



# COMICS, THE CHILDREN AND CHILDISHNESS

18-19 SEPTEMBER 2023

KASK, Louis Pasteurlaan 2, 9000 Gent

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drawing: Mona

# International conference – *Comics, the Children and Childishness*

## Ghent University, 18-19 September 2023

Comics have often been dismissed as child's fare. While comics scholars have long struggled with such dismissals, today they are more likely to run up against the stereotype that 'comics are not just for children' (Pizzino). The 'for children' snub has encouraged scholarship to focus on comics and graphic novels for adults. Although we have seen several exciting studies on the children in comics (Abate; Apostolidès, Chaney; Gordon; Saguisag) and comics for children (Abate and Tarbox, Heimermann and Tullis), most of which have appeared over the past decade, the many complex interactions between comics and children remain understudied.

Building on the research of the COMICS team based at Ghent University since 2018, *Comics, the Children and Childishness* seeks to disentangle these connections by focusing on two key strands: comics and children's culture (especially print culture), and childishness and comics. This follows the objectives of the COMICS project at Ghent University which focuses on children's comics magazines, child characters in comics and graphic novels, young readers' interactions (both programmed and unexpected) with their comics and children's drawings.

The conference aims to open a crucial forum of dialogue between European and international researchers, by focusing on a resolutely international corpus, covering comics from not only the dominant areas of Western Europe and North America, but also Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America, hoping to inspire further research in this overlooked but crucial aspect of comic studies.

The conference will also be accompanied by an exhibition in KASK of the Alain Van Passen comics collection, a rare and extremely well-preserved archive of French and Belgian comics magazines from 1930s through the 1990s.

### Scientific committee

Prof. Maaheen Ahmed (Ghent University)

Dr. Giorgio Busi Rizzi (Ghent University)

Prof. Benoît Crucifix (KU Leuven/KBR)

Prof. Vanessa Joosen (University of Antwerp)

### Organizing committee

Prof. Maaheen Ahmed (Ghent University)

Dr. Giorgio Busi Rizzi (Ghent University)

Dragana Radanovic (LUCA School of Arts/KU Leuven)

Dr. Eva Van de Wiele (Ghent University)

Dr. Cedric Van Dijck (VUB)

Dr. Frauke Pauwels (University of Antwerp)

# Conference program

## Day 1 – 18 September

### 9:30-10:00 Coffee and welcome

Maaheen Ahmed and Giorgio Busi Rizzi (Ghent University)

### 10:00-11:00 Keynote

*Re-Centering Children in Comics* – Carol Tilley (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

### 11:00-11:30 Coffee break

### 11:30-12:30 Session 1

*Children's Comics and Identity Politics* – Chair: Margot Renard (Ghent University)

- *Topolino beyond Comics: Construction of a Magazine Identity and Children's Contents from the 1960s to the 2010s* – Benedetta D'Incau (University of Tours)
- *Between "chinos" and "palomillas": Comics, Race and Childhood in Colombia and Peru (1920-1940)* – Maria Elena Bedoya Hidalgo (The University of Manchester)

### 12:30-14:00 Lunch

### 14:00-15:00 Session 2

*Children's Comics and Dictatorship* – Chair: Michel De Dobbeleer (Ghent University/KU Leuven)

- *Mikros Iros, 1953-1968: Stories of Young Orphans in the Service of National Reconciliation* – Effie Amilitou (University Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle)
- *A Model Childhood – For Boys and/or Girls. Czech Comic Series about Two Schoolkids from Late 1930s and Early 1940s* – Pavel Korinek (Czech Academy of Sciences) and Lucie Korinkova (Czech Academy of Sciences)

### 15:00-15:30 Coffee break

### 15:30-16:30 Session 3

*Constructing Children's Comics Magazines* – Chair: Kees Ribbens (NIOD/Erasmus University Rotterdam)

- *Stories and Pictures for Boys and Girls: Identifying the Child Reader in Pre-War British Comics* – Michael Connerty (IADT Dún Laoghaire)
- *Becoming a Comics Magazine: Lisette and the Disappearance of illustrés for Girls* – Nicolas Labarre (Bordeaux-Montaigne University)

### 16:30-17:00 Coffee break

### 17:00-18:00 Session 4

*Children's Magazines and Visual Culture* – Chair: Giorgio Busi Rizzi (Ghent University)

- *An Emerging Audience. Comics for Kids and the Popular Illustrated Press in Interwar Belgium* – Benoît Crucifix (KU Leuven-KBR)
- *From 'Kid Click' to 'Camera-Mad Carol': Imagining and Representing the Child Photographer in Mid-Century American and British Comics* – Anabella Pollen (University of Brighton)

### 18:00-18:30: Break/apéro

### 18:30 Dinner

## Day 2 – 19 September

### 9:30-10:30 Session 5

*Comics Narration and Childishness* – Chair: Lukas Etter (Siegen University)

- *Bathroom Words: Interactivity and the Graphic Narratives of Keiler Roberts* – Shiamin Kwa (Bryn Mawr College)
- *Embodying and Estranging Childhood Perspective through Childlike Graphiation: The Gull Yettin by Joe Kessler* – Rodolfo Dal Canto (University of L'Aquila)

### 10:30-11:00 Coffee break

### 11:00-12:30 Session 6 (parallel sessions)

A. *Roundtable: Manifestations of Child(ish)ness* – Moderator: Dragana Radanovic (LUCA School of Arts/KU Leuven)

- Eva Van de Wiele (Ghent University)
- Emma-Louise Silva (University of Antwerp)
- Frauke Pauwels (University of Antwerp)

B. *Immersion in French Youth Magazines: Insights from the Van Passen Collection* – Chair: Laurence Grove (University of Glasgow)

- *Hidden Secret Papers: Boy's Own Adventures in the French Indochina War* – Hugo Frey (University of Chichester)
- *A Year in the Van Passen Collection: 1937 in the French Youth Press* – Benoît Glaude (Ghent University)
- *When War Seems Inevitable – Francophone Comic Magazines 1938-1940* – Kees Ribbens (NIOD/KNAW and Erasmus University Rotterdam)

### 12:30-13:30 Lunch

### 13:30-14:30 Session 7

*Excavating Comics Childhoods* – Chair: Ian Horton (University of the Arts London)

- *Childhood Memories in Comic Books: An (Auto)ethnographic Investigation of Comics Reading* – Aseel Qazzaz (Carleton University) and Benjamin Woo (Carleton University)
- *The Child in the Archive: Evidence of the Child, Childhood, and Childishness in the Trina Robbins Papers* – John Walsh (Indiana University)

### 14:30 -15:00 Coffee break

### 15:00-16:30 Session 8

*Transitional Frames: Growing Up in Comics* – Chair: Manuela Di Franco (Ghent University)

- *Manga Infantilities: Revisiting Scatological and Sexual Gags* – Jaqueline Berndt (Stockholm University)
- *Becoming Adult: How Teenage Comics Depict and Put into Frames the Transitional State of Growing up* – Florent Perget (University Paris-Sorbonne and STIH)
- *Bruce Wayne and the Adoption of Tim Drake* – Joel Thurman (University of Colorado-Boulder)

### 16:30-18:00 *Public to Private* book launch (with Philippe Capart) and *Issue Zero* exhibition visit with a small reception

### Virtual asynchronous session

Papers will be recorded and made available to the conference participants soon. No live interaction is possible due to the configuration of the conference venue.

- *For Children, Against Western Comics* – Paola Bonifazio (The University of Texas at Austin)
- *Educational, entertaining, and aesthetic in the Vietnamese children's comic "Than Dong Dat Viet"* – Bui Thi Thanh Mai (Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies)

# Book of abstracts

## Keynote

*Re-Centering Children in Comics* – Carol Tilley (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

### Biographical Note

**Carol Tilley** is associate professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She teaches courses in comics reader's advisory, media literacy, and youth services librarianship. Her scholarship focuses on the intersection of young people, comics, and libraries, particularly in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. Tilley's comics research has been featured in the *New York Times*, BoingBoing, WNYC's *Takeaway*, and other media outlets. A frequent speaker at academic conferences as well as popular comics events, Tilley has served as an Eisner Award judge (2016) and president of the Comics Studies Society (2018-2019).

