

GERMAN GRAPHIC NOVELS & COMICS

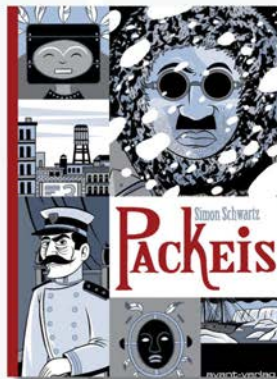
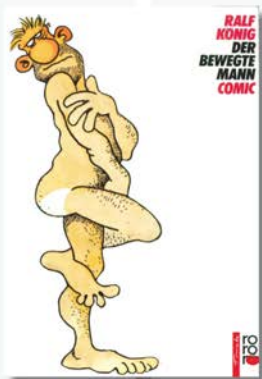


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A (Very) Brief History of German Comics

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Duke University, Durham, April 1st 2015

“Es ist wirklich zu toll! Es funkelt alles von Talent und Geist! Einige Blätter sind ganz unübertrefflich! Wenn er künftig einen weniger frivolen Gegenstand wählte und sich noch ein bißchen mehr zusammennähme, so würde er Dinge machen, die über alle Begriffe wären.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on early comic creator Rodolphe Töpffer

“It’s really too great! It all shines with talent and spirit! Some pages are completely unsurpassable! If he were to pick less frivolous subject and compose himself just a little more, in the future he could do things beyond all comprehension.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on early comic creator Rodolphe Töpffer

After discovering that a Swiss teacher had made an illustrated parody of his celebrated play, *Faust*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote these words of praise for the illustrator and his work. For millennia, many writers had derided images and graphic narratives as a lesser form of knowledge than speech and text. Thinkers from Plato to Shakespeare warned that image-making misses some crucial aspects of experience that speech and text do not. In *Republic*, it is a rational understanding of content that Plato finds lacking in the visual art of his time. All forms of art, but images especially, he suggests, are predisposed to copying without understanding. In a sonnet from 1609, Shakespeare takes another approach to denigrating images when he expresses that a painter’s images are well suited to capturing beauty but cannot capture the subject’s interior emotional complexity in a satisfactory way. He writes, “Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art, They draw but what they see, know not the heart.” In

short, some of the most influential thinkers suggested that both reason and emotion are lacking in image and that we should focus our energy elsewhere if we truly wish to understand ourselves and the world around us. To an extent, these prejudices are still with us today.



Histoire de Mr Jabot, Rodolphe Töpffer, 1833

Ironically, Töpffer, who is considered by Europeans to be the founder of contemporary comics, was motivated initially by improving his students' comprehension; he utilized a combination of image and text precisely because it helped his students to avoid copying without understanding and instead to break down and integrate new information into developing bodies of knowledge. After reading Töpffer's *Faust* spoof, *Voyages et aventures du Dr. Festus*, Goethe defied a longstanding tradition of prejudice against image and narrative art by recognizing the intellectual and emotional potential of what would later become comics, but he still found something missing. Writing in the subjunctive mood, which in German expresses the hypothetical and counterfactual, Goethe stresses that Töpffer would do truly great things if he only concentrated on something more serious. Emboldened by Goethe, Töpffer published his work, but he did not select a more serious subject, as Goethe suggested, and instead continued to publish parody and satire.

Goethe's expectations and Töpffer's refusal offer a glimpse into what makes German comics unique in this period. Whereas America and France opened up a new space for comics, in which frivolity, satire and parody were elevated, Germans at first wanted to retain continuity with other forms of art and literature. Perhaps it is for this reason that Germans were the first to develop what we would now call a graphic novel.

In fact, the first German graphic novel, written by Franz Joseph Goetz, was published in 1783, roughly fifty years before Töpffer began publishing his French-language satirical comics. Goetz's melodrama, *Lenardo und Blandine*, was based on a ballad by the poet Gottfried August Bürger and centers on the collapse of an arranged marriage after it is discovered that the young woman has another lover. Her father kills the lover and she falls into madness and dies.



Lenardo und Blandine, 1783

Although *Lenardo und Blandine* had little influence on the development of graphic narratives, its appearance is very early in the timeline of European comics, which are typically seen to begin in the 1830s with Töpffer. The heavy subject material also shows German comics beginning with an attempt to integrate with, rather than distinguish themselves from dominant art forms of the time, in this case with theatre.

