

Comicalities

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Comics out loud

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Comics Aloud: Introduction

Comics Out Loud: Introduction

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Comics Out Loud: Introduction [fr]

Summaries

English French

This folder is about comics as sound objects. The collection of articles and interviews examines how comics can be adapted, remediated and/or transformed into aural works. The collection's scope includes songs, radio dramas, audiobooks, and other aural forms, such as a spoken reading of a comic.

This thematic issue addresses comics through their sound objects. It brings together articles and interviews that study how comics can be adapted, remediated and/or transformed into acoustic works. This includes songs, radio plays, audiobooks and many other sound productions, such as the public reading of an album.

Index Entries

Keywords : sounds , comics , sound fiction , radio , oral reading , podcast , audio series

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Editor's Notes

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Full text

Beyond Synaesthesia

1 The reception of comics, like that of any artistic medium, is determined not only by the forms they take, but also by the cultural contexts in which they are distributed and the material conditions of their publications¹. While this may seem an obvious point, it is often overlooked in approaches that work with comics as 'disembodied texts' to be analyzed without reference to their materiality. Nevertheless, comics are always understood by their reader through their material dimensions, whether these are digital or printed in nature, and in the context of other cultural productions, everyday objects and interfaces.

2 Accepting that "materiality matters" means "challeng[ing] the idea that comics are a purely visual medium" (Hague 2014, 3). Reading a comic book means looking at it, handling it, feeling it, and arguably hearing it, even in so-called 'silent reading'. This materialist understanding goes beyond the framing presented by Scott McCloud's argument that comics is a "mono-sensory medium" (1993, 89; see also McMurtry 2019, who applies the concept to audio dramas) to draw out an embodied experience of sensation. McCloud goes on to argue that

[comics rely] on only one of the senses to convey a world of experience. But what of the other four? We represent sound through devices such as word balloons. But all in all, it is an exclusively visual representation.

3 This notion of sight as the mediator for the other senses has been explored extensively in Comics Studies (Khordoc 2001, Covey 2005, Robert 2015, Wilde 2017, Pellitteri 2019), which connects the advent of "an audiovisual stage on paper" (Smolderen 2009, 137) to the intermedia context of the sonic cultures of modernity (Fresnault-Deruelle 2013, Glaude 2019). But this *implicitly* multisensory object is not the subject of this thematic dossier. Rather, we are concerned here with sound and the voice as truly *acoustic* phenomena heard through the ears, not apprehended through the eyes.

4 In taking this approach, we move away from synaesthesia (hearing implied by sight) and towards the actual sounds generated by comics (Hague 2014, 68, 80 and 84). Not counting the sound environment of reading (sound around comics, studied for example by Ormrod 2018), we can distinguish those produced by the manipulation of the object reading (sounds of comics), sounds integrated electronically or digitally into the graphic narrative and triggered by the reader (sounds in comics) and, finally those of primary interest to us here: sounds broadcast alongside a comic to which they are linked (sounds with comics), including by voice. This is a common phenomenon, as will be well known by those who read comics or picture books to children, although these two different forms nevertheless require different approaches to vocalization (Sanders 2013). Performing a comic aloud requires creativity, as one must synthesize a voice (or voices) from words and images, but shared reading can also be as simple as pointing to the elements successively read aloud. In the opening lines of *The Narratology of Comic Art*, Kai Mikkonen (2017, 1) recalls learning to read with his father, at around age 5 or 6, from Donald Duck and Bugs Bunny comic books. The adult had his own method: he chose a page at random, separated the syllables with felt-tip pen strokes, before reading them to his son. The narratologist remembers the importance of the images, which he could follow as he listened to his father decipher the speech bubbles. The impact of such live readings on the field can be found in the influence they have had on noted comics artists, such as French creator Jacques Martin:

One day, as I was going to my piano lesson, passing in front of the open window of the Châtenay-Malabry patronage, I heard exclamations that intrigued me. I went in to see what was happening. A series of slides from the adventures of Tintin were being shown there, the different voices were interpreted by a commentator who mimed the action. [...] Under the influence of this sensational discovery, I went home to tell my parents that I wanted to become a comic strip artist.

[One day, as I was going to my piano class, I walked by the open window of the Châtenay-Malabry patronage (catholic youth club) and heard intriguing

exclamations. I entered to see what was happening. A slideshow was being displayed, from the adventures of Tintin, while the commentator performed the different voices, whilst mimicking the action. (...) Stunned by this amazing discovery, I went home to tell my parents that I wanted to become a cartoonist.]

(Jacques Martin, quoted in Groensteen 1984, 17.)

