Reading children in comics: a sociohistorical mapping

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Abstract

This article seeks to map a social history through examining children and 'childish' or child-like drawing styles, and hence the presence of children, in comics. Traced across different print formats, this history reflects the changing readership of different kinds of comics, ranging from the mixed, primarily adult readership of newspaper comics, the young readers of comics albums and magazines, and the mature readers of contemporary book-length comics or graphic novels. Unfolding through a changing matrix of affects incarnated by comics children, this social history shows how different kinds of power relationships between adults and children are articulated in the comics discussed. The carnivalesque liberty and laughter of early newspaper comics contrasts with the nostalgic gaze towards childhood imbuing many graphic novels that cater to a mature readership. Unfolding across a select corpus of key comics formats, this sociohistorical reading of comics children is channeled through affects and power struggles.

Keywords

comics, childishness; childness; social history; power; affect

I'm speaking of the injustice of being the small one, of being tied to their dull lives – the lives of the big ones […] How many Sunday afternoons with my Sunday clothes buttoned to my chin, did I long to be an Indian [sic] on the plains, to ride about on my great spotted pony and smoke a pipe at the campfire and stick my tomahawk into the head of some enemy brave? (Tuten 2009, 53)

The above quote comes from a novel based on the world famous *Tintin* comics[1] drawn by Hergé (and, later, his studio). Tuten's novel does what Hergé's comics carefully sidestepped: give Tintin a specific age, thrust him into a turbulent adolescence and force him to grow up. In making Tintin face the specter of adulthood, the novel indirectly draws out the elements destined for elimination as childhood uncomfortably meanders into adulthood: Tuten's Tintin indulges in romance and a crime that results in a murder. His loyal canine companion, Snowy, is sent away at the end of the novel, confirming a trope in child–animal relationships where the animal serves as a companion for the child but not the adult the child transforms into, usually because its role of socializing the child has become redundant (see Tribunella 2004). Tintin's above words to Clavdia Chauchat, a much older femme fatale, who hails from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, reveal two inter- connected issues that are inevitably recurrent in comics starring children: agency and child–adult power relations. Tintin's dream is one of liberty, free of suffocating Sunday clothes, free to act like an adult.

In focusing on these two interconnected issues of power and liberty accorded to children, this article constructs a social history through reading children in different kinds of comics, across for- mats (newspaper strips, comics albums, graphic novels), time periods (the late nineteenth century, the 1930s and our present era) and cultures (American and British, French and Belgian). In taking the figure of the child as my point of departure (see Philo 2016; Burman 2019), I am interested in how child–adult power relations are articulated in comics targeting different kinds of readers and how they generate different kinds of affects. I also explore how childishness and childness, especially the interaction between adult and child (Hollindale 1997, 49), figure in comics. Enacting different degrees of conformity to social expectations, comics children reflect, in a manner laden with affects ranging from nostalgia to amusement, contemporaneous values and norms, desires and anxieties. Chris Philo reminds us that for Theodor Adorno, 'marginal' figures such as children, clowns and animals 'intruded as a means […] to glimpse alternative ways of existing, […] different forms of social relations, apart from the "big structures"' (Philo 2018, 456).

The prism of childhood, as defined by Hanne Warming in her introduction to this special issue, can offer a fresh perspective on social and historical changes impacting the distinctive contexts of comics publications. This social history constructed through comics children articulates itself via power relations and affects that change over time, across formats and intended readerships. I first highlight how the 'flatness' of serial comics characters encourages a particular kind of reader identification. In considering child–adult power relationships, I engage with the concepts of child- ness (Hollindale 1997), children as representations of

(adult) interiority (Steedman 1995) and the nostalgization of children and childhood (Nodelman 2008, 191–194). For the discussion of affects tied to joy and amusement I turn to concepts of the carnivalesque and its reverberations in children's laughter (Feuerhahn 1998).

I begin with popular comics characters, such as the Yellow Kid and Tintin to show how children in comics have recounted specific social histories laden with affect. The focus on two extremely successful, iconic child characters from, respectively, late-nineteenth-century America and early to mid-twentieth century Europe are unique sources of insight into contexts experiencing rapid change. I then briefly turn to recent graphic novels for adult readers such as *It's a Bird … , Spiral Cage* and *Mother Come Home,* which offer images of children that activate familiar, recurrent characteristics associated with childhood, such as the 'childish' imagination, and represent childhood as a transitory phase into adulthood. All three graphic novels are either autobiographical or autofictional and all three turn to child versions of the protagonists as points of departure for their stories that revolve around themes such as mourning or physical and psychological illness.

