

Benoît Crucifix
*Drawing from the Archives:
Comics Memory
in the Contemporary Graphic Novel*

New York, Cambridge University Press, 2023, 274 pp.

Benoît Crucifix's debut book is a precious contribution to comics scholarship for several reasons: for the simplicity with which it reads despite the depth and breadth of its arguments; for the cohesion it achieves between case studies, illustrative examples, and critical reflection, always leading to one another seamlessly and often reading like a novel; and for the way it combines with acumen different critical perspectives, resisting quick summaries like this one. In many respects, this is a book with a typically Francophone flair and critical vivacity, written with a typically Anglophone clarity and argumentative order.

The volume explores how comics artists – mostly North American graphic novelists from the 2000s – have engaged with the medium's history. Crucifix navigates the way more culturally legitimated authors rethink their low-brow antecedents by identifying six key practices (or «gestures of transmission», 25), which name the book's chapters: collecting, curating, reprinting, forging, swiping, and “undrawing.” The overarching keyword is “archive,” pointing to both the material practice of preserving and reframing past comics (the first three gestures); and more creative, transformative, and critical engagements with comics history (the second three), close to Abigail De Kosnik's idea of «rogue archives» (2016), which, «maintained by amateurs, fan-curated and bottom-up [...] put more emphasis on circulation, proliferation, and reuse» (23). All foreground the material practices that inform this transmission of, and inscription within, the past. To describe this

sometimes-ambivalent relation the medium bears to its past, Crucifix appeals to Christopher Pizzino's notion of "autoclasm" (2016) – the idea that comics show «a commitment to working on the problem of illegitimacy in comics-specific terms and an expression of unwavering loyalty to the medium as such» (11) – perhaps managing to elevate Pizzino's (rather smoky) concept beyond its potential.

The introduction cleverly identifies a turning point in 2004, when three key events happen: *McSweeney's* special issue comics anthology edited by Chris Ware is published, building a personal genealogy of the contemporary US graphic novel; Charles Schulz' *Peanuts* are integrally reprinted, reimagined by (Gary Groth and) Seth in book format for an adult, affluent audience; and Art Spiegelman issues *In the Shadow of No Towers*, a graphic memoir reflecting on 9/11 through a series of pastiches of early comics. This establishes the book's focus on the 2000 US graphic novel, arguing that the emergence of the latter as a distinct medium (Baetens and Frey, 2015) marks a shift in the perception, institutionalization, and status of the comics medium, which in turn prompts the unfolding of a self-reflexive relationship towards its history, exemplified by Art Spiegelman's aphorism that opens the book («the future of comics is in the past», 1). The stress on the legitimization and canonization (another key reference is Beaty and Woo, 2016) of early ephemeral comics explains the focus on the graphic novel and on white male artists who homage other white male artists – something the book acknowledges and that, nonetheless, leaves open the door for a counter-investigation that challenges its premises by looking at female, queer, non-white subjects involved in the same practices.

Chapter 1 examines the role of amateur archivists, positing collecting as a foundational practice in preserving older, ephemeral comics. It emphasizes how, since the postwar period, collecting and organized fandom contributed to a burgeoning culture of comics preservation through «fanzines, correspondence barter, second-hand retail, conventions, and price guides» (32). Crucifix focuses on different figures, the most prominent being Bill Blackbeard, whose establishment of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art (SFACA, SFACA, later transferred to the Ohio State University Research Library) collection

challenged the distinction between private collector and public curator, by assembling an accessible collection whose original material was more perishable, but easier to recirculate than microfilms, usually adopted by libraries.

Chapter 2 is devoted to artists curating comics exhibitions, thus consecrating comics as objects of cultural and historical significance. The chapter examines in depth two exhibitions – *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman* (2012) and *Eye of the Cartoonist: Daniel Clowes's Selections from Comics History* (2014) – where Spiegelman and Clowes were invited to present their perspectives on comics history, which Crucifix traverses extensively. The chapter argues that these exhibitions offer a different approach to canon formation in comics, moving away from the top-down mode(s) of canonization in art history to highlight individual, authorial canons shaped by personal tastes, idiosyncrasies, and personal interests.

Chapter 3 discusses the reprinting of older comics in book formats, stressing the function of their processes of selection, design, and (re)framing. It traces the history of comics reprints from 1960s Nostalgia Press books through the rise of comics bookstores and the direct market, to that of the graphic novel. Crucifix discusses the reprinting activity of publishers like Fantagraphics and Drawn & Quarterly, and the role of contemporary graphic novelists in designing and curating reprints (what he cleverly calls «perigraphic novels», 98). He discusses two case studies: the *Peanuts* integral collection recently edited by Gary Groth and visually designed by Seth; and the *Walt & Skeeze* reprint co-edited by Jeet Heer and Chris Ware, which collects Frank King's long-running *Gasoline Alley* comics strip (currently covering the 1918-1934 period).

