COMICS AND THE MIDDLE EAST – REPRESENTATION, ACCOMMODATION, INTEGRATION

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COMICS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Representation, Accommodation, Integration

Malmö University, 2022
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CONTENT

This dissertation is dedicated to my long-suffering wife Hanna, who has stood by me all through the researching and writing needed to reach the end of the this long and winding road.

The dissertation would not have been possible without the invaluable guidance of my mentors Cristine Sarrimo, Inger Lindstedt, Jakob Dittmar & Margareta Melin.

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

> *"Even pin-ups and comics, when rightly viewed, may provide food for thought."* (Gombrich, 2014 [1960], p. 7)

1. Potholes to fill

I have nurtured a fascination with comics ever since I first noticed my parents "magically" understanding what the characters said in my favorite children's comic, spurring me to learn how to read. As I extended my knowledge of comics, searching for comics from all over the world, exploring new genres, styles, and ways of using comics – the feeling of wonder grew into an interest in the potential of the art form. This led me to writing articles and academic papers, editing and publishing journals and magazines, interviewing artists, visiting international festivals, curating exhibitions, giving lectures, and writing books – all about comics. And I still felt I had only scratched the surface of understanding this complex art form; that I wanted more tools in my analytical toolbox.

This search for a deeper understanding of comics led me back to academia after a few years of doing other things, and ultimately to this thesis. I am drawn to areas of which knowledge is lacking and I have in my work, whether searching through archives, doing interviews, or writing articles and books, often actively engaged in "filling potholes" (Lent, 2015, p. 8), i.e. gathering information and building an understanding of phenomena for which there is little or no documentation, often based on my own curiosity. When I started writing in newspapers and popular culture journals about comics in the early 1990s, there were many potholes to fill in our knowledge about this art form – and there still are, even though there has

been a flurry of writing and documentation on comics since then. The latter is also true within academia, where comics were, for a long time not viewed as suitable empirical data (Miller, 2007, p. 24; Lent, 2010, p. 7; Dittmar, 2013). This has changed, not least in the last decade – a theme explored in the article "Comics Study in the Nordic Countries – Field or Discipline?" (Strömberg, 2016), to which I will return in the next chapter.

Within this vast array of potholes to fill, a topic that has especially fascinated me throughout the years is how different contexts leave their mark on comics; how different cultures are represented in comics. This interest resulted in books such as *Black Images in the Comics* (Strömberg, 2003b), *The Comics go to Hell* (Strömberg, 2005), *Comic Art Propaganda* (Strömberg, 2010a), and *Jewish Images in the Comics* (Strömberg, 2012a) – all initiated by a desire to understand how certain phenomena have been represented in comics, and how these representations could be associated with the contexts in which they were produced. Due to this interest, I have actively searched for comics from different parts of the world, going far and beyond the dominant international comics cultures, i.e. North America, France/Belgium, and Japan/Asia (Pilcher & Brooks, 2005, p. 12).

This interest in comics from different parts of the world led to the choice of topic for the thesis: the meeting between comics and cultures from the Middle East. In the mid 1990s, the eye-opening book *Arab Comic Strips: Politics of an Emerging Mass Culture* (Douglas & Malti-Douglas 1994) was full of, for me, new information. I started actively searching for more information on comics in relation to the Middle East, but found few articles, interviews, or other secondary material. Even though I kept collecting primary data, mostly comics and graphic novels, either published in the Middle East or featuring themes related to cultures from the Middle East, I never felt I had a way to process it, to create knowledge out of what I had gathered. Barriers of language and culture left me hesitant as to what to make of it all. Thus, when I got the opportunity to write a PhD and to delve deep into a specific subject, I immediately knew what to write about.

2. Research Journey

The overall aim of this compilation thesis is to examine how cultures from the Middle East could be said to be represented in comics, and how this can be analyzed and understood. The main body of the thesis consists of three separate, interrelated articles, case studies that connect and ex-

tend on each other, since they were written consecutively, involving a process of gradually understanding what I wanted to accomplish. During the research process, I have become increasingly fascinated with the visual aspects of these cultural exchanges, of how innovations in ways of communicating visually in comics seem to result in different schools of style, of how comics artists inspire each other and how the transferal of these inspirations work. Gradually, this has become my focus, trying to understand this process of communicating visual ideas related to cultures in the Middle East, and finding ways in which this can be analyzed and understood. Thus, the aim for this cover text, which is written as a complement to the articles, is to deepen and further develop theory in connection to the formal aspect of comics and in the process re-analyze the material in the articles from a position of hindsight.

My research journey started with a pursuit of relevant texts on how cultures from the Middle East have been represented in comics, as well as a search for ways of collecting empirical data. This resulted in the article "'Yo, rag-head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11", published in the German journal *Amerikastudien* (Strömberg, 2012b). Here, the research question was how superheroes designated as Arabs and/or Muslims had been represented in American comics after 9/11 – i.e. how these cultures in the Middle East had been handled by American comics artists and writers. This entailed using critical discourse analysis, which even though this text has since been translated and reprinted in the anthology *Reader Superhelden: Theorie – Geschichte – Medien* (Etter, Nerhlich & Nowotny, 2018) and lauded as an important effort (Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 9), did not seem a sufficient tool for pursuing the overarching theme of the thesis.

Parallel to this, I also did research into comics studies, trying to understand where my research would fit in. This led to the article "Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries – Field or Discipline?" (Strömberg, 2016), published in the British Journal *Graphic Novels and Comics*. For this article, the main question was whether the expanding field of comics studies could be said to be on the verge of becoming a discipline, and if so, would this be a positive development? The writing of this article also started a thought process wherein I contemplate how my research would be situated within media and communication studies, a theme that I will get back to later in this chapter.

Returning to the main theme of the thesis, the search for ways to understand representations of Middle Eastern cultures in comics led to the creation of the article "Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?" (Strömberg, 2017), published in the anthology *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam, and Representation* (Lewis & Lund, 2017). Here, focus shifted to analyzing how the American-based superhero comics genre could work in Middle Eastern cultures, i.e. if the main direction of the cultural exchange was in a sense reversed (cf. Birken, 2015, p. 146) compared to what was analyzed in the article "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b). Genre theory was applied for the purpose of understanding the processes involved in using this genre in different cultural contexts by two Middle Eastern-based publishing companies. This theory did indeed enrich the analysis, but I still needed a way of delving deeper into the visual aspects of these representations; of understanding how visual elements in comics could potentially be connected to different influences; how access to different visual cultures could influence the end results.

These ideas led me to write the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis – Accommodation, Combination, Integration" (Strömberg, 2020), published in the British journal *European Comics Art.* Here, schema theory was applied to analyze potential connections between visual elements in this graphic novel and Persian art forms. Consequently, this led to the formation of a theory of how the idea of schema can be utilized for analyzing comics, with the purpose of understanding potential connections between the visuals in comics and other visual cultures. This approach will be developed further in "Part IV: Developing, Revisiting & Connecting", as I investigate more ways to achieve my overarching aim of examining how cultures from the Middle East could be said to be represented in comics, and how this can be analyzed and understood.

Through it all, it has been rewarding being a media and communication researcher studying comics. There is no comics studies discipline, yet (Singer, 2019, p. 6), and the study of comics can thus best be described as a genuinely interdisciplinary field (Lent, 2010, p. 3). Comics have, so far, not been a major research area within media and communication studies, but given the openness of this discipline for interdisciplinary research, for cross-pollination with theories and research from related fields and disciplines, media and communication studies have proved to be a welcoming home for studying comics, something that I will come back to in "Part IV", and the chapter "Media & Communication Studies and Comics".

Throughout my studies, I have furthermore been both helped and hindered by the fact that I, at the same time as I researched comics, have also been an active part of some of the cultures I have been studying – teaching, giving lectures, curating exhibitions, organizing festivals and seminars, moderating panels, writing books, and editing journals – all concerning comics.

The help has come from the direct access to the art form and the cultures I have been researching, giving me insights into the mechanics behind the scenes. When teaching aspiring comics artists, as well as when conducting artists talks and interviews with seasoned professionals, the ideas that I have been focusing on in my research have influenced my perception and my thinking and fed back into my research. The theories of schema and the communication of visual ideas have for instance been insightful when advising young artists on how to progress with their chosen profession, as well as when writing popular culture articles, reviews, and biographies – as they have helped in the comprehension of how the visuals of a specific comic could connect to other comics, as well as to other visual art forms. Thus, one of my initial goals have been met: that of giving me new tools in my analytical toolbox.

The hindrance has mostly come from the fact that all my work within the comics cultures has sometimes limited the amount of time and energy that I have been able to spend on research. It might also have influenced some of my choices early on in my research, based on oft-repeated "truisms" within the comics business, e.g. that an American superhero comic book needed to have a white, male main character in order to sell enough to sustain it's costs (cf. Kent, 2015, p 523). However, overall, my immersion in comics has felt like an asset.

3. Aims and Results

The general aim of this thesis has been to examine how cultures from the Middle East could be said to be represented in comics, and how this can be analyzed and understood. The main aims for the respective articles included were to examine:

1. How superheroes designated as Arabs and/or Muslims have been represented in American comics after 9/11 ("'Yo, rag-head!'", Strömberg, 2012b). This included to determine whether there were any popular Arab and/or Muslim superheroes, and if so, how they communicated ideas of their cultural backgrounds.

The results indicated that there were indeed popular examples of Arab and/or Muslim superheroes, and that those analyzed seemed to have been created with didactic intents of dispelling stereotypes about Arabs and/or Muslims, but still seemed to reinforce these exact stereotypes.

2. How the American based superhero comics genre works when implemented in the Middle East ("Superhero Comics from the Middle East", Strömberg, 2017). This included analyzing original superhero comics from Middle Eastern publishers in order to understand if and how this genre can acculturate.

The results indicated that the superhero genre was too steeped in American cultures to be easily adapted to work in Middle Eastern cultures.

3. How visual elements in the graphic novel *Persepolis* could be connected to Persian art forms ("Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis", Strömberg, 2020). This included trying to substantiate or repudiate the oft quoted "truism" that the visuals in *Persepolis* rely heavily on influences from Persian art in general and Persian miniatures in particular.

The results indicated that visual elements in *Persepolis* did show connections to Persian art forms, which had been accommodated, combined with visual elements from comics and integrated into the art form of comics.

4. Disposition

This thesis is intended to present and discuss the above-mentioned results. This introductory part continues with a research overview and theoretical positioning, where I discuss how the thesis engages with relevant fields and disciplines. This section includes, in accepted manuscript form, the article "Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries – Field or Discipline?" (Strömberg, 2016), to expand upon and deepen the understanding of how the thesis relates to the field of comics studies.

The second part, "Case Studies", contains – in facsimile – the three articles "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b), "Superhero Comics in the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017) and "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020). Each article is accompanied by a preface, where the empirical data is revisited, and the theoretical discussions extended, as well as a section afterwards, where the results are updated, and criticised.

This is followed by the third part, "Revisiting, Developing & Connecting", where I re-analyze the material in the articles and set out to further develop the theories in connection to the formal aspect of comics, as well as framing the analysis within media and communication studies.

The thesis closes with the fourth part, "Discoveries, Developments & Opportunities", containing a summary of the results achieved and ideas of how the theories set forth could be employed in further research.

5. Research Overview & Theoretical Positioning

In line with the fact that the study of comics is an interdisciplinary field, the research done for the articles included in this thesis engage with different fields and disciplines – with media and communication studies as the overarching theoretical umbrella.

Theories applied in the articles focus on ideas set forth in genre studies and the theory of intertextuality within literary theory, ideas concerning the Other and the male gaze within postcolonial studies and gender studies respectively, as well as theories such as remediation within media studies. For the last article, "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis", I utilized theories of schema from cognitive science in general and art history in particular.

I will here in more detail discuss the way the articles are based in: A) media and communication studies; B) comics studies – something that entails a reproduction of the article "Comics Research in the Nordic Countries – Field or Discipline?" (Strömberg, 2016). This article was written for the purpose of examining a field in flux and is followed by a text updating the results to the present day. This is then followed by a discussion on how my research relates to: C) intertextuality; and D) schema theory in cognitive science and art history.

Media and Communication Studies

Media and communication studies is the theoretical umbrella for my research. Specifically, I have utilized the media and communications theory of remediation, i.e. of what happens when one medium or art form is represented in another (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 339). The media and communication theorists David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss a spectrum of ways in which a medium can represent its predecessors, from direct,

unaltered representation at one extreme to a much higher degree of absorption and seamless integration into the new media (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 339). The former could for instance happen in comics when reproducing photographs relatively directly, whereas the latter could conceivably happen when a comics artist uses inspiration from another visual art form but integrates it with the style and form of comics to the point that readers cannot discern the influence.

This theory was based on how digital media can represent their analog forebearers, but it proven useful for understanding the transition between all kinds of media and can also be used to understand the differences in how the influences from other art forms in *Persepolis* integrated with comics (cf. Strömberg, 2020, p. 117). The idea of remediation has since its introduction in the late 1990s become a recurring theme within media and communication studies, most often referenced in relation to new – i.e. digital – media (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 293), but has also been used in relation to comics, e.g. when analyzing photography in comics (Lawson, 2014; Mikkonen, 2010) or the relationship between comics and film (Morton, 2012).

The question of whether media studies, communication studies, or media and communication studies constitute a discipline or a field, or for that matter several disciplines and/or fields, seems to remain open for debate (Nordenstreg, 2007, p. 213; Chasi & Rodny-Gumede, 2018, p. 56; Mutsvairo, 2018, p. 8). In Sweden, we use the label media and communication studies (MKV), but in other parts of the world, other combinations of media studies, communication studies and studies of different media, such as film, occur as labels for the research. Whatever the label, research within media and communication studies does have a history of diversification through inclusion of different media and aspects of communication, some of which have subsequently emerged as more or less independent branches of the field (Nordenstreg, 2007, p. 211). This openness indicates that media and communication studies can be a welcoming home for research on comics. When viewed as a text in the broader interpretation of that term, comics can be analyzed within media and communication studies the same way as other media, focusing on how they are produced and received, how they communicate and how they are being mediated. Ironically, media studies were earlier reportedly termed "Mickey Mouse studies" by representatives of older, more established disciplines (Nordenstreg, 2007, p. 211), but can now contain actual, illuminating studies, from various perspectives, of comics featuring Mickey Mouse.

Media, Communication and Comics Studies

The way in which comics studies have been pursued in different academic fields and disciplines has been described as "alliances with other, more recognizable fields" (Gardner & Herman, 2011, p. 6). This has included research made within media and communication studies, although this "alliance" has so far not been extensive. Media researchers Jan-Noël Thon and Lukas R.A. Wilde went as far as to describe the relationship between comics studies and media studies in general as "comparatively uneasy" (Thon & Wilde, 2016, p. 233). Comics have historically often been absent from media studies textbooks (Sabin, 2002, p. 14) – perhaps due to cultural bias (Groensteen, 2000, p. 35), and have been mostly included exclusively in volumes focusing on the role of children and media (e.g. Jensen Arnett, 2007, p. 191; Drotner & Livingstone, 2008, p. 94). When included, comics are often referred to as a medium (e.g. McLuhan, 2001, p. 178; Albertazzi & Cobley, 2013, p. 77) or in the form of one specific publishing format, e.g. comic strips or comic books (c.f. Rayner, Wall & Kruger, 2004, p. 76; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007).

In conjunction with this, a discussion about definitions might be in order. There are many ideas of what constitutes a medium within media and communication studies, with definitions often taking their starting point in one of three different aspects of media and their mediality: A) communicative-semiotic, i.e. how it communicates; B) material-technological, i.e. through what technology it is communicated; or C) conventional-institutional, i.e. how it is perceived or presented – sometimes seemingly two or even three of these are conflated (Thon & Wildek 2016: 233). For me, the material-technological aspect has always seemed the logical one, and I thus view for instance print and the web as different media, which in relation to comics can be differentiated into medial formats such comic books, graphic novels, or web comics (cf. Gabilliet, 2005, p. xii). Thus, I do not view comics, which I think can be communicated through different technological supports, as a medium, but turn to the communicative-semiotic aspects, as I view comics as a separate art form, a form of visual communication through "static, juxtaposed, interrelated images intimately integrated with texts" (Strömberg, 2003a, p. 131, my translation). I furthermore view this as a prototype definition, i.e. that a comic that meets all these criteria are prototypical of the art form, but examples that do not meet all of them, e.g. silent, wordless comics, may still be included (cf. Meyer, 1997, p. 2). The fact that McLuhan and other media theoreticians

cited in my study often seem to view comics as a medium (cf. McLuhan, 2001, p. 178; Albertazzi & Cobley, 2013, p. 77), seemingly using the communicative-semiotic or material-technological starting points, indicates that although their theories on media and how they are connected are relevant for my discussions on comics, I have had to keep in mind the discrepancies between our views on what comics are.

The "comparative unease" between media and communication studies and comics has recently been changing, as is the case with much research related to the rapidly expanding field of comics studies. There are an increasing number of articles on comics from a media and/or communications perspective, notably monographs (e.g. Dittmar, 2008; Berndt, 2015; Bachmann, 2016) as well as anthologies and special-themed issues of journals (e.g. Chute & Jagoda, 2014; Thon & Wilde, 2016), so it does seem as if comic studies are finding a home within media and communication studies, something this thesis could be viewed as further proof of.

Comics Studies

Research on comics is a fairly recent phenomenon (Miller, 2007, p. 24; Lent, 2010, p. 9; Dittmar, 2013). The question of when comics as a separate form of visual communication was created has been the subject of many heated debates (Strömberg 2003a, p. 68). The results depend on the definition of comics used, and there are almost as many definitions of comics as there are researchers analyzing comics. Using the definition given earlier, comics was established as a separate visual form of communication during the 19th century (cf. Gabilliet, 2005, p. xi), but not until the turn of the 21st century did research into comics start to get into its own (Lent, 2010, p. 9). There can be multiple reasons for this hesitancy in using comics as empirical data, but the root of the problem probably stems from the earlier mentioned negative cultural bias against the art form (Groensteen, 2000, p. 35; Mehta & Mukherji, 2015, p. 10).

An expression of this cultural bias can for instance be viewed in an autobiographical comic by Swedish artist Daniel Ahlgren (see Image 1, below), who in the late 20th century reminisces about not wanting to tell people that he draws comics, and even having a problem mentioning comics at all (Ahlgren, 1999). The text translates to "… yes, it's even hard to say the word … …c …c … cccc … cooo-comics.". The speech bubble is placed in an unconventional way for comics, covering the eyes of the character, as if he is trying to hide behind them.

Image 1: Panel from "Fy bubblan" by Daniel Ahlgren, published in Bild & Bubbla *2/1999 (Ahlgren 1999). © Daniel Ahlgren 1999.*

The testimony discussed above is from more than two decades ago, and today this negative cultural bias seems to be eroding and along-side this comics studies is expanding, seemingly on the verge of establishing a more cohesive, mature field (Singer, 2019, p. 6). But is it on the verge of becoming a separate discipline, or would it be intellectually more effective if it were to remain an interdisciplinary endeavor? These ideas were pursued in the article "Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries – Field or Discipline?" (Strömberg, 2016), which is reproduced below, in its accepted manuscript format. References in this thesis to the article's page numbers will be to the originally published version in *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, vol. 7, issue 2.

The article was written as part of the process of understanding how my research could fit into the academic system. The aim was to assess the state of comics studies in the Nordic countries, and in the process analyze the possible merits and pitfalls of comics studies becoming a separate discipline.

Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries – Field or Discipline?

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The last few years have seen a flurry of academic activities on comics in the Nordic countries. But are we on the verge of establishing an independent field or a discipline of comics studies, or both? And if so, is this desirable? On an international level, comics studies have for some time been an intellectual field and can now be said to be on a pre-paradigmatic level as a discipline. In the Nordic countries, the field of comics studies has grown rapidly the last few years, but it is still very much dispersed, with researchers working at different departments and within a number of disciplines. There are tendencies towards a maturing into a more cohesive field, but this is a recent development. The establishing of a comics studies discipline, though keeping an open "rural mode" of knowledge production to prevent a loss of the positive aspects of interdisciplinary research, would facilitate the possibilities for professors' seats, journals, specific grants, recurring conferences and research libraries – and thus a more rapid growth of comics studies.

Keywords: academic disciplines, comics research, intellectual fields, Nordic, Nordic Network for Comics Research, Scandinavia, Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art

"When I want to relax, I read an essay by Engels. When I want to read something serious, I read Corto Maltese."

Umberto Eco (qtd in Pratt 1994)

Introduction

The last decade has seen an unprecedented amount of academic research focusing on comics, sufficiently enough to say that there exists an international field of comics studies. But is there enough evidence to say that we are on the verge of establishing a separate, independent discipline of comics studies? And most importantly, is this desirable? I have examined these questions generally, on an international level, and more specifically, assessed the state of comics studies in the Nordic countries.

The origins of these ideas comes from a personal sense of "living in interesting times", as the supposedly ancient Chinese proverb states. In the Nordic countries there has been a flurry of academic activities on the subject of comics in the last few years. During the previous year or so, five Nordic PhDs on comics research have been accepted – almost doubling the number of PhDs focused on comics, in the Nordic countries – and the number of PhD students studying comics is constantly growing. Add to this academic conferences and seminars, official, government sponsored organisations, major grants given for comics research – all more or less unprecedented in the Nordic countries – and it becomes clear that something is happening, something that warrants a closer study.

I have found that, although the field of comics studies can be said to have been established and is growing in the Nordic countries, it is still highly dispersed throughout the academic system, with researchers situated at different departments, working within a number of different disciplines and often being the only one studying comics at their respective universities. There are tendencies towards maturing into a more cohesive field, with the formation of a Nordic organisation for comics studies, a number of conferences and seminars specifically on comics and a specialized academic journal being started. All of this is still relatively recent, though, and the fact that there are still no professors' seats established for comics studies, no specific grants for comics studies and no specialised research libraries indicates that there is no discipline of comics studies in the Nordic countries.

On an international level, comics studies can be said to be on a pre-paradigmatic level as a discipline, as this process has been taking place for a longer period of time, with more practitioners, academic journals and recurring conferences.

Intellectual Fields and Academic Disciplines

The academic world is divided into disciplines – defined, recognized and maintained by the universities where they are taught, the scholarly journals where peer-reviewed articles are published, the academic departments and faculties where the practitioners of the disciplines work and so on. These disciplines are often divided into sub-disciplines, and evolve through processes of split, conflict and ingestion. Opportunities for this depend on a range of external circumstances such as the availability of resources required for disciplinary expansion, i.e. jobs, journals, grants and conferences. (Abbott 2001, 22–27).

The existence of academic disciplines is not always seen as a positive force, though. Its most vocal detractor is probably Foucault, who in the book *Discipline and Punish* (1979), claims that the system of academic disciplines was established in 18th century France on the same premises as the modern day system of prisons and punishment, and that it shares many of its general aspects:

> *The disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate.* (1979, 223)

This harsh description of disciplines lies at the heart of most counterarguments to forming a comic studies discipline, i.e. that it would lead to a formalisation that would kill the interdisciplinary fervour with which the study of comics are done today. Foucault did backtrack some of his critique later, though, in the work *Security, Territory, Population* (2007).

Irrespective of the forming of a comics discipline is positive or negative, there is a clear development towards a more coherent field, akin to the formation of a discipline on an international level. Examining how new disciplines emerge leads to a differentiation between pre-paradigmatic disciplines – which are characterized by ambiguity and internal difference and consist of an aggregation of different networks and communities – and mature, paradigmatic disciplines, which are organised around an

agreed upon set of methods, theories and problems that form a more or less unified network (Kuhn 1996, 181–187). Comics studies on an international level could very well be said to be a pre-paradigmatic discipline at the moment.

There is however not a clear-cut evolution of intellectual fields and/or academic disciplines. Instead of looking at pre-paradigmatic and paradigmatic disciplines, Becher and Trowler differentiate between what they call urban and rural modes of knowledge production. The more concentrated urban form is defined by as a closely knit community whose knowledge does not travel far, and is circulated in a small number of elevated journals, using a shared and agreed upon terminology, theories and techniques. In this setting, researchers address a handful of recognised problems. In the more loosely knitted rural mode, problems, methods and theories are not as cemented, research output is usually in longer form like books and monographs, and there is less competition as there is a wider scope to address a wider range of questions, using a larger toolbox of methods and theories (Becher and Trowler 2001, 106–108). If you consider comics studies at the moment to be a pre-paradigmatic discipline, then it would also be rural mode.

There are also intellectual fields, which are social organisations in their own right, focused on certain areas of interest and differentiated from disciplines in that they are not necessarily connected to the institutions and structures of higher education. Intellectual fields can be completely independent of disciplines, but fields can also overlap more or less with disciplines (Whitley 2000, 9–13). Comics studies is without a doubt a field, but can also be seen as several fields, divided by language barriers.

There are academic fields that have more or less strived against becoming a discipline. Cultural studies is sometimes referred to as a discipline, with journals, departments, professors seats and PhD courses, but is most often is seen as an inherently interdisciplinary intellectual field, with advocates for the benefits of it staying that way (Bérubé 2009).

Comics Research

Research on comics is a relatively new phenomenon in the intricate academic system, and – though rapidly expanding – it's still not extensive compared to other academic fields and disciplines concerned with research on specific art forms, or even a self-evident, uncontended academic

discipline in its own right. Visual art, literature and even film – the (some would say) contemporary of comics – each has an established theoretical base, a specific terminology, nomenclature and specialized approaches and techniques for its study. Comics, on the other hand, was for a long time not even regarded as a valid object of study even among pop culture, and there were no scholarly books or articles, no libraries with easily accessible comics collections, no scholarships and often no career possibilities within the academic system for researchers interested in studying comics. (Lent 2010, 9).

The reasons for this are to be found in the general attitude towards comics. Thierry Groensteen sees several reasons for the long-time condemnation of comics to cultural insignificance, such as it being a hybrid media with sub-literature ambitions, connections to the "lowly" caricature and even if aimed at an adult audience, have a tendency to speak to the inner child in the readers (2000, 35).

Even though I do not agree with all of these assessments, it is evident that there are persistent negative cultural forces that have influenced the way in which comics have been evaluated, on all levels of society, including the academic world. Due to this stigmatization, the first to do research were fans, collectors and cartoonists, using their own collections as the base of their studies. The first PhD studies were written in the 1950s, mostly from a critical point of view, followed by a slow recognition during the 1960s and 1970s (Miller 2007, 24). Up until the 1980s, comics studies in Germany for instance was still based mostly on the stigmatised debate on the "dangers" of comics (Dittmar 2013). It was not until the 1990s that the study of comics generally started to get accepted into academic institutions (Lent 2010, 7).

Owing to the circumstance that comics studies has not been widely acknowledged as a field, much less a discipline of its own, research has been done from the points of view of a wide spread of academic disciplines. Comics studies is thus a broadly interdisciplinary field, often applying perspectives, theories and methods from, among others, literary studies, communication and mass media, art and aesthetics, history, language, sociology, psychology and philosophy (Lent et al. 1999, 18).

The part of the world where comics was first accepted as an area for academic study was the French speaking countries in Europe. This was probably due to the fact that comics were perceived as relatively more

culturally accepted there than in other parts of the world (Christiansen 2001, 22). According to one of the pioneers of French academic studies of comics, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, (qtd in Groensteen 2007, 1–2) , the evolution of comics studies in France and Belgium can be divided into four steps:

- the archaeological age of the 1960s, where nostalgic authors exhumed readings from their childhoods;
- the sociohistorical and philosophical age of the 1970s, where the critics established the texts in their variants, reconstituted the relationships, etc.;
- the structuralist age; and
- the semiotic and psychological age

The first two steps can be said to mirror the evolution of comics studies in other parts of the world, i.e. the U.S., Italy, Germany, Japan, China and Sweden (Lent 2010, 7; Dittmar 2013). After this, it is clear that geographical affinity has played an important role in which perspectives have been chosen, with semiotics and psychoanalysis as the main perspectives used in the French speaking parts of the world and cultural studies dominating the Anglo-Saxon research (Christiansen 1999, 5). Bart Beaty, a Canadian scholar positioned in between these two geographically defined areas, agrees with this and argues that comics studies falls into one of two camps: literary/textual and historical/sociological (Beaty 2007, 8).[1]

Comics Studies in the Twenty-first Century

Although there has been a discernable increase in academic research on comics, there has not been a straight line of development towards a coherent field, nor towards an established discipline of comics studies. Hans-Christian Christiansen, studying comics from a film perspective, summarized the obstacles:

> *Where film theory has hundreds of theoretically relevant works, comics research has maybe 25 works with a certain scientific validity and relevance. The theory is also characterized by a pronounced lack of knowledge between the most important research traditions, and the field primarily exists as isolated fringe areas in modern culture studies.* (Christiansen 1999, 15, translation by present author)

This was, however, more than ten years ago, and today, after more than a decade of largely accepted studies of comics, there are on an international

level more and more researchers with finished doctoral dissertations on comics and as a result of this an ever-growing number of research libraries, scholarly journals, monographs and anthologies concerning themselves with comics (Badman 2009, 574–576). Or, as John Lent recently put it:

> *[…] comics scholarship is gaining a theoretical base and a body of credible and systematic research, and by and large, the respect of the arbiters of academic standards.* (Lent 2010, 27)

In Asia there also seems to be a growing acceptance of comics being studied at universities. Especially courses geared towards teaching how to create comics have grown rapidly the last decade, both in Japan and South Korea (Tanikawa 2010; Ramanathan 2004, 232).

One way of measuring the expansion of comics studies is by assessing the number of academic journals specifically aimed towards comics studies that has been started in the last two decades: *International Journal of Comic Art* (1999–), *Image [&] Narative* (2000–), *ImageTexT* (2004–), *Deutsche Comicsforschung* (2005–), *Mechademia* (2006–), *SIGNs – Studies in Graphic Narratives* (2007–), *European Comic Art* (2009–), *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2010–), *Studies in Comics* (2010–) and *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* (2012–).

Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries

The study of comics on an academic level in the Nordic countries resembles that of the international trends outlined so far, though with a later start and with much fewer people involved, making it possible to examine this area more closely.

In order to assess the state of comics studies in each Nordic country, I have studied: 1. The number of accepted PhDs with comics as a subject matter. 2. Academic conferences and seminars specifically on comics. 3. Courses on comics on an academic level. 4. Articles and monographs about comics on an academic level. For all four areas, I have ascertained from which university and institutions/departments this is being done, to see which perspectives are being pursued in comics studies in the Nordic countries.

Denmark

Denmark is probably the Nordic country that has come the furthest with regards to research on comics. There are three persons who have finished PhDs specifically on comics: Anne Magnussen with *Spanish Comics – Semiotics and Society, Comics as Representations of Social Reality* 1975–1990 (2000), defended at the Department of Romance Languages, University of Copenhagen; Hans-Christian Christiansen, (Figure 2) who presented *Tegneserien – æstetik og kultur* (Comics – Aesthetics and culture, 2001) at the Department of Film and Media Studies, University of Copenhagen. And Rikke Platz Cortsen, who presented her dissertation *Comics as Assemblage: How Spatio-temporality in Comics is Constructed* (2012) at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen.

The earliest conference on comics in the Nordic countries, Comics and Culture, was held in 1998, organized by Magnussen and Christiansen, then PhD candidates (Christiansen & Magnussen 2000, 7). The conference resulted in the (Fugure 1) anthology *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (2000). As with the conference, the anthology was inherently interdisciplinary, with articles from different fields, disciplines and perspectives.

After the conference, there was a hiatus, with a flurry of activities in the most recent years. In 2010, the international conference *Contemporary Comics*[2] (Figure 4) was held at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen, organised by the above-mentioned Platz Cortsen in cooperation with the comics festival *Komiks.dk* and the Danish Comics Council. A one-day seminar, The Aesthetics of Comics: Cognitive and Phenomenological Perspectives, was held in 2011 at the Centre for Semiotics at the University of Aarhus, organised by research assistant Eskebeck Larsen.[3] In late 2011, there was a conference at the University of Odense,[4] organized by the newly formed Nordic Network for Comics Research, to which I will return later. And in 2013, again in conjunction with the big Danish comics festival, now titled *Copenhagen Comics*, and again with the help of the Danish Comics Council, another academic session was organised by Marianne Eskbæck Larsen at Copenhagen University.[5]

There have been also academic courses in comics studies in Denmark, for example *Tegneserien – form og udtryk*[6] (Comics – form and expression),

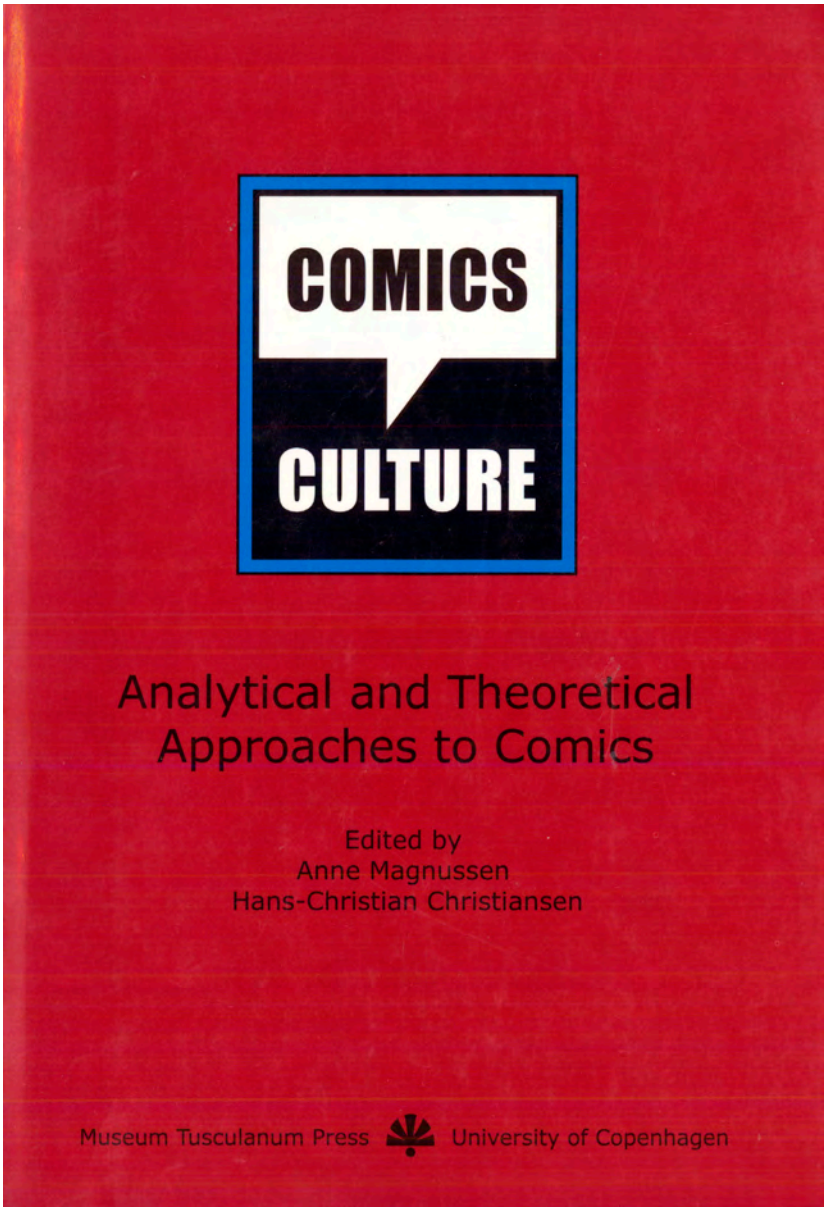

Figure 1. The anthology Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics was published in the year 2000 as the result of the first ever Nordic academic conference on comics, held at Copenhagen University in 1998.

Figure 2. Tegneseriens oestetik (The Aesthetics of Comics) by Hans-Christian Christiansen, was published in 2001, making it one of the earliest Nordic PhDs on comics.

a one-term course held in 2010 at the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen by Platz Cortsen, who also at the moment of writing, has a course in Graphic Novels at the same department. There have been a few other, shorter courses on comics, and in the autumn of 2013, the bachelor course Graphic Storytelling Programme, focusing on creating comics, was started at Via University College in Viborg.[7]

Publications, books and articles stem early on mostly from the two earlier mentioned, Magnussen and Christiansen. Besides their respective PhDs and the anthology *Comics and Culture*, they edited a special issue of the journal *Mediekultur* (Media Culture) on comics in 1999. Of the two, Magnussen has published regularly on comics after the Phd. In the last few years, activates have again accelerated and at least two special issues of established journals have been devoted to comics: *Kritik* 205/2012 (publishing articles from the seminar in Aarhus in 2011) and *Unge Pædagoger* 2/2012 (about comics, young readers and pedagogics), and edited by Eskebæck Larsen.

There are others, also writing about and researching comics, like Mathias Wivel, who wrote his PhD on Italian Renaissance at the Department of Art History, University of Cambridge, but also writes extensively on comics (e.g. the book *Forandringstegn: de nye tegneserier*); Andraes Lindegaard Gregersen (Assistant Professor, Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen) has also several articles published on comics (e.g. the article "Comics of the Decade: Daniel Clowes' Ice Haven and The Death Ray"), as has Fogh Nielsen (PhD in philosophy, Aarhus University); Chris Kjeldsen (Senior Scientist, Department of Agroecology, Aarhus University); Frederik Stjernfelt (Professor, Center for Semiotics, Aarhus University) and Gunhild Borggreen (Assistant Professor, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen). The wide range of institutions that these persons belong to gives an indication of the interdisciplinary and so far unorganized way in which research on comics has been performed in Denmark.

Finland

In Finland there are two accepted PhD dissertations on comics: the first was *Seriedebatt i 1950-talets Finland: En studie i barndom, media och reglering* (Comics debate in the 1950's Finland: A study in childhood, media and marketing, 2008) by sociologist Ralf Kauranen at The Eco-

nomics-Social Science Faculty, Åbo Akademi. Kauranen presented his licentiate's thesis, *Legitimering av tecknade serier som konst: En diskursanalytisk studie av finländska dagspresskrivelser om tecknade serier* (Legitimatisation of comics as art: A study of Finnish daily newspaper articles on comics), as early as 1997, making him one of the first higher level Nordic researchers of comics. There has been one other licentiate's thesis successfully defended: *Superhero Comics and the Geopolitics of American Identity* by Mervi Miettinen (2011) at the School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies, University of Tampere. Miettinen then went on to defend her PhD thesis, *Truth, Justice, and the American Way? The Popular Geopolitics of American Identity in Contemporary Superhero Comics* (2012).

The latest successful dissertation was presented in 2014 by Katja Kontturi, who worked in the field of Contemporary Culture studies at the Department of Art and Culture, University of Jyväskylä. Titled *Ankkalinna - portti kahden maailman välillä. Don Rosan Disney-sarjakuvat postmodernina fantasiana* (Duckburg – a Gate between Two Worlds. Don Rosa's Disney Comics as Postmodern Fantasy),[8] it contains an analysis of the fantastic and potsmodern features of the Disney comics of Don Rosa.

There is at least one PhD candidate writing a dissertation on comics: Leena Romu on 'The Ways which Comics Use in Structuring and Representing Characters' Bodies and Corporeality'[9] in the field of Finnish Literature at the School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies, University of Tampere.

There has been one semi-academic conference, on teaching comics, in 2011, with American Scott McCloud as keynote speaker, and teachers from comic art schools in Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany Great Britain, Sweden and the US participating. The conference was organised by Sarjakuvakeskus (the Helsinki Comics Centre) and was not directly connected to any University. Recently, the first major academic conference on comics, NNCORE 2013. International Conference in Comics Studies, (Figure 6) took place in the autumn of 2013 at the University of Helsinki,[10] as part of the NNCORE (Nordic Network for Comics Research) project. This was probably the most extensive academic conference on comics at a Nordic university to date, gathering academics from all over the world, as well as most of the members of NNCORE.

In Finland, there are several comics courses, especially from the perspective of creating comics, but only a handful at university level. The longest running is the course held by comics artist Matti Hagelberg at Aalto University, which started as early as 1998 and is co-organized with his wife, comics artist Katja Tukianen since 2007. These are long running courses, with few, interspersed meetings, resulting in 25–30 academic points.[11]

Academic writing about comics, besides the above-mentioned, stem from a few other comics scholars, like Kai Mikkonen (Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, University of Helsinki), who has published extensively on comics, Fred Andersson (PhD Postdoctoral, Visual Studies, Åbo Akademi University) and Karin Kukkonen (Research Fellow at the literary Balzan Project at St. John's College, Oxford).

Iceland

Although Iceland is a small country, with a population of less than 320 000,[12] there have been some academic activities on comics. There are no accepted PhDs with a focus on comics, but librarian and independent literature scholar Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir (MA) has given courses on comics at the Iceland Academy of the Arts, The Reykjavík School of Visual Arts, and at the University of Iceland, and has published articles in academic journals.[13]

Several of the comics artists surrounding the Icelandic alternative comics anthology *gisp!,* most notably Halldór Baldursson and Þorri Hringsson, have been educated at the Iceland Academy of the Arts and has since been giving recurring courses on creating comics at said university (Strömberg 2010a; Strömberg 2010b).

Norway

In Norway, there is so far only one dissertation accepted with a specific theme of comics: Svenn-Arve Myklebost at the Institute for Foreign Languages, University of Bergen, with his PhD thesis, *Shakespeare in Configuration: Models, Comics and Manga* (2013).

There are several PhDs and Professors, such as Anne Gjelsvik (Professor, Institute for Arts and Media Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology), Rebecca Scherr (Professor, Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo), Michael

Prince (Associate Professor, Department of American Literature and Culture, University of Agder, Kristiansand), Øystein Sjåstad (Post-Doc, Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas, University of Oslo) and Øyvind Vågnes (Post-Doc, Institute for Information and Media Studies, University of Bergen), who have all written articles and papers about comics.

There is also an abundance of research on comics on the level of master theses, mostly stemming from the 21st century, with a few earlier ones, the oldest from 1974.[14] The growing number of MA theses concerning comics indicates that there is a possibility for more PhDs being completed in the years to come.

There does not seem to have been any academic conferences or seminars on comics in Norway, though the seminar Hollow Land: Landscape, Memory, Politics, held at The Bergen Center for Visual Arts in 2011 and organised by the above mentioned Vågnes, did contain presentations on comics and had Joe Sacco as keynote speaker. There does not seem to be any recurring courses on comics.

Sweden

In Sweden there has, so far, been three accepted PhDs that focused specifically on comics. Ann Magnusson received her PhD for *Berättande bilder: Svenska teckande serier för barn* (Narrative Images: Swedish Comics for Children, (2005) at Stockholm University, Department of Literature Studies and History of Ideas. Ylva Sommerland defended her PhD, *Tecknad Tomboy: Kaleidoskopiskt kön i manga för tonåringar* (The Tomboy in Manga for Teens: Kaleidoscopic Bodily Styles, 2012) (Figure 5) at the department of Cultural Science, University of Gothenburg. And Martin Lund presented his thesis *Rethinking the Jewish-Comcis Connection* (2013) at the Department for Humanities and Theology, Lund University), writing about Jewish culture and comics.[15] There has also been one licentiate's thesis, *Vuxenseriens bilder. Tradition och förnyelse* (Images in comics for adult readers: Tradition and innovation, (1996) by Kristina Arnerud, Department of Art studies, Uppsala University – another early academic text on comics in the Nordic countries.

There are at least four Swedish PhD students right now focusing on comics, including the writer of this paper, Fredrik Strömberg (Department of Arts and Communications, Malmö University), writing about the concept of the Other, as represented in comics, Nina Ernst (Department of Com-

Figure 3. Poster from the academic conference Academic Perspectives on Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels as Intercultural and Intermedial Phenomena, held at Växjö University in 2009.

Figure 4. Poster from the conference Contemporary Comics: International konfernce om tegneserier, held at Copenhagen Comics in 2010.

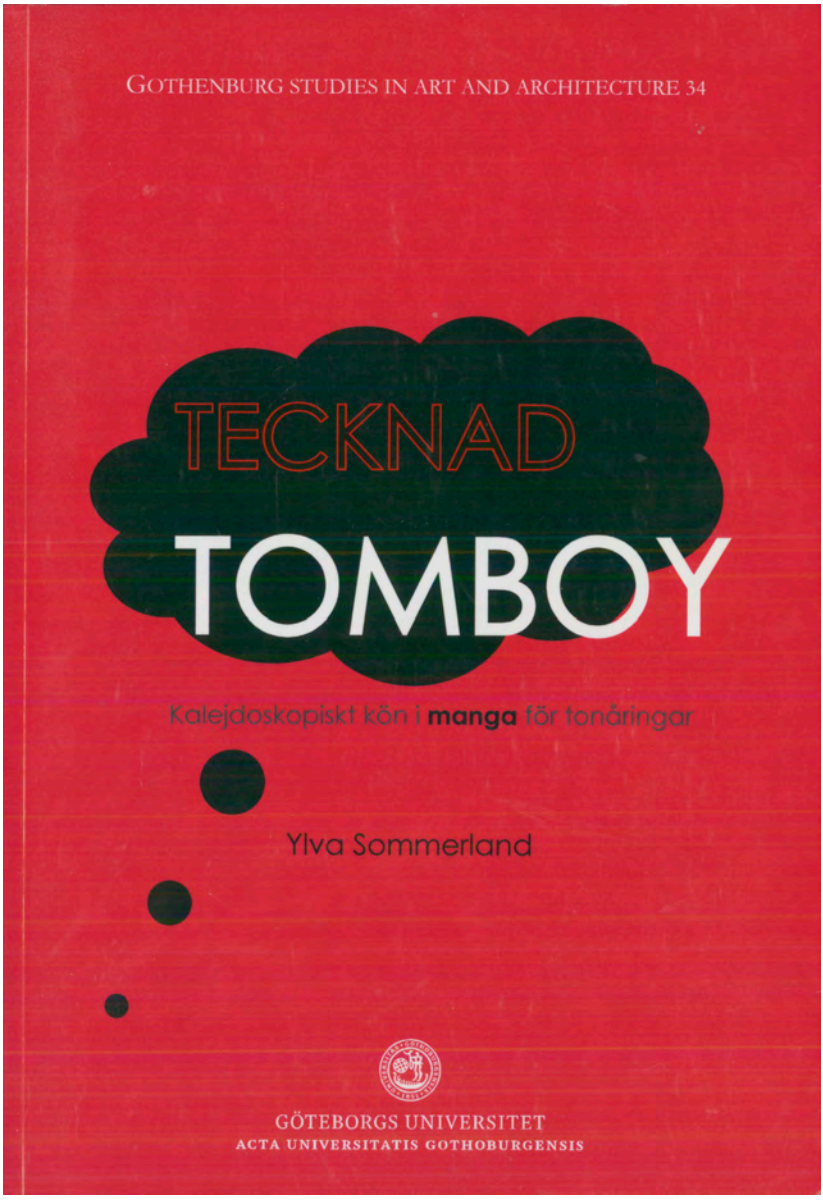

Figure 5. Tecknad Tomby: Kaleidosopiskt kön i manga för tonåringar (Drawn Tomboy: Kaleidoscopic gender in manga for teenagers) by Ylva Sommerland is one of the more recent Nordic PhDs on the subject of comics, published in 2012.

