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Comics and Agency

Introduction

When Marty Gold finished inking the pages that Joe had just completed, they would be strapped to the back of a motorcycle by the kid from Iroquois Color and carried along Broadway, down past Madison Square and Union Square and Wanamaker's, to the Iroquois plant on Lafayette Street. There, one of four kindly, middle-aged women, two of whom were named Florence, would guess with surprising violence and aplomb at the proper coloration for the mashed noses, the burning Dorniers, the Steel Gauntlet's diesel-driven suit of armor, and all the other things that Joe had drawn and Marty had inked. The big Heidelberg cameras with rotating three-color lenses would photograph the colored pages, and the negatives, one cyan, one magenta, one yellow, would be screened by the squinting old Italian engraver, Mr. Petto, with his corny green celluloid visor. The resulting color halftones would be shipped uptown once more, along the ramifying arterials, to the huge loft building at West Forty-seventh and Eleventh, where men in square hats of folded newsprint labored at the great steam presses to publish the news of Joe's rapturous hatred of the German Reich, so that it could be borne once more into the streets of New York, this time in the form of folded and stapled comic books, lashed with twine into a thousand little bundles that would be hauled by the vans of Seaboard News to the newsstands and candy stores of the city, to the outermost edges of its boroughs and beyond, where they would be hung up like laundry or marriage banns from wire display racks. (Chabon 2000, 74–75)

This elaborate description by Michael Chabon traces the complicated paths taken by the drawings of Joe Kavalier, protagonist of Chabon's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier & Clay* (2000), when the first intradiegetic issue of the "The Escapist" comic is completed in 1939. Comics were not simple "things," Chabon informs the interested readership in this monumental homage to comics history, they were an enormous industry even back then, a complex network of agency distributed between countless individual and collective actors ("the squinting old Italian engraver," "men in square hats of folded newsprint"), institutions ("the Iroquois plant on Lafayette Street," "the newsstands and candy stores of the city"), technologies and machines ("the big Heidelberg cameras with rotating three-color lenses," "the great steam presses"), and infrastructures ("shipped uptown once more, along the ramifying arterials," "hauled by the vans of Seaboard News"). Joe and Clay, in the midst of all this, must continuously reassert themselves against other powerful actors such as their editor George Deasey, the company owner Sheldon Anapol, the advertising agency Hitherto, Burns, Baggot & DeWinter, as well as the producers, writers, and actors of the subsequent "The Escapist" radio show. The network's more

visible nodes, which public recollection will focus on most within the story, are certainly the magnificent fictional creations such as the eponymous “Escapist” and his many adventures as well as the ephemeral objects that hold the “network” together as commodities and goods, distributed in “a thousand little bundles.” The specific materiality of those books, we are reminded again and again, serves as an anchor of memories and nostalgia for those who work with them and for those who bought, read, and collected them: “Joe loved his comic books,” Chabon reflects on his protagonist’s life in one of the last chapters, “for their inferior color separation, their poorly trimmed paper stock, their ads for air rifles and dance courses and acne creams, for the basement smell that clung to the older ones, the ones that had been in storage during Joe’s travels” (2000, 575). Less apparent, but perhaps most influential on the lives of Joe and Clay – as well as on their creations – are the millions of anonymous readers, some of which become only visible through their different stances on “The Escapist” comics. Their engagement ranges from fannish enthusiasm over political zeal to the admiration of fellow artists from other media, and finally to a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in which Joe is accused of the encouragement of juvenile delinquency by promoting homosexuality through his work. Cameo appearances of (and references to) Dr. Fredric Wertham, Joe Shuster, Bob Kane, and Orson Welles notwithstanding, Chabon’s account of twentieth-century comics and media history is clearly fictional. It nevertheless articulates a precise question in literary form: Where does agency reside within these networks of production, distribution, and reception surrounding “The Escapist,” and how do the fictional character and his adventures as they are represented in comics and in other media forms influence, shape, and transform the currents of individuals, companies, and perhaps US history itself?

