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›What Grows in the Gutter?‹ – Eco-Comics

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## ›What Grows in the Gutter?‹ – Eco-Comics

The special section of CLOSURE #7 is dedicated to the exploration of ›Eco-comics‹. Our contributors ask how comics visualise, sequentialise, frame, and annotate relationships of nature and culture. How can sequential art convey our position in and against the nonhuman world? Do comics do justice to the perspective of others – microbes and trees, great apes and laboratory animals, terrestrials and extraterrestrials? Which forms enable graphic media to ›unflatten‹ (Sousanis) our view of the environment, offering multiple, skewed perspectives on the nonhuman in the process? Our authors trace the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman in real and imagined graphic natures relating to biospheres and animals, microorganisms and ecosystems, landscapes framed and unframed. However, even if no trees nor any conventionally ›natural‹ entities make an appearance whatsoever, the comics analysed in this issue still feature *environmental* imaginaries worth investigating.

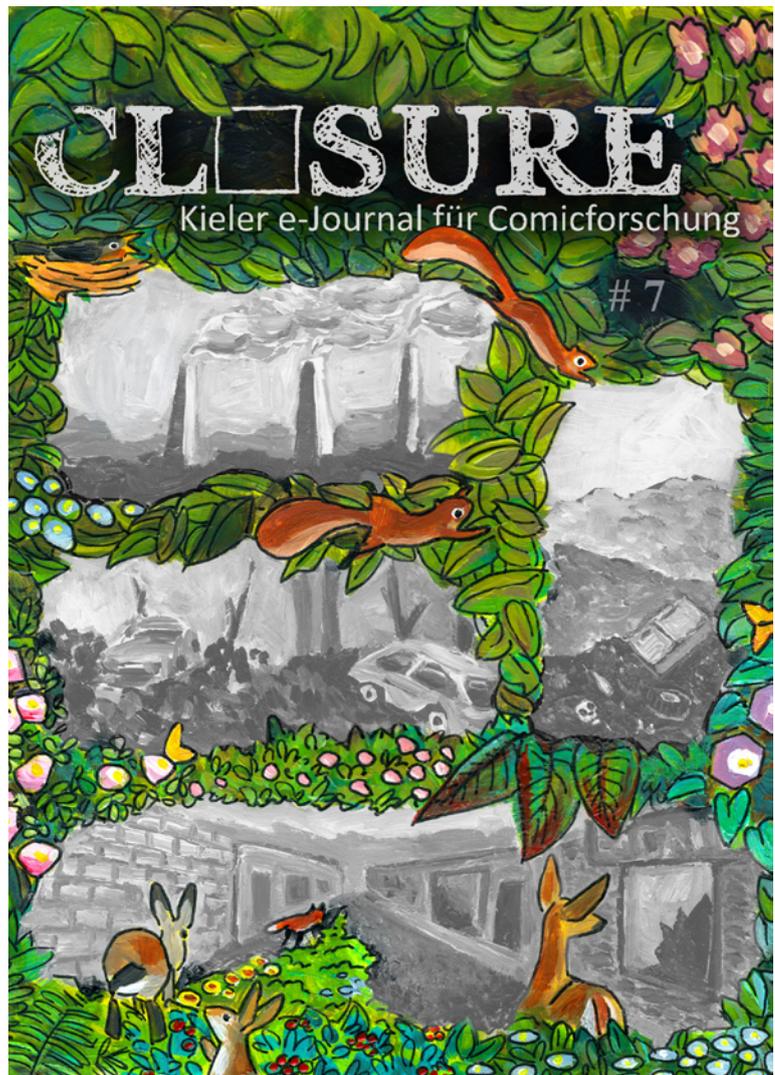
Accordingly, this issue is intended to (1) argue for the ecocritical potential of *comics*, its aesthetics and form. Rather than focussing only on representations of nature, our contributors demonstrate how the medium's repertoire of devices, its image-texts relations, and its degrees of abstraction add up to a *formal* environment that takes up, transforms, and reflects the demarcations of the natural and the ecological that we live by. It follows that (2) we consider comics studies a valuable complement to ecocriticism; developed in interaction with the »weird signs« (Frahm) of sequential art, *comics studies* may just cast light on the blind spots of ecocritical endeavours. After all, the original ecocritics oriented their discipline towards the »study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment« (Glotfelty, xviii) – so what happens if we add the relationships between comics and the environment to the mix? At the same time, CLOSURE #7 is also an appeal to reverse this premise: to (3) refract comics studies through an ecocritical lens, to map how graphic »forms relate to cultural as well as biological structures« (Heise, 258) – and to uncover the environmental knowledge of sequential art.