## Session 1. *Children's Comics and Identity Politics* – Chair: Margot Renard (Ghent University)

*Topolino beyond Comics: Construction of a Magazine Identity and Children's Contents from the 1960s to the 2010s* – Benedetta D'Incau (University of Tours)

When thinking of the Italian Comics for Children, it is impossible to avoid mentioning the magazine *Topolino*, the weekly Disney Comics publication dating back to the early 30s and still in activity to this day. *Topolino* has not only been the leading magazine of its kind, but has also been able to place itself as central in the Italian readers' experience, since it is commonly perceived as the "to-go" publication to begin with in the early stages of one's literary (and literacy) education. For this reason, *Topolino* has also played a major role in the construction of the Italian Comics artist community, since it was and is the reading starting point of most Comics artists and critics, that has influenced generations of readers. From a very early stage, *Topolino* has shifted from a mere collector of Disney Comics from overseas to a "Made in Italy" anthology of Comics stories, as well as a publication destined to be read and consumed by kids. Articles and columns, which intertwined the stories, are not just secondary intervention or advertisements, but have rather become an inherent part of *Topolino's* pages, meant both to familiarize the kids with adult magazine's readings and to create a sense of belonging and homogeneity through the Italian peninsula. Indeed, the necessity of producing a publication to be sold in a rather diversified (both culturally and economically) country, implied the creation of a neutral platform of entertainment, that could reach instinctively children from any background. Furthermore, these kind of contents are an expression of their time, meant to track the latest trends, news and habits of which the young public were creators and recipients. Like a prism, it is thus possible to read and comprehend the contemporary issues and point of interests that were perceived as central, as well as compare how the publication has adapted itself and found ways to be more attractive and compatible to the tastes and needs of its young public. The aim of the contribution is to collect five *Topolino* Comics from each decade, moving from the 1960s to the 2020s, and to compare all contents other than Comics (advertisements, game reviews, articles, columns...). Special attention will be brought in order to define the target of these contents, as well as gendered or non-gendered publications and advertisements, the language adopted, and the subject explored through the years by the contributors. The presence of Comics characters outside the comics stories, as well as their role in the paratextual contents, is also going to be explored. Since these contents are meant to embody the contemporary Italian children's culture of their time, which they also have contributed to enhance and valorize, it is going to be possible to describe the means through which this culture shaped itself, in what ways it is seen to be changing and what has been instead preserved to nowadays.

### Biographical Note

**Benedetta D'Incau** is a PhD student, currently researching "The evolution of the female character in the Italian Comics, 1960-2000" in the University of Tours and Ca' Foscari University in Venice. She has earned a License Degree in Modern Italian Literature at Ca' Foscari University (2018), with a thesis on autobiographic writings in Italian Comics, as well as a Master Degree in Italian Studies at the Alma Mater University of Bologna (2020), with a thesis on the international influences in the comics production of Andrea Pazienza. She collaborates on a monthly basis with the Italian cultural revue *Nova Charta*, curating the comics section. She is also a comics author known as BeneDi, who published her first graphic novel "Il Racconto della Rocca" in May 2023 with Coconino Press.

*Between "chinos" and "palomillas": Comics, Race and Childhood in Colombia and Peru (1920-1940)* – Maria Elena Bedoya Hidalgo (The University of Manchester)

In this talk, I am interested in analysing two children's comic strip characters: Mojicón and Pedrito. I have worked in depth with the comics *Para los niños Mojicón*, published in *Mundo al Día* in Bogotá (1924-1938), and *Pedrito, el indiecito estudiante*, published in *Palomilla, revista peruana para niños* in Lima during the 1940s. In both publications, I have located the different representations of racialised childhoods in their urban displays, as well as the links with the urban and social context in which their lives unfold in the adult world. These characters are in tune with each other in many respects. Despite the geographical distance that separates them, the former in Bogotá and the latter in Lima, what interests me are the connections that can be established between them in terms of characterisation, mobility and racial and gender representations.

For this particular occasion, I have chosen a few details from each of the comics to elaborate my analysis and make some connections that I am interested in developing around the theme of race and racism in these countries. These characters, Mojicón and Pedrito, have been recognised by the historiography of both countries as milestones in the history of local comics. Both children move in and out of environments considered urban. They are also pejoratively referred to with terms such as "chinos" or "palomillas" associated with their subhuman and/or racialised childhood "nature". These terms are linked to street life or to mischief, scams and gangs. Although these children have a picturesque character in some literary images of the period, in this paper I take the opposite stance. I argue that they are part of a moral project of adultcentrism linked to education and the white-mestizo (mixed-race) order and the promotion of eugenics in the cities of the first half of the twentieth century.

### Biographical Note

**Maria Elena Bedoya Hidalgo** is a historian and independent curator. She is currently a postdoctoral research associate with the [Comics and Race in Latin America](#) project at the University of Manchester, UK. She holds a PhD from the Society and Culture Program at the University of Barcelona, Spain and a Master's degree in Latin American Studies from the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, Ecuador. She has curated several projects combining historical curatorship and contemporary art. Her latest curatorial project combined working with historical archives and developing stories in [fanzine](#) format for young audiences. She has worked on several [exhibitions](#) of [visual arts](#) and [material culture](#) in Ecuador and Spain. Her latest book is entitled [Antiquities and Nation: Collecting Pre-Columbian Objects and Musealisation in the Andes 1892-1915](#) (2021). In addition, she is co-editing a book on *Public History, Memory and Digital Communities* in Latin America and another on *Museums and Public History* in Latin America, both to be launched in 2023. Currently, she is participating in the curatorship of the online exhibition on comics in Latin America, one of the products of her postdoctoral project.

## Session 2. *Children's Comics and Dictatorship* – Chair: Michel De Dobbeleer (Ghent University/KU Leuven)

### **Mikros Iros, 1953-1968: Stories of Young Orphans in the Service of National Reconciliation** – Effie Amilitou (University Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle)

Using a cultural history, discourse analysis and visual culture approach, I propose to study the illustrated short stories (798 issues), which later take the form of a 64 issues comic book, published between 1953 and 1968 in Greece. More precisely, Mikros Iros (= "little hero", or "young hero" in greek) first appeared as a 36-page weekly illustrated booklet, with half- or full-page images in black and white and colored covers, to become, after problems related to the censorship imposed by the dictatorship in 1968, a publication in the form of comics alternating color and black and white pages.

It is the story of the patriotic acts of the protagonist, 13-year-old Giorgos Thalassis, and his companions Katerina and Spithas, who are the same age as him and are surrounded by a dozen recurring characters of younger children. The action takes place in Greece, during the German occupation of 1941-1944, a few years before the publication of the first issue in 1953, and just before the beginning of the conflict that led to the civil war of 1946-1949. The interest of this publication consists in a reworking of the memory of the Greek Resistance during the Second World War, as well as in the omission of political events that could hinder the narrative of national reconciliation and resilience. By placing the resistance in the hands of a child and his friends, endowed with superhero power and without political affiliation, just inspired by the innocence of childhood and a pure sense of patriotic heroism, the author and editor Stelios Anemodouras wanted to offer a narrative that could make people forget the trauma of the national discord. The children's characters, who are all orphans without any adult protective figure other than the soldiers who entrust them with missions all over the world, becomes the symbol of a reconciled nation, feeding the legend of the national agreement and the union of the country in the face of the common enemy, namely Italian fascism and German Nazism.

I propose to study the following points in particular:

- The influences of Italian and American children's comics, both in terms of storytelling and graphic design. How classic superheroes, such as Tarzan, are adapted to serve the post-war national project? What image of childhood is conveyed, through which international and national filters does it pass, how does the reception and local adaptation of the great classics create a new, successful and deeply Greek product?
- The history: key events of the war years but also of the 1950s and 1960s presented from a child's point of view and consequently "purified" in a kind of national catharsis that reworks the memory of a particularly bloody civil war.
- The success of the paper and its readers, which became more and more adult, especially during the reissues of the 1970s, 1980s and 2000s, since Mikros Iros enjoys recognition that politically shifts from the left in the 1970s to the right since the 1980s.

### Biographical Note

**Effie Amilitou**, agrégée de lettres classiques, holds a PhD in general and comparative literature (Université Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle, dir. Philippe Hamon), and is currently a PhD student in the history of the fashion press (Université Paris 1-Pathéon Sorbonne, dir. Bertrand Tillier). Her research interests concern twentieth-century European press and literature, discourse analysis, visual culture, cultural history, and media culture. She has taught Greek and French literature, rhetoric and argumentation at Université de Nice, Université de Strasbourg, Université de Lille, Paris 3-Sorbonne nouvelle, UVSQ, and UPEC.