Chapter 4 moves from comics history to theory, focusing on graphic forgeries – originals that mimic the style and format of older comics. Crucifix references Thierry Smolderen's concept of «polygraphy» (127) to emphasize comics' inherent hybridity and intertextuality. The chapter discusses Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* and Cole Closser's *Little Tommy Lost* as prime examples of graphic forgery – blending real and fictional elements and referencing actual cartoonists

and historical events while simultaneously making up authors, works, and historical backstories. Crucifix examines Seth's references to 1950s comics – a recurring theme of the latter – showing how his nostalgic engagement with the past does not preclude a more critical stance; he then reflects on the relationship between the graphic novel and its serial origins through Closser's use of digital techniques and *Little Tommy Lost's* «pseudo-seriality» that mimics the weekly alternance of dailies and Sunday pages of early comics strips.

Chapter 5 investigates swiping – the informal term for adapting, redrawing, and plainly copying images from existing comics. It discusses how the term moved beyond its initial connotation of theft, and considers “swipe files,” collections of images clipped from other comics, photographs, or illustrations, that cartoonists used for reference and inspiration. These files, often organized thematically or by artist, served as visual archives that cartoonists could draw upon to meet tight deadlines. Crucifix attributes a key role to *The Comics Journal's* column “Swipe File,” which presented side-by-side comparisons of potentially swiped panels, inviting readers to judge the nature of the imitations. He discusses Keith Giffen's swiping of *Alack Sinner* by José Muñoz and Carlos Sampayo, showcasing how the practice intersects with power dynamics. After a refined application of Marion's concept of “graphiation” (1993) to swiping as the embodied labor of a «second hand» (151), Crucifix then examines at length the role of swiping in Charles Burns' work (especially *Last Look*), who uses it as much as homage as a strategy of estrangement based on engaging with comics history.

Finally, chapter 6 examines “undrawing” – digitally manipulating and remixing existing comics material – broadening the book's scope to include European works published from the 2010s, online or in small-press editions. Quoting Lev Manovich (2001), Crucifix argues that comics have long engaged with the “database logic” that characterizes digital culture, and explores a range of “uncreative” approaches (referencing Kenneth Goldsmith's «uncreative writing», 2011) that radicalize the act of redrawing, sampling and manipulating comics fragments.

The chapter discusses several authors – from Stefano Tamburini to Robert Sikoryak, from Kevin Huizenga to Derik Badman, from Simon Grennan to Mark Laliberte – but it dwells on the work of Ilan Manouach, as its true central figure. *Crucifix* touches, amongst others, on Manouach’s *Riki fermier*, which removes all characters but the protagonist from the Danish series *Rasmus Klump*; *Noir*, which reprints a Smurfs comic in cyanotype; *Peanuts Minus Schulz*, a 700-page book created by outsourcing the redrawing of Schulz’s *Peanuts* strips to online micro-workers; and *Blanco*, a blank 48-page comics album, perhaps the clearest example of undrawing.

The conclusion moves from Gary Panter’s poster image for the *McSweeney’s* comics anthology. The image, featuring a dense array of figures and objects from comics history, functions as a visual summary of the anthology’s exploration of the diverse comics styles and traditions. *Crucifix* uses Panter’s work as a springboard for reflecting on the role of comics practitioners and scholars in shaping our perception of the medium’s past. Once again, the book stresses that understanding how comics history is constructed and transmitted requires examining the material processes and practices involved in selecting, preserving and circulating comics archives across time, paying attention to the gestures and methods through which we engage with the past.

The author

Giorgio Busi Rizzi

Giorgio Busi Rizzi is FWO post-doctoral fellow at Ghent University, where he is also adjunct professor, teaching the English Literature and the Comics and Graphic Novel courses. His current project investigates authorship in post-digital comics. He holds a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies with joint supervision from the Universities of Bologna and Leuven. His PhD thesis, analyzing nostalgic aesthetics and practices in contemporary graphic novels, is currently being submitted for publication. His first post-doctoral project, funded by a BOF fellowship from Ghent University, was called *Experimental Digital Comics: Forms and Functions*. Later, he was post-doctoral researcher for the ERC project Children in Comics at Ghent University. He is a founding member of the international research group on Italian comics SNIF – Studying ‘n’ Investigating Fumetti, and member of several international research groups on comics studies.

Email: giorgio.busirizzi@ugent.be

The review

Data invio: 15/10/2024

Data accettazione: 30/10/2024

Data pubblicazione: 30/11/2024

How to cite this review

Busi Rizzi, Giorgio, “Benoît Crucifix, *Drawing From the Archives: Comics Memory in the Contemporary Graphic Novel*”, *La dimensione pubblica dell’abitare*, Eds. C. Bertoni, M. Fusillo, G. Iacoli, M. Guglielmi, N. Scaffai, *Between*, XIV.28 (2024): 513-518, www.betweenjournal.it.