

Historicising achronism. Some notes on the idea of art without history in David Carrier's The Aesthetics of Comics.

Jan Baetens

Abstract (E): This article deals with the notion of cultural memory and the postmodern doxa of historicization and contextualization. It discusses the apparently unfashionable notions of anachronism and achronism, the importance of which it illustrates via a dialogue with certain art-historical stances defended by the philosopher David Carrier in his work on comics.

Résumé (F): Le présent article aborde la double question de la mémoire culturelle et de la doxa postmoderne de l'historicisation et de la contextualisation. Il présente les notions apparemment démodées d'achronisme et d'anachronisme, dont il illustre l'importance à travers un dialogue critique avec les positions esthétiques défendues par le philosophe David Carrier dans son livre sur la bande dessinée.

Keywords: Achronism, Anachronism, Art, Caricature, Carrier, Comics, History

Modernism's achronism and postmodernism 's historicization

In one of those dialectical sweeps history will always surprise us with, the postmodern loss of the Great Narratives, with its tyranny of the *hic et nunc* of consumer culture and its rapid fading of any living historical consciousness, seems to have created and then accelerated the move toward a kind of historical turn in the study of culture, even within the narrower field of cultural studies often accused of acute blindness vis-à-vis history. We all know Fredric Jameson's methodological a priori: *always historicize*, just as we all know the crucial importance awarded to detailed historical contextualization within the field of cultural analysis (one may think for instance of the New Historicist paradigm in cultural studies and of the explicit theorization of history in the recently emerged branch of cultural studies called 'cultural analysis' (see Bal 1999). Given this undeniable come-back of history in contemporary culture and reflection on culture, future historians may very well be very intrigued (or not intrigued at all, who knows?) by the

simultaneity of two apparently contradictory phenomena. On the one hand the erosion of traditional historical knowledge (i.e., to put it bluntly, the knowledge that event A is more or less important than event B and the knowledge that event C precedes or follows event D: in the cultural field, this blurring of distinctions and hierarchies has entailed the disappearance of the canon, which could be described as the short-cut to traditionally built-up, conserved and transmitted knowledge unaffected by ephemeral and conjunctural variations). On the other hand the explosion of the craving for a cultural heritage, which is of course the strongest possible symptom of the loss of such an heritage (one should not forget that the widespread creation of *lieux de mémoire* is less the consequence than the cause of the destruction of the 'living past'). Historicizing has thus become a very ambiguous and even ambivalent stance in postmodern culture. It seems at the same time completely absent in the 'eternal present' of consumer culture and absolutely ubiquitous as a theoretical *conditio sine qua non* and as a social practice. Everybody is longing for the remembrance of things past, but nobody seems to know any longer how to exceed a commodified, Disney-like relationship with an unstructured and destructured past.

The erosion of the past has been best documented in the field of literary studies, with the well-known debates on the Western canon and the subsequent battle of the books (see for instance Williams 1995). In the field of the visual arts, one may think here of the discussions surrounding the role and place of the museum as a locus for both canonization and a possible tool for innovation (Damisch 2000). Yet this juxtaposition is a bit misleading, since the museum seems to have managed to reconcile both its canonical and anti-canonical functions, in the eyes of the artist as well as in the eyes of the public, the latter of which has no problems with the museum as a place where one can visit the 'treasures' of the past while being confronted with a severe critique of the very notion of 'treasure' and the very process of 'treasure-making'. In many recent art shows, curators are very fond of 'confronting' the great works of the past with lesser-valued ones, often without taking much care as to the theoretical or didactic framing and explanation of these *tutti-frutti* presentations, which indeed sometimes reflect less upon the canon than they take away the very possibility of such a reflection. In other areas, the erasure of the past has been much more radical. The explosion of the cultural heritage industry can be observed in all fields and at all levels, from the hysterical petty-bourgeois longing for 'antiques' (or the obsession with the

'fifties': fashion, Radio Modern, *Mad Men*, etc.) to the high-art play with the archive (one of the most booming issues in the circuit at the dawn of the new millennium) or the all-pervading scholarly discussions on, for instance, themes such as the *lieux de mémoire*, the trauma and mourning aspects of history (LaCapra 2000), and the digitization of the past (Badir & Baetens, 2004).