My understanding of social history is based on the Raphael Samuel's emphasis on 'real' life and 'ordinary' people, the 'human face of the past' (Samuel 1985). Popular media such as comics can provide crucial insights into the concerns of their contexts. Comics are also social media in the sense that they inspire specific social practices, ranging from comics reading to the creation of fan communities. Most importantly, comics breathe with their times and with their readers. They accompany their readers, fulfilling the very modern, human need for distraction. They can therefore provide clues to what was important to readers, what spoke to them and what moved them at a particular historical moment.

This is comparable to the kind of cultural history introduced by Raymond Williams in his aim to delineate the 'structures of feeling' attached to lived experience and expressed through popular culture (Williams 1977, 128–212). Although criticized, especially because of its vague- ness and the uncomfortable combination of structure with feeling (see Eagleton 1976), this attempt to capture 'meanings and values as they are lived and felt' through examining the conventions of representation in cultural products, seems particularly appropriate for studying the figure of the child, which embodies and triggers a range of affects (Williams 1977, 132).These affects are tied to individual childhoods and family life experiences (and memories thereof) as well as abstract conceptualizations of childhood. Notably, traditional members of the family, especially parents, are often only marginally present in most comics starring children; such comics offer alternative constructions of families as in the case of Snowy and later Captain Haddock for Tintin, or the changing constellations of street urchins and stray animals for Richard Outcault's highly successful newspaper comics character, the Yellow Kid.

The Yellow Kid: sociopolitical realities refracted through a comic strip

According to Richard C. Harvey: 'Richard Outcault may not have invented the newspaper comic strip, but he created a character that established comics in newspapers by demonstrating convincingly the commercial appeal of comics, both for selling newspapers and for merchandising, thereby paving the way for the artform's future development' (Harvey 2016). The drive to sell is almost inscribed in the genes of comics characters. And comics children are no exception since they acti-vate the affective connotations tied to their childishness into the service of selling. The Yellow Kid was immensely successful in this respect. In contrast to what one might assume given the character's young age, the Yellow Kid endorsed everyday products that were not exclusively tied to children, a practice that shows that the Kid was not being read by children but by adults, much in the vein of other illustrated, satirical supplements of the time, such as, in New York, *Puck, Judge* and *Life* (Harvey 2016).

The genre of kid strips does not always target a child readership (Gordon 2016; Dolle-Weinkauff 2017, 238). Correspondingly, the readership of *The Yellow Kid* and later *The Katzenjammer Kids* and even *Little Nemo* was a mixed one, comprising both adults and children (Saguisag 2018, 15). Charles Hatfield suggests that newspaper strips such as *Peanuts* exemplify cross-writing that com- bines adult and child perspectives (Hatfield 2011, 169). That the Kid was speaking to older readers was also a reason for the socially and politically charged themes he evokes. As Lara Saguisag explains, 'images of children in comics drew and redrew lines, demonstrating the rigidity and permeability of social boundaries, the intertwinings of hegemony and counterhegemony' (Saguisag 2018, 23).

The Yellow Kid captures concerns that interweave the political (American identity articulated through the contrast with the old continent) and the social (the deplorable conditions in which urban, poor, immigrant Americans were living in). A prematurely bald, barefooted child of Irish immigrants, living in a New York tenement building, wearing a bright yellow nightshirt which often bares his words in a distinctively oral English, the Kid draws his readers into scenes in the fictional Hogan's Alley that captures the harsh lives of New York's poor. The Kid's appearance, as early as 1895 in the Sunday supplement of *The New York World,* took part in a broader movement of creating awareness regarding the neglected lives of New York's impoverished classes, including Jacob Riis' groundbreaking work of photojournalism, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (1890). Another work of social realism is Stephen Crane's novel, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893) which describes the hard life and tragic end of a young girl growing up in the slums.

In keeping with these social concerns, Outcault initially called his strip *Hogan's Alley* where the Kid was only one of many characters who, if he was there at all, watched from the side lines. An early *Hogan's Alley* cartoon from 5 May 1895 shows the Kid in a corner, all smiles. It is the clown who speaks, announcing the disastrous acts of the makeshift circus with the 'marvelous grace' of Herr Svengeli

while Madame Sans Jane 'the champion bare- (I mean dog-back) rider of der world' waits her turn. These early single panels suggest that life in the Alley itself, with its tra- vesties of urban entertainment (circuses, restaurants, races, holiday celebrations) was the main, amorphous protagonist.