Figure 6. The NNCORE 2013 International Conference in Comics Studies, was held at University of Finland and is to date the most expansive comics conference held in a Nordic country.

parative Literature, Lund University) writing about self image in Swedish comics,[16] Madielene Wetterskog (Media and Communications department, School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University), writing about the impact that comics can have[17] and the above-mentioned Arenrud (now Arnerud Mejhammar, Department of Art History, Uppsala University), writing about the generation of Swedish comics artist that emerged in the 1980s.[18]

The first, and so far only, Swedish academic conference on comics: Academic Perspectives on Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels, as Intercultural & Intermedial Phenomena, (Figure 3)[19] was held at Växjö University (now Linnaeus University) in 2009, at the Department for Intermedial studies, and organised by Margareta Wallin Wictorin and the author of this article. There have also been seminars, one at the Arts Department at Uppsala University in 2011, which resulted in a special comics themed issue of the journal *Valör* (2/2011), and another, Telling Stories, Challenging Conventions,[20] at Malmö University in 2012, at the Department of Arts and Communication, organized by the author of this article as part of the NNCORE project.

There have been courses on comics in Sweden, both from a historical/cultural studies perspective and with a more production-oriented angle at the universities in for instance Gothenburg, Lund and Uppsala, during the last decade. The longest running was the full-time, two-year comics course Serie- och bildberättarprogrammet (Comics and picture storytelling program) at Gävle University. It was started in 1992, became a university level course in 2003 and was run by comics artist Johan Höjer until it was cancelled in 2011.[21] Other long-running courses have been given at arts and crafts universities, such as Seriekonst och avancerat bildberättande[22] (Comics Art and Advanced Image Narrative), a one-term Masters course at the School of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg, started by comics artist Gunnar Krantz and now run by comics artist Joakim Lindengren. Another long running course is Storytelling II/Graphic Novels & Sequential Art,[23] given as a part of the masters program Storytelling at the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, under the helm of comics artist Joanna Rubin Dranger. Both courses were started in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century.

Malmö University has furthermore, in 2011, added two new, on-going courses: Comics, International Perspectives,[24] a full-time, one-term, cul-

tural studies and graphic design oriented course, run by Associate Professor Jakob Dittmar, and Serieteckning och visuellt berättande[25] (Comic Art and Visual Narrative), a more creation oriented course geared towards contemporary comics, run by comics artist Krantz. Both courses are organized by the School of Arts and Communication.

Besides the above mentioned academics, who have had articles and papers published on comics, there is also in Sweden, one Professor (Michael Scholz, at the Department of History, Gotland University) and one the earlier mentioned Associate Professor (Dittmar, at the Department of Arts and Communication, Malmö University), both having been graduated in Germany and now working and researching comics at Swedish universities. Others who write about and research comics in Sweden include the earlier mentioned Wallin Wictorin (Senior Lecturer in Art History and Visual studies, Linnaeus University, Växjö) and Sonia Lagerwall (PhD, Senior Lecturer, Department of Languages and Literatures, University of Gothenburg). There are also a substantial number of MA theses about comics, making it evident that there is a possibility of more PhDs on comics in the future.

A Nordic Perspective

In addition to the activities on a national level, there has also been a recent development to organize scholars interested in researching comics on a Nordic level. The organization Nordic Network for Comics Research (NNCORE) was established in 2011,[26] financed by the Danish Research Council and had its founding meeting at the University of Odense that same year.[27] The group, led by Magnussen, consists of 50 persons, with 22 from Denmark, nine from Sweden, eight from Norway, seven from Finland, one from Iceland and Estonia respectively and two from other countries.[28]

The total number is not conclusive as to how many actually study comics in the Nordic countries, as the organization has only been active for about two years, but it is most likely indicative of the overall structure. The division between countries roughly corresponds in numbers to the academic activity around comics in each respective country, with a probable cause for the exceptionally high number of people from Denmark arising from the fact that the organization was started in, is run from and had its first, early conference in Denmark.

Finally, on a Nordic level, there is also the first and so far only Nordic academic journal focusing on research relating to comics, *Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art* (SJoCA), which released its first issue in the spring of 2012.[29] The journal is open-access, peer reviewed and has a decidedly Nordic editorial group, with Rikke Platz Cortsen (Denmark), Erin La Cour (guest researcher in Denmark), Ralf Kauranen (Finland), Fredrik Strömberg (Sweden) and Øyvind Vågnes (Norway).

Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries

Comparing research on comics in the Nordic countries shows that Denmark had the earliest start of academic studies of comics, together with Finland, and furthermore the most comics research done so far. Sweden seems to have the most organised courses in comics and comics studies, and also the most current PhD students. Norway has many PhDs, Professors and Associate Professors who write about comics, but still only one recently accepted PhD on comics specifically, and no major conferences. However, these trends are so recent and dependent upon so few persons that inference from them will most probably not predict with any certainty the development of comics studies in each country. The similarities are also stronger than the dissimilarities. Comics studies is in all of these countries a recent phenomenon. Comics as a medium has been influential in all Nordic countries for more than a century, but academic research on comics has not taken off until the 21st century.

Most scholars who write about comics on a higher academic level in the Nordic countries have not written their PhDs on comics, indicating that there has not been an acceptance of and/or interest in doing this previously. The five recently accepted PhDs on comics and the total number of at least eleven PhD candidates in the Nordic countries writing about comics right now, shows that this is changing. Furthermore, the fact that there is an abundance of recent MA theses on comics signifies a probable growth in the number of Nordic comics scholars in the years to come.

Examining the list of members of NNCORE more closely reveals that the level of the participants are evenly spread, with ten being marked as undergraduate, MA students or MA, ten are PhD candidates, thirteen are PhD, five are PhD postdoctoral, ten are Assistant/Associate Professors and two are Professors.[30] This indicates the level that research on comics has reached in the Nordic countries, with about half the group being PhD candidates or lower.

Considering the departments and disciplines within which the registered members of NNCORE work also gives a notion as of where comics studies are being performed in the Nordic countries. The largest group is that of Language and/or Literature studies, making up almost half of the members. Another large group is that of Art and/or Cultural studies, making up about a quarter of the members. Many also do research within Media and communications. Finally there are a few from History, Sociology and Theology, with one or two representatives per field.[31] Thus scholars from Art, Literature, Cultural and Media studies dominate the group, which is coherent with comics being regarded as an art form belonging somewhere between art and literature.

Comparing academic research on comics in the whole of the Nordic countries, which share an abundance of similarities in culture and academic systems, with the rest of the world, yields other results. The scholars in the Nordic countries seem to be influenced by both sides of the geographically divided international comic studies, in that there is an even occurrence of scholars from the predominantly French Literary studies/semiotics subfield and the predominantly American Cultural studies subfield. This is again not surprising, as the Nordic countries are situated, culturally, in between central Europe and the United States.

Comics Studies – Field or Discipline?

On an international level there is abundant evidence that a field of comics studies has been established, with most of the perquisite resources that Abbot stipulates, such as specialized libraries, archives, scholarly journals, discussion groups, recurring conferences and a wealth of published articles and monographs in the last two decades. On a Nordic level, it is evident that this development has started later and only gained momentum in the second decade of the 21st century, but also that the establishing of Nordic journals, organisations, conferences and so on, together indicate that a Nordic field of comics studies exists – though still in an early stage and dependent on few researchers spread out across the Nordic countries.

However, despite all the examples of academic research on comics shown, there is still not enough evidence for an established discipline of comics studies. Hatfield has this to say on the subject:

> *... comics studies has no disciplinary status in the traditional sense, that is, no clear, cohesive, and self-contained disciplinary identity.* (2010)

I would add that on an international level we are most probably on the verge of seeing a comics studies discipline emerge, as it can probably by now be said to be on a pre-paradigmatic level. There are still few, if any comics departments, but as has been stated earlier, more and more accepted PhDs, courses, libraries, research projects and so on, dedicated to comics within the academic system, and a clear expansion of these the last two decades indicate that there is a movement towards a paradigmatic level. Again, the Nordic countries are lagging behind, but with the added support of an international development, could very well play catch-up in the years to come.

Whether this is positive or not, is quite another question. Establishing a discipline of comics studies might help speed up the process with which research on comics grows, paving the way for career possibilities for researchers interested in comics, adding incentives for starting comics libraries, and so on.

The potentially negative aspect of becoming a discipline is the risk of losing the wide range of perspectives from which comics are being studied at the moment, in accordance with Foucault's views on disciplines (1979, 232). There are those who even see the establishing of a comics studies discipline as neigh impossible, as for example Hatfield who sees two reasons why comics studies does not require a disciplinary identity:

> *... one, because the heterogeneous nature of comics means that, in practice, comics study has to be at the intersection of various disciplines (art, literature, communication, etc.); and two, because this multidisciplinary nature represents, in principle, a challenge to the very idea of disciplinity. Comics studies forcefully reminds us that the disciplines cannot be discrete and self-contained: in effect, the field defies or at least seriously questions the compartmentalizing of knowledge that occurs within academe.* (2010)

At the recent NNCORE conference in Helsinki, these questions were at the very core of the final debate among all the assembled scholars, and there were very obviously disagreements as to which course would be the most fruitful. Everyone did not take part in this open discussion, but an estimate from the voices heard says that there is an even divide for and against institutionalizing comics research in the Nordic countries and in a broader scope on an international level. The persons arguing against an institutionalisation mainly saw risks in a stagnation of influx of new

ideas, whereas the persons arguing for institutionalisation saw a potential for a broader study with the help of a supporting system.[32]

After having done the research for this paper, and being part of the academic world for several years, I am convinced that comics studies would gain from formalizing into a recognized discipline, thus creating a situation where comics research can generate a sustained, cumulative production of knowledge. The analytic methods of literature studies, linguistics, art studies, narratology and so on are all valid and can generate interesting results, but may also be insufficient in capturing the whole of comics, which is a unique art form, with unique aspects, that would most likely be best analysed with theories and methods created specifically for it. These theories and methods could then also enrich other disciplines concerned with other art forms.

The establishing of a more specialized discipline of comics studies could also ensure that researchers who want to examine any aspect of comics would not feel the need to start from a comparatively low level of understanding and be compelled to explain the basics of the art form, or even worse, have to defend their choice of subject matter – as is still often the case.

In contrast to for example Cultural Studies, the fact that there is a distinct art form at the basis of this imagined discipline not only unites researchers around a unifying subject, but also makes it possible to see where this discipline fits into the existing academic system.

So, establishing a field and potentially loosing the positive aspects of interdisciplinary research, or not establishing a discipline and potentially having research on comics floundering on the outskirts of the academic system? I believe this is not necessarily an either/or situation. Using the argument set forth by Beecher and Trowler about urban and rural modes of knowledge production, I believe that it is possible to establish a discipline of comics studies, though keeping a rural mode, with a wider scope of research and a larger toolbox of methods and theories.

But can this theoretical hypothesis work on a practical level, internationally and more specifically from my point of view, in the Nordic countries? In order for this to work there needs to be a minimum of four things:

First, researchers who are interested in such as discipline, and interested in building it, with all the organisational work that this entails. The discussion at the end of the conference in Helsinki indicates that at least half

of the Nordic participants would like to see a comics studies discipline. The fact that NNCORE has been established and has worked for several years is also indicative that persons interested in organisational work are present in the Nordic field of comics studies.

Second, financing to cover the costs of the initial work of building a new discipline. As there have been several major grants rewarded to comics research and to the building of NNCORE in the last few years in the Nordic countries, there seems to be a positive climate for applications about comics, so this is clearly feasible.

Third, at least one existing Nordic university that is willing to host a newly started discipline. Some universities would be more interested than others to take part in this, depending on how well established current academic organisations and systems of disciplines are as well as how open they are to change. When meeting my colleagues at conferences and during the collection of data for this paper, I have had many discussions on this subject, and it seems that there are universities that are more open to the ideas of what Abbot called split, conflict and ingestion. There are also, as shown in the chapter Comics Studies in the Nordic Countries, several universities with courses on comics already, which means that initially, existing persons, courses etc. on a Nordic university could be organised according to other kinds of academic organisational systems, with the long-time purpose of becoming a department. This organisation/department would be a Nordic hub for the creation of recurring seminars, conferences, journals and courses on comics. The incentive for the participating university would be to be to be the first at establish a comics studies department, but also that financing could be secured externally.

This is most likely where the greatest resistance will be found, as a development like this will disturb existing systems of power, but it is a tried and tested way of enriching the academic world.

Lastly, in order to preserve the idea of a rural mode and benefit from both the fact that there are many practitioners in other fields and the fact that the Nordic countries have much in common and together can get a large number of researchers in comics than any separate Nordic country, there probably needs to be an organisation that takes on the responsibility of being the arbiter in deciding in questions that has long-term implications for the new discipline and generally handle the overarching, organisational

functions. A steering group, with representatives of not only all Nordic countries but of the most prominent existing disciplines, as indicated in my survey, would be needed. It would be up to this steering group to ensure that a rural mode would be the goal of the new discipline.

These are isues that are already being discussed within NNCORE, so given enough financial support, that organisation could very well develop into a more formal organisation, with clearer mandate to make decisions on behalf of the new discipline. Discussions have also taken place on the subject of connecting NNCORE to other, similar organisations in other parts of the world, which would be the start of building a network/organisation that could be the arbiter for a comics studies discipline on an international level.

Thus, creating a comics discipline with a rural mode of knowledge production in the Nordic countries does seem feasibly. This would maybe not completely negate the problems that Foucault envisioned with academic disciplines, but it would not mean that everyone doing research on comics would be automatically put into a hierarchical system, and it would not involve disqualification or invalidation. What it would allow for, though, is a structure that could lead to potential explosion of comics research in the Nordic countries.

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Notes

1. A good overview of the ever-growing array of methods for studying comics can be found in Ann Miller's book Reading Ban*de Dessiné: Critical Approaches to French Language Comic Strip* (2007). Despite the title, this book not only covers methods suitable for French comics, or for comic strips for that matter, but constitutes an accessible walk-through of suitable methodology for studying comics in general, from formal analysis to methods connected with, among others, cultural studies, gender, autobiography and psychoanalysis. Owing to the nature of overviews, each method is only presented briefly, but Miller continually gives references for further study.

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There is a need for introspection within any field or discipline, especially if it is in flux – a need for research on research. This is true for media and communication studies (cf. Nordenstreg, 2007, p. 220) as well as for comics studies, where an introspective debate has been that of whether comics studies should strive to remain a field or aim to become a discipline. The article ”Comics Research in the Nordic Countries” (Strömberg, 2016) took part in this discourse, adding among other things the distinction between urban and rural knowledge production (Becher & Trowler, 2001, 106–108) as a way of envisioning a road forward. But its main contribution is probably the assessment of the state of comics studies in the Nordic countries. As this was the first time this area was comprehensively analyzed, most of the information consisted of primary data.

A lot has happened in the fast-moving field that is comics studies in the years since the article was written. The negative bias against using comics as subject for academic study seems to have eroded away even further and comics research is now growing at an escalating speed within various fields and disciplines (Singer, 2019, p. 8). In all Nordic countries, the developments and the expansions discussed in the article have, mostly, continued, with for instance more PhD students and dissertations accepted, and new comics-related courses being added at Nordic universities, e.g. the Bachelor level courses at Malmö University: ”Serieteckning och visuellt berättande” (Comics and Visual Storytelling), ”Journalistic and Documentary Comics”, ”Digital Comics” (Malmö Comics Research Lab, 2021a) and ”Religion and Comics: A Critical Introduction” (Malmö University, 2021).

However, the Nordic Network of Comics Research (NNCoRE) has not arranged as many new seminars and conferences as earlier, nor has *Scandinavian Journal of Comics Art* (SJoCA) published as many new issues as before. There have been other comics-related academic activities, e.g. the three-year (2019–2021) initiative ”Comics and Society: Research, Art, and Cultural Politics” organized by the independent Nordic Summer University, which has included four seminars entitled ”Materiality of Comics” (2019), ”Participation and Communities in Comics” (2019), ”Comics and Feminism” (2020) and ”Narrative and Violence” (2021) (Nordic Summer University, 2021), as well as the ”Contemporary Nordic Comics Research Conference” at Malmö University (Malmö Comics Research Lab, 2021b). All-in-all, comics research in the Nordic countries seems to be a growing movement at the moment.

At the same time, the debate has continued, and the divide between the researchers advocating initiating a new discipline and keeping comics studies an interdisciplinary field still seems evident (cf. Sommerland & Wallin Wictorin, 2017; Aldama, 2018; Singer, 2019, p. 30; Jakobs, 2020, p. 656). There are indications that we are moving towards establishing a more cohesive field of comics studies, as there are more and more academic courses, libraries, grants, and research projects focusing on comics, but comics studies still seem to be at a pre-paradigmatic level (Strömberg, 2016, p. 14). The fact that there are new publications such as *Reader Superhelden* (Etter, Nehrlich & Nowotny, 2018), *Comics Studies Here and Now* (Aldama, 2018) and *The Oxford Handbook of Comic Book Studies* (Aldama, 2020), does indicate a canon being established. The texts in these volumes span from journalistic to academic writing, from historical analyses to close readings, from psychoanalysis to cultural studies – so the field of comics studies still seems to be very much interdisciplinary.

The reader *Comics Studies Here and Now* has a bold statement on the back cover, exclaiming that comics studies scholarship "…no longer feels the need to justify itself within or against other fields of study", and that what we are witnessing is the "…arrival of comics studies as a full-fledged discipline…" (Aldama, 2018). I disagree with at least the latter part of this statement, but the fact that it is stated, on the cover of a collection by a major, international academic publisher indicates the state of comics studies, i.e. that there are forces moving comics studies towards becoming more of an independent entity within the academic system, and quite probably this statement in itself also pushes the boundaries of where we are heading in the question of field vs. discipline.

Maybe the most succinct statement on the potential of comics studies as a discipline comes from literature researcher Marc Singer:

> *I'm looking for a professional academic discipline, one that is open to scholars from other disciplines and comics fans too, but also those who have never read a comic before. I hope comics studies will welcome any methodology or theoretical framework, provided that scholars are willing to put in the work of familiarizing themselves with the field and its subjects.* (Singer, 2019, p. 6)

This statement, of openness to different influences but at the same time sharing a basic knowledge, seems in accordance with the discussion in my article, of having a discipline, but keeping the rural mode of knowledge production (cf. Strömberg, 2016, p. 152).

However, the conclusions in the article "Comics Research in the Nordic Countries" (Strömberg, 2016), seem in retrospect to be a bit too black or white. With the benefit of hindsight, I have come to view the dilemma of whether a comics discipline would be a fruitful endeavor or not as more of a question of grayscales. On a political level, I still think that comics research would benefit from building its own power base within the academic system, i.e. that professors' chairs, research libraries, dedicated grants etc. could be beneficial, not least for the potential synergies of having larger clusters of comics researchers (Strömberg, 2016, p. 151). For the quality of the research, the epistemological development of comics studies, I think the arguments stated in my article, of there being several positive aspects to an inherently interdisciplinary approach is also valid, at least for the foreseeable future of comics studies, but that the optimistic vision of creating a discipline and keeping the rural, i.e. the diversified, non-centralized mode of research (Strömberg, 2016, p. 152) might turn out to be difficult to maintain in a realistic setting.

As a media and communication scholar, having done my thesis on comics within an established discipline, I realize just how much my research has benefitted from this; how the expectations of focusing on the formal aspects of how comics communicate has assisted me in going further than I might have done had I exclusively turned to specific theories on comics. This does not fully change my ideas on whether comics studies could benefit from becoming a discipline, but I do view the "alliance" between the field of comics studies and established disciplines such as media and communication studies as potentially beneficial, for both parties.

The discussion in my article on the state and future of comics studies in the Nordic countries has been referenced and the theme has been discussed further (cf. Sommerland & Wallin Wictorin, 2017; Wallner, 2017). The idea of analyzing comics studies within a specific geographic area has also been quoted as an inspiration for similar investigations into comics studies in other parts of the world (cf. Ariza & Manuela, 2018; Maksa, 2019), as the debate on the way forward for comics studies continues.

Subfields within Comics Studies

Two main areas have historically dominated comics studies: literary/textual studies within semiotics and psychology – mostly situated in French-speaking parts of the world, and historical and cultural studies

– mostly situated in the anglophone parts of the world (Christiansen, 1999, p. 5; Beaty, 2007, p. 8). However, these divides based on culture and language seem to be eroding in a more transnational academic world (cf. Cohn, 2013; McKinney, 2013). As comics studies diversify, new research areas and subfields emerge.

The themes of the articles included in this thesis, as well as the thesis itself, take part in four such areas within the growing, multi-disciplinary field of comics studies: A) the emerging subfield of studies on how comics can be impacted by cultural interactions across national and cultural borders (Stein, Etter & Chaney, 2018, p. 4); B) a small but growing body of research on meetings between Islam, the Middle East and superhero comics (Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 9; Høigilt, 2020); C) research on comics that uses the theories of intertextuality (Merino, 2012, p. 252); and D) the emerging subfield of studies of comics from the perspective of cognitive science and schema theory (Cohn & Magliano, 2020, p. 197). It is also part of the above-mentioned, expanding subfield of comics studies made from a media and communication studies perspective.

Transnational Comics Studies

The research in the articles "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) and "Superhero Comics from the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017), as well as "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020) could be viewed as part of a related subfield within comics studies, of how this art form has been impacted by aesthetic, social, political, economic and cultural interactions reaching across national and cultural borders. This emerging field, which has most often been pursued from the perspective of cultural studies, has been labeled transnational comics studies, and has seen an increased level of activity in the last decade, with conferences, articles, and anthologies (Stein, Etter & Chaney, 2018, p. 4). Although methods and theories applied differ, the idea defining this loosely connected subfield seems to be the view that the study of comics has historically focused too much on analysis through the lens of nationally defined comics cultures, often disregarding or sidestepping the potential of intersections between them (Denson, Meyer & Stein, 2013, p. 1).

The media scholar John A. Lent summarizes research trends within this subfield into three categories: A) the study of comics creators as transnational agents, containing analysis of works by artist that straddle different countries and/or cultures; B) the study of representations of transnationa-

lism in comics, where the analysis is focused on themes in comics based in different geographically or culturally defined areas; and C) the study of transnational comic book titles and characters, of how comic books and characters can be hybrids of several different comics cultures (Lent, 2014, p. xiv).

Within this categorization, "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020) could be included in the first category as it analyses the art of the Iranian French artist Marjane Satrapi; "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) could be included in the second category as it analyses how Middle Eastern cultures have been represented in American comics; and "Superhero Comics from the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017) could be included in the third category as it analyses an American genre transposed to the Middle east – showing that contributions to all areas in this emerging subfield have been made as part of the thesis.

The study of the graphic novel *Persepolis* is in itself a comparatively extensive research area (Singer, 2019, p. 153), partly situated within transnational comics studies, with analyses from perspectives such as feminism, nationalism, and remembrance (Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 9). Other themes within transnational comics studies include analyses of global adaptations of characters, e.g. Batman (Bieloch & Bitar, 2013) and Spider-Man (Davé, 2013; Stein, 2013) or transnationalism in specific comics cultures, e.g. Germany (Kraenzle & Ludewig, 2020).

Superhero Comics, Islam and the Middle East

The loosely connected, interdisciplinary research area dealing with the relationship between superhero comics, Islam and cultures from the Middle East is still emerging. The Middle East refers to the transcontinental region centered on Western Asia, Turkey, and Egypt. The term replaced the earlier designator of the Near East in the beginning of the 20th century and can be criticized for being Eurocentric (cf. Hanafi, 2000, p. 1). Other possible denominators include the Arab World and the Arab Nation, although as these seem more ambiguous and contended, the term the Middle East will be used throughout this thesis. For a discussion on the definition of Muslims, and the distinction between Arabs and Muslims, see the article "'Yo, rag-head!'", page 577. In short, even though there exists a preconceived notion of a homogenous category of the Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim, all Muslims are not Arabs, all Arabs are not Muslims and all Arabs

and Muslims do not live in the Middle East (Volpp, 2003, p. 147). Thus, when I refer to cultures from the Middle East, this includes but does not equate to Muslim cultures.

In the article "'Yo, rag-head!'" – which seems to have been part of the early inroads into the research area of superhero comics and the Middle East – an overview of existing research was presented, listing studies of how Muslims and Arabs had been represented in popular culture in general, and more specifically in superhero comics (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 577). The results showed little research done on this subject, and most of it dated (e.g. Rifas, 1988; Shaheen, 1994).

The preface to the anthology *Muslim Superheroes – Comics, Islam, and Representation* (Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 8) examined research into how Muslims have been represented in superhero comics. A total of twenty English-language articles and book chapters were found, all but one written after 2010. Of these, two were broader surveys of the field, seven single character analysis, three comparative readings and seven focused specifically on the Kuwaiti comic book *The* 99 (Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 9). There are more articles relating to this field, especially if broadening the view to include other languages. The publishing of the anthology *Muslim Superheroes* also expanded significantly on that number, containing nine new entries, including my article "Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?" (Strömberg, 2017).

The Kuwaiti superhero comic book *The* 99 (see Image 2, below – consisting of a promotional artwork presenting the titular team showcasing their combination of traditional superhero costumes and clothes and apparel from the Middle East) is an example of a subject matter within this field that has been given attention in academia. This is understandable as this attempt at using popular culture to create meetings between different cultures invites analyses from different theoretical starting points. Studies of *The* 99 have also been done from a number of perspectives, from Islamic studies and Middle Eastern studies to media and gender studies (e.g. Edwin, 2012; Deeb, 2012; Santo, 2013; Clements & Gauvain, 2014). *The* 99 was also covered extensively in international news media – culminating in an official commendation by then President Barack Obama (Obama, 2010).

Other subject matters that have garnered interest in academia within the research area of Muslim and Arab superheroes are the American comic

Image 2: *The 99*. © Teshkeel 2015.

book *Ms. Marvel* and its protagonist, the American Muslim Kamala Khan, as well as the Egyptian web comic *Qahera*. Both were analyzed in articles in the anthology *Muslim Superheroes* (Reyns-Chikuma & Lorenz, 2017; Kreil, 2017) and have also been studied in other academic texts in the last few years (e.g. Arjana, 2018; Baldanzi & Rashid, 2020).

Intertextuality

In ”Part III: Developing, Revisiting & Connecting”, I utilize the theory of intertextuality from literary studies to extend the understanding of how schemata in comics can be connected. Intertextuality can be defined as the “various links in form and content which binds any text to other texts” (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 224), or as Kristeva put it in 1969: ”Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). The theories of intertextuality were developed starting in the late 1960s as, among other things, a post-structuralist answer to the focus that had previously been put on the intent of the author when analyzing the meaning of texts. According to the ideas that were launched, a text owes more to other, previous texts than to its maker in that writing was viewed as a process of combining elements

that have already been used, building on established traditions rather than creating anything new. In this sense, an author becomes more of a compiler of collages, assembled from bits and pieces of already existing texts, and the emphasis is instead put on the reader, and how he/she connects these "bits and pieces" (Allen, 2000, p. 5).

Intertexuality and Media & Communication Studies

The ideas of intertextuality have become influential since Kristeva coined the term in 1966 (Kristeva, 1980, p. 145) and it is today employed in several disciplines and fields within academia. The concept of intertextuality is for instance frequently cited in media and communication studies, where it is employed both to describe an interpretative process of audiences and as stylistic device consciously employed by producers of media (Ott & Walter, 2000, p. 429). Critics of the initial ideas have countered by reintroducing the importance of the author into the theory and today, post-structuralists tend to use the term to question the very nature of meaning in texts, while structuralists in contrast see it as an opportunity to locate and even pinpoint literary meaning (Allen, 2000, p. 4).

Intertexuality and Comics Studies

Intertextuality is also a prevalent theory within comics studies (cf. Miller, 2007, p. 141; Merino, 2012, p. 252), with some writers even viewing comics, or at least some of its ubiquitous genres such as superheroes as especially intertextual (Bongko, 2013, p. 90). Comics being a multimodal art form means that both visual and narrative elements can be viewed as examples of intertextual references (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 85). Intertextual studies of comics include research into how other art forms influence comics (e.g. Jahlmar, 2015, examining how Milton's *Paradise Lost* is reworked in *The Sandman*), how comics influence other art forms (e.g. Lambert, 2009, discussing intertextual connections between early films and comics), as well as analyses of transmedial texts and adaptions (e.g. D'Arcy, 2019, researching the intertextual complexities of Allison Bechdel's critically acclaimed autobiography *Fun Home*).

Schema Theory

The final, major theoretical basis for my thesis is cognitive science and the theory of schema. Schemata can be defined within cognitive science

as mental frameworks, patterns built on prior knowledge and experience, serving to facilitate understanding of events in everyday life, but also in relation to texts in any media (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 376). These schemata express general characteristics of a phenomenon, not unique features of a specific object, situation, or event (Haberlandt, 1994, p. 147). These ideas have been adapted within several disciplines and fields (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 376), evolving into related but different theories, e.g. image schema, textual schema, story schema, gender schema, scripts, and genre schema – making it important to be particular with what strand of this theory is being referenced.

Art historian Ernst H. Gombrich developed schema theory in the 1950s in relation to the historical progress of creating mimetic effects in art, i.e. of attempting to recreate the perception of something in the "outer world" as faithfully as possible in visual art. Gombrich defined schemata as patterns artists (and potentially also viewers) recognize in visual elements in art, their own or by others, adjust to their purposes and use in creating new visual art (Gombrich, 2014, p. 64). The practice of using and referring to this theory has waned, perhaps as the basic premise of mimetic art seemed less relevant in an age of modern, conceptual art (Wood, 2009, p. 836). However, it seems more and more relevant as visual communication has become increasingly ubiquitous in the 21st century (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 172).

Schema Theory and Media & Communication Studies

Even though there are no mentions of schema theory in many anthologies and research overviews on media and communication studies, e.g. Scannell (2007), Berger (2011) or Hansen & Machin (2018), schema theory is utilized within media and communication studies, often referenced as: A) textual schema, where interpretations of texts in the broader sense of this term are viewed as dependent on expectations established by previous experiences of media, texts and genres (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 376, 432); B) gender schema, i.e. how we adjust the norms of our cultures to ideas of gender differences (Johnson, 2009, p. 436); C) theories of scripts – preconcieved notions of sequentially ordered events, e.g. what to do when visiting a shop; or D) story schemata – organized clusters of knowledge about stories and how they are typically structured (Downing, McQuail, Schlesinger & Wartella, 2004, p. 202). However, the development of schema theory in relation to art and images, as seen in Gombrich's writing se-

ems to be less prevalent in media and communication studies. The theory of image schema from linguistics has been utilized within for instance film studies (e.g. Coëgnarts & Kiss, 2017), although this is a development of the cognitive schema theory that despite its name is unrelated to Gombrich's ideas and more related to bodily interactions and their effect on how we interpret the world (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 20).

Another interesting development of schema theory, relevant to the studies I have made, is termed cultural schema. The cultural studies researchers Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros state that "…the education of an artist serves as a microcosm of the education of art as a whole" (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 169), touching upon the idea that schemata can be said to be carried both specifically in the consciousness of a single artist and more generally in a culture or subculture. Repeated exposure to a phenomenon is said to increase the probability of it forming a pattern, a schema in the mind of an observer (Mandler, 2014, p. 27), and according to theories of cultural schema, a repeated occurrence of said phenomenon increases the probability of the schema becoming part of a specific culture, thus increasing the probability that a person who has access to that culture, also has access to said schema (Garro, 2000, p. 285).

Film theoretician David Bordwell has also developed schema theory, proposing that there are external schemata, cultural norms and expectations that can be said to affect for instance a comic – comparable to the earlier mentioned cultural schema, but also internal schemata, rules for how the narrative and the visuals in the comic itself works. Internal and external schemata may coincide to a higher or lesser degree, with deviations between them potentially standing out prominently (Bordwell, 1985, p. 150–153).

Still, schema theory is not a major theme in media and communication studies, and especially not when it comes to analyzing images, which is exactly what I am interested in here.

Schema Theory and Comics Studies

The fact that Gombrich as early as in 1960 held forth comics and caricature as the epitome of artistic development when discussing schema (Gombrich, 2014 [1960], p. 286) could have led to schema theory becoming part of the earlier eras of comics studies. Gombrich's theories have been influential in art history (Elkins, 2009, p. 304), but notwithstanding the

existence of analyses of comics based on schema theory – from linguistic perspectives (e.g. Lefèvre, 2000; Cohn, 2013), from narrative perspectives (e.g. Kukkonen, 2013; Rendel 2019) or from an art historiy perspective (e.g. Aldama, 2009; Wallin Wictorin, 2011), schema-based analysis has just recently developed into an active subfield within comics studies and Gombrich is rarely referenced. This seeming lack of interest in Gombrichian schema theory stands in contrast to the fact that the sequential aspect of comics – i.e. that separate images in comics are juxtaposed components of a larger narrative whole (Groensteen, 2007, p. 5) – invites for a discussion about how images in comics can be said to be made up of recurring visual patterns, schemata that an artist can adjust in order to communicate not only the representations of characters, objects and environments, but also use to create variations of these, which can be what drives the visual narrative (cf. Cohn, 2013, p. 28). Recent anthologies on comics studies and special issues of journals in cognitive science (e.g. Dunst, Laubrock & Wildfeuer, 2018; Cohn & Magliano, 2020), indicate that analysis of comics using cognitive theories is indeed viewed as an emerging field, both in comics studies and in cognitive science (Cohn & Magliano, 2020, p. 197).

The article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020), as well as "Part III: Revisiting, Developing & Connecting" in this thesis seize upon the potential of schema theory in connection with comics and take part in this recently emerged research area within comics studies connected to cognitive science. Being a relatively new phenomenon, comics studies has much to gain from connecting to research found in related, more well-established disciplines and fields such as cognitive science (Aldama, 2009, p. 8), which has a long academic tradition and contains a treasure trove of potentially relevant theories that might illuminate comic studies (Kukkonen, 2013, p. 5).

Taken together, the above indicates that schema theory has an under-developed potential, both in media and communication studies and in comics studies, something that I will delve deeper into later in this text.

6. Roads not Taken

There are numerous ways in which meetings between comics and cultures from the Middle East could be discussed, analyzed, and understood and many possible inroads were contemplated and rejected during the

research journey. Some of these possible research options will here be presented under the headings: A) empirical opportunities; B) methodological alternatives; and C) theoretical possibilities.

Empirical Opportunities

Concerning the empirical data studied in the articles regarding comics and the Middle East, there are many relevant comics that could have been used as basis for the research. It would for instance have been interesting to analyze the traditional comic books for young readers that are produced in the Middle East, such as *Majid* from the United Arab Emirate or *Samir* from Egypt, which visually seem to have evolved away from their European and American predecessors. Alas, here language was a definite barrier. There are also recent developments concerning superhero comics of Middle Eastern origin, such as the Lebanese webcomic *Malak* (malakonline.com) or the comic book *Wayl* by Jordanian Zaid Adham and Saudi Arabian Yasser Alireza (Skye, 2018), which would have made interesting inclusions into the empirical material but made their debut too late to be incorporated.

Other art forms linked to comics, e.g. illustrations, cartoons and animation could also have been included. The subject matter the articles focused on appear in several forms, as for instance *The 99* has been made into an animated TV series and a videogame (Deeb, 2012, p. 191) and the graphic novel *Persepolis* was made into an animated feature film and a web comic (Chute, 2008, p. 106). As the intent was specifically to understand how these cultural meetings are represented in comics, these have for the most part been disregarded, although parallels could potentially be drawn from comparative studies.

Methodological Alternatives

In retrospect, the choices of methods for the articles seem to have been appropriate, based on the respective aims of the articles – but there are of course things that could have been done differently.

For the first article, "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b), the approach of analyzing five different superheroes could have been substituted for a close reading of the comics featuring one of these heroes, something that was suggested by the publishing journal. This could have opened up for going deeper into the motivations of the character, the origin story, the

visual and verbal communication and so on. What would have been lost would have been the overview that the article provided, which seemed important as it was part of opening a new research area.

The second article, "Superheroes from The Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017), contains a comprehensive, comparative study of the comics by the two Middle Eastern publishers AK Comics and Teshkeel, which could have been complemented by reception studies of how these comics were received in the Middle East and in the West. Based on available data, I draw conclusions in the article as to why both publishers ultimately failed at reaching large enough audiences to sustain the production of the comics, but primary data from the readers would have been an invaluable complement. Alas, this was not feasible due to it being too complicated to locate and interview readers in other countries in a way that would deliver substantial data to make the research meaningful and reliable.

Finally, the third article contained a formal analysis of the graphic novel *Persepolis*, and even though the insistence on analyzing only the information within the graphic novel yielded interesting results, a broadening of the scope to include more external information about the artist could potentially have been rewarding. However, the results would probably not have been able to fit into the maximum length required by the publishing journal without eliminating vital parts of the existing analysis.

Theoretical Possibilities

As media and communication studies is a melting pot of different relevant theories, I have attempted to keep an open mind as to which theories might apply to the problems I have sought to disentangle. The theories of schemata have for instance been adapted in several different fields and disciplines (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 376), and even though some of these also could be interesting in relation to the main theme of this thesis (e.g. Kukkonen, 2013; Cohn 2013) – the choice was made to focus mainly on ideas from cognitive science as developed within art history.

The way schema theory, and especially the new concepts of visual elements, visual ideas and visual building blocks were applied could also have been addressed using semiotics, which has been developed to answer similar questions of how visual communication can be analyzed and understood (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 382). This was attempted in the very first article, "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b), but ultimately, the

ideas of the more process-oriented schema theory (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2012, p. 336), which in Gombrich's version also facilitates a focus on the artist's perspective, were deemed better suited for the undertaking. The theories of semiotics, and especially those adapted and developed in conjunction with comics studies, seemed applicable to analyzing the way comics communicate, but a development of Gombrichian schema theories could open up the possibility of analyzing and understanding how, through the existence of schemata/visual patterns, the creative process of a comics artists can be affected, as visual influences are assimilated into the art.

Within comics studies, an oft quoted theory when discussing similar questions is Neil Cohn's psycholinguistics (cf. Cohn, 2012; Cohn, 2013). These did indeed touch upon ideas I wanted to pursue but felt inadequate for my purposes. I went back to some of Cohn's sources (e.g. Wilson & Wilson, 1984) and found that they in turn quoted Gombrich. This had me studying Gombrich's own writing, where I found many of the ideas that have since permeated my theories about schema and comics. Gombrich's theories have been tested through analyses of drawings by children from different geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds (Wilson & Wilson, 1984, p. 15). Children are not the same as professional artists, but according to cognitive theory the processes are similar, and the research indicated that Gombrich's version of schema theory can be useful for understanding how visual influences can be communicated (Wilson & Wilson, 1984, p. 25).

Theories connected to multiculturalism could furthermore also have been employed to contextualize the data in the articles. Similar themes have been analyzed within the research area of multicultural comics studies, and multicultural approaches to comics studies could have been a fruitful way of understanding the cultural exchanges that have been analyzed in my articles (cf. Ayaka & Hauge, 2015, p. 2). However, some of the theories employed within this research area, e.g. ideas of the Other, and Orientalism, associated with psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies that are often employed within multicultural studies of comics, have been used.

7. Barriers of Culture and Language

The dilemma of barriers of culture and language mentioned earlier, and my hesitancy as to how to process empirical data connected to the Middle East has remained throughout the research. A major concern has been how to reflect on my role as a researcher from the Western world, analyzing comics depicting and/or aimed at people from the Middle East.

Binary Opposites

The fact that all comics analyzed were, at least partially, aimed at an audience in the West (cf. AK Comics, 2005; Satrapi, 2007, p. 7; al-Mutawa, 2010), indicates that at least on some levels, I had the references needed to analyze and draw conclusions from the material. However, this has still often left me hesitant to express myself with any certainty. In hindsight, I realize that I could have made the author's presence more clear in the articles, making it more obvious what my preconceived notions and cultural background are, as a way for the reader to evaluate the analysis. As a white male from Sweden who has lived a relatively stable and secure life, I am for instance in some ways the binary opposite (Laskar, 2015, p. 4) to the artist who created *Persepolis*, a woman from Iran who has experienced war and had to go into exile in another part of the world. Satrapi created *Persepolis* specifically for a European audience, stating that she intended it to change the way in which people in Europe viewed Iran (Satrapi, 2007, p. 2), so my bias is in this case at least in line with how the artist expressed her view of the intended readership.

One way forward is to accept and acknowledge the bias of my viewpoint, making it more explicit, giving the readers a tool for understanding the interpretations (Haraway, 1988, p. 589) and potentially avoiding pitfalls of Eurocentric bias. Concerning the article "Superheroes in the Middle East" there is for instance the question of whether the view that the superhero genre and its essential conventions are based in the U.S. (Strömberg, 2017, p. 134) means that the analysis misses potentially interesting aspects that could have arisen from considering cultural exchanges to be more of a two-way negotiation (cf. Mehta & Mukherji, 2015, p. 12). For instance, Teshkeel hired artists from the American superhero business and seems to have instructed them to design superhero costumes that were less revealing, less geared towards the male gaze than had been the norm in the U.S. (Strömberg, 2017, p. 153). This raises the question of whether any

of these artists have used these visual ideas in subsequent productions of superhero comics in the U.S., making the cultural exchange reciprocal.

A Semi-peripheral Nordic Perspective

However, there are potential advantages to analyzing a phenomenon from the "outside". When writing books and articles about comics, I have found that being from Scandinavia can be advantageous, as we are not part of any of the dominant international comics cultures, i.e. North America, France/Belgium, and Japan/Asia. The indigenous comics cultures of Sweden are vibrant but comparatively small (cf. Strömberg, 2010b), and comics from all major international comics cultures have been translated extensively into Swedish, all the way back to the 19th century, giving the possibility of a broad base for entries into the study of comics as compared to the sometimes myopic view of studies performed by scholars situated within dominant comics cultures (Denson, Meyer & Stein, 2013, p. 1; Ayaka & Hauge, 2015, p. 7). One example of the latter is the anthology *Transnational Perspective on Graphic Narratives*, where it is stated that there is a "relative dearth of transnational investigations of graphic narratives in the growing field of comics studies" (Denson, Meyer & Stein, 2013, p. 1), at the same time as almost all studies included in the volume involve comics from the U.S. Or the anthology *Multicultural Comics from Zap to Blue Beetle* (Aldama, 2010), which deals with the idea of multiculturalism in comics, again almost exclusively by discussing comics from the U.S.

Anne Ring Petersen coined the term "semi-peripheral Nordic Perspective" to describe the idea that scholars based in the Nordic countries can, through a conscious and self-critical inscription in the semi-peripheral that the art cultures of the Nordic countries constitute in relation to the global art world, still have a productive entry into studying global art forms of today (Petersen, 2015, p. 1). This is in line with Haraway's idea of situated knowledge, i.e. that an understanding of your own social and cultural knowledge makes it possible to understand someone else's situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988, p. 589). Ring Petersen goes on to assert that contemporary comparative approaches would need to build on a critical revision of the Eurocentric bias endemic in art history's long tradition of cross-cultural comparisons (Petersen, 2015, p. 4). Similarly, a conscious and self-critical awareness of placement in the semi-periphery of the global comics cultures hold the potential of enriching the study of comics in the Nordic countries. These ideas, and espcially the awareness of the

risks of having a Eurocentric view influenced the analysis in the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis", where connections from comics and Persian art forms were not viewed as hierarchically ordered as to their importance, something that has not always been the case in earlier research on this subject (Singer, 2019, p. 156).

PART II: CASE STUDIES

This section presents the three articles that form the basis for this thesis, i.e. "'Yo, rag-head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11" (Strömberg, 2012b), "Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?" (Strömberg, 2017) and "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis – Assimilation, Combination, Integration" (Strömberg, 2020), in facsimile. Each article has been given a preface, with discussions on theories and methods employed, as well as the results. Included afterward are also updates on recent developments concerning the research areas of each article, as well as a critical look at the execution of the research.

1. "Yo, Rag-head!": Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11

The article "'Yo, rag-head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11" (Strömberg, 2012b) examines how Arabs and Muslims have been represented in the most American of all comics genres, superheroes, and more specifically how they were treated as superheroes in the period after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when the conflict between the U.S. and the Muslim world escalated.

Aim

This first foray into the main subject of the thesis served as an opportunity to delve into the broader theme of how cultures from the Middle East have been represented in comics. The aim was initially to discern

whether there were any Arab and/or Muslim superheroes in American comics published after 9/11, and if so, analyze how they communicated ideas and representations of the "Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim" (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 577) to American readers.

Theory

In this article, the idea of the Other, initially described in psychoanalytical studies as part of how the Same/Self can be defined as opposed to a person or a group different from one's own perceived group or groups (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 306), was a starting point for a discussion on how Middle Eastern-based cultures were represented by American comics writers and artists. The original, Lacanian psychoanalytical idea of the Other has been applied within comics studies in close readings, e.g. of the Belgian comic *Tintin* (Peeters, 1984) or the American *Batman* (Bongco, 2013). The concept of the Other and the process of Othering have also been used in postcolonial studies as a way of understanding how people and cultures associated with former European-dominated countries have been negatively defined from a Western perspective (Evans, 1996, p. 133) in a persistent and strategic practice of epistemic violence, of representing the self/Other binary from a colonial/imperial context (Mehta & Mukherji, 2015, p. 2).

Postcolonial studies have been criticized for essentializing cultures, representing them as fixed and static, as well as presenting the differences between East and West as unbridgeable (Chibber, 2013, p. 154). With this in mind, there are still possibilities for using this development of the concept of the Other in relation to representations of different cultures in comics (Wallin Wictorin, 2011, p. 34) – an art form that due to its sequential nature is often based on styles employing a restricted amount of visual information (McLuhan, 2001, p. 178; Gombrich, 2014, p. 286), which could lead to the use of stereotypical character designs in more or less overt forms of Othering (Rifas, 2010, p. 33).

Although both Ernst H. Gombrich and Marshall McLuhan seem to have had limited knowledge of comics, their views on this art form, from the perspective of art history and media studies respectively, are illuminating as they get to the core of comics when comparing it to other art forms and media. Even though comics can be a more complex art form than Gombrich and McLuhan seem to imply – often restricting their examples

to comic strips and/or cartoons, there is still a grain of truth in their assessments that comics often seem to lean towards "abbreviated styles" (Gombrich, 2014, p. 286) or "low resolution" (McLuhan, 2001, p. 24), i.e. that the visual aspects of the sequential, narrative art form of comics tend towards styles that are not as information-heavy as for example photographs or oil paintings (cf. Rifas, 2010, p. 33). This is not to state that all comics look the same, but if the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin for instance had been writing about comics, he would probably have put the art in comics closer to his concept of *linear* – i.e. art focusing on contours, than to *painterly* (malerisch) – i.e. art where representations of shadow and light can supersede the dominance of contours (Wölfflin, 2012, p. 14).