Generally speaking, historicization has never before been such a hot topic in the study of culture (and vice versa, since historians are now becoming more and more aware of the 'cultural turn' of their business). Everything is contextualized and historicized (both terms have now become almost synonymous) and any essentialism has been completely banned. No object can be studied without being situated in a 'field' (in semiotic terms, we are reminded that there is no text without a context). Instead of the traditional choice between the eternity of Great Art and the here and now of Mass Media culture, i.e. the choice between Art with a big A and cultures with a small c and in plural, we are invited to consider the historical dimension of both the present and the past. Contemporary culture's complex relationship with the past reveals here a second aspect: its postmodern refusal of the Great Narratives has not only become a very ambivalent plea for a diffuse practice of historicizing and remembering, this complex attitude towards the traditional conception of the past also implies a strong rejection of all types of all encompassing visions (such as for instance in the field of art, where 'eternal' works or values can no longer be defended). In short, contemporary doxa has an aversion of essentialism, which is always an aversion of achronism (and I mean by this term the specific temporality of objects or events whose characteristics are so general and context-insensitive that their meaning and value exceeds time in the chronological sense of the word). In a certain sense, and in order to synthesize the two tendencies one can distinguish in postmodernism's relationship with the past, history, or time (or even with the Past, History, or Time), one could say that postmodernism has, first, an easy relationship with *anachronism* (the knowledge of the past is unstructured, everything is mixed up, chronology does no longer matter) and, second, an uneasy relationship with *achronism* (the unstructured knowledge of the past is never 'timeless' or 'outside time': context always matters, nothing stands 'above' time).

This aversion of achronism, as we all know, is strongly linked with an aversion of modernism (in

the Anglo-Saxon meaning of the word: the artistic innovation of the 1910-1940 period, following the first modernisms of the end of the 19th century and competing with the revolutionary avant-garde movements). (High-)modernism's preference for 'mythical thinking' and the preference it gave to spatial rather than temporal structures, has been interpreted as crypto- or overt fascism, its negation of time and history as constituting essentially (hah) a negation of man's being in time, and therefore of Mankind itself.¹ Postmodernism's battle against modernist Great Narratives, i.e. against narratives whose teleology often masks some essentialist and thus fundamentally achronic bias (one can think here of course of the Greenbergian paradigm), cannot be fully understood without these political underpinnings: the critique of the Great Works of the Past is not just a matter of baby boomer laziness or the result of the all-pervading influence of television, it is also a critique of the (high-)modernist desire to clear the historical contingencies that keep us away from an 'ideal state of the art'. Postmodernism's practice of anachronism, which could have engendered a certain practice of achronism, has thus taken a different turn: since it is so strongly opposed to (high-)modernism's sense of history and time, it also refuses (high-)modernism's implicit hypothesis of an all-encompassing philosophy of history and time (a philosophy which, at a certain abstract level, comes very close to certain ideas on achronism).

Anachronism as a rule, achronism as a provocation?

If historicization has become the norm, model or doxa of postmodernism, then achronism may well be defined as its anti-norm. Yet postmodern historicity is not a traditional one: since the traditional vision of time and past has been shattered, history too has become a matter of bits and pieces, where anachronism has achieved a respectable status. Anachronism appears to be the 'natural' way to historicize our relation with people and object, as can clearly be seen in the transformation of the historical novel, whose postmodern version, the so-called revisionist historical fiction (see Hutcheon 2002), explicitly goes looking for anachronisms in order to stress the constructedness of the past (there is no such thing as history unless we manage to build it up starting from our current knowledge and current interrogations) and to stress the necessity of

¹ The landmark publication on this debate remains Frank Kermode's study on apocalyptic thinking, *The Sense of an Ending* (Kermode 2000). I insist on the difference between Modernism (a term so general and diffuse that it has become very difficult to use without many misunderstandings) and the more local meanings of the word. Anglo-Saxon High-Modernism's preference for myth and mythological thinking, for instance, has nothing to do with a Baudelairian use of the term, which leaves much room for the contemporary and the ephemeral. For a good survey of these discussions, see Compagnon (1994).

looking at the past while always emphatically putting something at stake (we look at the past from the viewpoint of the present and always in the hope to change both the present and the future).

