length Serials in the Golden Age of Comic Strips: Production and Reception” in *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (2018, with Lukas Etter).

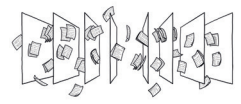
6 This is not to suggest that these kinds of “Qualifikationsschriften” only appeared in American Studies. For examples from Media Studies, German Studies, British Studies, and Comparative Studies, see Christian A. Bachmann, *Metamedialität und Materialität im Comic* (2016); Juliane Blank, *Literaturadaptionen im Comic* (2015); Nina Eckhoff-Heindl,

the eight books that make up my corpus, four were submitted as dissertations and revised for publication, while four represent the author’s second books, three of which formally submitted as habilitations. Notably, all of these works appeared in respected book series, some of them in series of a more disciplinary suasion (Anglia Book Series, Anglo-American Studies, Nordamerikastudien), others in series specializing in comics (Comics Culture, Studies in Comics and Cartoons, Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels, Cambridge Studies in Graphic Narratives). Thus, half of these books appear alongside non-comics work in American Studies, which underscores the acceptance of comics as a legitimate topic for American Studies research. The other half appear alongside internationally acclaimed comics scholarship, further raising the visibility of German Comics Studies in the English-speaking world. As we shall see, these eight monographs utilize a variety of methods, from archival research, close readings, and reader-response theory to cultural and historical analysis, actor-network-theory, and computational tools. The same variety appears on the levels of genre and subject matter, as these publications analyze alternative comics, documentary comics, autobiographical comics, superhero comics, newspaper comics, and graphic novels.

### The Dissertations

I will begin with the four dissertations: Birte Wege’s *Drawing on the Past: Graphic Narrative Documentary* (Nordamerikastudien, Campus, 2019), Johannes C.P. Schmid’s *Frames and Framing in Documentary Comics* (Palgrave Studies in Comics and Graphic Novels,

*Comics begreifen* (2023); Kristin Eckstein, *Shojo Manga* (2016); Felix Giesa, *Graphisches Erzählen von Adoleszenz* (2015); Daniela Kuschel, *Spanischer Bürgerkrieg Goes Pop* (2019); Thomas Merten, *Die Shoah im Comic seit 2000* (2021); Vanessa Ossa, *The Sleeper Agent in Post 9/11 Media* (2023); Stephan Packard, *Anatomie des Comics* (2006); Martin Schüwer, *Wie Comics erzählen* (2008); Véronique Sina, *Comic – Film – Gender* (2016); Jan-Noël Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (2016); Lukas R.A. Wilde, *Im Reich der Figuren* (2018). Karin Kukkonen’s *Storytelling Beyond Postmodernism* (2010) is situated at the crossroads of Comics Studies, Comparative Studies, and Narratology. We should also not forget the pioneering dissertations of colleagues such as Dietrich Grünewald (1976), Jaqueline Berndt (1990), and Ole Frahm (2006).



Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), Lukas Etter's *Distinctive Styles and Authorship in Alternative Comics* (Anglia Book Series, De Gruyter, 2021), and Nao Tomabechi's *Supervillains: The Significance of Evil in Superhero Comics* (Comics Culture, Rutgers University Press, forthcoming 2025).

Wege's *Drawing on the Past: Graphic Narrative Documentary* (2019) emerged from a dissertation submitted at the Free University's John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies. As the title indicates, Wege is interested in documentary comics whose "subject-matter [is] grounded in actuality" (ibid.: 11). Taking an "eclectic approach" (ibid.: 12) to Emmanuel Guibert's *The Photographer: Into War-Torn Afghanistan with Doctors Without Borders* (2009), Ho Che Anderson's *King: A Comics Biography* (2010), Art Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004), and Joe Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009) as four "graphic narratives" (Wege 2019: 10) that "differ [...] significantly in terms of structure, scale, and style" (ibid.: 12), Wege shows how each of these documentary works engages with "expectations of authenticity, evidence, veracity" (ibid.: 11) by "showcase[ing] the shaping subjectivity of artistic interpretation" (ibid.). It is especially the tension between the "implied subjectivity inherent to the form" (ibid.), or what she later calls the "always-visible perceived subjectivity of the artists' line" (ibid.: 20), as well as the "role of the artist as both creator of a visual account of and [...] participant in the events" (ibid.: 12) and the "demands of objectivity commonly expected of the genre" (ibid.: 11), that "complicate [the] presumed boundaries between *fiction* and *nonfiction*, [...] the *work of art* and *historiography*" (ibid.: 12; original emphases). Wege sets out to "trace each text's distinct techniques of implementing strategies for capturing the reality of lived experience" (ibid.) and ascertain how each text strives to achieve the "representation of limit events [...] without aestheticizing the violence and suffering" (ibid.).

