

# Epilogue

## Steffi RICHTER

Held under the title “Intercultural Crossovers, Transcultural Flows: Manga/Comics” in fall 2010, the Cologne conference was quite unique, in regard to both the thematic range of its altogether 26 contributions and the multitude of countries the speakers came from. It can be called unique for at least two reasons. Firstly, it brought together experts of the still young (and in Europe hardly institutionalized) field of Comics Studies, and engaged them in problematizing the global phenomenon of manga from a variety of angles. As evident from this volume, the contributions applied interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary approaches and, sometimes, exhibit an interest in intermedia and transmedia issues. Furthermore, the mostly young speakers made clear that they conduct Manga/Comics Studies not from a position of “objective distance” owing their findings mainly to booklore, but that they are in command of what should be called connoisseurship, leaning on a sort of knowledge which is closely tied to personal experiences as an “insider” to popular culture, in this case, comics. Theirs is a popular competence without being populist. They analyze and interpret the very field they are acting in as readers/users, as participants in “a complex organizational principle of various goods and activities” (Zahlten 2008: 82), as Media Studies scholar Alexander Zahlten has characterized it, last but not least referring to manga and anime.

Secondly, the Cologne conference was unique because manga activists, too, participated as speakers and discussants. Contributions to this volume such as the papers by Zoltan Kacsuk and Radosław Bolałek give evidence to the fact that analysts of fan cultures, for example related to manga, do not need to hide their own involve-

ment in the analyzed group anymore. Thus, it is not surprising either that Christina Plaka, who attended the conference and took part in a panel discussion of female manga artists, is at the moment enrolled in the new Graduate School for Manga Studies of Kyoto Seika University. Christina created a conference poster which visualized the key notions of “inter,” “trans” and “cross,” “comics” and “manga” in a unique way. Her image, however, cannot be shown in public, and consequently not be reproduced here. Therefore, I have no other choice than to take the path of “intermedia” transfer, that is, to translate the “banned” image into words, to describe it. After that, I will relate briefly what happened and offer some thoughts on the implications of that incident with respect to more general issues of our time, concerning changes in media culture and society.

Christina’s poster provides a bricolage of three characters which are not only easily recognizable but also easily regarded as representatives of specific comics cultures: Superman as standing in for American comics, *Sailor Moon* protagonist Tsukino Usagi for Japanese manga, and Tintin for Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*. Superman, placed on the left and staring sceptically into the distance, wears a sailor suit similar to Usagi’s, who appears at his right side dressed in brown trowsers, blue sweater and white shirt, in other words, clothes reminiscent of Tintin. Turning her body away from the big guy and raising her left leg as if she is about to jump off, she addresses the viewer with her gaze, unhampered by her glasses. In the lower right corner, we find Tintin sitting on the ground, stretching his legs (in Usagi’s boots) to the left. Swathed in Superman’s suit whose cape rises from its collar to form the characters’ background, Tintin seems to be completely absorbed by a book adorned with the *NARUTO* symbol on its cover.

Presumably, Christina opted for such a “disguise” of the famous characters in order to sententiously express the “*intercultural*” as one of the conference’s central notions. Each character is a hybrid, but represents a discrete entity whose identity is constructed by means of a binary distinction between Self and Other. Styles and stories are culturally (nationally) fixed: their borders can be crossed, but not dissolved. This fixation of the Self via distinction against the alleged Other, that is to say, the perspective of the “inter” leans heavily on “comparison” and “influence.”

Yet, the same poster can also be viewed from a *transcultural* perspective acknowledging that cultures have always been hybrid formations permanently re-constructing different codes and modes of meaning into a kind of fragile, dynamic “unit” (which is neither melting/dissolving nor unifying/harmonizing the existing differences).

Consequently, the “transcultural” does not signify an ontological novelty which replaces the “intercultural.” Rather, it is to be understood as a practice incessantly recombining signs and images, which is due to the interrelation of new digital technologies and community-specific ways of dealing with existent signs and images. Media Studies scholar Felix Stalder regards this digital “remixing” of existent contents as a central cultural technique of the 21st century and its “network society,” by which the dichotomy between creator and recipient loses its hegemonial definitude as does the hierarchy between original and copy (or fake), and also the notion which ties authenticity to artists as creators of auratic works.

To read Christina’s poster from this transcultural perspective seems appropriate, for example, in the light of her own lived transculturality as a Greek woman who grew up in Germany. Furthermore, the sort of manga she creates (and her Superman-Usagi-Tintin remix is mangaesque!) belong to a kind of comics which cannot be characterized anymore solely by the catchphrase “Made in Japan.” These comics are global insofar as they are being created and read within subcultural taste communities worldwide, because they provide the expressive means for telling one’s own story. Calling them “Japanese” may refer just to certain stylistic dispositions and themes, or to certain production strategies and business models.