Yet the spread of anachronism, freeing us from the teleological rigidities of the Great Narratives, is not considered a positive evolution by everybody,. Anachronism may indeed be seen as an unwelcome side-effect of postmodernism's 'anything goes' stance or as the slightly frightening consequence of its impossibility to construct any real history. One should thus not be surprised that in recent years the postmodernist lust for all-over and politically inspired historicization has come under strong attack.

First, the idea of context came under fire. Not as a theoretical concept (nobody denies the necessity of contextualizing), but as a methodological tool (context is fine, but how does one use it?). As Jonathan Culler put in a much-quoted statement: "Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless" (Culler 1997: 67). With this simple remark, which is also a strong critique, the very program of historicizing objects and practices was seriously damaged: the historicization of the text had always meant the contextual broadening of the text, i.e. its framing in terms of an excluded outside which was expected to deliver the key for the understanding of its internal logic (as deconstruction has learned to do (or taught us?), with the study of the "supplement" and the "parergon").

Then followed a denial of doing politics while doing historicization. Here also, the argument goes more or less as it goes in the discussion on the concrete application of the idea of context: everybody is doing politics, even a person working in a humanities department in a university, where the connection with the concerns of 'the people' in the street may seem very thin, or where scholars do not seem to have the power to influence 'real' politics. But is it enough to 'politicize' the curriculum and to conceive of the classroom as a place for consciousness-raising to do politics? As Stanley Fish, who cannot be accused of right-wing cultural studies bashing or New Historicism denigration, argued in his book *Professional Correctness* (Fish 1995), one cannot at the same time do scholarly research (the rules of which are defined within the academe and even within the narrow borders of independent and closed disciplines) and do politics (the rules of

which are defined within the larger whole of society). Doing politics in the classroom is fine, but it is not enough, and real politics are conducted elsewhere. Here too, the critique seems innocent, but its consequences are paramount, since the final aim of historicization had never been the broadening or the dynamization of a discipline, but always to give scholarship a social meaning. Critiques such as those formulated by Fish at least make clear that this task is not easy.

Third and finally, the very concept of close reading started finding new advocates, mostly as a reaction against the exaggerated abstraction of what some called 'theory'. Recently, pleas for close reading have been popping up regularly,² and it is helpful to remember the strong anti-historicist bias of this scholarly method (in order) to become aware of the paradigm shift we are experiencing today (the come-back of poetry, as a reading and writing practice as well as a field of scholarly and theoretical research is a symptom of the recently regained 'sexiness' (appeal?) of text- rather than context-oriented studies and preoccupations). This return of the text is not just a pendulum-like come-back of one of the poles of the text/context dual economy, but a new moment in their never-ending dialectics.

In this perspective, it is possible to better understand why eminent scholars have recently been making some very unsettling remarks on the *achronism* of the artistic field they are studying. David Carrier, for instance, the author of a philosophical reflection on comics (as far as I know, the only example of scholarly philosophical commitment in the unappreciated field of comics and graphic novels), insists very much on the lack of any 'evolution' of the genre. Can such an intervention be read as a provocation against a certain postmodern doxa, and thus as a sign of antipostmodern (or postpostmodern) times? It would be incautious to drive home the point without any further reading. For this reason, I will propose in this article an analysis (in part a historicized one, of course) of the provocative stance by Carrier in the very rarely treated case of comics.

² In this case too, a reading of some leading journals (*PMLA*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Diacritics*) and of professional publications such as MLA's annual *Profession*, suggests that attention is increasingly being paid to the reading and analysis of concrete texts, first in a negative, then in a positive manner: the complaints that poetry is fading away in the programs, for instance, certainly in the foreign languages departments, has probably played a role in *PMLA*'s decision to produce a poetry issue in 2005 (after the boom of the special issues on topics such as 'globalization', this return to a segment of the former core business of literary studies is very symptomatic).

Once upon a time...