While it is difficult to ascertain exactly why Outcault chose the Kid, it is possible to make a few educated guesses: the child character was an effective and *affective* means of capturing the social issues of urban slums. *Hogan's Alley* was dominated by kids. These children helped 'soften' the harsh realities they were part of; co-existing with the panoply of 'facts' offered by the newspaper, a comic's purpose was more to entertain than to educate. Outcault's own description of the Kid is significant in that it shows how attached he was to the character precisely because the Kid was a consistent, recognizable type:

> The Yellow Kid was not an individual but a type. When I used to go about the slums on newspaper assign-ments I would encounter him often, wandering out of doorways or sitting down on dirty doorsteps. I always loved the Kid. He had a sweet character and a sunny disposition, and was generous to a fault. Malice, envy or selfishness were not traits of his, and he never lost his temper (Wood).

In contrast to characters in lengthy stories that gave them the space to develop and gave readers the opportunity to watch them grow and empathize with them, comic strip characters like the Yellow Kid were successful precisely because they were immutable 'flat' characters. As Marta Figlerowicz suggests in her book on 'flat protagonists' in novels, characters that remain unchanged and one- dimensional reflect on the constraints of the medium while calling for readerly introspection (Figlerowicz 2016, 171). For comics (and serial literature in general), 'the flattest of characters […] produced the greatest emotional response on the part of readers: after all, flat characters require an active readership to "bring to life," and serial publication provides the space in which such a readership has (enforced) time to collaborate' (Gardner 2012, 57). Children in serial publications build bonds with a spectrum of possible readers. They also maintain a certain mythical quality attached to serial characters.

Umberto Eco has shown how comics characters, especially in long-running, serialized publi- cations, function like myths that are destined to remain unchanged throughout their adventures. Eco is careful to point out the nuances between a comics superhero and the protagonist of a novel who 'wants […] to be a man like anyone else' (Eco 1972, 15): a comics protagonist like Super- man 'must be an archetype, the totality of certain collective aspirations'. But there must also be some room for development in the course of his serial adventures, developments that remain small-scale and repeatable so as to maintain the immutability of the myth.

In his flatness and agency the Kid is comparable to Tintin; both are child archetypes in their own way. Where they differ is the amount, and kind, of laughter they provoke as well as the readers they entertain. The flatness and mythic nature of comics children suggests that they are presented as being rather than as becoming (James and Prout 2015; Warming's introduction). In contrast, children in

many, often autobiographical, graphic novels are often in the process of becoming: they rep-resent a (past) stage on the way to adulthood. As Warming as well as Eva Golløv and Laura Gilliam suggest in their respective contributions to this special issue, the aim here is not to privilege being over becoming but rather to work with the tensions between the two and the tensions between child and adult perspectives Similar to Erica Burman's discussion of 'found childhood' (Burman 2019, 3), these comics children can be seen as inhabiting different nodes of relationships and rely on tensionssurrounding notions of childhood and child–adult relationships.

A comforting constant, always cheerful and full of life, the Yellow Kid channeled and created awareness of the harsh realities in a rapidly growing, urban New York at the turn of the nineteenth century. He also channeled the caricaturing and stereotyping essence of comics drawing, incarnating and enacting poverty. The poverty of the Yellow Kid's surroundings was always more than just a motif as suggested by a single-panel comic, 'An Untimely Death' (24 November 1895) in which a little girl tells of her younger brother's death 'within a stone's trow of Tanksgiving' from what sounds like an acute stomach infection. In the background, a sign announces: 'Flats to let to select families' while the Yellow Kid sits and grins on the steps, almost relishing the irony of the situation. Later strips reveal a more active Yellow Kid who gets a kick from the transposition of upper-class activities such as the opera and golf to the poverty-stricken world of rundown tenements. In a strip from 24 October 1987, a fully confident Yellow Kid 'takes a hand at golf'. The game ends with the Kid hitting every child spectator with his golf club as he speaks through the changing words on hisshirt: 'Dat's one! Two! Tree!'.