Making Comics Audible

- 5 Alongside shared reading, many audio fictions have been recorded with several voices, music and sound effects. In the French-speaking world, professional productions of *The Adventures of Tintin* also existed: three different ones on Radio Luxembourg in the 1950s, and most famously 433 episodes of an RTF serial, broadcast three times a week from October 1959, most of which were reproduced on records by Pathé Marconi (Decker 48-56). From vinyl records to story boxes, objects of children's culture made it possible to re-experience these adventures at will. In 1932, Zig, Puce and Bécassine entered the new recording genre of sung sketches, while cartoonist Alain Saint-Ogan was very active on the radio (Baudry 2016; Figure 1). In 1961, *Asterix the Gaul* [*Asterix the Gaul*] was released simultaneously in bookshops and record stores (Michallat 2018, 42-49 and 87-92; Lesage 2018, 176-184), after being serialized in *Pilote* comics magazine and on Radio Luxembourg . A wave of vinyl records adapted from comics, notably *Disques d'aventure* (Festival, Philips, Musidisc) and *Le Petit Ménéstrel* (Adès) book-and-record sets, swept through France from the 1960s to the 1980s (Marmonnier 2009, 22- 35; Glaude 2023). Today, streaming audio series and podcast radio dramas (Lohse 2015), like public readings at festivals (Lyon BD, Québec BD and their “bandes éditions à voix”), present performances of comics for audiences of all ages (for more French examples , see Glaude 2024).



Figure : Children's programs from *Le Poste parisien* . Here, with Alain Saint-Ogan, their spiritual father, are Mitou, Toti and Serpentin, stars of the Ovomalline concerts

Anonymous photograph, in *Paris-Soir* , November 7th, 1935, p. 14.

- 6 Audio performances of comics have a long history in the English language as well. Dennis O'Neil, perhaps most noted for his work on DC's Batman comics, has similar recollections of the audio world of comics to those of Jacques Martin quoted above:

You know, one of the things we haven't talked about is the old Superman radio show. [...] I think maybe that was a bigger influence on me than the Superman comic books. That was everyday during my childhood, Monday through Friday,

5:15, St. Louis radio. Comic books were maybe once a week, until I got older and into the habit of trading them with my friends. But we all listened to those radio shows. (Dennis O'Neil, quoted in Eury 2006, 119.)

- 7 As O'Neil indicates here, children in the USA had an appointment several times a week with a comic-book hero (Lackmann 2004). The most famous serialized radio drama is probably still Superman (Gordon 2017, 73, 107-108; see also Frahm 2004, Freeman 2015), broadcast at least three times a week from 1940 to 1951, which endowed the superhero with a voice (that of Bud Collyer) and catchphrases including “up in the sky!” and “a never-ending battle for truth and justice” that followed him into other media. Newspaper comic strips also saw some play on the airwaves, with New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia famously incorporating readings of *Dick Tracy* and *Little Orphan Annie* into some 1945 editions of his *Talk to the People* radio show during a newspaper delivery strike, which Jean-Paul Gabilliet explores in detail in his article in this collection (for English language discussions of this event, see NPR 2008 and O'Dell 2007). As in France, records also played a role in English language comics: in 1966, Marvel Comics teamed up with Golden Records to produce four LPs that told the story of four of the comics that had contributed to the company's silver age revival: *Amazing Spider-Man #1*, *Avengers #4* (return of Captain America), *Fantastic Four #1* and *Journey Into Mystery #83* (first appearance of Thor) (see Hague 2014, 77-79 for a more detailed discussion of these works). More recent examples of audio comics include Ben Katchor's *Julius Knipl Audio Cartoons*, and Audible's adaptations of Gaiman et al's *The Sandman* (Figure 2; see also Christopher 2018, McMurtry 2019), both of which are explored in detail in this dossier and point to a new context in which audio comics can be situated alongside prose audiobooks thanks to the growth in streaming media over internet platforms. This is something that is also taken advantage of by the creators of *The Rez*, as discussed in their interview with Alex Fitch in this collection, which looks at questions of audiences and markets for audible works in addition to considering the creative process of this particular work.



Figure 2: Neil Gaiman and Dirk Maggs in 2012 at launch event for 'Neverwhere' (BBC Radio 4), October 23th, 2012.

Photograph by Comedycrank, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International.

- 8 The oral reading of comics, live and without prior rewriting, as well as the recording of an audio adaptation of comics, which can be listened to offline, raise narratological and cultural issues. Recording a comic requires adaptation, involving not only interpreting the comics' texts (including onomatopoeia), but also the creation of a narrative voice and additional sound content (music and sound effects). The transition from visual to sound narration, which is interesting in its own right, especially in the

field of audionarratology, can be complicated by multimodal reception practices, when a listener, for example, leaves through the comic book at the source of the sound adaptation he or she is listening to. Listening to a soundtrack while reading a comic book changes the reading experience (Screech 2010, Blin-Rolland 2019), especially in terms of temporality, and no doubt also has an effect on fictional immersion.

