Introduction
Comics, Caricature, and Transnational Critique

The Editors

European Comic Art 16.1 was not planned as a themed issue, but the articles by our contributors nonetheless touch on some recurring themes: the close relationship between comics and caricature, the capacity of the medium for political and satirical critique, and its cultural ostracism. There is also a notable focus on comics as a transnational medium.

Tilmann Altenberg discusses Flix’s German-language comics adaptation of Don Quixote, which relocates the novel to twenty-first-century Germany, evoking the original and its Spanish context obliquely through a protagonist, Quijano, with a deluded attachment to a largely mythical past, through names bestowed on characters and places and through visual references to Francisco Goya and Pablo Picasso. However, while readers are likely to recognise these allusions to the hypotext and to Hispanic culture, the characters remain wholly ignorant of their literary parentage. Flix’s refusal of faithful adaptation in favour of more distant appropriation (exemplified, for instance, by the greater prominence given to the helper, Quijano’s grandson, whose fascination with superhero comics motivates the adventure) is foregrounded in the paratext. A foreword attributed to a fictitious source refers to the work as a ‘revival’, the theatrical implications of which are drawn out by Altenberg, who emphasises the absence of a narrating voice in the comic, in marked contrast to the novel. Moreover, although the visual style of a comics adaptation of a literary work will tend towards the parodic, Altenberg argues that Flix’s target is not Don Quixote, itself already a parody of chivalric romances, but the superhero comics whose stylistic features he exaggerates to humorous effect. Amidst these divergences of content, narrative stance, and satirical intent, Altenberg notes a structural convergence in relation to the use of mise en abyme in both hypotext and hypertext: just as Don Quixote comes across a
book recounting his own adventures, so Quijano finds a corroboration of his own claim to knighthood in the pages of a comic, and, just as in the novel, the ‘evidence’ presented is not entirely reliable. The reader’s scepticism is paralleled within the diegesis by that of the grandson, newly disparaging about the comics medium, and thereby following his illustrious predecessors in raising questions about his own ontological status. Altenberg concludes by stressing Flix’s achievement in recreating a monument of Spanish literature as a transcultural work, albeit one that, currently lacking a French or English translation, has yet to cross some significant boundaries.

Jörn Ahrens uses Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino’s series *Gideon Falls* to develop an argument about ‘graphicality’ as a way of theorising the epistemology of comics. Like Altenberg, he remarks on the similarities between comics and theatre and on the capacity of comics to naturalise exaggeration in its graphic style, but he also insists on the cultural marginality of the medium as a determinant of its formal properties. Ahrens’s concept of ‘graphicality’ characterises the medium as fundamentally anti-mimetic, its drawn lines and arrangement of panels on the page signalling its own artifice rather than upholding the referential illusion. The contract with the reader does not guarantee the restitution of reality, but rather an aesthetic, often spectacular, performance. The thesis is demonstrated through analysis of selected extracts from *Gideon Falls* in which meaning is created not at the level of objects, characters, and events in a convincing fictional world, but through the composition of the page, where, for example, a key plot element is indicated by a sunburst pattern of panels or a superimposed frame complicates the relationship between image and action sequence. The spatial configuration and division of the page does not have to correspond to the imaginary space or chronology of a represented world but may follow a purely pictorial logic. Ahrens argues that the epistemology of comics may offer insights into the fabrication of cultural knowledge more generally, through its in-built self-reflexiveness. This is a strength of the medium: forfeiting any claim to the creation of a realist context, comics can enable different aspects of the story with varying degrees of reliability, including memories, metaphorical elements, and chimerical entities, to coexist on the page. The article concludes by returning to the exclusion of comics from mainstream culture, which has enabled a work like *Gideon Falls* to highlight and exacerbate its own incapacity for the immersive illusionism expected of mass media. Lemire and Sorrentino’s comic offers a demonstration of the formal language of
an art whose expressive potential is not rooted in representation but in a medium-specific knowledge that can be captured through the use of graphicality as an analytical tool.

Alicia Lambert considers *Le Singe jaune* [The yellow monkey] by Congolese artist Barly Baruti and French author Christophe Cassiau-Haurie against the background of a tradition of Franco-Belgian adventure comics that glorify the colonial project, inevitably featuring the quest of a white male hero. *Le Singe jaune* is part of a more recent current of comics that challenges this heritage. While the cover illustrations exhibit a network of intertextual references to classic Franco-Belgian albums that lure readers to expect familiar colonial adventure tropes, they include a series of more disturbing allusions to colonial violence and conflict that may be discernible to some. The story itself repeats this move by introducing the eponymous yellow monkey as the putative object of a quest only for the (fake) scientist to admit ultimately that this was a ploy to attract publicity. Meanwhile, references to the colonial past are gradually introduced as flashbacks and then through the story of Anaclet, a character who suffered the fate of many real-life mixed-race children born into the segregated Belgian colonial society, removed from their parents and sent to orphanages, an unresolved trauma for the children and their Congolese mothers conveyed through a blurring of past and present on the surface of the page. Lambert shows how, crucially, the focus of the comic shifts from investigation by a European journalist to the quest of Anaclet to discover his motherland, a country no longer depicted as a mere exotic backdrop. The white saviour narrative is overturned as Anaclet uses diamonds plundered by his own white father to finance a medicinal plant cooperative, although, as Lambert points out, some have likened Anaclet’s role here to a Western humanitarian intervention, even as continuing neo-colonial exploitation is denounced elsewhere in the comic. The article concludes by situating the album as a subversive appropriation that gives a voice to those silenced by an outdated genre and opens up a dialogue between Belgians and Congolese whilst noting that a coda portrays the white father as irredeemable in his refusal of any such overtures. The son, and his country, will move forward regardless.