Besides offering compelling close readings of her material, Wege is particularly interested in the ambiguity inherent in the comics' "handmade quality," on the one hand, and their indebtedness to processes of "mass production," on the other (ibid.: 16) – an ambiguity that also informs the comics' status as "slow reading" and a "narrative counterpoint" to our excessively fast 24-hour news cycle (ibid.: 17). The creators of the documentary comics Wege studies are less interested in the "current hot conflicts"

(ibid.: 18) and more in studying the "embeddedness of the[ir] imagery [...] in various broader historical and contemporary visual discourses" (ibid.: 19), including US-American perspectives on places such as Iran, Palestine, and Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> *Drawing on the Past* thus combines an interest in comics as a medium and documentary comics as a genre of reporting and journalistic inquiry with established themes in American Studies (war, trauma, lynching, witnessing).

The book most closely related in terms of content and subject matter to Wege's study is Johannes C.P. Schmid's *Frames and Framing in Documentary Comics* (2021), which originated as an American Studies dissertation at the University of Hamburg. Like Wege, Schmid focuses on documentary comics, but he chooses a different corpus: Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans after the Deluge* (2009), Guy Delisle's *Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City* (2015), and Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts: Dispatches from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq* (2016), as well as various examples of Joe Sacco's comics journalism. And like Wege, whose work he acknowledges, he understands these comics as representatives of a "slow medium" focused on "conflicts and crises that have lost their newsworthiness in the public eye" (Schmid 2021: 12), suggesting that comics are an "anachronistic form" and may function as an "antithesis to accelerating media culture of the digital age" (ibid.: 15). Noting that medial forms are not "neutral containers" (ibid.: 1), Schmid highlights the peculiar conjunction of comics and documentary as an "unfamiliar combination of me-

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7 Spiegelman created the original version of the cover image of *In the Shadow of No Towers* as a cover for the *New Yorker* magazine shortly after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, so in that sense this can be read as a response to a hot topic. But the comic itself, initially published in installments in the German weekly *Die Zeit* from 2002 onwards, took a much slower approach to the issues, and the book volume only appeared in 2004, several years after 9/11. While Sacco's *Footnotes in Gaza* mainly reconstructs a historical massacre from the 1950s, the work does comment on the ongoing hardships of Palestinians at the time he was doing research in Gaza, but the narrative does not function as direct political commentary on present events. Sacco's latest publication, "The War on Gaza" (since January 2024) a series of short comics published on the Fantagraphics website (cf. Sacco 2024) about the ongoing bombing of Palestine by the Israeli Defense Forces, is definitely not a "slow comic," even though it did take Sacco several months after the Hamas atrocities from 7 October 2023 to begin the series.



dium and genre” (ibid.: 13) and diagnoses a “mode of persuasive tension between narrative immersion and self-reflexive genre critique” (ibid.: 14) in the works he studies.

Schmid argues further that “the comics form serves to disrupt naturalized assumptions of medial truth-telling, but also to generate affect and empathy for the represented groups or individuals” (ibid.: 10), and he chooses frames and framing as his guiding theoretical concepts. Frames appear directly in comics, e.g. through the convention of the panel frame, but Schmid also suggests a broader understanding of framing as the “strategic use of communicative resources to encourage a particular interpretation of a scenario” (ibid.: 1). Referencing frame theory, he holds that framing is a “process of structuring a representation (or portions thereof) by situating it within certain boundaries” (ibid.) and that frames “implicitly or explicitly categorize, organize, and evaluate the information presented within” (ibid.: 2), “usually serv[ing] to influence meaning-making unconsciously” (ibid.). If frames “inform our thinking” and influence “what we can and should expect by default” (ibid.: 1), they position a particular burden on creators and readers alike, compelling “documentary cartoonists [to] use the medium to interrogate medial processes of framing per se” (ibid.: 2) and asking readers to draw inferences from the comic to the world outside the images, filling in the gaps and performing McCloud’s acts of closure as they follow the panels on the page. Focusing on single-creator works published as book-length narratives (like Wege and Etter), he positions the comics creator “as a subjective autodiegetic narrator as well as a meta-journalistic commentator” (ibid.: 22) and recognizes their aspiration to “convince readers that [...] comics is a valid documentary medium” (ibid.: 2). These creators “disclose and explain their framing choices” in a process of “conscientious authentication” (ibid.), where they do not merely try to present the facts (which are often contested anyway) but represent, through the means of graphic narration, the “fact-finding process” (ibid.: 3). As such, these comics “interrogate and renegotiate documentary as a genre” (ibid.), something that resonates with American Studies interests in the relation between fact and fiction, in documentary work across media, and in transnational perspectives on traumatic and violent histories of subjugation and oppression.

