

Reading Comics in Time

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Abstract

COMICS exist in time, not only as historical objects, but also through their reading, and it is the combination of these two aspects that this article addresses. I will start by analyzing a temporal paradox: reading comics seems to be timeless (fast, instantaneous, superficial: hardly “reading” in the noble sense of the word), yet at the same time it never stops (neither at an individual nor at a collective level). This paradox is something that can be framed in “cultural” terms, having to do with the fundamental problem (both a threat and an opportunity) of cultural memory and the possible conflict between transgenerational reading, transmission techniques, and shifting aesthetic categories.

Two Ways of Reading Time in Comics

CHANGE is the term that best summarizes our modern zeitgeist: fluidity, mobility, creative disruption, flexibility, hybridization, border-crossing, and countless other buzzwords are some of the many variations on the same idea of permanent (r)evolution that defines “the way we live now” (as Anthony Trollope’s novel already taught us many years ago). Comics are no exception to this rule.¹ Most of the time, however, this fundamental issue of change is examined in spatial terms and directly linked to questions of globalization and, more specifically, world literature. Comics have been fully integrated in the field of literature and are thus directly concerned by one of the major debates of contemporary literary scholarship, that of the “worlding” of reading and writing and, above all, distribution—world literature is in the first place a material problem of law and logistics (Domínguez). As a result of this interest, the framing of the concept of world literature has dramatically changed: the times of Goethe’s world literature (the universal heritage of mankind gathering the best of what has been said and thought in the great

¹ For reasons of clarity and simplicity, I will take the notion of comics here in its broadest and most common meaning, without going into questions of artistic and cultural value and putting between brackets recent debates on (desperately lowbrow) comic books versus (allegedly highbrow) graphic novels. For a general overview, see Baetens and Frey, *Graphic Novel*; for a critical discussion, see Pizzino, *Arresting Development*.

Western and non-Western languages) are over and we are now moving from the progressive opening of this major literature canon to “minor” languages and less traditional genres, to a more critical, post-colonial stance toward traditional hegemonomies and deeply rooted power relationships.² This also happens in the field of comic studies (see Schmitz-Emans). The classic triad of European *bande dessinée*, US-American *superhero comics*, and Japanese *manga*, which helped structure the new discipline during the first decades of its slowly emerging existence, has recently been seriously enlarged (Baetens and Frey, “Graphic Novel”) and is currently more and more criticized through the lens of social, sexual, ethnical, and other minority cultures (Aldama), on the one hand, and transnational approaches to comics, on the other (see Stein and Thon).

If change in comics can be seen as a form of radical *spatial* as well as cultural and ideological decentering, it is no less possible to study it from a different, *temporal* point of view. In the following pages, I will address more specifically this problem of changing in time. Two major dimensions come here to the fore. First, the fact that comics as material artefacts cannot be separated from the practice of reading, which is inevitably temporal. Although they are not an “isochronous” medium—that is, a medium where presentation time and reception time tend to coincide (see Marion)—, “non-isochronous” comics are time-bound in the sense that their reading involves issues of rhythm, fastness, slowness, and the like. Second, the fact that this reading is a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to the actual reading of a given work by a certain reader or a certain number of readers. The reading of comics can continue afterwards, or not, yet the interruption or suspension of a reading chain is obviously a temporal phenomenon as well. In addition, both aspects—the reading of comics *in itself* and the reading of comics *over time*—are variously linked: the way in which we read comics has an influence on how these successive readings occur or how they follow each other in time, and vice versa.

It is this cluster of temporal aspects of change that I want to foreground in this analysis. I will first examine the internal temporality of reading comics as such and second, the external relationship between time and transmission.