### ***A Model Childhood – For Boys and/or Girls. Czech Comic Series about Two Schoolkids from Late 1930s and Early 1940s – Pavel Korínek (Czech Academy of Sciences) and Lucie Korínková (Czech Academy of Sciences)***

The magazine *Punt'a*, published between 1935 and 1942 by the Prague based publishing house Rodina (Family), was one of the most prominent publishing platforms for children's comics at the time in Czechoslovakia. Commercially oriented, Disney inspired and rather rejected by the Czech didactic critique of the time, the bi-weekly magazine provided space for humoristic, adventure and fairy tale comics, whose protagonists were usually anthropomorphized animals (titular *Punt'a the Dog*) or supernatural creatures. One of the magazine's most extensive series, however, differed from this rule: the series *Růda a Slávinka*, scripted by the editorial writers (Marie Voříšková, Julie Kaublová, Blanka Svačinová) and drawn by the future famous Czech animator Hermína Týrlová, brought little stories about a couple of childhood friends.

The almost consistently episodic series *Růda a Slávinka* (1938-1941, 94 pages) brings stories full of children's everyday life, the small adventures of the school year, and as such the series lacks any significant drama, fully realised story-arcs or significant plot twists. Better than the other series printed in the magazine, however, it reflects contemporary Czech - and editorial - ideas of a "healthy" childhood, which form the ideological framework from which the entire magazine - as evidenced by various editorial texts - grew. Printed in the turbulent years of major socio-political transformations (its publication spans the First Czechoslovak Republic, the Second Czechoslovak Republic and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia), the series remained apolitical in its basic boundaries; however, a shift from cosmopolitanism to domesticity can be identified throughout the magazine and uncertainties of its time occasionally flash through an idealized image of a carefree childhood (as in the episode when Slávinka tries on a gas mask).

In our paper, we will focus on how the *Růda a Slávinka* series reflects the editorial ideological beliefs about "correct", "proper" and "joyful" childhood, how these are modelled in the episodes and how these beliefs are differentiated in relation to the gender difference of the two main protagonists. Different and sometimes even competing conceptions of childhood, related to the concepts of boyhood and girlhood, are from time to time explicitly formulated in the magazine; in the case of serialized illustrated prose, the editors were in the habit of offering an explicit gender and age dedication. The *Růda a Slávinka* series does not carry such a direct designation, but its different, "realistic" conceptualization stands out from the comparison with other *Punt'a* magazine series. This fact brings it - through its mostly everyday stories anchored in our "actual world" - closer to the editorial ideas of content "for girls". The analysis of the series, its stories and the norms of behaviour depicted will be confronted with other materials from the magazine and with the contemporary discourse of Czech criticism of literature for children, as well as with other contemporary comics of Czech and foreign provenance.

#### **Biographical Notes**

**Pavel Kořínek** is a Prague-based comics theorist, historian, and journalist, working at the Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences, and a founding member of the Centre for the Study of Comics ICL / UP and Czech Academy of Comics. As a researcher, he has written and co-written a number of monographs on Czech comics history and theory (f.e. *Dějiny československého komiksu 20. století / History of Czechoslovak Comics of the 20th Century, V panelech a bublinách. Kapitoly z teorie komiksu / In Panels and Speech Balloons: Chapters from the Theory of Comics, Punt'a: Zapomenutý hrdina českého komiksu 1934–1942 / Punt'a: The Forgotten Hero of Czech Comics 1934–1942*).

**Lucie Kořínková** is a Prague-based literary historian, working at the Institute of Czech Literature, Czech Academy of Sciences. As a researcher, she has written and co-written papers and books on early 20th Century Czech literature and editorial practice. Together with Pavel Kořínek, she produced a monograph *Punt'a: Zapomenutý hrdina českého komiksu 1934–1942 / Punt'a: The Forgotten Hero of Czech Comics 1934–1942*.

### **Session 3. *Constructing Children's Comics Magazines* – Chair: Kees Ribbens (NIOD/Erasmus University Rotterdam)**

#### ***Stories and Pictures for Boys and Girls: Identifying the Child Reader in Pre-War British Comics* – Michael Connerty (IADT Dún Laoghaire)**

In the UK, the notion of the 'children's comic' as a distinct publishing category emerged at the very beginning of the twentieth century, following a decade during which comics sought to appeal to a general readership that transcended the boundaries of class, gender- and age. Both *Puck* (1904-1940) and *The Children's Fairy* (1920-21) were published by Amalgamated Press during a period when Alfred Harmsworth was diversifying his popular print output to appeal to a range of specific groups. This paper seeks to examine the ways in which the juvenile readership was conceived and catered for, and how engagement with the comics medium was fostered during these years. If there appear not to be many obvious formal differences, in what way does it make sense to distinguish the comics produced for this demographic from the more generalized titles that preceded them?

The emerging comics for younger readers emphasized anthropomorphic animal protagonists and fantastical whimsy, in both cases drawing on conventions already established in illustrated picture books and the visual culture of the Victorian nursery. Editorial features were underpinned by the kind of moral instruction, including references to religious teaching, that also characterized many of these sources. Some of the additional elements that had featured in the pan-generational comics, such as readers' clubs, competitions, games, and literary serials, were readily adapted for the new titles, along with interactive 'make-and-do' features that aligned the comics with the world of toys and commodity culture. Up to this point comic narratives had been dominated by a cast of characters borrowed from the popular stage, whose adventures took place within the quotidian confines of the working class urban environment. Children's series like Julius Baker's *Babs and Bobs and the Little People who Live under the Ground* and Herbert Powell's *Merry Merlin* thus marked a departure that, arguably, more fully exploited the visual potentials

of the evolving medium. It is possible to detect the emergence of a specific visual style oriented towards this new readership, not least in the fact that these were among the first British titles to feature pages in full colour.

#### **Biographical Note**

**Michael Connerty** is Co-Chair of the Animation programme at the National Film School (IADT) in Dublin where he teaches film and animation history and visual culture. His monograph *The Comic Strip Art of Jack B. Yeats* was published by Palgrave MacMillan in 2021.

#### ***Becoming a Comics Magazine: Lisette and the Disappearance of illustrés for Girls* – Nicolas Labarre (Bordeaux-Montaigne University)**

Launched in 1921, *Lisette* was a successful example of the illustrated magazines offering young girls a mix of fiction (illustrated stories, short stories and comics), social prescriptions and star culture. By the late 1950s, these illustrated magazines – for boys and girls – as well as the formula of traditional young girl magazines, often aligned with catholic teachings, were on the verge of obsolescence. New sentimental or star-oriented magazines for teenagers (*20 ans*, launched in 1961, *Salut les copains*, 1962), as well as existing magazines like *Fillette jeune fille*, moved away from fiction and illustration, and many titles simply disappeared in these years.

*Lisette* survived until 1973, long after its historical competitors. However, while it had remained more or less unchanged between 1921 and 1952 (minus a 4-year interruption during WW2), it underwent profound changes in its final 15 to 20 years. It moved away from the format of the illustrated magazine and embraced comics, albeit reluctantly, and gradually increased the space afforded to media culture and stardom. This presentation will examine the illustrated content and its paratext in the last 15 years of the magazine, from 1959 to 1974 (further research may lead me to adjust these boundaries), and seek to examine the historical shift from an *illustré* to a comics magazine in the context of rapid changes both in youth culture and in comics culture.

