

Book review

Beers Fägersten, Kristy, Anna Nordenstam, Leena Romu, Margareta Wallin Wictorin (Eds.) (2021). *Comic Art and Feminism in the Baltic Sea Region: Transnational Perspectives*. Routledge.

Presenting individual and collaborative work on “transnational perspectives on feminist comic art” (p. 1), the volume results from the project “A Multidisciplinary Study of Feminist Comic Art” (2018-1021), founded by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies. Published in the *Routledge Studies in Gender, Sexuality, and Comics*, this collection examines the intersection of comic art and feminism, highlighting how global, transnational, and local influences have shaped their relationship. It focuses on analysing multinational comic art in the Baltic Sea region (in a geographical and a geopolitical sense), exploring themes such as gender, sexuality, power, vulnerability, assault, abuse, taboo, and trauma, often characterised by humorous self-reflection or sharp social critique. The chapters investigate recurring visual and narrative strategies used to portray female experiences. Therefore, the main aim is to identify similarities and differences between transnational perspectives on feminist comics, focusing on the Baltic Sea region.

Comics have been defined in numerous ways. The most important definitions are Hayman and Pratt’s (2005 apud Meskin, 2007, p. 369) definition as a “pictorial narrative” or McCloud’s (1993, p. 9) as juxtaposed images “in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer”. The importance of the text was highlighted in other definitions, but the sequential nature remains essential. From a social point of view, comics can be considered “instruments of social change” (p. 6). Feminist comics are regarded as works of comic art that cope with feminist themes (e.g. empowerment, gender equality, identity, sexuality), exploring gender issues, representing women’s viewpoints and experiences, and sometimes even challenging the traditional representation of women.

The book includes 12 chapters, joined by intrinsic characteristics that allow the division into five major parts. The first chapter establishes the context in which the anthology was published, introduces the key concept – *feminist comics* – and summarises each chapter. The book’s first part (Chapters 2-3) investigates the starting point of the transnational journey proposed by the author: “Swedish feminist comics artists”. The second part of the volume, “Gender, sex, and sexuality in German-language comics” (Chapters 4-6), illustrates and analyses German comics. The third part of the volume, “Non-binary and queer expression in comics” (Chapters 7-8), explores transnational themes similar to the ones already identified in the previous chapters, also adding comics on non-binary figurations and queer aesthetics. The fourth part of the anthology, “Addressing violence in Finnish comics” (Chapters 9-10), depicts sexual harassment and violence in the comic art of Finland. The fifth part of the book, “Memoir and remembering in Polish and Russian comics” (Chapters 11-12), takes a historical perspective.

The introductory chapter, “Feminist comics: An expanding field”, written by the editors, introduces the field of feminist comics, as suggested by the title. The first part enlarges the socio-cultural and socio-political context in which the book was published. The question raised by the editors from the beginning of the volume is: “What has instigated the production of a

transnationally expanding field of feminist comic art?” (p. 2). Considering comic art an international form, it creates, reflects and responds to the globalisation trends. Still, it is also deeply intertwined with local histories and contexts, reflecting each place’s unique social, political, and cultural dynamics, as also mentioned by the editors.

The emergence of feminist comic art can be traced back to the Women’s underground comix (1960s-1970s) in the US and the UK, which were a response to the male-dominated comic book industry, creating the space for women to express their ideas and experiences and address issues as sexual freedom, gender inequality, societal expectations etc., and which laid the basis for contemporary feminist comic art. While the Anglo-American history of feminist comics is central, other countries, including Sweden and Finland, experienced notable parallel developments that also influenced the evolution of feminist comic art. In Sweden, the specificity of feminist comics was linked to the liberation movement (early 1970s). Humour and satire represented tools to address issues related to women’s bodies, labour, and sexuality. Important female comic artists (Liv Strömquist and Nina Hemmingsson) made Sweden well-known for its active public debate on equality and generated substantial progress in publishing feminist comics. In Finland, “women’s comics” emerged in the 1980s-1990s, contrasting to the male-dominated industry. Starting with the 2010s, the Finnish comics scene became more diverse, reducing the need for gender-specific labels. Recent comics address issues such as intersectionality, the rights of non-binary and trans individuals, mental health, and body positivity.