Lukas Etter’s *Distinctive Styles and Authorship in*

*Alternative Comics* (2021), based on his dissertation submitted at the University of Bern, continues Wege’s and Schmid’s interest in single-creator (and often autobiographically inflected) works (cf. ibid.: 4, 5), where the roles of letterer, inker, and penciler are performed by the same person (cf. ibid.: 23).<sup>8</sup> Yet Etter moves the focus from the ethics and graphics of documentation to the formal analysis of visual style in case studies of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1972, 1986, 1991), Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983–2008), and Jason Lutes’ *Berlin* trilogy (1996–2008), all of which belong to the roster of US-American alternative comics. Etter frames his monograph as “a small contribution to a larger discourse on style and cartooning” (Etter 2021: vii), stating that he wants to

combine a (first and foremost aesthetic) interest in the notion of style with a (both aesthetic and culturally embedded) interest in the construction of a singular oeuvre in critical discourse wherever characteristic marks of the ‘style’ of someone’s work is described and detected (ibid.: 2).

In order to do so, he develops the concept of “auteurgraphy” (ibid.), which combines Whitlock’s notion of ‘autographics’ with elements from auteur theory and encompasses “the sum of the *perceived* artistic and discursive strategies on the basis of which we as readers construct our understanding of a distinctive, recognizable style” (ibid.: 5; original emphasis). Like Wege and Schmid, and indebted to Hillary Chute (especially *Disaster Drawn*, 2016), Etter views drawing style, as manifested in the hand-drawn line (Etter 2021: 6), as a kind of “personal handwriting or signature” (ibid.: 26): an “aesthetic autograph” (ibid.: 5) that uses “iconic physiognomies” (ibid.: 7), “ugly drawings” (ibid.: 29), and “[p]aratextual authorial reflections” (ibid.: 7) in the quest for authorial distinctiveness.

Etter’s method is the “close formal analyses of distinctive stylistic markers [...] without losing sight of the cultural particularities pertaining to the realm of alternative comics” (ibid.: 41). He provides a series of “case studies” that are “hermeneutic in nature” (ibid.: 42) and trace the “rise of the individual author-art-

<sup>8</sup> As a matter of full disclosure, I want to acknowledge here that I was the second reviewer for Lukas’s dissertation and that he has been working with me at the University of Siegen since 2015.



ist in U.S.-American alternative comics” (ibid.: 5), visible in an increasing sense of creative liberty but also prominent exhibitions and literary prizes (cf. ibid.: 19, 31), in contradistinction to more formulaic mainstream productions (cf. ibid.: 11). It is this recognition of comics’ intricate and manifold entanglements in culture, politics, economics, and history that can be identified as a unifying theme not just in the monographs I discuss in this article, but in American Studies more generally.

I end my tour de force through the four dissertation-based books in my corpus with remarks on Nao Tomabechi’s *Supervillains: The Significance of Evil in Superhero Comics* (forthcoming 2025), which is the revised version of her dissertation, submitted at the University of Siegen.<sup>9</sup> Tomabechi’s work stands out from the other dissertation-based monographs in that it does not analyze single-creator book-long graphic narratives but rather turns to the popular genre of superhero comics – multiply-authored, mass-produced, and less beholden to an ethos of political or historical documentation than to appealing to popular tastes and entertaining their readers. Tomabechi persuasively argues that comic book supervillains such as the Joker, Lex Luthor, or Harley Quinn are among “today’s most popular and globally recognizable serial figures” and that they continue to serve as “key players in the world of comic book superheroes” (Tomabechi forthcoming: 1).<sup>10</sup>

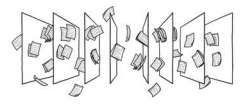
As her method, Tomabechi uses a combination of narratology, genre analysis, and Cultural Studies inquiry, which includes visual and textual analysis (cf. ibid.: 21, 23). In terms of narrative, she suggests that supervillains “initiate the confrontations that drive forward superhero narratives” (ibid.: 3) and become “active agents and ‘engines’ of superhero stories” (ibid.). These supervillains “create narrative and discursive space for questions [...] that deal with the Other” (ibid.: 8), which underscores their political significance as examples of “subordinated Otherness” (ibid.) and “deviant Otherness” (ibid.: 9). Drawing on work by Stuart Hall, Antonio Gramsci, and Edward Said, *Supervillains* investigates “the politics behind the creation of these characters” (ibid.: 4) and ponders “how hegemonic ideologies greatly

affect the construction of [...] heroism and [...] villainy” (ibid.: 9). The serial supervillains propagated in Marcel and DC Comics, Tomabechi maintains, “challenge the order the superheroes are so keen on defending”; supervillains “open up space for negotiating social and political issues” and “destabilize [...] the line between the good and the bad” (ibid.), allowing us to understand “how evil functions in society, as well as how it is constructed” (ibid.). It is particularly “what a society or culture regards as immoral” (ibid.: 5) and the popular notions of “deviance” inscribed in the “marked identities” of supervillains in terms of their racial, sexual, gendered, and disabled Otherness (ibid.: 6) that meld “disability and queerness [...] into ugliness” (ibid.: 24) and code these figures “as undesirable” (ibid.: 8). Othering processes and hegemonic constructions of deviance, including gendered, sexualized, and racialized identities, are, of course, core subjects of American Studies.