### **Ecologies, Broad and Narrow**

What is the ecology of comics? For all the currency of a cultural, political or critical account of ›ecology‹, the term still carries traces of its disciplinary, scientific sense. From this perspective, reading a comic as ›ecological‹ allows us to scour panels for the »distribution and abundance of different types of organism« (Begon/Townsend/Harper). Proceeding from this founda-

tion, a literal-minded account could attend to the comics version of »physical, chemical but especially the biological features and interactions that determine these distributions and abundances« (ibid.). Any cursory account of »creaturely genealogies« (Yezbick, 29), however, will have to reckon with ambivalent, hybrid cartoon figures, subject to varying degrees of anthropomorphism and abstraction. What is more, the storyworld environments of comics animals – for all that they diverge from our presumed actual world – do not necessarily strike readers as strange or unusual. The unstable status of samurai rabbits (*Usagi Yojimbo*) talking wildlife (*Billie the Bee*) or the border-crossing animals on **Jess Thomas'** cover for this issue only comes to the fore if we deliberately *estrangle* ourselves from familiar, and fairly ubiquitous, conventions.

This shows that immersion in graphic storyworlds is remarkably frictionless if we consider that – from Krazy Kat to Mickey Mouse – their inhabitants are »aggressively nonhuman in appearance, and according to any other anthropomorphic criterion rather monstrous« (Willmott, 56). Seeing them as such, however, misses the point – »I misread Mickey if I fail to apprehend his style« (ibid.). In a similar vein, we do not bat an eye when the protagonist of Carol Swain's graphic novel *Gast* interrogates a sheep in the course of her murder investigation – and receives a polite answer in extended speech bubbles. When we encounter clothed, talking opossums in the Okefenokee swamps of *Pogo*, we swiftly update our mental model of the world they inhabit. And when we read superhero comics, ambulatory tree aliens (Groot) or crystalline cosmic policemen (Chaselon in *Green Lantern*) are a matter of course. It is arguably because such represented immersive storyworlds are so entrenched that



An environment in the panel gutter (Jess Thomas: Cover CLOSURE #7).

their metaphorical usage, destabilisation, and dismantling (as in the case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*) is all the more disorienting. Any ecology of comics, then, has to account for both: the ease of immersive recentering (Ryan 22) in a variety of (1) *storyworld* ecologies and the (2) *style* in which the environment and its inhabitants are rendered. In other words: applying only ecological literalism – a search for thematic natures – is a dead-end, since represented ›types of organism‹ cannot be disentangled from their comics-specific mode of representation. Sliding up and down a scale of anthropocentrism as they do, comics' ›different types of organism‹ are also a matter of different types of human likeness, animal features, and abstraction. On the basis of this two-pronged approach – storyworld and style – CLOSURE #7 asks how comics visualise, sequentialise, frame, and annotate always-already »response-able naturecultures« (Haraway, 125) – and how, precisely, unstable environmental signs function beyond the thematically ecological, animal, or nonhuman.

To begin this search for ecological form, Eco-comics require a genealogy of their own, one that departs from entrenched priorities of ecocriticism – while acknowledging the »comic form's long tradition of representing environmental rhetorics and the potential of comics [...] enacting ecocritical work« (Dobrin, 1). According to Hubert Zapf's ›wave model‹ of the development of ecocriticism, a first wave of scholarship emphasised »the mimetic representation of the extratextual world« (5). This mimetic orientation was gradually replaced by discourse analysis and critical theory (second wave) to culminate in a focus on environmental justice (third wave) (ibid.). In comics, however, one would be hard-pressed to identify a ›mimetic‹ canon to be superseded in the first place. After all, this »marginal, caricaturing medium« always already plays a »complicated game of visibility and invisibility«, as Stephan Packard puts it. »Comics show us what they speak of: but often they do not tell us what the thing they show us looks like« (Packard 2014, our trans.).<sup>1</sup> Rather than ›animals‹, for instance, comics perform a *scale* of human likeness, giving rise to changeable ›ecomorphism‹ (Nichols, 7) which very rarely settles on one, determinate nonhuman form. As Glenn Willmott puts it in his review of *Billie the Bee* in this issue, the comic makes readers aware »that our images of animals are stylized in order to convey different things we know, and don't know, about them« (n. pag.). From one panel to the next, an affable talking animal pal can relinquish indications of its »experiential what-it-is-likeness« (Coleman, 57), morphing into an estranged being that does not share anthropocentric priorities whatsoever.