Ylva Lindberg has investigated data about the availability of French-language comics in Swedish translation between 1950 and 2020 and analysed its impact on the development of Swedish comics over the same period. Taking up a perspective from a peripheral ‘dominated’ comics culture allows for insights into the reception of comics from
a central, ‘dominating’ culture, including strategies for encouraging autonomy and agency. Using a data set that was part of a wider project researching translation and literary mediation, Lindberg adopts the method of ‘distant reading’ of a sample of the comics thereby identified in order to gain an overview of the evolution of subject matter and style. The author-illustrator appearing with the highest frequency is, unsurprisingly, Hergé, and Lindberg suggests that the prestige accorded to the Tintin series (including constant updating of translations) has been part of an integrating strategy, both promoting Swedish as a language that vehicles internationally recognised works and opening up a space for a comics culture in Sweden. Translations of the Astérix series as from the 1970s, with a crossover appeal to adults, increased the legitimating of the medium. The 1980s saw a peak in the publication of French comics in Swedish, but the division of the market into separate sectors for children and adults (the latter including erotic content), commercial and underground, tended to perpetuate the marginal status of the medium. By the twenty-first century, the manga boom, together with a greater diversity of translated French comics, including, as from 2010, many authored by women, notably Marjane Satrapi, brought increased cultural visibility to the medium. There was a corresponding upsurge in the production of comics by Swedish women artists, and a significant reversal of the direction of traffic as many of their works were published in France in French translation. The positioning of Swedish artists within a feminist current outside the mainstream may be regarded as a by-passing strategy, which, along with the above-mentioned strategy of integrating mainstream works, can secure agency for a peripheral comics culture. Lindberg concludes by proposing that further development towards autonomy requires research into the role of mediating practices that facilitate border crossings.

In an interview with David Morgan, leading British political cartoonist Steve Bell discusses the art of the caricaturist. He compares the licence afforded to some eighteenth-century cartoonists with the greater policing of boundaries in the current mainstream press, and considers the relationship between ethical and political critique and the ridiculing of the physique of individuals, noting that his own technique is to turn politicians into characters with recurring quirks as a way of concretising complex themes and issues. He argues that comic writing should have greater cultural recognition, and reflects on the development of his own work towards economy of detail, on the effects of technical changes in production processes, and on the new media landscape.
He declares his admiration for artists who work in animation and talks about cartoonists who first sparked his interest in political caricature and who have influenced his style.

The common themes are, then, treated from different angles in each article. Altenberg presents an artist, Flix, who undermines the truth value of comics within his story world, through characters who express disdain for the medium, while using its caricatural resources to parody its most emblematic genre and to highlight some contemporary social issues. Ahrens maintains that the disqualification of comics from the mainstream has been concomitant with the development of its formal properties, including a propensity for caricature, which forces suspension of the question of truth or falsity and opens up questions about the validity of cultural knowledge. Lambert shows how the very familiarity of a mainstream comics genre closely associated with a reactionary discredited worldview can be exploited to call that worldview into question. Lindberg considers the field of comics production on an international level in terms of the unequal struggle between centre and periphery, in which the latter marks out some ground through the reception and exchange of translated works. Steve Bell, as a practitioner, relates his own work to a tradition of political caricature dating back to the eighteenth century.

The transnational theme is particularly prominent across all our articles: Altenberg discusses a German-language comics appropriation of the greatest of Spanish novels, Ahrens analyses an American-Italian collaboration, Lambert looks at a Congolese-French album that revisits the history of the Belgian colonial occupation of the Congo not as civilising mission but as trauma for the indigenous inhabitants, and Lindberg situates the development of a Swedish comics culture as an ongoing negotiation with a more established French-language production. And we should add that the opportunity to interview Steve Bell arose out of an exhibition curated by Pascal Dupuy at the Maison française d’Oxford, entitled From History Painting to Steve Bell’s Cartoons: Parodies of Napoleonic Art (1801–2019), at which the maestro himself gave a talk. We are also delighted by the multinational line-up of contributors to this issue, all of whom enable our journal to live up to its name.