Looking over these four dissertations, we can discern a formidable range of material – superhero comics, autobiographically inflected alternative comics, documentary comics – as well as a variety of methods and approaches – formal and stylistic analysis, frame theory and cognitive considerations, narratology and genre analysis, Cultural Studies perspectives. While most of these dissertations-turned-books choose the case study as a central ordering device (Etter; Schmid; Wege), at least one of them expands the scope to a whole genre and structures the investigation along the lines of Cultural Studies-inflected themes (Tomabechi). All four books laudably and successfully bridge the gap between disciplines, working within both a Comics Studies and an American Studies framework without succumbing to the conventional expectations of either. They teach us, each in their own way, much about some of the most central questions in American Studies: about representations of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and queerness; about the ethics and media-specific conundrums of engaging with social and (geo)political conflicts; about questions of authorship and ethics; about the transnational implications of popular culture; and about the visual aspects of American culture. Americanists have much to gain from studying these books, as they bring key methods of American Studies (especially the contextualized close reading) to the table of Comics Studies without falling into the trap of subjugating the comics medium to overly literary interpretations. What is more, by being

9 More disclosure: I was Nao’s dissertation supervisor and first reviewer.

10 The page references refer to the un-layouted manuscript.



written in English and published in prominent book series, these books have joined the border-crossing and interdisciplinary discourse on US-American comics, in some cases (Schmid; Wege) also broadening the horizon of American Studies by including work by French-Canadian (Guy Delisle) and French (Emmanuel Guibert) creators and by moving the scope to places such as Afghanistan, Germany, Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. Taken together, they indicate that writing a dissertation about ‘comics’ (or ‘graphic novels’/‘graphic narratives’) is becoming more acceptable in German American Studies and that, at least for these early career scholars and their PhD advisors, choosing comics as a dissertation topic was not deemed a niche topic or career-killer.

### The Habilitations

But what about habilitations, the requirement for tenured professorships in Germany (now loosened up to include ‘*habilitationsäquivalente Leistungen*,’ or habilitation-equivalent achievements, as an alternative)? It is still widely expected that postdocs in American Studies write their second major study about a topic altogether different from the PhD, which creates opportunities for turning to comics after a non-comic-focused dissertation but also incentivizes moving away from Comics Studies if comics were the subject of the dissertation. In the four examples I include in my corpus – Christina Meyer’s *Producing Mass Entertainment: The Serial Life of the Yellow Kid* (Studies in Comics and Cartoons, Ohio State University Press, 2019); Markus Oppolzer’s *Reading Autobiographical Comics: A Framework for Educational Settings* (Anglo-American Studies: Literature, Culture and Teaching, Peter Lang, 2020); Alexander Dunst’s *The Rise of the Graphic Novel: Computational Criticism and the Evolution of Literary Value* (Cambridge Studies in Graphic Narratives, Cambridge University Press, 2023); and my own *Authorizing Superhero Comics: On the Evolution of a Popular Serial Genre* (Studies in Comics and Cartoons, Ohio State University Press, 2021) – the authors obviously decided that, after having written a dissertation outside of the comics field, their habilitation (or second book, in my case) would be devoted to the medium of graphic narrative – which also means that the authors must have felt confident enough about the acceptance of comics research as a legitimate

endeavor in American Studies to make them the center of their postdoc projects.

I start with Meyer’s *Producing Mass Entertainment*, the published version of her habilitation at the University of Hannover.<sup>11</sup> Meyer begins the preface of the book by evoking her time in the archives (Library of Congress and the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State), speaking of a

journey full of unpredictable discoveries, of hours of rolling reel after reel through the microfilm machines, of days and nights sitting in front of the computer screen, typing, procrastinating, and searching through online resources and databases, of weeks looking through magnifying glasses (Meyer 2019: xix).

Here, we already see a major difference to the dissertations, as Meyer was able (through external funding) to muster the time and resources for extended archival work in the United States. Such research was necessary because Meyer’s project reconstructs “urban modernity” (ibid.: 8) through the colored newspaper supplements in the *New York Press* that featured the popular figure of the Yellow Kid in the 1890s and the intersecting histories of the modern comic and mass-newspapers in NYC (most prominently the media empires owned and run by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, respectively). Meyer is interested in mass-culture, social practices, and aesthetics of the late nineteenth century, assessing them within the “framework of seriality studies” (ibid.: 2) as she reads the serial Yellow Kid figure as the “first mass-produced and mass-consumed commercial cultural artifacts” (ibid.: 3) situated in specific “medial, technological, economic environments” (ibid.). In that sense, the book is one extensive “case study” (ibid.), but as Meyer indicates, the focus is not just on the comics, but on the serial figure’s “migrat[ion] across different media” (ibid.: 13): the Yellow Kid’s “serial unfolding” (ibid.: 15) and the “whole range of cultural practices” (ibid.) it enabled and initiated as part of its “serial dynamics of duplication and imitation” (ibid.: 17). Modernity, mass culture, popular seriality, media and technology, economic contexts – these concerns are

11 Yet more disclosure: I was the second reviewer for Christina’s habilitation.



very much compatible with American Studies perspectives, and they offer a broad window into one of the most dynamic decades of modern US history.