The Kid cashed in on the affective connotations associated with childhood and children, trans- formed his innocence into a source of humor and comfort and evolved into a highly marketable character who catered, just like his comics, more to adults than to children. In this, the Kid wasnot the first. The so-called 'Me Worry Kid', now known to many of us as Alfred E. Neumann,the mascot of the satirical *MAD* magazine since 1954, could already boast of a successful commer-cial career in his previous lives. This red-haired, gap-toothed kid was, like the Yellow Kid, always smiling, simultaneously mischievous and serene. He was 'an itinerant orphan of low-budget adver- tising, with a trail of appearances dating back to the early twentieth century' (Sweet 2016). In his blog on early forms of the Me Worry Kid, patent attorney Peter Jensen Brown links him to gods such as the Wurra Wurra, the last pagan idol destroyed by St Patrick in the process of Christianizing Ireland and the commercially successful god-charm Billiken or 'The God Of Things As They Ought To Be', created in 1908 by Florence Pretz, an American art teacher (Brown 2017). Similarities between the Yellow Kid, such as the large smile and large ears, and the idol predecessors of theMe Worry Kid are unmistakable. The main quality binding these idols and 'flat' comics characters is their eagerness to absorb or at least divert from worry, a habit that is more frequently associated with adulthood rather than childhood. From the late nineteenth century, worrying, or more accurately not worrying had turned into an American obsession and led to a

peculiar compound of spiritualism and consumerism that allowed for the success of idols such as the Billikens (Leach 1993, 230).

These children on paper provided comic relief and potentially even comfort and relief from worrying. While the Yellow Kid was more directly engaged with his sociopolitical context, Tintin embodies a very different, somewhat subtle and even ambivalent kind of commentary on his context. Notably, both usually wield more power than the adults in their storyworlds.

Tintin's childness and lost childhood

The Kid shows how powerlessness or the lack of agency of children is transformed, in many comics, into an extraordinary amount of agency, which stretches realistic and social limitations but which, for the diegesis itself, is not that extraordinary; this is also the case in other forms of entertainment for children, where child protagonists are accorded unrealistic amounts of power. The very allocation of such power, even in a fictional world, can be controversial, especially in the highly regulated world of children's entertainment. However, as children such as Max, from *Where the Wild Things Are*, or Pippy Longstockings show, 'bad' children are more popular than idealized, good ones, at least in the modern world. Their relative freedom and escape from punishment is the result of the idealized Romantic conception of children and childhood which was a reaction against the heavily moralizing tone of most Humanist and Enlightened children's literature. The Romantics not only embraced the excess of emotions shunned during Enlightenment but they also associated children with innocence, unbridled fantasy and – an often overlooked relationship – common people and, by extension, folksy, carnivalesque humor (Lypp 1995, 183–184; see also Nikolajeva 2012). Maria Lypp emphasizes the close connections established between the child and the fool through humor:

> The figure of the fool was an element of common discourse in which children could participate; it was an official terrain to which children had access. The affinity of the fool with the child stems from the ambivalence between simplemindedness and wisdom: the fool is child and teacher in one person. This kind of association of contrasts is the fundamental element of humor (Lypp 1995, 184).

While such carnivalesque, momentarily subversive humor is a key element of many comics chil- dren's stories, such as *The Yellow Kid*, where the child often steps into the role of the fool, Tintin avoids indulging in this kind of humor. Rejecting the naughty child type, he brims with goodness and righteousness. Adventure after adventure, he refuses to succumb to mischief, something that is left for adults, and animals, including Snowy. This is not that surprising given his first appearance in the staunchly Catholic newspaper *Le Petit-Vingtième,* published by Abbé Norbert Wallez who was none other than Hergé's early mentor and father-in-law. For the same magazine, Hergé also drew a pair of naughtier, now lesser known boys, whose (mis)adventures unfolded on the streets of Brus- sels. Appearing roughly one year after the first Tintin comic strip, Quick and Flupke's stories were also

physically contained within the confines of one or two pages and thus followed the formula of a gag in which the two protagonists are implicated in jokes on a wide range of everyday themes and contexts (politeness, storm, radio). In contrast to Tintin, these young boys are neither very bright nor too obedient. With the city as their main playground, the two boys are also not as privileged as Tintin. Their non-conformity and naughtiness usually encounters correction or punishment, which is often the humoristic element of the gag. Most importantly, unlike Tintin's world (and much more like our real world), the adult characters are the ones in control, instead of being dependent on a young person's intelligence.

