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► **To cite this version:**

Romain Becker. How a German Publisher Appropriates Comics It Did Not Originally Publish. Comics and Agency, De Gruyter, pp.59-80, 2022, 10.1515/9783110754483-004 . halshs-03849339

**HAL Id: halshs-03849339**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03849339v1>**

Submitted on 20 Jun 2023

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Romain Becker

## How a German Publisher Appropriates Comics It Did Not Originally Publish

“[Éditrice], c’est un métier qui consiste à transformer des fichiers Word en PDF” [Publisher is a job that consists of converting Word files into PDF files] (Meurice 2020, n.pag.) – this statement by comedian Guillaume Meurice would most likely be easily dismissed by scholars in book history, in publishing studies, or in production studies, seeing as how when working closely with writers and artists, publishers evidently do contribute to the creation of books, and are an essential link in the production chain. By counseling creators and helping transform a raw manuscript into an actual publishable (and usually sellable) piece, their influence on books can hardly be denied, making their responsibility and “propriétés proches de celles de ‘ses’ artistes ou de ‘ses’ écrivains” [characteristics close to that of ‘their’ artists and ‘their’ writers] (Bourdieu 1991, 6). However, in cases where publishers had no say during the creative process and where a book template had already been produced, for instance when publishers bought adaptation rights to a piece, their influence may matter less and it seems more contentious whether the creators and their book are truly “theirs,” as Bourdieu put it. This latter scenario is especially common in the German-language comics publishing business, as indeed, the vast majority of comics published in German – around 84% of new releases in 2014 (Hamann and Hofmann 2015, 102) – were originally published in another language. This means that in almost all of these cases, the German publishers’ job consisted of merely “converting” already printed pieces into their own language, not of assisting in the production of a new piece. Hence, saying these foreign publishers possess a form of agency in the creation of comics seems to be a tenuous claim at best, at first glance.

However, the editing practices of Reprodukt, a German publisher founded in 1991, demonstrate how comics can be appropriated even by a company that did not partake in their initial production. Symptomatic of German publishers in general, the vast majority of comics worked on by Reprodukt are ones for which they bought the rights: Around 76% were first published by someone else.<sup>1</sup> The new publisher’s work then mostly consists of translating comics for

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<sup>1</sup> These 76% relate to the totality of comics published by Reprodukt between 1991 and 2021. There are significant variations depending on the years: Whereas in 2002, all comics were imports, just one year prior, almost 60% were original publications by Reprodukt. In more recent years, as Reprodukt’s production has ramped up, the share of original publications has varied

the German-language market, but in doing so, they actually possess leeway in adapting individual comics or series to their own editorial views and practices, as well as to their audience. Indeed, even for a comic that has already been released once, a publisher can decide to re-edit and reshape the piece. By modifying a comic's outward appearance, and/or even what it contains, Reprodukt leaves its imprint on it, and can reclaim a form of authority on who reads the comic and on how they read it. In that sense, the secondary publisher can make a piece or even an entire series “theirs,” expropriating the original creative and editorial team. Reprodukt's influence on comics can sometimes truly be considered to be *editorial writing*, making them a co-creator of said pieces, rather than a mere mediator between linguistic areas. Drawing on reception theory as well as on production studies whilst using concrete examples from Reprodukt's diverse catalogue, the following pages shall demonstrate just how a German editorial team manages to keep a form of agency and control on comics that did not originally belong to them.

## Harder, Better, Pricier: The Strong Influence of Materiality

Perhaps the most apparent way in which this appropriation shows is when Reprodukt changes a comic's physical properties. Without altering the actual contents of the piece, the publisher can choose to modify its format/size, its binding (including the type of cover), as well as the quality of the paper and the printing – although the latter two elements are usually determined with the printer's input. It must be noted here that while Reprodukt does not release comics digitally as of 2022, other publishers can also alter a comic's materiality through digital distribution. Changes made to these physical properties affect not only the way one interacts with the comic, but also who interacts with it: Using the expression literary theorist Genette used to describe the paratext, the aforementioned material elements can be said to be the “*lieu privilégié d'une pragmatique et d'une stratégie, d'une action sur le public*” [privileged place of a pragmatics and of a strategy, of an action on the audience] (1987, 8). This effect on the audience is further reinforced by the fact that a comic's materiality also largely determines its price.

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between 10 and 30%. There is no clear tendency for Reprodukt to publish proportionally more or less comics created by German-language artists over the years.

For instance, one can expect Reprodukt's hardcover edition of Luke Pearson's (2014) *Hilda und der Schwarze Hund* [*Hilda and the Black Hound*] to appeal to a different audience than its subsequently (2019) published softcover version: With its embroidered back and its heftier price tag (20.- EUR rather than 15.- EUR), the former will most likely be bought by people of a higher economic and cultural capital, or be bought as a present. Being more luxurious in appearance, yet also sturdier, one may perhaps want to give it to a younger child whose parent will read it to them. Likewise, the conversion of a comic to a different format will induce different people to read it differently. Such is the case for the pocket edition of Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's (2020) *Ein Sommer am See* [*This One Summer*] – its 17.3 cm x 13 cm size means it can easily fit some pockets and would not be too heavy in a teenager's rucksack, contrary to the 21.5 cm x 15.3 cm standard edition published four years earlier (2015). As a historian specializing in comics production, Sylvain Lesage notes on pocket editions of comics that the “format incite à une lecture décomplexée, une lecture nomade; la bande dessinée de poche se glisse dans le cartable et s'échange à la récréation” [format encourages spontaneous reading, nomad reading; the pocket comic fits into a backpack and is traded during recess] (2011, n.pag.). Furthermore, the smaller size, and the lighter and pulpier paper mean the price is reduced, as well: from 29.- EUR for the standard edition to 10.- EUR for the pocket one. Undoubtedly, as Lesage adds on pocket editions, “leur prix, d'abord, facilite son acquisition; il permet également de faciliter l'achat impulsif. Le réseau de diffusion du poche permet par ailleurs de diffuser la bande dessinée dans d'autres lieux que les librairies: relais de gares, kiosques, maisons de la presse . . .” [firstly, their price facilitates acquiring them; it also encourages impulse purchases. The pocket format's distribution network allows for comics to be distributed in other places than book shops: train stations, newsstands, so-called press houses . . .] (Lesage 2011, n.pag.). As is the case for the *Hilda* series and others, by publishing multiple different editions of the same piece, Reprodukt can expect it to appeal to a larger audience than with just one of these books, and readjust subsequent printings depending on a given edition's commercial success.