Nevertheless, these possibilities have led to the ideas concerning the Other becoming increasingly important in the study of comics, especially when analyzing graphic novels that in their narrative address the idea of Otherness, e.g. Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the aforementioned *Persepolis* and Joe Sacco's comics journalism (Mehta & Mukherji, 2015, p. 5).

A development of the concept of the Other used within postcolonial studies is that of Orientalism, defined as projections by Western cultures onto people and cultures from Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies of qualities opposite and inferior to those they ascribe to themselves (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 306). Edward Said, who was part of defining the term Orientalism as a general, patronizing Western attitude towards the "Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 202), saw a potential in comics as empirical data for study, as its immediate, comparatively artistically free, and unhindered communication is ideal for studies of cultural, political, and ideological trends in a society (Said, 2001, p. iv). This potential has been seized upon by many researchers, and theories developed around the term Orientalism and the Oriental Other have been used in the study of comics, especially in the last two decades (e.g. Miller, 2007; Dittmer & Larsen, 2010; Suter, 2012; McKinney, 2013).

This theoretical base was extended in "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) by including the concept of the male gaze, also associated with the idea of the Other. The term male gaze is based on the idea that in literature as well as in visual art forms, including comics, female characters are often designed from a male perspective, reflecting values of a patriarchal society (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 248). Even though this idea, introduced by film historian Laura Mulvey in 1975, has been criticized for not

taking into account other factors, such as class and race (Ettinger, 1995), the discussion surrounding this theory can be used as a complement to the ideas of the Other and Orientalism in analyzing how meetings between different cultural contexts can be represented in comics, where it can be utilized to make explicit how characters have been constructed by the earlier mentioned tendencies of utilizing restricted amounts of visual information in comics (McLuhan, 2001, p. 24). This theory has also been used in comics studies, again escalating during the last few decades, often in conjunctioon with: A) analyses of male and female oriented genres in Asian comics; B) comics made by female artists; and C) in line with the use in "'Yo, rag-head!'", in analyses of the often over-sexualized American superhero genre (e.g. Allison, 2000; Avery-Natale, 2013; Gibson, 2015).

An example of a combination of male gaze and Orientalism can be seen in Image 3, below, where the Marvel character Dust, who was originally given a superhero costume that was to invoke her diegetic cultural background of not sexualizing the female body (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 583) but who later has been reinterpreted by other artists to do the exact opposite.

Image 3: Cover art from New X-Men: Hellions #2 (Weir, DeFillips & Henry 2005). © Marvel Comics 2005.

The theory of the Other as well as that of Orientalism is frequently cited within media and communication studies (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 306), not the least in studies of media coverage in the West of events related to the Middle East and South-East Asia (Watson & Hill, 2006, p. 216). The theory of the male gaze is also frequently used within media and communication studies, especially in research on film (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 248).

Method

The method in "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) was initially inductive, as there was little knowledge produced concerning Arab and/or Muslim superheroes in American comics, post 9/11. A small number of studies conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s on the representation of Arabs and Muslims in American comics showed a profusion of negative stereotypes and a conspicuous absence of Arab and/or Muslim heroes (Rifas, 1988; Shaheen, 1994). To get a fair sample of empirical data, a cumulative, statistical approach was used to discover which were the most prominent Arab and/or Muslim superhero characters, which turned out to be Dust, Excalibur and Bridge from Marvel Comics and The Doctor and Hamza Rashad from Wildstorm/DC Comics (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 581), se Images 4A–C and 5A–B below.

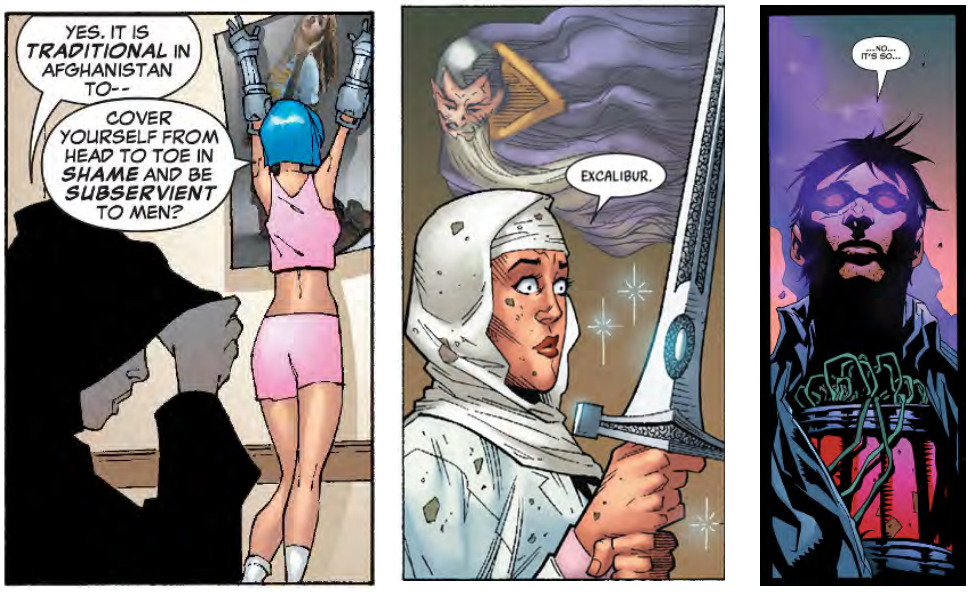

Image 4A: Dust from New X-Men #2, page 6, panel 1 (Weir, DeFillips, Green & Ketcham 2004, © Marvel Comics 2004); 4B: Excalibur from Captain Britain and MI13 #14, page 23, panel 4 (Cornell, Kirk & Delperdang 2008, © Marvel Comics 2008); 4C: The Doctor from The Authority: Revolution #9, page 14, panel 1 (Brubaker, Nguyen & Friend 2005, © DC Comics 2005).

Image 5A: Bridge from Punisher: War Journal #1, page 1, panel 3 (Fraction & Deodato 2007, © Marvel Comics 2007); 5B: Hamza Rashad from Gen 13 #9, page 1, panel 4 (Claremont, Bachs & Hope 2003, © DC Comics 2003).

In order to understand how ideas and representations of Arabs and Muslims were communicated, a critical discourse analysis was then performed, using semiotics and a combination of the earlier mentioned theories of the Other and the male gaze as a starting point, a baseline for making sense of what was found during close readings of the chosen comics.

Results

The results indicated that after 9/11, the number of superhero characters designated as Arab Muslims, Arab Americans, or American Muslims – male and female, from the openly devout to the only nominally religious – had increased noticeably (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 595). These characters seemed to have been created to resist stereotypical and/or racist configurations of Arabs and/or Muslims. Nonetheless, the characters partook in the Othering of these groups in American public discourse through stereotypes in both visual and verbal communication, and seemingly unintentionally reinforced rather than counteracted stereotypes of the Oriental Other (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 597).

In Image 4A we see the Sunni Muslim Dust, who with her abaya and niqab is contrasted with her less clothed, American roommate at school, a contrast that is clerarly made in favour of Dust. In image 4B, the British

Muslim Dr. Faiza Hussain, becomes the first female and first Muslim character in a Marvel comic to be given the legendary, magical sword Excalibur – a symbol of British, male power. In image 4C, a young Palestinian man is given the magical powers of The Doctor, at the exact moment when he's about to detonate a suicide bomb at an Israeli checkpoint in Palestine. Within a day of acquiring his new powers, The Doctor then goes on to negotiate a peace treaty in the Middle East. In Image 5A, the converted American Muslim G.W. Bridge, who is shown in the comics as a proud, powerful character who bows to no-one, is shown kneeling in prayer in one of the very few instances where his faith is ever alluded to. Finally, image 5B shows the debut of the character Hamza Rashad, where it is made clear from the very start that he is a third-generation immigrant to show that his deriders are ill-informed about what it means to be an American.

As can be seen in these images, all these characters have been used to make more or less overtly stereotypical points about Muslim and/or Arab culture through the narratives in the comics.

"Yo, rag-head!": Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11

FREDRIK STRÖMBERG

ABSTRACT

The relationship between the United States and the Arab/Muslim world has been problematic, to say the least, and it has left its mark on American popular culture in general and on comics in particular. A small number of studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s about the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in American comics have shown a profusion of negative stereotypes and a conspicuous absence of Arab and/or Muslim heroes. This essay revisits this discourse and examines the ways in which Arabs and Muslims have been portrayed in the most American of all genres—the superhero comic book—since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In order to understand how these comics communicate ideas and representations of the 'Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim' to American readers, this essay conducts a critical discourse analysis based on the idea of the 'Oriental Other.' After 9/11, the number of characters who are portrayed as Arab Muslims, Arab Americans, and American Muslims, both male and female, from the openly devout and zealous to the privately and nominally religious, has increased noticeably. Although such characters seem to have been created to resist stereotypical or racist configurations of Arabs and/or Muslims as terrorists, they nonetheless partake in the 'Othering' of these groups in American public discourse through stereotypes in both visual and verbal communication, and thus often unintentionally reinforce rather than counteract stereotypes of the 'Oriental Other'.

> His comic books have captured the imagination of so many young people, with superheroes who embody the teachings and tolerance of Islam.
>
> (President Barack Obama, on Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa and his comic book *THE 99*[1])

We have recently seen the unexpected emergence of a curious ideological and cultural hybrid: *THE 99*. Built upon the experience of veteran artists and writers from the American comics business, this series is based on the formal aspects of that most American of genres: the superhero adventure comic book. Produced by the Teshkeel Media Group, *THE 99* is published in Kuwait and inspired by the basic tenets of Islam. As outlined on the promotional website for the comic, *THE 99* aims to entertain children and young adults and, at the same time, seeks to promote a general understanding between normal human beings and superheroes, the latter of whom have characteristics based on the ninety-nine traits of Allah (cf. *THE 99*).[2]

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[1] President Barack Obama offered this assessment during the Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship on April 26, 2010.

[2] For critical analyses of *THE 99*, see Edwin; Enderwitz; Meier.

The success of *THE 99* has caused quite a stir, even going so far as to elicit the above comment by President Barack Obama, and it is easy to see why. The relationship between the United States and the Arab/Muslim parts of the world is problematic, to say the least. A long history of cultural and religious conflict, as well as postcolonial power struggles, have recently culminated—at least when viewed from an American perspective—with the events of '9/11' and the 'War on Terror.' These developments have, of course, also left their mark on American popular culture. Representations of Arabs and Muslims, whether Americans or citizens from other nations, have ranged from stereotypical terrorists and Islamic extremists to well-intentioned—but nevertheless stereotypical—characters (see also Michalak). Many of these representations have already been subject to critical analysis, but the depictions of Arabs and Muslims in American superhero comic books have so far been largely ignored in academic circles. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing political and military conflicts, a variety of new Arab and/or Muslim superhero characters have appeared in such popular comic book series as *The X-Men, Punisher War Journal, The Authority,* and *Gen 13.*

Superhero comics are very much an American preoccupation. As with many other forms of popular culture, they act as a mirror of the political and socioeconomic climate in the United States, providing an image that, although distorted by media and genre-specific constraints, is still indicative of the ways in which ideas and ideologies are developed and disseminated in the society within which they are created. Superhero comics, like so many other genres of popular culture, may not depict the real world, but they do mediate it; that is, they respond to, and comment on, the world around us. This process is reciprocal, as comics, a popular medium, partake in the general cultural public debate and contribute to the formation of images of the Other; an exemplary analysis of this discourse will help to explain how minority groups are represented in American popular culture and how comics creators struggle to come to terms with their nations' relationship to the non-Western world. The following examination of representations of Arabs and Muslims in American comic books is intended to pave the way for similar investigations into, for instance, representations of other ethnic minorities in comics. Although based on previous scholarship in American Studies, this analysis opens up access to a new, and hitherto neglected, dimension of popular discourse. Despite the tremendous changes over the past decade—changes that have been reflected in all dimensions of popular culture as well as in literary and cultural studies—no recent scholarship on representations of Arabs and Muslims in comics exists. This essay seeks to fill this critical gap and suggests further possibilities for future investigations of Arabs and Muslims and, for that matter, other ethnic minorities in comics.

Comics studies scholarship can also yield important new theoretical and critical insights concerning the process of Othering, a concept which has been paramount in postcolonial studies, American Studies, and related critical endeavors. Because images are a part of a narrative flow in comics and are not meant to be viewed separately from the text, cartoonists have often simplified their characters, making them more iconic and easily identifiable (cf. McCloud 7). Comics thus have a

tendency to employ stereotypical features—for instance, particular clothes, facial features, and bodily gestures—in order to effectively communicate characteristics such as gender, class, race, and so on (cf. Strömberg 23). More than a decade ago, Edward Said summed up the persuasive and subversive qualities of comics, qualities that make them ideal for studies of cultural, political, and ideological trends:

> In ways that I still find fascinating to decode, comics in their relentless foregrounding—far more, say, than film cartoons or funnies, neither of which mattered much to me—seemed to say what otherwise could not be said, perhaps what wasn't permitted to be said or imagined, defying the ordinary processes of thought, which are policed, shaped and re-shaped by all sorts of pedagogical as well as ideological pressures. ("Homage to Joe Sacco" 4)

The present study is designed as a critical discourse analysis, with a theoretical starting point in the Hegelian/Lacanian concept of the Other, which states that the Same/Self is defined as opposed to an Other through the realization of subjectivity (cf. Evans 133). As interpreted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and by Said in *Orientalism* (1978), this theory explains the process through which social groups and societies use the idea of other groups to define their own character. In doing so, they often demonize and dehumanize those who do not belong to their group or society through a process called 'Othering,' which is imperative in the formation of national identities (cf. Nasser 41).

An extension of this concept is 'Orientalism,' which describes the ways in which the West has historically defined itself in contradistinction to the Orient. According to Said, Orientalism is "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." This includes how "[t]he Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways" and how it is constructed not as an actual place or location, but as a "system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire" (*Orientalism* 202-03). In this sense, the Orient has long been a canvas on which the West(ern imagination) has constructed its self-image by creating fictionalized representations of the cultures and peoples of the Orient as Other than the West (cf. 209). One may thus speak of these cultures and peoples as 'Oriental Others' because the image of 'the Oriental,' as it has been built upon over centuries in the societies of the West, has served as a productive foil against which people in the West have come to perceive themselves (cf. Locke 262).

Said's *Orientalism* was the starting point for a variety of lengthy and frequently overlapping academic debates in which some contested Said's arguments and others tested his ideas in field studies (see Macfie; Schäfer). One reassessment of Said's theories recognizes the existence of an Orientalist genre in art, literature, and other forms of cultural production, but sees the explanation for it in a desire to escape from the constraints of modern Western life and return to the "ancient verities" (MacKenzie 67). According to this reassessment, lascivious sensuality signifies an escape from Christian Puritanism, respect for Islam constitutes an escape from the emptiness of Western agnosticism, and the depiction of oriental languor represents an escape from the frenetic Western life (see MacKenzie). In

this sense, Orientalism becomes even more of a self-portrait created by a collective Western consciousness.

Said's original argument, as presented in *Orientalism*, has been criticized for its strong reliance on dichotomies between East and West as well as between Other and Self, which share the ontological norms inherent in constructions of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation as defined in contrast to a white, male, Western world (cf. Bernstein and Studlar 3). This critique has led to a broadening of the scope of Orientalism, as Lewis indicates:

> [T]he deconstruction of the sovereign Western subject does not mean simply replacing a unified white male Western subject with a unified white female Western subject, but using all the contradictory positions inherent in those terms to 'disentangle' the ways in which representations of an Orientalized other simultaneously undercut and contribute to imperialist ideas and politics. (26)

To give but one example, this shift has resulted in various feminist reassessments and qualifications of Said's work (cf. Zonana 593; Lewis 163).

Due to the iconic manner in which comics communicate, a fitting theoretical perspective from which to examine their representation of Otherness is semiotics, and more specifically Ferdinand de Saussure's model of signs, according to which language is made up of signifying units divided into the signifier (the 'shape' of a word/sign) and the signified (the mental concept the signifier conjures). Using Saussure's terminology, groups or classes of units (letters, words, and sentences, but also more visual signs) that can be substituted for each other in a certain context are called 'paradigms,' and the new units that can be constructed by combining units are called 'syntagms.' Roland Barthes applied this framework in his analysis of cultural signifying systems, which discussed the change of cultural meaning when one sign is substituted for another (for instance, the choice between a bowler hat and a beret as well as and the different syntagms they can construct in combination with other forms of clothes) (cf. Miller 76-77). In the context of visual Orientalist discourse analysis, this method enables an analysis of the use of signs and the combination of signs to create syntagms that signify Orientalism on various levels.

Accordingly, this essay focuses on the ways in which Arab and Muslim characters are portrayed visually (facial features, clothes, etc.) as well as verbally (narrative descriptions, direct and indirect discourse).[3] My research indicates that Arab and Muslim superheroes exist in American superhero comics after 9/11 and that most seem to have been created to resist stereotypical or racist configurations of Arabs and/or Muslims as terrorists, submissive veiled women, and so on. Yet de-

[3] I am aware of the fact that I 'only' analyze the message. In some sense, I also analyze the sender, but not the receivers and their potential responses. As Ang, Mankekar, and many others have shown, there are many ways of receiving a message, and although an examination along these lines would undoubtedly have enriched my analysis, such considerations go beyond the scope and possibility of this study. Frank Miller's controversial *Holy Terror* (2011), which depicts Batman's fight against Islamic suicide bombers and Al-Qaida villains in Gotham, was published after this essay had been completed. The comic has been attacked as anti-Islamic propaganda; as such, it seems to reverse the well-meaning Orientalism I discuss in this essay.

spite this attempt, these representations still partake in the Othering of these ethnic and religious groups by reinforcing stereotypes of 'the Oriental.'

Depictions of Arabs and Muslims in American Popular Culture

To be a Muslim—that is, someone who professes to follow Islam—does not necessarily mean to be an Arab. The majority of the world's Muslims are, in fact, not Arabs. There are, as of 2009, an estimated 1.57 billion Muslims in the world, with 62 % of them living in the Asia-Pacific region. More than 300 million Muslims, or about one fifth of the total number, live in countries where Islam is not the dominant religion. As this essay is primarily concerned with representations of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture, it is also important to note that the 2.5 million Muslims who currently live in the United States constitute only about 0.8 percent of the total national population. The corresponding number of Americans of 'Arab descent,' according to the latest American Community Survey, is estimated to be approximately 3.5 million (see Pew Research Center; U.S. Census Bureau).[4]

Said was an ardent advocate for a greater understanding between the United States and the Arab and Muslim countries of the world. Despite his commitment to bridge these two cultures, he had a rather bleak outlook on the state of affairs when he observed in 1980:

> So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. ("Islam Through Western Eyes" n. pag.)

Said's essay was published more than thirty years ago, but much still seems to be the same. Indeed, more recent specific research has been conducted, mostly from a cultural studies perspective, on the ways in which Arabs and Muslims have been portrayed in American popular culture, and the results have not been encouraging, inasmuch as negative or stereotypical representations still abound.

Especially in the film industry, Scott J. Simon argues, Arabs seem to be the only ethnic group that still remains fair game for negative stereotyping, where-

[4] Conversely, despite Islam having its roots in Arab culture, not all Arabs are necessarily Muslims, and for a variety of reasons, a comprehensive definition of what it means to be Arab is nearly impossible. However, a broader definition, given, for instance, by political and religious leaders in Arab nations (nations in which Arabic is the primary language), is that Arabs can be defined as an ethnic group whose members identify as such on one or more linguistic, cultural, political, or genealogical grounds (cf. Deng 405). Still, many in the Western world perceive the terms Arab and Muslim as almost synonymous (see Shaheen, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping*). The supposedly homogenous category of 'Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim,' then, can be said to exist primarily in the ways in which people think and characters are portrayed in popular culture (cf. Volpp 147).

as many other previously stereotyped minority groups, African Americans and Jews, for instance, have gradually ceased to be targeted. In *Cruel and Unusual: Negative Images of Arabs in American Popular Culture* (1988), Laurence Michalak maintains that "[t]he same people who would find ethnic slurs about Blacks or Jews distasteful—as well they should—somehow see nothing wrong when the target is Arabs. The result is that, probably more than any other ethnic group, Arabs are maligned in American popular culture" (36). Starting with some of the very first films ever made in the late nineteenth century—and getting a real boost with immensely popular films starring Rudolph Valentino, such as *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926)—the theme of the Arab as a cultural Other was introduced early on in American film, and it would be frequently re-enacted in the decades to follow. The most common roles for these stereotypical characters have been captured by the phrase "The Three B Syndrome": bombers, belly dancers, and billionaires, that is, terrorists, Oriental *femmes fatales*, and oil sheiks (see Qumsiyeh). These stereotypical representations appear throughout the history of American film and went unchallenged for a long time, primarily because the Arab American community has been very small and has therefore lacked a strong voice in American society (see Shaheen, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping*). Such assessments also apply to many other areas of American popular culture, including television series and comics, which, taken together, form a widespread discourse of Othering Arabs and Muslims. These stereotypes did not originate in the United States, of course. Negative stereotypes of 'the Middle Eastern,' first as feared enemies and later as subjects in colonial possessions (cf. Michalak 33; see also Said, *Orientalism*, chapter two), have existed in Europe since the spread of Islam.

Depictions of Arabs and Muslims in American Comic Books before 9/11

Even though the image of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture has been thoroughly analyzed by such critics as Evelyn Alsultany, Jack G. Shaheen, and Scott J. Simon, there is a relative paucity of work on the depiction of Arabs and Muslims in American comics, an art form that many tend to associate instinctively with the United States. Indeed, only a handful of relevant studies have appeared, most of which stem from the aftermath of the first and second Gulf Wars in the 1980s and early 1990s. Of the few references to Arab and Muslim characters in cartoons and comic strips, comics author Jack Keen's speech at a conference for the Association of Editorial Cartoonists in San Diego in 1986 is telling: "You can hit an Arab free; they're free enemies, free villains—where you couldn't do it to a Jew or you can't do it to a black anymore" (qtd. in Shaheen, *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping* 97).[5] That it is, or at least was, possible to find stereotypes of Arabs in American comic strips is illustrated by Michalak's observation in 1988 that "[o]ne can open a newspaper and find Arab villains in daily comic strips as diverse as *Broom Hilda, Lolly, Short Ribs, Berry's World, The Wizard of Id*, and *Funky Winterbean*." Michalak goes on to cite the comic strip

[5] This statement recalls Simon's assessment of similar practices in the film industry.

Brenda Star as "the most frequently anti-Arab of the Sunday comics" (12). These comments are more than thirty years old, and it is more difficult to find negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in American comic strips today, most likely due to the influence of the 'political correctness' debates of the 1990s and to the growing presence of Arab and Muslim Americans as a visible and vocal group of citizens, readers, and consumers.

The most extensive research into the depiction of Arabs and Muslims in American comic books has been conducted by Jack G. Shaheen. In his article "Arab Images in American Comic Books" (1994), Shaheen analyzed 215 comic books and identified a complete absence of Arab or Muslim heroes or heroines. The characters he categorized as "commoners" were shown as passive, meaning they did not engage in "fighting the good fight." Arab and Muslim villains, on the other hand, abounded. Shaheen put them into three categories: "the repulsive terrorist," "the sinister sheikh," and "the rapacious bandit." To these he added two categories of females: "a scantily-clad and salivated-upon belly dancer" and "a faceless housewife, whose thick-set form is bundled up in dark robes" (129). Another, even more graphic, description can be found in Leonard Rifas's article "The Image of Arabs in U.S. Comic Books" (1988). According to Rifas's research, Arab characters are

> [b]arbaric, ignorant, backward, primitive, bloodthirsty, violent, villainous, dagger holding, gun carrying, evil, malicious, sinister, sneaking, double-crossing, dishonest, dangerous, decadent, fanatic, vengeful, warring, oily, dirty, greasy, greedy, grasping, materialistic, murdering, thieving, lascivious, sexist, oversexed, kidnapping, romantic, incompetent, inefficient, inferior, unreliable, powerful, corrupt, camel riding, slave owning, harem keeping, desert dwelling, nomadic, millionaires, controlling world oil and buying America. (13)

This is quite a mouthful and it is, of course, indicative of the negative images with which the category of the Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim has been associated in American comics.

Shaheen's claim that there have not been any Arab or Muslim heroes in American comic books is not entirely accurate. Apart from the newspaper comics strips mentioned above, one can find early comic book heroes such as Kismet (1944), one of the earliest (albeit token) Muslim superhero characters, who wears a fez as part of his costume and thanks Allah and the Prophet for granting him the power of freedom; Black Tiger (1976), a religious leader of the Muslim people of "Murkatesh" whose role has been assumed by different persons wearing the same disguise; and Arabian Knight (1981), an extremely Orientalized character with a turban, curved sword, and flying carpet, who has been revised twice in an effort to make him more acceptable to readers and critics. Although the two latter characters were included in comic books by a major American comics publisher, they played only minor roles. Other characters, such as Wise Son and Rampart, from Milestone and DC, respectively, were created in the 1990s in the aftermath of the second Gulf War, and while they were moderately successful at the time, they never really caught on. Such evidence indicates that Arab and/or Muslim superhero characters were not culturally significant on a wider plane in superhero comics before 9/11.

Depictions of Arabs and Muslims in American Superhero Comic Books after 9/11

The academic discourse on comics is a fairly new field and is characterized by a lack of secondary references and printed encyclopedias. Researchers face the additional problem of accessing primary material, as most libraries do not keep old comic books for reference. Thus, the Internet has become an important source for historical research on comics, thanks in part to the long tradition of fan scholarship. I have made extensive use of Internet sources and fan scholarship as a starting point for my analysis, accessing the results of many non-academic researchers who tend to build searchable, *Wikipedia*-like systems online. I began my search with the online database *Comic Book Religion*—a site maintained primarily by Preston Hunter, who, as stated on the website, endeavors to ascertain the religious affiliation of individual (predominantly American) characters from comics and animation with a system of noting primary sources including "reference works, news and journal articles, interviews with the creators, and the opinions of scholars and fans." *Comic Book Religion* lists 23,435 characters and provides detailed information on their religious orientation as well as the number of stories in which they have appeared. As of September 2010, 234 characters were listed as Muslim. Of these 234 characters, 64 were categorized as heroes, 99 as villains, and the rest as supporting characters. As I had set out to investigate Arab and/or Muslim superheroes in American comic books after 9/11, I had to eliminate those characters who have been shown mainly in animated cartoons (e.g. Aladdin and Sinbad), those who do not appear in superhero comics (e.g. Dilat Larath and Aisha), those who are villains rather than heroes (e.g. Shadow King and Mad Arab), and finally, those characters who were used before 9/11 (e.g. Black Tiger and Arabian Knight).[6] Some were also discarded because the Muslim part of their character was rather insignificant.[7] Having done this, I ended up with a list of fourteen characters, which I organized according to the number of appearances they had made. As cross-references, I utilized two additional online projects: *Grand Comics Database*, run by a non-profit organization and described as "an ongoing project to build a detailed comic-book database that is international, accurate and complete from the beginning of the art form to the present"; and the *Comic Vine*, a commercially run site about American comics with a wiki in which members register information on characters, issues, creators, and so on. These sites furnished, among other things, information regarding the issues in which these characters were featured. I also added characters listed as Arabs on these two websites and other online resources. Finally, I removed all characters from my list who were featured in fewer than ten issues so as to focus on those most likely to be known by readers. I ended up with the following list of the most

[6] Investigating these characters would have been interesting but fell outside of my analytical framework. In short, the Muslim super-villains seem larger in number but have made fewer appearances than the major Muslim superheroes.

[7] One example is the X-Men character Legion, who may have been featured regularly but is designated as Muslim in only one of his multiple personas.

frequently used Arab and/or Muslim superhero characters in post 9/11 American comic books, based on information gathered from *Comic Book Resources* (CBR), *Grand Comics Database* (GCD), and *Comic Vine* (CV). (see fig. 1)[8]:

			# of Appearances		
Name of Character	*Publisher*	*Debut*	*CBR*	*GCD*	*CV*
Dust (Sooraya Qadir)	Marvel	2002	102	142	130
The Doctor (Habib ben Hassan)	Wildstorm	2005	47	16	47
G. W. Bridge	Marvel	1991 (2007)	123 (---)	115 (22)	142 (24)[9]
Excalibur (Faiza Hussain)	Marvel	2008	---	19	22
Hamza Rashad	Wildstorm	2003	11	9	14

Fig. 1: Arab and Muslim characters in American superhero comics.

I then acquired and analyzed the most prominent story arcs in which these characters were featured in order to search for examples of how these superheroes have been portrayed.[10] In total, I analyzed 143 issues of American comic books. Some interesting characters were left out, such as the Janissary, a Turkish female superhero who wears a costume and veil in the red color of the Turkish flag and who only appeared a few times as a token character (see fig. 2),[11] and the Black Muslim Captain America, Josiah X, who appeared only in one short-lived series, *The Crew*, which lasted for seven issues between 2003 and 2004.

Dust

Dust is a character used in the fictional Marvel Universe, maintained by the publisher Marvel Comics. The Marvel Universe is a complex diegesis, a shared fictional universe comprising thousands of interlinked stories written and drawn since the publication of the very first related superhero comic books in 1939, then published under the Timely imprint (Daniels 26). The diegesis of the Marvel Universe is an alternative version of the real world (chiefly the United States), set in the present day but augmented with fantasy elements comprised of superheroes and villains, namely, people with extraordinary abilities (flying, walking through walls, and so on). The most famous characters in the Marvel Universe are Spider-Man, Captain America, the Hulk, and Daredevil, as well as superhero groups such as the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, and the X-Men (Rogers 391-93).

[8] I could have added information on the circulation of these comics so as to identify the characters encountered by most readers, but as this information was not as readily available, this was the best approximation I could reach within the boundaries of this study. All numbers were retrieved on 29 Sept. 2010.

[9] The number of appearances was adjusted for the character of G.W. Bridge, which was created in 1991 but was only shown converting to Islam as late as 2007.

[10] I established the most prominent story arcs based on an initial overview of the content of all issues, determining whether the character in question was given a prominent part in the storyline, as most of these stories feature groups of characters, each given more or less prominent roles.

[11] Especially in "Unveiling: The Janissary!" (published in *JLA Annual* #4 in 2000).

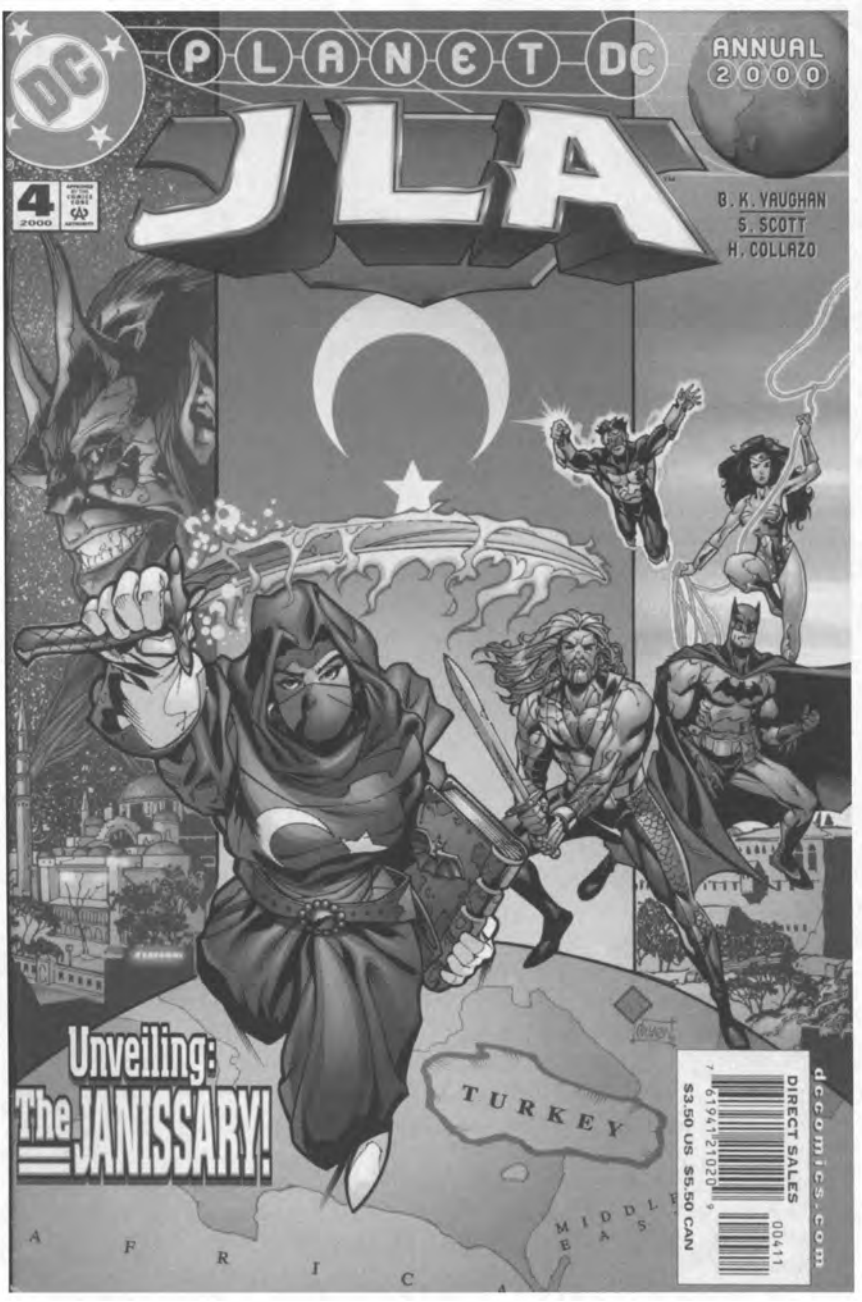

Fig. 2: JLA Annual 2000, cover art by Steve Scott. © DC Comics.

Dust is, without doubt, the most prominent of the Arab or Muslim characters I have identified.[12] She was created in 2002 by Scottish writer Grant Morrison and artist Ethan Van Sciver and seems to have been intended not only to symbolize a foreign/Middle Eastern character type, but also to show respect towards the culture she is supposed to represent. This approach has not always been successful. With the character's first appearance in *New X-Men* #133, she is shown as a Sunni Muslim woman from Afghanistan, clad in traditional black *abaya* dress and a *niqab* veil (an ensemble sometimes referred to as a *burqa*), who has killed a number of male slave traders who tried to remove her clothes (see fig. 3).[13] The slave traders are all shown as stereotypical Afghans with long beards and wearing presumably traditional clothes. Despite her powers, which consist of her ability to turn into sand (a rather predictably clichéd power for a Middle Eastern character—the conflation of the Muslim character and sand is predicated on the more than dubious assumption that all Muslims live in deserts) and to strip the flesh off her enemies, Dust is then rescued by a white, male character, who—after having killed some stereotypical Afghani slave traders—carries her away to a secret hideout. That she needs rescuing by a representative of the white, male, Western society carries a lot of postcolonial and sexist symbolic weight. The usage of the *abaya* and *niqab* are clear-cut, predictable signifiers intended to convey an image of the female Oriental Other.

In a supporting storyline in the same issue, three Pakistani men try to hijack a plane in order to use it as a "weapon in a righteous cause," but a telepathic hero thwarts their plans.[14] This hero rearranges their minds so that the men not only abort the hijacking, but also confess what they have done when they are turned over to the authorities. The leader, whose name is, curiously enough, Mohammad, states that "[i]t's true, I don't know what I'm doing with my life!" This scene is so over-the-top that it could have been conceived as a cynical comment on the problems many traveling Arabs and Muslims experienced during the rigorous and often downright racist security checks at airports after 9/11, but it may not have been received as such by the vast majority of readers in 2002.

The portrayal of the character Dust displays a certain degree of understanding of and respect for Muslim traditions and cultures, but does so in a setting that shows clear traces of being written for an American audience less than a year after 9/11. In this context, the need to show the Otherness of Muslims seems to have

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[12] For my analysis of the character Dust, I consulted *New X-Men* vol. 1 #133, 138, 146, 149-150 (2002-2004), *X-Men* 165 (2005), *New X-Men* vol. 2 #1-46 (2004-2008), *New X-Men Hellions* #1-4 (2005), and *Young X-Men* #1-12 (2008-2009). The necessity of examining such a wide selection of issues is due to the fact that, in a fictional universe such as the Marvel Universe, a character can be used by any number of writers and artists. The nature of such a universe allows the company to maintain a degree of consistency.

[13] *Abaya* means 'cloak.' It is a traditional, long over-garment, essentially a robe-like dress, often black, worn by women especially in the Gulf States and Saudi-Arabia. *Niqab* means 'mask' and refers to a veil covering the face, which can be used in combination with various modest garments like the *abaya*. *Burqa* means 'to patch up' or 'to sew up.' It describes a full body-covering outer garment worn by Muslim women that can be a combination of an *abaya*, a *niqab*, and a headscarf, or a garment sewn in one piece.

[14] *New X-Men* #133, (12).

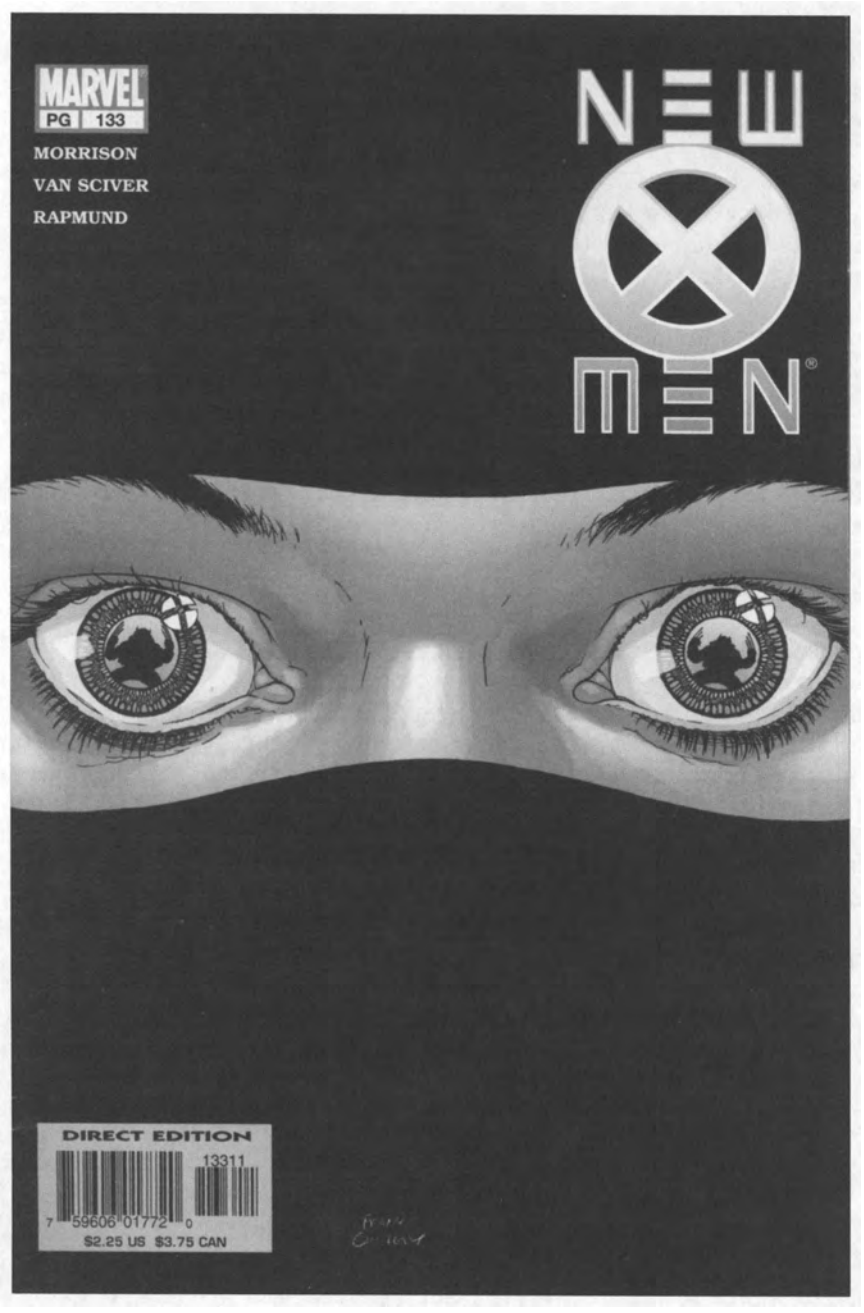

Fig. 3: *New X-Men* #133 (2002), cover art by Frank Quitley.

been just as important as the need to show respect for Muslim traditions. Dust is depicted as a character created very much in the Orientalist tradition: the sexualized female Oriental Other who needs to be rescued by the character with whom Western readers are supposed to identify. She is, to use a phrase coined by Laura Mulvey, the object of the male gaze of both a white male hero and, most likely, a white male reader.

Later stories involving Dust are not as easily categorized as instances of Orientalism or sexism. In these episodes, the superhero costume that the character chooses is based on her original black *abaya* and *niqab*. In the story arc *Children of the X-Men* from 2007 (DeFilippis and Wier, *New X-Men* vol. 2 #42), one character asks Dust why she still wears a *burqa*. Another character answers that it is not a *burqa* but an *abaya* with a *niqab* veil and asks the first character to respect Dust by learning more about her culture. There is no doubt that the creators wanted Dust to be a positive Muslim superhero character and that they also wanted to send a message about the need to understand Arab and Muslim culture. This didacticism, though rather obvious and somewhat heavy-handed, does not clash with the overall flow of the story and feels almost in line with the fantastical diegesis of the Marvel universe.

In a story from 2005 (DeFilippis and Wier, *X-Men: Hellions* #2), Dust meets her mother back in Afghanistan. When the mother is happy to learn that her daughter is still wearing her *burqa* (which is how the dress is referred to throughout this story), Dust tells her that "I never wore it because of the Taliban, mother. I like the **modesty** and **protection** it affords me from the eyes of men."[15] Again, the writer clearly tries to show respect for the religious and cultural beliefs that the character is supposed to represent (see fig. 4). Additionally, in "Choosing Sides" from 2004 (DeFilippis, *New X-Men* vol. 2 #2), another scene involving Dust's choice of dress depicts the heroine's new roommate, a young, scantily clad woman, taking offence at Dust's dress and exclaiming: "I don't need to be lectured by someone who's setting back women fifty years just by walking around like that." This scene highlights the cultural problems surrounding the traditional dress that Dust wears, and it also presents her as being the more understanding and tolerant of the two women, thereby aiming to overturn stereotypical representations of Muslims as intolerant.

The symbolism of Dust's dress is obvious. The use of various traditional veils, including the *burqa*, has been a hotly debated topic, both in Arab countries and in other parts of the world, a debate that most probably explains why Dust wears it and why it is so prominent in these stories. Many of the ideas presented by Dust and other characters on both sides of the *burqa* argument were, however, not entirely new to the world of comic books: some feminists in the West, including the comics artist Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis*), support the right of women to choose their clothes themselves and fight laws against the use of veils (see Satrapi).

While it seems obvious that most of the writers and artists who feature Dust in their work (and who are, as far as I can ascertain, not themselves Arabs, Arab Americans, Muslims, or Muslim Americans) have had the intention of presenting a positive Muslim character, her portrayal has been criticized by Muslims for showing her in a dress that is too tight and too revealing and that therefore ne-

[15] Throughout this paper, italics and bold type in quotations are emphases in the original texts.

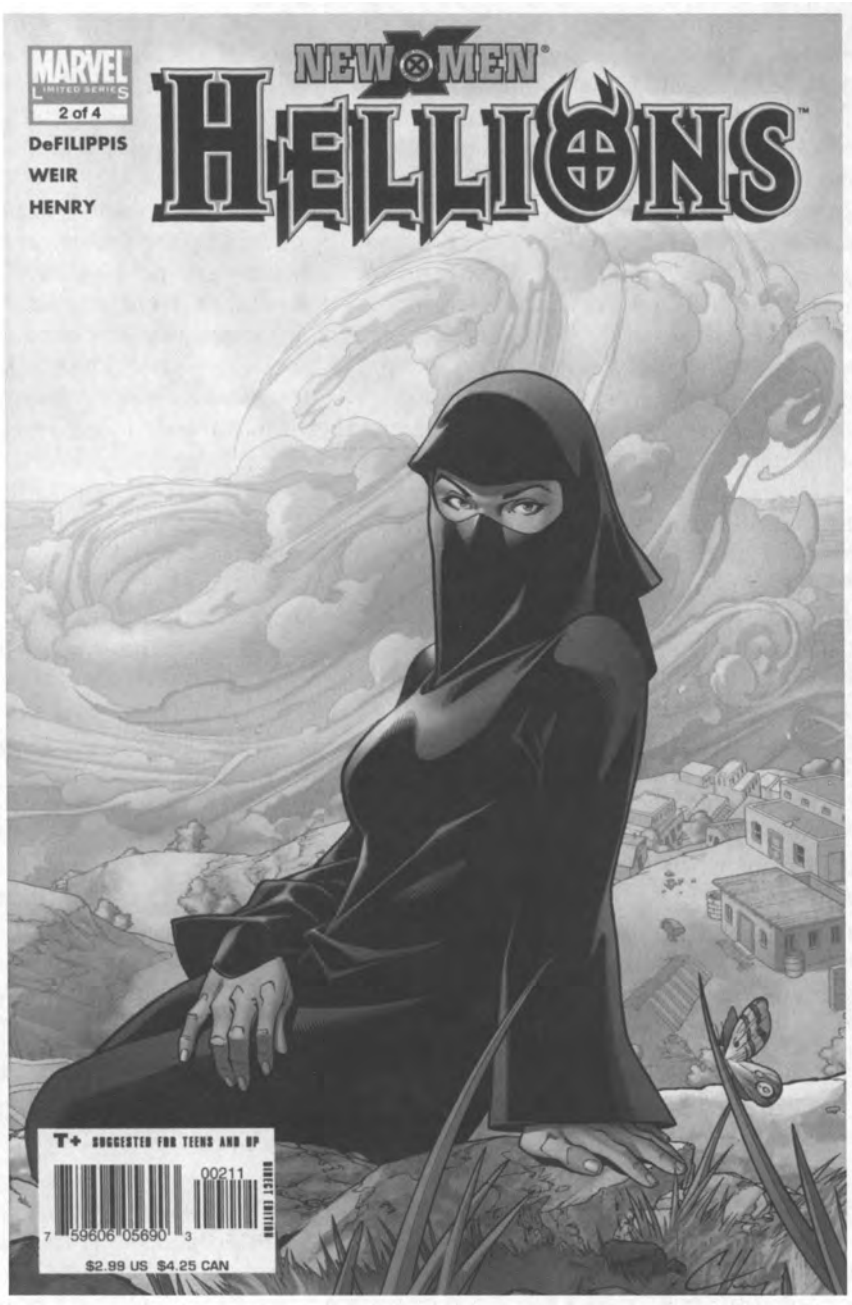

Fig. 4: *New X-Men Hellions* #2 (2005), cover art by Clayton Henry.

gates the inherent purpose of the *abaya*. Indeed, there is a significant difference in the ways in which the character has been handled by the various artists working on the titles in which she has appeared. Some of these artists did not display a full understanding of the initial idea and gave Dust a much more revealing dress; in some instances her attire clings to her like a traditional superhero spandex costume very much following the conventions of the male-gaze-driven American superhero genre.[16] Another critique of the character has been the fact that she is depicted at all, as representations of women are perceived as offensive by some Muslims.[17] Dust's religious beliefs are yet another potential point of contention, as she is often shown praying or asking for forgiveness from Allah for what she sees or does. This behavior stands in stark contrast to the way other characters act, even though many have been given religious affiliations and beliefs. As she is the only Muslim character, this may reinforce the common prejudice of Islam being a demanding and condemning religion. On the other hand, Dust is sometimes shown reprimanding other characters for acting in a sexist manner in a way that makes it obvious that she is morally superior to them.[18]

The veil or *niqab* is probably Dust's most controversial feature. The veiling of women has become both a symbol in the West of the oppression that Islam levels on women and also a kind of symbolic visual shorthand for sexual objectification in the Orientalist tradition. Thus, Dust's costume can be seen as both an invitation to be subjected to the male gaze and processes of Othering, and simultaneously as a signifier denoting an Arab/Muslim woman but with connotations of Western supremacy and male dominance.