Reading Time as Lack and Excess

THAT reading is a temporal process may seem banal or self-evident. Yet many reading theories do not draw all the consequences from this elementary observation. As a matter of fact, the hegemonic way of reading, at least in a scholarly context of “scientific” reading, is that which only starts once the text has already been read, not that which focuses on the progressive exploration of the string of words, sentences, images, shots etc. that unfold before the viewer or

² See Brouillette for a political-economical critique of the “Unesco” approach.

reader and that he or she has to put together by trial and error (see Herman for a useful survey of storyworld theories). As convincingly summarized by Raphaël Baroni (*La Tension*; “Le récit”), most reading theories are based on the assumption that reading well is the *a posteriori evaluation* of a reading process that is actually finished: we analyze the work that lies behind us, not the work as we experience it when we are in the middle of it. Only a minority of theories emphasize what one might call *reading in action* (Charles; Phelan).

Obviously, both methods are necessary, and they complement each other in various ways. In the case of comics, however, it makes sense to put a strong emphasis on the less hegemonic approach, which is clearly more appropriate when it comes down to displaying some of the specific properties of the medium as well as its reception. Too strong a focus on *post factum* reading, which is always a form of rereading (Calinescu), may insist on what comics have in common with other media, such as narrative—an aspect that comics share with novels, narrative being a rather medium-insensitive layer of the work—or a stylized and often exaggerated drawing style, which comics share with caricatures, both having a cartoonish style. The latter has been powerfully demonstrated by the very first comics theoretician, Rodolphe Töpffer (see Groensteen, *M. Töpffer*; Gardner and Herman; Grennan).

When concentrating instead on the temporality of comics reading in action, it appears that the presence of time in comics is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, time is all over the place, on the other hand, readers can focus on quite different aspects.

Let us start by analyzing the side of the reading process characterized by a lack of time—that is, by the virtual fading out, if not erasure of time and temporality. Four aspects come here to the fore: scanning, immersion, serialization, and non-aging (as a theme), which I will present in the order they appear to the reader entering a comic. For clarity, I repeat here that by *comics* I am referring to the mainstream adventure strip, say, for instance *Tintin*; the recently institutionalized field of the graphic novel does not always follow the same lines.

First, the reading of a comic is generally fast paced (that is at least our stereotypical way of seeing it), and this has been the case from the beginnings of the medium. Not because this reading would be lazy or distracted or impatient—I will immediately return to this aspect—, but because it adopts the model of visual reading, a type of reading that rapidly scans images and tries to grasp their meaning in a single glance, something that images seem to allow us to do without major effort. Unlike what happens with words and sentences, which we must process in small blocks of letters (Dehaene) and whose cognitive processing is not always easy or straightforward (Schaeffer), with comics we may be under the impression that even a quick look provides us with enough information to continue our reading. Instead of having to examine step by step, first the signs and then their meaning, comics readers can practice a more tabular or global reading. They may think they see the whole picture (in the literal as well as metaphorical meaning of this expression) without having to examine its parts, and this impression is not only one of instant satisfaction but also of “saving time”. A comics panel, tier, page,

instalment, album, *can* be read at high speed, even in cases where the artist tries to slow down the pace.³

Second, the reading of a comic is also a reading “for the plot” (Brooks). We expect a story and therefore will be tempted—this is an understatement—to carry on, jumping to the next panel, tier, page. . . to know what comes afterwards. In this regard, comics are no different from conventional literature. This essential promise of a gripping story found in the mainstream adventure strip makes comics the perfect example of such reading for the plot, at the expense of other aspects, such as style. At the same time, this approach also enhances the *immersive* character of comics reading:⁴ character identification and questions of relatability reinforce the speeding-up of the reading pace. Here as well, the result of these cognitive and emotional mechanisms is a partial vanishing of time. Time does not disappear as such, obviously, but comics readers strongly want it to shrink so that they can get to the end of the story more quickly.