All in all, changes to a comic's binding, paper quality, format, and subsequently its cost, give a publisher leeway to nudge the comic's reception in a particular direction. Even limiting the print run, or creating an edition with an alternative cover, as they did with the so-called *Vorzugsausgabe* [preferential edition] of *Schönheit* [*Beauty*] (Hubert and Kerascoët 2013), can encourage certain readers, in this case, “collector-speculators” (Gabilliet 2013, 154), as Jean-Paul Gabilliet calls them, to purchase a comic. However, it is important to see that such decisions on physical matters are made by publishers depending on the local comics market. Indeed, certain comics may attract a wealthier audience in Germany

than they would have in Japan, for instance. Thus, unless they wish to challenge current cultural practices, a publisher may want to comply with their market. Nevertheless, these adaptation practices are a way of appropriating comics for the foreign publisher, as they themselves choose to alter its properties depending on which particular crowd they want to attract in a given area.

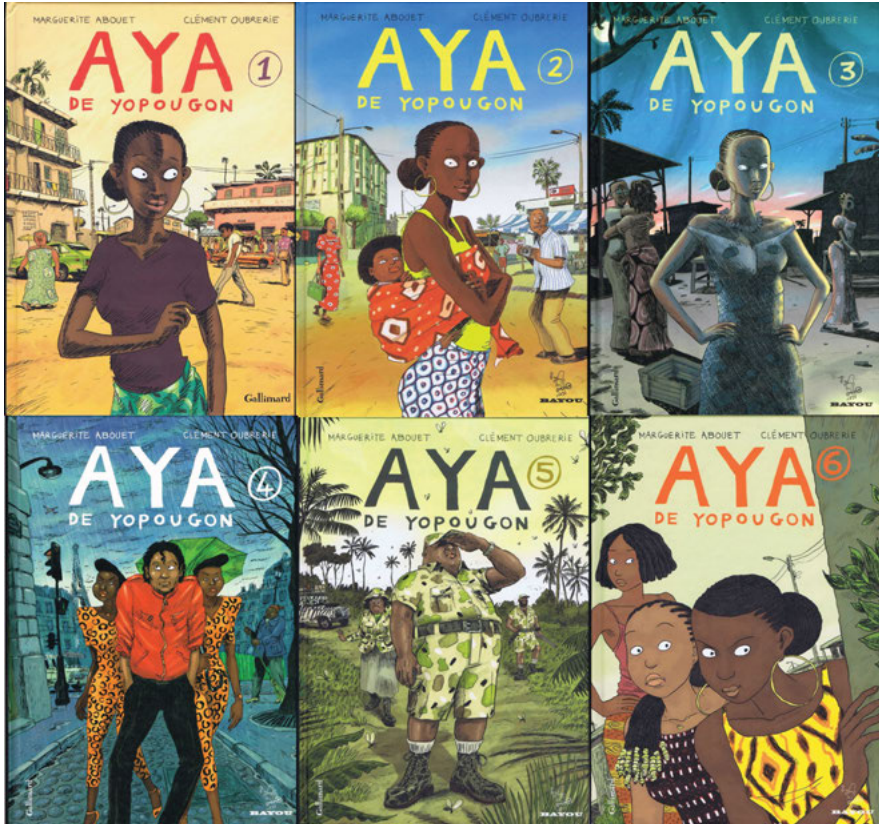
On top of the material properties of the text itself, peripheral elements can be added by the publisher so as to promote a particular reception of a piece. These epitextual additions, as Genette calls them, are indeed opportunities for more editorial paratext, “la frange du texte imprimé qui, en réalité, commande toute la lecture” [the fringe of the text, which, in reality, commands the entire reading] (Lejeune 1975, 45), as the formula used by Lejeune and repurposed by Genette goes. Concretely, the creation of a slipcase made specifically for both volumes of Pénélope Bagieu’s *Unerschrocken [Brazen]* (individual volumes in 2017 and 2018, slipcase in 2021), for example, gives Reprodukt additional space to add illustrations or a text of its choosing on the slipcase’s exterior, more space controlled directly by it, not by the artist or by retailers. Furthermore, the slipcase edition incites buyers to purchase and consume both volumes, although they are largely independent from each other from a narrative point of view. French publisher Gallimard went further with this idea of cohesion, and created a massive collected edition of both volumes (Bagieu 2019), released at a lower price than the combined individual volumes. Still, the slipcase strategy may be more sensible for a smaller publisher such as Reprodukt, as it does not necessitate the reprinting of volumes and means the new compiled version will not compete with the individual titles – all in all meaning Reprodukt gains more options for how to sell the comic. Other such peripheral elements include: a flyer recommending which parts of the *Donjon [Dungeon]* series (Trondheim et al. 2005–2021) should be read by which kind of reader, as well as explaining the series’ complex timeline, nudging readers towards reading the forty-odd albums of the series in a particular order; pamphlets featuring titles made by the same artist or upcoming titles; stickers representing characters from various Reprodukt comics, etc. These small trinkets are generally included with orders from Reprodukt’s website or are available at retailers, and serve not only as advertisement, but also to show the coherence between the various comics published by Reprodukt, making them part of a larger brand rather than separate pieces from around the world. Seeing as how the epitextual agency can be said to reside solely within a given publisher’s hands, they hold power over how a piece will be perceived by the audience that is yet to read it, or as Jonathan Gray puts it in the context of film and television studies: “[T]he paratext may well be, for such (non)viewers, the entirety of the text” (Gray 2010, 70).