The Structure of this Collection

9 This dossier of *Comicalités* explores these issues, approaching comics through their sound objects. It brings together articles and interviews that study and document how comics can be adapted, remediated and/or transformed into acoustic works. Included in the scope of the dossier are songs, radio plays, audiobooks and many other sound productions, such as the public reading of a comics album. Although the collection cannot claim to be comprehensive in its survey of audio comics, it nevertheless covers a broad range of works that are either acoustic in nature or that generate reinterpretations of comics through the acoustic mode. Note, however, that the remit of this collection excludes audiovisual adaptations for theater, television or film, as well as the visual translation of sound into comics (eg, the drawn adaptation of a musical work in a “*concert Dessiné*”).

10 The folder is divided into three parts. In the first and second, researchers from a variety of backgrounds (comics specialists from history, libraries, literary studies, linguistics, research and creation) explore the rich sound history of the field from the early 20th century to the present day. They examine how sound both opens up possibilities for and imposes constraints on what is generally considered a visual medium. In the third part, audio professionals are interviewed about their work in contemporary audio creation (2014-2023). This section aims to document a dynamic and multifaceted contemporary creation that is simultaneously burgeoning in several cultural areas.

11 In the first section, on the audible past of comics, three articles take us back to the first half of the 20th century, in three different cultural areas. Historian Jean-Paul Gabilliet looks back at the New York City newspaper deliverymen’s strike of July 1945. For two weeks, WNYC public radio presenters took turns reading strips from New York dailies (printed but undelivered) on weekdays, giving way on Sundays to the mayor of the metropolis himself, Fiorello La Guardia, who gave lively readings of Sunday pages on the air. These partially recorded radio broadcasts testify not only to a troubled socio-political context, but also to the possibilities and limits of the reading of comic strips on the airwaves. Next, literary scholars Lorenzo Di Paola and Eva Van de Wiele go further back in time to study the first decades (1908-1931) of *Corriere dei Piccoli*, the first Italian magazine to regularly publish comic strips, and whose existence spanned the entire 20th century. They link its beginnings to an ancient oral tradition in Italy, that of the “cantastorie” (itinerant artists who told or sang stories in public squares, with the help of painted posters depicting key scenes from their tales), traces of which they find “remediated”, in connection with modern educational practices and children’s consumer goods, in the forms of the comics magazine for children *Corriere dei Piccoli*. Finally, two researchers from the Royal Library of Belgium, Benoît Crucifix and Sébastien Hermans, trace the destiny of a Brussels transmedia character from the 1930s: Jules Slache. Created by Marcel Antoine, a multi-talented artist who was equally at home in live performance, radio, press cartoons and comic strips, Slache enjoyed success with humorous sketches on Radio Schaerbeek from 1936 onwards. Conducting research before and after this date, in various print and performance media, Crucifix and Hermans reconstruct the hero’s intermedia journeys, including as a comic in the bilingual weekly *Spirou/Robbedoes*.

12 A second section of the dossier, entitled “Comics Aloud Today”, invites us to listen to current comics through sound objects of various kinds (webseries, book-and-record sets

and audio series), which oscillate between oral readings and sound adaptations of comics. Benjamin Fraser, a specialist in the relationship between comics and urban life, studies the “radio cartoons” of *Julius Knipf's: Real Estate Photographer*, a series of fourteen short audio fictions, produced by David Isay and broadcast online. Already very “sonic” in itself, this American comic strip is saturated with the sounds of modern life, and develops a particular use of speech, particularly in terms of linguistic rhythm, which lends itself well to acoustic adaptation. Fraser shows how “radio cartoons” remediate both radio and comics, replacing them in the cultural context in which they were broadcast. Next, artist-researcher Damon Herd looks at two works by Quebec artist Geneviève Castrée, each of which combines a comics album with a record of songs: *Pamplemoussi* (2004) and *Tout seul dans la forêt en plein jour, avez-vous peur?* (2007). He begins by defining the genre of these works, between artist’s “recordworks” and “musicomic” albums, recalling previous examples combining records and comics. He then analyses Castrée’s two book-and-record sets, comparing the soundtrack to the drawn narrative: their respective autonomy as artistic works, their temporality in terms of reception, and the diegetic status of music in each of the graphic narratives. Then, linguist Silvia Masi studies the first season of the webseries *La Bande dessinée à voix haute*, co-produced by the Lyon BD and Quebec BD festivals in 2018 and 2019. The webseries gave French-speaking authors the opportunity to read and comment on an excerpt from a recent album, in professionally produced video clips. Each of them appropriates the video space, but there are certain trends that unite them: they all choose to embody their characters vocally, they assume their involvement in editorial marketing (they promote an album) and they express an artistic positioning by commenting on their own work. Finally, literary scholar Laurent Bozard examines the productions of Blynd, a French sound production company, which has been offering sound fictions adapted from French-language comics via its app and online audio streaming platforms since 2020. According to its slogan, Blynd creates “cinema for the ears” by adapting mainstream comics series. Based on analyses of several works and an interview with Christophe Arleston (the comics writer who self-adapted *Lanfeust* for Blynd), Bozard discusses the differences in serialization between comics series and their adaptations into audio series.