The Doctor

The second most frequently used Arab and/or Muslim character is Habib ben Hassan, or the Doctor, used in the Wildstorm Universe, maintained by Wildstorm (initially an independent publisher, but since 1999 an imprint of DC Comics).[19] The Wildstorm Universe is also a shared, fictional universe, similar to the Marvel Universe, although with a shorter history. The characters and concepts of the Wildstorm Universe were initially part of the Image Universe, a shared universe

[16] Mulvey's concept of the male gaze has been influential in film studies, but it has also garnered substantial criticism. Ettinger criticizes Mulvey for not taking into account other factors such as class and race and instead offers her more intersectional concept of the 'Matrixal Gaze.' For the purpose of this paper, however, I will use Mulvey's concept of the male gaze because its assumption that the reader/audience of visual media are interpreted as heterosexual men makes particular sense in the context of American superhero comics, a genre whose audience (as well as authorship) has always been predominantly male and whose history is littered with hypersexual depictions of scantily clad female characters.

[17] See, for example, the comments in the forum section of the article "Niqab SuperHero: Sooraya Qadir, X-Woman" (Younus).

[18] For instance in *Young X-Men* #2 and *Young X-Men* #3, written by Mark Guggenheim.

[19] For my analysis of The Doctor/Habib ben Hassan, I consulted *The Authority: Revolution* #9-12 (2005), *Captain Atom: Armageddon* #4-9 (2007), *The Authority: Prime* #1-6 (2007-2008), *Number of the Beast* #6-8 (2008), and *Wildstorm: Revelations* #2 (2008).

for the characters from the publisher Image Comics (founded in 1992 by a group of comics artists), but it broke off to form the Wildstorm Universe in 1996. As with the Marvel Universe, the Wildstorm Universe relates an alternative history of the real world, where such phenomena as superhuman abilities, interstellar travel, and alien races exist (see Khoury).

The character of the Doctor is a supernatural, almost omnipotent force, a shaman with unlimited powers connected to planet Earth, but it is a force that moves to a new person when the current incarnation dies. Writer Ed Brubaker and artist Dustin Nguyen created Habib ben Hassan in 2005. In the first issue in which he appears (*The Authority: Revolutions* #9), ben Hassan is a sixteen-year-old Palestinian boy on the verge of blowing up himself at an Israeli checkpoint, complete with an iconic set of explosives strapped to his belly. At the very moment of detonation, he is hit with the power of The Doctor, who is not only able to defuse this explosive moment but, in the words of the narrator, "[l]ess than twenty-four hours as the Doctor and he'd already engineered a **peace** in the Middle East that actually had a chance of **surviving**" (n. pag.).

Habib ben Hassan is later shown to have been captured and put in a kind of limbo, where he is clad in strange attire. Gone are his 'Western' white T-shirt, blue trousers (jeans?), and blue jacket. Instead, he wears what might best be described as an (anachronistic) traditional Palestinian outfit, with a green-and-orange checkered turban and a knee-length, one-piece purple dress. This ensemble is retained when he joins the superhero group The Authority; with the rest of the team wearing conventional (mostly spandex) superhero costumes, the effect can only be described as Orientalism in Said's sense of the term. His turban in particular carries much symbolic weight and clearly marks ben Hassan as the Oriental Other.

Habib ben Hassan has since been used by several teams of authors and artists, but his Palestinian/Arab background has seldom shone through except in his clothing. The rather impersonal way in which he has been portrayed indicates that no one has really been sure what to make of this character. This is also implied by the following questions, posed by the artist Gene Ha (who was to draw the character in 2006), at a forum for discussions about all things Palestinian:

> Our first instinct was to make him an unusually interdenominational Sufi, with acceptance of all religions. Does he sound like a Sufi? Is he still a mainstream Muslim? Does he still think Islam is the truest religion? Is he still a monotheist? And now that he's brought all Israelis and Palestinians into his way of thinking, what do they believe? (n. pag.)

As the stories progress, ben Hassan slowly loses his strange costume and begins to wear more conventional, Western-looking attire, but still in the color purple to distinguish him from the other characters. This attire often includes a minor additional detail, a sign that identifies him as a Middle Easterner. This was also one of the issues for which Ha solicited comments online:

> The original costume didn't seem Palestinian to me, and reminded me of pictures of the Afghani *mujahedeen*. Is it Palestinian looking? Because the original costume attempted to be traditional looking, I tried to create a sleek version of traditional Palestinian clothing. Did I succeed? Also, are there any color combinations I should avoid or perhaps use? The previous Doctor's clothes were mostly purple. [...] An even more important

> question is whether Habib should be wearing traditional clothing at all. When I look at photos from Palestine the kids mostly seem to be wearing Western pants and t-shirts. Should he just look like an American teenager? Heck, should he dress in superhero tights? How does he dress? (n. pag.)

Sadly, no one gave him any substantial answers. Ha's reconfiguration of Habib ben Hassan does feel more in tune with the background and cultural history with which we are supposed to associate this character, but the onslaught of questions in the two passages quoted above indicates the ambivalence and lack of knowledge with which the creators behind the Doctor have approached the character.

G. W. Bridge

The character G. W. Bridge is used within the same Marvel Universe as Dust and was created as early as 1991 by writer Fabian Nicieza and artist Rob Liefeld.[20] This character has the highest number of noted appearances in my list of Arab and/or Muslim superheroes, but it was not until quite late, in 2007, that he was revealed to have converted to Islam. It is this latter story arc, written by Matt Fritchman (under the pseudonym of Matt Fraction) in *Punisher War Journal* vol. 2, that I have investigated for this analysis.[21]

Bridge is an imposing African American. He does not possess any superpowers, but he is big, muscular, trained in hand-to-hand combat, and one of the leading characters in the fictional intelligence agency SHIELD (a high-tech version of the CIA and the FBI). The very first issue of *Punisher War Journal* vol. 2 starts off with a full page showing Bridge on his knees as he is praying in a mosque. This image is a powerful combination of signs: the mosque's interior and the character's kneeling position with his head pressed against the floor, combined with the character's Western clothes and appearance. This scene reappears a few times, always as a full page, but is the only indication that Bridge is a Muslim. This makes him the very opposite of Dust, who literally wears her religious and cultural affinity on her sleeve. He is a Muslim, but his personality is not dictated by his religion alone. This was probably Fritchman's intention; indeed, the writer offered the following explanation in a round-table discussion: "I love the idea of there being a respectable African-American Muslim and that he's a good guy" (qtd. in Carlton, n. pag.).

Although the use of a black man as an American convert to Islam is a cliché that has been used a number of times in films and TV, it is not entirely at odds with findings of demographic research: 46 % of the Muslim population in America are converts, many of them African Americans (Cesari 11). Moreover, especially since Malcolm X's conversion to Islam in the 1960s in addition to the radical politics of Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, images of black Muslims

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[20] G. W. stands for George Washington, a recurring pun in the stories about this character.

[21] For my analysis of G. W. Bridge, I consulted *The Punisher War Journal* vol. 2 #1-25 (2007-2009). Punisher is an anti-hero in the Marvel Universe, a contrast to more traditional heroes like Captain America; he is a vigilante who does not shy away from using excessive force, even to the extent of killing people, in his war on crime.

have become quite common in American popular culture. In this context, the presentation of Bridge as a Muslim can be regarded as an attempt to create a more familiar representation by steering away from stereotypes that pander to the image of Muslims as the foreign Other. He does not wear any symbolic clothes or display any other signs that would reveal his religious affiliation, and he does not invoke Allah or kneel down to pray all the time, as is the case with other characters more obviously created specifically to be Muslim. On the other hand, it could be stated that as a black man who believes in a non-Christian religion, Bridge already constitutes the Other in the eyes of the majority of those who read American superhero comics.

In contrast to the generally positive use of this Muslim character, there is a scene in these comics that takes place in Turkey and includes Turkish men chasing a young woman who is subsequently saved by Bridge. There are numerous problems with this scene. The male characters are shown as practically indistinguishable from each other, with big Turkish-style moustaches, clad in anachronistic white suits, and wearing red fezzes (there has been a ban on the use of a fez in Turkey since 1925), which make them look as if they had been copied more or less directly from Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989). Furthermore, they are easily thwarted by the Western hero Bridge, and the female character—who, just like Dust, has superpowers of her own—must be rescued by a male protagonist. Even more problematic, however, is that among the people in the streets almost all of the women are clad in full *burqa* (see *Punisher War Journal* vol. 2 #13: 13-15). Considering that the secular nation of Turkey has had, for a long time, various rules and regulations against using veils (see Özdalga), this could be interpreted as an indication that the author and/or artist is either (a) not knowledgeable about the history and politics of the country he writes about/draws, (b) wants to make a statement without regard for accuracy about Muslim countries and their treatment of women, or (c) simply uses the iconic image of the *burqa* as a short-hand sign for signifying a Muslim woman. However one interprets the intentions, the results are clearly lodged in the Orientalist tradition challenged by Said, and perpetuate, in one way or another, stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims.

Excalibur

Excalibur, or Faiza Hussain, is a complex and potentially more significant character than those discussed so far. Like Dust and Bridge, she is part of the Marvel Universe but appears in the 'Great Britain' of this diegesis. She was created by British writer Paul Cornell and American artist Brandon Peterson for the comic book *Captain Britain and the MI: 13*, made her debut in the first issue of that title in 2008, and has since appeared about twenty times.[22] From the start, it is easy to see that Cornell set out to create more than a token character and in-

[22] For my analysis of Excalibur/Faiza Hussain, I consulted *Captain Britain & the MI: 13* #1-15 (2008-2009).

stead formed an individual whose religious beliefs are only one aspect of a more complex personality:

> I have two aims here: to make her a real person and not someone who has to represent the entire British Muslim world all the time—I think superheroes are too prone to being standard bearers for whole communities—and to make her an everyday religious person who you won't hear anything religious from until it would naturally come up. Which is hardly ever. [...] I want people to adore her, not to be pleased she's there as part of a quota system. (qtd. in Richards, n. pag.)

Faiza Hussain is a young doctor, clad in white, modern clothes and a white *hijab*, or headscarf, signifying that she is a modern Muslim woman.[23] In the very first issue (*Captain Britain and the MI: 13* #1-2), she ends up in the middle of a battle zone and, after getting zapped by alien technology, is endowed with the ability to change the molecules of bodies. At the end of the battle, Captain Britain puts the magical sword Excalibur in the ground. As it turns out, it is Hussain who is worthy enough to receive this sword (see *Captain Britain and the MI: 13* #4). She is then invited to join the MI: 13, a superhuman group within the British Secret Service. She also dons a costume that looks very much like that of an old knight and adopts the alias Excalibur (see *Captain Britain and the MI: 13* #10-11) (see fig. 5).

A key scene takes place in issue #5, in which Faiza visits her family, who live in a traditional, British suburban home, to explain her decision to join a group of superheroes. She is accompanied by another hero, the Black Knight. Faiza's father (dressed in Western clothes—white shirt, black tie, and jeans) is at first angered by the inherent symbolism of his daughter's costume (which is associated, in part, with the Crusades) but is soon mollified when he is allowed to hold the sword Excalibur. As he states immediately, "Ahh! I've never felt... I can **feel** it... It is of this nation... and thus... mine. **Ours**. Astonishing! I'm not a particularly religious man, Mr. Whitman, but I can **feel** it... This is... blessed." Hussain's mother, clad in a combination of Western and Muslim attire (*hijab*, shirt, and long black skirt), asks the Black Knight if he intends to marry her daughter and later comments that "[i]t's always interesting what happens when I say that to a boy." In adding this comment, the author turns what could otherwise be interpreted as a stereotypical view of Arab mothers' attempts to marry off their daughters into a positive statement of empowerment for women, a statement made even stronger by the contrasting fact that she is the one wearing clothes that can carry negative connotations in the West.

Faiza Hussain initially wears traditional white, Western doctor's attire (with pants—another clear sign of her being a modern/Westernized Muslim) for about half of the series. This attire is never revealing in any way. In the later half of the series, she wears her superhero costume that is comprised of a modern version of a knight's armor, with the coat of arms of Essex and a hood that looks natural with the armor but at the same time works as a kind of *hijab*. Combined with the very male symbol of a sword, in fact, *the* sword in British mythology, it is evident that this costume is symbolic of her being both a Muslim and an integral part of Brit-

[23] *Hijab* means 'curtain' or 'cover.' It is a garment, often a kind of scarf, worn by Muslim women to cover their heads.

Fig. 5: *Captain Britain and the MI: 13* #7 (2009), cover art by Bryan Hitch.
© Marvel Entertainment, Inc.

ish society, and also free of male dependency. Another important factor in these comics is that Hussain is the focal character through whom the reader experiences the story. While not always told in the first person, the story clearly asks the reader to identify with Hussain as the new person in the group. This identification results from the fact that there is less of the male gaze in these stories and that Hussain's costume is less revealing than the costumes of most female superheroes.[24] The stories also include fewer examples of gratuitous close-ups of female characters' breasts and behinds than the average American superhero comic book. The general idea of respect towards Islam and Muslims further appears in *Captain Britain and the MI: 13*. In the initial scene of issue #2, Great Britain is mourning the death of Captain Britain; one of the six silent panels depicting this event includes three men probably intended to be Arabs and/or Muslims, one in a *thawb*, a long white dress, and the short, rounded *taqiyah* cap. Publication of *Captain Britain and the MI: 13* ceased with issue #15, and the character of Faiza Hussain, however complex and interesting as an object of analysis, has not yet become part of any other title.

Hamza Rashad

The final character I want to discuss in this essay is Hamza Mansour Al-Rashad. Like The Doctor/Habib ben Hassan, he appeared in the Wildstorm Universe. Created by writer Chris Claremont and drawn by Alé Garza and making his debut in *Gen 13* vol. 3 #1 (see fig. 6),[25] Hamza Rashad—the name he uses in all aspects of his life, foregoing the common adoption of a superhero moniker—is a third-generation Arab American. This biographical detail is provided several times so that the reader cannot miss the fact that Rashad is a 'real' American as well as a faithful Muslim. His superpower is his ability to stop time. In a key scene from the forth issue of *Gen 13* vol. 3, he is hospitalized and visited by his family: an Arab father in Western clothes, a red-haired (clearly non-Arabian) mother, and several siblings, of whom one sister is shown in a *hijab*. The rationale behind the introduction of this intercultural family is emphasized when one of the hospital personnel reacts to their presence with animosity, stating that he thinks he should "call the new TIPS hotline."[26] When a co-worker objects, he reiterates that "[t]he towers didn't just **fall** down, y'know. That was no accident. Tell me, do you **know** these people? Can you **vouch** for them?" (3). Since this story was published

[24] Most female superheroes have been created in full accordance with the idea of the male gaze. Characters such as Wonder Woman, Supergirl, and Catwoman have all been given big breasts, slim waists, long legs, and so forth. All are clad in tight spandex, often revealing much of their skin. For a thorough discussion, see Robbins.

[25] For my analysis of Hamza Rashad, I consulted *Gen 13* vol. 3 # 1-16 (2002-2004).

[26] The TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System) hotline was part of a domestic intelligence-gathering system installed by the administration of President George W. Bush in order to encourage citizens to report suspicious activities. The system was heavily criticized at about the same time this issue was published (February 2003) and was subsequently canceled after concerns about civil liberties violations.

Fig. 6: *Gen* 13 vol. 3 #1 (2002), cover art by Alé Garza. © Image Comics.

in 2002, the year after 9/11, it is plausible to assume that the creators were aiming for a positive counter-image to the many negative representations of Arabs and Muslims that had appeared in American news and in popular culture, even though they ended up stereotyping Islamophobes in the process. That the very first issue with Rashad even included a note on the cover stating, "We remember 9/11 / Sept 11 2001," likewise suggests that the comic was produced in a period when the depiction of Arab and Muslim Americans had become a hot topic and the vilification of earlier periods was no longer acceptable due to these groups becoming more visible in American society.

Rashad's clothes vary, but they always have a Western look that is complemented by a *kufi*, a round cap worn by people in Africa and by people of African descent either for traditional reasons and/or as a sign of respect for their cultural heritage and religious affiliation, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. As such, his appearance is not exaggerated or anachronistic, but the use of the *kufi* clearly signifies his cultural background. Several scenes depict Hamza Rashad's faith and Arab heritage. In the scene mentioned above, Rashad wakes up in the hospital with the whole world frozen in time. Not understanding what is going on, he interprets everything as if he were in Hell, referring constantly to the texts in the Quran. In issue #7, he is seen praying at the "Park Slope Islamic Centre," where he meets an older Arab American in a white *thawb* and a *kufi*. In issue #9, while praying in an empty classroom, Rashad is accosted by a group of male students whose leader calls out, "Yo, rag-head!" Again, this scene is evidently written to reveal the irrational hatred directed at Arab Americans: The students say such clichéd things as "[y]ou got a problem with the way we live here in this country, **Saddam**" and "maybe you should go back to where you came from" (n. pag.). Since readers know that Hamza is a third-generation American and a genuinely kind and good person, these remarks act as reminders of the injustices to which many Arab Americans were subjected after 9/11.

Conclusion

An important conclusion of this study—obvious though it may seem—is that Arab and Muslim superheroes do appear in American comics published after 9/11. Even though this development began following the first Gulf War, Arab and Muslim superheroes now enjoy a wider audience than they did before 9/11. As Louise Cainkar suggests, this development can most probably be explained by the fact that these groups have become more visible in the last decade in the United States. There has also been a change towards showing more positive images of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture, as Evelyn Alsultany's study of American television dramas after 9/11 indicates: "Two significant shifts occurred after September 11, 2001, in the representation of Arab and Muslim Americans in the U.S. media: an increase in representation and, in conjunction, an increase in sympathetic portrayals" (204). Although the positive superhero comics characters I have examined are not among the most popular—indeed, several of them are, at the time of writing, not featured in any ongoing titles (Habib ben Hassan, Faiza

Hussain and Hamza Rashad)—the fact of their existence proves that the presence of positive Arabs and/or Muslim superheroes has been actively on the mind of writers, editors, and maybe even the publishers of these comics.

In the past, critics have debated whether American superhero stories based on anything but male WASP characters would lower potential sales. I was unable to verify if the cancellation of the titles that featured the superheroes discussed above can be explained by low sales due to the ethnic and religious identity of the characters. The two still in use (Dust and Bridge) seem popular, but neither has so far been given a solo title (a comic book bearing the name of, or focusing on, one superhero in particular), indicating that they are not among the most popular. In other words, these characters, despite their increasing visibility and popularity, have yet to earn the distinction that more established superheroes enjoy.

The characters studied in this paper have all been designed in accordance with how comics characters work. In other words, they are more or less iconic (cf. McCloud 7) and, in this respect, have been assigned various cultural signifiers that quite often indicate that they are considered Oriental Others. The cultural signifiers from which the artists could have chosen to build the syntagms that visually make up each of these characters have resulted in a mix of signs that signify Western culture and signs that signify Arab and/or Muslim cultures. The markers used to establish the cultural background of Arab or Muslim characters range from the very obvious (Dust's *abaya* and *niqab*) to the more subtle (Rashad's *kufi*). Visually, all characters except Bridge display clear signs, including facial features, in their design that mark them as the Oriental Other. As signifiers, these are quite clear-cut, and it is impossible to mistake the intentions of the artists. (The ways in which readers have interpreted them, however, are harder to ascertain.) At the same time, since the characters are clearly designated as visually different from the norm, a didactic imperative often shines through in the narrative as the authors have tried, in their work, to convey messages of reconciliation and understanding of other cultures.

There was a marked variety in the backgrounds of the characters I have analyzed: One is an Arab coming from an Arab country, one is a Muslim from a Middle Eastern country, two are second or third-generation Arabs living in America or Great Britain, and one is a converted American black man. They also vary in the way in which they view religion, from the openly zealous to the more privately spiritual. None of the Arab heroes is shown as belonging to a faith other than Islam or as being an atheist, although two characters were Muslims but not Arabs; this indicates a reluctance to separate the idea of Arabs and Muslims. The varying fictitious backgrounds of all five characters show that they have not been created out of the same stereotypical mould, but seem to have been developed as ambitious, complex, and deliberately counter-hegemonic creations by their respective writers and artists. The ways in which they are treated and the ways in which their artists and writers have commented on them also indicate that most of these characters emerged from a sense of obligation to show a more positive image of Arabs and Muslims in a medium that otherwise still makes use of many negative stereotypes. Yet despite the laudable attempts to resist racist configurations of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, several of the stories still disappoint inasmuch as they are too eager to make their didactic point. The authors and/or the artists try too hard to show

positive role models, thereby unintentionally evoking equally stereotypical clichés of Arabs and Muslims as well as of Islamophobes. This strategy then risks causing a reinscription rather than a substantial revision of the image of the Oriental Other.

Shaheen, in *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping*, suggests one possible explanation for this tendency: The knowledge of Arab and Muslim culture and history is still superficial in America. As far as I can tell, no Arab and/or Muslim scriptwriters have been involved in making the comics I have examined.[27] Another explanation could be that the discourse of superhero comics is not suitable for more nuanced characterizations of these complicated subject matters. DC Comics is owned by the American entertainment giant Warner Bros., and Marvel Comics has been owned by another American entertainment giant, the Walt Disney Company, since 2009. Both of these owners will undoubtedly put pressure upon DC and Marvel to make a profit. Superhero comics are commercial products that need to reach large audiences in order to make money for the company producing it, and the discourse that has developed since the publication of the first superhero comic in 1938 has adapted to the demands of a mass audience made up mostly of male teenagers (Robbins 3). This could lead to the conclusion that the superhero genre in itself seems to require a dualistic, moral simplification of complicated matters, an iconic version of the world where one is either friend or foe or, in this case, either a 'good' or 'bad' Arab or Muslim. It is interesting to note that the two most nuanced and, in the diegesis, 'real' characters I have analyzed, Hamza Rashad and Faiza Hussain, are among the ones not currently being used by their respective publishers.

Outside of the superhero genre, a small but still noticeable trend of positive portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in comics in the United States can be identified. Examples include the critically acclaimed journalistic graphic novels *Palestine* (2001) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2010) by Joe Sacco, the graphic novels *Arab in America* (2008) by Toufic El Rassi and *Habibi* (2011) by Craig Thompson, and the success of translated graphic novels like *Embroideries* (2006), *Chicken with Plums* (2006), and *The Complete Persepolis* (2007) by Iranian-French author/artist Marjane Satrapi. In these texts, Arabs and Muslims are depicted not as token characters, loaded symbols, or simplistic stereotypes, but as complex human beings, sometimes good and sometimes bad. The difference between these graphic novels and the comic books I have consulted for this study is partly due to their respective target audiences, which is younger for comic books than it is for graphic novels and partly due to the fact that superhero comics are usually commercial products produced by a hired team, whereas graphic novels are often auteur projects, allowing for more ambitious storytelling and more nuanced representations of characters, relationships, social systems, and so on.

There is still some way to go before Arabs and Muslims, whether they live in the United States or in other parts of the world, will be treated in a less simplistic and problematic manner in American superhero comics. The way they are rep-

[27] That the most plausible example seems to be Excalibur/Faiza Hussain—who is a very clear attempt to create a convincing Muslim character that is within the diegesis of a superhero universe—can partly be explained by the fact that the writer used a group of Muslim women to check his scripts before they were handed over to the artist (see Ong Pang Kean).

resented today still tells us more about the self-image of the West in general and the United States in particular than it does about the Arab and/or Muslim worlds.

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Recent Developments

There have been changes in recent years concerning the representation of Arabs and Muslims in American superhero comics. All five superheroes identified in "'Yo, rag-head!'" as the most prominent Muslims and/or Arabs in American comic books are still featured. However, only Dust – a Marvel Comics character with a diegetic origin in Afghanistan and appearing in comics related to the mutant X-Men – has seen extensive exposure in comics. The reported appearances by Dust has more than tripled since the research was done, indicating that interest in this character has not declined (Comic Vine, 2022a).

Image 6: Design suggestions for the character Dust, by Sara Alfageeh (Pierpoint 2018, August 29). © Sara Alfageeh 2018.

The discussion on the Othering/Orientalism as well as the male gaze involved in the representation of the character, analyzed in "'Yo, rag-head!'", has also continued – in academic analysis, e.g. Pumphrey (2017), as well as in popular media, e.g. with suggestions for a less sexualized redesign of the costume presented by a female Muslim comics reader (Pierpoint, 2018 – se Image 6, above), who revisits the discourse in "'Yo, rag-head!'" on Dust's use of niqab and abaya, and the signals it conveys. The design of these less sexualized costumes for the character Dust seems to have been done with similar intent and results as the costume designs in the Kuwaiti comic *The 99* (cf. Image 2).

Image 7: Green Lantern series 5: #0 (Johns, Mahnke & Alamy 2012). © DC Comics 2012.

New Arab and/or Muslim superheroes have also been introduced and gained popularity in recent years, and a few examples will show how these representations have evolved: Simon Baz is a character in the DC Universe designated as dual-national Lebanese-Arab and Muslim-American (Cronin, 2016) and a member of the Green Lantern Corps – an interstellar, superhero-based peacekeeping force first introduced in 1961 (Daniels, 1995, p. 124). This specific character made its debut in 2012 (see Image 7, above) and has a diegetic backstory of being persecuted in the U.S. after 9/11 for his ethnic and religious background (Johns, Alamy & Mahnke, 2012). In the origin story, he is unjustly suspected of planning an act of terrorism, and in the fight to exonerate himself, proves that another American without ties to the Middle East was planning the attack (Johns, Alamy & Mahnke, 2013 – see Image 8, below).

Image 8: Green Lantern series 5: #15 (Johns, Mahnke & Alamy 2013). © DC Comics 2013.

This origin story puts Baz in the same category as the characters analyzed in "'Yo, rag-head!'", as he seems to have been created to counteract a stereotype, i.e. the Muslim terrorist. However, compared to the characters I analyzed, the way Baz has been handled indicates a development in how Arab and/or Muslim superheroes are represented in American comics. Even though – similar to what was the case for the earlier characters – the writers and artists involved do not seem to have personal connections to Middle Eastern cultures, Simon Baz's powers are not linked to stereotypical concepts of the Middle East, as opposed to e.g. the sand-related powers of Dust (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 583). Also, after the initial origin story – referenced above, the character's ethnic and religious background is rarely mentioned and he does not display stereotypical, orientalist traits concerning clothing or religious fervor (Cronin, 2016). Baz has become a prominent character in the DC Universe and is featured regularly in several monthly comic books, with the number of appearances surpassing most of those reported for the characters analyzed in "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Comic Vine, 2022b).

Image 9: Ms. Marvel #1 (Wilson, Alphona & Herring 2014). © Marvel Comics 2014.

The most prominent Muslim superhero introduced in American comic books in recent years is the aforementioned Kamala Khan, diegetically presented as a Jersey born teenager with a traditional Muslim family from Pakistan (Wilson, Alphona & Herring, 2014). This character was introduced in the Marvel Universe in 2013 and got her own monthly comic book in 2014 (see Image 9, above – which includes several visual elements indicating the ethnic and cultural background of the main character), creating publicity, receiving positive reviews, and winning a Hugo Award for best graphic novel (Wheeler, 2015). Khan is presented as a "normal" American 16-year-old, although with a family who wants her to adhere to Muslim traditions (Wilson, Alphona & Herring, 2014, p. 6). Like Baz, the character is associated with a pre-existing title; she is the fourth character to don the mantle of Ms. Marvel, a title first introduced in 1968 (Comic Vine, 2022c). Another similarity is that Khan's power of shapeshifting is not stereotypically connected to her Middle Eastern background, although it could

be connected to her dual persona of Muslim and American (Reyns-Chikuma & Lorenz, 2017, p. 83). Khan's ethnic and religious background is referenced frequently, mostly in interactions with her family, but seems to be handled in a more nuanced way (Reyns-Chikuma & Lorenz, 2017, p. 76) compared to for instance that of Dust (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 581). The potential Othering effect of the Arab and Muslim background of the character is not something the writer seems to shy away from, but this is presented alongside a focus on the character being an "ordinary girl from Jersey" (Wilson, Alphona & Herring, 2014) with immigrant parents (Reyns-Chikuma & Lorenz, 2017, p. 77). See Image 10, below, for an example of how the writer and artist attempts to visually and verbally portray everyday life in the U.S., for a family with an immigrant/ethnic culture.

Image 10: Ms. Marvel #1, page 6; panel 3-5 (Wilson, Alphona & Herring 2014). © Marvel Comics 2014.

The design of Ms. Marvel's costume, which in contrast to many costumes for female superheroes (Strömberg, 2017, p. 153) covers her whole body, seems practical and less designed to invite a male gaze. This development compared to the treatment of earlier Arab and/or Muslim superheroes has been attributed to the writer of *Ms. Marvel*, G. Willow Wilson, being the first of all artist and writers associated with the characters analyzed known to have personal experience of Muslim culture (Reyns-Chikuma & Lorenz, 2017, p. 73), although Wilson herself downplays this (Terror, 2018). There were outcries in the U.S. at the launch of *Ms. Marvel* from right-wing media, claiming it was created solely for the purpose of promoting a political agenda, but it seems to have been well received by readers and is gaining in popularity (Kent, 2015; Dominguez, 2018). Although created later, Khan has appeared in more comic books than Baz, has been included in animated TV series and animated feature films, was recently announced as the main protagonist in a live-action TV series within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the branch of Marvel producing films such as *The Avengers* and *Black Panther* (Gartenberg, 2019).

The comics produced with these new characters, and especially those featuring Khan, show a progression in the way Arab and/or Muslim superheroes are treated in American comics. The seemingly unintentional Othering effect discussed in the conclusions to "'Yo, rag-head!'" seems less likely in connection with these comics. The concluding remark in the article that: "There is still some way to go before Arabs and Muslims, whether they live in the United States or in other parts of the world, will be treated in a less simplistic and problematic manner in American superhero comics" (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 597), also seem to have, at least partially, been fulfilled (Pumphrey, 2017, p. 35; Reyns-Chikuma & Lorenz, 2017, p. 83).

A Critical Look

The research done for this article made it clear that the meeting between cultures from the Middle East and comics was an underdeveloped research area that could potentially lead to the unearthing of new empirical data, hitherto not analyzed in an academic context. An important purpose for writing "'Yo, rag-head!'" was thus to present and analyze new empirical data. This was achieved, and the article has subsequently been referenced and as mentioned earlier, seems to have been part in forming a new research area (cf. Lewis & Lund, 2017).

The methods used served the purpose of the article. The cumulative, statistical approach to ascertaining what empirical data to consider, could be viewed as a somewhat blunt instrument, but was essential as no overview on the subject existed at the time. However, this kind of statistical methodology is something that has recently been requested to be used more frequently in comics studies (Dunley, Priego & Wilkins, 2020). The overall idea of using critical discourse analysis was useful, but could possibly have been developed further in relation to the art fom of comics, as there is potential in using this method for analyzing comics, not least when discussing cultural exchanges (cf. Birken, 2015, p. 146).

The research also seemed to indicate that this area of investigation held a potential for developing new theories, new ways of understanding how cultural meetings could be represented in comics. The theoretical basis for the analysis could however have been more developed. The use of the theories concerning the Other, Orientalism and the male gaze served the general purpose of creating inroads into understanding how these characters had been handled by their writers and artists, although these theories were not further refined for the specific purpose of analyzing comics.

After having finished this article, it thus seemed as if there was a need for other theories and other methods for approaching the overall theme of the thesis. Specifically, even though the use of semiotics worked as a viable way for analyzing comics, other ways of understanding the visual aspects of these meetings between different cultures within comics seemed to be needed, which led to the writing of the next article, ”Superhero Comics from the Middle East” (Strömberg 2017).

2. Superhero Comics From the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?

The geographical focus was shifted for the article "Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?" (Strömberg, 2017), which analyzes what happens when the superhero genre, which has been mainly defined in the U.S. (Douglas & Malti-Douglas, 1994, p. 3), is utilized by publishers based in the Middle East. This article expanded on the article "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) in regards to empirical data, analytical methods, and relevant theories.

Aim

The theme of this article was chosen to analyze a process of cultural exchange in reverse compared to the data studied in the first article, as post-colonial theory indicates that influences need not be one-directional (cf. Birken, 2015, p. 146). The aim was to analyze original comics from two Middle Eastern publishers in order to understand what happens to the American-defined superhero comics genre when it is used in other cultural settings, and what this says about the genre's ability to acculturate.

Theory

Though granting inroads into understanding meetings between different cultures and comics, the theories utilized in the article "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg 2020) did not seem sufficient to fully understand the processes involved. In this article, genre theory was employed as another way of analyzing how cultural meetings are represented in comics. In aesthetic theory, genre is defined as types of texts in art forms such as literature, film and comics, recognized by conventions of form and of content shared by other texts (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 173). Genre theory invites, among other things, discussions on the boundaries of a specific genre, and the possibility of a "tyranny of genre", i.e. that these boundaries create restraints for what is possible to achieve and still have a work recognized as part of a specific genre (Coe, 2005, p. 188).

Genre theory can be useful when analyzing comics, where works often rely on genre for identification (Abell, 2012, p. 68). It has also become prevalent in comics studies, e.g. when analyzing major comics markets such as the ones in Japan or the U.S. – where a broad publication base allows for diversification into genres and subgenres, but also in compa-

rative analysis of comics remediated into films and other art forms (e.g. Ndalianis, 2008; Hatfield & Svonkin, 2012). In media studies, genre theory is frequently cited, especially within research on literature and film (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 173). Genre theory can give structure to an analysis of form and content when attempting to understand how comics traverse geographical and cultural boundaries. Defining narrative and visual conventions that delineate a genre can provide opportunities for studying how each convention works when transported to other cultural settings. Genre theory could at the same time potentially be less useful if genre conventions are not a pervasive presence in the material analyzed, i.e. if the comics studied do not rely heavily on genre conventions for their identity. Genre conventions do for instance seem to be slightly more easy to distinguish in the analyzed art in the superhero comics ("'Yo, rag-head!'" and "Superhero Comics from the Middle East"), compared to in the analyzed art in the graphic novel *Persepolis* ("Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis").

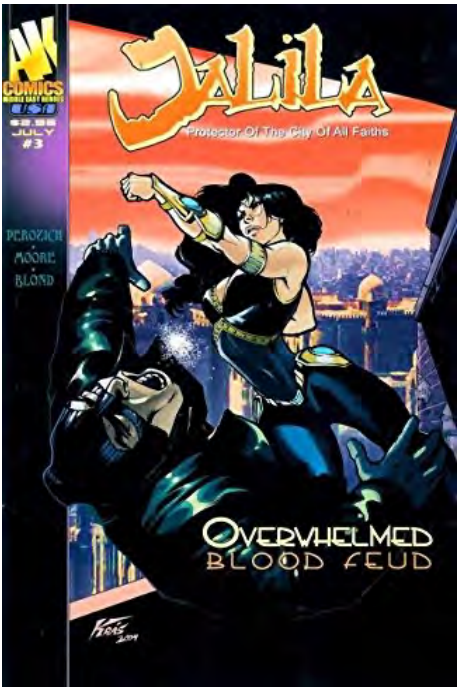

Image 11A: Zein #1 (Vicino, Albuquerque & Kras 2005). Image 11B: Jalila #1 (Kandeel, Vicino, Goldman & Lopes 2005). © AK Comics 2005.

Method

The method chosen for this article was a comprehensive, comparative study of almost all original comics from the two publishers AK Comcis and Teshkeel. The study was based on initially establishing the main conventions for the superhero comics genre through a combination and extension of earlier attempts (cf. Reynolds, 1994; McLain, 2009; Coogan, 2010). This resulted in a list of eight defining conventions: 1) Superhuman abilities, for heroes and villains; 2) A strong personal moral code as driving force for the heroes; 3) An origin story that explains the abilities and the moral code; 4) A clear visual branding of each hero, mainly through costume design; 5) A mundane secret identity that contrasts with the superhuman identity, 6) Recurring, violent clashes between heroes and villains; 7) A sexualization of the heroes, mostly seen through the male gaze; and 8) A cohesive and contemporary, although alternative, version of the reader's world (Strömberg 2017, p. 136).

Image 11C: Rakan #1 (Kandeel, Vicino, Albuquerque & Kras 2005). Image 11D: Aya #1 (Kandeel, Vicino & Goldman 2005). © AK Comics 2005.

These conventions were then used as a basis for a close reading of the comics, and a subsequent analysis, both of how the Middle Eastern comics handled the American-based conventions, and how their approaches differed from each other.

Results

At the time of writing the article, there had been two attempts in the Middle East at establishing publishing houses with a focus on creating original superhero comics, publishing both in Arabic and English: AK Comics – based in Egypt (van Leeuwen & Suleiman, 2010, p. 234), and Teshkeel – based in Kuwait (Santo, 2013, p. 1). These publishing ventures seem to have been initiated with similar didactic intent: to use the popular genre of superhero comics to promote Muslim ideas and beliefs, as well as ideas of benevolent coexistence between religions and cultures, across the world in general and in the Middle East in particular (O'Loughlin, 2005; Clements & Gauvin, 2014, p. 37).

Image 12A: The 99 #1 (Al-Mutawa, Nicieza, McCrea & Yeowell 2011a). Image 12B: The 99 #2 (Al-Mutawa, Nicieza, McCrea & Parsons 2011b). © Teshkeel 2011.

AK Comics published four titles between 2003 and 2006, *Aya, Jalila, Rakan* and *Zein* (see Image 11A–D, above). As can be seen in the cover art, these characters all seem to be designed using visual elements from the American-based superhero genre and were all based on established counterparts from American superhero and fantasy comics. They thus seem to have adherred closely to the genre specifics of superhero comics, including setting them in a fictional version of the Middle East (AK Comics 2005).

Teshkeel created one title between 2006 and 2013 – *The 99* (see Image 12A–D, below). As can be seen in the covers below, the artists working for Teshkeel modified the idea of the superhero genre somewhat, among other things using less revealing costumes for the female characters, presumably to better connect with audiences in the Middle East (Deeb, 2012, p. 382).

AK Comics and Teshkeel both ultimately foundered in their endeavors and had to close their respective publishing houses. A genre analysis of the comics published indicated that demands/boundaries based on the

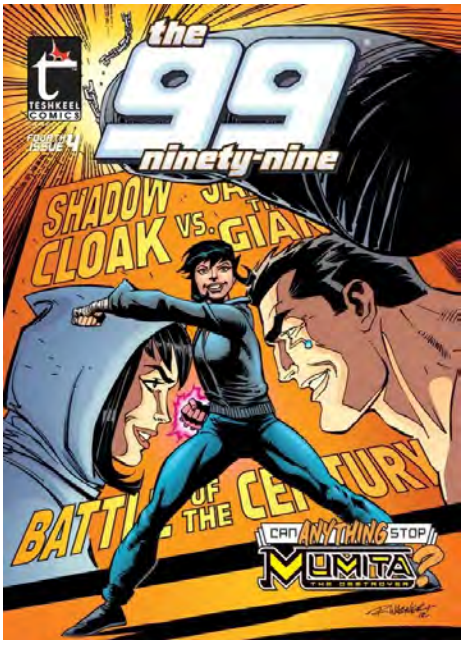

Image 12C: The 99 #3 (Al-Mutawa, Nicieza, McCrea & Parsons 2011c). Image 12D: The 99 #4 (Al-Mutawa, Nicieza, McCrea & Parsons 2011D). © Teshkeel 2011.

culturally specific genre conventions of superhero comics, the tyranny of genre (Coe, 2005, p. 182), had limited them from being used commercially to communicate with audiences across different cultures. For both publishers it seems that the tyranny of genre could have been at the root of the problem, though for different reasons. For AK Comics, using the superhero genre in a Middle Eastern context, gave them problems with the censors in several countries (Pilcher & Brooks, 2005, p. 37). For Teshkeel, the modified version of the superhero genre – downplaying physical violence and sexualized costumes – diverged so much from genre conventions that it seems to have failed to engage a large enough audience (Strömberg, 2017, p. 160).

Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?

Fredrik Strömberg

What happens if a culturally specific genre travels geographically and/or culturally? Will it retain its core conventions or be transformed, through adaptation, into something else? More specifically, is the superhero genre so rooted in its original American culture that it is problematic to adapt it to a Middle Eastern setting?

Superhero comics are intimately associated with the United States. The genre emerged in the U.S. in the late 1930s and is still popular in its native country. Despite American superhero comics having been exported for more than seven decades, there have been few commercially successful comics created in that genre in the rest of the world. Given that there have been several violent conflicts between the U.S. and Arab or Muslim-majority nations since the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is intriguing that attempts at establishing a line of original superhero comics were made in the first decade of the twenty-first century by two different publishing houses in the Middle East: AK Comics in Egypt and Teshkeel Media Group in Kuwait.

I will in this chapter analyze these publishers' comic books to ascertain what happens in regard to the American superhero comics genre when it is produced in the Middle East, and what this might say about the genre's ability to reculturate.

Superhero Comics

Even though there were predecessors, most comics historians agree the superhero genre's urtext is Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics* #1, cover dated June 1938.[1] Early on in the academic study of the genre, superhero comics were often seen as a subset of larger, more extensive genres,

1. Reynolds 1992, 8.

such as the adventure story,[2] but it has since been recognized as a self-contained, even "self-aware" genre.[3]

Definitions

Several attempts have been made at defining the conventions of the superhero genre. An early endeavor was made by comics historian Richard Reynolds in 1992, who started with the original story of Superman and found seven "laws," including the orphan hero, the earthbound god, a personal rather than legal sense of justice, a contrast between the superhuman hero and the ordinary surroundings, a mundane alter-ego, a patriotic theme, and finally a blending of science and magic.[4]

A more comprehensive definition of "primary conventions" was later established by comics scholar Peter Coogan: a selfless, pro-social mission; superpowers based on extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical and/or mental skills; and an identity comprised of a codename, a costume, and often a secret identity.[5]

A central theme of the superhero genre not addressed by the above-mentioned definitions is the conflict with the adversaries of the superheroes, the supervillains. Religion scholar Karline McLain included this in yet another attempt at establishing the conventions of the genre. She singles out six "essential features": extraordinary powers, enemies, a strong moral code, a secret identity, a costume, and an origin story.[6] The existence of enemies inevitably results in physical violence, so much so that in a content analysis of the genre, it was found that 97% of superhero stories contain violence.[7] The researchers analyzed animated TV shows from the U.S. featuring superheroes, but my experience after having read superhero comics for more than three decades is that their findings are valid also for superhero comics.

Another prevalent convention of the superhero genre left out of earlier definitions is the sexualization of the main characters. Most superheroes and superheroines have exaggerated (superhuman) physiques, which are amplified through skin-tight spandex costumes.[8] This is especially true for the superheroines, who are often clad in quite revealing costumes, and seen through the male gaze.[9] Finally, most superhero comics are set in a cohe-

2. Cawelti 2014, 40; Rollin 2013, 84.
3. Klock 2002, 26; Brooker 2013, 73.
4. Reynolds 1992, 16.
5. Coogan 2010, 607.
6. McLain 2009, 1.
7. Wilson et al. 2002, 32.
8. Duncan and Smith 2009, 235.
9. Avery-Natale 2013, 72.

sive storyworld, shared by other superheroes and based on the present-day world of the average reader, with varying degrees of deviation – the most obvious being that superheroes and supervillains exist.

My definition of the superhero genre would thus include the following conventions:

1. Superhuman abilities, for heroes and villains.
2. A strong personal moral code as driving force for the heroes.
3. An origin story that explains the abilities and the moral code.
4. A clear visual branding of each hero, mainly through costume design.
5. A mundane secret identity that contrasts with the superhuman identity.
6. Recurring violent clashes between heroes and villains.
7. A sexualization of the heroes, mostly seen through the male gaze.
8. A cohesive and contemporary, although alternative, version of the reader's world.

I view this as a prototype definition, meaning that not all conventions must be present to establish that something is a superhero comic, but that if they are, the comics in question can be said to be typical of the genre.[10]

Superhero Comics in the Middle East

Comics is not, nor has it ever been, a major popular medium in the Middle East.[11] The comics culture in the Middle East has its roots in imports from the U.S. and Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, *Mickey Mouse* comics were translated and printed in Arabic magazines, as were American comic strips, and French-style albums like *Tintin* soon followed.[12] A new era was initiated in the 1970s, when money from the oil boom facilitated indigenous, original production. Comics from the Middle East have since mostly been published in children's magazines and are traditionally didactic and political in their content, with recurring themes of pan-Arab solidarity, anti-imperialism, and the glory of Arab history and heritage.[13] In the twenty-first century, an alternative comics scene has also emerged in many Middle Eastern countries, with notable anthologies such as *Samandal* in Lebanon and *Tok Tok* in Egypt.[14]

10. Swales 1990, 52.
11. Pilcher and Brooks 2005, 306; Otterbeck 2011, 137.
12. Douglas and Malti-Douglas 1994, 9.
13. Machin and van Leeuwen 2007, 36.
14. Bakhat 2013.

American superhero comics have been exported to the Middle East since the 1960s, particularly *Superman*. The Arab version has been adapted for a Middle Eastern audience: a high Arabic language has been used in the translation to increase its educational value, pages with didactic games and stories have been added, and older, less violent comics have been published, to suit the censors.[15] There had also been superheroes of Arab origin even before the advent of AK Comics and Teshkeel but mostly in the form of parody, as in the Algerian *Maachou, the Algerian Superman* (1983) by Menouar Merabtene or *Super Dabza* (1986) by Abd al-Karim Qadiri.[16]

AK Comics

In light of the above, AK Comics was an anomaly when it was founded in 2001/2002[17] by the Egyptian businessman Dr. Ayman Kandeel (whose initials gave the publishing house its name), with the aim of producing superhero comics that would promote peace and understanding in the Middle East.[18] AK Comics started publishing in 2003/2004, with four different titles collectively called *Middle East Heroes*: *Zein, Aya, Jalila*, and *Rakan*.[19] Even though – or maybe because – the comics were aimed at both Middle Eastern and Western audiences, there was an explicit desire to stay true to the Middle Eastern origin of the comics, as indicated by the following quote from a promotional pamphlet:

> Our mission is to fill the cultural and social gap that was created over the years between the West and East, by providing essentially needed role models – in our case, Middle Eastern superheroes. Ultimately, we are presenting to the entire world a strong and optimistic vision for a futuristic Middle East, void of war, violence and turmoil.[20]

15. Pilcher and Brooks 2005, 302; van Leeuwen and Suleiman 2010, 234.

16. Douglas and Malti-Douglas 1994, 180.

17. There are different datings for AK Comics's founding. The year 2001 comes from founder Ayman Kandeel's own webpage (*www.aymankandeel.com/about-ayman*). Van Leuuwen and Suleiman (2010, 237) instead propose 2002, which is also the year stated in the colophon in the English-language editions of AK Comics.