A third element with similar consequences is the longtime preference for the instalment publication format. Comics are often elaborated and then packaged as progressively distributed fragments of a larger whole to come. In this regard, we should not forget that the album format only became the dominant publication format in the late 1950s (Boillat and Revaz). Even immensely popular strips such as the long-running *Terry and the Pirates* serial (1934–73) were not reprinted in book format before the 1980s, while there already existed a radio serial in 1937, a film serial as well as a movie adaptation in 1940, and, finally, a TV serial in 1953. Comics were, and to a certain extent still are, mainly read in bits and pieces. Apart from the short gag strip, none of them were meant to be “closed”. The traditional cliffhanger technique of instalment comics and their “to be continued” rhetoric sturdily push the reader to forget about her or his present reading moment and to eagerly wait for the next instalment. The paradoxical character of comics time becomes here perfectly visible: the faster one reads, the more one erases the temporality of this reading but also the longer it takes before one can access the next instalment (and all of us certainly have delicious memories of the painful experience of such waiting for a long-desired continuation).

Fourth and last, this virtual absence of time—that is, of time going by during the reading process—is thematically reflected in the extra-temporal status of conventional comics characters. As Umberto Eco has taught us, comics heroes tend not to age or die. (Exceptions such as Frank King’s *Gasoline Alley* do not have superheroes, but just ordinary people, and even here their aging avoids their moment of death.) This decidedly non-realistic feature of comics should not be interpreted as a symptom of the medium’s childishness or its guilty complicity with escapist entertainment. It is above all one more aspect of the relative absence of time that is part of the medium’s DNA.

³ For a discussion of the tension between these mechanisms of slowing down in the work of Chris Ware, Lewis Trondheim, and Adrian Tomine, and the “impatience” of certain readers, see Schneider.

⁴ For a critical discussion, see Pizzino, “Doctor”.

At a different level, the apparent timelessness of the reading of comics can be linked with the *longue histoire* fixity of the medium's formal structure—namely, the layout *grid*, a structure that has proven amazingly stable over more or less one century, between the late nineteenth century (appearance of the US-American newspaper strips) and the 1980s (emergence of new layout formats in the wake of the graphic novel hype). This exceptional stability, compared to other media such as cinema (Smolderen), undoubtedly supports the easy-going aspect of much comics reading, whose basic rules seem to be already known by young beginning readers from the very start. Contrary to other types of books or print media, and thanks to the widespread and longtime use of page grids, comics apparently do not have cognitive thresholds.⁵ This formal stability has also an institutional complement: the longtime absence of any special awareness of the medium's history, a typical feature of non-institutionalized popular media formats. It is no coincidence at all that the current superfast integration of comics in the academic agenda translates into an explosion of archival research.

As already mentioned, lack of time can almost immediately morph into its opposite, excess of time. In many cases, both elements are just two sides of the same coin. Immersive reading for the plot is voracious reading, while fragmented and serialized reading is endless reading. Yet voracity and open-endedness are temporal characteristics that all readers are perfectly conscious of—and which they fully enjoy: slowness is boring, reaching the end is disappointing, for if the story is great, we want it to continue for ever and ever (or to read it over again and again).

There is much more, however. Excess is not only induced by speed and the tickling effects of impatient waiting. It also results from the essentially repetitive character of comics reading itself. Contrary to the quasi-norm of the single reading of works of fiction at an adult age, when we only reread by mistake (“Oh, I had forgotten that I had already read this before!”), comics readers, young and old alike, often return to their favourites, rereading them with the same pleasure and excitement as at the moment of the initial encounter. The persistence of such pleasure and suspense, even in spite of the fact that one already knows the story, is striking. It is not difficult to understand why comics readers tend not to care too much about spoilers: comics capitalize on archetypical stories and readers are rarely surprised by the way these narratives unfold. Just as many readers seem to know how to read comics even before having read one, most of them also know the tricks of the trade when it comes down to the rules of comics storytelling.