Comics and Agency

Notions of “agency” distributed by semiotic, technological, and sociocultural means among the heterogeneous actors surrounding “comics” as an assemblage or a dispositive certainly require further investigation. The concept has proven indispensable in a wide range of disciplines for determining processes of mutual influences and responsibilities for specific actions. Fields of study extend from political science to anthropology and ethics, all strongly influenced by sociology, as one of the latter’s basic questions has long been how the agency of individuals can be conceived in opposition to social structures (Giddens 1984, 17–45; Hays 1994). In some contrast to these approaches derived from sociology and

related fields, distributed agency is not yet established as a standard concept in comics studies, nor indeed in media studies (for a survey, see Eichner 2014; the term is also commonly used in game studies in order to describe the various opportunities for interaction and engagement that video games afford their players; Bódi and Thon 2020; Nguyen 2020; Bódi 2023):

Media Studies are usually concerned with the economic, social, and political conditions of the *production* of media, the analysis of media *content*, the reception and consumption of media products including the characteristics of *users* of media, and finally, the *critique* of media in general from a cultural and historical perspective.

(Belliger and Krieger 2017, 20, original emphases)

Approaches to *mediating and mediated agency* were first developed in response to Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which has been booming since the 1990s (Latour 2005; Blok et al. 2020), leading to subsequent drafts of an emerging “actor media theory” (Schüttpelz 2013; Krieger and Belliger 2014; Spöhrer and Ochsner 2017). Most existing approaches to mediating and mediated agency, despite all internal differences, were undeniably characterized by a strong orientation towards perspectives developed by Bruno Latour (2005), Michel Callon (1986), Antoine Hennion (2015), Madelaine Akrich (1997), and John Law (2002). An “actor” is here understood as any entity that becomes recognizable as the catalyst or cause of interrelated, complex chains of action, transformation, or reconfiguration. Other important strands of research include critical posthumanism and neomaterialism inspired by Donna Haraway (1991) and Katherine Hayles (1999), which dissolve traditional subject/object boundaries altogether (Barad 2003; Braidotti 2013), while “flat ontologies” are also prominent among proponents of object-oriented epistemology (Harman 2002; Bryant 2011; Bogost 2012). According to all these “new materialisms,” agency can not only be attributed to “natural” persons, but also to “things” as heterogeneous as materialities, devices, inscriptions, institutions, or programs within complex configurations or assemblages.

For Latour, all and any entities are to be treated indifferently in ontological terms, as mere “quasi-objects,” fleeting nodes of distributed agency (Belliger and Krieger 2017; Seier 2017). Hence, Latour addresses mediation wherever actors are connected as “mediators” or “intermediaries” to transmit any “meaning or force” (2005, 39). In light of all these interconnections between actors, Erhard Schüttpelz has coined the term “Operationsketten” [operational chains] (2008, 234), which are linked through modulations of agency. Operational chains of comics would thus include natural persons and their institutional roles (such as writers, colorists, and letterers), apparatuses and materials (such as drawing pens and reading apps), as well as texts and inscriptions (from specific

editions of a given book to entire genre traditions). This list must remain programmatically open: “Following this definition, ‘mediators’ or ‘médiateurs’ can be personal, technical, discursive – they can be any kind of transformational linkage between delegated agency” (Spöhrer 2017, 11). Andrea Seier has pointed to the fact that it is not “networks” that offer the starting point and the foundation of any ANT investigation, but “the establishment, interference, and transformation of the *agency of actants*” (2017, 41–42, emphasis added). Agency thus turns out to be a truly foundational concept, because any “capacity to act” (Callon 2005, 4) precedes an identification of subjects vs. objects as well as stable domains such as nature vs. culture or human vs. technology.