Confronted with these unstable natures and quasi-animals, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clean split between narrow/thematic and broad/formal conceptions of ecology. Comics natures are defined by their gaps and omissions while plants and animals are entangled with the style that depicts them. As Adele Bealer claimed, the ecocritical potential of comics lies precisely in the »boundary blurring performance of these polyform, transgressive, mediating chimera«; what results is not an essentialist ecological style but a »productive dissensus among its assembled parts« (6). Comics, that is to say, contest any

image of nature in which a collective actor ›humanity‹ is confronted with an external ›environment‹ in the first place. Rather than a unitary storyworld, each panel can shift its allocation of human characteristics in the course of one movement across the gutter between panels. This attenuation of ecology as ›types of origin‹ deploys the »weird signs« (Frahm 1994) of comics in the service of an equally ›weird ecology‹. Marked by repetitions-with-a-difference separated by gaps, »each iteration both confirms *one* identity« (Frahm, 155, our trans.) of a represented organism and its environment – and dispels that identity at the same time. After all, »each repetition has its own ›semiotic‹ identity referring to nothing but further repetitions« (ibid.).<sup>2</sup> Scrutinizing the ecology of the medium as a destabilisation of any one represented nature, our special section traces how comics entangle formal repetition with a constitutive instability of nonhuman beings and natures.

### **Eco-Theme, Eco-Form**

However comics actors are positioned on a sliding scale of anthropomorphism, comics appear to elicit a push and pull between two poles: between, firstly, imagining comics animals as »existents« (by which Seymour Chatman means »fixed and continuing« narrative entities, 306) in determinate storyworlds; and, secondly, perceiving them as conspicuously *drawn* abstract stand-ins for human traits. It follows that there is no hard and fast humanity in these cartoon assemblages, which, as Michael Wood puts it regarding literature, »frame knowledge with visible or invisible sentences saying, ›If I were to say this‹ and ›now that these possibilities have been laid out« (59). In the case of comics, panel borders ensure that we navigate literal and very much visible equivalents to such frames as a matter of course – a box-shaped ›if I were to say this‹.

This focus on the framing of ecological knowledge, and the formal affordances that make it perceptible, moves Eco-comics further away from the *represented* distribution of organisms. Rather, the frames around segments of the environment take us towards a »paradigm, a model of thought based on the articulated interconnection of elements with each other and with the environment in which they are situated« (Iovino, 113). From this perspective, Eco-comics need not focus on a domain of ›nature‹ at all. After all, as Erin James claims, »every narrative contains a virtual environment« (xii) into which we imaginatively transport ourselves. And even if we contest the de facto narrativity of each and any comic, the medium constantly requires viewers to draw a distinction between medium and form (Wilde, 2014). Or rather, in the terms of Eco-comics, between ›elements‹ and their ›environment‹: the drawn line and the surface, the panel and the grid, the image and its »*iconic solidarity*« (Groensteen, 18). Comic signs are determined by a web of interactions, a formal ecology that requires environmental imagination before any consistent storyworld can be reconstructed.

With CLOSURE #7, we suggest approaching this discontinuous comics ecology both as theme and form: the ›virtual environment‹ that we project entangles both. This is not to say that the narrow perspective is without its uses. Indeed, the Eco-comics featured in this issue explore fictional ecologies, their environmental conditions, their ›actants‹, and their change through intersections with human systems. A broader perspective, however, would consider ecologies of knowledge and form. This non-thematic approach to comics environments adapts Hubert Zapf's account of cultural ecology. Instead of Zapf's ›literature‹, we see comics »as themselves actively participating in the production of ever new ecologies of knowledge and communication« (Zapf 2016, 92). The storyworlds we recover from ambiguously framed panels retain their ›virtual‹ status. As a result, our hypotheses about the represented environment require permanent revisions on the basis of »gaps and polysemic processes of identification« (ibid., 92).

In a slight departure from ›cultural ecology‹, however, the particular means by which sequential art takes up, aesthetically deforms, and refracts cultural models of nature does more than »resist straightforward ideological messages« (Zapf 2016, 92). In the environmental context, indeterminacy as the basis of active reading seems like ›too little too late‹, an encomium to open debate in a warming world. In environmental negotiation, after all, more often than not the »organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution« (Rancière, 28) can appear as fixed, an unimpeachable set of presuppositions determining the range of the possible from the get-go. The panels and gaps of the comics form simulate readerly agency while, in many cases, leaving little room for nonhuman sentience, animal rights, or environmental justice beyond the human. The comics about animal testing covered by Martin de la Iglesia and Jason Wallin in this issue, for instance, include »acts of speaking-for« non-human animals; these »cross[...] the species boundary but in a manner that imposes human frames of reference on the animal subject« (Herman, 207). In this ›distribution of spaces and roles‹, the specific experience of the animals can fall by the wayside.

It comes as a relief, then, that the contributions to CLOSURE #7 indicate how comics do, after all, offer less human-centric distributions of possibility. They suggest a deployment of gaps and unexpected semiotic convergences so as to grant mental-state attributions and, simply, *interests* to animals, plants, hybrid beings – the nonhuman »part of those who have no part« (Rancière, 30). The particularity of the comics approach to ecology, then, may lie less in the reversal of hierarchies than in the expression of that which is excluded, of the ›disnarrated‹ (Prince) falling through the cracks of an ideological nature-culture divide that annihilates what it claims to revere. On the level of represented ecologies, this ecological ›part-of-no-part‹ can be gleaned in ambivalent objects that deviate from a standard environmental imaginary. At times, these objects are monstrous, grotesque, or abject, as Jason Wallin demonstrates in his reading of *Animal Man* in this issue. His account of a violent opposition

to the nonhuman world (23) tracks with Lorraine Daston's contention that monsters are a »prototypical disruption of the order of specific natures« (19) – i.e. of concepts of nature that embrace »the characteristic form of things«, their properties and tendencies (7–8). In the case of *Animal Man*, what is excluded from this alleged, intrinsic nature are grotesque compound actors that disturb the set-apart, superheroic bodies and their individuated super-agency.