Related to this issue of power is the deliberate ambiguity of Tintin's age ranging from pre-ado- lescent as declared in Tuten's novel, or adolescent according to Jean-Marie Apostolidès (Aposto- lidès 2006, 23; all translations from the French are mine). This allows for a broad spectrum of readers to identify with the protagonist.[2] Such ambiguity is not uncommon for comics' protagonists. Drawing parallels with Michael Fried's concept of absorption (Fried 1980), Apostilidès suggests that Tintin's introversion, combined with his lack of family, facilitates the reader's identifi-cation with him (Apostolidès 2003, 14). As Carolyn Steedman has admiringly argued, from the late eighteenth century onwards, children themselves came to symbolize an interiority, a particular con- stellation of 'adult beliefs, desires and fantasies' (Steedman 1995, 5). Through his highly abstract form and identity, Tintin is the locus where his young readers' desires (particularly for adventure and autonomy) negotiate the spaces of imagination and childhood entertainment with those of his adult creators.

In the case of Tintin, the ambiguity regarding his age is revealing for the power dynamics between children and adults. For Apostolidès, the early adventures of Tintin, first published in 1929, were heavily impacted by the memories of the First World War. They were an inventory of Europe's, particularly Belgium's, place in the world (Apostolidès 2006, 21–22). The child-like Tintin embodies the shock of the Great War in that it is he, and not the adults around him, who masters and resolves the difficult situations he and his mostly adult friends find themselves in. Indeed, adults, especially the detectives and agents of justice, Thomson and Thompson, are completely helpless without Tintin. Tintin thus incarnates the myth of the superchild, a reconciliatory myth that reflects the disillusionment of the reason personified by adults, while conforming to values upheld by the world of adults (Apostolidès 2003). He remains a staunch proponent of the European civilizing mission as his adventures in the Congo painfully remind us. Hergé however was 'both a rebel and a conformist' (Apostolidès 2003, 7). This paradox extends to the combination of adult privileges and a child's body that is Tintin, but also to the ideological ambiguities that come to fore when the *Adventures of Tintin* are examined in their entirety.

Tintin was not the only child to have such a degree of autonomy. Zig and Puce, drawn by Alain Saint-Organ, whom Hergé admired, also became ministers in the late 1930s, albeit blundering ones, to help Princess Yvette de Marcalance to rule the principality she had recently recovered (also with the help of Zig and Puce).[3] Comics

have been empowering and punishing child characters since the earliest days of the medium at the same time as they themselves have been gradually confined to childhood and children's reading. The contrast between the almost-adult Tintin and the openly childish Quick and Flupke or Zig and Puce mirrors the contrast between childishness and childness. Peter Hollindale introduces childness as a defining element of children's literature (Hollindale 1997, 47). He distinguishes between two kinds of childness, one for children and another for adults:

> For the child, childness is composed of the developing sense of self in interaction with the images of childhood encountered in the world (including adult expectations, standards of behaviour, grants of privilege and independence, taboos, goals, and offerings of pleasure). For the adult, childness is composed of the grown-ups' memories of childhood, of meaningful continuity between child and adult self, of the varied behaviour associated with being a child, and the sense of what is appropriate behaviour for a given age, of behavioural stan- dards, ideals, expectations and hopes invested in the child as a child (Hollindale 1997, 49).

Crucially, especially for comics speaking to a broad audience of both children and adults, Hollindale's concept of childness is also a space of dialogue and interaction between children and adults (Reynolds 2011, 130). The child in comics is a changing, nebulous social category. This child embraces both the clichés of childishness and nostalgizing attempts to remember being a child (see for instance, Nodelman 2008, 191–192). Such a fluid and interactive conception can be especially fruitful given the different kinds of relationships established in comics between children and adults that very often channel the desires of particular, or several, age groups. Different kinds of affects are tied to the childness and the childishness of comics children.

Even though, Tintin is in many ways distinct from other agentic, but more openly childish chil- dren in comics (such as Charlie Brown or the American and British Dennis the Menaces), especially because of the ambiguity regarding his age and his avoidance of mischief, he also retains many of the key markers of childhood. These include his extremely close relationship with Snowy, who is not only his pet but also his companion and often his bedfellow. In taking on the role of a stuffed animal, Snowy also functions as a transition object, facilitating the, in the comics albums never witnessed, transition of Tintin from childhood to adulthood. Despite their diversity, these comics children's worlds share one major feature: they by and large avoid close confrontation with the key themes of adult literature, such as love and death. Such protection is tied not only to the youth of the characters but also to the fundamentally transformative nature of both themes, which can create obstacles in the smoothly running wheel of seriality. In the rare cases of facing adult themes and seriousness, the children's main weapons include avoidance and laughter.