#### **Biographical Note**

**Nicolas Labarre** is professor of American civilisation at Bordeaux Montaigne University. His research focuses on North American comics, particularly through the prism of the question of adaptation. He is the author of *Heavy Metal, l'autre Métal Hurlant* (PUB, 2017) and *Understanding Genres in Comics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

#### **Session 4. Children's Magazines and Visual Culture – Chair: Giorgio Busi Rizzi (Ghent University)**

##### ***An Emerging Audience. Comics for Kids and the Popular Illustrated Press in Interwar Belgium* – Benoît Crucifix (KU Leuven-KBR)**

Before comics became the main crucible to market and rebrand children's periodicals in the mid-1930s and postwar period (Crépin 2001), comics in Belgium were produced, circulated, and read in a variety of forms and contexts, mostly in the margins of the popular press. The emergence of Hergé's *Tintin* in the pages of *Le Petit Vingtième* would of course dramatically influence the media landscape for decades to come. This paper proposes to return to the period of the interbellum in Belgium to interrogate the development of comics for children within 'general audience' magazines, working from the corpus of the Belgian illustrated press in the interbellum recently digitized as part of the ARTPRESSE project. Most of these publishers would in the late 1930s develop periodicals specifically catered to children, often in both French and Dutch: Dupuis launched *Spirou* and *Robbedoes*, Meuwissen *Brava*, and De Standaard *Ons Volkske*. To do so, they often relied on 'in-house' cartoonists who had already been producing drawings, illustrations, covers, cartoons and all sorts of graphic works for their previous magazines. The point of this paper will be less to study the careers of these cartoonists than to interrogate the function and role of comics, cartoons, drawn gags in the general audience illustrated press of the 1920s and 1930s, in its connection to children audiences. How did these adult magazines segment their contents, singling out certain sections specifically for children? What place did comics take in the illustrated press? Which continuities can be established with the later development of children's illustrated periodicals?

#### **Biographical Note**

**Benoît Crucifix** is assistant professor of cultural studies at KU Leuven and researcher at the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), where he works on the collections of print popular culture. He has worked on the American graphic novel and comics heritage and on the intersections of children's drawings and comics culture. He is the author of *Drawing from the Archives: Comics Memory in the Contemporary Graphic Novel* (2023) and has coedited *Comics Memory: Archives and Styles* (2018) and *Abstraction and Comics* (2019).

##### ***From 'Kid Click' to 'Camera-Mad Carol': Imagining and Representing the Child Photographer in Mid-Century American and British Comics* – Anabella Pollen (University of Brighton)**

In 1944, the US Camera Company, the force behind one of the largest circulation camera guidance magazines, launched *Camera Comics*. Aimed at children, the comic combined adventurous strips of fictional hero photographers, from 'Bob Scott: Crash Photographer' in the US Navy to 'Linda Lens: Ace Woman Photographer' whose photojournalism covered international revolutions and violent crime scenes closer to home. In a war context, the aerial camera was at the centre of comic stories about aerial bombardment, while the American detective camera vanquished,



through photographic proof, the cunning wiles of the crudely yellow-faced Japanese enemy. At the heart of every ten-cent issue was 'Kid Click', a blonde teen 'shutterbug' whose camera helped him overcome bullies at summer camp, to uncover Nazi spy rings and to bring armed robbers to justice as an amateur reporter. The character, drawn by Bob Oksner, provided a neat segue to the pages of *Camera Comics* that offered photographic guidance for children, including tips for building camera gadgets at home and winning school photo competitions. Photographs by children – real-life Kid Clicks – abutted Kodak ads aimed at teens. From 1944-46, *Camera Comics* addressed American child photographers and imagined their potential, while pressing patriotic and commercial messages home.

On the other side of the Atlantic, British mid-century attitudes to cheap American literature for children were marked by anxieties about cultural imperialism and juvenile delinquency. As Mel Gibson (2015) summarises it, American comic values were seen as "gauche, crass and commercial". George Orwell's 1940 account of British "Boys' Weeklies" found a staid moral universe in children's leisure reading, markedly distant from the "cynicism and corruption" of "Yank Mags". He observed that "boys at certain ages find it necessary to read about Martians, death-rays, grizzly bears and gangsters". They found what they want in British weeklies to some extent, but "they get it wrapped up in the illusions which their future employers think suitable for them". Girls, too, got periodicals marked by adult British moral codes; emerging post-war girls' comics included adventure stories moderated by restraining messages about friendship etiquette and appropriate school behaviour. Yet, in these stories, the camera appears again as a central narrative device, in strips such as 'Snapshot Susie' and 'Camera-Mad Carol' where girl heroines seize the means of cultural production to snap trespassers and capture thieves. Through photography, camera characters bring justice and prove their worth to those who doubt their gendered and childish capacities. Along the way, they are trained for future fantasy photographic careers, in the air, underwater, and in the fashion studio, while in the intervening pages, child readers submit photos for competition and win camera prizes.

This presentation argues that the child photographer, as seen in post-war comic pages, reveals much of authors' and editors' gendered and nationalistic expectations of both children and photography. Depending on their context, cameras in children's comic strips are variously tools for violence and conquest, paralleling weaponry and surveillance devices, or they operate as metaphorical moral compasses for personal development, decency and altruism. When triangulated with the camera promotions and with children's photographs on parallel pages, comics offer a productive space for understanding, side-by-side, the mediation of children's worlds and children's media production.

#### **Biographical Note**

**Annebella Pollen** is Professor of Visual and Material Culture at University of Brighton, UK. She is the author or editor of seven books covering histories of art, design, fashion and photography. In 2021 she was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize, which she is using to prepare a new book and exhibition on the history of photography by children since c.1900.

### **Session 5. *Comics Narration and Childishness* – Chair: Lukas Etter (Siegen University)**

#### ***Bathroom Words: Interactivity and the Graphic Narratives of Keller Roberts* – Shiamin Kwa (Bryn Mawr College)**

Keller Roberts trained as a fine artist with a bachelor in fine arts from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and an MFA from Northwestern University, specializing in painting. Alongside painting, she has also made a substantial body of critically-acclaimed autobiographical comics that detail the everyday experiences of domestic life that involve excursions to the store, walking her dog, and cleaning her house. The stories are humorous even when they confront very grown-up issues such as the death of her grandfather or her struggles with her multiple sclerosis diagnosis. Unlike many graphic narratives in the memoir genre, her pages are collated into books that are oneiric in their evasion of chronology and continuity. Sequences are not dated, and are untitled, so that they simply follow from each other consecutively. Dimensionality is withheld within the frames: little shading exists to suggest a light source. They transition from one incident to another without comment or signposting. A story about a visit to the OB-GYN office will be followed with a short comic that starts in an art classroom and moves to ruminations about her deteriorating short-term memory. As a reading experience, the shifts are strange and unexpected, and yet they are a casual reminder that this is how our everyday lives evolve as well—little moments that are memorable glistening between the forgotten spaces that constitute getting from morning to night. They are also how the child activity book is formatted: shifting register and experience from page to page. The reader becomes accustomed to this cluster of brief narratives that vary in length and form, which Roberts has likened to walking through a room full of paintings. Each person pieces these individual parts together as active labor towards creating their own experience.

This paper examines how Roberts elides the form of comics to blur the borders between childish activity books given to children as a counterpoint to so-called grown up graphic novel forms. Like these activity books, her comics reject signposting paratexts such as chapter titles or other identifying information; panels are drawn with spareness and unvarying line thickness that is familiar to the coloring book; comics, like those activity books, are printed on cheap paper with unfussy bindings. These comics offer an inversion of the museum visit where the viewer has to travel to a collection, and walk through long galleries from piece to piece. The comic book brings the artwork to the reader, delivering the same experience of narrative conjuring but at a close and intimate level. This paper asks how this unfettered and childish structure might contribute to our broader understanding of the interactivity of reading, drawing attention to inter-activity in its many functions, and highlighting the implicit call to effortless mastery that this kind of childlike inter-activity may provide.

#### **Biographical Note**

**Shiamin Kwa** is a graduate of Dartmouth College (AB) and Harvard University (MA, PhD). She teaches at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, USA, where she is Chair of East Asian Languages and Cultures and Chair of Comparative Literature. Her book *Regarding Frames: Thinking with*

*Comics in the Twenty-first Century* was published by RIT Press in 2020. A new book on the subject of reproduction and comics, *Perfect Copies: Reproduction and Contemporary Comics*, will be published in January 2023 by Rutgers University Press.

### ***Embodying and Estranging Childhood Perspective through Childlike Graphiation: The Gull Yettin by Joe Kessler – Rodolfo Dal Canto (University of L'Aquila)***

Joe Kessler's comic book *The Gull Yettin* (L'Association 2022) offers a symbolic and allegorical account of a child protagonist going through, and trying to overcome traumatic events. Hybridizing the fantastic, the *Bildungsroman* and the travel narrative, *The Gull Yettin* relies on the disturbing figure of an anthropomorphic, shape-shifting seagull as the protagonist's sidekick and main driving force of the story. The consistent presence of similar uncanny elements leaves no doubt that the work, which is without dialogues and words, is intended for an adult audience. At the same time, while the book's representation modes intricately oscillate between mimetic realism and abstraction, its graphic style clearly mimics that of children's drawings.