The choice for David Carrier as a corroboration of the point I would like to make in this article may seem a little astonishing, yet it is in reality a very logical one. First, because this author has done important work in the circle of Arthur Danto, whose work on the philosophy of art and history in general and the end of art in particular remains a major contribution to the field (in 1998, for instance, Carrier edited the important collection *Danto and his critics* (Carrier 1998)). Second, because Carrier is one of the very few philosophers to write on comics, still a much-despised medium in Anglo-Saxon scholarly reflection. His decision to tackle the field of comics, rather than to write a new book on visual artists strongly influenced by comics, deserves praise. Third, because the author does not write about comics as a 'fan' in order to enjoy the response of other fans, but as a philosopher eager to read comics in the light of Art.

David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (Carrier 2000) does not aim to give a history of comics, nor does it want to provide its reader with a whirlwind of examples or background information on the genre. Instead the book strives for a philosophical reading of a particular art form from the double viewpoint of the history of art (directly inspired by Gombrich, and also a little by Greenberg) and the philosophy of art (strongly indebted to Danto). As Carrier puts it himself: "(...) just as Descartes could philosophize using but a small selection of examples, so I identify the nature of comics by surveying a limited range of materials" (4). Carrier's theoretical and intellectual references bring him to a vision of art in which the philosophy of art and the history of art seamlessly coincide: postulating a certain definition of art as a way to tackle a crucial issue of representation (the representation of the outside world, in the premodern history of Western art since Giotto as told by Gombrich, the representation of itself in the modern history of Western art since Manet as told by Greenberg, the impossibility of representation itself since Warhol and the shift from art to philosophy in the post-historical history of Western art as told by Danto), Carrier accepts that art is defined by its history (the history of gradually matching new technologies to the basic issue of the art, until the complete matching of problem and technology, i.e. the set of appropriate artistic devices, brings art history to its end).

I will not discuss here this Hegelian interpretation, the scope of which exceeds by far the limits of

this article. The discussion on the end of (art) history is a broad philosophical, social, and political one, which needs a broad interdisciplinary approach that of course goes far beyond the ambitions of my text (for an example, see for instance Rollins 1993). What I would like to do here, is examine the strange position held by Carrier, who argues throughout his whole book that comics as an art form is not only part of this all-over master narrative of Western representation, but that it has been post-historical from its very beginnings. In other words: comics is not an art form whose history, as all art history in Western culture, has come to an end (and has thus turned into something else, which Danto calls philosophy), but is an art form which has never had a history. To quote the author: "(...) from the start the comic was essentially a posthistorical art, incapable of development (...)" (7).

First of all, I will try to give a survey of the arguments used by Carrier in order to articulate his provocative idea on the post-historicity of comics, which it is possible to define as a perfect illustration of 'achronism'. Second, I will criticize these arguments, as I believe that there are some serious flaws in his argumentation (these flaws also have to do with lacunas in his corpus, but I will come back to this later on). However, it should be clear that this critique does not seek to reopen here the issue of 'art after the end of art': my topic is Carrier, not Danto. Yet, implicitly and maybe unavoidably, one may recognize in my critique of Carrier a sign of my reluctance to follow Danto's interpretation of art and history.

What brings Carrier to the idea that comics has never had a history, or at least a *real*, i.e. aesthetically and philosophically relevant, history? His main argument is that any art form should be considered in relationship to its essence: "To interpret an art, we need to know its essence, its defining qualities" (7). In the case of comics, the essence is defined as follows:

"Speech balloons and closely linked narrative sequences - these are the crucial, the defining elements of comics. But there is a third way in which the comic strip differs in kind from other visual art. (...) Visual artworks, be they frescoes, panel paintings, or even old-master drawings, typically hang on walls. Spectators move around these objects. Movies, too, are public. (...) Comics are read like books, by one person, who by turning the pages determines how fast he or she moves through the narrative."(64-65).

