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A Year in the Life of a Finnish Comics Researcher: A Combined Conference Report

Essi Varis

Let us dispel a certain misconception that might be embarrassingly easy to form: researching comics is *not* the easiest job in the world. While it does involve a delightful amount of reading and raving about graphic novels, and the conference culture tends to be more brotherly and relaxed than in the older, more established fields, resources – such as experts, events and libraries dedicated to sequential art – are few and far between. Remarkably, 2016 did finally see the birth of an international Comics Studies Society, but finding suitable academic forums for specialized comics research still requires extra effort, particularly if one is based in a small, peripheral country like Finland, where there resides only about a dozen graduate or post-doctoral level comics scholars, scattered in different universities and disciplines. However, if one is prepared to go that extra mile from the subtropical spring of New Orleans to the freshly frozen Arctic Circle, one can, in fact, pack a very full year. In addition to attending the two small regular events my comics-researching colleagues organized in Finland, I toured comics panels in literary and cultural studies conferences as well as widened my horizons in seminars about transmedia and geek culture.

Academic Underbellies of Finnish Comic Festivals

Since the biannual gatherings of the NNCORE, the Nordic Network for Comics Research, were on hiatus this year, there was no missing the two Finnish comics festivals that include modest professional sections: *Tampere kuplii* festival goes academic every spring, and Oulu comics festival always calls together an *Arctic Comics* seminar in late autumn. Both usually attract a small but mixed crowd of researchers, artists and hobbyists, which makes them ideal venues for casual but invested discussions on the latest comics and research findings.

Tampere Kuplii Goes Academic seminar, which has opened the annual Tampere comics festival weekend since 2007, took place routinely in Tampere University Library on March 18. The special highlight of the seminar has always been the Comics Finlandia award ceremony: a celebrity judge – someone accomplished in another field of art – declares his or her favorite from a small hall of fame, which a jury of experts has distilled from the mass of comics published in Finland during the previous year. This time, actress Heli Sutela handed the prize to Kati Närhi, for her equally quirky and murky *Seitsemäs vieras* (“The Seventh Guest”). It is the final part of a sympathetic trilogy that follows the formative years of a curious girl called Agnes and echoes Edward Gorey’s legacy to the comics scene.

The academic talks that followed tracked the ever more complex political and transmedial trajectories of comic book characters; most speakers demonstrated how various genres of graphic narration use characters to embody, parody or comment on current affairs. Reeta Kangas (University of Turku) discussed the animal iconography of Russian political cartoons, Laura Antola

(University of Turku) the surprisingly liberal values of contemporary superhero comics, and Jonne Lehto (University of Tampere) the anarchistic, critical quality that Charlie Christensen's Arne Anka gains from its overt contrast to Disney's Donald Duck. Tanja Välisalo (University of Jyväskylä), on the other hand, drew the discussion towards identity politics with her presentation about the virtual avatars people create for themselves in several fandoms. It was concluded that characters can serve as powerful mouthpieces and negotiation tools for personal and shared ideologies alike, and therefore, the boundaries between caricatures, characters and avatars should be considered quite flexible.

Arctic Comics seminar, staged in the brand new comics section of the beautiful city library of Oulu on November 4, facilitated another topical discussion under the theme "Comics and Science". The art director of the festival, Harri Filppa (University of Lapland) has roused polarized opinions with his Master's thesis, which was written and published completely in sequential art format in 2007. While comics' potential for expressing abstract and even academic ideas have been debated ever since Scott McCloud's seminal *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993), Nick Sousanis' widely publicized doctoral dissertation, *The Unflattening* (2015), has heated the topic again. Thus, much of the seminar's general discussion focused on comics' role in academia: even though they have been readily accepted as a means of popularization, could thinking and explicating scientific matters through combinations of texts and images ever be considered a valid method of research? Filppa and Timo Kontinen (Novia University of Applied Sciences and Arts), who have both included comics in their MA theses, agreed that the multimodality of the format clearly allows a wider range of concepts and expressions than written word alone. Yet, the cultural prejudices remain strong: the image content is immediately dismissed as too subjective and inaccurate by most academics – as if the same flaws were not inherent in language.