## It's a Long Story: How Publishers Appropriate Comics and Series by Lengthening Them

A non-peripheral element of comics that can be altered by the publisher, and *does* have an impact on the actual contents, not just the initial reception, is its length. Publishers such as J'ai Lu BD lengthen comics when converting them to another format – in the case of said publisher, the pocket format. As panels are reorganized, cropped, and redrawn in order to remain legible even on smaller pages, the entire structure of a comic can sometimes be altered, resulting in significantly longer pieces whose rhythm and visual workings are vastly different from their original edition: an entirely new comic created not by the artists, but by their publisher (Lesage 2011; Becker 2021). In contradistinction, Reprodukt preserves the visual integrity of the pieces it adapts, even when it alters their format. Still, some of its published work is longer than it was in its original release, because Reprodukt may add additional material.

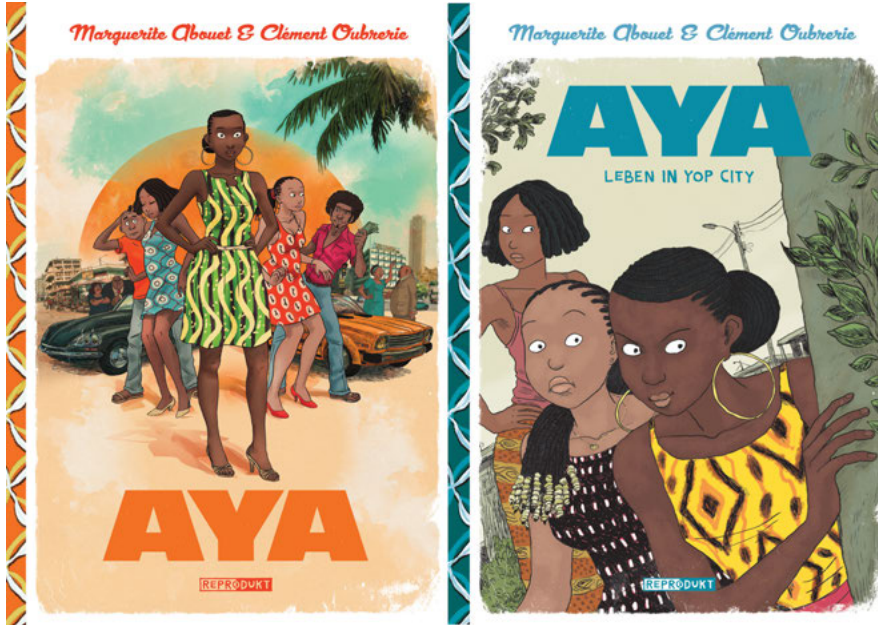
In cases where the comic is part of a series, Reprodukt can choose to add another part of the series, making the piece a compilation rather than a single issue. The repercussions on the comic can be substantial, as demonstrated by Marguerite Abouet and Clément Oubrerie's *Aya de Yopougon* [*Aya of Yop City*] series. Initially published in French by Gallimard in six volumes of slightly more than 100 pages on average (Figure 1), Reprodukt decided to change the makeup of the series by compiling three volumes of around 370 pages (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, 2014b), meaning the series is composed of only two books in German (Figure 2). This change made by Reprodukt serves not only to adapt the series to the German-language comics market and, more specifically, to their own readers, but also to transform it into a different reading experience.

The two books are, of course, much more voluminous than the single issues, which entails that they are also more costly: 39.- EUR a piece instead of 17.- EUR. Thus, the readership of Reprodukt's version must be able and willing to pay almost forty euros for a single comic and should be accustomed to reading lengthy books. In comparison to Gallimard's *Aya* comics, one can expect Reprodukt's to appeal to presumably older readers from a more privileged socio-economic background. Furthermore, compiling the comics means that, quite logically, one has to purchase fewer to complete the series. Not only may this lower the inhibition for starting a series – after all, it is only two volumes long now – it is also more practical to have to buy less volumes in German-speaking countries, as comics shops and shelves are few and far between there. An added benefit of compiling an already completed series means the release dates can be closer: Whereas French-language readers who picked up the series as it released had to stay



**Figure 1:** The six individual *Aya* volumes were released in Gallimard’s Bayou collection between 2005 and 2010. The clearly numbered covers show a wide variety of characters – the titular *Aya* is even missing from the covers of volumes 4 and 5 (Abouet and Oubrierie 2008, 2009, cover pages).

hooked for over 5 years in order to read the plot’s ending, German-language readers only had to wait for a few months. This also entails that the difference in sales between the first and the last volumes may not have been as high as it was in the French edition, where readers had more time and occasions to quit the series mid-way. Although the complete *Aya* series costs more in French than it does in German, the higher production cost resulting from more volumes, and



**Figure 2:** The two *Aya* compilations published by Reprodukt in 2014. The name of the second volume as well as the cover illustrations have been changed from the initial release. The left volume's cover illustration stems from a movie poster, the right one's is the same as the original 6th volume's (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014a, cover page; Abouet and Oubrerie 2014b, cover page).