In light of these premises, this talk proposes a close reading of Kessler's comic along two main lines: a thematic one, in which the content of the story will be analyzed, referring both to the events that characterize this coming-of-age tale and to the presence of the seagull, a mysterious figure who plays different roles within the story. The second line of analysis is stylistic, certainly the most complex and layered aspect of the text. While addressing an adult audience, the author chooses a drawing style that explicitly references childish graphiation: stylized figures, lacking graphic consistence between different panels; the use of marker pens for both lines and texture; a limited palette with very bright and unrealistic colors that often bleed out of their edges; a quick and (apparently) spontaneous drawing gesture. The use of this type of drawing in an adult comic inevitably produces estrangement, further stressed by relying on heterogeneous styles, from the more realistic to the abstract. Simulating the graphiation of a child means visually embodying their perspective, hence positioning the reader close to the perception of the protagonist of the story. Within an adult comic book, such a perspective produces a short-circuit that influences the reading experience: in fact, the child's gaze emerges not from narrative devices of identification or strictly from ocularization, but from the graphic style, giving the impression of reading events as if they were told by a child through their drawings.

A further level of reading concerns the intersection of visual elements and plot progression. The repetition of certain recognizable figures, the absence of a precise spatial and temporal context, and the different allegorical and symbolic elements, seem to recreate the way the child mind would process and emplot traumatic events. This network of signifiers hence reverberates the childhood perspective communicated by the drawing, giving it greater depth and complexity.

This paper will analyze the interplay and intersections between these elements, showing how Kessler's *The Gull Yettin* engages with a perspective as complex, mysterious, and layered as that of childhood.

#### **Biographical Note**

**Rodolfo Dal Canto** is PhD student at the University of L'Aquila, with a project investigating the precariousness and the absence of future in contemporary Italian comics production through the Derridean notion of *hauntology*. He graduated in Italian Studies at the University of Bologna with a thesis on the comics narrative of urban transformation processes. He is an editor for the website «Lo Spazio Bianco» and the magazine «Le sabbie di Marte». He is interested in comics studies, cultural studies, literary criticism, spectrality and hauntology.

### **Session 6 (parallel sessions). *Roundtable: Manifestations of Child(ish)ness* – Moderator: Dragana Radanovic (LUCA School of Arts/KU Leuven)**

#### ***Manifestations of Child(ish)ness* – Eva Van de Wiele (Ghent University), Emma-Louise Silva (University of Antwerp), Frauke Pauwels (University of Antwerp)**

This roundtable explores different formats of children's literature to discuss manifestations of child(ish)ness through the theoretical prisms of Robin Bernstein, Hannah Field, Peter Hollindale, and Emma Uprichard.

The format of the serially produced comics magazine for children is studied as a "scriptive thing" (applying Bernstein's theory) and as a "moveable" object to "play" with (based on Field's study). While Bernstein used children's toys and Field studied priceless picture books, Van de Wiele will apply their insights to three contemporary children's magazines from Germany, France and Belgium: *Polle*, *Biscoto* and *Cuistax*. Pauwels uses the lense of "childness", coined by Hollindale and further discussed by a.o. David Rudd, to look at the way comics are integrated in the oeuvre of Edward van de Vendel and Joke van Leeuwen.

Why and how is this medium used to reach out to particular age groups? Silva focuses on the graphic novel *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf* by David Almond, which features sequential artwork by Dave McKean. The story recounts the experiences of three siblings who experiment with being and becoming, one of the central arguments that features in Uprichard's approach to children, childhood, and temporality. *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf* raises pertinent questions when it comes to the (dis)connections that can be made between child(ish)ness and experiences thereof across the lifespan. In sum, this round table aims to generate new understandings of the term child(ish)ness by zooming in on the ways in which it manifests itself in children's literature.

#### **Biographical Notes**

**Frauke Pauwels** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Antwerp, Belgium. As part of the project 'Constructing Age for Young Readers', she studies adaptations of Dutch children's books. In her doctoral dissertation she explored the representation of scientists and technologists in contemporary fictional and nonfictional children's literature. She has published in several journals, such as *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and *De Spiegel der Letteren*.

**Emma-Louise Silva** is a postdoctoral researcher aboard the ERC-project 'Constructing Age for Young Readers', led by Vanessa Joosen. Focusing on age studies, cognitive narratology, genetic criticism, and philosophy of mind, her research has been published in the *European Journal of Life Writing* and in *Age, Culture, Humanities*. She combines this role with a lecturing position at the University of Antwerp, where she teaches the 'Joyce Seminar'. As a member of the Centre for Manuscript Genetics, Emma-Louise defended her PhD on James Joyce and cognition in 2019 and has co-edited volumes and published on an array of Joyce-related subjects.

**Eva Van de Wiele** is postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Literary Studies at Ghent University, and a guest lecturer at LUCA School of Arts Brussels. Her most recent projects within the ERC project COMICS are an edited volume on Girlhood in Comics (Leuven University Press) and a doctoral dissertation on transnational spread in early-twentieth century children's comics magazines *Corriere dei Piccoli* (Italy) and *TBO* (Spain). She is currently working on how children's periodicals of the 1930s to 1960s from the [Alain Van Passen Collection](#), demanded active rather than passive readers. She researches the scripting of child readers in special DIY and game sections of the children's comics magazines.

## **Session 6 (parallel sessions). *Immersion in French Youth Magazines: Insights from the Van Passen Collection* – Chair: Laurence Grove (University of Glasgow)**

### ***Hidden Secret Papers: Boy's Own Adventures in the French Indochina War* – Hugo Frey (University of Chichester)**

This paper explores the military adventure comics set in the French war in Indochina (1945-1954). It is based on substantial research from the Van Passen Collection and will use previously undiscussed adventure comics set in Indochina during the conduct of the catastrophic war of decolonization. Reading the comics as children's literature (boy's own adventure stories) helps better understand the corpus and allows a greater focus on a forgotten ideological formation in the comics. Thus, recurrently I will identify a subtle linking theme in the works: the narrative trope of 'missing secret papers' or 'lost documentation'. This facilitates a discussion about the role of secrets, lost treasure and lost inheritance, in these Indochina comics that also implicitly speaks of French anxiety at losing colonial power, in Indochina a case in point since in fact 1940 and the limited French defence against Japanese power.

#### **Biographical Note**

**Hugo Frey** is Professor of Cultural and Visual History and Director of the Institute of Arts and Humanities at the University of Chichester, UK. His research work focuses on twentieth century France and Francophone Europe with special emphasis on the politics of visual culture. He is the author of monographs on *Louis Malle* (Manchester University Press, 2004) and *Nationalism and the Cinema in France* (Berghahn, 2014). With Jan Baetens, he is the author of *The Graphic Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and one of the editors of *The Cambridge History of the Graphic Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

### ***A year in the Van Passen Collection: 1937 in the French Youth Press* – Benoît Glaude (Ghent University)**

This conference is based on an original research, which consists in studying one year exhaustively through the whole Van Passen Collection. The choice of 1937 was made for various reasons. On the one hand, it is, along with 1938 and 1939, the year of the 1930s best represented in the VPC, with 18 different magazines. The pre-war period was a time of effervescence for the youth press in France, nevertheless constituting a period with a certain coherence, between the launch of the *Journal de Mickey* (October 21, 1934) and the establishment of the Vichy regime (July 10, 1940). On the other hand, 1937 is a well-known year in the history of the youth press, thanks to the pamphlet *Ce que lisent vos enfants* (1938) by the communist Georges Sadoul, and to the perpetual list of children's magazines established by the Catholic critical bulletin *Revue des lectures*.

The collection will be scanned with three research questions in mind. (1) Is the content of the VPC representative of the French youth press in 1937? (2) What does a quantitative and comparative survey of the magazines' contents tell us? In particular, what do we learn about readers from each magazine? What impact did the socio-political context of the Popular Front have on the 1937 children's press? (3) What place did 1937 receive in *Ran Tan Plan* (1966-1978), a comics critical fanzine in which Alain Van Passen (b. 1941) played an active part?

#### **Biographical Note**

**Benoît Glaude** is a researcher at UGent and a visiting lecturer at UCLouvain, Belgium. He has published several books about French-speaking comics, including his PhD on comics dialogues (*La Bande dialoguée*, Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2019), as well as books on novelization (*Les Novellisations pour la jeunesse*, coedited with Laurent Déom, Academia, 2020; and *Comics and novelization: a literary history of bandes dessinées*, Routledge, 2023). He is preparing an essay on audio adaptations of comics (*Écouter la bande dessinée*, to be published by Impressions nouvelles) and a dossier for the magazine *Comicalités* on [Comics aloud](#), coedited with Ian Hague.