18. O'Loughlin 2005.

19. The first issues of the English editions are copyrighted for 2003, but seem to have been distributed in the early months of 2004. Brooks and Pilcher (2005) date the U.S. launch in 2004 and the release of the comic books in the Middle East in 2005. See also BBC World Service 2005. Throughout the chapter, references to *Zein* comic books below are to Nashar and Raapack 2006; *Aya* comic books to Vicino, Goldman, and Smith 2006; and *Jalila* comic books to Kandeel et al. 2006.

20. The promotional pamphlet was distributed at the 2005 San Diego Comic Con. See AK Comics 2005.

Kandeel, as founder, seems only to have been involved in the production of the initial comics, after which writing was left mostly to lesser-known U.S. scriptwriters and the art chores to studios based in South America. AK Comics were initially distributed in a number of Middle Eastern countries and the publisher twice attempted to enter the American comics market, first in 2003–2004 and again in 2005–2006. However, despite respectable, but not spectacular, sales figures during the second U.S. launch,[21] the fact that the whole enterprise comprised only about twenty issues in total, with all titles both ending in the middle of ongoing stories and including ads for further issues that were never published, indicates that it was not a resounding financial success. Ultimately, when all titles were cancelled in 2006, a statement was issued proclaiming that the publisher would focus on producing material directly for the graphic novel market.[22] Thus far, nothing has come of this.

Teshkeel

Teshkeel Media Group was founded in 2004/2005,[23] initially as a publisher of translated American superhero comics. But already by 2006, Teshkeel's endeavors had been refocused on the publication of its original superhero comic book, *The 99*. By 2008, *The 99* was outselling all but two of the translated comic books, and Teshkeel ceased distribution of other publishers' works the same year.[24] Teshkeel was founded by the psychologist Dr. Naif al-Mutawa, who has gained worldwide attention and acclaim for his efforts to create a cultural bridge between the Middle East and the Western world.[25] Al-Mutawa has had a didactic aim with his comics: "Islamic culture

21. Williams 2005.

22. See Economics 101 2006. This is a post on the blog *Friends of Jalila – AK Comics – Middle East Heroes*, dated November 20, 2006 and entitled *AK Comics – Graphics Novels!* Although published under the pseudonym "Economics 101," the intimate knowledge of the ins and outs of AK Comics indicates that the writer was in some way associated with the publisher.

23. As with the history of AK Comics, there are different years associated with the start of Teshkeel. Most sources claim that Teshkeel was founded in 2005, but some, like Deeb (2012), make 2004 the starting point. Al-Mutawa himself often recounts a story of how the idea for *The 99* came to him in a New York taxi in 2003 and that the need for better Muslim role models for his children became a concern for him after 9/11 in 2001 (al-Mutawa 2011).

24. Santo 2014, 682.

25. Clements and Gauvain 2014, 37; Deeb 2012, 392. Al-Mutawa has, among other things, been given the Eliot-Pearson Award for Excellence in Children's Media from Tufts University, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Market Place of Ideas Award, and the Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneurship Award. He has also been named one of the 500 Most Influential Muslims by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center four years in a row and, in 2013, *Gulf Business* included him among its "Top 100 Most Powerful Arabs."

and Islamic heritage have a lot to be proud and joyful about. *The 99* is about bringing those positive elements into global awareness."[26]

While al-Mutawa was officially involved as co-writer of almost all of *The 99*, he also enlisted high-profile U.S. scriptwriters like Fabian Nicieza and Stuart Moore, and he employed respected American artists such as John McCrea and Ron Wagner. Teshkeel's comic books seem to have been more successful than those of AK Comics, as the enterprise kept going from 2006 up until September 2013, when publication ceased after a run of over forty separate issues. However, in a 2010 TED Talk, al-Mutawa admitted that the comic books were losing money and that they were part of establishing an intellectual property, aimed at making money from other enterprises using *The 99* brand.[27]

Genre Analysis

For this chapter, I have studied all English-language issues published by the two publishers: twenty-three comic books from AK Comics[28] and forty-two from Teshkeel.[29] The comic books have been printed in the standard American format: they are about seventeen by twenty-six centimeters and contain between twenty-four and fifty pages in color. The majority of Teshkeel's comics have only been published digitally.[30]

Due to censorship issues in the Middle East, there are small differences

26. al-Mutawa 2008.

27. al-Mutawa 2010. For a thorough examination of Teshkeel Media Group from the perspective of brand marketing, see Santo 2014.

28. AK Comics published their comics twice in English, first in 2003–2004 and then restarting the enterprise in 2005–2006. I have tracked down all English language issues, as far as I can tell, and there do not seem to have been any issues only published in Arabic. Since there were fewer comics published in the first run, and since the comics were republished in the second run with different numbering and new covers, I have for the sake of clarity chosen to use the second-run numbering, from which I have located issues #1–6 of *Aya, Jalila*, and *Rakan*, and issues #1–5 of *Zein*.

29. Teshkeel published a total of 36 regular, numbered issues of *The 99*, but also 5 slightly longer (50 pages) "specials" and an "origin" issue, making for a total of 42 issues. All issues were published in both in an English and an Arabic version. The comics were initially printed as physical copies, but Teshkeel shifted to digital-only publication after seven issues. As this happened, it seems that the first printed issue was replaced by two new issues, making the old issue two the new issue three, and so on. For the sake of clarity, I have used the digital numbering, which represents the only complete run of *The 99*.

30. The four #1s of the English-language AK Comics re-launch were, for some reason, published in a slightly smaller format, with sturdier covers. This deviation from the American standard format was quickly abandoned, presumably to fit into existing shelving systems in the comic shops.

in the artwork of the Arab- and English-language editions of the AK Comics.[31] The written text, however, differs widely between the two, which have been adapted for their respective audiences. As a comparative study of the different versions of an issue of *Zein* indicates, the tone was different between the formal Arabic and the more informal English language, but the English adaptations also shifted focus somewhat towards a more Orientalist view. "Colonizers," for instance, became "imperialists," and "their largest colonies" became "their most cherished of imperial possessions."[32] Teshkeel's comics seem to be visually identical in the English and the Arabic editions. The translations seem to have been fairly direct as well, having been done from English to Arabic by a third-party translator as al-Mutawa and his main co-writer Fabian Nicieza originally worked in English.[33]

Figure 1: Part of the material studied. Photo: Fredrik Strömberg.

31. Williams 2005
32. van Leeuwen and Suleiman 2010, 237.
33. Clements and Gauvain 2014, 60.

The first question concerning this material was whether the comics actually belong in the superhero genre. Both publishers advertise them as such, but are they according to the conventions established earlier? To answer this, I analyzed four sample comics from each publisher: the first issue of each of AK Comics title and the first four regular issues of *The 99*.

The comics from AK Comics were clearly created to be close in form and content to their American counterparts. Three of the titles (*Aya, Jalila*, and *Zein*) contained all eight conventions, making it obvious that they belonged within the genre. *Rakan,* based on the archetype of the massive, sword-wielding barbarian made famous by *Conan the Barbarian,* did not feature a secret identity or a clear visual branding through a costume, nor was it set in the contemporary world. Even though this title has been presented as a superhero comic, presumably to fit in with the other three in marketing, it more correctly belongs within the sword-and-sorcery comics genre.[34] Thus, *Rakan* was excluded from further analysis here. *The 99* was also evidently modeled on the American superhero genre. In one sense, it can also be said to contain all eight conventions. Two of the conventions, however, were clearly adapted: violent clashes were often brief or avoided altogether and the sexualization of the heroes was almost non-existent, especially for the female heroes.

Based on these initial results, I decided to go forward with a complete analysis of all issues of *Aya, Jalila, Zein*, and *The 99*, analyzing more closely how the eight conventions have been treated, focusing especially on the two conventions that seems to separate the comics by AK Comics from those by Teshkeel, i.e. violence and sexualization.

Superhuman Abilities

The first and most basic convention of the superhero genre is that of superhuman abilities. These can be acquired through magic, science, or a combination of both, but they can also come from highly developed physical and/or mental skills, often attained through arduous training.[35] Supervillains almost always also have superhuman abilities, both allowing them to challenge the superheroes on a figurative "level playing field" and letting the scriptwriters keep suspension high issue after issue, as these are often continuous, serialized stories.

The three heroes from AK Comics all have archetypal superhero abilities, though. In fact, the basic ideas for the titles were more or less openly copied either from iconic American heroes or the archetypes from which they

34. Cf. Duncan and Smith 2009, 216.
35. Coogan, 2010, 607.

have risen: *Aya* was based on the lone vigilante/detective, most famously portrayed in Batman, and has trained herself to her seemingly superhuman proficiencies; *Jalila* was based on the strong, godlike, flying superheroine, most prominently embodied by *Wonder Woman*; and *Zein* is a mix of the godlike archetype of the supreme superhero (Superman) and the self-taught detective (Batman).

The heroes of *The 99* have more specific abilities, many of which seem less easy to connect to the traits of earlier superhero characters. There are heroes whose abilities are based on divine attributes and include the power to "turn chaos into order," to "track any object or pinpoint any location," to "chemically induce love and good feelings into a person's brain," to "instill mercy in other people," or to "turn discrimination back on the offending party."[36] These abilities, which might seem too specific or even too flimsy for a traditional U.S. superhero, have been chosen because one of the main ideas of *The 99* is teamwork.[37] A major narrative device is that the heroes are supposed to form "triads" where they link together, three at a time, enhancing each other's abilities. The powers of each hero thus becomes more or less a tool for their leader Dr. Ramzi, who composes each triad, based on the assignment that he wishes to send them on.

Personal Moral Codes

Why does the superhero keep fighting injustice instead of leading a normal life or even harnessing the extraordinary abilities for personal gain? There needs to be a believable motivation for heroic action within the narrative. This is where the personal moral code is introduced both as a driving force for the hero within the diegesis and as a key for the reader in understanding the hero's motivations. The moral codes of superheroes stem from the general perception of what it means to be a hero, i.e. to courageously help others both without any expectation of a reward and, at times, at great personal risk. Even though many variations on this theme do exist based on different cultures, these general traits still seem to be universal.[38]

The heroes of AK Comics all certainly have similar and, for the superhero genre, generic personal moral codes. Aya is determined to defend the innocent and fight crime in her hometown; Jalila wants to do the same in "The City of All Faiths"; and Zein sees himself as the last defender of the ancient land of Egypt. Their underlying reasons are not explained extensively

36. al-Mutawa, Moore, Brigman, and Richardson 2011.
37. al-Mutawa 2007b, 39.
38. Jayawickreme and Di Stefano 2012, 167.

in their respective origin stories, however, nor given any depth in the ongoing stories. The most engaging explanation for a hero's actions belongs to Aya, who wants to prevent more murders like that of her own father, which is copied more or less directly from *Batman*.

The creator of *The 99*, al-Mutawa, has explicitly stated that the stories and the characters should be based on universal values, and most of The 99 have moral codes that adhere to the generic principle of the hero, i.e. that they wish to help others both seemingly without any kind of reward and at personal risk. What sets *The 99* apart is that the heroes' prevailing moral compass is provided by their leader and mentor Dr. Ramzi, who is a psychologist (just like *The 99* creator al-Mutawa) and the founder of the 99 Steps foundation, a non-profit organization with the goal of "bringing hope and assistance to those people who need it the most."[39] He seeks out young adults who have been given powers by magical stones and then convinces them to use their newfound abilities to work for a world at peace.[40] It is not always explained how, or even if, the members of The 99 actually accept Dr. Ramzi's vision, aside from assertions that he is pure of heart.[41] The new heroes all simply leave their former lives, becoming more content with themselves and their situations, and unquestioningly throw themselves into the battles that Dr. Ramzi directs them towards. This goes against the conventions of the U.S. superhero genre, as the moral code that drives a superhero is usually personal and more specific.

A more communal sense of moral obligation is not a completely new idea in superhero comics. There is, for instance, a resemblance to Marvel's *X-Men* comics, which feature mostly young superheroes assembling around their self-appointed leader Professor Xavier, who acts as their moral compass. That the writers were aware of this comparison is made likely in the story "The Stinging Tree: Part One,"[42] where Rughal, the main villain of the series, is presented as reformed and starting an alternative school for young heroes. The resemblance is evident to the classic dichotomy in the pages of *X-Men* between the two leaders/mentors, the altruistic Professor Xavier and the more aggressive, sometimes villainous, sometimes heroic Magneto, who has been shown in several storylines to be reformed, even taking on the role of leader for other groups of young mutants.

39. al-Mutawa, Moore, Brigman, and Richardson 2011, 7.

40. *The 99* #7, 26. For this and future references to the ongoing series, see al-Mutawa et al. 2006–2013.

41. *The 99* #1, 30.

42. *The 99* #28.

Figure 2: The villain Rughal announces his intention to become a second mentor/leader of the young heroes. From *The 99* #28, p. 6. © Teshkeel Media Group 2011.

Origin Stories

Ever since Superman first appeared, most superhero comics somewhere contain an origin story that explains the hero's abilities and moral code. Communications scholars Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith even go so far as to claim that the origin story is the only recurring narrative pattern of the whole genre.[43]

In all the AK Comics titles, the origin stories are printed on the inside of the front covers to make sure that the reader never forgets the background story of the hero in question. These stories show clear inspiration from

43. Duncan and Smith 2009, 231.

American superheroes. Almost completely copying Batman's origin story, Aya is said to have been "traumatized when her father was shot in front of her" and has since devoted her life to "mastering all forms of martial arts, forensic techniques and other detective skills" in order to "defend the weak and innocent."[44] Zein is described as the last descendant of an ancient dynasty who was sent by his father in a specially designed vessel from a doomed civilization into the present to be the designated defender of their land in the future. The similarities to Superman's origin story are obvious, even though Superman was sent across space and Zein across time.[45] Jalila is a nuclear scientist who gains her powers in a nuclear blast, which mirrors the origin story of Marvel Comics's Hulk. But the fact that her parents, who died in the blast, were nuclear physicists who devoted their lives to protect their city through their work is an original variation and also the reason why Jalila decides to follow in their footsteps and to use her powers to protect the city and its inhabitants. None of these stories seem to resonate explicitly with the religious affiliations of the heroes, who, although this was never overtly revealed in the comics, were supposed to be adherents of different monotheistic religions.[46]

Conversely, the background story of *The 99* is different from that of most American superhero comics. The series has an overarching origin, which is retold several times. It is the story of ninety-nine stones that have been imbued with the collected wisdom of ancient Arab culture. When they come in contact with worthy persons, stated as "the right personality and inclination, plus an essentially pure heart"[47] – the latter a reference to the concept in Islam of the heart as the essence of an individual, where a sense of right and of faith resides – the so-called Noor Stones imbue them with special powers. These stones also epitomize the ninety-nine qualities of Allah, making the heroes embodiments of Allah's names. This is not unprecedented, as it can be said to be in line with the Sufi concept of *al-takhalluq bi-asma' Allah*, i.e. that by striving to embody the names of God, the Sufi manifests the traits of the names.[48] Still, it is not something that is unproblematic within Islam where it can be seen as idolatry. Al-Mutawa made sure to consult with religious scholars before creating *The 99,* but he has still been attacked and has even had a fatwa leveled against him from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, specifically based on the naming of the heroes.[49]

Still, al-Mutawa did give each of his heroes names that reflects the

44. Daniels 2004a, 34.
45. Daniels 2004b, 38.
46. O'Loughlin 2005.
47. al-Mutawa, Moore, Brigman, and Richardson 2011, 44.
48. Clements and Gauvain 2014, 63.
49. al-Mutawa 2014.

qualities of Allah. Some are taken directly from the Qur'an, such as the super-strong Jabbar, who gets his name from *al-jabbar* meaning "irresistible." The name Sami, from *al-sami'* meaning "listener," is given to a character with superhuman hearing. Other names are slightly adapted, such as Widad, a character who has the power to fill others with love, the name coming from *al-wadud*, meaning "full of love and kindness" – or Noora, a character who can see the light inside other people, based on *al-noor* meaning "light."[50]

In addition, all of The 99 have individual origin stories. Throughout almost the entire series, one new hero is introduced in every issue, making each issue an origin story. These stories are often based on trauma. The young people who are empowered by the Noor Stones have, for example, trodden on land mines, been kidnapped, or experienced traffic accidents. This, as observed by comics artist Paul Chadwick, is in line with many U.S. superheroes; as he has noted, the origin stories that resonate most with readers are those that "mine the vein of trauma."[51] But it is also a way for the writers of *The 99* to connect with the everyday lives of readers in the Middle East, where landmines, kidnapping, and traffic accidents can be common in the daily news.[52]

Visual Branding

The clear visual branding of each hero has been a mainstay since the early days of superhero comics, when the printing processes available to comic book publishers necessitated the use of simple designs that would both make the most of four-color printing and ensure that the images were legible despite numerous misprints.[53] While printing techniques have vastly improved, most superheroes still have colorful, iconic costumes, designed to symbolize their identities and powers.

AK Comics's heroes have traditional, tight-fitting, brightly colored, spandex-like superhero costumes. Jalila, for instance, wears a skintight blue costume with gold details. This, combined with long, flowing black hair and the ability to fly, makes her resemble Wonder Woman (who is dressed in a blue and red costume with gold details), although Jalila's body is comparatively more covered due to censorship issues in the Middle East.[54]

The 99 are also easily discernable through color schemes and symbolic attire, although their costumes are less skintight spandex and more like or-

50. Ali 2006, 135, 535, 876, 1450.
51. Duncan and Smith 2009, 232.
52. Deeb 2012, 400.
53. Clark 2014, 59.
54. Williams 2005.

dinary, though individualized, clothes. The first hero in *The 99*, Jabbar, is one of the few who actually has a body-hugging spandex costume, making him stand out among later additions to the team.

Secret Identity

The secret identity is a well-established convention of the superhero genre, again harking back to Superman and his alter ego, the timid, bespectacled Clark Kent. The reason given within the diegesis is often that the superheroes need to protect their friends and families from being attacked by supervillain enemies. The secret identity also gives writers and artists a chance to contrast superhuman abilities and personas with a more mundane existence and to provide readers a more plausible identification object.[55] Although this specific convention has somewhat fallen out of style recently (e.g. Captain America, Iron Man, Robin), it remains a useful generic marker.

The AK Comics superheroes have traditional secret identities. Jalila is a nuclear scientist, just as Bruce Banner is in *The Incredible Hulk*; Aya is a law student, seemingly combining backgrounds from *Spider-Man* and *Daredevil*; and Zein is a university professor. Little is made of these secret identities, however, with the exception of Jalila who is shown to have a brother who has been drawn into an organization run by the villains. Like Clark Kent, Jalila seems to be able to show up in her superhero costume without any mask and still not be recognized, not even by her own brother. She wears glasses at work, but not in private, making her look similar both in and out of costume. The only other difference is that she wears her hair in a ponytail when she is in her civilian identity as Ansam Dajani. The fact that no one recognizes her is consistent with how Superman can don a pair of glasses and not be recognized as Clark Kent within the DC Universe as that storyworld's most recognizable superhero.

In *The 99*, all heroes initially also have secret identities, but this is problematized and discussed within the story. Initially, the heroes use secret identities for protection, as they are often underage, and Dr. Ramzi's role as mentor includes him giving them superhero names and advising them to keep a secret identity. In the seventh issue, "Hiding in Plain Sight,"[56] the whole story is devoted to Dr. Ramzi discussing with the heroes' parents if and how to reveal their existence to the world. In the end, they are revealed at a press conference, but with masks on.

In the later story "Masks," after experiencing people's fear of them, the heroes rebel and demand to be allowed to work without secret identities and

55. Duncan and Smith 2009, 228.
56. *The 99* #7.

masks.[57] This story can be read as an allegorical tale of the heroes growing up and breaking free from their surrogate parent Dr. Ramzi, but it is also indicative of the self-reflective, self-aware relationship that the writers of *The 99* have to the superhero genre. Having a secret identity is so integral to the idea of superheroes that when the characters in *The 99* discard their masks, the fact that it goes against the constraints of the genre adds emphasis to the story's message of openness and international solidarity.

Figure 3: From the story "Masks" (The 99 #17, p. 27). © Teshkeel Media Group 2009.

Violent Clashes

The superhero genre has a built-in narrative tension that pits hero against villain – all of whom possess extraordinary abilities – and they inevitably

57. *The 99* #17.

end up fighting each other physically. This violence has often inspired critique of superhero comics, a debate that has existed almost as long as the genre itself.[58] The AK Comics titles very much adhere to this convention. Almost all of the stories follow a fixed narrative system based on a classical three-act structure, where the first two-thirds of an issue are used as a set-up for a fight between hero and villain, which then goes on for between three and seven pages, out of a total of twenty-four. That is not to say that there is no violence in the first two thirds, but the final third is often one uninterrupted fight scene. Examples of this can be found in, for instance, *Aya* #5, where the climactic battle between Aya and a supervillain group covers pages 9 through 20; in *Jalila* #3, where Jalila fights a group of terrorists on pages 16 through 22; or in *Zein* #3, where Zein battles the villain Ammit on pages 15 through 21.

Teshkeel's balance of clashes is very different, and clearly based on al-Mutawa's thoughts that violence is to be avoided at almost all cost.[59] In *The 99*, much thought has been put into figuring out non-violent solutions to stages in the narrative where, traditionally, a fight between hero and villain would have erupted. Some such solutions include having the hero who is all about brawn, Jabbar, hit the ground, not the villain, thus making the opponent fall down and lose consciousness;[60] having Noora shine a light so bright that the villains are blinded and the heroes can run away;[61] and having Mumita destroy the villains' escape vehicle instead of fighting them.[62]

The theme of non-violence is built into *The 99* throughout the whole series, including the creation of the Noor Stones, said to have taken place during the Mongols' ransacking of Baghdad in 1258. In contrasting the senseless violence, including the destruction of the city's famous library, with the valiant efforts of the librarians who save all the knowledge through magic into the Noor Stones, al-Mutawa not only transmits the idea of the importance of knowledge but also that only the ignorant who do not know any better engage in violence. At the same time he connects this to a pivotal moment in Arab history, a story that is taught to most young Muslims in the Middle East.[63]

This non-violence theme equally includes the villains, who use things like knockout gas and sound to incapacitate the heroes.[64] But they also run

58. Cf. Beaty 2005, 114.
59. al-Mutawa 2007a, 39.
60. *The 99* #6, 25.
61. *The 99* #14, 11.
62. *The 99* #24, 15.
63. Deeb 2012, 394.
64. In *The 99* #14, 10; #23, 23.

Figure 4: A two-page spread from *Aya* #5 (p. 12–13), part of a longer fight scene between the heroine and a group of super villains. © AK Comics 2006.


YAAH!
KRACK
ZING
WHOA!
WELL WELL, THE GANG'S ALL HERE!
GLAD YOU COULD MAKE IT!
WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME, AYA!
YOU SHOULD HAVE LISTENED THE FIRST TIME... YOU'RE BECOMING QUITE THE NUISANCE!
YEAH, I DON'T LISTEN SO WELL...
I HAVE THIS ATTENTION DEFICIT... SOMETHING... SOMETHING...

away instead of fighting or simply remove the heroes' Noor Stones and thus their powers.[65] Much is done in order to win without ever throwing a punch. Several times there are generic build-ups to fights between a group of heroes and a group of villains, only to end up with both teams standing around glaring at each other.[66]

Figure 5: Image from *The 99* #33, p. 27. © Teshkeel Media Group 2013.

There is an awareness of this deviation from the convention of the genre in the diegesis. In the story "House Party: Part One," near the end of the series, a character whose superpower is fighting enemies and destroying things, Mumita – called "The Destroyer" – complains that during her last three missions she has been held back and therefore been "fighting against

65. *The 99* #24, 7; *The 99* #12, 3.
66. E.g. *The 99* #12, #15, and #24.

my nature." This is used as as the starting point of a story that introduces the hero Rahima the Merciful, who, when joined up with Mumita's power, can solve problems without the use of violence.[67]

Even in the cross-over series *JLA/The 99*, the Justice League of America is made to play along with The 99's rules of the genre. There is one evident exception to the non-violence rule, in *The 99 Special: Sacrifice*, where Jabbar solves a problem with violence for the first time, and Mumita actually hits the villains, Arab mercenaries, repeatedly and very graphically.[68] These scenes contain more violence than in all other issues put together, which could owe to this being the only issue not officially co-written by al-Mutawa.

Sexualization of the Heroes

Sexualization of the heroes, and in some cases the villains, is a long-standing convention of the superhero genre, harking back to the tight spandex costume of Superman and the revealing costume of Wonder Woman. Over decades, the bodies of superheroes, male and female, have become ever more exaggerated, and the costumes have revealed more and more. Or, as cultural theorist Scott Bukatman writes: "superhero bodies have always been naked bodies exhibited to a very public gaze."[69]

This convention is evident in the AK Comics titles, mostly the two featuring female heroes. Both Aya and Jalila have costumes that cover more of their bodies than is customary in U.S. superhero comics, where superheroines often sport costumes with bare arms and legs, as well as exposed cleavages. This was done to appease censors in the Middle East,[70] but both AK Comics superheroines nonetheless wear skin-tight, body-hugging costumes which reveal more than they hide. And they are frequently drawn in poses that focus the reader's attention to their breasts, buttocks, and crotches. Both superheroines are also often drawn with impossible combinations of thin waists and big, seemingly weightless breasts.

In *The 99*, all female characters have costumes that cover their bodies, they have more normal physiques, and there are no poses that draw particular attention to the bodies of the heroes. As in the titles from AK Comics, there are no overt references to the religious affiliation of the characters in *The 99*, but many female characters wear different variations of the veil, from the assistant to Dr. Ramzi, Miss Ibrahim, who wears a modern veil that

67. *The 99* #33.
68. al-Mutawa et al. 2007, 16, 34–38.
69. Bukatman 2013, 190.
70. Williams 2005.

Figure 6: Two examples of the sexualization of heroes, from *Jalila* #1, p. 12 and *Aya* #2, p. 18. © AK Comics 2006.

Figure 7: Examples of the less sexualized heroes of The 99. From *The 99 Special: Beginnings*, p.1. © Teshkeel Media Group 2007.

shows part of her hair and goes with a modern business suit,[71] to the superhero Batina the Hidden, who wears a full *abaya* with *niqab*. Batina does reveal her face when among friends,[72] though, and many of the female characters do not wear any veil. The heroes' clothing and costumes adhere to the Islamic code of sobriety and modesty, while at the same time signaling their unique personal and superhero qualities.[73]

Again, there is a self-reflexivity about this issue within the diegesis. In the story "Problem Solving,"[74] two of the young heroes are seen looking into a shop window with quite revealing clothes:

Figure 8: From *The 99* #3, p. 14. © Teshkeel Media Group 2007.

Also worth noting in this connection is that, in comparison to equivalent American comics like *the X-Men*, there is a marked absence of love affairs between the young heroes gathered together.

An Alternative Version of the World

Most superhero stories are set in an alternative version of the reader's world. Locating these fantastical stories within a more mundane, easily recognizable setting makes the comics relevant, relatively accessible, and understandable to the readers, but it also provides a familiar setting against which to contrast the extraordinary personas and powers of the superheroes and supervillains.

AK Comics set all three of its titles in a version of the Middle East where the confrontations between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim forces have come to an end, and people live in peace. The text that can be found on the inside covers of all titles proclaims that their shared diegesis is a world "after the 55 year war," but the setting looks like it is supposed to be the contemporary Middle East. Thus, AK Comics are not set in a science fiction-like future but

71. *The 99* #1, 36.
72. al-Mutawa et al. 2011, 47.
73. Edwin 2012, 195.
74. *The 99* #3.

simply an alternative version of the reader's contemporary reality, which is consistent with the genre convention.

Two of the titles are set in Egypt, where the comics were produced. Zein is placed in a version of Cairo, as indicated by frequent visuals of the nearby Pyramids of Giza. Aya is situated in "Alexia" (Alexandria), Egypt's second-largest city, presumably so that the two heroes' stories can be kept separate. This mirrors the way two of the oldest superheroes, Superman and Batman, have been associated with two different cities, Metropolis and Gotham City, respectively, within the diegesis of the DC Universe. Then there is Jalila, who operates in and around Jerusalem, in the locale called "City of All Faiths." This is the most political of the three titles, with mentions of things like the opposing forces of the "United Liberation Force" (PLO) and the "Xenox Brigade" (the Israeli armed forces) and Dimondona, a thinly disguised reference to Israel's probable nuclear weapons facility at Dimona.

Despite setting the comics in geographical areas that are supposed to resonate with readers in the Middle East, it is evident that the artists were not from the Middle East themselves, as many characters look like traditional characters from U.S. superhero comics. In *Jalila* #4, for instance, there is a bank robbery scene, where the innocent bystanders are fair-haired, while the robbers all seem to be dark-haired,[75] something that in a comic made in the U.S. or Europe at the same time would probably have been deemed racist even though it was more common earlier on in comics history.[76]

Image 9: From *Jalila* #4, p. 16. © AK Comics 2006.

In *Zein*, references to ancient Egyptian culture such as the pyramids and the Sphinx are abundant, but in scenes from the diegetic Cairo, no veils are shown on the women, despite the fact that many in Egypt do cover their

75. *Jalila* #4, 16.
76. Lund 2013, 199.

heads.[77] The opening scene of *Zein* #3 looks like it was copied from an *Indiana Jones* film, complete with a Westerner in a fedora excavating an old gravesite in Egypt, a scene that in a U.S. comic book would most likely be considered Orientalist.

There is a greater diversity of locations in The 99's alternative version of our world. The heroes travel the world on missions, with the help of a team member who can teleport himself and others. Many of these missions are in the Middle East, but The 99 are headquartered in Paris for the main part of the series and, later, move to Spain for the last few issues. This geographic diversity and the idea that each of The 99 comes from a different country is, of course, good for a series that is set to have an international appeal,[78] but it is not new. Both Marvel and DC, the two big U.S. superhero publishers, have been doing this for years, albeit not as deftly as it is done in *The 99*. The American publishers' international heroes have often been stereotypes, made to represent their whole country, with costumes made out of the colors of their country's flag, such as the heroine Sabra, who wears a version of the flag of Israel. *The 99*'s writers and artists have, mostly, avoided these particular stereotypes.

Tyranny of Genre?

This chapter shows that AK Comics and Teshkeel have consistently applied intrinsically different methods in their efforts to use the American superhero genre in the Middle East. It is evident that the two genre conventions that gave these publishers the greatest problems were those of violence and sexualization.

Censorship is an ever-present force in many Middle Eastern countries, both in the shape of official, governmental censorship and in the risk of having a publication banned by various religious groups for not complying with their rules. This also applies to comics, which are mostly viewed as culture for children and young adults and can be censored for containing sexually implicit or explicit content, for being too violent, or for not being educational enough.[79]

Despite this, AK Comics decided to stay true to the conventions, with revealing costumes and recurring bouts between superheroes and supervillains aplenty. Particularly the sexualization seems to have clashed too much with Islamic principles in the Middle East and, even though AK Comics had the comics redrawn with more modest costumes after critique from the cen-

77. Slackman 2007.

78. Meier 2013, 187.

79. Clements and Gauvain 2014, 60; Douglas and Malti-Douglas 1994, 5; van Leeuwen and Suleiman 2010, 234; Zitawi 2008, 143.

sors, both titles featuring female heroes were banned from sale in several Middle Eastern countries.[80]

Teshkeel, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight from starting a few years later, chose a different approach, excluding violence and letting the superheroes, male and female, wear less tight-fitting costumes. The more modest, though still varied costumes conform to a modern-day feminist reading of the Qur'an, where the egalitarian message is stressed while Islamic traditions remain respected.[81] The restrictive view on the use of violence is in line with the interpretations of the Qur'an that can be found in what social scientist Mohammed Abu-Nimer calls "war and peace" studies within Islam, i.e. that violence should be heavily restricted and can only be justified in defense.[82]

These adjustments of the genre meant that the comics from Teshkeel were more sedate, making it possible for them to be more acceptable in the Middle East, but they were at the same time perceived as less exciting compared to American superhero comics. Looking at the way AK Comics and Teshkeel have treated *all* of the conventions of the superhero genre, it becomes evident that there is more to it than just how sexualization and violence can be treated in popular culture for young readers, due to cultural differences between the U.S. and the Middle East. Just as American superhero comics can be said to resonate with Jewish and Christian culture, so do the stories from AK Comics and Teshkeel Comics resonate with Islamic principles in the Arab culture.[83]

The term "tyranny of genre" was introduced by Richard M. Coe to describe the creative constraints that can be felt when working within a defined genre.[84] Staying close to the tradition of a certain genre – using most or all of its conventions – can generate strong genre identification. Using fewer conventions will, conversely, result in weak or ambiguous genre identification.[85] Simply using all the conventions of the superhero genre does not inevitably make for interesting comics, however, and tedious repetition often does not attract an audience. There needs to be a certain amount of adaptation of the genre, a manipulation of the conventions, in order to excite readers.[86] This leads to an extended definition of the "tyranny of genre," that the use of a certain genre demands a trade-off between conservative applications and innovative transformations of generic conventions. Again,

80. Pilcher and Brooks 2005, 307; Williams 2005.
81. Edwin 2011, 195.
82. Abu-Nimer 2000–2001, 223.
83. Otterbeck 2011, 138.
84. Coe 2005, 188.
85. Schauber and Spolsky 1981.
86. Fishelov 2010, 36; Neale 1980, 50.

the comics from AK Comics and Teshkeel show different ways of handling this balancing act.

AK Comics stayed true to all of the conventions of superhero comics, going so far as to copy most of the characteristics for their characters from well-known American counterparts, as well as imitating drawing styles and storytelling techniques. This meant that the only difference between their comics and the ones published in the U.S. was that the AK Comics's stories were set in the Middle East. The content only superficially mirrored the Middle Eastern origin, despite the openly stated intent of doing the exact opposite. This resulted in weak copies of American superhero comics, which did not excite readers in either the Middle East or in the U.S.

Teshkeel chose a largely different method and, to a greater or lesser degree, adapted almost all of the conventions. Elimination of violence and significantly downplaying the sexualization of the heroes were the major adaptations. But other changes were made, such as the use of superpowers that were designed to fit into a group rather than work independently, and the heroes' communal moral code also radically changed the way the stories in *The 99* were told, as compared to their American counterparts. The latter can be referred back to the fact that all of The 99 have been chosen to be the embodiment of Allah's named attributes, which unites them despite differences in age, nationality, and cultural backgrounds.[87] This can also be seen as a reference to the *umma*, the Islamic community all over the world, which fits in with the fact that all The 99 heroes are from different countries.

This meant that Teshkeel, through adaptation, really did create something new. By adapting almost all of the conventions, however, they changed so much that their comics moved closer to the genre of information comics, comics "designed to educate, inform, or teach the reader something."[88] This is consistent with the way comics made in the Middle East are often viewed, as didactic vessels intended to convey information for young readers. When moving towards the more educational information genre, *The 99* lost some of the appeal of the original genre, risking disappointment from readers expecting more traditional superhero comics.

So, do genres travel geographically and/or culturally? The material studied indicates that the conventions of the superhero genre are too immersed in U.S. culture to be directly appropriated into a Middle Eastern setting without adapting the conventions, and in doing so, risk straying too far from the genre's core. This could lead to the creation of a new genre, but does not seem to have done so yet.

87. Edwin 2012, 175.
88. Caldwell 2012.

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Recent Developments

Both AK Comics and Teshkeel have cancelled their publishing ventures and there does not, at the time of writing, seem to be much in the work of the proposed auxiliary plans for *The 99* of more animated TV series, theme parks, etc. (al-Mutawa, 2010). However, this does not mean that the idea of superhero comics based in the Middle East has disappeared. Suleiman Bakhit attempted a similar endeavor with the publishing company Aranim Hero Factory, based in Jordan (Greene, 2015), stating that his intent was similar to that of Teshkeel and AK Comics, i.e. to use a popular art form, comics, and popular genres, such as superheroes, to change preconceived notions of people and cultures from the Middle East, i.e. changing the Oriental image of the Middle Eastern Other, as well as the self-images among young people in the Middle East (Abrahams, 2017). Although there seems to have been some success, such as the Jordanian government deciding to buy large numbers of comic books by Aranim Hero Factory annually to hand out to school children (Gray, 2017), Bakhit's attempts to establish a publishing house does not seem to have achieved the level of success of either AK Comics or Teshkeel. None of the comics from Aranim Hero Factory were published in English, and although Bakhit and his publishing house have been referenced extensively in news media, research examining the comics has yet to be published. Sadly, Bakhit died in 2019, and without him, Aranim Hero Factory seems to have stopped producing comics.

There have been other superhero comics produced in the Middle East in the last few years, such as Joumana Medlej's *Malaak: Angel of Peace*, a web comic from Lebanon (Medlej, 2016), but the one that seems to have had the biggest impact is the aforementioned Egyptian web comic *Qahera* by Deena Mohamed (Mohamed, 2019). Similar to the analyzed Middle Eastern superhero comics, Mohamed seems to have a didactic purpose for producing her comics, initially only releasing them in English (see Image 13, below), intending them as a response to Western stereotypes of Muslim women (Kreil, 2017, p. 187). She seems to be aiming at countering the stereotype of the Oriental female Other by creating an empowered heroine from Egypt with a costume that, similarly to that of Kamala Khan's, does not cater specifically to the male gaze (Bailey Jones, 2015, p. 144). The fact that both comics seem to be prospering where AK Comics and Teshkeel faltered, could be due to them embracing the new medium of web publishing, which compared to the older print medium has advantages when it comes to both production cost and distribution (Carter, 2011, p. 191).

Image 13: Qahera (Mohamed 2019). © Deena Mohamed 2019.

A Critical Look

For this article, the introduction of genre theory served the purpose of the analysis, opening up for a different way of analyzing and understanding this meeting between cultures. The establishing of a list defining the conventions for the superhero genre gave a structure to the analysis and has subsequently been cited and used (e.g. Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 241). However, the high number of defined genre conventions analyzed, combined with the fact that comics from two different publishers were exa-

mined, although allowing for a comprehensive, comparative study, meant that the analysis through the lens of each convention became limited due to the maximum length of the article.

Even though genre theory suited the specific purpose of the analysis in "Superhero Comics from the Middle East", there was still a need for more specific theories/tools for the analysis of how the visual aspects of comics could be said to represent these meetings between cultures. This led to the writing of the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020).

3. Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis – Accommodation, Combination, Integration

Even though the theories employed in the articles "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) and "Superhero Comics from the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017) helped elucidate their respective research questions, there still seemed to be a need for a more specific theoretical basis for analyzing and understanding the visual aspects of how cultures from the Middle East could be said to be represented in comics. To explore this, the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020) was written, using schema theory to analyze how visual elements in *Persepolis* could relate to visual elements in Persian art forms.

Aim

The graphic novel *Persepolis* by French Iranian artist and film maker Marjane Satrapi has been analyzed from several perspectives, and the idea that there are visual references to Persian art forms present in the images has often been mentioned in earlier research (e.g. Shilton, 2009; Uchmanowicz, 2009; Naghibi & O`Malley, 2005; Chute, 2010), as well as by the artist herself (Hill, 2006, p. 7). Although these ideas have become "truisms" about the graphic novel (Singer, 2019, p. 158), there had been no thorough analysis of these potential influences, how these meetings between different visual cultures are represented or how the influences integrate with comics (Singer, 2019, p. 154). So, the aim for this study was to identify visual elements in the graphic novel potentially connected to Persian art forms, attempting to discern if and how they could relate to their proposed influences and how they integrate with styles and visual conventions in comics.

Theory

In this article schema theory, and specifically its application within art history was introduced as a way of analyzing possible connections between visual elements in *Persepolis* and Persian art forms.

The foundation for the analysis was the theory of general, cognitive schemata, mental frameworks built on prior knowledge and experience, serving to facilitate understanding of events in everyday life, but also in relation to understanding texts in any media (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 376). More specifically, schema theories as developed by art historian

Ernst H. Gombrich in relation to art (Gombrich, 2014, p. 64), were implemented. These theories were also developed through the introduction of the concepts of visual ideas and visual building blocks (Strömberg, 2020, p. 96). This will be discussed further in ”Part IV: Revisiting, Connecting & Developing”.

Method

This article was based on a formal analysis, i.e. an analysis of the formal aspect of the art without relying on background information about the artist, what she has said about her art, potential influences, etc. (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 157). This was done since many of the claims about potential connections with Persian art forms in previous research were not only made with little analysis to back them up, but also seemed to have been made with conscious or unconscious intentions of elevating the graphic novel to something more than a “mere” comic, and in that process potentially overstating the influence of the Persian art, and subsequently understating influences from comics (Singer, 2019, p. 160). A formal approach using schema theory made it possible to focus on the actual art, attempting to avoid these pitfalls.

Taking cues from Gombrich’s schema theories, four different levels of visual schemata, with an increasing complexity in their construction, were defined: A) lines; B) details; C) characters and objects; and D) compositions (Strömberg, 2020, p. 99). These definitions were used as a basis for a close reading of the graphic novel, going back and forth, compariing the visual elements in the graphic novel with visual elements in Persian art forms that had previously been identified as potentially referenced in the art in *Persepolis*, i.e. A) arabesques and calligraphy (Shilton 2009, p. 71; Uchmanowicz, 2009, p. 368); B) miniatures (Naghibi & O`Malley, 2005, p. 231); and C) reliefs (Chute, 2010, p. 144).

Results

The results indicated that there were indeed connections between these Persian art forms and visual elements in *Persepolis*, although some of the connections could be attributed to parallel developments. The schemata from Persian art forms also seemed to have gone through different levels of accommodation and combination in order to be remediated in comics (Strömberg, 2020, p. 112). These different levels in the analysis

were deemed potentially related to: A) divergences between the involved art forms; B) combinations of schemata from different art forms; and C) the potential objectives for using the visual ideas. All three explanations seemed to, in varying degree, fit the different Persian art forms.

Schemata in the Graphic Novel *Persepolis*
Accommodation, Combination, Integration

Fredrik Strömberg

Abstract

It has repeatedly been suggested that the art in the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Iranian French artist Marjane Satrapi contains numerous connections to ancient Persian art forms, to the point of this becoming a 'truism', although the claim has not been subjected to in-depth analysis. The present formal analysis employs Gombrichian schema theory to identify visual elements in the graphic novel potentially connected to Persian visual cultures to discern if and how they might relate to their proposed influences and how they integrate with styles and visual conventions in comics. The results indicate that there are indeed connections, although integrated into the art form of comics through combination and accommodation, and that this reinforced the Persian theme of the graphic novel and potentially enriched the art form of comics.

Keywords: arabesques, art history, *bande dessinée*, calligraphy, cognitive psychology, comics, Persian miniatures, schema theory

Graphic novels are often created within specific comics cultures, which influence visual aspects such as format, page layout, and style.[1] However, the art in graphic novels can still be highly individual and can conceivably contain influences from any number of visual sources. This possible influx of inspiration may hold the potential of diversifying and enriching the art of a graphic novel, but how does this process work? How can visual elements from other visual cultures or art forms integrate with visual conventions in comics?

1 I am in debt to my PhD supervisors, Jakob Dittmar and Inger Lindstedt, for putting Gombrich on my map, to Martin Lund and the anonymous reviewers for insightful criticism, and not the least to my wife Hanna, for putting up with me writing and rewriting this text innumerable times.

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To explore these ideas, I have analysed the graphic novel *Persepolis*:[2] a visual memoir with a Persian theme,[3] told in the comics format by Iranian French artist Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis* is visually clearly situated within the subculture of the French New Wave in the late 1990s/early 2000s,[4] but it has regularly been suggested that it contains connections to Persian visual cultures.[5] The high degree of influence of these connections has become a 'truism', oft-repeated in academic writings about this graphic novel, although unaccompanied by thorough analysis.[6]

The present analysis employs schema theory to identify visual elements in the graphic novel—potentially connected to Persian visual cultures—to discern if and how they could relate to their proposed influences, how they integrate with styles and visual conventions in comics and what this could indicate for the graphic novel and for the art form of comics. A number of different terms have been used to designate comics. Marshall McLuhan labelled comics a medium,[7] but in academic research, it is often referred to in the form of one specific publishing format, such as comic strips or comic books.[8] I have chosen to view comics as an art form,[9] communicated through different media—an art form with its own characteristics and defining traits.

The analysis focuses on potential connections to four Persian art forms suggested in earlier research: arabesques and calligraphy,[10] min-

2 Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (Paris: L'Association, 2017).

3 Cf. Jennifer Worth, 'Unveiling: *Persepolis* as Embodied Performance', *Theatre Research International* 32, no. 2 (2007), 143–160, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883307002805; Hillary Chute, 'The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1–2 (2008), 92–110, https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.0.0023; Pauline Uchmanowicz, 'Graphic Novel Decoded: Towards a Poetic of Comics', *International Journal of Comic Art* 11, no. 1 (2009), 363–385.

4 Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comics in the 1990s* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007), 65; Ann Miller, 'Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*: Eluding the Frames', *L'Esprit Créateur* 51, no. 1 (2011), 38–52 (50).

5 Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics Account* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 244; Dianat Firouzeh, *Where I am: Between Two Worlds: The Graphic Khaterat of Taj Al-Saltaneh and Marjane Satrapi* (Baltimore: Morgan State University, 2013), 10.

6 Marc Singer, *Breaking Frames: Populism and Prestige in Comics Studies* (Austin: University Press of Texas, 2019), 158.

7 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge 2001 [1964]), 178.

8 Cf. David Machin and Theo van Leeuwen, *Global Media Discourse: A Critical Introduction* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2007).

9 John Sinclair, ed, *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 69.

10 Siobhán Shilton, 'Transcultural Encounters in Contemporary Art: Gender, Genre and History', in *Comparing Postcolonial Diaspora*, eds Michelle Keown, David Murphy and

iatures,[11] and friezes.[12] Other potential influences from Iran have been suggested, such as political cartoons in Iranian newspapers.[13] Although the latter do share characteristics with Satrapi's style, they also seem closely aligned with styles of political caricatures in the West,[14] presumably due to Iran's openness to Western culture up until the Iranian Revolution, and are therefore less interesting in illuminating the search for Persian influences.

Schema Theory

Firstly, I present an outline of relevant ideas within schema theory as well as the Gombrichian version within the science of art, showing why this theory was chosen as a foundation for the analysis in contrast to some of the prevalent strands of schema theory within comics studies.