the likely lesser sales numbers for the later volumes mean that Gallimard's benefice proportionally to the sales may not have been as high as Reprodukt's.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, the longer reading experience provided by the compiled volume means that the episodic nature of the *Aya* series is largely diminished: Each book's story now goes beyond the resolution of one given conflict per character, and delivers an in-depth exploration of Ivorian society, where suspense is quickly resolved, and thus sidelined, compared to the single issues. The narrative cohesion given by Reprodukt is further strengthened by changing the volumes' titles. Whereas the French volumes are all clearly numbered, Reprodukt merely added a

<sup>2</sup> Given that, apart from all-time best-sellers, comics sales numbers in German-speaking countries are but a fraction of the French-language market, one can expect the total (not proportional) commercial benefits to have been much higher for Gallimard than for Reprodukt.



subtitle to the second, calling it *Aya: Leben in Yop-City [Life in Yop City]*<sup>3</sup> (Abouet and Oubrerie 2014b) (see Figure 2). This means both volumes are presented as being potentially independent from each other, prompting some readers to buy the second volume not even knowing it is a sequel; in contrast, it is unlikely one would buy *Aya de Yopougon 4* (Abouet and Oubrerie 2008) without having first read all of the preceding volumes, especially since the cover does not even feature the titular character (see Figure 1).

Each volume being longer and containing a more cohesive story also means the comic is easily marketable as a *graphic novel*, and thus more likely to be distributed by general bookstores, as well as reviewed even by literary critics. As Jean-Matthieu Méon puts it, the status as a graphic novel “is first and foremost defined through editorial formats” (2020, n.pag.), after all, meaning the massive *Aya* is more likely to be considered as such than the shorter volumes. Furthermore, Méon claims that this symbolic label enables a piece to be placed “in a continuum which goes beyond comics by encompassing cinema and literature and which is meant to give the works a more solid artistic grounding” (2020, n.pag.) – a filiation on which Reprodukt may have wanted to insist by using the same illustration on the first volume’s cover (see Figure 2) as the movie poster for the 2013 animated film (Abouet and Oubrerie 2013). Although Reprodukt may have gambled on it when releasing its adaptation in 2014, the movie did not have a German-language release, meaning readers could not be expected to recognize the illustration from the promotional poster on the comic cover. Nevertheless, the poster’s cleaner and more detailed drawings and shading, as well as the faded colors on the edges contribute to giving the first cover cinema-like aesthetics that are quite distinct from the other cover illustrations. These paratextual and material changes lead to Reprodukt appropriating the series in a different way than Gallimard and are assets in a comics market as small as the German-language one: necessary strategies for the works published by Reprodukt to garner an audience and attract reviews.

When speaking about added content, one can of course not omit bonus pages or illustrations, sometimes created specifically for Reprodukt’s edition of a comic. In the case of Nicolas Mahler’s (2017) *Goldgruber-Chroniken* [Goldgruber chronicles], the artist added annotations, an epilogue, and follow-ups to storylines developed in *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* [Art theory versus Miss Goldgruber] (Mahler 2003), the first of the three comics included in the *Chroniken*

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<sup>3</sup> The English-language edition released by Drawn & Quarterly uses the same naming scheme as the German-language releases. This shows that Reprodukt’s publication strategy is not particularly original, but has rather proven its worth in other markets, as well.

trilogy. This results in the plot being somewhat different from what it was when *Kunsttheorie versus Frau Goldgruber* was initially released by Austrian publisher edition selene. Although the publisher adds contents made by the artist himself, one could argue that this helps Reprodukt make the comic its own, as it transforms this specific compilation into a retrospective of sorts, where the artist confronts his previous work critically, making it a different piece from the individual comics. Additionally, the selection of the compiled comics is also an arbitrary choice made by the publisher: Of Mahler's four autobiographical pieces on creating comics, only three are contained in the *Chroniken*, whereas for reasons pertaining to the publisher's logic, *Franz Kafkas nonstop Lachmaschine* [Franz Kafka's non-stop laughter machine] (Mahler 2014) remains a standalone comic, in spite of tackling similar subjects in a similar style.

In the same vein, Reprodukt can choose to include comics into series they were not really a part of, thus inciting people to add somewhat unrelated comics to their collection. For instance, Lewis Trondheim's (2018) somewhat autobiographic *Die Abenteuer des Universums* [The Adventures of the universe] is categorized as being a part of the *Herr Hase* [*The Spiffy Adventures of McConey*] series on Reprodukt's website, albeit actually belonging to the *Abenteuer ohne Herrn Hase* [Adventures without McConey] series, comics explicitly said to be *without* the eponymous character. While the name of the series does reference Trondheim's most famous creation, this comic in particular is not set in the same storyworld and is composed of single-page comics, far from *Herr Hase*'s usually cohesive albums. Still, the structure of the publisher's catalogue creates a link between two different series here, as tenuous as it may be.