Meyer understands this historical moment as the breeding ground for Yellow Kid's "cultural work" (ibid.: 16) as she goes about exploring the "serial practices and aesthetics of the late nineteenth century" (ibid.: 2; original emphasis). In terms of method, the aim is not to "trace actual reading experiences" (ibid.: 10; original emphasis) (which would be nearly impossible anyway because of the fleeting access to historical reception) but rather to "trace the reading options that are inscribed in and the potential uses generated by the Yellow Kid comics" (ibid.). The study thus examines the "frictions that the Yellow Kid pages are built upon to fulfill the different reader needs" (ibid.), identifying central "modes of representation" (ibid.) and determining how they "encourage specific activities" (ibid.) that involve the "copresence of manifold reading options" (ibid.: 11). Here, we see a first indication that the habilitation-based monographs tend to move beyond a focus on authors and works (a focus present in the four dissertations discussed above) toward the consideration of the reception side of the comics' cultural work. While Meyer identifies reading options and remains on the textual side of the equation, Oppolzer, Dunst, and I engage more extensively with comics' reception.

In Oppolzer's *Reading Autobiographical Comics* (2020), the published version of his "Habilitationsschrift," submitted at the University of Salzburg for the *venia legendi* of "Englische Literaturwissenschaft und Fremdsprachendidaktik," this engagement emerges from the assessment of reader-response theories (Louise M. Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser). Oppolzer proposes a multi-step approach to reading (7 stages based on Michael Benton) in order to "encourage an ongoing dialogue with the text, but especially amongst students" (ibid.: 11), distinguishing "between reading as a flow experience and as a form of analysis" and "embracing aesthetic reading in educational settings" (ibid.: 16). Including Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000–2003), Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (2003), Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002), Chester Brown's *I Never Liked You* (1994), John Lewis et al.'s *March* (2013–2016), Raina Telgemeier's *Smile* (2010), and various works by Harvey Pekar (all of which belong to the

autobiographically inflected type of comic Whitlock labels 'autographics') in his corpus, Oppolzer is less interested in generating empirical data about the historical and ongoing reception of these works by their respective readerships than in thinking about how these works can be used to create comics literacy among students, enabling them to switch competently between their personal reading experiences and the narratological analysis of these works.

In terms of methodology, Oppolzer's study seeks to "build a bridge between Iser [i.e., reader-response theory] and comics studies" (Oppolzer 2020: 13) while adding concepts from cognitive linguistics, schema theory, and embodied cognition (ibid.: 13, 17) to the mix. Proposing that established tropes of Comics Studies such as Scott McCloud's "closure" are inadequate because reading paths are not linear (cf. ibid.: 12) and drawing on work by Thierry Groensteen and others to produce a more suitable reading model, Oppolzer creates new foundations for Comics Studies (refining existing models of comics reading) as well as for Teaching Foreign Languages and Didactics more generally. Using mostly US-American examples, Oppolzer also makes significant inroads into American Studies, demonstrating that comics and didactics can be a vital part of the discipline.

Alexander Dunst's *The Rise of the Graphic Novel* (2023) is the published version of his habilitation, submitted at the University of Paderborn, and the only study in my corpus that uses tools and methods from digital humanities to produce an "empirically driven history of graphic narrative" (ibid.: 2).<sup>12</sup> Dunst employs "computational and statistical methods as well as cognitive approaches," having built the "first digital corpus of book-length comics" (253 scanned works, more than 60.000 pages, two terabytes of data) (ibid.: 2). This so-called "Graphic Narrative Corpus" (ibid.: 20) contains narratives from the 1970s to 2018, which Dunst subdivides into a "first cycle of graphic narrative [...] from the late 1970s to 2000" (ibid.: 8) and a "second cycle" from early 2000s to 2018 (ibid.: 9), arguing that "graphic novel" became a "shelf category in bookstores" and marketing phenomenon by 2003 (ibid.) and that the cultural status and reception of these works changed fundamentally in the process. "How did the term

12 Final disclosure: I was the second reviewer for Alexander's habilitation.





‘graphic novel’ become a catalyst for the transformation of the once derided comics medium?’ (ibid.: xiii), Dunst asks at the outset of the study, adding in even simpler terms: “What happens to comics when they become graphic novels?” (ibid.: 1). He describes this development as an overarching process of “aesthetic gentrification” (ibid.: xi) and the “rise of the graphic novel” (a phrase inspired by Ian Watts’ *The Rise of the Novel*) as a process of “canonization” (ibid.: 3) during which the boundaries between high and low culture become blurred but do not dissolve (ibid.: 14). Comics as graphic novels become “gentrified as they circulate under the mantle of graphic novels, trading cultural prestige for financial value” (ibid.: 16), Dunst asserts, an insight that requires updating Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of taste and fields of cultural production (cf. ibid.: 22).