The anthology explores whether there is a shared aesthetic or thematic frame in feminist comic art across the Baltic Sea region, concluding that there is no universal connection. Therefore, the diversity in feminist comics is shaped by local variations in historical, political, and cultural contexts, resulting in different styles, genres, and media. Hence, the anthology aims to identify “distinguishing features and transnational commonalities of feminist comic art” (p. 5) in Finland, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Sweden.

Chapter 2, “Swedish feminist comics and cartoons at the turn of the millennium: Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström)” by Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Victorin presents humoristic comics that belong to two prominent Swedish artists, as the title suggests. The chapter illustrates how the works of Joanna Rubin Dranger and Åsa Grennvall (Schagerström) have been shaped by and contribute to global aesthetic, social, and political interactions. Dranger’s feminist black-and-white comics address topics such as women’s roles in public life, women’s bodies, criticism of their physical demands, and criticism of the pressures on women in the demanding and competitive working environment. Grennvall incorporates punk, goth, and DIY aesthetics in her comics, exploring topics such as relationships, women’s bodies, and violence against women. The chapter also discusses the intertextual connections between these early Swedish creators and other female comics artists worldwide.

Kristy Beers Fägersten explores the comics of Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg in Chapter 3, “A woman’s place (in the panel): Positioning and framing in comics by Nina Hemmingsson and Lotta Sjöberg”. Her main aim is to identify how the two Swedish comic artists, in the single-panel format, address gender norms and roles through positioning and framing. The chapter examines how visual and textual positioning and framing align or conflict, revealing the gendered expectations that women face and how these comics renegotiate “a woman’s place” (p. 8). The author highlights that single-panel comics are rarely created by women globally, making the act of producing such comics a feminist statement in itself.

In Chapter 4, “A brief history of girlsplaining? Reading Klengel, Patu, and Schrupp with Strömquist. Or: Reflecting visualities of gender and feminism in German-language comics”, Marina Rauchenbacher and Katharina Serles analyse the Swedish artist’s, Liv Strömquist’s,

album *Kunskapens frukt* (2014), translated in 2017 in German as *Der Ursprung der Welt* (Eng. *The Origin of the World*). They focus on its influence on the “comeback of the vulva” and its connection to the #metoo movement and the feminist discourse in the German-speaking context. The corpus consists of two other crucial works: Patu’s and Antje Schrupp’s *Kleine Geschichte des Feminismus im euro-amerikanischen Kontext* (2015) and Katja Klengel’s *Girlsplaining* (2018). The authors introduce “the visualities of gender”, exploring how feminist comics illustrate what is shown and what is hidden, usually using visual quotations from non-comic artists (Botticelli, Rodin, Goya, etc.), as a form of intertextuality. The role of humour is mentioned as a strategy to criticise societal gender norms.

Chapter 5, “‘What’s in a name?’: Anke Feuchtenberger’s *Roses* and the mythic methodologies of her feminist comic art”, focuses on Anke Feuchtenberger’s feminist comic art, namely on the pair of graphic narratives *Rosen* and *No Roses*. The rose is considered, generally, a metaphor for love and romance. Therefore, the artist challenges the conventional symbolic meaning of the rose, criticising this perspective. The author, Elizabeth “Biz” Nijdam, uses the theories of Roland Barthes and Mary Daly to explore the myth- and countermyth-making strategies used by the artist to deconstruct the conventional signification of the rose.

In Chapter 6, “For sex-positivity? Potential and limits of representing sex and sexuality in Ulli Lust’s comics across genres,” Anna Vuorinne analyses Ulli Lust’s work. She explores female sexuality, which includes both pleasure and joy together with degradation through pain and trauma, in genres such as pornography, autobiography, and reportage. The chapter underscores the transnational relevance of Lust’s work, highlighting the challenges of opposing “essentialist and hierarchical ideas about sexuality and race” (p. 9) prevalent in Western culture.

In Chapter 7, “Strategies of ambiguity: Non-binary figurations in German-language comics,” Anna Beckmann undertakes an analysis of the representation of non-binary figures in German-language comics, based on some pieces of work of Anke Feuchtenberger, Imke Schmidt, and Ka Schmitz. The author identifies ambiguity and unreliability as the main strategies. These help to question rigid gender roles and challenge expectations of femininity.