- 13 The last part of the dossier features four interviews with audio practitioners about recent sound creations related to comics. Jennifer Nagtegaal interviews the artist and singer Isol (Marisol Misenta), a well-known Argentinian comics author. The interview focuses on her “discómic” *Novela gráfica* (2014), a book-and-CD set combining an album by her musical group SIMA with a set of graphic narratives, each corresponding to a song on the CD. Next, Vikram Nijhawan talks to Dirk Maggs, who has had a long career directing radio dramas for the BBC, about his recent work on *The Sandman* for Audible (2020-2022). The interview links these audio dramas to Maggs’ past achievements, including Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* and Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, to show what is innovative about the sound adaptations of *The Sandman*. Following this, Alex Fitch collects interviews with three British “multimedia comics creators”, who have in common the fact that they had a background in comics creation at the time they embarked on making fantastic and humorous audio works. In a first interview, Tom McNally, editor of the South African comics anthology *Semiotic Cohesion*, talks about his audio serial *Saga of the European King* (a 35-episode podcast released between 2012 and 2021). In a second interview, comics artist Hannah Berry and audio producer Lance Dann talk about their multimedia creation *The Rez* (ongoing since 2019), which is at once a podcast, website and comic. Finally, Benoît Glaude documents the recent boom of audio comics in France, interviewing four of its protagonists: Antoni Fournier (Bayard), Valérie Lévy-Soussan (Audiolib), Jean-Jacques Quinet (5 sur 5) and Clément Rivière (Blynd). The individual interviews are structured in two parts, the first tracing the comic’s entry into the audiobook publishing market, and the second outlining its development in another audio storytelling format: the online audio series.

14 This dossier is certainly not the end of research into the many ways in which comics can be told aloud, and several other avenues of inquiry are open to exploration. The study of acoustic notation is one such avenue: what can be done with the score of a song, or the script of a radio drama, especially when the recordings have been lost? The dossier also touches only tangentially on the realm of digital comics in the interviews by Vikram Nijhawan and Alex Fitch but does not go into detail on this complex subject. There is much still to be researched here, from the first multimedia comics of the 1990s and 2000s, which discovered the technological possibility of augmenting comics with audiovisuals, to more recent works in which sound is still seeking its place (Goodbrey 2015, Crombet 2017, Paolucci 2019). Nor—with the exception of Silvia Masi—have we done much to explore the boundary between commentary and oral narration of comics in public interventions by authors (Burton & Legay 2023), as in conferences in comics studies. This thematic dossier of *Comicalités* therefore remains open and ready to welcome new contributions that will fill its gaps.

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Notes

1 Our dossier follows a path traced by another *Comicalités* dossier: "Bande Dessinée et culture material" [Comics and Material Culture], edited since 2019 by Sylvain Lesage and Bounthavy Suvilay. We take a closer look at the sound dimension of this material culture.

Table of illustrations

	Legend	Figure: Children's programs from <i>Le Poste parisien</i> . Here, with Alain Saint-Ogan, their spiritual father, are Mitou, Toti and Serpentin, stars of the Ovomaltine concerts
	URL	http://journals.openedition.org/comicalites/docannex/image/9282/img-1.jpg
	File	image/jpeg, 394k
	Legend	Figure 2: Neil Gaiman and Dirk Maggs in 2012 at launch event for 'Neverwhere' (BBC Radio 4), October 23th, 2012.
	Credits	Photograph by Comedycrank, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International .
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	File	image/jpeg, 369k

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Articles by the same author

A new boom in comic strip sound in France (2019-2023) [Full text]

Cross-interviews with Antoni Fournier, Valérie Lévy-Soussan, Jean-Jacques Quinet and Clément Rivière

Published in *Comicalités* , Comic strips spoken aloud

Listening to *The Intrepid Alix* : audio experience of a classical *bande dessinée* [Full text]

Listen to *Alix the Intrepid* : Audio Reception of a Comic Strip Classic

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