Regarding repetition, we can distinguish three different types. In addition to the rereading of the same comic sketched in the previous paragraph, there is the deeply rooted practice of transgenerational reading, which goes beyond the simultaneous intergenerational sharing of comics by readers between 7 and 77 years (to echo the marketing slogan of the Tintin books). Comics are material objects that are handed down from one generation to the next. The already mentioned persistence of the grid prevents older comics from being perceived as

⁵ In practice they do, of course, even if we are not always aware of them (see Cohn).

such, since their basic formal features remain unchanged over time. This second type of repetition is another aspect that underscores the temporal excess of comics reading: the comics medium is an object as well as a practice that, regardless of its content and by the virtue of its shared use, travels through time.

A third and final kind of repetition occurs in the form of “remembered reading”, currently a hot topic in comics studies (see Ahmed and Crucifix), though in a much stronger form than what Victor Burgin has studied in the world of movies. For Burgin, the notion of the *remembered film* refers to the creative gap between what we actually remember (a certain picture that functions as the summary of a larger scene) and what we are capable of making it when confronted with the return of certain haunting images or sequences triggering new stories (and in this case, the scene that we rebuild via the remembered picture does not necessarily match the actual scene of the movie). In the case of comics, which are generally more readily available than movies, that gap may be less important; but what doesn’t change is the creative impulse that sparks from our memories, often giving a nostalgic twist to our imagination. Unlike what happens with movies, our habitual rereading of comics prevents us from forgetting the story. What we recompose in our minds, then, is less the story itself than a specific atmosphere, whose nostalgic overtones grow stronger with each new reading. In other words, what we want to remember is not the story, for there is no need to do so, but our past experiences of it. With every reading we try to go back to the experience of our first encounter, which inevitably becomes strongly idealized. Rereading comics is thus also an attempt to link up with a lingering yet irremediably lost joy. And what applies to rereading comics probably applies to first readings at a later age as well: there is something fundamentally nostalgic about comics as a gateway to our past.⁶

All these forms of repetition—rereading, transgenerationality, nostalgia—burden comics with an excess of time. This excess does not overrule the various forms of lack of time, but it contributes to the specific tension that defines the temporality of reading comics. Similar tensions can be observed as well at the broader level of the scholarly readings that are now rapidly being introduced in academic circles. On the one hand, the new-found legitimacy of comics studies has given birth to important archival research, which generally invests a posteriori reading methods borrowed from literary studies, mainly narratology. On the other hand, the hegemony of these methods is also challenged by a new attention to reading as an ongoing process, thus reestablishing the centrality of reading as a living performance.

From Reading to Transmission

IT cannot suffice, however, to limit the analysis of comics reading to the actual reading of specific works. One also must consider the larger mechanisms that organize cultural transmission in general. Reading comics is a profoundly cultural process, which needs a closer analysis of how the notions of culture and

⁶ On the importance of nostalgia in comics culture, see Baetens and Frey, *The Graphic Novel*.

transmission (the latter being no less a form of migration than the distribution of goods in the global market) are deeply intertwined.

In his work on the semiotics of culture, Yuri Lotman, founder of the Tartu School, defines culture in terms of *non-hereditary*, that is, non-biological *memory* (Lotman). The static and dynamic dimensions cannot be separated: culture on the one hand and transmission on the other hand largely overlap. No culture without transmission. Only what is considered culturally valuable can be the object of transmission. Yet the success or failure of transmission and thus the building of a collectively shared and supported culture does not only depend on the intrinsic quality of what is labeled as cultural. At least as important are the mechanisms that govern this process, be it positively (encouraging transmission) or negatively (blocking transmission). Three perspectives, all strongly intertwined and complementary, come here to the fore: institutional, mediological, and aesthetic. All three define certain types of thresholds—cultural gatekeeping, if one prefers—, but they also designate with precision the possible routes of efficient transmission.