The fifteenth annual conference of the German Society for Comic Studies (ComFor), “Comics and Agency: Actors, Publics, Participation,” focused specifically on the interrelations between (groups of) individual, collective, institutional, and corporate actors of comics (including graphic novels, manga, cartoons, and other forms of sequential or cartoonish images). Even if many classifications in the world of comics – such as the distinction between authors and readers – seem less salient from this point of view – as producers may have once been consumers and readers easily become authors and artists themselves – they are distinguishable through a particular distribution of agency within historically evolving media configurations. If readers, authors, or editors comment on or add to an existing work, they operate within different dimensions of agency defined by their possibilities to influence, alter, or shape other actants in the network. Agency is at stake when audiences resist hegemonic meanings and interpretations of multimodal texts in order to assume opposing positions. In the same manner, authorship could be understood as the attribution of agency to and across various medial instances and roles such as writers, artists, colorists, letterers, or editors, as well as commercial rights holders such as publishing houses or conglomerates (for US superhero comics, see, e.g., Stein 2021). Instead of considering Marvel, for instance, as a monolithic institution of publishing power, we can approach it as a network of people (with different roles) as well as of material resources that all gain certain amounts of agency through their position as part of the quasi-object “Marvel.” The latter thus not only entails editors, authors, and artists, brick buildings, paper and ink – but also employees and objects in less visible positions, such as perhaps janitors or coffee machines. Even if network theory aims to shine a light onto these less obvious forces at work, a less hierarchal structure in terms of theoretical design by no means implies an equality of power, since the individual agency and “connectedness” within any network can differ greatly for individual nodes. The conceptual lens of “distributed agency” might also be able to trace a continuity between “mainstream” and “alternative” traditions of comics and comics scholarship, where exchanges between approaches derived from cultural studies on the

one hand (concerned with popular superhero comics, *shōnen* or *shōjo* manga, or globally marketed franchises) and literature studies on the other (concerned with more “literary” genres such as comics autobiographies, journalistic, or other non-fictional works) are still more the exception than the norm (Singer 2018, 1–35). Both comics traditions, after all, are equally responsive to their markets as well as to their creators, distributors, and readers. From this point of view, a specific comic as a semiotic and material object or as a “site” of distributed agency can be related to aspects of comics’ *production* (e.g., authorship, technical affordances, infrastructures, and institutions), to aspects of comics’ *reception* (e.g., consumption, appropriation, and participation) as well as to aspects of comics’ *recognition* (e.g., circulation, canonization, and discursivation). An even broader perspective includes further relations such as those between different media (i.e., comics’ potential for adaptation and transmedialization; Davis 2016; Yockey 2017; Rauscher et al. 2021).

Comics and Mediality

In order to provide a brief overview of possible dimensions of comics and mediating/mediated agency (which draws on Jung et al. 2021), we will begin by differentiating between specific dimensions of their mediality. Comics can be identified by their integrated “base media,” writing and sequential images, with the interplay of written and pictorial elements being increasingly referred to as multimodality, both within comics studies (Herman 2010; Kukkonen 2011; Packard et al. 2019) and beyond (Kress 2010; Gibbons 2012; Bateman et al. 2017). These semiotic structures will always be integrated into some sort of “carrier medium” that lends material support, such as newspapers, booklets, or digital reading technologies (Thon and Wilde 2016; Kashtan 2018; Jenkins 2020). Yet, we can also speak of comics themselves as a “medium conventionally perceived as distinct” (Rajewsky 2010, 61), which allows us to focus on comics as an artistic genre, communicative form, or cultural technique that can be imitated or “quoted” in other medial contexts through intermedial references. Here, multidimensional conceptualizations of media and mediality such as those proposed by Siegfried J. Schmidt (2000, 2008), Marie-Laure Ryan (2004, 2006), and Jan-Noël Thon (2014, 2016) provide further orientation by allowing us “to distinguish between at least a communicative-semiotic, a material-technological, and a conventional-institutional dimension of media and their mediality” (Thon and Wilde 2016, 233) in general as well as of comics and their mediality in particular (as discussed in more detail by Wilde 2021), without prioritizing certain projects, interests, and terminologies over others.

First, whatever we approach *as comics*, it is clear that the respective artifacts will have a communicative-semiotic dimension: Comics usually tell stories or communicate other kinds of meanings that may be actualized differently by various groups of readers. For media studies scholar Werner Faulstich, a “medium” would hence be “*ein institutionalisiertes System um einen organisierten Kommunikationskanal*” [an institutionalized system around an organized channel of communication] (2002, 26, original emphases). In this perspective, we can consider media as “Kommunikationsinstrumente” [instruments of communication] (Schmidt 2008, 144). Jan Teurlings even speaks of a “transmission approach” (2013, 106) to media production studies. In this view, then, media primarily establish “the condition of the possibility of communication and cooperative action beyond the *hic et nunc* of interaction” (Belliger and Krieger 2017, 22). In a subsequent “agentic analysis,” the corresponding *meanings* could be reconstructed with recourse to specific actors and their interpretative authority according to social and institutional roles. A variety of different methods are available for this purpose, from semiotics-based textual analysis to empirical reception research.