## ***When War Seems Inevitable – Francophone Comic Magazines 1938-1940* – Kees Ribbens (NIOD/KNAW and Erasmus University Rotterdam)**

There was a vivid and varied media landscape in the Francophone world in the late 1930s when it came to magazines that gave considerable exposure to comic strips. Many of the French and Belgian titles that devoted an important share to publishing comic strips, usually as weekly installments of longer running stories, were aimed at a readership of children. They enjoyed the often colorful content on a regular basis but, after reading these magazine issues, preserving those already consumed was probably not a high priority. Partly because of this, comic magazines from this decade are relatively scarce. Consequently, the presence of complete volumes in public and academic libraries is limited. In some cases, collectors hold more extensive collections, but then the accessibility of such magazines to researchers is dependent on personal friendships. Thanks to the acquisition by the Ghent University Library of the abundant Van Passen collection, this source material is now available for research purposes.

During a research stay at Ghent University in November 2022, I could familiarise myself with this comic book heritage. My central question is how these publications aimed at a youthful readership reflected the rising political and military tensions on the eve of World War II. To this end, I focus on a selection of six titles whose 1938, 1939 and 1940 volumes I have studied. This period saw the international expansion of Nazi Germany take shape following the annexation of Austria, the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia, the invasion of Poland and subsequently the invasion of France and Belgium.

Although in principle the editors of these comic magazines had no journalistic ambition to chronicle current political and social affairs, their content was influenced by recent developments. The circumstances of the time, the political orientation of the editors/publishers, the mobilization of contributors, and possible censorship by national governments left their mark in the choice of topics and narratives shown and in the way the changing political reality implicitly or explicitly permeated the content (and form) of these magazines. The fact that magazines mostly operated within a specific national framework while their content sometimes came from abroad may also have played a role.

By means of a qualitative content analysis of these magazines, I want to gain insight into the extent to which these magazines changed and adopted to wartime conditions. Thereby I try to find out how comic magazines between 1938 and 1940 may have increased their readers' awareness of the drastically changed political and military circumstances by culturally mobilizing them or whether they more or less tried to distract this young audience from this harsh reality.

### **Biographical Note**

**Kees Ribbens** is a senior researcher at NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies and endowed professor of 'Popular historical culture of Global Conflicts and Mass Violence' at Erasmus University Rotterdam. His interest is in how memories of war, genocide and mass violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are represented in words and images. More generally, he looks at how individuals, groups and societies relate to these histories. He is fascinated by the ways in which the Second World War is given meaning, represented and appropriated, each time anew, across various communities, in particular in comics.

## **Session 7. *Excavating Comics Childhoods* – Chair: Ian Horton (University of the Arts London)**

### ***Childhood Memories in Comic Books: An (Auto)ethnographic Investigation of Comics Reading* – Aseel Qazzaz (Carleton University) and Benjamin Woo (Carleton University)**

Although much has been done by publishers, creators, fans, and scholars to rehabilitate comic books' reputation for childishness, many readers still have their first and formative encounters with graphic narrative as children (Pizzino 2016; Williams 2020; Cedeira Serantes 2019). Consequently, even if comics aren't *just* for kids anymore, childhood still looms large in both individual and collective imaginaries of the comic book. Comics are enmeshed in familial reading cultures, relationships with siblings, peers and schooling, and identity formation, and these early experiences with comics are retrospectively reconstructed as "origin stories" for fan practices in later life.

Building on Mel Gibson's (2008; 2015; 2019) pioneering studies of British women's memories of reading comics as children in the 1950s and '60s, the Research on Comics, Con Events, and Transmedia (RoCCET) Lab launched the Comic Book Memories project to investigate how people's relationships to comic-book reading changed over the life course (Harrington and Bielby 2010). We invited current and former readers to complete a questionnaire, and follow-up interviews were scheduled with approximately 60 of the 432 respondents. As part of the questionnaire, participants were asked to name the most significant comics they remembered reading in each decade of their "careers" as readers, assembling a skeleton "auto-bibliography" (Mackey 2016). Adapting Gibson's (2019) object elicitation technique for virtual interviews, images of comic book covers and pages were presented to interviewees over Zoom to prompt discussions about what they remembered about reading comics at different stages of their life.

Most of the participants interviewed were current comic readers whose experiences date back to childhood. Interviewees' ages ranged from 19 to 69—with the majority at the older end of the spectrum—so interviews not only reflected individual variation but also captured *generationally* distinct experiences of the comics world (Kies and Connor 2022). In this paper, we bring these issues into focus by examining one interview from the Comic Book Memories study in particular: as part of her onboarding onto the project, Qazzaz interviewed Participant 000, i.e., principal investigator Benjamin Woo. Recognizing that there is no generic, universal "childhood" and reflecting on how differences of age, gender, race/ethnicity, and reading history influenced this conversation, we seek to situate ourselves as co-producers of (auto)ethnographic knowledge about childhood comics reading alongside other study participants.

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### Biographical Notes

**Aseel Qazzaz** (she/her/هي) is a first-year PhD student in Communication and Media Studies at Carleton University. She completed an MA in Communication and Media Studies from Carleton University and a BA in Communications Studies from the University of Calgary. Aseel's research interests include race and communication, transnational comics, and audience reception studies. Aseel is also a fellow researcher at the Research on Comics, Con Events, and Transmedia Laboratory (RoCCET Lab).

**Benjamin Woo** (he/him/他) is Associate Professor, Communication & Media Studies, and Associate Dean, Equity & Inclusion, in the Faculty of Public Affairs at Carleton University. He is the author of *Getting a Life: The Social Worlds of Geek Culture*, co-author of *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time: Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*, and co-editor of *The Comics World: Comic Books, Graphic Novels, and Their Publics*, winner of the Comics Studies Society's 2022 prize for Best Edited Book.

### ***The Child in the Archive: Evidence of the Child, Childhood, and Childishness in the Trina Robbins Papers* – John Walsh (Indiana University)**

Millie Collins, created by Ruth Atkinson, was the lead character of the comic book *Millie the Model*, published by Timely/Atlas/Marvel for 207 issues from 1945 to 1973. Millie also featured in a number of spin-off titles, such as *Modelling with Millie* and *Mad About Millie*. After a hiatus of over a decade, Millie returned to comics in the pages of *Misty* #1 in December 1985. *Misty*, featuring Millie's niece Misty Collins, contained all-new material written and drawn by Trina Robbins, famous for her work in underground women's and feminist comics—such as *It Ain't Me Babe* and *Wimmen's Comics*—and for her work on comics history, especially the history of women in comics. A noteworthy feature of the Millie the Model and *Misty* comics is the presence of reader-contributed content, especially fashion designs and paper doll outfits. Readers submitted designs through the mail, and select submissions were then reinterpreted by professional artists in the pages and panels of the comics. Embedded within the panels, gutters, and margins of the comic book page are the names and addresses of the scores of readers, mostly children, who contributed content to the comic.

The short 6-issue *Misty* series is a trove of evidence for studying children and childishness in comics. Robbins saved the original reader correspondence and reader contributions to *Misty*, and these materials are available in the Trina Robbins Collection and Papers at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum at Ohio State University. The collection includes over 1000 correspondence items. A typical item consists of a letter, one or more fashion designs, and the enclosing envelope. The letters were variously addressed to *Misty*, Trina Robbins, Marvel, or Star Comics (the imprint Marvel used in the 1980s for *Misty* and other titles aimed at younger readers). Thus, in the short *Misty* series and the archival collection of reader mail in the Trina Robbins Collection at the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, we find an invaluable resource that allows one to compare original reader correspondence to published letters and reader-contributed content to Robbins' reinterpretations of reader-submitted designs and concepts. Through these letters and drawings, we can explore the readers' relationships with the comics, comics characters, and comics creators; paratextual interactions in letters columns and the embedded credits within the panels; children's roles as readers/consumers, critics, and co-creators of the *Misty* comics; the erasure of childishness as childish drawings are reinterpreted by professional artists; and recollections of childhood from adult readers submitting designs and writing letters. In my presentation I will explore these and other issues and illustrate the discussion with photographs from the archival collection juxtaposed against content found in the pages of *Misty*.