Schema theory is based on the idea that we as humans sort memory into cognitive structures, patterns that help create an understanding of complex phenomena.[15] A schema is, according to cognitive theory, a collection of information about a certain phenomenon, connected in the consciousness—a categorisation of related information and a matrix of its interconnectivity, guiding our incorporation and structuring of new information.[16] This can relate to everyday events and connects relevant cognitive information about a certain phenomenon into a pattern of general knowledge, informing how we understand a new phenomenon and how we act based on previous experience from similar phenomena.[17]

James Procter (New York: Springer, 2009), 56–80 (71); Uchmanowicz, 'Graphic Novel Decoded', 368.

11 Nima Naghibi and Andrew O'Malley, 'Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in Satrapi's *Persepolis*', *English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2–3 (2005), 223–247 (231), https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.2007.0026.

12 Chute, *Graphic Women*, 144.

13 Mostafa Abedinifard, 'Graphic Memories: Dialogues with Self and Other in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*', in *Familiar and Foreign: Identity in Iranian Film and Literature*, eds Manijeh Mannanin and Veronica Thomson (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2015), 93–109 (96).

14 Cf. Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 174, 285, 297, 298, 302, 303.

15 Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 376.

16 Ibid., 508.

17 Ibid., 336.

Though disputed for lack of empirical evidence,[18] schema theory has proven useful for its heuristic possibilities[19] and has been developed within a number of academic fields and disciplines, evolving into related but different theories, such as image schema, textual schema, story schema, scripts and genre schema,[20] making it important to be particular about what strand of this theory is being referenced.

Schema Theory and Comics Studies

There is indeed also an emerging field of comics studies connected to cognitive science,[21] indicated by recent anthologies on comics studies as well as a special issue of *Topics in Cognitive Science*.[22] Two influential monographs in this field referencing schema theory are *The Visual Language of Comics* by Neil Cohn[23] and *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* by Karin Kukkonen.[24]

Cohn based his ideas of how the sequential narrative in comics works on cognitive schema theories in combination with linguistics, making his ideas comparable to those of researchers who analyse comics through the use of semiotic theories.[25] Cohn discusses how 'visual vocabularies' can form through the use of 'graphic schemas' that are stored in a 'visual lexicon', a process and a system that he views as following similar basic rules as language.[26] Cohn's theories are often

18 Elana Semino, 'Schema and Script Theory', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*, eds Michael Byram and Adelheid Hu (London: Routledge, 2000), 525–527 (527).

19 Susan T. Fiske and Patricia W. Linville, 'What Does the Schema Concept Buy Us?', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 6 (1980), 543–557 (543), https://doi.org/10.1177/014616728064006.

20 Chandler and Munday, *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 376.

21 Neil Cohn and Joseph P. Magliano, 'Editors' Introduction and Review: Visual Narrative Research: An Emerging Field in Cognitive Science', *Topics in Cognitive Science* 12, no. 1 (2020), 197–223 (197).

22 E.g. Alexander Dunst, Jochen Laubrock, and Janina Wildfeuer, eds., *Empirical Comics Research: Digital, Multimodal, and Cognitive Methods* (London: Routledge, 2018); Neil Cohn and Joseph P. Magliano, eds, 'Visual Narrative Research: An Emerging Field in Cognitive Science', issue 12, no. 1, of *Topics in Cognitive Science* (2020).

23 Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics. Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

24 Karin Kukkonen, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

25 E.g. Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

26 Neil Cohn, 'Explaining "I Can't Draw": Parallels between the Structure and Development of Language and Drawing', *Human Development* 55 (2012), 167–192 (188).

referenced but also contested,[27] with his mapping of linguistics onto comics sometimes viewed as too deterministic.[28]

Kukkonen examines comics from a cognitive perspective, although with a narratological and literary agenda,[29] mostly utilising schema theory developed within narrative studies. Kukkonen also discusses the theory of image schema, how preconceptual bodily experiences can be mapped onto our perception of images, and how our perception of movement can be embodied in images and thus readily understood on a basic, cognitive level.[30]

Ultimately, these linguistic and narrative developments of schema theory in relationship to comics were not deemed to be the most useful basis for the analysis. For this purpose, schema theories within the science of art, originating in ideas by Ernst H. Gombrich, were chosen as a starting point,[31] since these process-oriented theories were deemed more apt for the purpose of trying to understand the process of how comics artists acquire and use visual patterns.

Schema Theory and the Creation of Art

Gombrich claimed that works by earlier artists inform how artists think about ways of depicting different phenomena, such as objects, persons, or backgrounds, more so than the perception of the actual phenomena, and that this process is based on visual schemata—patterns artists recognise, copy, transform, and use.[32]

Once acquired, a set of these visual schemata can be developed into an individual style, that is, specific, personal, interrelated visual conventions based on the memory of previous successful artistic solutions, either by the artist or by tradition.[33] These solutions can then become patterns that recur in art that are connected in different ways, forming

27 Cf. Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); Simon Grennan, *A Theory of Narrative Drawing* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2017).

28 Paul Fisher Davies, *Comics as Communication: A Functional Approach* (New York: Palgrave McMillan 2020).

29 Kukkonen, *Contemporary Comics Storytelling*, 1.

30 Ibid., 20.

31 Chandler and Munday, *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 162.

32 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London: Phaidon Press, 2014 [1960]), 56.

33 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 29; Brent Wilson and Marjorie Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt. Cultural Style Acquisition as Graphic Development', *Visual Arts Research* 10, no. 1 (1984), 13–26 (24).

a more or less unified style for a whole group of artists.[34] This is indicated when comparing styles by comics artists in the earlier mentioned French New Wave, where many of the influential artists, including Satrapi, shared a studio in Paris at the turn of the twenty-first century, influencing each other, sharing schemata, and forming a subculture within the French comics culture.[35] The artists of this generation often discarded the use of flat, bright colours in the French album tradition, opting for contrast-rich, black-and-white artwork.[36]

New Concepts

In order to develop schema theory for the purpose of the analysis, new concepts need to be introduced. When Gombrich discusses schemata, it is often from one of two different perspectives: (1) the tactile, hands-on applications of the knowledge of how to create graphic representations; and (2) the mental processes upon which these applications are based and with which they communicate.[37] He is never clear as to the difference between these two ways of using schemata in the creation of art,[38] and to make this distinction clearer, the term 'schema' in relation to visual arts has been divided into two separate, related concepts: *visual building blocks* and *visual ideas*.[39]

Visual Building Blocks

Visual building blocks are based on the practical methods an artist works with, conventions for representations of different phenomena using motor habits, the movement of the hand, and different artistic tools and techniques.[40] Visual building blocks may, as they are based on practical, hands-on methods, be closely linked to specific artistic techniques and materials used.[41] Communications of schemata on this

34 Brent Wilson, 'The Artistic Tower of Babel: Inextricable Links between Culture and Graphic Development', *Visual Arts Research* 29, no. 57 (2003), 25–38 (27).
35 Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 10; Miller, 'Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*', 50.
36 Ibid.; ibid.
37 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 76.
38 Cf. ibid., 64.
39 These two terms in some ways articulate the same phenomena as Cohn's Image and Production Scripts (Cohn, 'Explaining "I Can't Draw"', 173), but are viewed as different aspects of one schema.
40 Ibid., 309.
41 Cf. Jessica Abel and Matt Madden, *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures: A Definitive Course from Concept to Comic in 15 Lessons* (New York: First Second, 2008), 108.

level could, for instance, happen during shop-talks between artists[42] or at lectures in art schools,[43] where practically applicable advice could result in direct exchanges of visual building blocks, conventions for how to create a graphic representation of certain phenomena using specific artistic methods.[44] Manifestations of visual building blocks can be found in image-based instruction manuals for artists, often containing 'rules' for how to create graphic representations of different things,[45] not uncommon within comics.[46] In *Persepolis*, a visual building block could, for instance, be the way the representation of young Marji was created, using the artistic methods needed to create the distinct black-and-white style of the graphic novel.

Visual Ideas

Schemata can also, on a less concrete level, be visual ideas: thoughts on how we perceive patterns in certain phenomena in art and real life and how these may be the basis for creating graphic representations of said phenomena.[47] This can be manifested as insights and inspiration, internalised and developed in the consciousness of an artist.[48] Since visual ideas are less pragmatically applicable and based on the general characteristics of something, they are probably less likely to be linked to specific artistic techniques and could potentially come from a variety of visual sources.[49] The communication of visual ideas can happen at any time when an artist recognises a schema, a pattern for creating a graphic representation of something. For the example of young Marji in *Persepolis*, the visual idea would be a more general idea of how to represent this character, an idea that could be transported into other media, such as animation, but also the general idea that makes the character recognisable, despite being varied due to the sequential nature of comics.

Using visual building blocks can, despite its being based on general visual ideas, result in the creation of specific and potentially highly

42 Wilson and Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt', 24.
43 Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros, *Visual Culture,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 169.
44 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 134.
45 Howells and Negreiros, *Visual Culture,* 181.
46 E.g. Abel and Madden, *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*.
47 Wilson and Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt', 14.
48 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 76.
49 Howells and Negreiros, *Visual Culture,* 169.

individual *visual elements*:[50] the embodiment in the 'outer world' of the mental processes of using visual ideas and visual building blocks. In *Persepolis*, this would be a specific example of a depiction of young Marji.

Assimilation and Accommodation

The connection between what I have labelled *visual building blocks* and *visual ideas* is what Gombrich calls 'corrections', namely alterations the artist makes to the schema of 'oscillating back and forth' between practical application and mental processing.[51] The artist moves from acquiring a schema—a *visual idea*—creating and applying a *visual building block* based on said schema, assessing the results—the *visual elements*—potentially making changes to the *visual ideas* they are built upon, adjusting the *visual building blocks* accordingly, and trying again. This can be compared with the idea within cognitive psychology of two possibilities for using schemata: (1) assimilation, using an internalised schema more or less without changing it; and (2) accommodation, developing and adapting a schema for your own requirements.[52] Applying these two concepts to the world of art, assimilation would indicate copying other artists' visual solutions more or less directly, whereas accommodation would entail producing new, personalised versions through Gombrich's process of oscillating back and forth. This could concern the artistic development of a specific artist but could also encompass a larger group—for example, the artists involved in the French New Wave—exchanging and developing schemata as a group, thereby developing a new subculture within a comics culture.

Analysis of Potential Connections

Finally, in order to operationalise the theory of schema for the purpose of the analysis, there is a need for a structuring of the search for schemata.

Gombrich never defined exactly what can or cannot be a schema[53] but suggests it can include influences down to the basis of minute de-

50 Wilson and Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt', 14.
51 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 64.
52 Jean Piaget, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952), 140.
53 Veronika Kopecky, 'Letters to and from Ernst Gombrich regarding *Art and Illusion*, Including some Comments on his Notion of "Schema and Correction"', *Journal of*

tails, such as a line indicating a fingernail.[54] Opinions differ as to where the upper 'boundaries' are for what could be the basis of a schema in visual arts, but representations of characters and objects have been referenced.[55] Gombrich also claims that the composition of whole images can be based on schemata: patterns transferred from the work of one artist to another.[56] More complexly constructed visual schemata, namely containing more information, can also include smaller schemata, details that form a larger whole,[57] resonating with cognitive schema theory where a schema can contain other schemata.[58]

This discussion on the boundaries of what can constitute a schema was used as a starting point for the structuring of the analysis, where indications of connections to visual ideas from the aforementioned Persian art forms were sought in visual elements in *Persepolis* on four levels of complexity in the construction of their schemata: (1) lines, (2) details, (3) characters and objects, and (4) compositions.

Lines: Curvilinear Art and Rhythmical Designs

One distinguishing feature of the art in *Persepolis* on the level of lines is the use of curvilinear art and rhythmical designs.[59] These could be connected to visual ideas from arabesques and calligraphy, two distinctive, yet interlinked forms of Persian art.[60] Both art forms have been associated with the aniconistic tendencies in Muslim traditions, namely trepidations concerning figurative art,[61] contributing to the flourishing of ornamental, artistic, and often geometrical designs used

Art Historiography 3 (2010), https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/media_183172_en.pdf.

54 David Carrier, 'Gombrich on Art Historical Explanations', *Leonardo* 16, no. 2 (1983), 91–96 (92), https://doi.org/10.2307/1574792.

55 Wilson and Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt', 17; Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, 28.

56 Gombrich, *Tributes: Interpreters of Our Cultural Tradition*, 122.

57 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 26.

58 Robert J. Sternberg and Karin Sternberg, *Cognitive Psychology*, 6th ed. (Belmont: Eadsworth, 2012), 337.

59 Uchmanowicz, 'Graphic Novel Decoded', 367.

60 Shilton, 'Transcultural Encounters in Contemporary Art', 11; Uchmanowicz, 'Graphic Novel Decoded', 368.

61 Milette Gaifman, 'Aniconism: Definitions, Examples and Comparative Perspectives', *Religion* 47, no. 3 (2017), 335–352 (345), https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2017.1342987.

on everything from texts and illuminated manuscripts to buildings in historical Persia, and still a presence in everyday life in Iran today.[62]

Persian arabesques are vegetally inspired decorations, using graphic representations of leaves and spiralling stems to form rhythmic, linear designs that can be repeated over and over again.[63] These have become highly formalised and are viewed as an essential part of decorative traditions in Persian visual cultures.[64] Calligraphy is the art of linear graphics, of giving letters and words sculptural autonomy through a process founded on geometrical and decorative rules.[65] Calligraphy has been described as one of the highest achievements of Persian art, creating linear art based on the Farsi language.[66] It has traditionally been designated as representing the holy scriptures of the *Quran* through a balance between beauty and disciplined artistic freedom.[67] Calligraphy and arabesques are often used together[68] and are intricately linked with each other.[69]

One extradiegetic example—that is, outside of the narrative world in the graphic novel—of possible connections to visual ideas from these two art forms can be found on the cover to the English language *The Complete Persepolis* (see Fig. 1).[70] Curvilinear art and floral designs surround a turquoise area containing an image of the family of the young Marji, the protagonist of the story and Satrapi's alter ego, seated in and standing around a sofa. The colour turquoise is dominant in decorative, repeatable designs on exteriors and interiors of buildings in Iran, including both arabesques and calligraphy in their designs.[71]

62 Henri Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), 138.
63 Gordon Campbell, ed., *The Grove Encyclopaedia of Decorative Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 25; Mikhail B. Piotrovsky, 'Monotheism and Ornamentation', in *Earthly Beauty, Heavenly Art: The Art of Islam*, ed. John Vrieze (London: Lund Humphries, 1999): 23–32 (29).
64 'Arabesque', *Encyclopædia Britannica*, http://academic-eb-com.proxy.mah.se/levels/collegiate/article/arabesque/8148.
65 Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001), 6–7.
66 Ben Wittner, Sascha Thoma, and Nicholas Bourquin, *Arabesque: Graphic Design from the Arab World and Persia* (Berlin: Die Gestalten Verlag, 2008), 4.
67 Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès, 'Foreword', in *Arabesque: Graphic Design from the Arab World and Persia*, eds. Ben Wittner, Sasha Thoma, and Nicolas Bourquin (Berlin: Gestalten Verlag, 2008), 4–7 (4).
68 Cf. Anette Hagedorn and Norbert Wolf, *Islamic Art* (Cologne: Tachen, 2009), 9.
69 Michel Barbot, 'Calligraphie, Arabesque et Structure Lexical', *Revue des Sciences Sociales* 34 (2005), 160–169 (167).
70 Marjane Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, tr. Anjali Sigh (New York: Pantheon Books 2007).
71 Cf. Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture*, 214; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy*, 198.

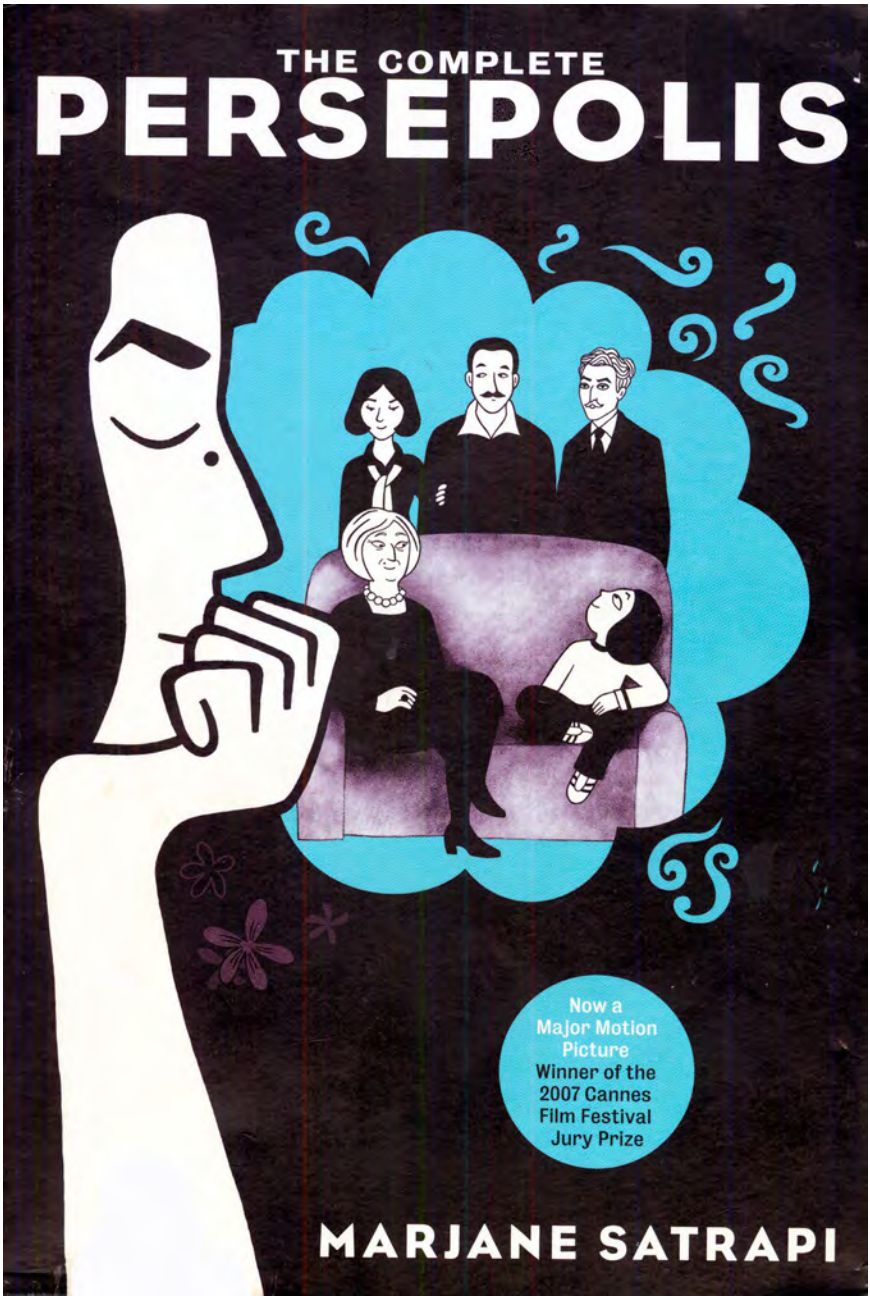

Figure 1. Cover of *The Complete Persepolis*. © 2007 Marjane Satrapi, L'Association and Pantheon Books.

The shape and placement of the turquoise area seems to be connected to the visual idea from comics of using thought bubbles: a version of the speech bubble with a cloud-like shape and bubbles forming a 'tail', designating the thinking character.[72] Thought bubbles contain words, indicating inner monologues, but images also occur as visual representations of thoughts.[73] Thus, the cover can be interpreted as adult Marji thinking about her life as a young girl. The placement of adult Marji outside of the flower-like, bubbly turquoise shape, with closed eyes, head resting in her hand—suggesting thinking, reminiscing about her past—also indicates a connection to the visual idea of thought bubbles, as do the stylistic flowers in the lower left-hand corner forming what could be interpreted as an equivalent of the bubbly tail, pointing towards the adult Marji.

The visual elements forming the curvilinear art, also turquoise on a black background, do not seem to be connected to specific Farsi letters or traditional Persian rhythmic visual patterns, but design and placement suggests connections on the level of visual ideas with both curvilinear art in Persian calligraphy and floral designs in Persian arabesques.[74] Connections to floral designs in arabesques are also indicated by inclusion of the visual elements creating graphic representations of stylistic flowers, as well as by the symmetrical, flower-like shape of the large turquoise area. The latter, semi-symmetrical shape could, furthermore, be connected to visual ideas from Persian carpets, often including large-format, centrally placed, flower-shaped medallions.[75] These visual elements originated on book covers in the fifteenth century,[76] often combined with both calligraphy and arabesques,[77] and are also used in decorations of buildings (see Fig. 3B).

The visual elements forming the curvilinear art are placed outside of the flower-like, turquoise shape and do not seem to connect directly to the visual idea of thought bubbles. The non-mimetic design of the curvilinear art could be indicative of the ephemeral thinking process, an

72 Abel and Madden, *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*, 5; Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, 36.

73 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 20.

74 Cf. Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *The Splendour of Islamic Calligraphy*, 182.

75 Cf. Elke Niewöhner, 'Decorative Arts', in *Islam: Art and Architecture*, eds Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (Cologne: Köhneman, 2000), 520–529 (523); Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture*, 169.

76 P. R. J. Ford, *Oriental Carpet Design: A Guide to Traditional Motifs, Patterns and Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 274.

77 Sheila R. Canby, *Islamic Art in Detail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 83.

interpretation supported by curvilinear art recurring as visual elements throughout the interior of the book to visualise the characters' inner life. Curvilinear art appears to signal inner turmoil (195), thoughts (34 panel 4, 209), dreams (64 panel 1, see Fig. 2A), memories (84), and prayer (233 panel 4, see Fig. 2B, and 296 panel 9).[78] These visual elements are used sparsely, contrasting with scenes focusing more on action in the diegetic 'outer world'. This use of curvilinear art could be viewed as a combination with and an accommodation to the visual ideas in comics of using what have been labelled emanata,[79] or typographic signs:[80] lines pointing out from the head of a character to indicate feelings, visual elements that are closely connected to comics.[81]

One departure from established conventions in comics is that the curvilinear art in these examples in *Persepolis* is more extensive, sometimes filling the space around a character, whereas in comics it often consists of a few lines in close proximity to a character's head.[82] The use of lines filling the space around a character to indicate a certain feeling does exist within comics,[83] although mostly in Japan, further removed geographically and culturally, making a connection less likely. These lines in *Persepolis* also form loosely connected geometrical designs, indicating connections to visual ideas in arabesques.[84] Despite the differences, indicating both accommodation and combination, the positioning of these visual elements around the heads of the characters still implies connections to visual ideas of emanata in comics.

On a couple of occasions, curvilinear art is used in ways more closely aligned with the visual ideas from comics: wavy lines emanating from Marji's head when she is angry (239 panels 2–4) or spirals indicating that Marji is going crazy (247 panel 5). The lines used in these examples are fewer and, in accordance with visual ideas from comics, more directly centred towards the characters' heads, but through their inclusion of curvilinear art, still seem to carry connections to calligraphy and arabesques.

78 Pages and panels in *Persepolis* refer to the French language collected edition of *Persepolis* (Satrapi, *Persepolis*).
79 Mort Walker, *The Lexicon of Comicana* (Port Chester: Comicana, 1980), 28.
80 Maria Jesus Pinar, 'Comics', in *Interactions, Images and Texts: A Reader in Multimodality*, eds Sigrid Norris, and Carmen Daniela Maier (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 357–371 (360).
81 Cf. Abel and Madden, *Drawing Words and Writing Pictures*, 8.
82 Ibid.
83 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, 40.
84 Cf. Niewöhner, 'Decorative Arts', 494.

Figure 2A. Curvilinear art in *Persepolis*, used to visualise dreams... Page 64, panel 1.

Figure 2B. ...and prayer. Page 233, panel 4. © 2017 Marjane Satrapi and L'Association.

Figure 3A. Visual elements connected to curvilinear art, as part of the diegesis in Persepolis. Page 65, panel 4. © 2017 Marjane Satrapi and L'Association.

Visual elements connected to ideas of curvilinear art are furthermore used as graphic representations of material phenomena in the diegesis of the story. This can be seen in a panel where Marji and her friends walk through an alley of trees, where the foliage is indicated with stylised, curved white lines against a black background (65 panel 4, see Fig. 3A).

The design and use of these visual elements are similar to those used to indicate emotions, but when compared to ornamental, decorative Persian designs seem slightly more mimetic and more aligned with visual elements in arabesques.[85] This is potentially because their objective is closer to that of using curvilinear art in arabesques, namely to create graphic representations of leaves and stems (see Fig. 3B).[86]

85 Cf. Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture*, 209.
86 Canby, *Islamic Art in Detail*, 26.

Figure 3B. Example of an arabesque from a mosque in Teheran. © nyiragongo/ Adobe Stock.

Details: Facial Features

The faces of the characters in *Persepolis* are examples of the idea that complexly constructed schemata can consist of combinations of smaller schemata. A few visual elements create the graphic representations of a facial feature: nose and mouth consist of one visual element each, one single line; eyes are two connected curving lines with a dot to indicate the pupil;[87] and finally, marked eyebrows, also consisting of one single line each. These visual elements, though similar to conventions in which representations of faces have been created in comics,[88] also bear a resemblance to the design of facial features in Persian miniatures, one of the most well-known Persian art forms.[89] Persian miniatures consist of images based on black line drawings on paper, coloured with a flat, bright palette,[90] and were mostly complements to texts in books, comparable to the European tradition of illuminated manuscripts in medieval times.[91] The art form seems to have come into its own in the thirteenth century and is still very much part of everyday life in Iran.[92] Probably due to being intended for private and not public use, Persian miniatures, often containing people in large quantities, were less affected by aniconism.[93]

Fewer visual elements create the graphic representations of facial features in *Persepolis,* compared to the slightly more detailed art in many of the styles used over the centuries within Persian miniatures,[94] indicating accommodations to fit the sparse, black-and-white style of the graphic novel. Persian miniatures also contain colour, which differentiates them from the art in *Persepolis*. The use of flat colouring without shading or other representations of volume combined with the

87 Cf. Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Illusion and Art', in *Illusion in Nature and Art,* eds Richard Langton Gregory and Ernst H. Gombrich (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1973), 193–244 (205).

88 Cf. Thierry Groensteen, *La Bande dessinée, son histoire et ses maîtres* (Paris: Skira-Flammarion, 2009), 329.

89 Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture,* 138.

90 Nancy Purinton and Mark Watters, 'A Study of the Materials Used by Medieval Persian Painters', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 30, no. 2 (1993), 125–144 (126).

91 Oleg Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures: An Introduction to Persian Paintings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 125.

92 Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures,* 32.

93 Terry Allen, *Five Essays on Islamic Art* (Manchester: Solipsist Press, 1984), 24; Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture,* 138.

94 Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures,* 32.

Figure 4A. Detail from panel in *Persepolis* featuring the father of the main character (page 143, panel 2). © 2017 Marjane Satrapi & L'Association.

Figure 4B. Detail from Persian miniature from the sixteenth century featuring a soldier in a battle.

use of black outlines means that they are still close to the style used in *Persepolis*.

The facial features in *Persepolis* are, furthermore, more varied in design and the expressions they convey than was the custom in Persian miniatures. Specific *visual building blocks* for how to create facial features seem to have been dominant and used more or less as templates,[95] especially for depicting crowds.[96] Despite this, there are similarities, indicating possible connections between these visual elements in Persian miniatures and in *Persepolis*.

The possible connections are exemplified in Figures 4A and 4B, where the face of Marji's father is shown next to that of a Persian bowman from a sixteenth-century Persian miniature. There are differences, such as more variations in the thickness of line in the visual elements forming the facial features of the bowman. There are also similarities, such as the general design of the eyes, which with their

95 Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures,* 133.
96 Cf. Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture,* 147.

horizontal, semi-mimetic design, are different from visual conventions within comics featuring similarly 'cartoony' art as in *Persepolis*[97] as well as more specific details, such as the angular design of the eyebrows and the drooping moustache shown without indications of the mouth.

Characters and Objects: Persian Soldiers

Moving to the level of schemata connected to characters and objects, the most easily recognisable visual element in *Persepolis* connected to Persian art forms is the distinctive design of ancient Persian warriors, soldiers with characteristic hairstyles and beards (see Fig. 5B). These have historically been featured on Persian stone friezes, many of which are to be found in museums around the world,[98] becoming synonymous with the ancient Persian Empire.[99]

A number of visual elements in *Persepolis* are clearly connected to these *visual ideas*, especially in the first part, where the narrative focus is on the history of Persia. Visual elements creating graphic representations of the soldiers from the friezes are shown in the diegesis as physical objects in a museum (341, panel 4) but also appear as extradiegetic representations of the Persian Empire in a chapter header (30, panel 1, see Fig. 5A), as well as in illustrations of the history of Persia (32, panels 1–2).

The complexly constructed visual elements representing the soldier carry a *visual idea* but also contain smaller visual elements that carry separate *visual ideas*,[100] such as the semi-mimetic design of the eyes, similar to those of the characters of the story. The soldiers in the graphic novel show fewer details than their counterparts in the friezes, lacking, for instance, visual elements for nostrils and eyebrows, indicating an accommodation to the black-and-white style of the graphic novel and a move towards representing the *visual idea* of the soldiers.

97 Naghibi and O'Malley, 'Estranging the Familiar', 228; Groensteen, *La Bande dessinée, son histoire et ses maîtres*, 329.

98 Lindsay Allen, '"The Greatest Enterprise": Arthur Upham Pope, Persepolis and Achaemenid Antiquities', in *Arthur Upham Pope and a New Survey of Persian Art*, ed. Yuka Kadoi (Leyden, Brill Academic Pub, 2016), 127–168 (146).

99 Mehrdad Kia, *The Persian Empire: A Historic Encyclopaedia*, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2016), xvii.

100 Cf. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 28.

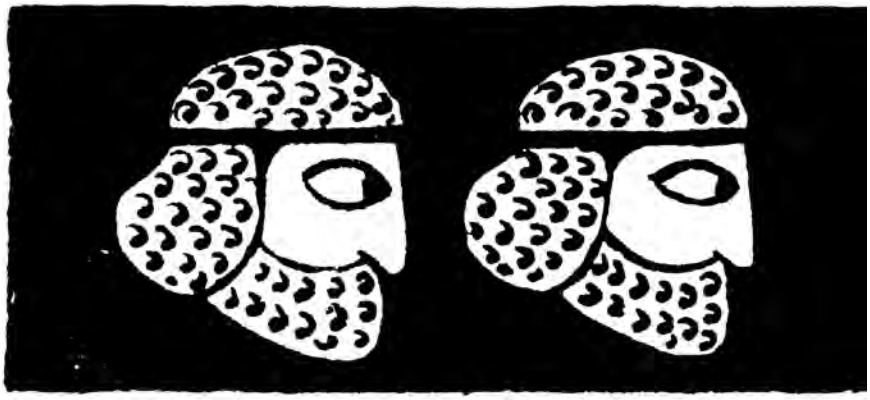

Figure 5A. Part of a header in *Persepolis*, page 30. © 2017 Marjane Satrapi and L'Association.

Figure 5B. Details from a frieze in Persepolis, the ancient capital of Persia from the sixth century BC.

Compositions: Symmetrical Crowds

On the level of composition, some images in *Persepolis* stand out due to the use of regular, repeatable designs for representing crowds in panels depicting confrontations between the public and the military during the Iranian Revolution. Crowds on both sides are shown as symmetrical, stylised formations,[101] with multiple characters depicted in almost the exact same poses, seen from the side, forming rhythmical designs (22, panels 1–3, see Fig. 6C, and 42, panel 6). Similar compositions can be found when victims of a massacre are shown as symmetrically stacked bodies, forming gruesome, rhythmical designs (44, panel 1).

101 Cf. Chute, 'The Texture of Retracing in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*', 98.

Figure 6A. Detail from a frieze in the city of Persepolis, from the sixth century BC.

These compositions are most likely connected to *visual ideas* on a compositional level from Persian friezes, which also depict figures, men and beasts seen from the side at a fixed ninety-degree angle, without background and with more or less identical figures arranged in symmetrical rows (see Fig. 6A). There are marked similarities in the way they are arranged in rows, especially when compared to the panel shown in Figure 6B, where the characters are also based on the visual idea of the Persian soldier in the friezes.

The soldiers in Figure 6B are stacked in additional rows, creating a more complex design compared to the friezes where added rows are shown in separate lines arranged on top of each other with all characters on the same plane, with no indication of perspective or depth. This could be due to schemata for indicating perspective not being accessible to the artists creating the friezes, or, as Wölfflin phrased it: 'not everything is possible in every period'.[102] The added rows in *Persepolis* and the pattern they create indicates a connection with *visual ideas* of geometrical, repeatable designs in arabesques, namely a combination

102 Quoted in Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 4.

Figures 6B and 6C. Panels from the graphic novel *Persepolis* (page 32, panel 2; page 18, panel 3). © 2007 Marjane Satrapi, L'Association and Pantheon Books.

of visual ideas from different Persian art forms. In other panels, crowds depicted as rhythmic designs recur, and even though these do not connect directly to the *visual idea* of the Persian soldiers (e.g. Fig. 6C), connections to *visual ideas* of rhythmical, linear designs in arabesques and rows of characters from the friezes are still evident. Also supporting this interpretation is the fact that in *Persepolis*, the soldiers in Figure 6B are more or less the same, whereas in the friezes they have variations in their armour and so forth,[103] indicating that the compositions in *Persepolis* are connected to the way specific visual elements can be repeated over and over again in arabesques.[104]

Accommodation, Combination, Integration

The process of transforming Persian *visual ideas* into visual elements in *Persepolis* and the integration this achieved with a new art form indicates that accommodations generally seem to have been made with the objective of adjusting the Persian *visual ideas* for use in comics, namely that *visual building blocks* were designed specifically for this art form

103 Cf. Henri Stierlin, *Splendors of Ancient Persia* (Vercelli: White Star, 2006), 113.

104 Wijdan Ali, *The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art: From the Seventh to the Fifteenth Century* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1999), 63.

and the tools and techniques used[105] as well as for the general style in the graphic novel. However, there are variations in the accommodation for the different Persian art forms involved and trends in the data concerning the degree of accommodation and integration could be due to: (1) divergences between art forms involved; (2) levels of combinations of schemata from different art forms; and (3) apparent objectives for the use of *visual ideas*. These factors seem to have influenced the use of schemata from the respective Persian art forms differently, so let us examine them separately.

Persian Miniatures

Visual ideas connected to Persian miniatures seem to have been applied without much accommodation needed for the creation of visual elements integrating with comics, presumably since the Persian miniature is an art form closely related to comics through its tools and techniques.[106] This is indicated by the way that visual elements creating the graphic representations of facial features in *Persepolis* seemingly carry connections to their counterparts in Persian miniatures but at the same time, are connected potentially to visual conventions for graphic representations of facial features in comics. This suggests a combination of two sets of *visual ideas* but could also indicate parallel visual developments based on similar art techniques and similarities in the way these visual elements have been used. Persian miniatures were often intended as easily accessible complements to texts,[107] and each panel in a comic is intended to be read as part of a larger whole.[108] Both of these forms of communication create 'the illusion of life which can do without the illusion of reality',[109] in other words, a more detailed and mimetic representation, in this case of facial features, risks getting in the way of efficient communication in Persian miniatures as well as in comics.

Similarities between the objectives for using these *visual ideas*, as well as the comparative closeness between the art forms involved, indicate a parallel development that could explain the high degree of inte-

105 Cf. Claire Golomb, 'Rudolf Arnheim and the Psychology of Child Art', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 27, 11–29 (13).

106 Sheila Canby, *Persian Painting* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 7.

107 Grabar, *Mostly Miniatures*, 2.

108 Paul Atkinson, 'Why Pause?: The Fine Line Between Reading and Contemplation', *Studies in Comics* 3, no. 1 (2012), 63–81 (69).

109 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 284.

gration, that is to say, the *visual ideas* seem to have fitted into the new art form and been more or less seamlessly combined with *visual ideas* from comics, without this process creating visual elements that contain new *visual ideas*. It could also indicate that developments of conventions for representations of features in Persian miniatures and in comics are truly parallel and that there are no direct connections. Visual evidence points to the former interpretation but seems less certain than has been stated in previous research.[110]

Persian Friezes

Visual ideas connected to Persian friezes, an art form displaying a higher divergence from comics, could have been expected to have been accommodated to a higher degree than *visual ideas* from Persian miniatures, due to the shift in artist's materials and techniques, from chisel and stone to pen and paper,[111] as well as a shift from three to two dimensions.[112] Combined, this could raise the need for a process of oscillating back and forth between *visual ideas* and *visual building blocks* when creating the visual elements.[113] The fact that there seems to be comparatively little accommodation could be due to other similarities between these two art forms, which are both based on representations of characters, with Persian friezes, though partially three-dimensional, even being labelled 'sculpted pictures'.[114] The objectives for the use of the *visual idea* of the Persian soldier as recognisable artefact within the diegesis also makes their use different from that of other visual elements analysed, as the connection to Persian friezes is specific and can be viewed as less of a pattern used and more of a visual quotation.[115] This indicates a process of replication,[116] not allowing for much accommodation besides adjusting for the new art form and the general style in the graphic novel.

The resulting visual elements seem to integrate seamlessly with more conventional visual elements from comics and, except for possible

110 Cf. Naghibi and O`Malley, 'Estranging the Familiar', 231; Chute, *Graphic Women,* 145.
111 Cf. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 'Remediation', *Configurations* 4, no. 3 (1996), 311–358 (327), https://doi.org/10.1177/135485650000600209.
112 Cf. Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye,* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974), 202.
113 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion,* 118.
114 Stierlin, *Persian Art and Architecture,* 137.
115 Cf. Chute, *Graphic Women,* 144.
116 Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception,* 136.

connections concerning the eyes of the characters in the graphic novel, do not seem to have been combined with *visual ideas* from comics.

Arabesques and Calligraphy

In contrast to the specificity of the Persian soldiers, the use of the more adaptable *visual ideas* of curvilinear art and repeatable designs seems to have opened up for more accommodation, not only to fit the style and integrate with comics but also for combination with other *visual ideas*. The close links between Persian arabesques and calligraphy sometimes make it difficult to differentiate between them, but their respective divergencies to comics are different. Calligraphy is more closely related to comics through the use of pen, paper, and ink, but arabesques are further removed through the use of other artistic tools and techniques. The connections perceived in visual elements in *Persepolis* to the rhythmical nature of arabesques do seem straightforward, as they have resulted in distinctive visual elements, but the connections to calligraphy are more elusive and could exist in more aspects of the art in *Persepolis* than identified. Studies have shown that the use of calligraphy by children in the Middle East can directly affect how they draw,[117] indicating that there might be more connections to be found between calligraphy and the visual elements in *Persepolis*.

In the panels containing symmetrical crowds (Figs. 6A and 6B), *visual ideas* of Persian soldiers and compositional ideas of rows of similar characters, both from Persian friezes, seem to have been combined with ideas of rhythmical designs in arabesques (cf. Fig. 3B). This process seems to have involved a higher degree of accommodation, resulting in visual elements containing new *visual ideas* that, though integrated with the style and the visual narrative flow, still stand out due to their different composition.

The connections to curvilinear art and rhythmical designs in combination with visual conventions from comics—that is, thought bubbles and emanata—seem to have included accommodations resulting in visual elements containing new *visual ideas*. Most of the formal conventions from comics, such as format, page layout, and speech balloons, seem to have been used with direct assimilation, indicating that these elements, used for the purpose of creating readability in a comic, were not open to much accommodation.[118] The fact that there still were

117 Wilson and Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt', 17.
118 Cf. Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*, 34.

accommodations to these conventions from comics indicates the degree to which Persian visual ideas is present in the art of *Persepolis*.

Diversifying and Enriching

All three explanations presented in the secondary analysis seem applicable to the data, though none alone is able to explain the degrees of accommodation that seem to have been involved when applying *visual ideas* from different Persian art forms. However, in combination, they give an indication of the processes going into the integration of these visual elements into a new art form. This leaves the question of what these remediations, that is to say, representations of one medium in another,[119] through the use of schemata from different visual art forms, have meant for the graphic novel and for comics in general. I argue that the connections to Persian *visual ideas* have enriched and diversified *Persepolis* in at least two ways: (1) reinforcing the narrative theme, and (2) expanding the visual possibilities of the art form of comics.

Narrative Theme

It might seem self-evident, but the visual elements connected to the Persian art forms analysed add a dimension to the narrative of the graphic novel, as they interact with and enhance the Persian theme. On a basic level, this merely involves the insertion of visual quotations, such as the Persian soldiers. The degree of accommodation and combination involved in the process of turning some of the other Persian visual ideas into visual elements in the graphic novel means that at the same time as they connect to the theme of the story, their presence resonates with the format and visual conventions of comics, making their inclusion more subtle and potentially more pervasive. The combination of *visual ideas* of emanata with the Persian *visual ideas* of curvilinear art, for instance, results in visual elements more or less immediately understandable in a comics context, at the same time as they display properties connecting to Persian visual cultures, making the connections to Persian art forms an integral part not only of the narrative but of the format, of the way the story is communicated. This is not unique for *Persepolis*, as there are numerous examples of artists from Iran, expatriates like Satrapi but also artists living and working in Iran, intentionally or subconsciously using patterns and conventions from

119 Bolter and Grusin, 'Remediation', 339.

ancient Persian visual cultures to convey contemporary messages.[120] That this integration of Persian art forms is at least partially intended in *Persepolis* is indicated not only by the title, referring to a well-known capital of the ancient Persian Empire where many of the referenced Persian friezes were situated,[121] but also by the fact that in a section of the narrative that takes place in Europe,[122] the connections to Persian art forms all but disappear in the visual elements, not only in the diegetic representations of environments but in the art in general.

Expanding the Art Form

The connections to Persian visual ideas have also added a diversity to the art in the graphic novel through the inclusion of new visual elements. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, when discussing different functions for remediation, emphasise remediation as reform, namely that the implicit and sometimes explicit goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate a new medium,[123] which is congruent with the idea that the inclusion of schemata from other art forms holds the potential to reinvigorate comics. The fact that the identified schemata in *Persepolis* were remediated from other art forms suggests they added to the visual toolbox of the artist and, in the process, brought the potential of new *visual ideas* to comics.[124]

Gombrich discusses the implications of moving from one art form to another and the inherent 'sacrifice' involved in moving, for instance, from three-dimensional to two-dimensional art.[125] In the case of *Persepolis*, it could be argued that the degree of accommodation and combinations has resulted not only in the adaption and integration of these visual ideas into another art form but also in the creation of visual elements that do not suffer from this 'sacrifice'. The images in *Persepolis* contain fewer details and 'lack' the three-dimensionality of Persian friezes and the colour of Persian miniatures, but the contrasting black-and-white art in *Persepolis* is a textbook example not only of Gombrich's 'condensation and fusion', eminently suitable for communicating in a

120 Manya Saadi-Nejad, 'Mythological Themes in Iranian Culture and Art: Traditional and Contemporary Perspectives', *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009), 231–246 (232), https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860902764946.

121 Typhaine Leservot, 'Occidentalism: Rewriting the West in Marjane Satrapi's *Persépolis*', *French Forum* 36, no. 1 (2011), 115–130 (127).

122 Satrapi, *The Complete Persepolis*, 197–305.

123 Bolter and Grusin, 'Remediation', 346.

124 Cf. Wilson and Wilson, 'Children's Drawings in Egypt', 21.

125 Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, 118.

sequential art form where each image is part of a visual narrative rather than a stand-alone piece of art,[126] but also the way in which communication in comics seems to benefit from using visual elements that display the *visual ideas*, the meaning of the images, more clearly, thereby using images that create a high degree of immersion and participation from the reader.[127]

A Visual Legacy

The unique combination and accommodation of visual ideas from comics and Persian art forms in *Persepolis* do seem to have created new visual elements and the commercial and critical success of *Persepolis* indicates that *visual ideas* inherent in them could potentially have influenced the content of other comics,[128] thus enriching the art form of comics. One example where connections to these new sets of *visual ideas* seem to be detectable is in the works of Lebanese French comics artist Zeina Abirached, who has won great acclaim the last few years for graphic novels that appear to contain connections to *visual ideas* from *Persepolis*, with additional accommodations resulting in more extensive use of symmetrical designs and curvilinear art.[129]

Another example is Syrian French comics artist Riad Sattouf, who had an exaggerated, heavily caricatured style in earlier, humorous works,[130] but when he decided to tell an autobiographical story similar to the one in *Persepolis*—of growing up in the Middle East and in Europe—in the much lauded *The Arab of the Future*,[131] the more sedate style carries a number of similarities with sets of schemata established in *Persepolis*.

These similarities could be based on shared influences due to calligraphy and arabesques also being prevalent in Lebanon and Syria as well as to these artists being part of the 'alternative' subculture of French

126 Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 7.
127 McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* 24.
128 Simon Hattenstone, 'Confession of Miss Mischief', *The Guardian* (29 March 2008), https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/mar/29/biography.
129 Zeina Abirached, *A Game for Swallows: To Die, To Leave, To Return,* tr. Edward Gauvin (New York: Graphic Universe, 2012 [2007]); Zeina Abirached, *I Remember Beirut*. tr. Edward Gauvin (New York: Graphic Universe, 2014 [2006]); Zeina Abirached, *Le Piano oriental* (Tournai: Casterman, 2015).
130 E.g. Riad Sattouf, *Pascal Brutal: La Nouvelle Virilité* (Paris: Fluide glacial, 2006).
131 Riad Sattouf, *The Arab of the Future: Volume 1: A Childhood in the Middle East, 1978–1984: A Graphic Memoir,* tr. Sam Taylor (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015).

comics, which partly grew out of the New Wave.[132] However, similarities on the level of visual elements as well as in general styles indicate direct connections to *Persepolis*, which could also be due to wanting to reference visually an established style within the genre of comics memoirs in order to reach similar target audiences.

So, Satrapi may have stopped making comics and moved on to a career as film director,[133] but visual ideas established through *Persepolis* live on. How much of this is based on schemata from Persian art forms is difficult to say. My analysis indicates they are present, although integrated and combined with schemata from comics, but that the connections to the most often-quoted influence, namely from Persian miniatures, seem to be among the more elusive.

On a meta-level, analysing using Gombrichian-inspired schema theory has proved to be elucidating. Compared, for instance, to Cohn's psycholinguistic version of schema theory,[134] Gombrichian schema theory invites for a more process-oriented view of the complex way in which images in comics are created and could potentially be utilised to delve deeper into other 'truisms' within comics studies.

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Email: sekventiellt@me.com

132 Beaty, *Unpopular Culture*, 9.

133 Emma Watson, 'Emma Watson interviews *Persepolis* author Marjane Satrapi', *Vogue* (20 June 2019), https://www.vogue.com/article/emma-watson-interviews-marjane-satrapi.