## Divide to Conquer: Appropriating a Series by Shortening It

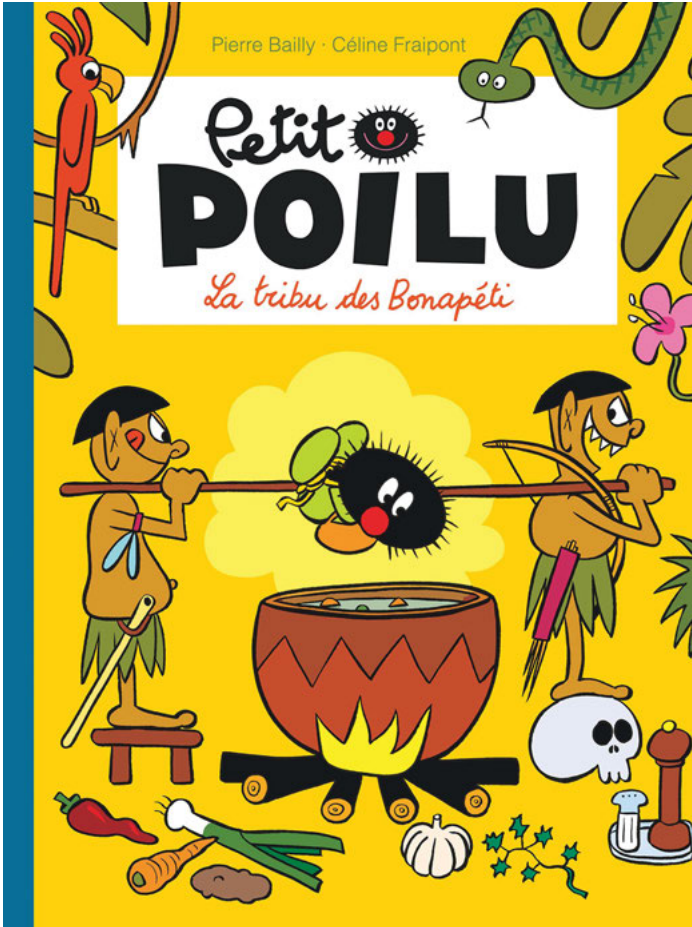
Contrary to volumes 1 and 4 of the *Ohne Herrn Hase* series, however, the two middle-parts are not mentioned as being part of the same series. Indeed *Mein Freund, der Rechner* [My friend, the computer] (Trondheim 2002) and *Nicht ohne meine Konsole* [Not without my console] (Trondheim 2003) were not published by Reprodukt, but by the Carlsen publishing house. When Reprodukt bought the rights to this series and others, it decided to re-edit and re-publish most, but not all of Trondheim's comics – for some, it merely bought all unsold copies from Carlsen. Thus, while volumes 1 and 4 were produced by Reprodukt, the volumes 2 and 3 one could purchase from the publisher were actually publications made by the rival company, which may explain why they are not advertised on Reprodukt's

website as belonging with the comics it actually released. Perhaps in order to maintain a visual homogeneity between comics of a same series, or simply for commercial reasons, these volumes are *de facto* left out of the series by the publisher, made to seem like single-issue comics. Both volumes have gone out of sale by now, either because all copies have been bought, or because Reprodukt decided to only sell the *Ohne Herrn Hase* comics it published itself. In a sense, in order to truly make Trondheim's series its own, Reprodukt chose to strip it of two of its parts.

Speaking of leaving out elements: Reprodukt has changed the makeup of other comics series or collections, and for various reasons. In spite of the different elements in a series being coherent with one another from the artist's point of view, it is truly up to the publisher to respect these elements belonging together or not. Firstly, there are the above-mentioned licensing-right issues that can arise and mean a series is published between multiple publishing houses. Secondly, there are occurrences where the publisher may not publish a complete series because of economic and critical shortcomings. For example, of Bastien Vivès, Michaël Sanlaville and Balak's (2013) twelve tomes of *Lastman*, only the first four volumes were published by Reprodukt – according to a forum post by Reprodukt editor-in-chief Dirk Rehm (2016) himself, the fifth was in the works, but was dropped due to disappointing sales. The series remains widely successful in French-speaking countries, and even sparked an animated series and a video game adaptation; nevertheless, it did not resonate with Reprodukt's audience, demonstrating that not all attempts of appropriating a comic for one's audience will be fruitful. Albeit a decision prompted by exterior factors, the choice to keep a series forever incomplete was ultimately made by the publisher, not the artists. Thus, an editorial decision means that reading *Lastman* in German is another experience entirely than it is in other languages, one where the narrative is not complete and does not span over different forms of media.

Lastly, a series or collection can be shaped and appropriated according to more internal factors, namely the publisher's political and editorial stance. One notable example for a reshaping prompted by political ideals is a comics series aimed at pre-school children, the *Kleiner Strubbel* [Little Tousle-Head] series by Céline Fraipont and Pierre Bailly (2013–2021). Of the first ten published volumes, only volume 5, *La Tribu des Bonapéti* [The tribe of the Bon Appetits] was never published by the German publisher, most likely for political reasons. Indeed, although offset by the simplified art style, the color scheme used for the title character could be seen as reminiscent of blackface. This visual element becomes especially apparent and controversial in the context of volume 5, where the title character meets a cannibal tribe. Seeing as how this volume in particular could be considered to promote racist depictions of people of color (see Figure 3),

Reprodukt, a politically left-leaning publisher, may have decided to erase the volume from its canon continuity by not publishing it in the first place. Of the later, more recent volumes of the series, others were not released by Reprodukt either, but most of these can be expected to simply not have been released yet.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 3:** The cover for a *Petit Poilu* album that has not been adapted by Reprodukt. The cover shows a supposedly cannibal tribe of indigenous people wanting to cook the titular character. The illustration reproduces colonial imagery and racial stereotypes that could be considered inappropriate for young readers (Bailly and Fraipont 2009, cover page).

<sup>4</sup> The output of *Kleiner Strubbel* comics has been steady and rapid, but Reprodukt took a break from 2019 to 2021, perhaps in order not to overtake the French publications.