Second, it should also be clear that these “semiotic sites” are always dependent on a material-technological dimension of “carrier media” or distributional media. With Schmidt, we thus consider media as “Medientechniken (bzw. sogenannte technische Dispositive)” [media techniques/technologies (or so-called technical dispositifs)] (2008, 144). The field of multimodality research, for example, tends to emphasize a comparatively narrow conceptualization of media that highlights their material-technological dimension: If one considers writing and images *not* as base media, but as semiotic modalities, then one draws a sharp distinction between the material substrate (the “medium”) on the one hand and an abstract semiotic form realized within it on the other: “[M]edia become modes once their principles of semiosis begin to be conceived of in more abstract ways (as ‘grammars’ of some kind). This in turn will make it possible to realise them in a range of media” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 22). Yet, the material-technological dimension of media is perhaps best regarded not as autonomous, but as a materialized expression of sociocultural negotiation processes. This becomes clear, for example, in the fact that certain technological

Formate [. . .] – sowohl durch explizite Normierungen wie auch durch unabsichtliche Affordanzen – immer ganz spezifische und selektive Formen von Gebrauch, ganz konkrete Adressat*innen und eindeutig bestimmbare Rezeptionssituationen [antizipieren].

[formats (. . .) – both through explicit standardizations and through unintentional affordances – always (anticipate) very specific and selective forms of use, very concrete addressees, and clearly determinable reception situations.] (Fahle et al. 2020, 13)

Third, the production, distribution, and reception of printed or digital comics (and all of their various meanings) will thus always be embedded in a conventional-institutional dimension of mediality that can encompass more or less strongly conventionalized and institutionalized social practices. Schmidt calls this a consideration of media as “institutionelle Einrichtungen bzw. Organisationen” [institutions or organizations] (2008, 145). Communication studies or journalism, for example, tend to focus on conceptualizations of media as “mass media” and thus foreground the social-institutional dimension of their mediality – but other media certainly also exhibit a social-institutional dimension. The actors involved could then once again be defined according to medium-specific roles: Comics know not only writers and artists but also publishers, editors, reviewers, booksellers, and many more, who can play a decisive role in the production, circulation, reception, and discursivation of a comics text (Woo and Stoll 2021). Connected to their roles are certain conventionalized habits, which the media historian Laura Gitelman describes as “cultural protocols” (2008, 5): How do we generally use a certain type of media artifact? For which social spheres are they intended in a certain historical and cultural context? Some of these “normative rules and default conditions” (Gitelman 2008, 7) are “industrially defined,” others emerge in more of a “grassroots” fashion.

Since these three areas are interconnected aspects or dimensions of specific media artifacts, it has proven useful to consider them as medial qualities or *medialities* (Thon 2014, 2016; Thon and Wilde 2016; Giannoulis and Wilde 2020). With regard to specific artifacts or events – such as a particular comic, film, or video game – these three dimensions of mediality should always be observable at the same time, but may very well receive different attention depending on the specific research interest. For those who, like Hartmut Winkler, are more interested in the communicative-semiotic dimension of media (“gesellschaftliche Maschinen, die ein Biotop für die Semiose, für die Artikulation und für die Herausbildung von Zeichen bereitstellen” [social machines that provide a biotope for semiosis, and for the articulation and the formation of signs] [Winkler 2008, 118]), the material-technological dimension as well as the actual human actors that operate it appear as a mere “medial context.” Other media scholars problematize an overly narrow communicative-semiotic perspective as they are more interested in the material-technological dimension of mediality interacting with different human actors on an affective and bodily level. Yet, other researchers focus primarily on conventional-institutional questions of mediality when they investigate the socio-political dimensions of production, circulation, and reception and their associated structures of power and (in)equality. In any case, different conceptualizations of mediating and mediated comics agency could be located alongside these three dimensions of mediality.