The keynote presentation was given by Finland's official "Ducktor" Katja Kontturi (University of Jyväskylä), whose PhD dissertation (2013) on Don Rosa's *Donald Duck* comics also stretched the boundaries of viable research topics in Finnish academia. As many times before, she indicated the popularity as well as the political and aesthetic depth of comics – even those regarded as disposable or aimed at children – thus proving them well worth academic consideration. She also introduced her tentative model for teaching and analyzing comics systematically. A few other presentations, on the other hand, applied other existing theories and models to other selected works: Jyrki Korpua (University of Oulu) gave the audience an efficient tour to the mythopoetics of Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* (1989–1996), while Aino-Kaisa Koistinen (University of Jyväskylä) and myself employed transmedia theories in order to examine the continuous yet dissimilar protagonists of Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Gaydos' *Alias* (2001–2004) and the new *Jessica Jones* Netflix series (2015–).

Unlike *Tampere kuplii Goes Academic*, *Arctic Comics* has declared English as its primary working language, in hopes of promoting comics-related collaboration across Northern Europe. This year, the roster included only one foreign guest, Øyvind Lauvdahl, who speculated that Norwegian comics are currently characterized by a "temporal disjoint". As opposed to the Swedish scene that seems to foster highly topical, political comics at the moment, Norwegian comics reach towards the past and the future.

In the Gutters of Wider Cultural Landscapes

Even though the two one-day seminars remained the only comics-centered events I could attend this year, I managed to find panels dedicated to graphic narratives in the folds of two much bigger conferences. Leena Romu (University of Tampere) and Ralf Kauranen (University of Turku) had decided to reserve more space for comics studies in the annual conference of the Finnish Literary Research Society by calling for presentations about the ethics and politics of – or in – graphic

storytelling. The theme complied with the conference's overall headline, "Ethics, Aesthetics and Politics", which brought a grand total of 50 presenters to the former capital of Finland, where Åbo Akademi and the University of Turku co-hosted the event on May 19–20.

The Literary Research Society has welcomed presentations about comics to its conferences in previous years as well, but they have rarely piqued much interest. Therefore, centralizing all the comics scholars explicitly in the same sessions was a practical solution: we still could not fill a very large room but those who were present were especially eager to discuss the topics at hand. Two local undergraduate students, Anna Vuorinne and Aura Nikkilä, contemplated the ethical implications of documentary comics and comics journalism, while the thematic strand of aesthetics was picked up by Oskari Rantala (University of Jyväskylä) and myself – although in strong correlation with ethics and politics. Rantala demonstrated that adapting comics into films involves not only artistic but also ideological decisions, and I argued that the layers of metalepses in Mike Carey and Peter Gross's *The Unwritten* (2010–2015) destabilize the ontology of its fictional characters to the point where their aesthetics become indistinguishable from their ethics. In other words, editing fiction becomes an act of violence. Since comics rarely hide their "made", artificial quality, different acts and methods of making them were considered from various angles throughout the double panel: when are lines of a comic fluid or delineating, subjective or objective, individuating or typifying? Finally, Katja Kontturi and Joel Kuortti (University of Turku) explored how comics are used to construct Finnish and Indian national identities, respectively.

