

IMPERVIOUS PATHS OF ABSTRACTION: THE CASE OF COMICS

Krešimir Purgar

Abstraction and Comics / Band dessinée et abstraction

Edited by Aarnoud Rommens

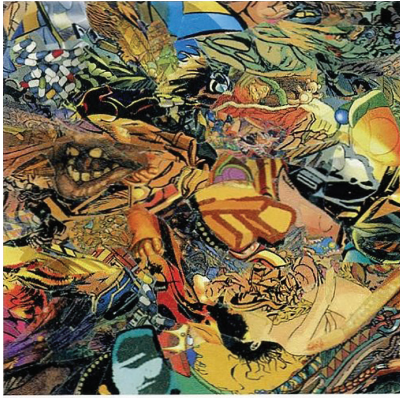
Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2019

Abstraction and Comics is a two-volume and richly illustrated collection of essays that provides an outstanding insight into the issue of abstraction in the medium of comics. A review of individual essays and comic book authors represented in the collection would require much more space and therefore it seems to me that the book(s) as a whole should be addressed here, that is, the focus should be given to relationship between non-figurativity and comics as the basic theme of this unique collection. My impression is that the editor Aarnoud Rommens made this collection with very clear premeditation and at the same time attempted to shed light on some of the traditional and general misconceptions of academically oriented criticism.

When it comes to Rommens' intent, it is evident that this edition was made with a desire that comic book theory should not overshadow visual practice itself. In his introductory essay, the editor clearly distances himself from theories of abstract art—primarily the “purism” of Clement Greenberg—and argues that his collection deliberately moves between “anarchic engagement with other media” and “whatever at hand” (...) “making abstraction palpable as dirty, lived, concrete”. This is probably also the reason why the book does not deal with the application of canonical theories of abstraction to the medium

of comics but rather instrumentalizes the operational procedures that I have, analyzing the methodological innovations in W.J.T. Mitchell, recently called “theory-on-demand”. This book successfully balances between one's urge to see the actual visual material and the need to say something about it that the image itself, even when “supported” by the text, simply cannot. Hundreds of examples from well-known and less-known comic book authors, reproducing whole boards or just accentuating details, help the reader to always be completely immersed in the world this publication brings about. But serious discussions about the multifarious nature of visual communication—like those of Lukas R.A. Wilde, Kai Mikkonen, Paul Fisher Davis or Laura Caraballo—constantly bring us back to the world of theoretical reflection.

On the one hand, this book is made as if image and text compete on each of its pages, as on William Blake's prints from the illuminated manuscript *Jerusalem*, and on the other hand the striking absence of canonical theories of artistic abstraction and bypassing the art-historical priority of artistic image over explanatory text or post-structuralist priority of beholder over picture, testify to another quality of this book—the choice of scholarly methodology of visual studies and, especially, *Bildwissenschaft*, both of which proved to be



Pascal Matthey, excerpt from the comics album entitled 978, published by the Belgian independent house *Le cinquième Couche*, 2013 (screen shot, fair use)

particularly insightful for the material presented. Although I do not think that some classical theories of abstraction of high modernism—such as that of Clement Greenberg apostrophized by Aarnoud Rommens in his editorial—cannot be useful in analyzing, for example, abstract comic boards by Albert Breccia, Pascal Matthey, Cátie Serrão or Jochen Gerner, the interdisciplinary nature of the articles published in this edition suggests that the place of comics theory should be looked for elsewhere. In this case the problem would not be in the inadequacy

of Greenberg's theory for the analysis of abstraction in comics (as the editor seems to propose), but in the institutional framework that his theory goes with, and that is the framework of elitist modernism facing the imminent dissolution (we are talking here of the 50s and 60 of the last century) in conjunction with real and symbolic capital parasitizing on the modernism's ideals.

I am convinced that Rommens wanted to compile a book about comics that would draw attention to the possibility of a return to vernacular (and not, as



Alberto Breccia and Norberto Buscaglia, excerpt from *Cthulhu Mythos—The Haunter of the Dark*, AR, 1975, pg. 11 (screen shot, fair use)

he calls it, “sacrosanct”) abstraction, which would reactivate the potential of art today to change the social and economic *status quo*. Having this in mind, a key question follows: does comics belong within the art-historical or any other canon at all, since the conception of the whole book, the visual and theoretical contributions published in it, openly oppose the canon or, at the very least, try to redefine it. On the one hand, by reaching for a much more permissive theoretical concept of the image and visual studies, and on the other hand by approaching comic abstraction from a position that does not establish a relation to a much wider field of historical abstraction, in both art and technology. I’m not arguing that this is a shortcoming of this truly impressive edition—because, as I said, Rommens has a very clear and consistently implemented concept that has successfully replaced the theoretical (and, I would add, ideological) exclusivism of high-modernist theories of abstraction.

I guess this is simply not the context in which Rommens wants to see comics, because he believes that comics are not part of an art-historical teleology that ends with Kazimir Maljevič

anyway, and that can never be restored after a linguistic (post-structuralist) and pictorial turn. *Comics and Abstraction* is first and foremost a book about the potentials of comics to achieve what philosophers call “artistic transcendence” without succumbing to ubiquitous commodification and musealization reaching absurd price levels on the art market. No one knows whether the same will happen one day with comics, but what is sure is that their abstract dimension, masterfully described in this collection, is certainly one way to prolong the reading, in this case actually watching, of comics—just as we can look at the paintings of Mark Rothko, Franz Kline or Barnett Newman countless times and always see something else in them.

It is my impression that the readers of this book, after the exceptional insights of many theorists about equally exceptional comic book authors, are deliberately left with a dilemma: are you willing to change the last remnants of the comics narrative, no matter how impervious it may be in some authors, for a radical sequential abstraction that can only conditionally be called comics? As for myself—I am.



Jochen Gerner, an excerpt from *Johnny perd l'équilibre*, 2012. Chinese ink on printed paper, dimensions: 18 x 12,5 cm (screen shot, fair use)