Methodologically, Dunst’s book is perhaps the most innovative in my corpus, as it injects two non-conventional elements into the American Studies fray: comics and digital scholarship. Dunst uses “visual stylometry,” i.e., the “computational analysis of artistic style,” and “automatic text analysis” in combination with “sociological metadata” (ibid.: 2) and an interest in the comics’ “physical form” (ibid.: 5) and “material conditions of production, circulation, and consumption” (ibid.: 5). He explicitly distinguishes his approach from Franco Moretti’s “distant reading” (ibid.: 19) and from literary studies’ most treasured method, the hermeneutic close reading. Seeking to overcome the biases of the comics-as-literature school and avoid the blind spots of close reading, where scholars often “extrapolat[e] from a small number of texts to entire genres, movements, or historical periods” (ibid.: xii), while also rejecting the mostly quantitative concerns of the distant reading approach, Dunst chooses a “mid-level method” (ibid.: 24) that combines “computational criticism” (ibid.: 1) and machine learning (cf. ibid.: 24) with manual annotation (cf. ibid.) in order to study “the field and its component parts” (ibid.). Questions of high and low, as well as of the cultural elevation and veneration of popular genres or formats, are, of course, central to American Studies.

I want to close this section with a few remarks about my own monograph *Authorizing Superhero Comics* (2021), which began as a habilitation project at the JFK Institute at the Free University Berlin and morphed into a second book without the formal habilitation process once I started my position at the

University of Siegen. My study shares Meyer’s and Tomabechi’s interest in poplar serial figures as well as Tomabechi’s interest in the nexus of serial narrative and genre development, which, in my wording, calls not for a teleological but for an “evolutionary” account that views genres as “evolving actor-networks” (ibid.: 15). This, then, is the book’s main critical intervention: a move away from overly author- or creator-centered histories of superhero comics and a complication of the dominant ages-model in superhero scholarship. I seek to accomplish this via a theoretical framework informed by Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory and its recognition of interlocking human and nonhuman actors and agencies as mediators of social and cultural evolution. Heeding Latour’s dictum that “objects too have agency” (ibid.: 10), I move beyond questions of intentionality to account for the manifold “interactions among different actors” (ibid.: 7) in the history of US-American superhero comics.

*Authorizing Superhero Comics* centers on popular superheroes from Marvel (mainly Spider-Man) and DC Comics (mainly Batman) and examines the “recursive production and reception cycles” (ibid.: 19) that emerge from what Frank Kelleter calls the “serial agencies” (ibid.: 3) of popular serial narratives and from Eco’s notion of “scheme and innovation” (ibid.: 4) as the driving forces of serial storytelling. These agencies, I suggest, act as “forces of genre evolution by utilizing the tension between centrifugal tendencies toward proliferation and diversification and centripetal tendencies toward containment and control” (ibid.: 8), revisions and reboots but also archive editions and fan productions being part of the evolutionary process. As a guiding concept for the analysis, I condense Latour’s list of “mediating activities” (ibid.: 20) into the notion of “authorization conflicts,” proposing that “authorial and readerly functions” in superhero comics are dispersed (ibid.: 6) among officially authorized, un-authorized, and often diffusely authorized human and nonhuman actors that collaboratively constitute the evolving comics collective. This proposal has consequences for my methodology, including the selection of materials for analysis. If such serial “transformations and mediations [...] must be authorized again and again by interlocking human and nonhuman actors” (ibid.: 19), then the “collective expertise of [...] fandom” (ibid.: 5) and forms of “authorship outside the sphere of professional cultural production,” e.g. in



fan letters, fanzines, etc. (ibid.), enter the analytical scope, and instead of celebrating major achievements by major creators or gushing over the brilliance of certain characters, storylines, or artistic styles, I look at the spaces and processes of interaction in and through which actors seek to authorize all elements of a comic.

Compared to the four dissertations discussed above, the four habilitations showcase an even broader methodical and conceptual spectrum, which makes sense since dissertations, as a scholar's first extended work, are meant to be more focused and more narrowly conceived than habilitations, which will qualify the author to teach their respective discipline as a tenured professor. This includes Meyer's extensive archival work and historical reconstruction of the Yellow Kid as the first popular media-crossing serial comic figure on the modern mass market as well as Dunst's computationally-grounded analysis of the gentrification of comics as they become graphic novels. While Meyer zooms in on a single figure but then traces its countless iterations across time, space, and media, focusing on the ambiguous interpretive possibilities afforded its various representations, Dunst provides a mid-level computational approach to the development of the graphic novel format in the US and remains doubtful about close reading as an analytical method and the case study as a legitimate focus while also rejecting even broader-scale approaches such as Moretti's distant reading. Both scholars, however, suggest that it is not enough to read texts (whether individually or computationally) and insist on the need to include questions of mediality and materiality, of infrastructure, and of cultural, social, political, economic context. In this regard, they align well with the research design of my own superhero genre study, especially its emphasis on the interlocking serial agencies of the comic book superhero in all its mediations and authorization conflicts, even though they choose different methodologies and corpora.