According to Daston, in discourses of nature-as-harmony, »disequilibria play the same role« (Daston, 19) that the monstrous plays for specific natures: loss of balance can also become an abjected outside upon which a stable image of nature can be founded. Like the grotesque hybrids in *Animal Man*, nature-in-disequilibrium bursts through orderly regimes of nature in comics, appearing as an inconceivable breach of the knowable. In her article for this issue, Christina Becher traces manifestations of such counter-nature. In her analysis of unclassifiable bio-tech-viral hybrids in Frauke Berger's *Grün* (68), she presents a world of permanent, uncontrollable metamorphosis. The monsters of *Animal Man* and the disequilibrium of *Grün*, then, do not just ›resist ideology‹. Whichever distribution of nature and culture is suggested, the comics discussed in this issue show a remarkable propensity for unruly quasi-objects, for monsters and unbalanced ecologies that contest the very distribution of possibility on which dominant environmental orders are founded.

### ›Transient Nature‹

While comics present counter-ecologies to the dominant Book of Nature, they do so as a matter of media performance, cognitive reorientation, and affective investments. In this contestation, it is only fitting that, as Stephan Packard notes, spatial depictions in comics »have no outward borders and are bound only by the delineations of the cartoons [...]. Thus, for instance, a forest will appear with any number of trees of changing shape and placement, yet no contradiction will be observed by readers« (2015, 69). These readers are, in turn, called upon to individuate elements of the background whenever storyworld space is granted a narrative function or simply perceived by a character (cf. *ibid.*).

This peculiar changeability of comics space proves fortuitous for considerations of the Anthropocene as a period in which climatic background conditions move to the foreground of policy debates, projected scenarios, and lived realities alike. Every neologism for the current epoch – Anthropocene (Crutzen), Misanthropocene (Clover/Spahr), Capitalocene (Moore) – can be considered a shorthand for such distinctions of latent *background* processes and a manifest *foreground* on which they make themselves felt. For Timothy Morton, however, such distinctions have become precarious as we are confronted with ›hyperobjects‹ massively distributed in space and time. While they exceed our conceptual grasp, these objects – chief among them climate itself – simultaneously have »a significant impact on

human social and psychic space« (1–2). Foreground and background blur as distinctions between our most personal lifeworlds and planetary processes break down. For Morton, such loss of spatial certainty is »part of the problem« since »there is no meaningfulness possible in a world without foreground-background relations« (104).

How do comics respond to this assumed collapse of stable backgrounds? In Jess Thomas' cover for CLOSURE #7, for one, there is no unitary collapse of scales. Thomas – whose web-comic work is »about birds and what it means to be human« (artist's bio) – turns nature into the main, shaping force of her drawn environment. Her animals occupy the space normally reserved for the gutter, the interstice between panels. Rather than an empty gap to be overcome, that liminal space is teeming with life. There is no abstract interpretative process binding together images; rather, the panels are literally entangled by vegetation and traversed by animals. Gap and panel border, gutter and frame become one comics ecology as finely-tuned formal differences are subsumed by nonhuman life. Compared to this animated gutter, the framed images are a wasteland. Their industrial residue in shades of grey – bereft of the conspicuously hand-drawn black lines animating the cartoon animals – appear as flat, unchanging snapshots out of time. Background and foreground do not ›blur‹ so much as Thomas questions their respective function. According to the cover, an ecocentric point of view is a matter of contesting familiar modes of framing, connecting, and negotiating images – while allowing an ambient natural background to enter the main stage.

Thomas' cover can be read as a thesis on comics space. Since its environments have ›no outward borders‹, readers navigate blurs of foreground and background all the time, performing shifts that are elicited by the distinctly ›inward bounds‹ of comics space. Comics recipients are capable of navigating the »transient nature« (Packard 2015, 69) of a graphic environment precisely because they are accustomed to re-mapping volatile storyworlds. In a medium that, on its most basic level, features repetitions-with-a-difference across panels, readers trace multiple signs simultaneously, inferring unstable identities through a series of deformations and inconsistencies. Readerly reconstructions of comics ecologies, in other words, presuppose the limitations »on *representational correspondence*«, by which Gregory Currie means the simple fact that »[f]or a given representational work, only certain features of the representation serve to represent features of the thing represented« (59). For instance: in this issue, Martin de la Iglesia discusses the vanishing of a drawn background in *Animal Man* (96). Specifically, a superhero mourns the death of a gorilla companion against a sudden backdrop of uniform blue. There is little reason to assume that the diegetic environment has been erased in an apocalyptic event. Rather, readers will understand this shift as part and parcel with a radical revaluation of human-animal relations. The blue negative space gives all the more exclusive affective resonance to the superhero-animal *pietà*, to the affective resonance of a companionship that, for the moment, renders the precise features of the material environment irrelevant.