Comics children created especially for young readers indulge in a comparable degree of chaos and anarchy while softening difficult realities, such as war. For *The Beano,* the longest running British comics magazine for children, published during the Second World War, such softening relied essentially on entertainment and

laughter. The war is present in between the lines: the stories are increasingly militarized and patriotic; referencing paper shortage, the rare editorial notes encourage readers to reserve their copies in advance. Conversely, however, journals such as *The Beano* continued to offer candy to buyers even during the years of sugar rationing from 1940 until 1953. Perhaps one of the most intriguing of these gifts is the 'Black Jack Licorice Revolver' with a 'sweet sugar barrel' offered with every copy of *The Rover*, a magazine for boys (see, for instance, *The Beano,* 24 February 1940). Here, in an almost surreal configuration, candy meets weaponry and thus caters to two desires haunting many young boys during the war: the hankering after increasingly rare, sweet goods and the desire to take part in the war like an adult male. This mediation of reality passes through the hallways of merchandizing and is tailored to children alone.

Comics drawing and childishness

Notably, however, the visual style itself is never completely free of connotations of childishness and amateurism. The *Tintin* comics, for instance, exemplify the deceptive simplicity of comics drawing and the wide range of messages they can transmit change with each reader and each reading. Ian Gordon sees comics as a 'humor-based response to the problems of representation faced by a society in transition' (Gordon 1998, 6). In many ways comic strips contributed to modern art aesthetics while reflecting the modern experience. Produced regularly and in multiple copies, the news-paper comic strip owed its existence to reproduction technologies. It reflected and commented on lived collective realities (see Bukatman 2012; Gardner 2012). By laughing at those realities the Yellow Kid made them easier to live through. This is comparable to the moment of liberty provided by the medieval carnival which was more than just an indulgence: with its logic of transgression, of turning the world upside down, it offered breathing room in a constrained reality (Bakhtin 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986). The comic strip fulfills a similarly human function of entertainment and liberating laughter.

Childishness remains relevant regarding the nature of the visual style as well as the kind of logic employed: it persists through the carnivalesque laughter provoked since the child's laughter only acquires a carnivalesque quality through unfolding in an adult context i.e. when children in comics find themselves in adult situations or try to act like adults by taking control of a situation, as is the case in most of the comic strips examined here. This trope goes back to Rabelais' Pantagruel who is

a child replacing an adult (Feuerhahn 1998, 21–25). Highlighting the carnivalesque essence of children's laughter, psychologist Nelly Feuerhahn also suggests that children have a close connection to laughter since 'the laughable is confused with the most primitive of emotions, such as the childish sources of art' (Feuerhahn 1998, 251). Furthermore, for Feuerhahn, the comic situation of laughable disorder can reference two kinds of orders: it can either critique segments of the social order while reaffirming its principles or it can evoke an order that follows a child-like logic. This once again highlights the intricate connection between children, modernity and comics. Comics reflect both the changing speed and mores of everyday life but also changing conceptualizations of children and adults, particularly the way adults relate to children and vice versa in comics for children.

The aesthetics of comics is also influenced by the Romantic tendency of privileging simpler and even child-like drawing styles as a rejection of Enlightened ideals of logic, clarity and realism. Measuring the impact of Rodolphe Töpffer's proto-graphic novels from the mid-nineteenth century, Thierry Smolderen lists children's drawings as well as graffiti and scribbling as the 'new site "at the edge of seriousness" from which nineteenth century cartoonists spoke whenever they pre-tended to express themselves' (Smolderen 2014, 25). Here Smolderen not only points to the under- lying irony of comics drawing but also to a change of paradigm, where non-academic drawing styles began to take on a new relevance. The rejection of convention suggested an absence of artifice and even access to a primitive, unadulterated state that persisted in the many '-ism's' of modern art. For comics, in contrast, the seemingly untutored drawing has remained a mark of its lower status in the hierarchy of arts.

Children in graphic novels: childhood re-found?