Nevertheless, volume 15, which questions gender stereotypes, and received backlash from conservative newspapers in France, may have also been willfully excluded from the series' German run. In this case, probably not because Reprodukt condones gendered behaviors – after all, the company publishes and publicizes various feminist comics, and comics on queer identities –, but because it could nevertheless not want for a children's series to possess such an obvious political subtext, or simply wish to avoid controversy. Clearly, by selecting which comics to publish and which not to, Reprodukt appropriates the series and gains a form of interpretative authority on it, demonstrating that it possesses textual agency.

Here, one can introduce the concept of editorial writing, used by production scholars Anne Réach-Ngô and later by Brigitte Ouvry-Vial to describe the traces of editorial authorship during the Renaissance, as it could be applied to a contemporary comics publisher, as well. According to them, “*écriture éditoriale désignerait, à travers la typographie, la mise en chapitres, l’organisation formelle de l’ouvrage, les traces visibles et lisibles de l’auctorialité éditoriale [ . . . ] inscrit[es] dans la matérialisation de l’écrit*” [editorial writing designates the visible and invisible traces of editorial auctoriality inscribed into the materialization of writing [ . . . ] via the typography, the division into chapters, the formal organization of the piece] (Ouvry-Vial 2007, 78, original emphasis). Through the formal changes made to the structure and contents of the Bailly and Fraipont's series, one could argue that the German *Kleiner Strubbel* is not only the artists' invention, but also that of the editors, who co-wrote it, in a way. The same goes for Mahler's *Goldgruber-Chroniken*, where through the combination of different volumes into a single book, Mahler's individual pieces are now perceived as belonging to one cohesive narrative, all because of an editorial decision.

## The Publisher as a Narrator: Choosing Which Story to Tell

Another series highlights how editorial choices can affect how not only a piece, but an entire artist will be perceived by a given audience, meaning the publisher in a sense rewrites the artist as opposed to only their work, making them their own. Regarding the Japanese artist Shigeru Mizuki, for example, Reprodukt decided to publish his autobiography differently than its Canadian counterpart Drawn & Quarterly. While the latter published a four-part series on Mizuki's life (Mizuki 2013), French publisher Cornélius (Mizuki 2012) and Reprodukt (Mizuki

2020) released a trilogy.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the various publishers unexpectedly adapted different autobiographic pieces: Whereas the Canadian publisher adapted the manga *Shōwa-shi* [Shōwa era], originally released from 1988 to 1989, the German and the French publishers translated Mizuki's shorter 2001 production *Boku no Isshō wa GeGeGe no Rakuen Da* [My life is Shigeru's paradise] (Mizuki 2001). A great many pages of Mizuki's later autobiography, the one published in German and French, actually stem from the older *Shōwa-shi*, and as can be expected for biographies, both pieces essentially tell the same story, albeit with a different aim – against this background, the question for a publisher is which of the series to select for publication, and why.

In spite of the commercial and critical success enjoyed by the English version of *Shōwa-shi*,<sup>6</sup> Reprodukt chose to nevertheless adapt *Boku no Isshō*, as it is closer to its vision of what kind of stories it wants to publish. According to Reprodukt's self-description, it releases comics where "Person und Erfah[r]ungen der Autor:innen im Blickpunkt [stehen]. Auch wo Fiktion entsteht, werden autobiografische Bezüge erkennbar, bleibt die eigene Perspektive der wichtigste Ausgangspunkt" [the person and experience of the author are at the center of attention. Even when a fictional story is created, autobiographical references can be recognized, and the personal perspective remains the main focal point] (Reprodukt n.d., n.pag.). Although Mizuki's *Shōwa-shi* is personal, it is also a historic documentary on Japanese society and on the evolution that it underwent – hence why the English-language edition is titled *Showa: A History of Japan*. While this may have been a better sales pitch than simply a biography of an artist not too well-known in the West, the German publisher decided to publish a piece that related to the company's ambitions: Instead of publishing a *History of Japan*, Reprodukt chose to publish a history of Mizuki. This even extends to the volumes' titles: Whereas Drawn & Quarterly neatly categorized each part by the dates in which the plot takes place (*Showa: A History of Japan 1926–1939*; *Showa: 1939–1944 . . .*), Reprodukt included the artist's name in the title<sup>7</sup> and, in spite of their retaining a similar chronological structure, used a more thematic approach to divide the volumes, calling their comics *Shigeru Mizuki: Kindheit und Jugend* [Childhood

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<sup>5</sup> The series on which Cornélius's and Reprodukt's adaptation is based was six volumes long – shortening a series' run is a strategy of leaving one's imprint on a comic that was discussed earlier in this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> The comic was nominated twice for the Harvey Awards and thrice for the Eisner Awards, where it won in 2015 and 2016.

<sup>7</sup> On the cover, "Shigeru Mizuki" is written in the same font as the rest of the title, implying the name is a part of the title. Furthermore, on Reprodukt's website, as well as in product descriptions of retailers and reviews, Shigeru Mizuki is listed as the title and as the artist of the series.