In Packard's laconic formulation, ›no contradiction will be observed‹ as we negotiate foreground and background, realism and abstraction on the basis of our knowledge of comics style and colouring conventions. In other words, the background erasure would be jarring (and, as Morton laments, a ›problem‹) if it were not so effortlessly navigable on the basis of our knowledge of genre, medium, and form. Every comic, then, is intimately bound up with storyworld construction on the basis of an environmental knowledge that remains variable and context sensitive. That sequential art allows for the flexible allocation of attention in radically shifting environments may prove a testing ground for a global environment in which environmental backgrounds come to the fore. At the very least, our interaction with Eco-comics challenges any »*distribution of the sensible* (partage du sensible) *whose principle is the absence of void or supplement*« (Rancière 2010, 36). Accustomed to the reconstruction of a storyworld determined by its gaps and fissures, the comics reader is cued to an active environmental construction, imaginatively dwelling in spaces inhabited, supplemented, and negotiated rather than posited. The ›hyperobjectual‹ blurring of background and foreground, thus, loses some of its reality-disturbing shock.

### Changing Forms, Changing Environments

As a result of their relaxed position vis-à-vis ›representational correspondence‹, Eco-comics are also particularly apt to present changes of story logic. »Not *all* properties of a representation are relevant regarding the diegetically referenced situation«<sup>3</sup> (Wilde 195, our trans.) – and comics readers constantly have to distinguish stylistic choices from features of the storyworld. This attention to the difference between style and represented objects comes in particularly handy for the representation of *unprecedented* environmental change that defies everyday imaginative capabilities. Comics' changeable correspondence between how and what they represent particularly sets the medium apart from the realist novel, which, as per Amitav Ghosh, is ill-equipped for global environmental change. According to Ghosh, the unheard-of nature of strange weathers and mass extinction, pandemics and global migration, hurricanes and burning forests resists the representational potential of this ›bourgeois‹ genre. It fails to find adequate forms because it »has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning« (23).

If the novel fails to offer forms for the Anthropocene – can the comic come for the rescue? At least the medium (here decidedly *not* seen as ›graphic novel‹) bears the potential to contest a rigid scaffolding of possibility – not least since its panel grid already calls into question the commensurability of the world we see with the world being narrated. Granted, in comics as in any other medium, »recipients will generally try to exhaust every possible

alternative explanation before trying to imagine a logically impossible, contradictory local situation« (Thon, 61). In ecocritical terms, however, what may be most important are the moments in which the charitable reading does not add up; situations, in other words, in which readers suspend the expectation of a consistent, recoverable relationship between style and environment. In such instances, the comics recipient assumes an eventful shift of the very properties of the storyworld *and* its mode of representation in order to understand the narrative. Again, Jess Thomas' intricate cover demonstrates this capacity to perform unstable correspondences. In the bottom left panel, the vegetal gutter suddenly extends into the grey, embedded image. A fox can be seen scampering off into the rundown street, into the drab picture plane that previously appeared like a snapshot of a past state of decay, possibly captured in a photo. The overgrown ›bridge‹ that allows him to traverse the boundary juts upwards, covering the image; alternatively, however, it leads inwards, connecting two distinct ontological levels. Rather than reclaiming comics for ecological readings, then, Jess Thomas' intricate gutter ecology shifts into a multistable position. It morphs into a liminal sign breaching and connecting mutually exclusive levels of representation – and hovering between previously distinct worlds.

In this issue, Christina Becher describes one such scene in her reading of Frauke Berger's *Grün*, in which a character is transformed into a hybrid, vegetal being (80). In this instance, ›representational correspondence‹ is increased as readers exclude readings that would ›domesticate‹ the transformation by ascribing it to a matter of style: a metaphorical shift, a dream, or an event imagined by a protagonist. Instead, this change is *here to stay* as the final, vegetal form is repeated-with-a-difference in subsequent panels. While we remain in a world of cartoon signs of variable abstraction, and can never be entirely sure which elements of the plant being are stylised and which are part of the represented world, any subsequent interpretation has to accept the visual ›baseline‹ that beings can transform from a more anthropomorphic to a more vegetal, alien state. Eco-comics, then, keep open the possibility that a procedure of aligning representation and the reality of the represented becomes subject to a ›meta-event‹ (Titzmann) that reorders not only the features of the storyworld but also the stylistic features by means of which it is shown.

