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Comics in Germany

For a very long time in Germany, comics were not regarded as proper reading material for children or young people, nor for adults, of course. And this perception of comics is still changing only very gradually. It makes no sense to blame this circumstance on one factor or another, since the origins of this attitude are probably more complex. We only can try to understand by looking at the history of comics in Germany.

Many describe the well-known German artist Wilhelm Busch as one of the early fathers of comics. It does at least seem that the work of Wilhelm Busch inspired the early newspaper cartoon strips "Katzenjammer Kids" by Rudolph Dirks, an artist of German origin, who emigrated to the USA in 1884. It is said that the editor William Randolph Hearst had explicitly ordered Dirks to produce "something like Max und Moritz" for the Sunday magazine section of *The New York Journal*. The first issue of "Katzenjammer Kids" came out in 1897. It was around this time that comic strips in newspapers - the original form of comics - became very popular in the USA.

Back in Germany, traditional illustrated stories were still far more popular, with text below the picture for dialogue, and not balloons. Despite the German influence on the development of comics, they were not very popular in Germany.

Later, the Nazis forced many famous artists into exile, which was not just a human catastrophe, but also absolutely disastrous for the development of the arts in Germany, including comics.

One exception was the illustrator Erich Ohser who stayed in Germany. From 1934 to 1937, his famous comic strips "Vater und Sohn" ("Father and Son") were published in the newspaper *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*. He had to work using the pseudonym e.o.plauen, having already been in trouble with the Nazi regime early on. He was arrested in 1944 together with his friend Erich Knauf. If he had not committed suicide in prison, he would most probably have been executed like his friend.

Unfortunately, the destructive influence of the Nazis did not end with the end of World War II. An entire generation of children had been brought up under the regime and heavily indoctrinated, which had also affected their cultural education.

According to Bernd Dolle-Weinkauff, curator of the exhibition "Comics made in Germany - 60 Years of Comics in Germany" (24th January to 24th May 2008 in the German National Library in Frankfurt), it was probably for all these reasons that the history of comics in Germany did not actually begin until 1945. American GIs brought comics with them and they definitely made an impact. The "Fix und Foxi" strips published by Rolf Kauka in 1953 certainly resembled America's "animal funnies" more than just a little. They became one of the most successful comic strips in the post-war Federal Republic of Germany. The entertaining "Nick Knatterton" by Manfred Schmidt solved crime cases for about 10 years, and there were also of course more serious, classic comic heroes such as "Sigurd" by Hansrudi Wäscher.

Many German comic series of the post-war period seemed rather old-fashioned and frumpy compared to comics from the USA, whose super heroes had sometimes been hardened in battle against the Nazis.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, licensed editions of Mickey Mouse were soon enjoying increasing popularity. In the GDR on the other hand, the import of licences from capitalist countries was not permitted, so the successful series of the "Digedags" was created for the comics magazine *Mosaik*.

It was also in the 1950s that some well-meaning worried Germans (West Germans!) started a fierce campaign against comics. Young readers were to be given two "worthy educational magazines" in exchange for one "rubbish comic". It is almost incredible to think that these zealous moralists actually burnt some of the captured comics. At that time, it was not just in Germany that comics were suspected of corrupting young people, but nowhere else did this kind of campaign evoke such dreadful memories.

The political upheavals of the late 1960s produced an original scene of its own, focusing primarily on political and socio-critical cartoons. The so-called *Neue Frankfurter Schule* remains active and influential to this day. But since political cartoons depend very much on their own social context, their chances of being exported to other countries are generally very limited.

At the same time and with the same motivation, a completely new type of comic was being created in the USA too. Comic artists who had had enough of working for the entertainment industry wanted to tell their own stories, and to express themselves and their opinions. In "underground comics", they found a new freedom, both in terms of subject matter and artistically. Before that, comics had to be funny, adventure stories or fantasy. Now, daily life could be a topic, as well as any other issue the author was interested in. Although this development probably influenced European comics, it is likely that something similar happened of its own accord simultaneously in Europe. At any rate, these new comics appealed to a new readership.

Gerhard Seyfried, the well-known author and illustrator of many funny comics about the squatter scene in Berlin, spent several years in the USA. He even worked together with Gilbert Shelton, creator of the legendary "Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers". Seyfried's first comic came out in 1979 and to this day, he is still considered one of the most influential German underground comic artists.

And perhaps the "Werner" comics by Brösel, also known as Rötger Feldmann, could be seen as Germany's answer to the "Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers"? The series about a young man whose favourite hobbies are bikes and beer, started in 1981. "Werner" was fairly successful for many years and to this day, the series has a probably smaller, but faithful readership.

Ralf König, another highly successful German comic artist, also released his first comic in 1981. His comics, mostly about gay life, have been published world-wide in many different languages. Ralf König still is one of the most popular and respected cartoonists in Germany.