Mediating and Mediated Agency in a Comics Context

Within the dimension of communicative-semiotic mediality, we could first look at (groups of) human actors in different contexts struggling to influence and determine the meaning of comics stories and characters. Often, hypothetical intentions of authors are taken into account here (Chris and Gerstner 2013; Gray and Johnson 2013), at least to the extent that they can be plausibly reconstructed (or inferred) from comics texts themselves or from surrounding paratexts and discourses (Kindt and Müller 2006; Currie 2010; Thon 2016). Michel Foucault's concept of an "author function" (1998, 221) is also relevant here, as it describes the attribution of authorial agency to some human actors and not others. At the same time, inevitably, questions of *distributed* authorship are at stake, which can become extraordinarily complex, especially in the case of comics' author collectives (Thon 2016, 125–166) and publishing houses as copyright holders, providing various creative frameworks and limitations for hired authors. The interests and relative agencies of these diverse groups of actors can, in many cases, hardly be brought down to a common denominator. This is especially relevant for serial and, potentially, transmedia(l) characters that have been reused and recontextualized in and around comics for decades (Thon 2019; Wilde 2019a, 2019b; Pearson and Thon 2022, 2023/forthcoming; Kunz and Wilde 2023/forthcoming). Within the present volume, for instance, Mark Hibbett (2022) reveals through an empirical, data-driven study on Marvel's character Dr. Doom that the majority of industrial actors (59%) credited with the character's countless transmedia(l) appearances between 1961 and 1987 have worked with him only once. As Dr. Doom never had any series of his own during that period, instead being inserted wherever creators felt the need for it throughout comics, animated films, or radio shows, there have been multiple authorial agencies – rather than a single overarching one – that could be said to control the character as such. Hibbett's study thus reveals a significant misalignment between actual distributed authorship, on the one hand, and its public perception, on the other.

Some of the actors shaping the meaning of comics certainly stay invisible by default, most prominently perhaps editors. In the present volume, Romain Becker zooms in on this question, looking closely at the many editing practices of the German publisher Reprodukt. The mostly translated (reprinted) texts in Reprodukt's catalogue are appropriated in countless ways, even in cases where the publishing house had no say in their initial production:

By modifying a comic's outward appearance, and/or even what it contains, Reprodukt leaves its imprint on it, and can reclaim a form of authority on who reads the comic and on how they read it [. . .]. Reprodukt's influence on comics can sometimes truly be considered to be *editorial writing*, making them a co-creator of said pieces, rather than a mere mediator between linguistic areas. (Becker 2022, 60, original emphasis)

Jessica Burton (2022) broadens the scope of these considerations with her contribution on Tintin's global journey in the 1960s and the editor's role within this period of change for European comics. Burton also advocates the concept of an "editorial voice," especially when the role of the editor merged with that of the writer for the first time and at least a few editors – such as René Goscinny and Jean-Michel Charlier for the comics magazine *Pilote* – became quite visible for a broader public.

A general tension in the correlation of agency with intentionality results from the observation that not merely "intended" meanings can be relevant for a work's cultural impact. Rather, such relevance can be attributed perhaps to an even greater extent to unintended, possibly ideological dimensions which can only be "uncovered" through critical analysis (through a "symptomatic reading" [Best and Marcus 2009, 1]). The text itself and the reader (or groups of readers) emanate their own forms of agency in these cases. Even an ostensibly "ironic" utterance can, for example, perpetuate problematic (e.g., sexist, racist, or homophobic) patterns and discourses, beyond any hypothetical or actual authorial intentions. Already in the communicative-semiotic dimension focused on by different kinds of textual analysis, it may then be appropriate to systematically distinguish (implied or attributed) authorial agency from "textual agency" as such – *a text's multifaceted agentiality*. A certain ideological position may show effects without being in any way intended by or reflexively conscious to the respective actors, just as stereotypes might be revealed from their continuous repetitions. Jörn Ahrens approaches these questions with a nuanced look at the conflicting meanings in Tullio Altan's graphic novel *Ada dans la jungle* [*Ada in the Jungle*] (Altan 1985) and Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie's comics series *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya: Life in Yop City*] (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014), which "unfold counter approaches in dealing with the representation of cultural clichés and stereotyping" (Ahrens 2022, 237) – that are, for example, manifested in the European appropriation of "Africa," with its deep entanglement in Orientalist imaginations and traditions.