Oppolzer's study of comics didactics may seem like the odd book out in this short list, mainly because it is less clearly positioned as a contribution to American Studies and also because its focus on teaching situates it within a didactics and teaching methodology framework. Yet what Oppolzer does, and what I think Meyer, Dunst, and I are trying to do as well, is to make a critical – methodological, conceptual, and theoretical – intervention against established re-

search, in his case by championing aesthetic reading in educational settings and bringing schema theory and cognitive linguistics into conversation with reader-response theory and didactics. In Dunst's empirically informed history of graphic narrative from the 1970s to the late-2010s, the intervention may be even clearer: to counteract what he calls, citing Stuart Hall, "the overwhelming textualization of cultural studies" (Dunst 2023: 18) and to "update Bourdieu's cultural sociology for computational scholarship" (ibid.: 22). If Meyer traces the reading options inscribed and the potential uses generated by the Yellow Kid on the basis of her historically and culturally informed analysis, and if Oppolzer brings in a variety of theories to conceptualize the didactic potential of reading comics, Dunst practices a method of "situational reading" that "employs computation to analyze cultural objects in their sociohistorical contexts" (ibid.: 24). In my own work on the evolution of the superhero genre, I take yet another approach as I examine the back-and-forth between differently authorized actors in the world of comics, from acknowledged figures like Stan Lee to the authors of fan letters, creators of fanzines, the collectors' culture surrounding the genre, and the impact that digitization has been exerting on the genre.

## Conclusions and Outlook

What do we take away from all of this? I am aware of the fact that my reduced focus on "Qualifikationschriften" from the field of American Studies cannot claim to provide an assessment of Comics Studies in Germany but must confine itself to exemplary insight that may or may not apply to other disciplines, such as German Studies, Romance Studies, Media Studies, History, Art History, etc.

Moreover, it is very much possible that I missed relevant dissertations and habilitations that would fall under the scope of my corpus criteria. If that is the case, it is not meant as a slight but would simply serve as evidence of the growing number and variety of studies on comics in Germany. For one, I know of dissertations that have already been defended but have not yet been published (Elisabeth Krieber at the University of Salzburg, on *Adapting Autobiographics: Phoebe Gloeckner's and Alison Bechdel's Transgressive and Queer Subjectivities from Page to Stage and Screen*, 2021) or are currently being written (Natalie Veith,



*Neo-Victorian Comic Books and the Politics of Representation* at the University of Stuttgart) and I can report that four of my PhD students are either about to submit theses on comics (Annemarie Klimke on emotions in superhero comics; Anne Deckbar on popular participatory fan practices in serial comics) or are in the process of researching and writing them (Svitlana Stupak on Irony in US-American graphic narratives; Ioanna Papaki on transnational perspectives on Greek graphic narratives). Second, I applaud colleagues like Dorothee Marx and Gesine Wegner, both of whom received the Martin Schüwer-Publication Prize from the German Society for Comics Studies and the Committee for Comic Studies for outstanding scholarly articles and who are writing dissertations in the field of American Studies.<sup>13</sup>

Third, Americanists in Germany also publish English-language edited volumes on comics – think of Georgiana Banita and Lee Konstantinou's *Artful Breakdowns: The Comics of Art Spiegelman* (2023), Andreas Rauscher, Daniel Stein, and Jan-Noël Thon's *Comics and Videogames: From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions* (2021), Alexander Dunst, Jochen Laubrock, and Janina Wildfeuer's *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Cognitive, and Multimodal Methods* (2018); Johannes C.P. Schmid and Christian A. Bachmann's *Framing [in] Comics and Cartoons: Essays on Aesthetics, History, and Mediality* (2021).<sup>14</sup> Some are also working on third monographs with comics connections (e.g. Christina Meyer's forthcoming *Novelists, Lawmakers, the Yellow Press, and Modern Mass Culture: Intellectual Battlefields in Late Nineteenth-century America* or my own forthcoming *Strange Fruit and Bitter Roots: Black History in Contemporary Graphic Narrative*).

Fourth, as the acknowledgements sections of the eight monographs I have reviewed here indicate

13 See Marx, "The 'Affected Scholar': Reading Raina Telgemeier's *Ghosts* as a Disability Scholar and Cystic Fibrosis Patient" (2018) and Wegner, "Reflections on the Boom of Graphic Pathography: The Effects and Affects of Narrating Disability and Illness in Comics" (2020).