## **Ecomorphic Form**

The question of environmental change and its representation has high stakes. The productive uncertainties of comics coincide with crucial issues of climate catastrophe, ecocide, and the so-called Anthropocene. Who, after all, causes these catastrophes? ›Humanity‹ appears singularly unsuitable, since the term tars with the same brush the beneficiaries, victims, and drivers of climate change, implying that we all participate equally in capitalist »ritual:

that unconditional imperative to accumulate« (Salvage Collective, n. pag.). If the invocation of ›humanity‹ is a mode of hiding responsibility, so is the strand of thought that collapses human and nonhuman agency into one undifferentiated mesh – a hybridism that Andreas Malm has identified with the claim that »*because natural and social phenomena have become compounds, the two cannot be differentiated*« (47). In this impasse, Comics are ›good to think with‹ against the new materialist insistence on interacting matter, against a flattening of agency in which molecules and corporations, cows and laws, infrastructure and signs are co-implicated (Bennett). Specifically, the Eco-comics covered in this issue point out driving forces in processes of environmental change, whether they be capitalism, extractivism, corporate ideologies, or even a system of childhood socialisation (as shown in Dona Pursall's contribution) that systematically instils anthropocentric priorities.

In each of these cases, the ›ecomorphic‹ form of comics throws a spanner in the works of any representational system that would dissolve the various actors involved in environmental degradation into one undifferentiated whole. Rather, comics are marked by specific ›base distinctions‹, which, as Lukas Wilde has shown, observers can draw and re-draw constantly in their reading process – for instance between more or less abstract, cartoonish signs (2014). As a result of the need for distinctions of this kind, the aesthetics of comics appear as discontinuous, particularly when compared to media geared towards an impression of unambiguous reference. How does this track with a definition of the »ecocritical conception of ›environment‹ to include unfamiliar, creative, and nonrealist representations of the physical world and people's experience of it« (James, 26)? Heuristically: whenever readers differentiate medium and form, they also make decisions concerning signs and their environment. They decide, in other words, which elements of style exist in the storyworld, what the diegetic environment looks like, or which larger cultural, discursive, and generic environment is relevant to determine the features of the respective comics world in the first place. The »non-absolute, shifting boundary« of a panel, for instance, is ›decomposed‹ and ›absorbed into higher level frames‹ in the course of understanding comics (Denson 571–572). This process forces us to attribute agency, to allocate responsibility, and to draw distinctions between different orders of being. Instead of one collective actor ›humanity‹ wreaking havoc on the world, the comics-specific need to draw distinctions can lead to a more fine-tuned identification of environmental damage and its culprits.

The leading metaphor of our special section – ›what grows in the gutter‹ – could, then, be answered with ›environmental form‹. Comics offer conspicuously intransparent, repeating signs that foreground their fabrication and keep diegetic reality at arm's length. In bulk, these strategies make sure that represented ecologies are never fully subsumed under one mode of representation. If comics animals move up and down a scale of ›cartoonisation‹ and diegetic natures depend on differential relationships of sign and environment, closure – in the sense of endowing »two or more images [...] with a single overriding identity« (McCloud

73) – appears a long way off. Eco-comics help us to leave a gap, to linger in the panel gutter before traversing it. In this way, we have the opportunity to maintain the Otherness of nature, a nonhuman kernel that is not easily subsumed into actor-network relationships. As a result, represented animals or plants, minerals and stones, jetsam and flotsam are (potentially) granted their own, proper agential status. As comics readers, we cannot shift the blame onto ›nature‹ or ›humanity‹ as we permanently establish distinctions between human agency and nonhuman processes as a matter of form.

### What Grows in the Gutter?

*Closure #7: What Grows in the Gutter?* aims to do justice to both the thematic and stylistic sense of ecology, providing both a cartography of represented environments and an account of the forms by means of which they are evoked – and productively withheld. In this vein, **Jason Wallin's** contribution ›Evolve or Die! Enmeshment and Extinction in DC's *Animal Man*‹ tackles the unseen and unrepresentable outright. The article proceeds from a distinction: ›the occulted life of the nonhuman emerges in distinction to the ›normative‹ superhero mythos‹ (19). In his reading of two incarnations of the DC superhero *Animal Man* – the classic Vertigo revival by Grant Morrison and Chas Truog as well as the *New 52* version by Lemire/Snyder/Foreman – Wallin traces lineages of suppressed, extinct, hidden animals, violently dislodged from human rationality. The article shows that the denial and evisceration of nonhuman life extends to cultural discourses of animality as much as to the violence and extinction that follows in their wake. The article demonstrates how *Animal Man* reconstructs techniques of control and violence that derive from an absolute boundary between the human and the animal. Is there a way out of this split? As per Wallin, the comics offer glimpses of a ›morphogenic field‹ that allows the superhero to attempt to bridge the human-nonhuman gap, thus hinting at a line of flight beyond the horrors of the Capitalocene. In tracing the ecocidal status quo and its contestation, Wallin offers a detailed account of the comics' ecological imaginary, their limits, and their forms of enmeshment that may just indicate a posthuman future.