But this description is just technical. The issue at stake here is that these techniques help to realize an 'essence', which Carrier identifies as the essence of Western painting itself:

"Comics permit us to see, in retrospect, what the essence of painting was (the essence of European painting, Chinese art has quite different concerns). They show how the needs of narrative painting naturally led to the employment of speech balloons and visual sequences. Comics thus make explicit the problem implicit in narrative painting: How is it possible to tell a story without reference to some prior text? (...) Far from being an odd or marginal form of visual art, comics are of central importance, because they thus mark the natural limits of this mainline modernist tradition." (74)

"Looking backward, viewing the history of art in light of the historical perspective I have supplied, comics appear the natural end point of the tradition of European painting. Making outwardly visible the inner feelings of depicted figures, unambiguously presenting the development of action: when these goals are fully achieved by comics, then the whole tradition from Giotto through Impressionism finds its natural resolution (...)" (115)

After this epiphany regarding painting's essence, painters had no option left other than turning towards autorepresentation, first moving away from representation (Greenberg), then hitting the limits of art itself (Danto).

The second argument is that this essence can be either given or found immediately, or discovered gradually through time. Painting is of course an example of the second case, and the systematically cited and paraphrased master narratives of Gombrich (detailing/ recounting/ narrating/ positing the progressive discovery of the best way to represent perception), Greenberg (detailing/ recounting/ narrating/ positing the progressive discovery of the best way to represent the essence of painting by painting itself), and Danto (detailing/ recounting/ narrating/ positing the progressive discovery of the impossibility to tell the difference between art and non-art), very neatly illustrate the historical dimension of this essentialist thinking. Comics, however, is a good

example of the first case for Carrier, since from the very first published comic strip (Outcault's 1895 *Yellow Kid*, in Carrier's strictly American view of the medium: in Europe, there are many other and much older types and traditions than the American 'newspaper-strip' (see Kunzle 1973 & 1990)) this art form had at its disposal all it needed to realize its essence: it had speech balloons which enabled it to represent speech and thought and to bridge the word/image gap, it had the sequential structure which enabled it to represent a simultaneously verbal and visual story, and it had the reduced size which enabled it to function in the mass media (the reason why this parameter is important elicits no further comment from Carrier, who just mentions this third element). Given the fact that this triple technology perfectly fit the essence of the genre, comics has never had a history, since there simply was no reason and even no possibility for it to have one. Born perfect, all the genre could do was reproduce itself endlessly. Arriving at the end of the history of Western representation, comics solves all problems left unsolved up until then by painting (in that tradition). Once it emerged (and there is in Carrier's book a curious repetition of the word 'once', which stresses of course the literal coincidence of terminus *ad quem* and terminus *a quo* in his teleological framework), everything had *already* been accomplished.

Does this imply that no history at all occurs (develops)? Yes and no. No real history occurs (takes place), indeed, since the logical possibilities of the genre are present from its very start (beginning), so that the modifications one can make are only superficial:

"Recent comics artists have developed styles different from those of Winsor McCay and George Herriman, but once the word balloon and the narrative sequence were invented, the basic tools of this art form were available. The presentation of novel content did not require any additions to or radical development of these techniques. In this sense, there is no progress in comics - there are no deep ways in which present day balloons or image sequences differ in kind from those of the pioneering artists." (109)

If there is any history, its nature is second-rate (it is second-rate): it is social history, with its gradual unfolding of new themes and its endless succession of authors and groups whose social conditions are of course never completely the same. But from Carrier's philosophical viewpoint, nothing 'essential' happens after the 'essence' of an art form has been disclosed.

"(...) once Richard Outcault learned how to ink in the color for his *Yellow Kid*, all the essential technology required for comics existed. (...) A history of the comics must therefore be a social history - an account of the ways in which this art form reflects changing social and political goals and needs." (113)

Carrier's view on comics is an ambitious attempt to include a widely underrated genre in the glorious history of Western High-Art. Comics, Carrier argues, are not just a member of the family, they are the very culmination of a century-long evolution leading to an essence that painting itself was unable to achieve. Yet at the same time, this valorization remains ambivalent. Indeed, while being careful to stay clear from the high-low divide, Carrier does use a historic/a-historic distinction that comes very close to it. Take for instance his comparison with pop music, which should ring a bell:

"Comics stand to museum art rather as pop recording does to classical music; once the early rock-and-roll pioneers discovered how to perform Afro-American blues on electric instruments, the essentials of that art had been identified. The interesting discoveries were made very early on, Robert Johnson's 1930s recordings employing, in technically primitive form, almost all of the musical techniques that made the Rolling Stones famous in the 1960s." (114)

Even more astonishing is Carrier's statement that comics resemble novels in that both have no history: "But the most famous comics illustrators were boldly original not in terms of their formal innovations but because they found new subjects and original kinds of characters. In this way, these creators of comics seem more like novelists than visual artists." (114-115) In this statement the art-philosophical a priori of Carrier's thinking becomes fully visible: most art philosophers indeed proceed from the unquestioned assumption that art is in fact synonymous with visual art (i.e. with painting, much less with sculpture, never with cinema). The reduction of the domain of Art to the field of a certain category of visual art is typical of much philosophical thinking on the arts and already points to one of the inherent weaknesses of *The Aesthetics of Comics*.

The most immediately perceptible flaw in Carrier's book is of course the rather crude way in which it tries to match the comics corpus with the definition put forward by the author. The problem here is not with the definition: one has the right to argue that comics are defined by the conjunction of a) balloons, b) single word and image narratives, c) scale reduction, just as one has the right to consider that each of these elements are questionable and others much more important (Groensteen 1999). And neither does the problem lie with the corpus: one has the right to think that there is no other way than the American way, just as one has the right to disagree with a vision of comics can include any American comic published after 1895 while ignoring or misinterpreting other examples (the exclusion of the non-American or non-Americanized comic may seem shocking to a European, and difficult to understand in the case of a scholar who has such a fine knowledge of European culture, but even the inclusion of comic strips that do not obey the narrow American newspaper model would not have modified Carrier's argumentation). Even in the United States some do not surrender passively to the "balloon" -definition of the comics as launched by Outcault (see for instance the proceedings of the 1995 "centennial" conference, where a widespread agreement on the frailty of the American definition emerged (Dierick & Lefèvre 1998). What is the problem, however, is the manipulation of the corpus so that it can match the definition, and hence the very history of the genre. Given the fact that the definition used by the art-philosopher claims to be both essential and teleological (essence and history being furthermore exactly the same), any room for discussion is brutally taken away. Carrier excludes pre-1895 balloon strips as definitively as he excludes post-1895 non balloon strips. Carrier disregards comics whose function is not exclusively narrative just as he neglects comics in which the interaction of words and images is less seamless than he than he would have it be in his theory. Carrier finally also neglects textless or balloonless comics just as he forgets to question large-format or non-print versions of the genre. At the same time, *The Aesthetics of comics* praises George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* to the sky (and I can only fully agree with this appreciation), a work that often completely lacks balloons and a neatly operating narrative word and image conjunction...

The biggest problem with the book, however, is the fact that the unification of words and images into a new and single story is actually never demonstrated. The principle is certainly endlessly repeated, but we are never provided with any concrete evidence, unless (apart from) at a very

general level. Moreover, the very idea that the verbal and the visual in comics can also be used to tell separate, even contradictory, stories, is never taken into account, whereas the possible tension between words and images is considered by more than one theoretician an important innovation of comics to storytelling (for a survey of this on-going debate, see Groensteen 1999). Carrier's unusually ecumenical vision of the genre is probably related to his conviction that "great art = synthesis", (a stance) which does not come from Danto or Greenberg or Gombrich, but from Winckelmann. It is perfectly possible to explain this error: such a way of reading comics reflects the philosophical Superego of the professional philosopher, who has a difficult time coping with the specific features of art, which are not (always) an illustration of philosophical or theoretical stances and discussions. Carrier's problem is here that of philosophy in art in general, which forgets too easily that it gives just one perspective (and not necessarily the ultimate one) on the thing called art;

This curious, but very forceful matching of corpus and definition, of things and words, on the one hand, and the abuse of wishful thinking in the analysis of concrete examples, on the other hand, are, I believe, the direct consequence of the author's *philosophical* starting point. One cannot, at the same time, be respectful of the purity of the theory and the complexities of an object that always resists philosophical generalization (and in this case, philosophical eradication of the object's temporality and historicity).