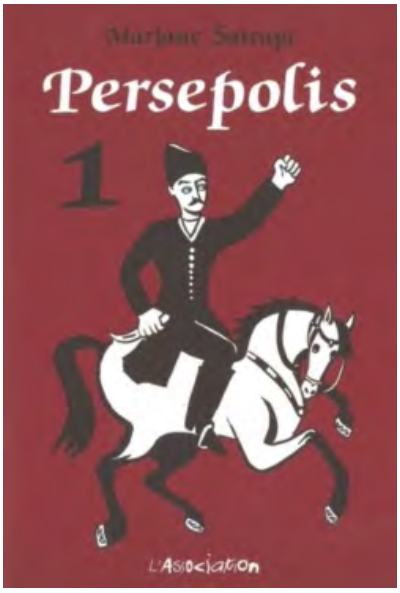
134 Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics*.

A Critical Look

Formal analyses risks becoming "arid" (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 47) and even though an attempt was made to avoid this, the introduction of more ancillary data, information about *Persepolis*, Satrapi and the comics culture the graphic novel was created within, the so-called "New Wave", could possibly have enriched the analysis (cf. Ayaka & Hauge, 2015, p. 11). There are, for instance, most likely other potential influences to be found within *Persepolis*, which could have interacted with the influences from Persian art forms, not least that of Satrapi's colleague David B. (Arnold, 2003, May 16; Singer 2019, p. 160) – but this was not the aim of the article and will have to be tackled in another text.

Another problem was that, initially, I was not well versed in the visual art forms considered as potential influences. This was remedied by specifically studying the art and history of the Persian art forms that had been indicated in earlier texts, but a scholar more well versed in these art forms might have found more examples of visual connections. For instance, the French covers to the original, four-volume edition of *Persepolis* (see Images 14A–D, below), seem to contain visual ideas from both Persian and Western art history concerning the depiction of horses and riders, corresponding to the content of respective volume (volumes 1, 2, and 4 are all set in Iran, whereas the third volume is set in Europe). These covers have subsequently been abandoned when the whole of the story was collected into on, single volume, but do invite for further analysis of what they say about the content of each of the four initial parts of the story.

Researching for this article made it clear to me that the theory of schema held a potential for being developed into an analytical tool not only for the understanding of representations of cultural meetings in comics, but also for illuminating the creative process behind the making of said comics. However, the theory needed to be developed further in relation to comics, which is what the next part, "Developing, Revisiting & Connecting", is going to focus on.



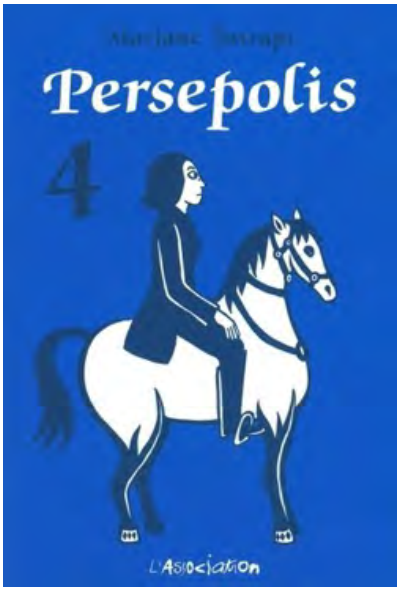


Image 14A: Persepolis 1 (Satrapi 2000). Image 14B: Persepolis 2 (Satrapi 2001). Image 14C: Persepolis 3 (Satrapi 2002). Image 14D: Persepolis 4 (Satrapi 2003). © Marjane Satrapi & L'Association 2001–2003.

PART III: DEVELOPING, REVISITING & CONNECTING

In the earlier articles "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) and "Superheroes from the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017), the analyses focused mostly on content, which according to McLuhan is the wrong approach in media studies, arguing that it should focus more on the characteristics of the medium (McLuhan, 2001, p. 8). This was remedied somewhat with the approach in the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020), but here I want to delve even deeper into how the theories I've utilized can be utilized for the overarching aim of my thesis.

During the research journey I have become increasingly fascinated by the visual aspects of these representations of cultural exchanges, of how changes in ways of visual communication in comics seem to be able to generate similar changes in other comics, how these transferals of inspirations work, and how Gombrichian schema theory could contribute to an understanding of these processes. This has had me delving deeper into schema theory, developing these theories further, but also examining how schema theories relate to earlier theories used – and how this all could be connected to the formal aspects of comics.

As these ideas are part of the results of the research for my PhD they are included here and will be presented in three sections: A) "Developing Schema Theory" – a reexamination of Gombrichian schema theory and a development of it in relation to comics; B) "Revisiting Genre Theory and Remediation" – a reassessment of theories from the earlier articles, discussing them in relation to Gombrich's schema theory; and finally: C) "Connecting Comics and Schema Theory" – an examination of the formal

aspects of comics, and how they relate to my theories of schema. Throughout, I will revisit the empirical data from the articles, reexamining them through the lens of these new ideas and theories.

1. Developing Schema Theory

Some of Gombrich's ideas from the second half of the 20th century have become mainstream within academia in general and within art history in particular, but as Gombrichian schema theory specifically does not seem to be used extensively either in comic studies or in media and communication studies, I still found it elucidating to go back to the original texts. So, let's revisit Gombrich's ideas on schemata, and to some extent his contemporary, the art theoretician Rudolf Arnheim's ideas, which complement and expand on Gombrich's.

The Riddle of Style

Gombrich set out to answer the "riddle of style", i.e. why at certain places and times, artists have used similar styles when attempting to create mimesis – graphic representations of how the world appears to us (Gombrich, 2014, p. 1). He discards older theories of artists needing to reclaim the "innocent eye" in order to see the world "as it really is", without a filter of artistic ideas. Instead, he claims the opposite, the idea that artists achieve mastery of mimetic art not by observing the "outer world" (Gombrich, 1984, p. 206), but by studying earlier masters, identifying schemata, patterns in their art, and incorporating established conventions into their arsenal of artistic methods (Gombrich, 2014, p. 76). Put succinctly, artists learn to paint, not by learning to see, but by learning to paint. This, Gombrich argues, is based on the existence of schemata, patterns that artists recognize in art, their own and others, and utilize to create what Gombrich calls the "illusion", i.e. the mimetic likeness, of characters, objects, and backgrounds (Gombrich, 2014, p. 23).

Arnheim discusses, from a perceptional perspective, a similar process of transition from experiences of the world to the invention of what he labels representational concepts that mediate this experience into images (Arnheim, 1974, p. 169). This, according to Arnheim, involves an abstraction, transforming perceptual concepts into forms that represent the object, reproducing some of its essential features in a "structurally purified form" (Arnheim, 1947, p. 76), a process the language and cognitive science rese-

archer Frederick Luis Aldama calls "schematizing" in relation to comics (Aldama, 2009, p. 81). This is compatible with Gombrich's ideas of visual schema, which can be said to represent these essential features in a purified form.

In comics, the illusion that Gombrich alludes to does not need to be photorealistic, but it probably needs to communicate the idea of what is being represented in order for the visual narrative to work. In the empirical data examined in the articles, it seems that comics within the superhero genre often aim at representations of characters, objects, and backgrounds with a fairly high level of mimesis (cf. Strömberg, 2012b, p. 592; Strömberg, 2017, p. 155), whereas representations in *Persepolis* are more "schematized" but still clearly depict humans, houses, objects, and so on (cf. Strömberg, 2020, p. 112). This difference can be viewed in Images 15A and 15B, below. In one of the first chapters of *Persepolis*, a crowd is represented as comprised of stylized, similar characters that together seem to form a rhythmic pattern. In contrast, in the very first issue of *The 99*, a crowd is represented with more mimetic and diverse characters. These differences indicate different aims, different ideas of how to communicate, even though they both were created to work in comics.

Gombrich goes even further and insists that some kind of starting point, an initial set of schemata, is needed in order for an artist to be able to "get hold of the flux of existence" and start creating graphic representations of different visual phenomena in the world (Gombrich, 2014, p. 88). Aldama seconds this, when discussing how to be creative within the art form of comics, stating that: "Innovation is a cognitive process, not the result of divine inspiration", adding that comics artists need to know how to use their sets of schemata in order to create (Aldama, 2009, p. 85). The latter can for instance be studied in *Persepolis*, where the art could be said to really capture Arnheim's "structured characteristics" of the objects, characters and backgrounds represented, as Satrapi seems to have a well-defined toolbox of schemata that she uses repeatedly, as indicated for example in Image 15A, below.

Revisit: Defining Sets of Schemata in Superhero Comics

According to Gombrich´s theory, the presence of schemata in the creative process can be viewed in all kinds of art as recurring patterns. The use of these patterns can be followed throughout history, as single artistic

Image 15A: Persepolis, page 22, panel 1 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L´Association 2017. Image 15B: The 99 #1, page 3, panel 1 (Al-Mutawa, Nicieza, McCrea, & Yeowell 2011a). © Teschkeel 2011.

inventions that become popular and as dominant styles, interrelated sets of schemata defining different eras in art history (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 160). This is consistent with how the history of comics has been depicted, where historical developments of visual trends have been identified, both within and between different comics cultures (Stein, 2013, p. 145). The styles, i.e. the sets of schemata used in the superhero genre for instance, has evolved over time, something that has had fans label different eras Golden age, Silver age, Bronze age and so on, to indicate that they are distinctly different in the styles used (Bryant, 2010, p. 12).

Reexamining the superhero comics analyzed in the article "Superhero Comics from the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017) for instance, shows that AK Comics produced comics using sets of schemata that puts them in the general vicinity of American superhero comics of the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Strömberg, 2017, p. 150), i.e. a decade or two before they were published, whereas the comics produced by Teshkeel used more contemporary sets of schemata to the time when they were produced, i.e. American superhero comics of the 2000s (cf. Strömberg, 2017, p. 148). This indicates that one problem that led to the relatively quick cancellation of the titles from AK Comics might have been a failure to connect with readers who were attuned to more modern sets of schemata in vogue at the time of their launch, whereas Teshkeel, who used the schemata of the era might have had an easier time connecting with the readers. This deduction is supported by the fact that Teshkeel remained in business longer than AK Comics and produced more comics before they ultimately also discontinued their publishing endeavors (Strömberg, 2017, p. 139).

Beyond Mimesis

Critics of the schema theory in cognitive science have objected that: A) the concept's hypothetical origins have been forgotten and the theory is often presented as a given truth (Dahlin, 2001, p. 287); B) that there is no definite empirical evidence that this is how our memory works (Semino, 2000, p. 527); and C) that the term is vaguely defined (Kuklinski, Luskin & Bolland, 1991, p. 1343). Despite this criticism, the theory has been influential in several fields and disciplines for its heuristic possibilities (Fiske & Linville, 1980, p. 543) and can be used as a starting point for understanding how visual influences can affect the creation of comics.

A criticism levelled against Gombrich's development of schema theory is his Eurocentric view of art history, i.e. that he rarely ventured outside of visual traditions expressed in European art. He does discuss art from for instance Egypt and Asia, but mainly use European paintings as examples when discussing his schema theory (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 72; Elkins, 2009, p. 305). This does not, however, imply that his theories are only applicable to Western imagery. The schema theory he built his ideas on is based on theories from cognitive science, claiming to be more or less universal, i.e. that most people use similar basic functions of sorting, connecting, and using information in cognitive, schema-like structures (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2012, p. 508). My research into how visual cultu-

res from the Middle East have been presented in comics, using a development of Gombrich's schema theory, also indicates that his ideas could be useful outside of studies of European art history.

Gombrich's theories have also been criticized, mainly for his focus on mimesis, on "realism", and viewed as a reactionary and limiting way of discussing art in a time when mimesis has sometimes been discarded in art in favor of more conceptual, non-mimetic imagery (Wood, 2009; 836). Arnheim for instance contrasts what he calls replication – striving for a faithful rendition of an object (what Gombrich labels mimesis) with the idea of representation – which requires inventions of forms that are structurally and dynamically equivalent to the object, but do not necessarily strive for a mimetic likeness (Arnheim, 1974, p. 136). Even though Arnheim did not refer to schema theory, he also based his ideas on cognitive science, although from the perspective of perception, and his theories share basic assumptions with schema theory, e.g. that the development of artistic thinking starts with abstract, simplified forms (Arheim, 1974, p. 181).

Gombrich did however go much further than simply focusing on mimesis. Several of his ideas indicate that his writings could be useful in comics studies, e.g. the idea of "condensation and fusion" of information in cartoons and comics as being the epitome of the development of art (Gombrich, 2014, p. 282). Also the idea of the "illusion of mimesis", i.e. that art does not necessarily imitate reality, but creates its own ways of communicating (Wilson & Wilson, 1984, p. 25; Chien, 2014, p. 32) indicates that Gombrich writings can suit comics analyses. More on this in the section "Connecting Comics and Schema Theory".

Revisit: Emanata in Persepolis

Despite Gombrich's focus on mimesis when developing his schema theory, there are no reasons why the process of utilizing schemata should be limited to producing mimesis. In comics, styles may vary but tend to lean towards "readability" rather than mimesis (cf. Gombrich, 2014, p. 286), but there are still comics cultures where artists seem to share styles and ways of making comics (Stein, 2013, p. 145), similarities that could be connected to the theory of schema and the idea of artists learning from each other's artistic solutions. While figurative images are dominant in the narratively driven art form of comics (Molotiu, 2009, p. 8), comics seem to be able to contain visual elements that have no mimetic purpose but still functions as schemata. Examples of this are forms of crosshat-

chings that can be utilized to create mimetic illusions but also fulfill other artistic purposes (cf. Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 109; Labarre, 2012; Cohn, 2013, p. 33), but also more abstract parts of images meant to convey emotions or create other artistic effects (Groensteen 2013, p. 11). And indeed, Gombrich does extend his interpretation of schemata to include other kinds of human imagery, not only covering mimetic ambitions.

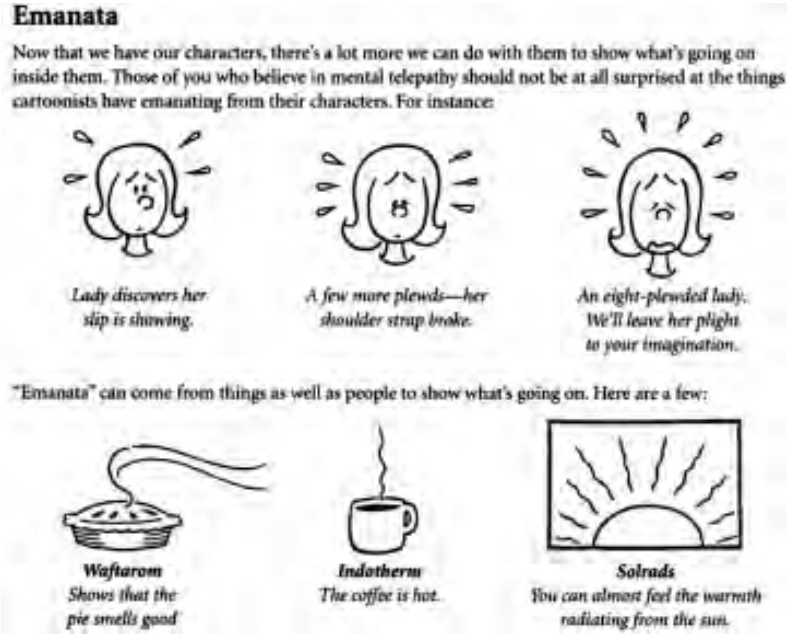


Image 16: The Lexicon of Comicana, page 28 (Walker 1980). © Mort Walker 1980.

Comics can also include visual elements intrinsically connected to the art form, e.g. speech balloons and symbols for sounds, movements, and feelings – so called *emanata* (Walker, 1980, p. 28, see Image 16, above). In psycholinguistics, these more formal elements in comics are compared to closed class word groups that rarely have new units, new words added to them, e.g. prepositions and conjunctions (Murphy, 2010, p. 14). Cohn labels these more specific elements in comics as "closed lexical elements" that artists use but do not modify, and therefore are not based on schema (Cohn, 2013, p. 34). Nevertheless, the use of speech balloons, emanata, etc. seems to show connections between the art of comics artists in the same way as for more representational visual elements, indicated by congruences within comics cultures for these formal elements. Cohn also modifies his view somewhat, indicating that visual elements such

as thought bubbles, speed lines and emanata are to be seen as ”relatively closed” lexical elements (Cohn, 2013, p. 24). Using terminology specifically designed for the study of one art form to describe another, risks creating ”false friends”, i.e. that similarities might lead to making strenuous connections. But the idea that different categories of schemata in comics may be more or less open to adjustments is intriguing, as it relates directly to my analysis of formal elements of comics in *Persepolis*. There, it was shown that Satrapi seemed to have accommodated schemata for thought bubbles as well as for emanata, combining them respectively with schemata from Persian art forms (Strömberg, 2020, p. 115). As these formal elements were accommodated and, in some cases, quite a lot – it does seem as if these comics specific visual elements are open to adjustments. But the fact that they keep enough of their traditional schemata to be easily recognizable, indicates that there are limits as to how much accommodation can be done to these kinds of visual elements in comics.

There are many more such examples in *Persepolis* of both direct assimilation of visual conventions from comics – e.g. the tradition of having a question mark appear above the head of a character as an emanata representing being confused (see Image 17A, below), as well as others that indicate accommodation, and potentially also combination with Persian schemata – e.g. imagery that indicate dust being stirred by a car breaking violently that seems to include inspiration from curvilinear art (see Image 17B, below).

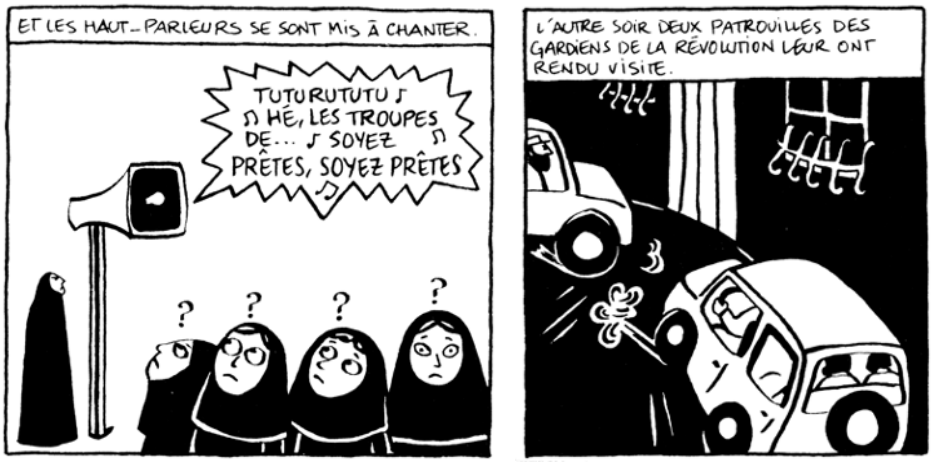


Image 17A: Persepolis, page 103, panel 2 (Satrapi 2017). Image 17B: Persepolis page 112, panel 4 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L'Association 2017.

Visual Ideas and Visual Buidling Blocks

Art historian F. C. Ayer stated that an artist can produce a schema on paper, indicating a structural sketch (Ayer, 1916, p. 8), i.e. that the phsyical image constitutes a schema. Viewing schema in relation to its definition in cognitive science, this is stretching the concept beyond the breaking point (Wood, Stoltz, Van Ness & Taylor, 2018, p. 246). For this reason, I have chosen to label the visual results of applying a schema, whether that be physical or digital, as *visual elements*, to separate them from the idea-based schema they can be said to be based on and to be carrying. A distinction between what I chose to label as *visual ideas* and *visual building blocks* was furthermore proposed in the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020, p. 96). This development of schema theory was made to make explicit what I felt was implicit in Gombrich writings, but also to make the theory more specific for the purpose of analyzing potential connections inherent in the visual aspects of comics.

A visual schema can, according to Gombrich, go through several stages when assimilated by an artist (Gombrich, 2014, p. 121). Initially it can be a loosely defined, general idea of how something can be represented in an image, an idea that can come from an existing visual element in an image or from observing things in the "outer" world. These ideas can be viewed as discernable, general patterns; reproducible ways of creating images, potentially useful for an artist (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 62). I refer to these less specific forms of schemata as visual ideas, thoughts on how we perceive something and how this could be the basis for creating visual elements. According to Gombrich, all art is based on human reactions to how our world is embodied, not on what it actually looks like (Gombrich, 2014, p. 76), and it is on this conceptual level visual ideas can be communicated through insights and inspirations concerning the creative process that can be internalized, developed and adapted in the minds of a comics artist, but also communicated between different comics, visual cultures and art forms through the art itself, i.e. the visual elements.

Then there are the visual building blocks, which are more pragmatically oriented conventions, geared towards creating parts of images using specific artistic tools and the motor habits of the hand, as an artist contemplating to create a certain visual element will have his or her thoughts steered by the artistic tools and methods chosen (Gombrich 20,14, p. 56).

For comics, where line drawings are often used, this means that outlines and specific details will be accentuated (Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 104), often foregoing the nuances and three-dimensionality an artist working with for instance oil paintings can aspire to (cf. Arnheim, 1974, p. 253). This of course does not in any way imply that drawn comic art is in any way less good at communicating compared to painted art, only that it communicates differently.

Revisit: Marji in Persepolis

Both visual ideas and visual building blocks refer to mental concepts that are used when processing visual information – even though visual building blocks are connected to the practical part of creating art, and both concepts are contained within the general idea of schema. Visual ideas could be viewed as closer to a basic idea in cognitive schema theory, i.e. that schemata represent general characteristics of a certain phenomenon (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2012, p. 336). Another fundamental notion in cognitive schema theory is that when compared to other theories of how we categorize, sort, and understand our world, schema theory is more oriented towards how previous information informs how we *act* in a certain context (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2012, p. 332). This task orientation, when transferred to the world of art, resonates with the idea of visual building blocks, of how the artist can start out with a general visual idea, but at some stage in the process needs to move to more pragmatically applicable methods (Cohn, 2013, p. 32).

This phenomenon can be observed in *Persepolis*, where children have head shapes that seem to be based on a spherical design, but the adults have a more elongated, oval head shape. There are variations to these two basic designs, seemingly to create specific visual building blocks used to distinguish between different characters. However, the basic shapes stay the same, indicating that Satrapi used two different visual ideas for heads, one for children and one for adults. This is best exemplified with the visual evolution of the main character, Marji, who, as she is shown to grow older, goes from a spherical to an oval head shape throughout the book's narrative (see Image 18, below).

These general visual ideas could be viewed as part of a sorting and classification of things a comics artist wants to communicate in the art (cf. Sternberg & Sternberg, 2012, p. 337). The general set of schemata, the visual ideas of a humanoid character can for example be used as a starting

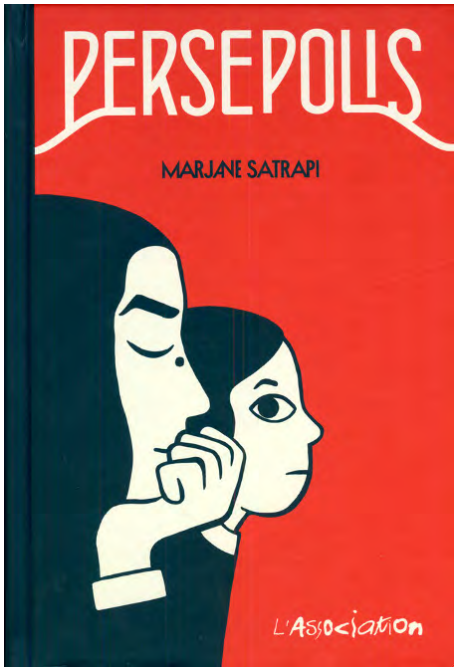


Image 18: Persepolis (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L'Association 2017.

point for any number of humanoid characters, which could be given more and more explicit characteristics, forming the visual building blocks for a specific character. These visual building blocks can then be used and adjusted to represent variations of said character again and again in a sequential visual narrative (cf. Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 146).

This function is made explicit in *Persepolis*, where Satrapi establishes the design of the young protagonist in the very first panel and then proceeds to utilize that design, this set of schemata repeatedly. She slowly accommodates the design as Marji gets older, but essentially keeps using the same set of schemata, only slowly accommodating, elongating the character, most often between different chapters.

A few times in the story, the character needs to change more drastically, and instead of constantly tweaking the design, giving herself more work in accommodating her set of schemata and potentially making readers doubt which character it is, Satrapi comes up with ingenious solutions to show the changes within the diegesis. At one point, she has a roommate add new makeup to Marji, (Satrapi, 2017, p. 194 – see Image 19, below), literally drawing on her face in the diegesis, and subsequently changing the

Image 19: Persepolis, page 194, panels 1–3 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L'Association

design, which is then utilized repeatedly. In another scene, Satrapi dedicates two pages to the changes puberty brought to the character and how she adjusted by cutting her hair, changing her makeup, and clothing (Satrapi, 2017, p. 199–200 – see Image 20, below), ending up with a distinctly different design, a new set of schemata, that is then repeatedly utilized by the artist, and easily understood by the readers as the same character.

Image 20: Persepolis, pages 199–200 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L'Association 2017.

Revisit: Superheroes vs. the New Wave

The focus on outlines and specific details that the use of visual building blocks connected to creating line drawings can result in, can be viewed as a defining trait of many comics, but the degree to which it is implemented varies. This becomes clear if we again compare the art in the comics from AK Comics and Teshkeel, which were based on genre specifics from the U.S. to that of the graphic novel *Persepolis*, which was made within a European comics tradition. The superhero genre carries a visual tradition of attempting to create an illusion of reality – admittedly a reality in which superheroes exists – but still a reality that is intended to make the readers immerse themselves into a diegesis that seems like a version of the real world (cf. Strömberg, 2017, p. 136). This is achieved with, for comics, relatively mimetic art that often seems to aim more for replication than represention. Se Image 21, below, for an example of a street view from *The 99*. This image is far from photorealistic, but an attempt seems to have been made to replicate a specific street in Paris in a way that gives the impression of being mimetic, with specific and individualistic designs of different houses, cars and so on. The artist seems to have used different schemata for creating representations of these things, and in attempting to be specific in what it is that is represented and utilizing a fairly high degree of details, the schemata, the conventions used, can seem less visible to the reader/viewer.

Image 21: The 99 #2, page 13, panel 1 (Al-Mutawa, Nicieza, McCrea, & Yeowell 2011b). © Teschkeel 2011.

The art in *Persepolis* is distinctly different in that it goes further in accentuating the outlines, giving them broader, thicker lines and foregoing "unnecessary" details, i.e. it seems to aim more for representation than replication. See Image 22, below, for another street view, this time from *Persepolis*. Here the design is more scaled down, with the houses seemingly all the same, the windows represented as similar-looking black slots and the trees all looking alike. Compared to the image from *The 99*, it seems as if Satrapi has aimed more for representations of the ideas of "house", "tree" and "pavement", rather than attempting to replicate specific houses, trees, pavements and so on. Here, the schemata, the basic visual conventions are seeingly more on display, more easily discernable for the reader/viewer than in the art for *The 99*.

Image 22: Persepolis, page 144, panel 1 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L'Association 2017.

The reasons behind these choices of style have been attributed to Satrapi's cultural background in Iran, especially connecting it to the designs of Persian miniatures (cf. Naghibi & O`Malley, 2005; Uchmanowicz, 2009; Chute, 2010). Specifically seeing connections to the, in the Western world, most famous Persian art form, could be an example of Orientalism on the part of the mostly Western authors, or at least be viewed as culturally reductive (cf. Singer, 2019, p. 159). It also seems possible that the style stems from the visual tradition of the French New Wave in general, and the aesthetics of L'Association and artists like David B., with whom Satrapi shared a studio when she embarked on creating *Persepolis*, her first major work in the comics form (cf. Singer, 2019, p.160).

No matter how these different styles evolved, for the superhero comics and for *Persepolis*, they do seem to communicate visually in different ways, even though both work within the confines of the art form of comics. This could be connected to different genre constraints, something I will return to in the section "Revisiting Genre Theory and Remediation".

Making & Matching

The creation of a visual element, a phsyical or digital image, can be assessed by the artist and in turn lead to adjustments of the schema it corresponds to, a process Gombrich labels "making and matching" (Gombrich, 2014, p. 121), which can continue until the artist feels comfortable with the end results.

Gombrich use the term correction for the process of adjusting a schema to come closer to the vision of the artist (Gombrich, 2014, p. 64). The corresponding terms from cognitive science, assimilation, and accommodation (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 2, 21), opens up for a more nuanced discussion about how schema can be a part of the creative process of a comics artist. Assimilation is the process in which a schema, a cognitive pattern of ideas for how to act in a specific situation is stored and used more or less directly in order to react to similar stimuli, whereas accommodation involves a process of changing the schema in order to suit personal needs and preferences (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 2, 21).

The process of making and matching thus involves an artist assimilating a preexisting schema or a whole set of related schemata, patterns based on visual elements in art or in visual phenomenon in the "outer world", using these in a process that goes back and forth between practical applica-

tion, transforming general visual ideas into more specific visual building blocks connected to an artistic technique, and through practical application creating an image, evaluating the results, the visual elements and accommodating the original schema (cf. Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 163). Se Image 23 below, for my visualisation of this process..

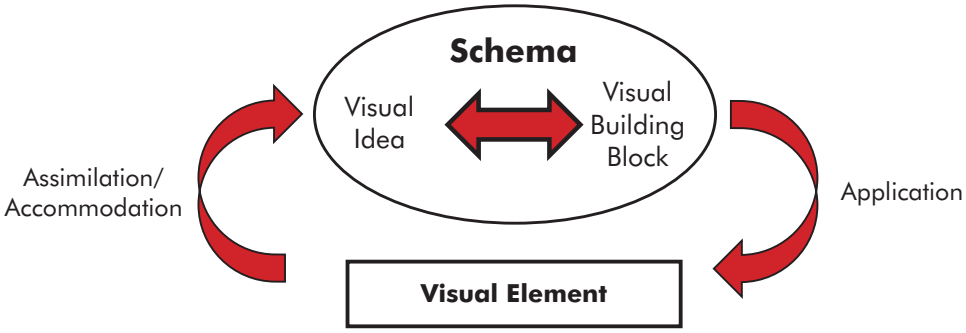


Image 23: The Process of Making and Matching.

An example of this process could be the use of the oval, one of the most common schemata for creating a representation of a head. As this schema is used by many artists, it is something a beginning artist could discern in visual elements of earlier art and assimilate, i.e. add to his or her own ideas of how to create the representation of a head. This schema contains a general, visual idea of the simple oval, which can be transformed in the mind of the artist into a more specific, visual building block, i.e. an idea of how the oval can be used to make a more detailed design that makes the head individual, using specific tools, e.g. pen and paper. The visual building block can then be applied using the intended technique, which creates an image containing new visual elements. If this is the first attempt, the artist might not be fully satisfied with the results and reevaluate the schema, i.e. accommodate it, making changes to the visual building block and attempt a new application. This process can continue until the artist is satisfied with the end results, the visual elements.

The importance of the artist's motor-habits, or as Thon and Wilde puts it, "the visible slant of the creator's hand" (Thon & Wilde, 2016, p. 235), cannot be overstated in the part of the process where a visual idea is transformed into a visual building block and subsequently used to create a visual element through the tools and techniques chosen. Comparing for instance the art in the children's books that Satrapi made before embarking on creating *Persepolis* (e.g. Satrapi, 2000), shows that much of the

style in *Persepolis*, the sets of schemata used, were already part of her "visible slant", making some of the claims as to the origin of her style at least debatable (cf. Singer, 2019, p. 153).

Revisit: Distortion and Exageration in Superhero Comics

By repeating the aforementioned process, a comics artist can adjust the patterns, the schemata, according to his or her preferences and needs, and it is through this process, which could involve the internalization of visual ideas from many different sources, that the artist's style is created (Gombrich, 2014, p. 291). The style of a comics artist can thus be defined as sets of schemata, interrelated visual building blocks that have been developed into the specific, signature way that he or she draws. Or as the comics artists Jessica Abel & Matt Madden more poetically put it: "an organic, constantly evolving dance between a cartoonist's influences" (Abel & Madden, 2012, p. 106). Aldama, when discussing this, describes a creative process for a comics artist as a question of "distilling" and then "distorting and exaggerating" influences (Aldama, 2009, p. 82). Although Aldama does not refer to Gombrich, this idea is similar to his: an artist storing a general idea of how something can be represented and then making this his or her own through accommodation, adjustments that in expressive comics styles very well could be accomplished through distorting and exaggerating.

Image 24: Aya #2, page 18, panel 2 (Vicino & Goldman 2005). © AK Comics, 2005.

One example of this phenomenon could be viewed in an image of the character Aya (ref. Strömberg, 2017, p. 154; see Image 24, above), which seems to be based on schemata established within the superhero genre that has been "distorted and exaggerated", indicated by the impossible way the character's anatomy is represented (also, very much from a male gaze perspective). This could be the results of having been inspired directly by the art of other superhero artists but not attempting to combine this with for instance croquis drawings from live models – something that might result in adding new visual schemata and subsequently the development of potentially more anatomically correct set of schemata for representing the human body.

Having thus expanded on Gombrich's schema theory in relation to comics, it is time to revisit some of the other theories applied in the articles, in search of answers to the main questions of this thesis, to see how they could relate to each other and how they potentially could be utilized together.

2. Revisiting Genre Theory and Remediation

The fundamental ideas of schema theory have become established far beyond their roots in cognitive science and have influenced several disciplines (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 376). I will here discuss connections to: A) genre theory; and B) the theory of remediation.

Genre Theory and Schema

One development of schema theory that could connect the research in the articles analyzing superheroes (Strömberg, 2012b; Strömberg, 2017) to the theoretical framework presented in this thesis is to be found within narratology. Schema theory within narratology includes the aforementioned term *scripts*, i.e. temporal, structured schemata linked to a particular event (Chandler & Munday, 2011). A script encompasses *slots*, categories such as places, roles, props, and potential results – all of which can be varied within certain limitations (Semino, 2000, p. 525). A script can for instance be a visit to a store, where the basic structure contains knowledge about choosing and paying for a product, and different slots can define what kind of business it is, what agenda the buyer and seller have, etc. These ideas apply to everyday encounters but can also apply to how narratives in different art forms are created and perceived (Aldama, 2009, p. 84; Sternberg & Sternberg, 2012, p. 337).

In the analysis of how the superhero genre was adapted in the Middle East (Strömberg, 2017), genre can thus be viewed as an extensive, narrative schema (Chandler, 2004, p. 7; Kukkonen, 2013, p. 72), in which there is an overriding, genre-inspired script containing given slots, which can be adjusted within certain limits. These slots could be said to connect with what was defined as the conventions of the superhero genre (Strömberg, 2017, p. 136). If the limits to the slots prescribed by the genre are exceeded, i.e. if accommodations are too far-reaching, then the perception of the genre expectations will not be met (Semino, 2000, p. 525), which seems to be what happened with the comics from Kuwaiti publisher Teshkeel (Strömberg, 2017, p. 160). This is comparable to the aforementioned "tyranny of genre", i.e. that a comics artist working within a certain genre needs to conform to the general ideas of a genre if the work produced is to be understood and appreciated by an audience as part of said genre (Coe, 2005, p. 188). If a comics artist, on the other hand, engages largely in assimilation, i.e. stays within the boundaries of all the slots, they risk

creating what can be perceived as non-independent copies of existing comics – which was what seems to have happened with AK Comics, where readers seem to have been disinterested due to the comics being too much like their American counterparts (Strömberg, 2017, p. 160).

Thus, the idea of schema, though interjected comparatively late in my research journey, seems compatible with earlier theories used. The way in which narrative stories are created can be said to rely on similar cognitive functions as the ones presented for the creation of images, which is interesting for the analysis of comics, as they consists of stories told in large part in visual form.

Revisit: External & Internal Schemata

The idea of boundaries for how much a comics artist can deviate from a narrative schema can be related to Bordwell's idea of external schemata, cultural norms, and expectations, but also internal schemata, in this case rules for how the communication in the comic itself works, and how deviations between external and internal schemata can stand out prominently (Bordwell, 1985, p. 150–153). These ideas are often discussed from the perspective of the comics reader (e.g. Lefèvre, 2000), but can also be used to attempt to analyze the art from a comics artist's perspective. i.e. to try to understand the processes behind the creation of the art. Bordwell's external schemata could be said to be a more neutral expression of the forces included in the term tyranny of genre, i.e. the expectations a certain genre carries regarding narrative and visual parameters, and the possible leeway this leaves for an artist wanting to produce a comic that is accepted as part of a specific genre. Thus, a comic could be said to contain an internal set of schemata with its own rules that may deviate from the external, cultural schemata but work within said comic. This could for example help explain the way in which Teshkeel accommodated the visual schemata for superhero costumes, having them designed less for a sexualized, often male gaze, and more from a seemingly pragmatic use for the characters within the diegesis (cf. Strömberg, 2017, p. 153). Teshkeel set up internal narrative and visual schemata that deviated from the external schema of the superhero genre. For me personally, having read, mainly American, superhero comics since the 1970s, this deviation did indeed ”stand out prominently” (cf. Bordwell, 1985, p. 150), making these comics seem like something new and different.

An external set of schemata can be said to be built out of the contributions of schemata from many comics, indicating that a successful/useful internal deviation from the rules of the external schemata could be elevated to the external schemata. This could be one way for comics cultures to expand artistically. Deviations from the "approved" set of schemata are introduced and becomes popular, thus taking the step up to the external, or cultural schemata, becoming part of the tyranny from which it started out as a deviation. In narrative theory this has been labeled "schema refreshing", which is contrasted with "schema preserving" or "schema reinforcing", i.e. to adhere to the approved sets of schemata (Cook, 1994, p. 191; Aldama, 2009, p. 89). Both could be necessary in order to be able to communicate within a specific genre or subculture, suggesting a potential spectrum between schema preserving and schema refreshing, where the degree of new elements accepted/needed is dependent on the context in which the work is produced (Semino, 1997, p. 175).

This also relates to *Persepolis*, which seems to have been contributing to schema refreshing, and in that process, adding schemata to the New Wave of French comics, and probably due to its international success, also to other comics cultures around the world (cf. Strömberg, 2020, p. 118).

Tyranny of Visual Schema

Visual parameters are included in the idea of tyranny of genre, but how does this relate to Gombrichian schema theory? An artist active within a comics subculture can have access to a set of visual schemata through that culture but can also have access to other visual schemata through the general comics culture that he or she belongs to, as well as through other visual cultures he or she encounters. This does not indicate that schemata from other visual sources will automatically be used, as the artist can also be said to be constrained as to what schemata to use in a specific comics subculture. Any visual text produced individually cannot help but articulate visions of the culture it belongs to as much as it does that of the individual (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 74). In a specific comics culture, there seems to be unwritten rules as to which visual schemata, which conventions to use to create visual elements. Breaking with these rules, crossing these borders, may refresh said comics culture, but the artist may also run the risk of failing to live up to the expectations of what the art is supposed to look like. Consciously or unconsciously, a comics artist may feel a need to fit his or her art into certain visual parameters, i.e.

sets of schemata and engage in schema preserving if they are to be taken seriously by critics and/or become commercially successful (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 171). This could be labeled *tyranny of visual schema*, as it relates to and could be included in the phrase tyranny of genre but could also encompass whole culture and/or subcultures, surpassing the confines of a specific genre.

Revisit: Tyranny of Visual Schema in Superhero Comics

In comics, which are often divided into more or less clearly defined comics cultures and subcultures based on cultural contexts, genres, etc. (Beaty, 2007, p. 49), the tyranny of visual schema could be more or less evident. It seems for instance to be highly present in the American superhero genre, where commercial success can be a major driving force (Reynolds, 2013, p. 100). In this comics subculture there seems to be recurring visual patterns, i.e. sets of schemata which changes over time and, as has already been discussed, thus be used to interpret in what period a comic was produced. This indicates that in a specific period, certain sets of schemata were "approved of", i.e. part of the external schemata, and certain sets of schemata were not "approved of" (cf. Schumer 2003, p. 23). Or as Wölfflin put it: "…not everything is possible in every period." (Wölfflin, 2012, p. 11).

A comics artist could potentially use any style when producing a superhero comic – creating a specific internal set of schemata for that comic, but if it is to pass the narrow straits of an editor, be published and reach a paying audience, generating more work for said artist, then a conformity to the style or styles currently in vogue, i.e. adopting and slightly accommodating the external, cultural sets of schemata within certain parameters, i.e. walk the narrow path between preserving and refreshing the sets of schemata, could potentially be beneficial.

Revisit: Tyranny of Visual Schema in Persepolis

The graphic novel *Persepolis* was created within the comics subculture of the French New Wave, which grew out of a reaction against the 1990s mainstream French comics culture with an aim at creating more visually artistic comics (Beaty, 2007, p. 8). Breaking with an older comics culture that a new generation of artists felt was restraining led them to create new publishing formats, targeting at new audiences, and introducing new sets

of visual schemata. These new sets of schemata seem to be partly based on earlier sets of schemata in French and Belgian comics cultures, which through accommodation and combination with other influences created new sets of visual ideas for the New Wave. The focus on making comics less directed towards the commercial market could indicate a subculture less susceptible to the tyrannies of genre and of visual schema. However, the existence of a dominant genre, i.e. autobiography (McKinney, 2008, p. 15), does indicate the existence of some kind of tyranny of genre. A recurring use of black and white art, with the emphasis on the contrast between the two, also seems to be one underlying visual "rule" for the comics produced, indicating the presence of a tyranny of visual schema (cf. Dayez, 2004), albeit seemingly not as strict as the one found in the supehero genre.

It is in this context that the combination of schemata found in *Persepolis* can be understood. *Persepolis* generally displays visual elements that seem connected to external sets of schemata from the New Wave, indicating a conformity to the comics subculture it was a part of, i.e. an adjustment to the tyranny of visual schema. At the same time there seem to be schemata connected to Persian art forms, visual patters introduced into the sets of schemata of the New Wave comics culture through their use in *Persepolis*. The fact that *Persepolis* turned out to be the biggest critical and commercial success of the New Wave (Hattenstone, 2008) indicates that a balance between adhering to the external schemata in the subculture, i.e. schema reinforcing and introducing new schemata, i.e. schema refreshing, was achieved in the internal schema of the graphic novel, and that through its success, the graphic novel probably changed the external sets of schemata of the New Wave (Strömberg, 2020, p. 118).

Remediation

The transferal of visual ideas discussed so far, can also be understood through the lens of the media and communication theory of remediation, which I referenced in the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis" (Strömberg, 2020), but which could benefit from further discussion in relation to comics. McLuhan put forth the idea that the content of every medium is always developments of previous media (McLuhan, 2001, p. 8), which relates for instance to the connections to early Persian art forms in *Persepolis*. If you define comics as having its historical roots in Europe, which many comics historian do, this indicates that what has gone into its creation, what its visual content is made up of, are developments of

earlier European-based art forms, e.g. paintings, drawings, and caricatures (Gombrich, 2014, p. 284). For a comics artist with access to European visual cultures, this could thus consciously or unconsciously influence the sets of schemata included in the process. However, for an artist with a different cultural background, there might be other art forms that could seem as natural "predecessors" of comics, from which inspiration for the visual content might be gathered. This could be one explanation for the inclusion of visual elements in the graphic novel *Persepolis* that seem to have other vsiual sources than European/American comics, especially sources that seem closely related to comics through the use of similar artistic techniques and media, such as Persian miniatures and calligraphy.

Revisit: Remediation in Persepolis

The inclusion of visual elements in *Persepolis* that seem to be connected to different Persian art forms could thus be viewed as an example of remediation, i.e. the representation of one medium or art form in another. Bolter and Grusin proposed that there is a spectrum of ways in which a "predecessor" to a medium can be represented, from direct, unchanged representation at one end of the spectrum to absorption and seamless integration at the other (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 339).

Direct remediation of Persian art forms does not seem to be present in *Persepolis*. However, the photo of the artist on the back cover of the English edition of the book, connecting to the representation of the main character in the comics, is an example of direct remediation. The closest to this extreme end of the spectrum within the book are the representations of the Persian warriors from the ancient friezes, which seem to have been accommodated for the purpose of remediation, i.e. of being represented in another media/art form, but otherwise seem to have kept many of their distinctive traits (cf. Image 25A & 25B, below). Bolter & Grusin compare this kind of semi-unaltered remediation to a mosaic in which we are simultaneously aware of individual pieces, and their new, incongruent placement is made obvious (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 341). The images of the ancient warriors in *Persepolis* could be an example of such a seemingly obvious visual reference to an older art form, forming a kind of mosaic together with visual elements from comics, although their placements in the graphic novel does not seem to be intended to be incongruous, as they are used logically as visual elements in the narrative.

A middle ground on this spectrum of remediation would be a refashioning

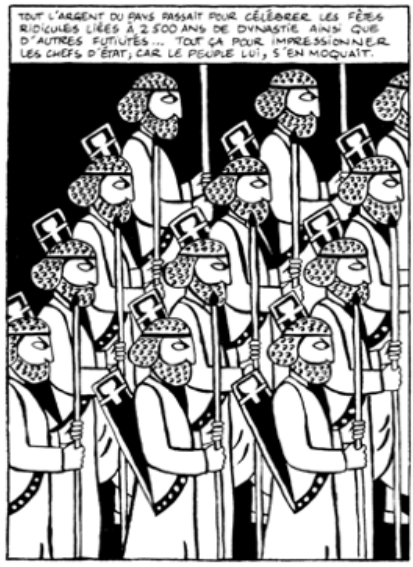


Image 25A: Detail from a frieze in the city of Persepolis. © Adobe Stock 2021. Image 25B: Persepolis, page 28, panel 2 (Satrapi 2017). Image 25C: Persepolis page 21, panel 3 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L´Association 2017.

of older media while still marking their presence, making the viewer aware of the medium through the relationships among the remediated content (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 340). This description fits the depiction of images containing rows of similar characters in *Persepolis* – interpretable as a remediation and a combination of schemata from Persian friezes and arabesques (see Image 25C, above). The presence of these, for comics, seemingly new schemata can be sensed in their rhythmical patterns, which break visually from the way the rest of the visual elements in the book looks, at the same time as they integrate due to the remediation through the application of the general style and art techniques used throughout the

book. Another way of understanding these images is that they work with the internal schemata of *Persepolis*, at the same time as they break with the external schemata of the New Wave culture that they were a part of.

At the other end of the spectrum there is remediation by absorbing an older art form more or less entirely, minimizing the discontinuities between the two (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 341). This is what seems to have happened with some of the visual connections with arabesques and calligraphy, which are integrated to a high degree with comics in *Persepolis* (Strömberg, 2020, p. 115). This "aggressive remediation" (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 341) is part of what makes the inclusion of these visual influences/schemata seemingly so pervasive (Strömberg, 2020, p. 116). The older art forms cannot be entirely effaced, though, as the new art form remains dependent on the older ones through the act of remediation, in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 342). The inclusion of visual elements connected through schemata to these two art forms, though heavily integrated, are often detectable, even though, as commented in the article, there is still the possibility that influences from calligraphy could be present in more ways than were identified (Strömberg, 2020, p. 115).