Traveling to New Orleans on April 28–30, for the annual conference of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Studies, had, however, already allowed me to zoom out from the Finnish comics research scene for a little bit. Incidentally, *SASS 2016* had included a very similar, modestly attended but lively doublepanel on "Nordic Comics". There, the tentative conclusion had been that many of the qualities that resurfaced in the Finnish Literary Research Society's conference might be especially prominent in Northern European comics. Although the few attending scholars – representing various Swedish, Finnish, Canadian and American universities – might have been biased on the matter, we identified strong autobiographic, feminist and medially inventive movements in the Nordic graphic novel scenes. That is to say, Nordic comics appear to be exceptionally aware of their ethics, aesthetics and politics. Jens Mondrad (University of British Columbia) went so far as to call autobiographical graphic novel "the quintessential Nordic comic". Andreas Hedberg (Uppsala University) and Margareta Wallin-Victorin (University of Göteborg) added that Swedish comics are currently dominated by satirical leftist and autobiographical female voices. My and Clarence Sheffield's (Rochester Institute of Technology) presentations, for their part, highlighted the inventive methods of narration, characterization and expression in various Finnish comics and Steffen Kverneland's widely acclaimed graphic novel *Munch* (2013).

Granted, the honest, topical and unglamorous tones of our target texts did feel out of place in the country of haunted Creole houses, plantations surrounded by ancient oaks, and palm trees dripping with glittering Mardi Gras beads.

Branching out to Other Media

Of course, one does not always need to wait for an invitation. If the aim is to grow comics studies as a discipline, it might be better to go where no comics scholar has gone before. What is more, preying on the fringes of neighboring or intersecting fields often proves especially educational and inspiring.

Transmediations! Communication across Media Borders seminar, held in Linnaeus University of Växjö on October 12–15, was certainly a case in point. The final version of the programme included only one presentation that addressed comics directly: Björn Hochschild (Free University of Berlin) indicated intriguing analogies between current superhero universes and

baroque aesthetics. According to him, the labyrinthine structures, the dissolved medial frames and the knowledgeable elites of the 17th century are echoed in the nonlinear network structures, in the impossibilities of retcons, and in the active fan cultures that dominate the storyworlds of Western comics today. Indeed, as companies like Marvel and DC expand their character franchises across more and more media platforms, and as well-known comics artists continue to remix literary classics, few comics researchers can afford to be just comics researchers.

For better or for worse, transmedial storyworlds seem to be gaining popularity both among fans and in academic discussion. Furthermore, it can often be linked with another growing popular cultural phenomenon: mainstream's interest in the so-called "geek culture". As it happens, University of Jyväskylä put itself on the nerd world map with two conferences this year. The sixth national fandom research conference, organized on March 3–4 under the title *Nörttikulttuurin nousu* ("Rise of the Geek Culture"), was already reported thoroughly in the previous issue. However, many of its topics were resurrected again six months later, when *Uses of Fantasy in Changing Media Landscape* conference lured a host of reception and storyworld experts to Jyväskylä. One of the presenters, Oskari Rantala, was quick to remind the audience that "comics is the most fantastical medium", and many of the points made by the international keynote speakers Martin Barker (Aberystwyth University) and Susana Tosca (IT University of Copenhagen) would indeed apply to comics as well. All in all, many of the transmedial storyworlds currently in vogue are speculative in nature and employ some forms of graphic storytelling, which means that comics and fantasy continue to intertwine in ever new fascinating ways.

For the same reasons, the 75th Worldcon – which will take place in Helsinki on August 9–13, 2017 – is sure to have much to offer to comics researchers, even if the world's largest science fiction convention is known to lean rather heavily towards literary culture. The academic track will be honoring the centennial of Viktor Shklovsky's influential coinage with the theme "100 Years of Estrangement". NNCORE's upcoming seminar, on the other hand, is likely to put a very different spin on sequential speculation with its theme "Comics and Memory". It is set to take place at the apex on Belgian summer, on April 20–21, in the University of Ghent. Unfortunately, the CFP's for both events have already reached their deadlines, but that should not stop anyone from putting an eye and an ear out.

To be sure, specializing in a small field in a small country has always required a special brand of agility. At the same time, however, the ongoing changes in medial environments seem to encourage ever more radical movement between theoretical and artistic contexts. If the aforementioned seminars serve as reasonably reliable trend barometers, the ties between comics and speculative fiction are strengthening rather than weakening. What is more, the various political media discussions and the formation of transmedia theory are creating a clear demand for comics expertise.