In the meantime, the growing comic community had become hungry for exchange and communication, for a public platform. So in 1984, a handful of idealists and pioneers launched the first Comic Salon in Erlangen. This two-yearly event has since become the most important comic festival in Germany. 1984 also saw publication of the first issue of the ambitious German-Swiss comics magazine *Strapazin*, on the occasion of the first Comic Salon. Since then, *Strapazin* has been published as a quarterly, bringing its readers the latest news from the avantgarde comic sector.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 brought new artists and fresh impetus to the German comic scene. Many artists from the GDR immediately began to exploit their new freedom. ATAK, CX Huth, Anke Feuchtenberger, Fickelscherer and many others founded new cartoonist groups and produced exciting and groundbreaking magazines. They even set up a comic library in Berlin, the "Renate", still in existence today. These artists added a new visual freedom to the extended range of possible topics. They amplified the picture language of comics enormously, sometimes without paying much attention to narrative structures.

They have had a lasting influence on the contemporary German comic scene. Some of them now teach at art colleges or universities. Their students' books repeatedly crop up in the latest comics collections at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

It is not least thanks to these artists that comics now enjoy a greater acceptance in the feature pages.

But this did not have any effect on the commercial mainstream. On the contrary - at the same time as this, the comic market in Germany was in deep crisis. After high-quality comic albums, above all those from France and Belgium, had been selling rather well for a while, demand collapsed dramatically. The brief golden age of German comics also seemed to have run its course.

It was Carlsen Comics who then started the manga boom in Germany in 1996, beginning with the "Dragon Ball" series and followed by countless more; the other major publishers soon joined in. According to Carlsen Comics, 80 percent of the total annual sales in comics are accounted for by manga. Most of the manga on the German market are imported from Japan, but as the "Notfunny" comic collection shows, there are now successful manga from Germany too. Some of them, such as "Stupid Story", are even published in France.

The manga boom has attracted new readers too, most of them young and female. This has even changed the look of fairs and festivals - as you can see every year in the Frankfurt Book Fair's Comics Centre (launched in 2000). Thousands of manga fans, many of them in fantastic costumes, come to the exhibition halls. They liven up the atmosphere at the venerable Book Fair with their enthusiasm and the way they enjoy their reading.

Funnies are also now quite important to the German comic market. The cartoon series "Notfunny" by Joscha Sauer, for example, which gives its name to the 2008 comic collection, is very successful. The fourth volume, published in October 2008, had sold more than 75,000 copies by February 2009.

The "Abrafaxe" are something of a secret hit. They have survived the GDR, where in 1975, they had replaced the "Digedags" mentioned earlier. *Mosaik* magazine now appears monthly with a circulation of 80,000. The adventures of the "Abrafaxe" also come out as hardcover albums.

They appeal to young readers, combining entertainment with education. Rights and licences are exported to 20 different countries.

Which brings us back to the German comic market. Imported classics like "Lucky Luke", "Mickey Mouse" and superhero series have their faithful fans, but this market segment does not seem to expand any further.

Original German productions, on the other hand, are increasingly successful. German mangaka and cartoonists have already been mentioned, but the authors of graphic novels are also attracting a great deal more attention and recognition, not only from the critics.

The idea of the graphic novel is currently treated as the new thing on the comic market, although Will Eisner had already launched this description in 1987. For his comic "A Contract with God", he needed a term to distinguish his new work from the superhero comics for which he was then known. (Although his "Spirit" comics are undoubtedly wonderful!)

Graphic Novels are long, self-contained stories, unlike comic series. "Maus" by Art Spiegelman and "Persepolis" by Marjane Satrapi are without doubt among the best-known graphic novels.

Graphic novels are intended for literary-minded readers and are on sale in bookshops as well as in comic shops.

The 2008 "Notfunny" comic collection includes, for example, "Die sechs Schüsse von Philadelphia" by Ulrich Scheel, and "Die Sache mit Sorge" by Isabel Kreitz.

Nowadays, rights and licences for German comic titles are exported to other countries, even to France, which would have seemed unthinkable only a few years ago.

In the context of globalisation, the development of the medium is no longer a national affair. Interrelations between the different comic scenes cannot be overlooked, trends and influences have long since impacted across national borders. In the course of this, the Franco-Belgian market has also opened up, so that the French-language edition of "Die Sache mit Sorge" was published by Casterman, a major Belgian publishing company, and "Cash" by Reinhard Kleist by Dargaud, one of the big French publishing companies.

The newspaper cartoon strip is also enjoying something of a renaissance. One example is "Im Museum" by Jan-Frederik Bandel and Sascha Hommer, published daily in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* till the end of June 2009. This entertaining tale of two children who experience absurd adventures when locked in overnight in a museum actually led to readers cancelling their subscriptions. "Im Museum" is to be followed by a new strip, just as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is also surprising its readers with comics from a series of different cartoonists.

All in all, this means that it is not unreasonable to take an optimistic view of the future of the comic in Germany. There is a vital and creative comic scene driving the development of this versatile medium, and it is one with good international connections. The Frankfurt Book Fair also contributes here, presenting the comic collections from Germany all over the world.

It might even be possible to hope that the Germans will one day be able to enjoy reading comics without struggling so much with the question of whether the latter represent high culture or not.

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