Chapter 8, “Feminist and queer aesthetics in Tove Jansson’s *Moomin* comics,” takes the reader to the work of Tove Jansson (an important contributor to children’s literature, but also to queer literature and feminist aesthetics). Mike Classon Frangos analyses Jansson’s *Moomin* newspaper comic and how it explores the performativity of gender.

In Chapter 9, “Feminist education and empowerment: The individual and the collective in Emmi Nieminen and Johanna Vehkoo’s comic on online violence”, Ralf Kauranen and Olli Löytty examine *Vihan ja inhon internet* (Eng. *The Internet of Hate and Loathing*, 2017) by Johanna Vehkoo and Emmi Nieminen, a work of comics journalism addressing online misogynistic hate speech in Finland. The chapter highlights how misogynistic hate speech is a global phenomenon and how the Internet serves as a transnational platform, which the comic represents through innovative visual strategies.

Chapter 10, “The narrative complexity of showing and telling sexual harassment and violence in Kati Kovács’s comics”, presents the comics of Kati Kovács. Her works include both fictional and autobiographical stories about young girls and women experiencing sexual harassment and assault. Leena Romu analyses the corpus in terms of narratology to explore how Kovács combines words and images in complex ways to represent sexual violence in a feminist manner. The author concludes that comics provide unique modalities to address feminist issues. Hence, it demonstrates flexibility and innovation in representing complex topics like sexual violence.

In Chapter 11, “‘After all, we must be our own heroines’: The power of feminism, Fun Home, and form in Wanda Hagedorn’s graphic memoir *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar*”, Małgorzata Olsza examines the graphic memoir *Totalnie Nie Nostalgia: Memuar* (2017) by

Wanda Hagedorn, illustrated by Jacek Fraś, which narrates Hagedorn's childhood and adolescence in 1960s–1970s communist Poland. The chapter highlights the differences between Western and Central European feminist perspectives, shaped by distinct historical and cultural conditions, particularly within the Baltic Sea region. The memoir employs visual metaphors to represent trauma, self-acceptance, and emancipation. Intertextual references are also found (e.g., Alison Bechdel and Kate Zambreno).

The last Chapter, “Staring back at history: Varvara Pomidor and Russian comics” by José Alaniz, presents and analyses Varvara Pomidor's unique comic art – *Pravda* (Eng. *Truth*, 2010). This combines a naïve visual style with mature, unsettling themes that delve into personal, historical, and political dimensions, juxtaposing life events and historical narratives such as the Soviet era, using the collage technique. Although the artist may not explicitly be linked to the feminist movement, Alaniz mentions that her contribution in the time of a men-dominated comics culture can be regarded as an important feminist act.

The contributors to this anthology are experts in comics studies, feminist theory, and visual humour from diverse academic backgrounds (literary studies, linguistics, art history and visual studies, history, sociology, and gender studies). Together, they advance the global and interdisciplinary study of feminist comic art, focusing both on the social phenomenon (and feminist ideas/issues promoted) and on the aesthetic and formal aspects.

Expanding the scope of feminist comics research, the volume includes national comics cultures outside the dominant Anglo-American, Franco-Belgian, and Japanese traditions. It examines how these local histories of comics and feminism, along with their transnational connections, challenge or deconstruct the prevailing narratives of canonical works. Therefore, it highlights how these local perspectives complement or reshape the current understanding of the interplay between feminism and comic art. At the same time, the chapters also highlight the transnational influences between artists.

The volume creates a great collection of comics and comic artists from the Baltic Sea Region, illustrating their power to highlight feminist ideas. It analyses notable artists and their works, investigating how they reflect and/or challenge aspects related to feminism using narrative and visual strategies. Therefore, through this anthology, the concept of feminist comics is now expanded, and it includes comic cultures outside the traditional Anglo-American, Franco-Belgian, and Japanese cultural centres of comic art. Moreover, it highlights the particularities of each country around the Baltic Sea while illustrating the shared perspectives on feminism in the region.

This anthology not only proves the diversity of feminist comic art across the Baltic Sea region but also offers new perspectives on how local and global influences contribute to its evolution. As the editors state, this volume may be considered an indispensable resource for “scholars and students in comics studies, women and gender studies, media studies, and literature” (p. i). Therefore, this volume is an innovative anthology, which may be a starting point for analysing other European feminist comics.

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