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## Introduction

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# Introduction

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- 1 When we want to be unkind to the tradition of comics studies we compare it to the work accomplished in other disciplines. Academic areas with higher levels of cultural credibility, longer institutional histories, and superior resources continue to dwarf comics studies in almost every imaginable way. Even in a comparison with cinema, an art form that is its rough contemporary, comics pales badly. Indeed, one could argue that comics studies in 2009 exists in a state comparable to film studies in 1959.
- 2 Fifty years ago, cinema studies was an unusual specialization in which only a small number of critics and scholars engaged. In the silent period, much of the important writing on the emerging art form came from filmmakers themselves, including Germaine Dulac, Sergei Eisenstein, Lev Kuleshov, and Dziga Vertov. Crucially, many of the earliest scholars of the cinema, such as Rudolph Arnheim and Sigfried Kracauer, addressed themselves to the question of how cinema operated as a distinct art form. The leading exponents of the form published in popular, rather than purely scholarly, journals like André Bazin's *Cahiers du cinéma*. The few university level courses that existed on the topic tended to be taught by researchers who were experts in other, related fields (often in language departments), and there were no departments of Film Studies yet constituted.
- 3 Similarly, much of the major writing on the formal operation of comics has come from practitioners, including Will Eisner, Benoît Peeters, and, centrally, Scott McCloud. Like film, comics have developed a constellation of cultural sites for criticism, debate and experimentation such as *The Comics Journal* in the United States or *Neuvième Art* in France. There are a growing number of university courses taught on the subject, again often in language departments, but, as yet, no departments. Regular conferences on the subject of comics are becoming the norm, but there are few dedicated scholarly journals and no international academic association promoting work in the field.
- 4 One of the signature turning points in cinema that enabled the growth of film studies as an important and distinct scholarly discipline also dates from a half century ago. The birth of what would come to be known as the French New Wave in filmmaking allowed an explosive new aesthetic movement to be tied to a new critical perception in François

Truffaut's conception of "la politique des Auteurs". Author-driven cinema accorded nicely with the scholarly politics of its time, and authorized an explosion within the field of film studies. In short, the mutually reinforcing relationship between new film practices and critical writing about those works served to bolster both the growing international "art film" movement and the critical and theoretical apparatus that would be mobilized around it.

- 5 Today, as Jan Baetens argues in this issue, we can see a similar pattern taking shape again. Comics studies has largely been driven by the success of a very few key works which have "crossed over" into academic realms. Chief amongst these have been, in the United States, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and, in France, Hergé's *Tintin*, and in both, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, each of which has generated a raft of critical insight. The foundation laid by these works has had the effect of opening doors for the analysis of related, and often very different types of work. In this issue, Ana Merino, with great eloquence and insight, adds her voice to the established debate about *Maus*. From a very different standpoint, but with no less skill, Nicolas Labarre writes about the presentation of France in contemporary American superhero comics. While, on the surface, the works chosen by these scholars seem quite distinct, I would suggest that the internationalization implicit in each makes them particularly appropriate for analysis in a journal such as *Transatlantica*.
- 6 The intellectual exchange that is suggested by the name of this journal is something that is fruitfully extended into the offerings here from Craig Fischer and Charles Hatfield. Each is concerned with the state of the field in his own way. Hatfield offers a view looking towards the future and imagining a space for the discipline to grow. Fischer, on the other hand, tackles a current debate in the field about the use of language, a debate, it should be noted, that has its own echoes in the history of film studies. For whom do we write? To what purpose and for what ends? These are the sorts of questions that are crucial for a nascent scholarly discipline.
- 7 Finally, questions about the institutionalization of scholarly practice are placed front and centre in this issue by Michael Rhode and Jessica Abel and Matt Madden. Rhode, an archivist working in Washington, offers an overview of the state of comics bibliography, one of those crucial elements of innovative scholarship that is often far too much taken for granted. Similarly, Abel and Madden, each of whom is an acclaimed professional cartoonist, provide insights into the act of teaching comics classes to aspiring professionals, a practice that is too frequently seen as marginal in the more elevated arena of "Theory".
- 8 Together these articles present many facets of the field but is not anywhere close to complete. We are fully cognizant of the fact that entire areas of inquiry have not been addressed here. Nonetheless, we hope to atone for this lack of comprehensiveness through a careful consideration of institutional imperatives and opportunities. In comparing a nascent field like comics studies with an established discipline like film studies, it can be easy to read the former as merely impoverished relative to the latter. I would suggest that this is not simply the case. Comics studies, as the essays in this special issues so ably demonstrate, is today a wide-open vista, unfreighted by the intellectual baggage of the past. Comics studies is ours today to create. This is a thrilling and unusual opportunity for us as intellectual laborers in the twenty-first century, and I hope that this issue will be read as an honest contribution to the task that faces us all.