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# Ocean Comics

## About this Issue

The main focus of the 10th edition of CLOSURE deals with the sea and its diverse representation and meaning in the medium of comics. In literature and the fine arts, the sea has always functioned as a place of longing, but also as a stage for great adventures. Classic stories by researchers and discoverers, from Captain Ahab and his hunt for Moby-Dick, to Captain Nemo's journey 20,000 leagues under the sea have been published as comic adaptations, but new comics of various genres also use the sea as a setting, metaphor, chronotope, or explore the aesthetic, economic, political, historical or ecological dimensions of the oceans. The sea fascinates as the origin of life, as well as being a source of danger and destruction, a recreational area, or the scene of historical and current horrors of flight and expulsion. The deep sea as a region of hidden knowledge and unknown, monstrous horrors has inspired comic artists, likewise the destruction of these ecosystems by climate change, pollution and exploitation with their dire consequences.

CLOSURE #10 asks what specific means of representation comics use to approach the global ocean. It's not just about a thematic focus on watery spaces, but also about the media ecology of graphic storytelling and the usage of the comic's network of symbols. If the sea appears like an »abyss of representation« (Blum 2010), the loosely connected forms of the comic promise a very unique approach to the apparent unfathomability: the panels show a section of the oceanic whole that makes no claim to completeness. We are interested in the comic as a mobile medium for a fluid space, with an image system for the ocean system – and at the same time with a transculturally adaptable form that allows global access to the watery Anthropocene.

So, how does the comic reconstruct the oceanic knowledge and, in doing so, considers both the metaphors of the alternative space ›sea‹ and the attempts to approach the reality, political negotiations, material change and historical constitution of the ocean through the graphic medium? The contributions in CLOSURE #10 not only reconstruct the representation of the sea, but rather aim at comic-specific Oceanic Studies: A search for »surfaces, depths and extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations« (Blum 2010) in panels and speech bubbles, images and writing, diagrams and cartoons.

In her essay »Towards an Ethos of ›Aqua Graphic‹: Representation of Marine Ecology in Select Visual Narratives«, **Ananya Saha** examines how environmental crises concerning the marine ecosystem have been depicted visually and narratively in global comics of the last three decades. Analysing five comics and manga from India, Japan, Europe and North America, Saha describes characteristics of an ecologically oriented comic subgenre she calls ›aqua graphic‹. These comics address the threats to aquatic ecosystems and resistance in the face of these threats. Furthermore, Saha argues that the resistance struggle in ›aqua graphic‹ is supported by supernatural or fantastical interventions and concludes that this presence of the divine and the mythological enhances a life-affirming consciousness regarding the world's oceans.

The comic series *Varua Rapa Nui* tells the story of an island in the ocean. In his essay, **Mario Faust-Scalisi** focuses on this graphic, fictionalized historiography of the so-called Easter Island (Rapa Nui). Central to his analysis are the consequences of historical, geopolitical interests of external aggressors, as well as the ambiguity of the sea as shelter and a source of danger for the population. The sea makes Rapa Nui transnational and thus places it in a continuous field of tension that characterizes the indigenous historiography. The narrative structure of the series, which works with mythological and anthropomorphic narrative figures, also is remarkable for the conclusions drawn by the author.

The essay by **Arnold Bärtschi** aims to examine the geopoetic representation of the sea in Homer's *Odyssey* and the comic book *The Voyages of Odysseus* by Emmanuel Lepage, Sophie Michel, and René Follet. He argues that the sea in both works can be read as a reflective surface intertwining the journeys of the protagonists. Bärtschi analyzes the intertextual references between the two works and explores



Fig 1: Steven Statz, Cover CLOSURE #10.

how the comic book reinterprets the travel route and depictions of the sea. In doing so, he employs concepts such as allelopoiesis, narratology, and geopoetics following Marszałek and Sasse.

**David Höwelkröger** reads Catherine Meurisse's comic *La jeune femme et la mer* through the lens of the Japanese cultural concept of the sea using Testurō Watsuji's philosophical framework, *fūdo* (風土). The article scrutinizes the comic's portrayal of the sea's dual nature, highlighting the interaction between cultural and material attributes associated with water. It engages in a philosophical exploration of the reciprocal relationship between humans and nature while also paying meticulous attention to the formal representation of these ideas. Consequently, the article provides nuanced insights into the broader argument regarding the cultural significance of the sea within Japanese culture and transculturally through the medium itself.

In **Elena Stirtz's** article »I dij ek kadu!« The inability to speak of the sea« focuses on Dave Shelton's novel *A Boy and a Bear in a Boat*, or rather the comic that spreads over two pages within it. The comic and the sea become a symbol of each other and are mutually dependent in their perception, right up to their transformation of materiality. On his seemingly endless journey across the sea, the boy not only learns something about himself while reading the comic, but also about the relationship between himself and the all-encompassing water.

In his article »Reading Race in the Comics Medium,« **Chris Gavalier** explores the intersection of semiotics and cultural conventions in conveying race in comics. He addresses two key questions: whether recipients »read« images featuring Black characters and if »race« is a matter of reading. The analysis delves into the dual nature of comics images, which necessitate both linguistic *reading* and spatiotemporal *observing*. In order to trace these processes, Gavalier introduces a sophisticated four-part spectrum outlining how viewers comprehend combined sets of linguistic and spatiotemporal marks. The article demonstrates how observing and reading influence the encoding and decoding of racist legacies, emphasizing the complexity of race in spatiotemporal images. In doing so, the study underscores the learned and inherently ambiguous nature of observing race. Gavalier contrasts observation with the comparative precision of reading, asserting that the former retains »race's inherent indeterminacy.« The article challenges entrenched notions of how we understand comics while demonstrating the complexity of perceiving race in the interplay of the viewer and the viewed.

In the Winter 2023 edition of *Kotoba* (Words), a special focus on Manga Studies featured an article by senior manga scholar **Natsume Fusanosuke**. Titled »An Extremely Personal Take on the History of Manga Studies,« the article provides an overview of Japanese manga research from the 1980s to the present, highlighting Natsume's unique perspective as a trailblazer and outsider in the field. **Jon Holt** and **Tepei Fukuda** have translated this personal retrospective for *CLOSURE*, and provide a Translator's Introduction offering context for Natsume's position in academia and culture. A pioneer in manga research in Japan since the

1990s, Natsume brings a distinctive viewpoint to the history of Manga Studies, sharing personal impressions and detailing his career in comparison to the work of his peers and subsequent scholars. His essayistic historiography explores the academization of Manga Studies in Japan, weighing the rise of a theoretically informed style against the analytical approach he pursued in his columns. Despite labelling his outsider approach as »irresponsible,« Holt and Fukuda compellingly argue for the value of Natsume's focus on »those lines, frames, and words that made manga ›interesting‹ for him.« Natsume's text confirms this assessment and raises hope for further translations of his impressive body of work.

**Sophie G. Einwächter** and **Vanessa Ossa** argue that comic research can benefit from approaches in Fan Studies. These focus on the reception of comics and their significance, while traditional analyses often prioritize producers and texts. The authors demonstrate how fan theoretical approaches can help understand and analyze conflicts within the comic community. This is illustrated by the case study discussing representations of female bodies and diversity in Marvel comics within the fan community.

We would like to thank the authors and especially **Steven Statz** for designing our cover (Fig. 1) and for the provision of two of his comics »Inspector Cetus – Shellycoat« and »The Last Light« for publication in our anniversary issue.

Kiel, March 2024

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## **Bibliography**

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