New departures?

I would like to stress that Carrier's blunt negation of comics genre history and historicity, except in the anecdotal sense of social *petite histoire*, should not be considered a part of the current dissent (dissatisfaction?) with a postmodern *Zeitgeist* accused of sacrificing not only the great narratives (they of course have not disappeared) but history and historical awareness *tout court*. On the contrary, the a-historicity which Carrier attributes to the comics art form is deeply rooted in a teleological framework cast on art and culture that radically historicizes postmodernism. Yet at the same time, an intriguing, although obscure, complicity rises between postmodernism's inclination toward anachronism and art-philosophy's production of achronism in its teleological master narrative. The missing link between both is the difficulty to grasp the future in terms other than repetition, remake, sometimes boring, sometimes titillating. In a sense, one might even say

that the hyper-rational vision of post-history as achronism developed by Carrier (i.e. by Danto, who Carrier follows completely on this point) tends to show anachronism as a mask of historical (historically?) forced immobility, whereas the unfolding of anachronisms in contemporary postmodern culture tends to make more complex the too linear vision of 'social history' which is the only form of time conceded to art and society by Hegelian thinkers such as Carrier.

The fact that Carrier makes his point by foregrounding the almost systematically neglected case of comics is both the strength and the weakness of his argumentation. Indeed, the very fact that Carrier pays so little attention to the third 'essential' aspect of the genre, i.e. its (reduced) scale, registers as a strong symptom for the reader. Scale-reduction, one might think, or the shift toward the private reading sphere (it never becomes clear whether Carrier is willing or not to separate these two elements) sounds very strange in comparison with the widely commented upon features of speech and thought balloons on the one hand and narrative sequence on the other hand. In reality, what is hidden behind the occasional remarks on scale reduction is an aspect that Carrier never succeeds in tackling satisfactorily: mass-production, mass-consumption, mass-culture. The very emphasis on the continuity of the Western canon and the still very poorly esteemed field of comics prevents him from seeing the heart of the matter: the transition not from an elite to a non-elite art, but the leap from a conception of the work of art as an object (be it original or not, this is a false question) to a conception of the work of art as part of a media network and as a social practice. Comics have been studied by philosophers to the extent that the medium has been 'remediated' by artists. It is now time to leave this remediation behind and tackle the real thing.

Carrier is not totally blind to this revolution, but again he reduces it to his achronic a priori. He agrees that something unseen is going on in comics, namely the fact that in this art form meaning is produced by the audience, whereas in the previous era meaning was considered the inalienable privilege of the artist: "Comics are about their audience, we readers who project into them our desires". (92) But this important shift is immediately neutralized by comparing this new way of meaning-making with high-art profoundness: deep art for times of history in the making (and history made by strong people: artists), flat art for flat times of post-history (not made but simply *lived*, maybe depressingly so, by audiences).

This conclusion is dissatisfying for two reasons. First because it maintains the traditional and utterly reactionary vision of a passive audience (the consumer may be considered active to the extent he or she is able to produce meaning, but this activity is nothing more than a projection, i.e. a repetition). Second, because more generally speaking, authorship always remains at the side of the artist, even if this artist is, from an art-philosophical standpoint, dead, except as a provider of some superficial content for entertainment use only. The real breakdown of the boundary between author and audience, between maker and consumer, between the philosopher and the unhappy crowd, is yet to be imagined by Carrier. In contemporary network society, however, this breakdown is happening everywhere. When he looks at the future, the author of *The Aesthetics of Comics* is an author who can do nothing but stay put, unable to observe from the peak of his Olympus what is going on at his feet. This calls for a return to earth. But such a return, which implies a forsaking of achronism, is not an uncritical embrace of anachronism. It is, on the contrary, a new opportunity to really historicize the comics medium as a social practice and to show that it is possible to find a dialectical way out of the sterile opposition of achronism and anachronism.

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Jan Baetens is professor of cultural studies at KU Leuven and editor in chief of "Image (& Narrative". E-mail: jan.baetens@arts.kuleuven.be