A re-definition of the relationship with nonhuman beings is also at the centre of **Dona Pursall's** article, ›Growing Stronger Together: Representations of Active Eco-Citizenship within Contemporary Comics‹. Pursall outlines an educational process towards an equitable companionship across species-lines. To this end, she asks whether comics can foster the ›active compassion and decision making‹ (44) that an ecologically attuned attitude requires. Such traits are not only part of the learning process undergone by the comics protagonists the article considers (Luke Pearson's *Hilda* and Katie O'Neill's *Aquicorn Cove*); they are also the result of an interactive practice on the part of young readers. They can negotiate their

own position vis-à-vis the environment by learning in tandem with the cartoon avatars. In addition to the diegetic environments and their impact on childrens' prospective eco-citizenship, Pursall also pays close attention to the formal characteristics of the comic, including rhizomatic suspensions of narrative that allow for affective responses to non-anthropomorphic beings. These comics, then, provide young readers with a testing ground for concrete, material environmental action. The graphic form inspires eco-citizens, as Pursall defines them, to no longer project their own characteristics upon an environment, but to perform an evolving relationship with creatures, ecosystems, or places on different scales.

The articles so far have presented the status of nonhuman animals as a lynchpin for cultural attitudes towards the environment. By contrast, in »Nach dem Kollaps: Pflanzliches Aufbegehren in Frauke Bergers *Grün*«, **Christina Becher** demonstrates a *vegetal* turn. Or rather: the article traces how *Grün* contests a plant-shaped blind spot in the cultural imaginary, as a result of which plants are relegated to a lower strata of beings deprived of agency. If such hierarchies were simply overturned, the comic might still be limited to represented ecologies, however alien they may be. However, in Becher's account, *Grün* goes much further in its ›greening‹, availing itself of the full range of comics ambiguity to contest hard-and-fast hierarchies of matter. The article explores a ›natureculture‹ that, in turn, cannot be disentangled from its cartoon complements, maybe chief among them the creatures called *Phagen*. Becher offers a fascinating account of how these creatures condense entire networks of agency which combine the vegetal, archae-bacterial, and technological into weird hybridity, far removed from any harmonious natural idyll. On the basis of these strange actants, among others, Becher's reading uncovers the full range of ambivalence that can accompany a naturecultural state of affairs: as hybrid matter proliferates and uncanny agency takes over in this graphic enunciation of a shifting environment, the world that results is not exactly *for us* any longer.

**Martin de la Iglesia's** »Formal Characteristics of Animal Liberation in Comics«, which closes the special section, shares with the preceding articles a concern with the comics form. Particularly, de la Iglesia investigates if comics associate the specific scenario of animal liberation with a formal correlative – and if the comics form is geared towards a presentation of »animal communication and perception« (91) at all. And indeed: some commonalities emerge from the analysis of open cages, sudden flight, and abject suffering in *Animal Man*, *Daredevil*, *We3*, and *Pride of Baghdad*. In its detailed close readings and search for an overarching graphic rhetoric of liberation, the article pays particular attention to the ›expressive‹ potential of comics devices and the degree to which observers alternately share and are distanced from animal minds.

**Jörn Ahrens'** contribution – »Zur Erfindung des Comics in Deutschland: Frühe Perspektiven der Comicforschung« features foundational work on the history of comics criticism in Germany. His article reconstructs an entire ›cultural topography‹ (122) of the medium (a term that resonates with the environmental focus of our issue), including its marginalisation

and critique. Particularly, its detractors have time and again charged comics with a regrettable absence of mimetic authenticity. Ahrens shows how this ill-fitting representational requirement came about in the German discursive field, but also traces it to current valorisations and literary re-interpretations of comics as ›graphic novels‹. Cultural capital that was accrued by excluding or diminishing the counter-hegemonic, cartoonish graphicality of the medium. Ahrens provides a detailed outline of the historical ›domestication‹ of comics and the restrictions imposed by of a ›media regime of truth‹. It is also partly *because* of this marginalisation, however, that comics developed their own, proper logic. Their anti-classificatory, unruly potential is not an essentialist trait, the article demonstrates, but co-develops with attempts to contain the ›deterritorialising‹ potential of comics.