### Biographical Note

**John Walsh** is an Associate Professor of Information and Library Science in the Luddy School of Informatics, Computing, and Engineering at Indiana University and Director of the HathiTrust Research Center. His research applies computational methods to the study of literary and historical documents. Walsh is an editor of digital scholarly editions, including: the Petrarch archive, the Algernon Charles Swinburne Project, and the Chymistry of Isaac Newton. He is the developer of Comic Book Markup Language (CBML), for scholarly encoding of comic books, and TEI Boilerplate, for publishing documents encoded according to the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Guidelines. He is General Editor of *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. His research interests include: computational literary studies, textual studies, book history, 19th-century British literature, and comic books, especially formal, material, and bibliographic aspects of comics and the role of the reader and fan in comics and comic book culture.

## Session 8. *Transitional Frames: Growing Up in Comics* – Chair: Manuela Di Franco (Ghent University)

### *Manga Infantilities: Revisiting Scatological and Sexual Gags* – Jaqueline Berndt (Stockholm University)

This contribution is interested in the in-betweenness, or indeterminacy, posed by corporate manga with respect to the modernist child-adult divide, and the Orientalist twists that have accompanied manga's global spread. Three issues will be interrelated: first, the initial European perception of manga (as distinct from *gekiga*) as childish; second, the initial domestic positioning of manga in postwar Japan as child-oriented graphic narratives, and their increasing combination of lighthearted appearance with serious stories (exemplified by Tezuka Osamu, whose works were not of primary importance for the European "manga boom"); third, the historic upstaging of *kodomo manga* as a genre aimed at elementary school-children in favor of *shōnen*, and *shōjo*, *manga* targeting young teenagers, an age group in-between child and adult. Graphic, or more precisely, multimodal storytelling had been the main marker of childishness, as it merged art forms that were supposed to be neatly separated; public discourse subordinated *story-manga* to newspaper caricatures and comic strips which distinguished themselves as visual art until the once-childish media form seized commercial hegemony within the comics field, gained cross-generational popularity and ultimately also cultural reputation.

The maturation of the gendered genres for minors since the late 1960s has been marked, among other things, by the rise of sexual representation. Sexual representation, however, has often been moderated by humor, embedded in cartoony expressions, cute imagery, newly created onomatopoeia, and an overflow of pictorial runes. In the 1970s and 1980s, when sexual gags abounded, it was primarily in the male domain, and they often ran in parallel with scatological jokes in a way that evokes childishness: while adult readers could indulge nostalgically, the non-serious form offered minors an opportunity to see their interest in adult topics being taken seriously. Thus, the in-betweenness that has been causing problems abroad appears not just to be a matter of target readership; rather, it relates to reader agency, its cultural acknowledgment in the case of minors consuming entertaining graphic fiction, as well as its commercial exploitation by major media corporations. To discuss the respective potentials and limitations, I will take a long-running series from *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, the late-comer flagship of corporate manga, as my main example – Toriyama Akira's *Dr. Slump* (1980–84) – and carve out its characteristics in comparison to the genealogy of so-called gag manga on the one hand, and the role of sexual humor in concurrent *shōjo manga* on the other. Finally, I will reflect on what has changed, and what hasn't, considering the complexity of child protection and child sanitizing in our present moment, and also the ongoing infantilization of manga in European public and academic discourse, which shows, for example, whenever manga narratives are criticized for the lack of clearly articulated political positions, and readers, including minors, are denied the capability to make their own choices.

#### Biographical Note

**Dr. Jaqueline Berndt** is Professor in Japanology at Stockholm University. Her main academic work is on manga as graphic narratives from the perspectives of media aesthetics, new formalism, and materialities. She is the chairperson of the Open Access series *Stockholm Media Arts Japan* (Stockholm UP) and managing co-editor of *Comics Studies: Aesthetics, Histories, Practices* (de Gruyter). Exhibitions directed by her are *Manga Hokusai Manga: Approaching the Master's Compendium from the Perspective of Contemporary Comics* (The Japan Foundation, since 2016), the Nicolas Mahler show *Crossing Borders: Mahler's Manga Park* (Kyoto International Manga Museum, 2015), and *Manga: Reading the Flow* (Museum Rietberg, Zürich, 2021).

### *Becoming Adult: How Teenage Comics Depict and Put into Frames the Transitional State of Growing up* – Florent Perget (University Paris-Sorbonne and STIH)

Throughout fiction, and especially in comic books, children and teenagers are often depicted as adults. Specifically, it seems that they embody adults' behaviours and act like them – the kid detective trope is a common example of such an embodiment, as it dives a children character into a mystery-type narrative that is generally characteristic of adulthood. Those representations mainly play on the discrepancy – whether it serves a comic relief or not – built between young protagonists and what could be called an adult worldview. This presupposes, of course, that children and adults don't share the same perception of the world and, therefore, that this means of expression conveys a deeper meaning.

This is what our communication proposes to study: while portraying young protagonists acting and reproducing adult actions, teenage comics seem to display a generational gap between children and/or teenagers and adults. Therefore, those fictions may represent a creative space where childishness is evolving into adulthood and where children and teenagers learn to reproduce actions specifically perceived as adult. The long history of comics and young readers may then allow us to consider comic books as a privileged space for telling stories about growing up. Not that the comics medium has a better way, in essence, to depict or evoke this idea – but, first of all, due to the fact that it was, and sometimes still is, considered as childish, the medium seems to have an editorial interest for crafting and conveying stories eager to please a children targeted readership; moreover, considering that teenage comics are mostly written and drawn by adults for young readers, they surely are conceived both as a learning process material and as a way, for the author, to reinvest his or her own childhood and teen years to put what characterizes them into frames.

We thereby would like to determine which strategies – editorial or narrative-wise – are used to promote this kind of fictions. Then, we would like to focus our study on how comics can specifically put this transitional state into frames. In order to achieve this purpose, we will rely on three works whose characters are representative of three different ages of childhood: Bill Watterson's *Calvin & Hobbes* series will allow us to

examine how a young boy is endlessly struggling with his own adult behaviours and expectations; Rumiko Takahashi's *Ranma 1/2* manga series, by portraying a panel of young teenagers slowly getting into adulthood, will help us analyse the generational gap between teens and adults; lastly, several of Mariko Tamaki's works which focus on late teenagers (*This One Summer*, *Supergirl: Being Super*, *Harley Quinn: Breaking Glass*, *Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up with Me*, *I am Not Starfire*) will illustrate both an editorial and creative attempt to make comics about growing up for readers currently becoming adults.

### Biographical Note

**Florent Perget** is both a PhD student at Sorbonne-Université (STIH) since 2019. His research, under the supervision of Jacques Dürrenmatt, focus on the place of comics in literature teaching (« Quelle place pour la bande dessinée dans l'enseignement littéraire ? Enjeux et perspectives »). He is also a teacher (PRAG) at Université Paris Cité (UFR LAC, DEFI, SEE).

### ***Bruce Wayne and the Adoption of Tim Drake* – Joel Thurman (University of Colorado-Boulder)**

Throughout their decades of publication, the Dynamic Duo of Batman and Robin have undergone many changes. These changes often coincided with societal shifts and consumer tastes of their respective eras. These shifts, however, are often subtle. In 2006 during the "One Year Later" era, following the Infinite Crisis event, the dynamic of Batman and Robin underwent an unprecedented shift. Bruce Wayne adopted Tim Drake, something that he had never formally done with his wards Dick Grayson or Jason Todd. It was a moment that challenged the Batman mythos that he has to be an orphan and without a family in order to carry on as the Batman. It was a rare moment in which Bruce Wayne was allowed to grow. This essay will look at the relevant issues of Detective Comics (#817-820) and Batman (#651-654) written by James Richardson, as well as other key titles that contributed to and followed this narrative shift. Additionally, I would like to provide relevant social commentary to situate this literary text within the real-world framework of changes to the American foster care system in the 1990s and 2000s. These changes support Batman's in-comic commentary that "...the laws have changed. I can't adopt you as my ward. For you to have the security I feel you deserve... I'd have to adopt you as my son" (Batman #654). Exploring why Bruce Wayne needed to adopt Tim, adds an academically unexplored layer to the Bruce Wayne/Batman orphan-to-vigilante identity that is unique to that period of time. Bruce Wayne is more than a playboy billionaire by day and a capped crusader for justice by night... he is a foster parent with an extensive bat-family.