On the side of reception, too, different groups of actors come into view, as they negotiate diverse interpretations and "subversive" readings with each other (Hall 1973; Jenkins 1992). Since the meanings and the cultural relevance of comics may change over time, historically variable groups of recipients have to be taken into account (often reconstructed as "model readers"). Again, this is especially

complex for serial and, potentially, transmedia(l) characters, something that is discussed by Ashumi Shah and Anke Marie Bock for the character of Death of the Endless, who was initially created by writer Neil Gaiman and artist Mike Dringenberg for the *The Sandman* series (1989–2015). While “Gaiman, who boasts a prominent digital presence via his social media handles – specifically on Twitter and Tumblr –” (Shah and Bock 2022, 147), is a particularly salient example of a prominent author figure, Sha and Bock focus on the agency of fans or, rather, “prosumers” of Death, as she is continuously reinterpreted, appropriated, and transformed in fan texts on platforms such as DeviantArt. A more troubling example for fan agency in user-generated paratexts (Gray 2010; Mittell 2015; Brookey and Gray 2017) is provided by Christopher Pizzino, who critically discusses the YouTube channel of Richard C. Meyer, a key figure in what is now commonly called “Comicsgate.” Meyer offers a notorious variety of destructive “criticisms” of “social justice warrior” comics, most often Marvel superhero comics, and the creators who make them. Pizzino points to Meyer’s presence in the videos as “an embodied reader” (Pizzino 2022, 179) proposing that, “[l]ike the proverbial customer, the religious pontiff, or the absolute sovereign, the comics reader’s body is always right” (Pizzino 2022, 180). His analysis relates Meyer’s self-representation to the latter’s position between fans, creators, and the very material he engages with. Pizzino’s important study reveals that, while the term “agency” often invokes positive connotations of initiation and innovation, autonomy and intervention, it must be seen in a more nuanced way that often deserves, or even necessitates a critical approach (for respective criticisms addressing agency in relation to various technological and cultural interfaces, see, e.g., Hadler and Haupt 2016). Accordingly, an agency-centered textual analysis of a comic might ask, with Erhard Schüttpelz, how “die Interessen der Gruppen durch die Form ihrer Inskriptionen und Gegenstände ausgehandelt und ineinander übersetzt [werden]” [the interests of groups are negotiated and translated into each other through the form of their inscriptions and objects] (2013, 38).

Yet, exploring material-technological mediality evidently goes further than that. Asking about agency in this dimension investigates how the material conditions of comics’ production, distribution, and reception structurally influence and co-determine the abilities of the actors situated therein. We might thus also investigate the distribution of agency *between* human and non-human or even entirely amongst non-human actors (Knappett and Malafouris 2010). This is immediately apparent for digital media such as video games, the “interactivity” of which constitutes a crucial design element of the media texts themselves (Thon 2016; Fernández-Vara 2019, Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2020). Connecting the question of comics and agency to the field of game studies, Hans-Joachim Backe investigates “*hybrid game comics*” (Backe 2022, 283, original emphasis) that explicitly

and deliberately reference comics not merely on the level of content, but also in their visual and formal design. Underscoring that agency is a distinct theoretical concept in game studies and “one of the central criteria for the discussion of the ‘gameness’ of digital games” (Backe 2022, 284), Backe evaluates how this field-specific understanding of agency relates to, contradicts, or affirms the desired comics aesthetics.

The agency of the material-technological dimension of comics does not have to be limited to digital media, however. Against the background of neomaterialist approaches (Bennet 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Goll et al. 2013), the concept of an “agency of materials” has been applied, for instance, to the oil paint of classical painting, whose material properties enable certain actions and uses while restricting others (Lehmann 2012). This can be connected to the “affordances” of any object or dispositive, a term that was initially derived from the work of psychologist James J. Gibson (1979), but has long since become a part of the standard vocabulary of media studies (Zinnien 2008). If applied to questions around comics agency, the distribution of agency within a dispositive appears as being determined by the material and digital affordances that open up or close off certain actors’ scope for action (including specific interpretations). Serialized comics’ ephemeral, often “trashy” material quality affords their “cheap” and lowly status in the cultural commodity market as well as a specific potential for nostalgic recollection (Jenkins 2015). Henry Jenkins, for instance, expands on his recent exploration of the material side of comics culture in *Comics and Stuff* (2020): “Comics are stuff – material objects in their own right, which are appraised, collected, interpreted, displayed, bagged, stored, sold, etc., in a complex set of cultural negotiations within the context of everyday life” (Jenkins 2022, 26). In his contribution to the present volume, Jenkins further explores how the “archival and repertoire cultures” (2022, 27) of comics are reflected in Dylan Horrock’s comic *Hicksville* (1998) as practices, performances, and fantasies that have “grown around” the material interfaces of comics. Importantly, comics and their materialities do not exist in a cultural vacuum, but are always related to other forms of media and their material properties and affordances. This is a perspective also taken by Grace Schneider, who looks at comics as a site for exercising “archival remediation” (Schneider 2022, 267), especially with regard to materials derived from photojournalism. Schneider discusses the complex dialectics between photographic practices, on the one hand – embedded in a “belief system that grants the status of visual proof to technical images” (Schneider 2022, 275) – and drawings which “denounce[] the presence of a manual gesture” (Schneider 2022, 275), on the other.