For Michael Chaney, 'the child [is] the default face of American comics […] the child is a resilient emblem of the comics and its mediation' (Chaney 2016, 16). In the graphic novel, which has a strong preference for serious, autobiographical adult stories, the child becomes a conduit for the nostalgic gaze towards an irretrievable past. Their scope of action is also limited. The child and childishness seems to be subsumed into the very stuff of the graphic novel as Chaney suggests when he discerns the 'destabilizing capacity for caricature and the grotesque accorded to visualizations of autobiographical, 'I'-icons, whether drawn cartoons, elves, or the child that once was. It is for the same reason that comics extol and exile their affinities with children and childishness' (Chaney 2016, 15). Children and the presence of childhood in graphic novels, however, does not seem as destabilizing as Chaney suggests, especially in comparison to the older, more mainstream comics children mentioned above.

Graphic novels such as *It's a Bird … , Spiral Cage* and *Mother Come Home* offer images of children and childishness that activate familiar, recurrent characteristics associated with childhood, such as the imagination, but which also treat childhood

as a transitory phase for adulthood. All three graphic novels are either autobiographical or autofictional and all three turn to child versions of the protagonists as points of departure for their stories that revolve around heavy issues such as mourning or physical and psychological illness. In Paul Hornschemeier's *Mother Come Home*, for instance, the younger version of the I-narrator deals with the death of his mother and his father's gradual submergence into depression and eventual suicide.

Wearing a lion's mask (a gift from his mother) and establishing a space of make-believe within reality, the boy takes on the role of the 'caretaker', first of his mother's grave but eventually of the entire house. Hornschemeier includes episodes that adopt an openly child-like narration and unfold through 'childish' drawings that are more simplified and abstract than the dominant visual style in the graphic novel (Hornschemeier 2003). All of the characters in this childish version of the story, including the young boy and his aunt and uncle who become his guardians when his father goes into psychiatric care, have animal heads. These anthropomorphic figures evoke children's entertainment but also fables and by extension, the connection between children, childhood and 'simple,' moralizing or educational stories.

Al Davison's *Spiral Cage,* which takes the form of a diary recounting the author's struggle with spina bifida, also begins with childhood memories. Davison turns to childlike drawings, uneven writing and narrative style to recount his memories as a three-and-a-half-year-old who presumed that '[e]verybody lives in in hospital till they have lots of operations so they can walk' (Davison 2003, 25). This is the stuff of childness described by Hollindale: adult memories of what being a child was like. *Spiral Cage* goes further to establish a close connection between children and a specific comics genre, namely superhero comics. The young Al is often pictured wearing a Super- man costume and on one spread, he actually feels like Superman when he finally manages to walk (Davison 2003, 32).

Also concerned with the body's vulnerability, *It's a Bird* … is obsessed with Superman and the fantasy of the perfect, immortal body he incarnates (Seagle and Kristiansen 2005). In *It's a Bird* … itis not only the superhero, but also superhero comics that take center stage as the I-narrator, Steve, reflects on his task of writing a *Superman* story. The graphic novel opens with a flashbackshowing Steve and his brother fighting over a *Superman* comic in a hospital where their grand- mother will soon die of a hereditary disorder that risks being passed on to both children. Besides building on the connection between comics and children, these reading children evoke another persistent but more latent image of childhood that considers children as metaphors of human interiority (Steedman 1995).

Patricia Crain has highlighted the persistence and marketing of the image of the reading child as 'a nostalgic fantasy of interiority' (Crain 2016, 3). She discerns therein 'a layered cultural fantasy:reading is easy, dreamy, natural, cozy, sleepy, safe, comfortable, comforting, desirable – and so are children'. Many graphic novel children are, more than anything else, embodiments of interiority and of

becoming. Trapped in memories and nostalgia these children are given less freedom than the children in the comics discussed above. They are also more closely tied to clichés of childishness. This brief overview of children in graphic novels suggests that child characters as well as childish drawing styles are a means of demarcating the adult identity of the graphic novel against the comic. But what can these graphic novel children tell us about social history? According to Chaney, '[t]he graphic novel child foments crises of community and spectacle that the Yellow Kid [...] helped torealize [...] the Yellow Kid put youth at the center of social, historical, and psychic volatility' (Chaney 2016, 63). However a comparison between the comic strips and graphic novels discussed here suggests that the energy and freedom of young comics characters such as the Kid, is pushed out of the space of the diegetic real to the child protagonist's imagination or the adult protagonist's memory. That *Mother Come Home* and *Spiral Cage* rely on the contrast between 'childish' drawing styles and the regular comics style highlights the rift between children and graphic novels: children and
childishness remain frozen in the past, relegated to another sphere.