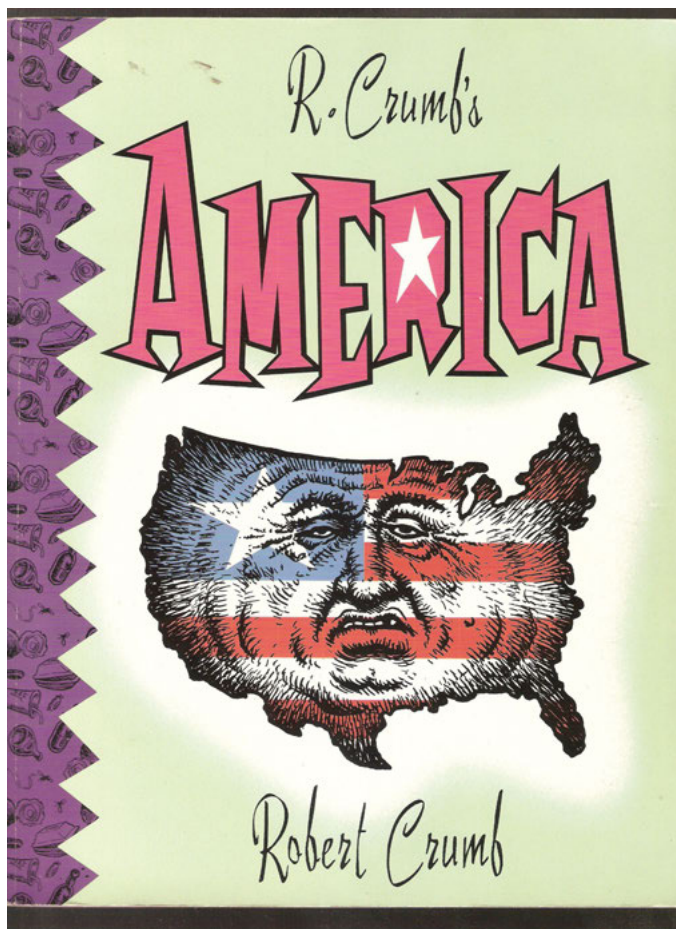
and youth], *Shigeru Mizuki: Kriegsjahre* [War years], and *Shigeru Mizuki: Mangaka*.<sup>8</sup> By altering the titles, Reprodukt appropriated the series differently than its Canadian and French counterparts, and by publishing another autobiography of the same artist, it arguably altered how that artist would be received in German-language cultures. Reprodukt's and Cornélius's Mizuki is highlighted as an artist with a tragic personal backstory, whereas for Drawn & Quarterly, he is perhaps first and foremost a witness of Japan's evolution throughout the twentieth century.

Speaking of evolution: It is up to a publisher to make a given comic go with the times and adapt it to what readers may expect in a given era – or not – shaping it according to what the former deems relevant. Without necessarily changing the contents, an older piece can be appropriated by a publisher so as to be presented as a comment on contemporary issues. Reprodukt accomplished this with Robert Crumb's *Amerika* (Crumb 2019), giving it a not-so-metaphorical new coat of paint. While this collection of short comics was originally published by Knockabout Comics in 1994 (Crumb 1994), most of the stories it contains date back to the early 1970s. While one can most certainly compare issues and conflicts of back then with those of today, and perhaps discover a striking resemblance, this reading is not necessarily incentivized by the British publisher. In contradistinction, Reprodukt presents its 2019 release of the same anthology as one containing “eine bitterböse Abrechnung mit dem amerikanischen Traum, die – obwohl zwischen 1965 und 1996 entstanden – aktueller nicht sein könnte” [a ruthless confrontation with the American dream that – albeit created between 1965 and 1996 – could not be any more contemporary than it already is] (Reprodukt 2019, n.pag.). Further links with contemporary American society are reinforced by explicitly naming Donald Trump as one of the many characters portrayed in the book. However, back when Crumb drew him in 1986, Trump was still a real estate tycoon, and not a former politician, meaning the particular short story starring him was not conceived as a comment on US politics *per se*, but rather on the state of the financial system. Still, given how interested overseas media were in the Trump presidency and in the then upcoming 2020 presidential race, it makes sense to market *Amerika* as if it contained a contemporary vision of the US, and as if it focused on Trump.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cornélius used the same tripartition for their adaptation of Mizuki's autobiography, but called their volumes *L'enfant* [the child], *Le survivant* [the survivor], and *L'apprenti* [the apprentice]. While the same stages of Mizuki's life are accentuated in each volume, the different titles nevertheless connote different interpretations the publishers made on what these stages represented for the artist and narrator.

<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, the short story in which Donald Trump appears is a mere 6 pages long, making up barely 6% of the 96 pages long anthology, meaning he is hardly the focus of the comic.



**Figure 4:** The cover for Knockabout Comics' *America*, a compilation of short comics published by Robert Crumb. The illustration shows the United States personified as an obese and unfriendly-looking person (Crumb 1994, cover page).

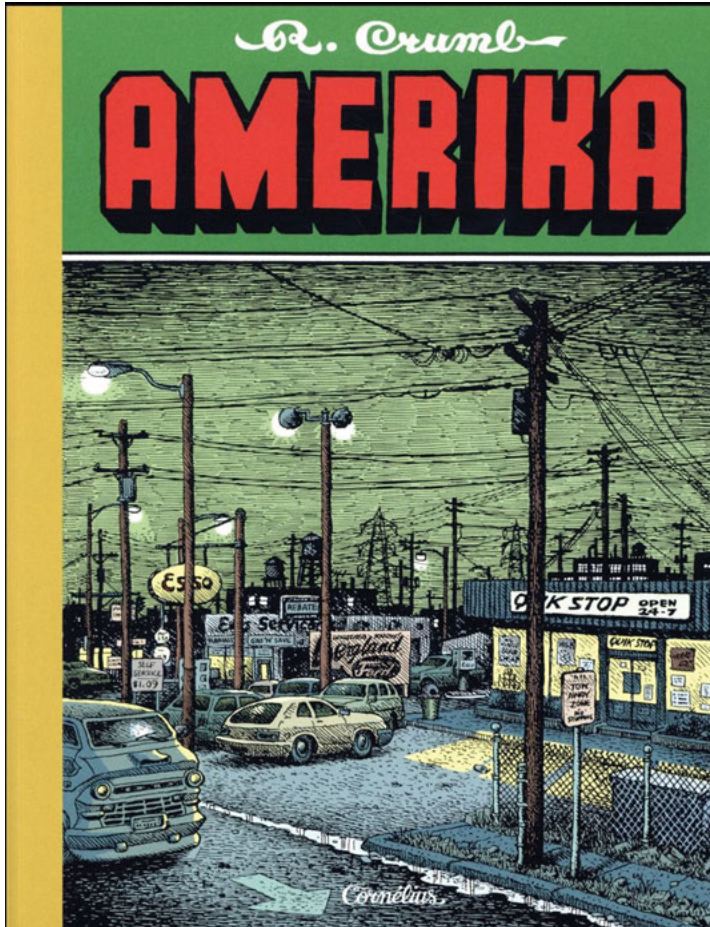
The association with the Trump presidency is further strengthened by altering the cover. Both editions contain the same cover illustration: the wrinkled face of a grimacing, very stout human, in the shape of a map of the US, colored with a motive reminiscent of the Puerto Rican flag, but that most likely represents a modified US flag (see Figures 4 and 5). The same illustration (minus the flag motive) is used in one of the short stories, where it is said to represent the greedy, cruel, and ugly “Modern America” (Crumb 1994, 4). However, the original cover background’s uniform mint green (see Figure 4), perhaps signaling sickness, was changed