From an institutional perspective, the gatekeepers are diverse: *educational* (there can be no cultural canon without inclusion in a mass-education curriculum: the canon is what is being taught at school), *political* (an aspect that touches on censorship or propaganda, but also on the defense of cultural diversity, like in the case of the French “cultural exception”), *industrial* (cultural industries only release what they believe profitable in the short run, and in certain circumstances, for instance in a period of paper shortage, one cannot avoid making draconic choices), or *financial*, not on the supply side but on the demand side (facing issues of cultural transmission, one should always ask whether the members of a given community have access to the cultural offer—in other words, whether the cultural goods are affordable or not).

As far as comics are concerned, the practical translation of these general principles is quite simple. One can surely notice important shifts in terms of education and politics, leading to a strong and probably lasting cultural legitimization of a medium that has been despised if not simply ignored for many years. The industrial transmedia franchising of comics, which has become systematic in our days, is anything but a new phenomenon. However, the enlarged acceptance of comics as a culturally valuable medium reinforces the impact of this cross-fertilizing policy. Superhero comic books, which seemed to run out of steam in the 1980s, have been saved and eventually revamped by a new wave of Hollywood adaptations. (These blockbuster productions are very different from the B-movie style serials of the 1930s and '40s.) Financially speaking, at least from the consumers' perspective, the global picture is less bright. Comics have become relatively expensive, graphic novels are now even discouragingly posh in quite a few cases, and copyright restrictions hinder the smooth circulation of popular material in our modern participation culture and fandom culture. (Anyone who has ever tried to use a *Tintin* vignette to illustrate an article will know what I'm talking about. . .) In combination with the almost complete disappearance of comic strips from newspapers, which allowed children to read comics for free (provided, of course, their parents bought

the daily paper), these transformations of the comics mediascape explain the drop in popularity. Comics are everywhere, but where are the (new) readers?⁷

The most serious obstacle to the transmission of comics, however, comes from the fact that most works, old or new, resist cheap reprints in pocket book format, and even digitization has not helped overcome that problem (see Baroni, et al.). The miniaturization of original formats engenders insuperable readability problems, whereas changes to the page layout prove, in most cases, either technically impossible (how do you split a circular panel in the middle of an original double-spread, for example?) or aesthetically unsatisfactory (separating the upper and lower half of a page, for instance, may produce a visual disaster). Since a large majority of comics authors and readers remain attached to print, to put it mildly, the absence of cheap reissues within a medium that has always had strong ties with *pulp* culture, provokes serious complications. Since digitization is not a panacea,⁸ the absence of cheap alternatives to increasingly expensive trade publications is now a real brain teaser. Comics have been accepted by all kinds of institutional gatekeepers, yet the actual dissemination and purchase of the material are no longer what they used to be.

The example of the impossible pocket revolution brings us to a second type of transmission threshold, which has to do with the specific mediality of comics. Over the course of the last two centuries at least, our culture has become a media culture, more precisely a mass media culture. There are simply no works that use no medium, even die-hard conceptual works of art need spoken or written language—, yet the shift to industrial publication techniques and strategies in the 1820s and '30s, and the opportunities as well as pitfalls resulting from it need special attention. Publishing has become faster, easier, cheaper, but its massification has also created new barriers in the transmission process, such as overproduction and programmed obsolescence.⁹

There is no single or simple way to overcome these barriers. On the one hand, mass culture needs multiplication. As Dominique Kalifa argues in his reference work on popular media culture, in a mass culture environment cultural artefacts can only survive if they are standardized, serialized, adapted or transmedialized—and preferably all this at the same time. Comics are a textbook example of a medium that has successfully navigated these conditions for survival. On the other hand, however, only certain types of works can survive in the long run. The findings of a fascinating article by Jean de Guardia on the posterity of “classic” literature—his main example is seventeenth-century French playwright Molière—can easily be transferred to the field of comics. As claimed by de Guardia, there exist certain procedures, known and used by authors as well as readers, that function as “techniques of duration”.¹⁰ Roughly speaking, these techniques can

⁷ For a discussion of the medium's future, see Groensteen, *La bande dessinée*.