Although placed in the above-sketched context, Christina’s poster did eventually not see the light of day. The conference organizers had welcomed it as authentic in the new sense of an authenticity which admits its source explicitly, while using it freely and creating something new and of equal value (Stalder 2009: 10). And it was about to be mailed to a number of European university departments when the International Manga Research Center of Kyoto Seika University notified the German organizers that *Sailor Moon* creator Takeuchi Naoko withheld her approval to employ her Usagi character. This came as a complete surprise since the poster was to serve scholarly, not commercial purposes. After all, the remixing had resulted in a new work. However, the International Manga Research Center feared that this work’s partial source material might be claimed by the copyright holder. So this, then, was the kernel of the brute.

Anything but an expert in copyright, I have become interested in topics such as “knowledge, autonomy, original, power in the age of new digital media,” stimulated by my research on postmodern identities, and precisely therefore, the “poster incident” made me pursue the issue a little further. Soon I learned that such incidents are not exceptional anymore, and how important it is to face them in an unemotional yet politically committed way. Another case which I came across shall serve as a contrastive

example here in order to raise some fundamental questions related to our “poster incident.”

In 2004, internet artist Cornelia Sollfrank conceived a project for an exhibition in which a search engine software developed by herself assembled Andy Warhol’s “Flowers” from the internet and recomposed them. But, as the website “iRIGHTS.Info – Urheberrecht und kreatives Schaffen in der digitalen Welt” reports, “The board of the exhibition venue feared a legal battle with the powerful Warhol Foundation. Consequently, Sollfrank withdrew her work and decided to instead conduct video interviews with four copyright lawyers about her work and to show these in the exhibition. What emerged is a document in which one can listen to lawyers in conflicting deliberation about authorship and art.”

Structurally the two cases seems to be similar. Two art works were supposed to be shown, although with different intentions: Sollfrank’s project aimed at an exhibition and, possibly, subsequent sale; Plaka’s poster aimed at spreading information and arousing curiosity. Similar agents were involved: in addition to the artists, persons of the public realm such as researchers and curators who faced conflict. Like the exhibition board, the International Manga Research Center feared legal consequences for a public use of the poster without the creator’s permission. But there was also an important difference. The “Warhol-Sollfrank” case was about avoiding a legal battle with the powerful Warhol Foundation, while the International Manga Research Center was mainly concerned with not increasing the negative impression Ms. Takeuchi had received by the fact that the poster had been given to the print-shop before her answer to the initial request arrived. It goes without saying that this was a gross mistake. However, the question arises whether the request for approval, that is, for a grant of the copyright holder’s permission was necessary in the first place?

Since the early 19th century, the concept of copyright has been assigned the task to balance out artists (and other creators), commercial agents and the public. Critics such as legal theorist and activist Lawrence Lessig assess that the copyright does not fulfill this function anymore in the digital age. According to them, it favors the cultural industries. Sollfrank, a copyright activist herself, developed her “Warhol incident” into a meta-art work. Instead of leaving the matter to lawyers, in her “Work about a (finally

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1 <http://www.irights.info/index.php?q=node/643>. See also <http://artwarez.org/projects/legalperspective/>. Sollfrank’s “Anonymous Warhol Flowers” can be found on the homepage of The Agency for Civic Education of the State of Nordrhein-Westfalen, section “Multimedia,” under the title “Arbeit 2.0: Die Ausstellung” <http://www.politische-bildung.nrw.de/multimedia/podcasts/00109/00114/index.html> (last access for all: 11 Dec., 2011)

not) impeded work” she features four legal experts who voice fundamentally different opinions about the case, illuminating that in digital media authorship, originality, and intellectual property are not unequivocal anymore and precisely therefore have to become the subject of general discussion, including artists and scholars. One of the legal experts, Peter Eller, remarks: “I find it remarkable that Andy Warhol, who himself played with the copyright, comes into play. Therefore, this art cannot really be sacrosanct for all eternity.”

In contrast, the “poster incident” was apparently mainly about personal sensitivities. Any discussion of whether Christina’s was a work in its own right and, if so, why, was avoided, and the particular occasion of her creation—a scholarly conference which was expected to give fresh impetus to Manga/Comics Studies in Europe—did not play any role at all. All those who were involved are to reflect upon the reasons of this failure, in order to deal with such incidents in the future. Insiders know very well about the hardships of manga artists who depend on their work. Manga Studies are, among other things, called upon analyzing and criticizing the precarious nature of such labour. In this regard, Takeuchi Naoko’s concern about what happens to her work’s results are not only understandable but also legitimate. If the aim of the conference—as so aptly expressed by the poster—would have been communicated more sufficiently, Ms. Takeuchi might have reacted in another way, not only as the entrepreneur of *Kabushiki gaisha* [joint-stock company] *Princess Naoko Planning*. She might have acknowledged her mangaka colleague’s right to deal freely with a fragment of her own work, and she might have even smiled at the result.

Finally, the following question arises: Do not we researchers and scholars have the right as well as the obligation to decide upon whether the aim of a conference—in this case, the promotion of Manga Studies beyond Japan—outweighs an alleged copyright? It should not be our stance to freeze immediately like the proverbial rabbit in front of the snake, that is to say, to leave our very own matter to legal experts and, eventually, economic necessities or financial constraints.

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2 <http://artwarez.org/projects/legalperspective/download/PeterEller-engl.pdf> (last access: 11 Dec., 2011), p. 4.

**Bibliography**

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