Schneider’s invocation of the “archive” already points to the third, conventional-institutional dimension of mediality that we have distinguished above, a dimension of mediality that particularly foregrounds questions of social agency.

The “network” in Actor-Network-Theory is not thought to be a technological entity in the field of digital media (Stegbauer 2010), but a mere operational perspective applied to actors in various social contexts (Latour 1999a, 1999b, 174–215). Latour thus increasingly favored neologisms such as “worknet,” “action net” (2005, 132), or “actant-rhizome ontology” (1999a, 19; Jensen 2020). Analogous terms have emerged in communication and media studies, especially “assemblage” and “dispositive.” Since both terms are commonly used to discuss the relationship between media systems and social agency, a closer look at their respective emphases is warranted. The term “assemblage” is derived from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983). Even in its current usage (e.g., Wise 2017), it retains a typically poststructuralist double meaning, insofar as it captures both the process of assembling elements and the result of such a process: “What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations, between them [. . .]. Thus, the assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 42). In media studies, the term “dispositive” is perhaps more common. Dispositives can be understood as institutionalized correlations of applications, devices, and settings (Deterding 2013), as is the case, for example, with the “dispositive of cinema” or the “dispositive of television” (including their established uses in certain social frames). The concept of the dispositive, which goes back to Foucault (1980), is especially concerned with power relations, thus transcending the more descriptively oriented ANT endeavors. Dispositives and assemblages, however, coincide with Latour’s notion of networks (composed of “quasi-objects”) in that they all inevitably bring into view the socio-political dimension of media systems: The cinema is then not only a place for experiencing films, but also a social configuration that produces a certain kind of subject. According to Giorgio Agamben (2008, 14), a dispositive is thus a historically situated, social structure that turns human individuals into subjects with specific positions in social power relations – not only within political or sociological configurations (“Regierungsmaschinen” [machines of governing] [Agamben 2008, 38] such as prisons, asylums, or schools) but also in connection to the domains of media. In her contribution to the present volume, Mel Gibson analyzes the development of graphic novel collections across British public library services in these terms, as a complex interrelation between both human and non-human actors (including objects and spaces). The publication of the Youth Libraries Group’s *Graphic Account* in 1993 (Barker 1993) can thus be seen as “a moment where a range of actors of various kinds came into contact and functioned as catalysts for complex change and the reconfiguration of how graphic novels were understood, leading to more physical collections and to a shifting understanding of comics as a medium in various professions and institutions” (Gibson 2022, 214).

Another complex example that showcases social agency and conventional-institutional aspects of comic's mediality is investigated in Matthew Smith's contribution on the San Diego Comic-Con as a particularly versatile space of intersections between social roles of both professional and fan visitors: "Comic-Con is each of the following: an invasion, a homecoming, a publicity event, a jury, a consciousness-raising session, a costume party, a networking event, a marketplace, a life support system, a classroom, and a ritual" (Smith 2022, 191). The respective dynamics of "fan agency" in the context of such cons are thus quite complex, entangled in a multitude of heterogeneous interests and co-opted by corporate agendas. From the perspective of a socio-politically oriented mediation theory, it can hence be hypothesized that personal and group agency, across all social contexts, is also mostly (pre)structured by media (Crowley 2013, 331) and that, conversely, material-technological affordances specifically anticipate "ganz konkrete Adressat*innen und eindeutig bestimmbare Rezeptionssituationen" [very concrete addressees and clearly determinable reception situations] (Fahle et al. 2020, 13), which means that they function as "Kondensationen kultureller Aushandlungsprozesse – kultureller Performativitäten" [condensations of cultural negotiation processes – cultural performativities] (Fahle et al. 2020, 12). From an intersectional perspective, such an approach must then also always ask about the respective agential in/equalities within networks of comics production, distribution, and reception, as various subject positions and binary oppositions constitute, solidify, or challenge associated power structures (such as "male" vs. "female" or "white" vs. "PoC"; Noble 2018; D'Ignazio and Klein 2020). This is a perspective also taken up by Cathérine Lehnerer, who reflects a practice-based approach via comics workshops with students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds as a site to negotiate fluid identities and to enable cultural participation. Participants in her workshops were encouraged to question their own and each other's identities and their reliance on aspects such as skin color, cultural origin, or gender identification through comics drawings employed as avatars of themselves. Lehnerer aims to understand social agency in terms of "conviviality," a term that "refers to the process of how people interact and communicate with each other" (Lehnerer 2022, 229) in a way "that motivates communal thought and action" (Lehnerer 2022, 228) – and is here facilitated through comics as a communicative-semiotic, material-technological, and conventional-institutional form of expression.