⁸ See Baudry for a discussion of the hits and misses of digital comics.

⁹ Although not a new concern, overproduction is a huge problem in countries with a strong comics production such as France (see Ciment et al.).

¹⁰ In cultural Darwinist terms, one might call them *basic tools of cultural survival*, but this is not the

be summarized in the following way. In order to last, a work must be *quotable* (it should be possible to extract shorter fragments that can be exploited independently), *available* for reuse (the selected fragments must have a rather open meaning, allowing their appropriation by different audiences in different contexts), and sufficiently *general* (a work must be capable of circulating interculturally and detaching itself from its original setting without losing its appeal to the reader).

Comics meet these conditions for long-term survival perfectly, as shown by the almost limitless migration of comic icons such as Superman or Tintin, the former less prominently available on the European continent, the latter less known in the USA.¹¹ Fragments of comics can be taken out of their initial publication format without difficulty. Their meanings are open to a wide range of interpretations, the abundance of parodies being a symptom of such openness. And the appeal of the medium and many of its heroes appears to be universal. Nevertheless, the friction between “too much” (publication overkill) and “too little” (the selection of the culturally valuable units) is a reality, and in this conflict, culture is not necessarily victorious. It is not clear for instance whether the successful merchandising universe behind Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* is not killing the comic strip itself.¹² What is Charlie Brown *today* if not a marketing vehicle? Nor is it clear whether the most valued of the new masterpieces—one may think here of the works by Chris Ware—will not suffer from their refusal to strictly follow the industrial dos and don’ts of mass media publishing. Comic authors may be seduced by other types of artistic production, that of the museum or the gallery circuit for instance (Beaty; Baetens and Frey, “Comics Culture”), but here the transmission principles are based on a logic of scarcity and conspicuous consumption, which may prove incompatible with the basics of comics culture.

The third category of gatekeeping structures is properly aesthetic. For many centuries, our cultural taste has been informed by the sometimes converging, sometimes conflicting combination of two chief values: the classic criterion of *beauty* (via emulation of the canon) and the modern criterion of *novelty* (via originality and the subsequent rejection of the canon). The outcome of this century-old history has been the steadily growing influence of the latter criterion, which translates into the current hegemony of the avant-garde, although this manifests itself more powerfully in the field of visual culture than in that of literature. It should, however, not come as a surprise that the cultural rise of comics has originated on the literary side of the spectrum, where the input of this kind of popular culture was seen as a welcome refreshment after the exhaustion of some forms of high modernism. Comics were, if one prefers, an innovative and aesthetically pleasing answer to the dead end of certain exaggeratedly abstract literary experiments.

ideological framework of de Guardia’s article.

¹¹ It is worth pointing out, however, that the presence of Superman in French popular culture is definitely rising, which is not really the case of Tintin in the USA, despite the 2011 movie adaptation by Steven Spielberg.

¹² See Manouach for a critical reflection on the drift of copyright and ownership questions in the digital age.

In postmodern times, however, the position of both beauty and innovation has been dramatically challenged. There has been a reinforced awareness of the fact that despite our culture continuing to pay lip service to the dual entity of beauty (or ugliness, that doesn't make any real difference) and novelty (or its opposite of conceptual and "uncreative" writing, see Goldsmith), this framework is no longer working today. A key theoretical reflection in this regard is the work by Sianne Ngai (*Ugly Feelings; Our Aesthetic Categories*). A brilliant representative of critical theory, Ngai makes a plea to broaden the intellectual and terminological toolkit of our contemporary ways of experiencing culture, first by criticizing the limits of beauty and innovation, second by making room for new concepts such as the *zany*, the *cute*, and the *interesting*.¹³ What makes Ngai's argumentation so interesting for comics is the fact that she does not address high or elite culture, but mass culture.¹⁴ Ngai includes the material (economic) and ideological (cultural) context of the production and reception of mass media works into her analysis, stressing the pressure of the neoliberal cultural industry, which forces producers and consumers alike to try to turn everything into profit, *at any time*, relentlessly. Hence the uselessness of dichotomies such as *beautiful* versus *ugly* or *old* versus *new* and the emergence of new categories that are more appropriate to address that pressure.