**Figure 5:** Reprodukt’s cover for its 2019 adaptation of Robert Crumb’s comics collection. The color scheme is different from the one of the piece it adapts, and may be reminiscent of caricatures of then US-President Donald Trump. The positioning of the colors yellow and orange could fit with representing the face’s hair and skin color (Crumb 2019, cover page).

by Reprodukt to orange on the bottom two-thirds and yellow on the top third (see Figure 5). Associated with the portrait of an older, obese, presumably male person, the color scheme used by Reprodukt can easily make one interpret the cover illustration as representing Trump, seeing as how these colors were, in fact, associated with the former President’s hair color and skin tone, and prominently used in caricatures. Additionally, several characters fleeing from the gigantic face were added, as well as wriggly lines representing stench or possibly



**Figure 6:** Cornélius's 2004 adaptation of Robert Crumb's comics collection. In contrast to the original release and other adaptations, the French publisher decided to show a commercial district on the outskirts of a US-American town on the cover. The greenish colors from the original cover may represent an inherent sickness to the American way of life (Crumb 2004, cover page).

loudness, all accentuating its supposed repulsiveness. Coupled with the publisher explicitly naming Trump in the book's description, as well as releasing the comic in February 2019, right at the start of the US Democratic Party's presidential primaries, and thus, at a time where German-language media would look at US politics with renewed and heightened interest, it is clear that Reprodukt somewhat hijacked the comic's interpretation. The German *Amerika* is not a

comment made by Crumb on today's US politics, but rather a comment made by Reprodukt, its interpretation of how this anthology should be read today.

In contradistinction to its foreign colleagues, French publisher Cornélius chose to represent a typical suburban commercial district on the cover (see Figure 6), signaling the comic as being a portrait of worldwide consumer culture in general. This is emphasized by its product description stating that Crumb's "constat lucide et acerbe qu'il dresse de son pays vaut pour tout l'Occident, tant nos modes de vie semblent s'être calqués sur le rêve américain" [clear-sighted and ruthless appreciation of his country is valid for all of Western society, seeing as how our ways of life seem to have copied the American dream] (Cornélius 2021, n.pag.). Here, the cold colors and most notably the green sky may hint at this American dream having become unhealthy, if not sick. Nevertheless, this cover represents the US as being a drab and sad place rather than the repulsive subject it seems to be in Reprodukt's edition. Thus, as evidenced by the cover illustrations, different publishers chose to interpret the piece differently, making the comic tell a bit of a different story depending on the edition.

## Conclusion

As one can see, whenever different forces, be they the artists or previous publishers, claim authorship on a piece, even when market dynamics try to impose how a comic ought to be released, and the times should determine how it ought to be read, Reprodukt – and other companies – can keep a large part of their agency and appropriate parts of these aspects. As claimed by Ouvry-Vial and Réach-Ngô (2007), publishers do, in fact get to actively take part in authoring a comic and are not merely passive recipients. Contrary to most artists, their agency does not limit itself to the textual, but reaches to the paratextual and its impact on the broader public (even those parts of the public that will not consume the products), in spite of not always having been involved in the creative process.

Of course, the publisher's agency can still be limited by the artistic input, by the market . . . and even when it is not, a publisher will not necessarily impose its vision: In fact, only a minority of series published by Reprodukt contains changes of the likes that were discussed here. Perhaps due to an increasingly globalized way of consuming media, modifications (other than of the language and lettering of a comic) are not always necessary to appeal to an audience in a given country. Even when there are such alterations, most, if not all of them have been made with the artists' consent and approved by them in order to appeal to Reprodukt's readers. Especially when the changes do not alter the writers'

and artists' intentions for the text, but only the paratext and epitext chosen by the original publisher, they may be gladly accepted. In the end, while publishers have a great deal of control over comics, they usually also have to keep up a balance with the artist's own agency, and with market dynamics; if they neglect this balance, they risk failing to disseminate the comics they want to spread. As a publisher that prides itself on releasing personal comics, Reprodukt generally uses its editorial power with great responsibility, and it tries to be faithful to what the artists want to express. Being in the latter's favor and strictly adhering to their vision means they may ask for their other comics to be released with the same publisher and may incite them to attend marketing events such as book signings. In a few of the cases mentioned in this contribution, however, far from being a mere mediator for the artists, or from simply turning Word files into PDF files, Reprodukt shows the great extent of their agency as publisher.

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