Considered in these terms, one and the same individual "kann [. . .] der Ort mannigfaltiger Subjektivierungsprozesse sein: der Mobiltelefonnutzer, der Internetsurfer, der Schreiber von Erzählungen, der Tangobegeisterte, der Globalisierungsgegner usw." [can be the site of manifold processes of subjectivation:

the cell phone user, the Internet surfer, the writer of narratives, the tango enthusiast, the opponent of globalization, etc. (Agamben 2008, 27)

Perhaps obviously, the social dimension of mediating and mediated agency already plays a significant role for the communicative-semiotic dimension of mediality, insofar as “authors” and “readers” are at least to some extent produced via communicative-semiotic processes. Joshua Meyrowitz’s well-known study *No Sense of Place* (1986) serves as a prominent example of how the effects of media on such social roles (in the sense of Erving Goffman [1976]) can be traced. The contribution by Laura Glötter likewise discusses the “strategic self-depiction and the glorification of other artists” (Glötter 2022, 119) in the comics series *Kanon* by Lars Fiske and Steffen Kverneland (2006–2012) as an execution of authorial agency that perpetuates the idea of an omnipotent author figure. Yet, Fiske and Kverneland also use their comics to advocate for public funding of comics artists and purchasing programs, further underscoring that they regard comics as valuable cultural artefacts. Quite similarly, Barbara Margarethe Eggert, in her contribution, investigates how the role of the “comics author” is represented within the autobiographical and self-reflexive comics of Austrian artist Nicolas Mahler (e.g., Mahler 2003) and a *Drawn & Quarterly* anthology (Devlin et al. 2015) which both deal with agency in the process of creating, publishing, and distributing comics. However, in contrast to the proposal of public funding found in *Kanon*, Eggert’s close readings reveal a “mighty yet invisible non-human agent” determining or limiting all creative control, namely the economic forces that have “the final word when it comes to ‘making’ comics in the narrower sense of publishing and distributing them” (2022, 115).

Conclusions

Mediating and mediated agency, in the broadest sense, is relevant wherever mediation takes place; wherever agents are placed in relation to each another within chains of operations and interaction. This once again expresses a conviction that manifests itself across all contributions to the present volume in one way or another, namely to think comics agency as strictly relational. As Mitchell and Hansen note, “media studies can and should designate the study of our fundamental relationality, of the irreducible role of mediation in the history of human being” (2010, xii). Mediation in/with comics can be modulated through communicative-semiotic artifacts (media texts and their oft-contested meanings), through material (2022, 000) as well as technological tools, technologies, and infrastructures of production, distribution, and reception (sometimes in the form of “carrier media”), as

well as through social-institutional frameworks, conventions, and social power relations within medial dispositives. Importantly, these aspects of comics mediality and agency are often closely entangled, which is why it is necessary to consider all three dimensions of (communicative-semiotic, material-technological, and conventional-institutional) mediality and (communicative, material, and social) agency in their interrelations. Against this background, the following contributions offer a selection of spotlights on comics “sites” of distributed agency. The resulting studies show how productive the question of agency can be as a starting point and a common denominator for specific projects – and how, at the same time, it may serve to relate rather different approaches to each other and open up new avenues of inquiry in the process.

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