To reconnect with the discussion on the effect that the transferal of schemata could have on comics, Bolter & Grusin, when discussing different functions for remediation, emphasize remediation as reform, i.e. that the implicit and sometimes explicit goal of remediation is to refashion or rehabilitate a new medium (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 346), which is congruent with the idea presented in the article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis", i.e. that the inclusion of schemata from other art forms, other visual sources, might reinvigorate comics as an art form (Strömberg, 2020, p. 117). I will get back to this idea, and how this relates to comics and schema in the end of the third section of this part.

Revisit: Superheroes and Remediation

Reassessing the empirical data in the articles on superheroes (Strömberg, 2012b; Strömberg, 2017), there seem to be multiple examples that could be understood through the lens of remediation.

For example, the stories and the characters from the comic book *The 99* were used in both an animated TV series and a theme park (al-Mutawa, 2010). In doing so, the comics – which were created first, were remediated

into new media, a transition that seems to have included the accommodation of several schemata from the comics, but which does not seem to have generated the same positive results as for instance Marvel comics making the transition into TV series and movies. The animated TV series *The 99* was mostly met with obstacles. Viewers in the Middle East believed the show was blasphemous, and viewers in the U.S. thought it was spreading Muslim propaganda. Both groups were complaining and trying to get it off the air (Santo, 2013, p. 9). Subsequently only one season was ever produced. The theme park was only mentioned a few times in news media at the time of its inauguration (Santo, 2013, p. 2) and has since seemingly disappeared from the public eye, indicating that this endeavor was also not a resounding success. A tentative analysis of this suggests that the problems the creators of the comic book *The 99* met when attempting to make the American superhero genre work together with Middle Eastern cultures was exacerbated when the material was remediated into media that had higher public visibility. .

A remediation that seems to have worked better, at least commercially, also included *The 99*, as the publisher Teshkeel decided after a while to cease publishing printed comic books and opted for publishing in a digital format on platforms such as comiXology (comixology.com), to be read on tablets or computers. The comic books were still produced in the exact same format, with covers, interior page, editorial pages, ads etc. and the same standard number of pages. This transition did not include any visible accommodation to the new medium, the new tecknological plattform and can thus be viewed as a direct remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1993, p. 339). As the comics are still available through several digital sellers of comics, whereas the printed comics are long since out of print, this does seem to have worked, though evidently not enough to sustain an ongoing production of new comics.

There are opportunities and possibilities inherent in communicating comics digitally, as compared to through print (Oppolzer, 2016, p. 280). Teshkeel did use the possibility of publishing in another medium but may have missed an opportunity by not using the transition to make a more aggressive remediation, adapting the material more to the new medium. Comics produced directly for the purpose of being read digitally are often not presented in the traditional format of a page, but in a vertical flow of panels, meant to be scrolled through on a screen of a smartphone, one example being the Korean based Webtoons (webtoons.com). This not only

seems to be the fastest expanding publishing format in comics right now, as it seems to be able to reach new audiences (Joo-won, 2020), but it also opens up for other visual storytelling techniques, something that might have launched the idea of *The 99* to new audiences.

Remediation, Intertexuality and Schemata

Related to the idea to remediation is that of intertextuality, post-structuralist theories set forth by Julia Kristeva defining intertextuality to indicate that a text, through associations in the mind of the reader, creates networks of connections blurring the borders of where a text starts and ends (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). These associations can be defined as ”The various links in form and content which binds any text to other texts.” (Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 224). These ideas are associated with the idea of remediation, as representations of a medium in another also can create connections, links that bind different media to each other.

Kristeva, looking at intertextuality from the creators perspective, stated that ”Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” (Kristeva, 1980, p. 66). Thus, a text owes more to other, previous texts than to its maker in that writing is viewed as a process of combining elements already used, building and rebuilding within established traditions (Allen, 2000:, p. 5). Barthes took this even further, famously proclaiming “the death of the author”, stating that everything is “already written” and “already read”, and that all writers do is create an amalgam using bits and pieces of already existing cultural elements (Barthes, 1977, p. 142–148). This also resonates with schema theory, which similarly deals with how humans connect information, how we weave together information in order to create meaning, and especially with Gombrich’s development, of how artists create images using accommodations and combinations of already existing visual conventions. The development of schema theory within the science of art holds the potential of complementing the ideas of intertextuality, which have mostly been developed to discuss the interconnectedness of texts in the traditional sense of the term (Allen, 2000, p. 174), extending these ideas into the realm of images, which do not always consist of elements that are easy to distinguish or categorize.

The way Gombrich viewed schema can thus be considered intertextual, even though this term was not yet coined when he wrote some of his most

influential works on schema theory (Gombrich, 2014 [1960]). Gombrich's take on schemata in the arts, that no image can be created out of nothing, that everything is based on earlier images, which through the use of schemata, of patterns being accommodated, combined and integrated relates to the ideas set forth by Kristeva, although Gombrich focuses more on the creator. The way Gombrich envisions how visual schemata are connected, how they create networks of associations informing the creation of each new piece of art, is also congruent with the way things are seen as connected, woven together in theories of intertextuality.

Thus, genre theory and the theories of remediation and intertextuality can all be combined with schema theory in order to delve deeper into the question of how to analyze and understand how cultures from the Middle East can be represented in comics. As a final development, I will in the next section discuss how the formal aspects of comics connect with schema theory.

3. Connecting Comics and Schema Theory

As stated earlier, McLuhan emphasized that media studies should focus more on the characteristics of the medium (McLuhan 2001, p. 8), and the characteristics of comics. Its specific traits are indeed interesting to examine in conjunction with the idea of schemata. Schema theory holds the potential to benefit comics analysis, but needs to be examined specifically in relation to this art form. As the field of comics studies seems to be moving towards a formalization and conceivably even becoming a separate discipline (Singer, 2019, p. 6), there have been requests for research focused on the formal aspects of comics (Aldama, 2009, p. 7; Denson, Meyer & Stein, 2013, p. 6), as well as calls for more research into the context of the creation of comics (Brienza, 2010, p. 107). Schema theory could be a possible inroad into both areas.

It has been suggested that the way comics represent visual elements is similar to how we as humans perceive, store, and use information about the visual aspects of the (outer) world (Hochberg & Brooks, 1996, p. 383). Schema theory as it has been developed within art history thus offers an alternative as an analytical tool to the code-based semiotics popular within comics studies (e.g. Groensteen, 2007). Gombrichian schema theory holds the potential for a nuanced analysis of the visual aspects of comics, as not all parts of images included in comics need to be signs and/or part of a code (cf. Kukkonen, 2013, p. 6).

This potential will here be analyzed in relation to three key characteristics of comics: A) schematization; B) sequentiality; and C) variability.

Schematization

As mentioned earlier, Gombrich's theory of schema (Gombrich, 2014) was mainly based on a study of the search for mimesis in Western art meant that it for a time went out of style in art history, as the art world moved away from mimetic ambitions (Elkins, 2009, p. 305). However, the experience of mimesis can potentially work differently in different art forms (Aldama, 2009, p. 9), and in comics, there has never been a similarly radical movement towards abstraction. Mimetic ambitions in the sense of Arnheim's replication, of mimicking the real world as closely as possible, is often not a major visual theme in cartoons and comics (Rifas, 2010, p. 33), as the visuals in comics tend to lean towards contour-emphasizing line drawings (Lefèvre 2016, p. 67). On the other hand, fully abstract comics without images in some sense connected to what we see and know are few and far apart in the history of comics (Molotiu, 2009, p. 8). Comics are visual narratives and for these to communicate, the visual elements they are built up of might not need to replicate reality, but they often need to create graphic representations of repeatable, recognizable characters, objects, and backgrounds.

Gombrich discussed comics and cartoons in his major treatise on schema, stating that the directness and condensation of information in comics results in images showing their schemata more clearly than for instance oil paintings. This, he refers to as a "condensation and fusion" of information, i.e. using images that are closer to their general, visual ideas, rather than aiming for more specific images and/or a higher degree of mimesis (Gombrich, 2014, p. 133). However, it should be noted that Gombrich was an expert on oil paintings – which are often made up of continuously applied colors. Compared to comics, which are often based on lines delineating outer frames and details (cf. Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 104), this could seem like a condensation and fusion of information. But this is doing comics a disservice. For comics, caricature is one potential predecessor contributing to the design of the content of the art form (Gombrich, 2014, p. 284) and from this, comics could have inherited the use of easily reproducible line-based art, aimed at reproduction on low grade paper with printing methods not allowing for much detail (McLuhan, 2001, p. 179). This could be one reason why comics artists developed styles based

on black inked lines – part of the conventions, the visual building blocks connected to art techniques still used in comics cultures today – even though methods for reproduction have improved (Abel & Maden, 2008, p. 104). However, this does not imply that comics artists engage in a condensation and fusion of information, as they do not necessarily start out with the intentions of making the equivalent of a sequence of oil paintings, ending up making line-based comic art. Still, the general idea of Gombrich's reasoning is sound, as many comics could seem to readily display their schemata, the visual patterns involved in their making. Images in comics can be produced in different ways and be highly mimetic, e.g. constitute of reproductions of photos, but comics tend to consist of images that go in the other direction, towards schematization or conventionality (Rifas, 2010, p. 33). It has even been postulated that images that reproduce photographs in comics, contain too much information, more than the narrative needs (Marion, 1993, p. 101), and that adding texture to a line drawing can impede a quick visualization of said image (Barbieri, 1991, p. 28).

Again, this relates directly to the style used in *Persepolis*, which with its few details and line-based art that is devoid of crosshatchings, in many ways is the epitome of Barbieri's idea of avoiding "unnecessary" texture and focusing on a quick visualization of what the images are to represent. Whether this style is based on Persian miniatures or the French New Wave, or most likely a combination of both and other potential influences, it does resonate with Gombrich's idea of "condensation and fusion".

Revisit: Immersion in Persepolis and in Superhero Comics

An alternative concept to Gombrich's mimesis in relation to comics is "immediacy" (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 318). This term could be used to broaden Gombrich's concept to encompass different ways of diminishing the distancing effects of the user interface and putting the viewer more in direct contact with the content. Even though Bolter & Grusin specifically discusses the immersion modern technology, i.e. computer games with low resolution can create through the interaction they provide (Bolter & Grusin, 1996, p. 325), this is an apt simile in conjunction with comics, where artists can use the possibilities of visual narratives to create an immediacy, connecting directly to the reader without having the images replicate our perception of reality. A similar idea was launched by Aldama, who uses the terms geometrizing and storyfying to describe the ways in which an artist attempts to connect more directly with the reader

on visual and narrative levels (Aldama, 2017, p. ix). One possibility to do this, could be to use images more closely related to schemata, to the general visual ideas. In a sense, this is what McLuhan referred to when identifying comics as a medium requiring interaction and input from the reader (McLuhan, 2001, p. 179). Even though McLuhan's theories have been contended (cf. Gozzi, 1994) and as stated earlier, his understanding of comics seems to have been limited (Hatfield, Heer & Worcester, 2013, p. xiv), the idea of higher reader interaction is relevant, as images that veer towards depicting the general idea of something, i.e. the visual idea, rather than a specific example of said thing, invites the readers to add their own interpretations as opposed to steering it towards a more specific reading (Gombrich, 2014, p. 286).

This would indicate that the art in *Persepolis* offers a higher degree of immersion compared to the comparatively more mimetic, detailed art in superhero comics from AK Comics and Teshkeel. This is difficult to quantify and measure, but it could be part of the explanation as to why *Persepolis* has had such a large international success compared to the comics from AK Comics and Teshkeel.

Sequentiality

There are other possible reasons why images in comics seem to lean towards displaying their schemata prominently (Gombrich 2014, p. 288), besides the aforementioned historical reasons for adopting clear, inked lines. One of the defining traits of comics is that they are meant to be read as a continuous flow of images, where each panel is not intended as a stand-alone image to be viewed separately – as for instance most paintings, but to be read consecutively (Groensteen, 2007, p. 5). This sequential trait invites the use of a style that is easily decipherable/readable, something that has had some comics theoreticians putting comics closer to language than mimetic art in the way they communicate (Groensteen, 2007, p. 19; Midorag, 2013, p. 12). This resonates with Gombrich's theory that the idea behind an image becomes more clear the less details there are to contradict our projection of its meaning (Gombrich, 2014, p. 280), an idea that seems applicable to the style of many comics, as the sequential trait of comics seems to lead to a major focus on the visual idea, i.e. showcasing the underlying schema. Gombrich also expressed his theory of how art has evolved as a "rhythm of invention and simplification", i.e. that inventions for how to create graphic representations of something

often be refined, by the original artist or other artists exposed to these visual inventions, i.e. schemata. Visual conventions could thus be simplified when an understanding from the artists and/or the viewers of what they represent indicates that they can be stripped of details, but still retain the meaning they communicates (Gombrich, 2014, p. 280).

Comics is a comparatively young art form, and as mentioned earlier probabaly incorporating developments of older visual art forms that preceeded it (McLuhan, 2001, p. 8; Aldama, 2009, p. 6). Thus, it is not inconceivable to view the evolution of the visual conventions of comics as an example of this "rhythm of invention and simplification", of having schemata from more mimetic visual art forms accommodated to the demands of sequentiality, of moving from replication to representation (Arnheim,1974, p. 136), from painterly to linear (Wölfflin, 2012, p. 14).

Revisit: Innovation & Simplification in Persepolis

The idea of invention and simplification could relate to the previously discussed theory that Satrapi got much of her style from Persian miniatures (cf. Naghibi & O'Malley, 2005, p. 231; Chute, 2008, p. 98). Seeing that Persian miniatures is an art form with a history spanning almost a millennium, during which there were numerous different styles – most of which were not only in color but also often contained more details than the art in *Persepolis*, this connection is at the very least debatable (cf. Singer, 2019, p. 159; Strömberg, 2020, p. 114). Still, in my analysis of these connections, it did seem plausible that some parts of Satrapi's visual elements could be related to Persian miniatures, which could indicate such a "rhythm of invention and simplification", i.e. that Satrapi has accommodated schemata from Persian miniatures and in the process simplified them in order to make them suit the sequential aspects of comics.

Variability

In an art form based on sequentiality, on juxtaposed, interrelated images (Strömberg, 2003a, p. 131), coherency is crucial for the representation of the diegetic world (Lefèvre, 2016, p. 78), i.e. that characters, objects, and environments are recognizable from one image to another. This means that there is a need for variations of similar visual elements for the purpose of a visual narrative (Lefèvre, 2000), something that has had researchers label comics the "stuttering art" (Mason, 1985, p. 72). Again, this is

doing comics a disservice, as the reproduction of similar visual elements does not necessarily equate the end results being repetitive. For a reproduction of visual elements, e.g. a character, to work repeatedly without becoming a "stutter", visual schemata underlying these visual elements could help artists represent them in a way that makes them understandable and carry the same meaning, even though they are altered from one image to another (Able & Madden, 2008, p. 59). These underlying patterns assist the reader in being able to follow the story and interpret the connections between visual elements from one panel to another, but also assist the artists, who need to reproduce similar images repeatedly. For this purpose, the artist can create visual building blocks that can be varied according to the needs of the visual storytelling, but still retain the visual idea at their core.

One tangible form this takes are so called *character sheets*, drawn models of a character seen from different angles and with different expressions – establishing how the characters is to be made to feel consistent despite variations (Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 146), i.e. which visual building block to use in different settings. The basic meaning of the character remains the same, but the artist needs different visual building blocks and sometimes even different visual ideas to vary the depiction depending on the demands of the visual storytelling. A lack of an understanding of the general visual ideas behind a specific visual element may hinder an artist from producing the variations needed to efficiently tell a sequential story without "stuttering".

Revisit: Noses in Persepolis

One example of this process of using specific visual ideas is distinguishable in comics in the way certain artists seem to favor drawing characters from a specific angle, avoiding other possibilities even though they might be indicated by the visual narrative. This phenomenon, of preferring a certain angle, is well known in portrait paintings (Gombrich, 2014, p. 147) but can become even more evident in comics due to the need to draw the same characters repeatedly. Examples often include characters drawn at an angle but not directly from the front, indicating that the artist started out drawing the character at a certain angle, creating a set of visual buidling blocks for this that has been accommodated, refined, and used, but has never created a similar set of schemata for representing said characters directly from the front.

Image 26A: Spectators in a Persian miniature from the 17th century. © Adobe Stock 2021. Image 26B: Persepolis, page 101, panel 1 (Satrapi 2017). © Marjane Satrapi & L´Association 2017.

This phenomenon could be exemplified by the visual conundrum of how to depict noses from different angles and can for instance be observed in the comics style sometimes labeled "Gros nez" i.e. "big nose" (Groensteen, 2009, p. 220). The French comic *Asterix* by Rene Goscinny and Albert Uderzo is perhaps the most famous example of this tradition. Here Aldama's "exaggeration and distortion" (Aldama, 2009, p. 82) results in features including over-dimensional, non-anatomical noses, designs that seem to work when a character is drawn in profile or at an angle, but seemingly becomes harder to handle when drawn from the front as the oversized nose could potentially hide both eyes and mouth, making the communication of the chracters identity more difficult.

In *Persepolis*, the schemata for noses seem to be based on a similar visual idea, where, even though a face might be shown directly from the front, the nose is still depicted as if seen from the side, with variations of an L-shaped line (see Image 26B, above). This could be connected to Persian miniatures and reliefs, where faces are shown at fixed angles of 45 or 90 degrees respectively and noses often represented with similar L-shapes (cf. Grabar, 2000, p. 132; Stierling 2006, p. 137; see Image 26A, above). However, fixed angles are not used for the faces in *Persepolis*, except in the direct visual quotes of the Persian friezes (cf. Strömberg, 2020, p. 110), indicating that other influences, e.g. visual conventions from the comics culture in the New Wave had greater influence on these choices. The fact that noses are not shown directly from the front in *Persepolis* could also be related to the same artistic problem that seems to have limited many other comics artists throughout history, attempting to depict noses on characters shown from the front.

Thus, it seems as if some of the formal aspects of comics, i.e. schematization, sequentiality, and variability are all connected to the existence and use of visual schemata, of visual patterns, making schema theory a potentially useful theory for analyzing comics. The next chapter will summarize the conclusions that can been drawn from the resarch done for this thesis.

PART IV: DISCOVERIES, DEVELOPMENTS & POSSIBILITIES

The writing of this thesis has truly been a journey into uncharted territories, attempting to understand how comics can include representations of Middle Eastern cultures and how these can be analyzed and understood. This journey has allowed me to dive into ideas from cognitive science, media theory and schema theory as developed within art history, as I attempted to further develop theoretical tools in connection with my aim. The results of this journey will here be divided into: A) empirical discoveries; B) theoretical developments; and C) methodological possibilities.

1. Empirical Discoveries

The empirical data highlighted in the articles pertain mainly to two areas: A) the superhero genre; and B) the graphic novel *Persepolis*.

The Superhero Genre

As mentione earlier, academic studies of the relationship between comics and the Middle East were for a long time almost nonexistent, or at least severely dated (cf. Rifas, 1988; Shaheen, 1994). The cumulative, statistical method used in "'Yo, rag-head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11" (Strömberg, 2012b) unearthed new empirical data concerning the state of representation of Arab and/or Muslim superheroes in American comic books, including the conclusion that even though the superheroes analyzed seemed to be created with didactic intentions of educating American readers of Middle Eastern cultures, they

still perpetuated and, in some cases, seemingly reinforced stereotypes of the Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 581).

By reversing the perspective and analyzing Middle Eastern comics, the article "Superhero Comics from the Middle East: Tyranny of Genre?" (Strömberg, 2017), added empirical data about the publishers AK Comics and Teshkeel, not the least through the comparative analyses of all their publications, which led to the conclusion that the publishers despite different approaches to adopting the American defined superhero genre to Middle Eastern cultures, both seemed to struggle with the tyranny of genre and ultimately failed in their attempts at acculturating this genre.

The results from both these articles helped broaden the idea of how Middle Eastern cultures can be represented in comics and the themes brought up in these articles have since been referenced and discussed further by other researchers (cf. Dubbati, 2017; Pumphrey, 2017; Wanner, 2017; Arjana, 2018; O'Ready, 2018; Lund, 2020).

The Graphic Novel Persepolis

The article "Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis – Accommodation, Combination, Integration" (Strömberg, 2020) was an attempt, through formal analysis to prove or disprove the "truism" of there being Persian visual influences in *Persepolis* – an idea that had previously mostly been given short mentions (cf. Naghibi & O`Malley, 2005, p. 231; Uchmanowicz, 2009, p. 368; Chute, 2010, p. 144). The analysis expanded on the empirical data on Persian art forms that could have been influential and introduced a potential link between the patterns made up of characters in specific panels and the recurring repeatable patterns of arabesques (Strömberg, 2020, p. 115), as well as the conclusion that even though Persian visual influences were detectable, the most common comparison, i.e. that of Persian Miniatures, seemed to be one of the least obvious (Strömberg, 2020, p. 113). Another conclusion was that the deviations that could be detected between the Persian influences and the visual elements in the graphic novel were deemed potentially related to: A) divergences between the involved art forms; B) combinations of schemata from different art forms; and C) the potential objectives for the use of the visual ideas.

Taken together, the articles introduced new themes and empirical data, which combined seems to have been part of the creation of a new research area of comics, Islam, and the Middle East (cf. Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 9).

However, there are potentially much more interesting data concerning comics and the Middle East still to uncover and illuminate through academic research. Doing so could not only broaden the scope and understanding of the relationship between comics and cultures in the Middle East, but also shed light on communication of visual ideas between different cultures, through comics and other visual art forms.

2. Theoretical Developments

In the initial articles, theories were mostly used as springboards for analyzing and understanding the main themes and questions asked of the empirical data. However, theoretical contributions were made in the latter articles, as well as in this thesis in the form of further development of theories and adding to terminology as I headed McLuhan's insistence that media studies should focus more on the medium itself (McLuhan, 2001, p. 8). These developments mainly concerned: A) genre theory; and B) schema theory, but also regarding: C) the relationship between media and communication studies – particularly media theory, and remediation theory – and comics.

Genre Theory

In the article "Superhero Comics in the Middle East" (Strömberg, 2017), genre theory was utilized and developed for comics. Through assessing earlier attempts at establishing a functioning definition of the crucial elements of the superhero genre, combined with a lifelong consumption of the genre, eight defining characteristics were established (Strömberg, 2017, p. 136). Earlier attempts at establishing defining characteristics of the superhero genre seemed almost fawning over the genre. Attempting a more critical view led to adding violent clashes and sexualization of the heroes – recurring, defining traits, although often disregarded in texts on the genre. The idea of the diegesis being an alternative version of the readers's world also seemed like a relevant aspect of the superhero genre often neglected in attempts at defining genre specifics.

This development has been quoted as a useful contribution to comics studies (Lewis & Lund, 2017, p. 241) and the list of defining characteristics could for instance be used for comparative, transmedial analysis of superhero stories told in movies and TV-series – increasingly popular media for this genre – and the original comic books, to ascertain if the transition between media has affected core characteristics of the genre.

Schema Theory

The development of schema theory for the purpose of analyzing comics is potentially another useful contribution to the field of comics studies, as cognitive based schema theory within art history in general and Gombrich's ideas in particular have not been explored much in relation to comics, despite comics communicating in large parts through images. Compared to for instance Cohn's influential but somewhat deterministic psycholinguistic theories (2012; 2013), which does address similar analytical problems, I feel that schema theory invites for a potentially more nuanced view of the complex way in which images in comics are created.

My development of schema theory can be summarized in the model presented earlier (Image 23), consisting of the definition of a *visual schema* as containing both the more general *visual idea* and the more specific, practical *visual building block*, as well as how these connect and take part in a process of *making and matching*, where application is followed with *accommodation* until a successful resulting *visual element* is created.

A further development of these ideas was the theory that visual schemata from different sources seem to be able to be adjusted for the use within comics not only through accommodation – i.e. changed to better fit the artists vision, but also through combination – combined with other visual schemata, and integration – adjusted to the formal aspects of comics (Strömberg, 2020, p. 112). In the processes described in the model, these different forces seem to work simultaneously with varying degree of influence, shaping the visual elements that end up in a comic.

This development of schema theory, the idea of visual ideas, visual building blocks and visual elements and how they function together in the creative process, has given me new insights into how comics work and could be used in further research. The sequential and fragmented nature of comics seems to lead to a need for images that are comparatively easy to create and consume (Groensteen, 2007, p. 19), but also to a need for variations of these images (Abel & Madden, 2008, p. 146). These traits indicate an intimate relationship between comics and the patterns, the schemata inherent in the visuals, i.e. that comics in many ways is a schema-based art form and that research into cognitive schema theory in relation to the visual aspects of comics could be beneficial for the development of comics studies. Using cognitive based schema theory when analyzing images offers a pragmatic alternative to popular semiotics and

psycholinguistic theories in trying to understand how images in comics could be said to be connected to other comics but also to other visual art forms (cf. Kukkonen, 2013, p. 7). More on this in ”Methodological Possibilities”, and the section ”Visual Genealogies”, below.

Media & Communication Studies and Comics

This thesis has focused on developing analytical tools in accordance with the overall aim of examining how cultures from the Middle East can be represented in comics and how this can be analyzed and understood. The use of schema theory from cognitive science, reworked through art history, adapted for comics, and added to with parts of genre theory and media theories, is a combination of theories with the potential to benefit media and communication studies, but also an eclectic mix that perhaps could not have been created under other academic umbrellas. Even though these theories were crafted for comics analysis, they can potentially be utilized for analyzing other visually oriented art forms and media where an artist is involved in the production of representations, i.e. painting, drawing, children's books as well as decorative arts and craft.

The development of schema theory in relation to art and images seems to be less prevalent in media and communication studies and part of my contribution is to reintroduce this version of schema theory to this discipline. Having made my research within media and communication studies, I also view part of my contribution is also to clearly situate comics studies within this discipline, to open for more studies of comics under the big umbrella that is media and communication studies. On an epistemological level, the discussion on how comics studies can best be performed in the future (Strömberg, 2016, p. 151), has on one level at least been showcased with this thesis, displaying how the inclusive melting pot that is media and communication studies can be a fertile ground for interdisciplinary comics studies.

3. Methodological Possibilities

Comics has been referred to as “a nexus of cultures” (Berninger, Ecke & Haberkorn 2010), alluding to the ability to capture the zeitgeist in words and pictures. This connects to Said´s idea that comics are ideal for studying cultural, political, and ideological trends in a society (Said 2001, p. iv), indicating that there are still numerous opportunities to further expand

our understanding of this complex art form and through this, the rest of our society. Research on comics may be expanding rapidly (Singer, 2019, p. 8), but as a field it is in an early, formative phase and there are still many "potholes" to fill (Lent, 2015, p. 8). The ideas presented in this thesis could be utilized to help fill some of those potholes, e.g. in the areas of: A) collecting primary data; B) understanding the creative process; and C) investigating visual genealogies.

Collecting Primary data

The choice of method for gathering empirical data in the very first article "'Yo, rag-head!'" (Strömberg, 2012b) was viewed as "unconventional" by the editors of the publishing journal *Amerikastudien*, which might have been due to the openness within media and communication studies for new and seemingly unconventional ways of performing research, in this case to: A) use fan-based communities for raw but relevant and up-to date empirical data; and B) use a statistical, cumulative approach.

Concerning the first part, online, crowd-sourced Wikipedia-like systems was used for access to relevant information as there were no contemporary research available. These systems constituted the best resources available at teh time, as readers and fans seemed to add information quicker and more meticulously than official record keeping system could keep up with. This is not to say that these systems were perfect, and I did triangulate using three different sources for the article (Strömberg, 2012b, p. 580), but there is much to gain from interacting with the fan-based communities that exists throughout the comics cultures of the world. Research within comics studies should be executed with as much rigor as within any field or discipline and a critical approach to the information presented is essential as there could be all kinds of bias behind the answers you get. There are still a lot of truisms in the writing of comics history, ideas that can affect what is being focused on, both among collectors and academics. Still, opening for interactions with the fans and the collectors, fan-based and professional comics organizations, holds a potential of enriching comics studies.

A recent example of this is Swedish government making the official digital archives of newspapers available to the public for two months in the spring of 2020, due to the corona pandemic making it difficult to provi-

de traditional physical access (Kungliga biblioteket, 2020). This got the Swedish comics community going, as people not only started downloading comics and comics related articles, reviews, interviews and advertising all the way back to the 20th century, but also quickly organized themselves online and made lists of themes etc. that different persons were researching, to make the work efficient, with the goal of sharing the information at the end of the period. The flurry of activity during these two months probably constitutes the biggest gathering of empirical data on comics in Sweden ever, and was mostly done by people outside of the academic sphere, often resulting in updates to the online Wikipedia-inspired Seriewikin (The Comics Wiki, seriewikin.serieframjandet se). Thus, Seriewikin now contains numerous unique pieces of information, readily available as springboards for researchers into Swedish comics history. This is only one example of how fan-based communities can be a source of vital information for researchers, and an open mind towards this can be advantageous, both for media and communication studies and for comics studies.

Concerning the second objection from the editors, i.e. that the use of cumulative, statistical methods was somehow ”strange”, this most likely stemmed from the fact that research into comics still tend to be dominated by qualitative analyses, whereas the opportunities for the use of more empirical models have often been overlooked (cf. Gordon, 2020, p. 647). As comics studies is still an emerging field, i feel that there is a need for basic research on comics, of getting raw data about the comics cultures and comics businesses across the world, with statistical, empirical data on e.g. number of publications, number of sales and revenues for publishers, print-runs, wages, and income for comics artists and so on. Analyzes of such empirical data could be used to further our knowledge of the world within which comics artists live and work, not the least could it be used to prove or disprove a lot of the “truisms” the writing of comics history has created – truisms that are oft repeated but seldom scrutinized.

Understanding the Creative Process

One way of viewing the choices you as a researcher can make within media and communication studies, is between studying a certain phenomenon from the perspective of sender, message, or receiver (cf. Chandler & Munday, 2011, p. 384). Even though this simplified way of viewing a communication process has been both criticized and nuanced (cf. Chandler,

1994), it can still be a useful distinction for comparisons. I began my journey mostly studying the message, but through the research journey realized the importance of attempting to understand the processes influencing the sender, of how comics are created using, as Barthes puts its "bits and pieces of already existing cultural elements" (Barthes, 1977, p. 142–148).

Schema theory can be used to delve deeper into the creative processes behind comics and not, as is more common in comics analyses, to attempt to understand the reader´s response (Brienza, 2010, p. 107), especially in the earlier mentioned semiotic approaches to comics analysis. Gombrich devised his theories in order to "understand what they [the artists] wanted to do" (Gombrich, 2007, p. viii), a statement criticized for the underlying assumption that artists strive for artistic development for the purity of that quest alone, disregarding other factors, e.g. the pursuit of commercial success, but also for assuming we can analyze our way towards the intent of the artist through some sort of mental connection (Howells & Negreiros, 2012, p. 74). Even though this might not be possible, the theory of schema, of how artists adapt and adjust preexisting patterns to create graphic representations of objects and characters could be used in research with the intent of probing into the processes that have gone into creating visual elements in comics. Using the theory of making and matching, combined with the terminology of visual ideas and visual building blocks could for instance open for research based on interviews with artists about their creative processes, combined with analyses of their art.

There has also been a dearth in research relating to the materiality of creating comics (Hauge, 2014, p. 23; Thon & Wilde, 2016, p. 234), a research area where the theory of schema presented in this thesis and the distinction between visual ideas and visual building blocks could be useful. It could for instance be possible to identify external visual influences in comics and through the concept of visual building blocks analyze how these influences could have been represented in comics; how visual ideas from other art forms might have been accommodated for integration in comics through the creation of visual building blocks based on different artistic tools and techniques, their possibilities, and restrictions (Gombrich, 2014, p. 309). Schema theory could thus become the basis for analysis of visual elements, by way of the concepts of visual building blocks and visual ideas, working towards an understanding of a process that can often be convoluted (Brienza, 2010, p. 107). For this purpose, the analysis could also be structured using the four levels of complexity in the construction

of their schemata established in the article ”Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis”, i.e. A) lines, B) details, C) characters and objects and D) compositions (Strömberg, 2020, p. 99).

Visual Genealogies

There is furthermore a dearth of research examining comics in relation to other art forms and/or media (Thon & Wilde, 2016, p. 236). The development of Gombrichian schema theory presented in this thesis could be a tool for doing this, for following how inspiration and influences flow back and forth between different cultures and how they are being remediated, and accommodated, combined, and integrated in the process.

Using the concept of visual ideas, it for instance becomes conceivable to search for parallels on a more general level to visual elements in the analyzed comic, plausible connections that might not be initially discernable when focusing on specific visual elements. Schema theory thus could become the basis for a way of understanding the influences of the transnational, multicultural visual world comics are part of.

As Lefèvre recently stated (Lefèvre, 2016, p. 79), there has so far not been any large-scale research within comics like Bordwell et al.’s research into styles and modes of production in films (Bordwell, Staiger & Thompson, 1988). Gombrichian schema theory could be used in pursuit of an understanding of intertextual visual connection, enabling a discussion of specific visual patterns as well as identifying whole sets of visual patterns of a certain style that can be traced between different pieces of art. This could be utilized to attempt to understand how different influences have been represented, and how they have been communicated and developed over time.

The proposed theories could thus be used to analyze “visual genealogies” within comics (Aldama, 2009, p. 6), of looking for recurring patterns, dominant styles, i.e. interrelated sets of schemata defining different eras in the history of comics (Stein, 2013, p. 145). A theme related to the research in this thesis could be to examine the styles used in the New Wave in French comics and analyze comics from this movement in comparison to the comics made by Satrapi, building on the work done in the article ”Schemata in the Graphic Novel Persepolis” (Strömberg, 2020), extending the understanding of Satrapi’s style. A thorough analysis of this trail could add information to a discussion that often seem to be based more on politics/power than the study of the actual art (Singer, 2019, p. 153).

Another potential extension of my research would be to examine whether any of the American artists involved in the production of Teshkeel's *The 99* have used the accommodations introduced to the superhero genre of having less overtly sexualized costumes in subsequent productions of superhero comics in the U.S. – potentially making this cultural exchange reciprocal. There is a trend right now within American superhero comics of redesigning costumes, making them less about the male gaze. It would for instance be interesting to find out if the artists involved in *The 99* were part of this trend.

In short, this development of schema theory in relation to comics opens several new possibilities, new routes for further analysis.

Endnotes

I started out this journey wanting not only to "fil potholes" and add to my understanding of the relationship between comics and the Middle East, but more importantly to add new tools to my analytical toolbox. Having accomplished these goals I now look forward to using these new tools and hope you will accompany me on this journey as we try to understand the magic that is comics.

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SUMMARY

The art form of comics seems to have undergone a gradual development over the course of history. This development has taken place through a continuous introduction of conventions, solutions for dealing with visual storytelling, conventions that can be launched by individual comics artists and then adopted, modified and used by other comics artists, thus becoming established and spread, within and between different comics cultures. Initially, this development seems to primarily have been linked to Europe and the United States, which is reflected in the visual ideas that formed the basis for the conventions that were established within comics.

But, what happens when the art form of comics meets other visual cultures; when artists with other frames of reference create comics; or when a genre established within one comics culture is introduced into another? Such meetings can potentially make visual conventions that can otherwise be taken for granted stand out prominently, and in the meeting itself, new visual solutions can arise – new conventions that can then be spread from one artist and their art to another and potentially enrich the art form of comics. In the history of comics, this can be seen, for example, in how conventions for visual storytelling in the comics form from the U.S. influenced comics artists in Japan during the first half of the 20th century, but also how the Japanese comics – after developing their own unique conventions of visual storytelling, in a movement in the opposite direction, influenced comics in the U.S. in the late 1900s and early 2000s.

Comics and the Middle East

Examples of these cultural exchanges can also be found in encounters between the art form of comics and cultures from the Middle East, cultures in which comics have not been as prevalent a presence as they have been in other parts of the world. This can be observed, for example, in attempts to establish publishers such as Teshkeel in Kuwait and AK Comics in Egypt in the early 2000s, that invested in producing their own superhero comics – utilizing a genre culturally based in the United States. These publishers eventually had to discontinue their respective endeavours, something that seems to be associated with the narrative and visual conventions linked to the superhero genre. Teshkeel modified a number of these conventions in order to adapt the comics for publication in the Middle East, but in doing so, they seem to have ended up too far away from the core of what constiutes the superhero genre and thus created something that did not appeal to readers. AK Comics created comics that retained most of the conventions of the superhero genre, but then had problems with the comics clashing with social and cultural expectations for visual entertainment intended for children and young people in the Middle East. In both cases, the built-in conventions of the superhero genre seem to have created problems when introduced into cultures that were not part of the genre`s original developement.

The Graphic Novel Persepolis

The critically acclaimed graphic novel *Persepolis* by the French-Iranian comics artist Marjane Satrapi is another example of a meeting between cultures from the Middle East and the art form of comics. *Persepolis* is stated as autobiographical and tells the story of Satrapi growing up in Iran before, during and after the revolution of 1978–79, when the Iranian monarch was overthrown and an Islamist regime was established. Visually, the graphic novel is clearly related to the French so-called New Wave of literary and artistic comics from the late 1990s, but it also contains visual elements that suggest inspiration from Persian art forms such as arabesques, calligraphy, sculptures and miniature paintings. These influences seem to have affected the creation of images in that visual elements from the earlier mentioned Persian art forms have been modified, combined and integrated in various ways to work together with the comics format and its visual conventions. In some cases, this process has taken place to such an extent that it appears as if completely new visual elements have

been created. Versions of these new visual elements can be found in later works by other French comics artists, suggesting that the introduction of them in *Persepolis* enriched the art form of comics by adding new opportunities for comics artists to express themselves.

Cognitive Patterns

How then do these transfers of visual conventions work between different comics and between different comics artists? Research in cognitive psychology indicates that we store and organize information in so-called schemata, cognitive patterns that include information related to certain concepts and how this information is connected, but also about how we act based on this information. A schema can, for example, be based on the concept of going to a shop, and include information on how we are expected to act, that we should choose products, go to a checkout and pay, while a salesperson is expected to help, and charge us money. These cognitive patterns are considered to be general and include variants of a certain concept, but also to be adaptable as an individual can modify a learned schema after new experiences are added to existing information.

Research indicates that we handle visual information in a similar way, i.e. that we connect different parts of an image – lines, dots, fields, etc. – into a whole, a pattern that we interpret based on previous experience of similar images. Artists also seem to create images based on such schemata, general patterns they recognize in images, incorporate and accommodate according to their needs and use in the creation of their art. This seems to apply to all visual art, but not least to comics, an art form that due to its sequential nature is largely based on repetition, on characters, details and backgrounds recurring in image after image. To avoid this becoming repetitive, but also to meet different need that arise based on the visual narrative, comics artists needs possibilities to vary recurring images but still communicate the same things are represented. For this to work, ther is a need visual patterns that can be varied, ways in which, for example, characters can be changed as they need to be shown from different angles, adopt different postures or show different emotions. These visual patterns, schemata linked to a certain way of depicting a certain thing, often with a specific kind of tool, are nevertheless adjustable and thus give the artist the opportunity to adapt them to different needs.

Sequential Art

The sequential nature of comics also means that the images tend to lean towards the more iconic, representative rather than the photorealistic, mimetic. The fact that images in comics are often expected to be both produced and consumed relatively quickly seems to result in images that are often based on clarity, on lines that define contours and details, which means that the images' underlying visual ideas "shine through", i.e. their basic schemata are an important part of the communication process.

Taken together, this makes comics an art form in which schemata seems to play a crucial role. Nevertheless, research on comics and schemata is still in its infancy. Research on comics is in itself a relatively new phenomenon in the academic sphere and there are still many gaps to fill in our understanding of how the art form of comics actually works. Theories based on the study of cognitive psychology and not least the idea of visual schemata appear to be a productive way to understand the often impenetrable process behind the creation of comics, but also to understand how visual ideas are transferred between artist and between works, within and across cultural boundaries.

POPULÄRVETENSKAPLIG SAMMANFATTNING

Konstformen tecknade serier verkar ha genomgått en lång, gradvis utveckling under historiens gång. Denna utveckling har skett genom en kontinuerlig introduktion av nya konventioner för att hantera visuellt berättande, konventioner som kan ha lanserats av enskilda serieskapare för att sedan anammas, modifieras och användas av andra serieskapare och därmed etableras och spridas, inom och mellan olika seriekulturer. Denna utveckling var länge framför allt kopplad till Europa och USA, vilket avspeglas i vilka visuella idéer som legat till grund för det bildspråk som byggts upp och vilka visuella konventioner som etablerades inom seriekonsten.

Men, vad händer när seriekonsten möter andra visuella kulturer, när bildkonstnärer med andra visuella referensramar skapar serier, eller när seriegenrer etablerade inom en viss kultur introduceras i en annan? Dylika möten tydliggör ofta just de konventioner som annars kan tas för givna och i själva mötet kan nya bildlösningar uppstå, nya konventioner som sedan kan spridas från en tecknare till en annan och potentiellt berika seriekonsten. I seriernas historia kan detta till exempel ses i hur konventioner för bildberättande från USA influerade serieskapare i Japan under första halvan av 1900-talet, men även hur de japanska serierna – efter att ha utvecklat ett stort antal egna unika konventioner inom bildberättandet, i en rörelse i motsatt riktning influerade serierna i USA mot slutet av 1900- och början av 2000-talen.

Serier och Mellanöstern

Tydliga exempel på detta fenomen står även att finna i möten mellan seriekonsten och olika kulturer från Mellanöstern, kulturer i vilka serieformen inte framstår som lika etablerad som den är i andra delar av världen. Detta kan till exempel observeras i försök att på 2000-talet upprätta förlag som Teshkeel i Kuwait och AK Comics i Egypten, förlag som satsade på att producera nya serier i superhjältegenren – en genre tydligt kulturellt baserad i USA. Dessa förlag fick till slut lägga ner sina respektive utgivningar, något som verkar ha varit kopplat till de berättarmässiga och visuella konventioner som är kopplade till superhjältegenren. Teschkeel modifierade ett antal av dessa konventioner i syfte att anpassa serierna för publicering i Mellanöstern, men verkar i samband med detta ha hamnat för långt bort från superhjältegenrens kärna och därmed skapat något som inte appellerade till läsarna. AK Comics skapade serier som behöll de flesta av superhjältegenrens konventioner, men fick då problem med att serierna bröt med sociala och kulturella förväntningar på visuell underhållning ämnad för barn och unga i Mellanöstern. I båda fallen verkar de inbyggda konventionerna i superhjältegenren ha skapat problem när de skulle introduceras i kulturer som inte varit del av att utveckla dem.

Serieromanen Persepolis

Ett annat exempel på ett möte mellan kulturer från Mellanöstern och konstformen tecknade serier återfinns i den kritikerrosade serieromanen *Persepolis* av den fransk-iranska serieskaparen Marjane Satrapi. *Persepolis* är uttalat självbiografisk och handlar om Satrapis uppväxt i Iran före, under och efter revolutionen 1978–79, då Irans monark störtades och ett islamistiskt styre instiftades. Visuellt anknyter serieromanen tydligt till den franska så kallade Nya vågen av litterära och konstnärliga serier från slutet av 1990-talet, men den innehåller även visuella element som tyder på inspiration från persiska konstformer som arabesk, kalligrafi, skulptur och miniatyrmålningar. Dessa influenser förefaller ha påverkat bildskapandet genom att visuella element från dessa konstformer på olika sätt har modifierats, kombinerats och integrerats för att fungera tillsammans med serieformen och dess visuella konventioner. I vissa fall har denna process skett i så hög grad att det framstår som om helt nya visuella element skapats. I senare verk av andra franska serieskapare verkar versioner av dessa nya visuella element kunna återfinnas, vilket tyder på att introduktionen av dem i *Persepolis* berikade seriekonsten genom att tillföra nya möjligheter för serieskapare att uttrycka sig.

Kognitiva möster

Hur fungerar då dessa överföringar av visuella konventioner mellan olika serier och mellan olika serieskapare? Forskning inom kognitiv psykologi indikerar att vi lagrar och organiserar information i så kallade scheman, kognitiva mönster som inkluderar information relaterad till ett visst koncept och hur denna information hänger samman, men även om hur vi agerar baserad på informationen. Ett schema kan till exempel baseras på konceptet affär, och innefatta information om hur vi förväntas agera, att vi ska välja produkter, ta oss till en kassa och betala, medan en försäljare förväntas hjälpa till, och ta betalt. Dessa kognitiva mönster anses vara generella och omfatta varianter av ett visst koncept, men även vara anpassningsbara såtillvida att en individ kan modifiera ett inlärt schema efter det att nya erfarenheter läggs till existerande information.

Forskning indikerar att vi hanterar visuell information på liknande sätt, det vill säga att vi kopplar samman olika delar av en bild – streck, punkter, fält etc. – till en helhet, ett mönster som vi tolkar baserat på tidigare erfarenhet av liknande bilder. Konstnärer verkar också hantera skapande baserat på dylika scheman, generella mönster som de upplever i bilder, anammar och modifierar efter sina behov och använder i skapandet av sin konst. Detta verkar gälla för all visuell konst, men inte minst för tecknade serier, en konstform som på grund av sin sekventiella natur till stor del bygger på upprepning, på att figurer, detaljer och bakgrunder återkommer i bild efter bild. För att detta inte ska riskera att bli repetitivt, men också för att möta olika behov som uppkommer baserat på det visuella berättandet, behöver serieskaparen möjligheter till att variera återkommande bildelement men trots det kommunicera att det är samma saker som representeras. För att detta ska fungera behövs visuella mönster som kan varieras, sätt på vilket till exempel figurer kan ändras för att anpassa dem efter att de behöver visas upp från olika vinklar, inta olika kroppshållningar eller uppvisa olika känslor. Dessa visuella mönster, scheman kopplade till ett visst sätt att avbilda en viss sak, ofta med ett specifikt konstnärligt verktyg, är trots detta anpassningsbara och ger därmed möjlighet för serieskaparen att anpassa dem efter olika behov.

Sekventiell konst

Seriernas sekventiella natur gör dessutom att bilderna tenderar att dra åt det mer ikoniska och representativa snarare än åt det fotorealistiska – något som gjort att en del teoretiker sätter seriekonsten närmare språket än bildkonsten. Att bilderna ofta förväntas produceras och konsumeras förhållandevis snabbt verkar resultera i bilder som ofta bygger på tydlighet, på linjer som definierar konturer och detaljer, något som gör att bildernas underliggande visuella idéer ”lyser igenom”, att deras grundläggande scheman i hög grad är del av kommunikationen.

Sammantaget gör detta serier till en konstform i vilken schema verkar spela en avgörande roll. Trots det är forskningen kring serier och schema fortfarande i sin linda. Forskning om serier är i sig ett förhållandevis nytt fenomen inom den akademiska sfären och det finns fortfarande många hål att fylla i vår förståelse av hur konstformen tecknade serier faktiskt fungerar. Teorier baserade inom studiet av kognitiv psykologi och inte minst idén om bildmässiga scheman framstår som ett produktivt sätt att förstå den inte sällan svårgenomträngliga processen som ligger bakom skapandet av serier, men även för att förstå hur visuella idéer överförs mellan skapare och mellan verk, inom och över kulturgränser.