However, to characterize German comics as generally more serious and continuous with traditional arts than in the French or American traditions would be misleading. Beginning in the Early Modern Period, German graphic narratives also prominently feature foolhardy deviants. Some notable works include *Till Eulenspiegel* and *The Ship of Fools*. Although such works cannot strictly be considered comics in today's sense of the word, they played a crucial role in the birth of comics and continue to shape the expectations for both form and content in many graphic narratives.

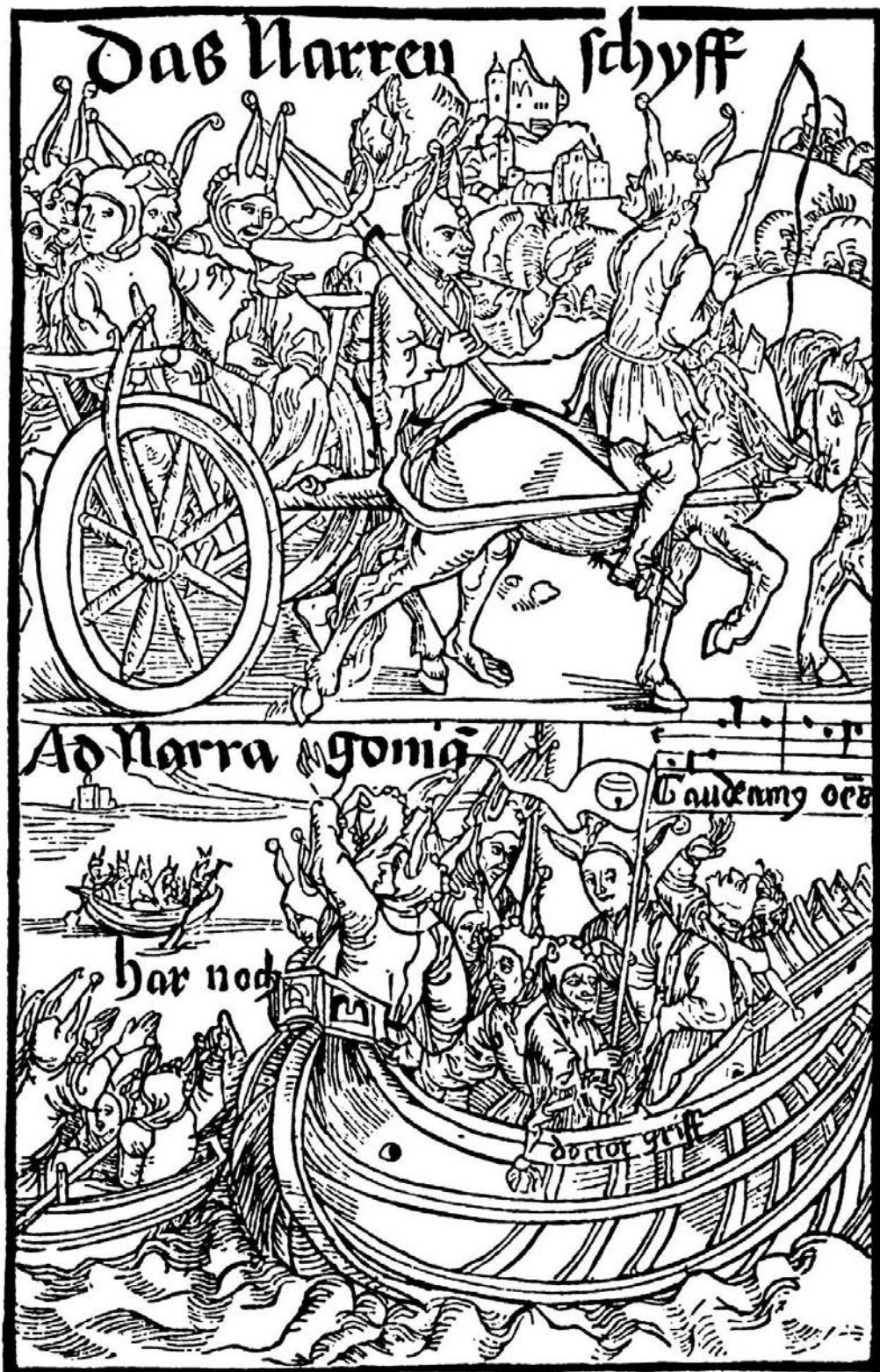
Till Eulenspiegel (originally *Dyl Ulenspiegel*) follows the eponymous merry prankster who journeys through Europe, finding work in whatever form he can. Frequently, *Eulenspiegel*

misunderstands his employers, completing his work in ways that they did not intend and leading to humorous consequences.