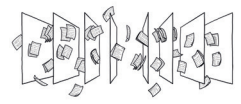
14 There is, of course, much important work done outside of American Studies, including (but certainly not limited to) essay collections such as Ole Frahm, Hans-Joachim Hahn, and Markus Streb's *Beyond MAUS: The Legacy of Holocaust Comics* (2021); Jaqueline Berndt and Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's *Manga's Cultural Crossroads* (2013); Jaqueline Berndt, Kazumi Nagaike, Fusami Ogi's *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan* (2019).

rather forcefully, German Americanists are part of broad, interdisciplinary and international, network of scholarship that includes many acclaimed comics scholars as well as many influential Americanists (and several thank the ComFor for serving as a productive forum and network among comics scholars based in Germany, but increasingly also abroad).

Fifth, even though there is (as far as I can tell) still no BA or MA in Comics Studies and still no professorship for Comics Studies, we still see an increasing institutionalization through academic book series devoted to comics and published in Germany: *Comicstudien* (ed. Juliane Blank, Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff, Véronique Sina) and *Comics Studies* (ed. Jaqueline Berndt, Patrick Noonan, Karin Kukkonen, Stephan Packard), both with De Gruyter; *Comics/Histories* (ed. Felix Giesa and Christina Meyer), with Rombach Wissenschaft; *Comic-Kulturen* (ed. icon Düsseldorf) with transcript; as well as the continuously expanding comics portfolio of the Chr. A. Bachmann Verlag. *The Handbook of Comics and Graphic Novels*, edited by Sebastian Domsch, Dan Hassler-Forest, and Dirk Vanderbeke, published as part of De Gruyter's *Handbooks of English and American Studies* series in 2021, is yet another indicator of institutional solidification, as is Etter, Nehrlich and Nowotny's *Reader Superhelden: Theorie – Geschichte – Medien* (2018). What's more, *Closure – Kieler e-Journal für Comicforschung* has proven to be a stable venue for excellent research and has served as an excellent forum for comics research from Germany and beyond (the 16th issue is slated to appear in 2024).<sup>15</sup>

Finally, it seems safe to say that working on comics is no longer detrimental for third-party funding. Research for Meyer's *Yellow Kid* book was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), and the same is the case for my work on superhero comics, first as part of the Research Unit 1091 "Popular Seriality – Aesthetics and Practice" (2010–2013) and now as part of the Collaborative Research Center 1472 *Transformations of the Popular* (2021–). Dunst's pioneering work on computational analysis was funded by the Federal Ministry of Education & Research (BMBF) as part of the early career research group "Hybrid Narrativity: Digital and Cognitive Approaches to Graphic Literature"; Jeanne

15 See also the forthcoming *Handbuch Comicforschung*, edited by Juliane Blank, Janina Wildfeuer, Christian Bachmann, and Stephan Packard.



Cortiel and Laura Oehme have worked on comics as part of their DFG-project “Contemporary American Risk Fiction” (2015–2019); Sylvia Kesper-Biermann is currently reconstructing the pedagogical discourse on comics in her DFG project “ComBiMe: Comics als Bildungsmedien in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (1960er–1980er Jahre)” (2021–). The Volkswagen Foundation has sponsored conferences and summer schools on comics.<sup>16</sup> Further outside of American Studies, the DFG provides funding for projects such as Véronique Sina’s “Queering Jewishness – Jewish Queerness. Diskursive Inszenierungen von Geschlecht und ‘jüdischer Differenz’ in (audio-) visuellen Medien,” while the EU has funded Jasmin Wrobel’s MSCA European Postdoctoral Fellowship for a book project on “Resisting Lines: Anti-Patriarchal Agencies in Latin American Comics.” The Einstein Foundation Berlin sponsored the important Pathographics project (2016–2021) directed by Susan Merrill Squier and Irmela Marei Krüger-Fürhoff at the FU Berlin (see also their essay volume *Pathographics: Narrative, Aesthetics, Contention, Community*, 2020).

I ended my 2011 attempt to account for the state of Comics Studies in Germany with the following prospects for the future:

My hope is that German scholars will continue to study comics from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, develop approaches that do more than simply force comics into established paradigms, place high-quality scholarship in peer-reviewed national and international publications, expand and tighten existing scholarly networks (both nationally and internationally), secure third-party funding from major research institutions, and continue the productive dialogue between their “home” disciplines and the burgeoning field of Comics Studies (Stein 2011: n.pag.).

While hopes do not always become reality, as we all know, I am happy to report that, at least from my limited view through the American Studies looking glass, all of the future prospects formulated at the

end of my first survey of Comics Studies in Germany have come to fruition. Sure, there is still room for improvement – resources and funding are always difficult to obtain; the job market for early career scholars and non-tenured Americanists is far from ideal; academia itself is facing increasing political harassment in many countries, including in Germany – but I do think that comics research is here to stay as an integral part of American Studies and many other disciplines.

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16 Summer School “Transnational Graphic Narratives” (organized by Lukas Etter and Daniel Stein at the University of Siegen in 2017); Symposium “Comics/Games: Aesthetic, Ludic, and Narrative Strategies” (organized Andreas Rauscher, Daniel Stein, Jan-Noël Thon) for the Committee for Comic Studies (AG Comicforschung) in 2018.



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