### Biographical Note

**Joel Thurman** earned his Bachelor's in History from the University of Nebraska-Kearney and a Masters in US History from Adams State University. His research interests involve comic books in print and film adaptations and their changes as a lens through which to study American pop culture history. He is currently interested in the representation of youth in foster care depicted in DC Comics and how that representation influences public perception of foster care. Prior to entering CU's Media Studies program, Joel was a middle and high school history teacher in Texas and Colorado. He has also taught adjunct history courses for Bellevue University in his home state of Nebraska.

## Virtual asynchronous session

### ***For Children, Against Western Comics* – Paola Bonifazio (The University of Texas at Austin)**

A recent post on ebay.com advertises the "Pecos Bill Kid" toy gun, produced in the 1950s by the Italian company Molgora under the label "Mondial" [1]. The gun's box and grip both have the name and the picture of the legendary hero of Texas, whose adventures were published by Mondadori in a comic of the series "Albi d'oro" between 1949 and 1955, under the title *Pecos Bill: Il leggendario eroe del Texas* [2]. The fact that the comic hero is featured on the toy gun is not unusual in a system that thrives on media convergence: children are enticed to buy both products thanks to the character's branding. In fact, Mondadori was an integrated firm that could branch out its characters simultaneously into different products: Pecos Bill's fans could listen to his adventures on a Fonit Record, watch them in a Walt Disney animated movie (*Lo scrigno delle sette perle*), and re-enact them by means of action figures or through role-playing. [3] However, while Italian children playing the American cowboy had (or could wish to buy) a toy gun in their hands, Pecos Bill in the original American tall tale *and* in the Mondadori version never used the gun, only the lasso. Violence is not a feature of the character, who instead has a penchant for forgiveness and for setting the villains free after a pep talk. And yet, in 1950, *Pecos Bill* was blacklisted by the Catholic organization in charge of screening the press, because of "exciting illustration and content based on violence." [4]

In my presentation, I will examine representations of the American cowboy in Italian western comics of the late forties and fifties vis-à-vis the vehement political campaign against children's magazines that spread, at the time, both in the media and during parliamentary debates. In 1949, a group at the House of Representatives voiced the concerns of politicians, and of religious and school educators in the proposed legislation to "monitor and control children's press," which was to be blamed for "any deviance, any crime committed by children these days." [5] In my paper, I will explore the effects of this campaign on the publishing industry and study the dynamics of negotiations between publishers, political and religious powers, and the young fans, whose active role as consumers (I argue) challenged traditional conceptions of children's readings as educational tools. I will focus in particular on the Italian appropriation of the character of the American cowboy, vis-à-vis the practice of gender labeling (associating the western with young male readership) and the role played by whiteness in the construction of children's imaginary of the American west.

### Notes

- [1] Pecos Bill Kid, <https://www.ebay.com/itm/323996393411>, toy gun by Mondial, Italy, 1954.
- [2] *Pecos Bill: Il leggendario eroe del Texas (Pecos Bill: The Legendary Hero of Texas)* Milan: Mondadori, November 26, 1949.
- [3] The "Albi d'oro" hosted for the most part Walt Disney narratives; Pecos Bill (although he looked different, more like a caricature of a cowboy than a handsome hero) was also a character in the animated movie *Melody Time*, produced by the American magnate in 1948 and released in Italy as *Lo scrigno delle sette perle* in 1952 (seven short stories, including "The Legend of Johnny Appleseed" and "Pecos Bill"). The recordings of *Pecos Bill* ("riduzione fonografica") by Nina are available at the Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi in Rome: <http://opac2.icbsa.it/vufind/Record/IT-DDS0000095031000000>
- [4] *Indicatore della Stampa Periodica*, May-June 1950 available through the online database Comizi d'amore (University of Milan) <https://sites.unimi.it/comizidamore/892-2/>
- [5] Federici Maria, Migliori, Angelucci, Bartole, Scalfaro, Manzini, Giordani, Law Proposal n. 995, 19 December 1949.

### Biographical Note

**Paola Bonifazio** is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Texas at Austin. She received her MA from the University of Pittsburgh (2000) and her PhD from New York University (2008). She was a NEH-Rome Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Rome in 2011-12. Her research interests focus on film and media studies, and gender studies. Her first book *Schooling in Modernity: The Politics of Sponsored Films in Postwar Italy* (University of Toronto Press, 2014) explores short film productions sponsored by state and non-state agencies to promote modernization and industry, and to govern the Italian people's conduct. Her second book *The Photoromance: A Feminist Reading of Popular Culture* (MIT Press, 2020) explores the storytelling, cross-platform success, and female fandom of an often scorned medium. She is currently working on a book manuscript on the reception and appropriation of the American western in Italian media, from Buffalo Bill's Wild West (1890) to *Django* (1966). With Ellen Nerenberg and Nicoletta Marini-Maio, Paola is a founding editor of [gender/sexuality/italy](http://gender/sexuality/italy).

### ***Educational, entertaining, and aesthetic in the Vietnamese children's comic "Than Dong Dat Viet" - Bui Thi Thanh Mai*** **(Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies)**

For over 15 years, with over 200 collections of stories and nearly 1 million copies in print, *Than Dong Dat Viet* (Temporary translation: Prodigy of the Viet Land) has become a "phenomenon" in the cultural life of Vietnamese children. Some articles have mentioned the story's records such as the comic "made in Vietnam" born in the storm foreign comics, the longest Vietnamese comic series, the most successful comic series in the history of Vietnamese comics (ZingNews, *Tạp chí Tri thức trực tuyến*, 2018), but so far there have not been in-depth studies on the factors that make up the success of the comic series.

This paper examines the creation of *Than Dong Dat Viet*, a famous Vietnamese children's comic series by painter Le Linh and Phan Thi company, first published by Tre Publishing House in 2002 in a comparative framework. Studying some other Vietnamese comics, the paper analyzes and points out how Le Linh painter and Phan Thi company exploit elements of Vietnamese history and folklore to build content and pay attention to exploiting visual details to create a Vietnamese identity for the comics. The paper investigates the highlights of the Vietnamese prodigy in terms of his approach to the subject, reflecting Vietnamese culture. Based on the stories and historical stories of the nation, the comics of *Than Dong Dat Viet* build the story content around the life of Le Ti, the poinsettia of Dai Viet, the embodiment of real events in history, and legend episodes that are transmitted orally in folklore. The exploitation of old stories to adapt them to comics not only attracts the reader but also contributes to improving knowledge and understanding of famous people and Vietnamese national culture. The attraction of the comic is a combination of humorous elements, close to the tastes of readers, and clever details. The series has short, witty words, and the dialogues are riddles and poetry sentences. The content of the story presents situations and handles them intelligently and astutely. The background, personality, and dialogue of the characters are all pure Vietnamese, bringing a sense of closeness. In addition, the shaping of characters, scenes, and some details in the *Than Dong Dat Viet* are rich in humor and bold in Orient. The main group of characters includes Ti, Suu, Dan, and Meo in folk costumes, combined with three tufts of hair, a typical image of Vietnamese children in the past. On the shirt of the character Ti, there is a map of Vietnam, cleverly integrated with ancient costume motifs. The unity between the name and the character's shape depicts the character and class of peasants and intellectuals to mandarins in the feudal period of Vietnam. In addition, even though the authors set the story in the Late Le period, the story still possesses a separate space and time dimension, interwoven with many surreal details, enlivening the history, traditions, and culture of the Vietnamese nation.

### Biographical Note

**Bui Thi Thanh Mai**, Ph.D. in Art history, associate professor, the Division of Arts Research at Vietnam National Institute of Culture and Arts Studies, in Hanoi, Vietnam. Her research focuses on Vietnamese modern and contemporary fine arts. In recent years, she took part in some research projects on comics such as "Vietnamese Comics: The Situation and Solutions to Develop the Art", "Transformational in Form and Socialist in Content: An Exploration of Comics for Adults by Nguyen Thanh Phong", "The Combination of Literature and Painting in Thanh Phong and Huu Khoa' *Memory of Vietnam Subsidy's Period*", ... She takes part in training Ph.D. students at VICAS and in teaching art history for Ph.D. students at the Ho Chi Minh University of Fine Arts, and also teaching art history, and supervising MA students' thesis in art history at the Vietnam University of Fine Arts.