Till Eulenspiegel, 1515

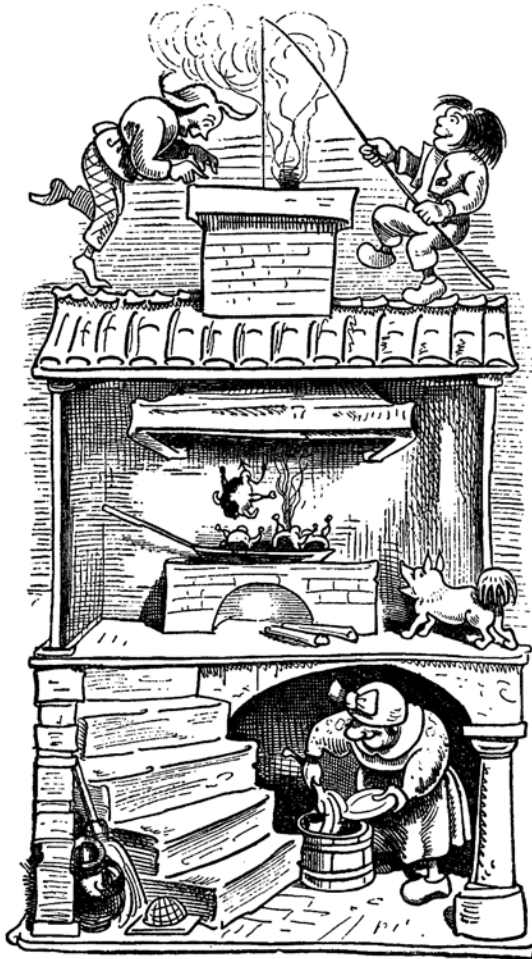
Das Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools) is a satirical work by Sebastian Brant, published in 1494. It describes one hundred types of fools, emphasizing their distinct vices and follies. These include transgressions such as greed, frivolous fashion or infidelity. The engravings were done by a young Albrecht Dürer and employ the fool's cap as a thematic thread between the many panels.



Zu schyff Zu schyff Brüder: Es gat / es gat.

Together, *Das Narrenschiff* and *Till Eulenspiegel* provide a prototype for illustrated fools and pranksters that remains internationally relevant in comics today. The prankster is disobedient and fails intentionally by aspiring to notions of success not recognized by those in power.

One of the first authors to capitalize on this prototype in Germany was Wilhelm Busch. Busch's *Max und Moritz* is inspired, in part, by *Till Eulenspiegel*, and carries on the physical humor and deviant behavior found in the earlier work. The influential early American comic strip *The Katzenjammer Kids* is based on this type of deviant figure as is, arguably, the Joker from *Batman*.



Max und Moritz, 1865

However, while illustrated children's literature was developing into what would one day become comics, adult political cartoons were also on a trajectory that would lead them to intersect and, to an extent, merge with children's literature, most powerfully in the form of war-time propaganda.

Adolf Hitler's favorite periodical was, like many periodicals of the time, illustrated. *Der Stürmer* was an extreme-right weekly newspaper published by Julius Streicher that often featured racist caricatures. Streicher's side-project, an anti-Semitic children's book called *Der Giftpilz* (The

Poison Mushroom), typifies the merging of adult caricature and children's illustration in wartime propaganda. Such books were also complemented by other materials that glorified war and unquestioning sacrifice, frequently highlighting gendered roles surrounding the masculine soldier identity and the feminine maternal role.

Der Stürmer

Münchener Wochenblatt zum Kampfe um die Wahrheit

HERAUSGEBER: JULIUS STREICHER

Nummer
5

München, im Februar 1932

10. Jahr
1932

Die Sowjetpakete

Wie die Juden einander in die Hände arbeiten

Beckheimer und Zieg
Alleinlieferanten für Sowjetjuden

In Deutschland, namentlich in den großen Städten, leben Menschen, die sich Kommunisten nennen. Ein Teil von ihnen kommt aus den Reihen des Unternehmertums. Es sind Jubiler und geborene Dämonen. Sie bekennen sich zum Kommunismus, weil ihr Verstandesvermögen ihnen sagt, daß der Bolschewismus das in der Natur einer vorwiegend jüdischen Bevölkerung besteht. Der andere Teil sind Revolutionäre und Schar, die vom Kommunismus die Erlösung der Unterdrückten und Ausgebeugten erwarten. Alle aber leben in Moskau ihr Ideal. Die einen denken, wenn sie „Sozialismus“ betreiben, an die Tugend, an Flämmerung, Fort, Freundschaft, abgeschliffene Pfeiler und gesprengte Kirchen. Die anderen betreiben dabei den angeblich freien russischen Menschen und Arbeiter, der trotz aller Not, ein Leben in Schönheit und Würde lebt. Alle tragen für die Lebensform auf Sowjetrußland, Kommunismus-jüdische Religionen führen das Sowjetparadies in den verödeten Tönen. Tausende deutscher Arbeiter haben sich nach jenen Rußland. Nach dem Lande der „Freiheit“, der „höhen Lohn“, der weißen Fleischtöpfe. Nach dem Lande, in dem nicht das Volk Religion die Schicksale verurteilt. Nach dem Lande, in dem angeblich der Sozialist Kapitalismus zur Strecke gebracht ist.