First, the *zany*: we want to see that the makers have surpassed themselves to create their work, and we enjoy that effort while criticizing authors who refrain from it, relying on their talent more than on their work, the difference being that the former cannot be quantified while the latter can. Second, the *cute*: we like objects that may be aesthetically weak or silly but that shamelessly exploit our emotions and affections. By showing appreciation for the *cute*, we can congratulate ourselves because we are the ones that produce meaning and value: facing the *cute*, we are both weak, since we give value to something that is worthless, and powerful, since we are the source of the value nevertheless ascribed to *cute* objects. And third, the *interesting*: a category that refers to anything that succeeds in making us talk about it, even if we don't have anything else to say than that it is "interesting". This hollow, noncommittal judgment keeps the conversation going and helps us be or become "relational", another buzz word of our times; the *interesting*, in other words, is a quality that stimulates socializing and networking. Comics, once again, are excellent candidates for the application of these new categories, with their high speed (the *zany*), their cartoonish style (the *cute*) and their suitability to become the topic of conversation (the *interesting*). The transmission of comics may have been a difficult task in the context of beauty and originality; it becomes almost trivial in our postmodern times of the *zany*, the *cute*, and the *interesting*, which put a stronger emphasis on the "here and now" and tend to discard the building of an archive.

¹³ Brian Glavey, among others, has expanded on this work, adding other categories, such as the *relatable*.

¹⁴ While taking Theodor Adorno as her starting point, Ngai's take on the cultural *industries* is more nuanced and less negative than the former's take on the cultural *industry*.

Migration and Time

As a conclusion, let us repeat that the issue of comics and migration cannot be exclusively framed in spatial or mediological terms. Admittedly, the geographical spread of comics, both pushed and delayed or even blocked along commercial and ideological fault lines, is a vital aspect of the medium's migration. (By comparison, linguistic fault lines are just details: although far from easy, translating comics is never a real obstacle.) It would be equally absurd to deny that the transfer of comics to other media—including radio shows, movies, and video games—plays a key role in the dissemination of the medium. However, putting too strong an emphasis on the spatial and mediological dimensions of comics migration might blind us to what is at least as significant—namely, the temporal migration of the medium.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, the issue of temporality is double-faced: internal and external. The former point of view draws attention to the fact that time and temporality are not elements that are just added to comics at the moment of their reception, but vital parts of the medium itself, which presents a strange but challenging mix of excess and lack, always struggling to strike the right balance between too little and too much. The latter point of view situates comics in a larger cultural context, taking as its point of departure the intermingling of culture (as a set of collectively shared and valued objects and practices) and transmission (as the process of ensuring comics' cultural sustainability). The question of transmission is not a matter of excess and lack, but of the interplay of a certain number of gatekeeping instances and levels: blocking as well as filtering and enhancing cultural items that compete for place and time in the culture to come. Internal and external aspects of time and temporality are not simply juxtaposed, they are strongly interconnected. The concrete treatment of excess and lack depends on the failure or success of transmission mechanisms. This does not necessarily happen at the level of the initial reading of a comic; rather, since reading comics is inextricably linked with forms of rereading, the relationship between reading and transmission is central in any living contact with the medium. And as we have seen, comics are never dead objects; they are the source material of passionate performances. Conversely, transmission processes—transgenerational reading, institutional embedding, and shifting aesthetic categories—are not imposed upon the medium from the outside; they are triggered, or discarded, as a side-effect, if one prefers, of what happens at the very moment of the act of reading. Comics definitely migrate across borders, but these borders are temporal as much as geographical.

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