Children in graphic novels teach us more about the medium of comics, especially about the cultural status and social work that can be attributed to comics. They partake in the history of comics perception, particularly the presumably close relationship between comics and childhood, which forgets that many comics from the late nineteenth century were for adults rather than children. The graphic novel children discussed in the article incarnate and absorb personal anxieties; in contrast, the comic strip children often point towards collective, social anxieties. While this conclusion is reached through a selective set of comics (I have only looked at very personal, often autobiographical graphic novels catering to an adult readership in this article), it captures the extent to which different tropes associated with children – interiority, carnivalesque liberty – have acquired currency in different kinds of comics formats and the stories and readerships they entail.

An affective social history through comics children

Many comics styles maintain a simplicity – of drawing and storytelling – that is associated with children. Childness from the adult perspective is more dominant in graphic novels and generally results in a docile but also nostalgic child, who is often the opposite of the energetic, relatively emancipated young people we see in the shorter, serialized comics. While Romantic ideals surrounding the child are reproduced in the graphic novel, comic strip children infuse those ideals with a degree of liberty that is untenable in the real world.

The different child characters in this selection of graphic novels and comic strips suggest that the kinds of temporalities represented by children varies according to format: children in comic strips and albums take part in a cyclical temporality that follows our lived, daily or weekly, rhythms; such children, with some notable exceptions,[4] do not grow up. Graphic novel children are often memories loaded

with nostalgic affect. In addition to thriving in very different kinds of storyworlds, comic strip children and graphic novel children embody different fantasies for different readerships.As I have tried to show, the graphic novel child is often a symbol of interiority and a conduit for nostalgia, whereas the child of comic strips in newspapers and magazines has a more entertaining agenda. Yet both are relevant for a sociohistorical mapping since both reveal our socialized relation- ship to the figure of the child. Graphic novel children play on a more emotional connection to children and childhood which has changed over time: since the birth of psychoanalysis, childhood has been identified as the site where otherwise inexplicable adult traumas can be found and which can offer a better understanding of the self. With the graphic novel and the accompanying discourse of comics 'growing up', the status of child characters becomes, in general, more constrained to this role of becoming-adult. It is therefore sometimes more representative of the norms of children's lived realities.

In the case of comics, this molding of content by format, publication context and readership shows how the intimate link between the packaging of a comic and its legitimization also transforms the possibilities of reading comics as social history. Nowhere is the effect of format more evident than through the child protagonist: generally speaking, the children of serial comics are rambunctious and hardy, ready to go through one daily or weekly adventure after another. Children in auto-biographical graphic novels intended for adults are more concerned with the troubled facets of a past that often continues to haunt the adult in the story's present; here, social history is buried under layers of subjectivity. Children in serialized comics permit a clearer reconstruction of a lived history through their selection of themes that reflect the concerns and mores of the period, as exemplified by the energetic, cheerful Yellow Kid and the equally agentic but less rambunctious Tintin.

All these children have one element in common: the affective relationships established through their very childishness. These affects reconstruct, or at least point towards, contemporaneous lived experiences that are not limited to children, even if they are channeled by them: the urban slums inhabited by the Yellow Kid or a looming war watched with dread from the home front in *The Beano* were contemporaneous social realities visible to, and affecting, their (young) readers. The comics children are no simplistic conveyers of these realities; they engage with them in a carnivalesque manner, disrupting hierarchies of power rooted in age and often class. The dominant affect is that of joy, a joy that provokes laughter but also relishes in a degree of liberty denied to children in the real world. More restrained, the graphic novel children examined here remain important indicators of the social constituents of childishness which includes nostalgia, the status of becoming and the interiorization attached to the child. A social history through children in comics is therefore one that is set in tune to different kinds of affects – from nostalgia to the carnivalesque – and tied to publication contexts.

Notes

1. In this article, I use comics as a general term for referring to the medium and the forms it takes. Comic strip refers to short, serialized publications appearing in newspapers and (comics) magazines. Album refers to comics collected in a specific format that is larger than that of a novel and typical of French-language comics publishing. Graphic novel refers to contemporary comics that have self-contained, novel-like formats and are sometimes combined with some literary and artistic aspirations.
2. Apostolidès discerns specific age groups for readers identifying with Tintin and Snowy: young adolescents andyounger children, respectively.
3. *Zig et Puce, ministres,* tenth album in the *Zig & Puce* series (Saint-Ogan 1989), which was serialized in 1938 in*Le Dimanche Illustré* (Sunday supplement to the illustrated daily, *L'Excelsior*).
4. Such as Skeezix in Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*.

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