Kühnheit führt die „Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands“ Hauptquartier in das Reich Talmud. Sie haben dort einer Woge die russischen Verhältnisse. Sie kommen übermäßig und bezahlt wieder nach Deutschland zurück. Die ersten dann in Hunderten von Millionenvermögenen von deutschen Arbeitern von der gewaltigen Kasse, von den herrlichen hygienischen Arbeitsbedingungen, von den hohen Löhnen und dem Wohlstand des russischen Menschen. Sie vergelten dabei, daß es ihnen ging, wie es den amerikanischen und englischen Studien-

Faschingsdämmerung



Wie scheint, jetzt geht es auch mit dem Karneval zu Ende, den wie Juden mit dem deutschen Volk veranstaltet haben

kommissionen ergangen ist, die in den letzten Jahren Deutschland bereiten, um ein Bild von den Juden in Deutschland zu gewinnen. Die wurden bei mit an den

Bahnhöfen auch von den Kommunisten empfangen. In Autos herumgefahren. Stadions, Willkürkreis, neue Flughäfen, Krankenhausneubauten.

Aus dem Inhalt

Elias Bohrenhies des Zalmudjude
Die Internationale des Verbrechens
Hefelome für die Lüge
Die Versteigerung von Windheim
Der Bauernaufmarsch in Dreziden
Die Verurteilung Wschaffenburgs

Die Juden sind unser Unglück!

Der Stürmer, 1932



Der Giftpilz, 1938

In the postwar period, memories of wartime propaganda shaped negative attitudes toward comics. During that time, German comics were dominated by translations and imitations of American and French comics, particularly Western, Crime, Thriller and Romance comics. Such comics were unprecedented in the level of violence they portrayed, which for many youth was the main attraction. In 1954, after German-American psychologist Fredric Wertham testified about the correlation between comics and delinquency in the United States, Germans followed the American response (the Comics Code Authority) and also created a board for the censorship of comics.

In the context of divided Germany, comics nonetheless became a portal for introducing children to the polarized values and expectations of East and West German adults. One example of this tension is documented in the alternative visions of the future offered by the West's *Nick der Weltraumfahrer* and the East's Digidags in *Mosaik*. Nick, on the one hand, lives in a science-fiction future in which danger awaits at every turn. However, despite these constant dangers, there is comfort in the fact that Nick always overcomes them, implying a future of limitless economic and technological expansion in which humans can even dominate space. The Digidags, on the other hand, are a humble and physically diminutive group that inexplicably appears in various epochs, future and past. When an alien or creature appears to the Digidags, there is a real possibility that humans will actually lose their central place in the universe, and there is a real possibility of economic collapse. This dynamic possibility is realized in one story, as the earth is shattered and marred by the collapse of capitalism.



Nick der Weltraumfahrer

After the fall of the Berlin wall, German comics and graphic novels have seen the rise of several new and important categories. Among these are travelogues, adaptations of world literature, and historical biographies. In short, the original model of Goetz's *Lenardo und Blandine* is in vogue and there is an urge to place comics and world literature under the same set of