Taking up the thread of the workings of comics form, **Susanna Schoch's** contribution ›An der Grenze: Intermediale Inszenierungen der Berliner Mauer‹ analyses the particular, multimodal strategies by means of which sequential art represents and negotiates borders. Specifically, her analysis investigates representations of the Berlin Wall and the GDR border regime in a number of so-far underexplored comics. Schoch shows how these works heighten the contrasts between types of text and image in order to yield unstable signs. These mutual enhancements and tensions between increasingly entangled media separate modes of expression as much as they invite transgression – in clear analogy to the represented wall. In response to the material boundary and the violence sustaining it, the comics resort to insistent self-reflexivity. Rather than a multimodal authentication of the border experience, the wall emerges as a fructuous, internally riven boundary that is subject to constant reinterpretation by those who grow up in its shadow, who seek to overcome or document it. According to Schoch's intricate interweaving of form and function, the border emerges as a copy of a panel of a photograph framed in a comics page, interposing difference against any unduly totalising synthesis of historical moments or media strategies.

In his contribution – ›Schmelztiel der Welten: Realität und Fiktion im intermedialen Werk von François Schuiten und Benoît Peeters‹ – **Lukas Mathias Albrecht** explores the reality-bending strategies of the Belgian *Cités Obscures* cycle. Albrecht examines a heightened version of the suspension of real-world reference that has proven to be a recurring motif in CLOSURE #7. Proceeding from a ›close viewing‹ of Schuiten's architectural work, the article traces nested distinctions between reality and fiction in a series of unstable graphic worlds. In particular, Albrecht emphasises the construction of *passages* between reality and fiction, between domains that retain their distinctiveness, yet change depending on the trajectory of the trans-dimensional traveller (and, by extension, the comics reader). In this process, fiction and reality are far from dichotomous. Instead, Albrecht disentangles what is fictional for the reader, what is fictional within the fictional world, and what happens if fictional worlds are treated as factual by clued-in recipients. Through its careful readings of instances of dimension-hopping, the article shows how these self-reflexive, metafictional

techniques emerge as a thesis on comics environments in their own right: the graphic narrative reflects on its own possibilities of immersion and on the process by means of which we imbue fictional environments with momentary reality.

Interdimensional transits are also at the centre of **Alexander Horn's** »ZeitRäume kreieren: Zum Sprachkolorit im Geschichtscomic«. Particularly, the *Abrafaxe*, heroes of the comics magazine MOSAIK, have been portrayed as seasoned time travellers in their decades-spanning run. As per Horn, the strategies of representing and authenticating the respective ›timespace‹ – an authenticity effect for a historical period and place – are deceptively simple: they hinge on inflecting stereotypes and peppering regional and temporal markers amongst the historical characters' utterances. However, the contribution demonstrates how some instances of speech turn out to have a measure of authenticity, accurately infusing expressions that are thereby shown to be older than readers might think. Thus geared towards separating anachronisms from authentic detail, MOSAIK aficionados may just be motivated to consider language change. Overall, though, it is a different, comics-specific type of linguistic authenticity that Horn reconstructs – one that works through ›verbal abstraction‹. The article argues that the intricacies of verbal strategies have not so far been given adequate attention, let alone appreciated as didactically useful shorthand for historical, spatial, and cultural knowledge. Horn's article, then, doubles as a plea to give the content of speech bubbles their due.

For all their diversity, the contributions to CLOSURE #7 share a commitment to exploring the specificity of comics environments. In our special section, we are confronted with nonhuman entanglements, animal minds, and alien ecologies, yet also with the formal shifts that dislodge viewers from entrenched anthropocentrism and the blind spots of the Anthropocene. Our contributors demonstrate that Eco-comics go beyond illustrations of environmental models. Instead, the various graphic environments avail themselves of the full range of shifting representational correspondence, ambiguous nonhuman emblems, and entangled verbal-visual signs – while retaining critical potential in the face of ecological breakdown and the ideologies that foster ecocide. In our general section, this comics ecology is complemented by considerations of the sociocultural environment to which the medium responds, the ambivalent spaces it negotiates, and the variable verbal markers of historical place it uses. What grows in the gutter is a comics ecology sufficiently self-reflexive, incomplete, abstract, and cartoonish to illustrate the current deadlock in understanding large-scale environmental change. In this way, comics imagine alternative worlds, weird naturecultures, and radical ecologies that contest the inevitable march towards ecological collapse.

Kiel, November 2020

Cord-Christian Casper for the CLOSURE-Team

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- 1] Orig. quote: »Comics spielen ein kompliziertes Spiel mit Sichtbarkeit und Unsichtbarkeit, Sagbarkeit und Unsagbarkeit. Sie zeigen uns, wovon sie sprechen: Aber oft sagen sie uns nicht, wie das aussieht, was sie zeigen« (Packard 2014, 21).
- 2] Orig. quote: »Die Wiederholungen bestätigen eine Identität und zerstreuen diese zugleich, denn die Wiederholungen haben alle eine eigene ›zeichenhafte‹ Identität, die aufnichts als auf weitere Wiederholungen referiert« (Frahm, 155).
- 3] Orig. quote: »Es sind also nicht *alle* Eigenschaften einer Darstellung hinsichtlich der diegetisch referenzialisierten Situation relevant« (Wilde 2018, 195).