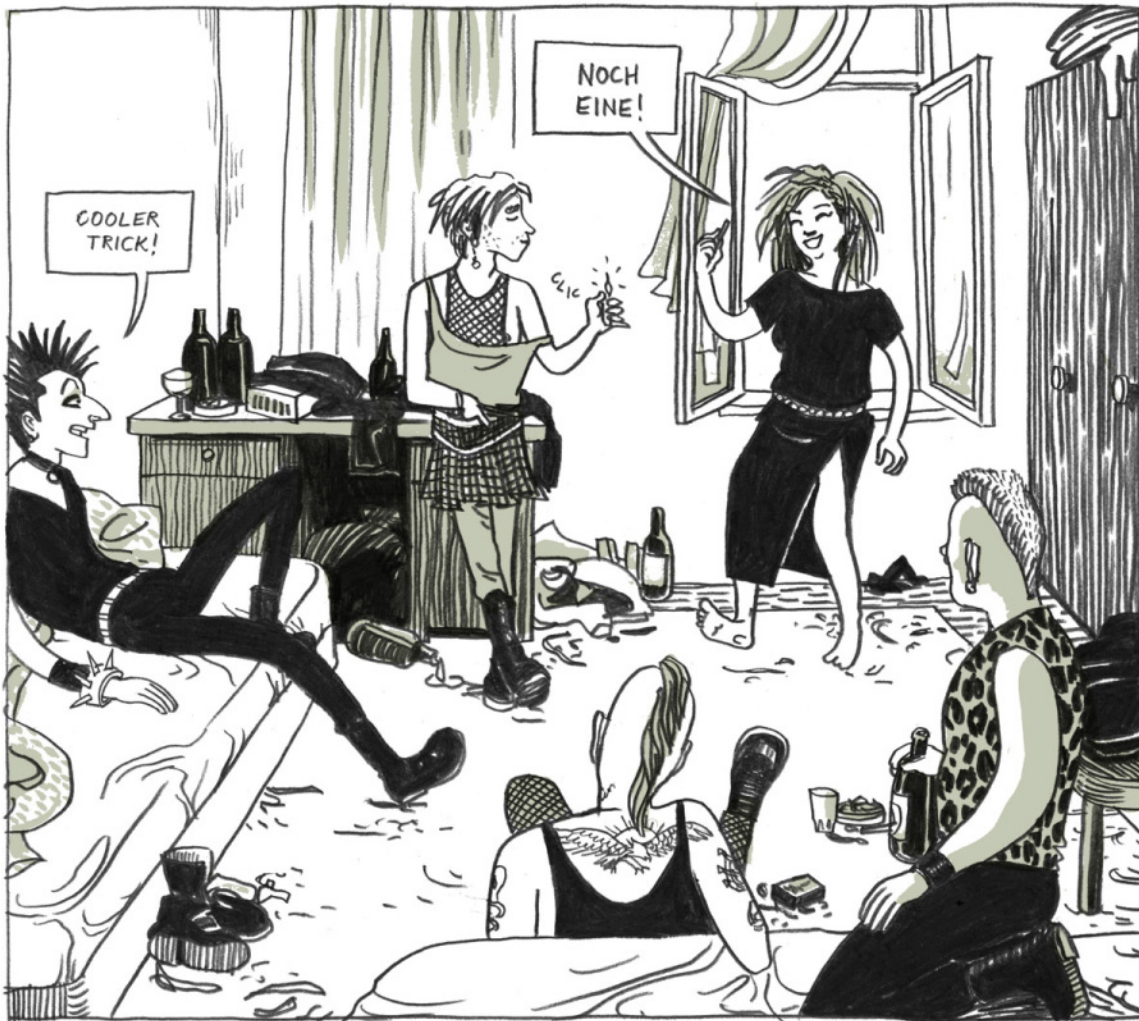
expectations; greatness, depth and interiority are in some ways becoming more important than satire, play and frivolity. Adaptations have been made of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Goethe's *Faust* and many other canonical German works. Likewise, there are now graphic biographies of Richard Wagner, Luther and other major figures from German history. Notable travelogues exist for countries including Israel and Japan; showing that comics are now engaged in processing Germany's moral identity after WWII and the Holocaust.



Die Verwandlung Graphic Novel, 2010

At the same time, the unpretentious history of comics offers authors and readers an asylum from the assumptions and values of the more canonical media of text and film. It is perhaps for this reason that comics have attracted so many voices from the LGBTQ, feminist and punk scenes in Austria and Germany. Some of the most exciting comics and graphic novels are being produced at the intersection of these groups and their various interests. Perhaps the best known in the USA is Austrian feminist Ulli Lust, whose 2009 graphic novel *Today is the Last Day*

of the Rest of Your Life achieved much acclaim after an English translation in 2013. The novel is a coming-of-age story that follows a group of young anarchists from Vienna who travel through Italy. Although absolutely a monumental work, Lust's graphic novel, does not aspire to greatness. That is to say, it does not aspire to the same stoic and gallant greatness ascribed to so many canonized authors. Lust finds meaning in the marginalized and laughs at the ego of conventional "greatness". It is in this way that even in the depth and intricacy of her work, Lust finds a fitting home in comics. Her subject matter is not frivolous, nor is it grave; instead Lust exposes the meaninglessness of this distinction.



Heute Ist Der Letzte Tag Vom Rest Deines Lebens, 2009

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