

So bad it should be banned

Judging the aesthetic of comics

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In 1989, Horst Schröder (b. 1943), the publisher of the Swedish adult comic magazine *Pox*, was reported under the Freedom of the Press Act for the unlawful depiction of sexual violence.¹ The comic magazine introduced experimental and avant-garde adult comics from Europe and North America to a Swedish audience. During the trial in January 1990, the prosecutor argued that ‘artistic arguments’ were used to legitimate the publication of pictures of sexual violence. During an account of the comics in question, he posed the question: ‘Is this really art?’² Further, he stated that only work of low aesthetic quality should be prosecuted.³ The trial thus came to focus on the question of aesthetic quality—were the comics of sufficient artistic value to justify their publication?

The *Pox* trial makes visible a period in the politics of reading in Sweden when reading printed literature, from an institutional perspective, could still be perceived as bad, or even dangerous. From a contemporary standpoint, it is fair to say that printed matter today no longer constitutes the primary battleground for the discussion about the limits of decency. Stand-up comedy, computer games, and even jokes on Twitter are recent examples of media that have undergone different kinds of protests and/or prosecution.⁴ The trial of *Pox* and the accompanying debate took place against a backdrop of a decade that saw an increasing interest in comics with a postmodern aesthetic that pushed the limits of decency, as well

as an increasingly heated debate about violence—sexual violence in particular—in the new media. An analysis of the *Pox* trial can help historicize current debates about obscene cultural expressions, examining how fiction has been perceived to affect its readers by focusing on the ‘sociohistorical specificity’ of the trial.⁵

Pox’s first issue of 1989 (see fig. 4.1) was reported by a member of the People’s Organization against Pornography.⁶ The Chancellor of Justice (Justitiekanslern, JK), Hans Stark, decided to prosecute *Pox* on six counts of illegal depiction of violence, specifically sexual violence and sexual coercion, due to a new Article in the Freedom of the Press Act.⁷ Article 13 had been introduced that same year to combat violent videos and photographs.⁸ The Article outlawed sexual violence or coercion in pictures with the intention to distribute them, with the exception of justifiable circumstances. Since then, this Article has only been tested in court in relation to drawn pictures in very few cases. The cases that led to convictions in the 1990s were mainly videos and pictures depicting child pornography and sexual sadism. It is the combination of sex and violence that falls under the law, and the aim and circumstances of a publication are identified as the most important aspects of the legal judgement. Two cases concerning pictures where JK chose not to bring a prosecution provide some indication as to how the law was implemented. In 1989 a photograph by the artist Man Ray was indicted, the publication was assessed as serious, and it was conceded that the picture could be deemed to possess artistic value. In a statement, JK specified that artistic considerations can be a reason for publishing a picture that depicts sexual violence; other extenuating circumstances are a serious intent, and a primary aim not to awaken the viewer’s sexual desire. In another case two years later, stills in a pornographic magazine were not considered unlawful, since the depicted violence was not illustrated in a sexualized manner.⁹

In this study I analyse the trial against *Pox* by focusing on conceptualizations of the aesthetic in the politics of reading. The politics of reading as a theoretical framework refers to the power structures that encompass the practice of reading, including the production,

distribution, and mediation of reading materials. Literature policy, for example, is included in the politics of reading, but the *who, what, where, when, how, and why* of reading are much larger than specific policy areas.¹⁰ The politics of reading—how readers and literature are governed in a society—will always be a result of different discursive structures that regulate what is rational or not in a given time or place.¹¹ Different conceptualizations of the aesthetic—meaning artistic value and what a work of art is or should be—are central to this overarching framework. The comic format is understood as a medium in its own right, depicting a narrative, but also closely connected to literature in general—one in fact *reads* comics.

The methodology used for the analysis is Michel Foucault's notion of problematizations, addressing how it becomes possible to think about phenomena as 'problems' that need solutions, in this case policy solutions. For example, if the reading of certain materials is perceived as dangerous, then certain policy solutions such as censorship or distribution control become possible. In the analysis of written testimonies and the public debate about the case, I have identified the main 'problems' with reading *Pox*. Further to the analysis, these problems are articulated using discourses that build on certain scientific and/or practical knowledges.¹² Subject positions of various kinds are available in the problematizations, such as 'reader of comics'. It is also important to acknowledge other ways to think about the problem, challenging the dominant problematization.¹³

Comics and Swedish literature policy

Only rarely have works of art been explicitly named as harmful from a judicial standpoint in Sweden after the Second World War. Freedom of expression is strong, and politicians ideally aim to be at arm's length distance from publicly funded culture, meaning that they and civil servants should not have any say in what kind of culture or what artists should be supported.¹⁴ Literature policy actions since the middle of the 1970s have been part of welfare

policy, focusing on the promotion and distribution of a qualitative literature production with taxpayers' support, including comics. The goals of Swedish literature policy have been to provide alternatives to commercial book publishing and to facilitate access to qualitative reading materials. In this discourse, there is an assumption that people will prefer qualitative literature if it is made available.¹⁵ Qualitative culture is connected to moral and social elevation, thus making it possible for culture that does not adhere to this standard to be perceived as harmful.¹⁶

Policy actions in Sweden's literary field have mostly sought to support what is deemed as qualitative, instead of forbidding or sanctioning what is considered bad.¹⁷ One example of this approach is the comic magazine debate that preceded *Pox* by over thirty years. In the 1950s, the magazine market of comics imported from the US worried those who viewed the medium as the worst of capitalist cultures, a threat to democracy, and a cause of youth delinquency. Comics in this debate were seen as low culture, as harbingers of harmful stereotypes and sexualized violence, but no legal action was taken.¹⁸ The debate itself of course was also imported from the US, where it had resulted in the infamous Comics Code Authority (CCA), self-regulating the content of comics in detail.¹⁹ The Swedish, liberal line of reasoning was still active in the early 1980s, where the commercial (predominantly US) magazines were identified as a great threat to children and young people. Suggested solutions were to support Swedish comics publishing and improve the national distribution system to ensure greater diversity, stimulating qualitative comic production.²⁰ Thus it was unusual to explicitly regulate reading material, except for pornography, at the time of the *Pox* trial.²¹

Horst Schröder and *Pox*

The publisher Horst Schröder was behind the introduction to Sweden of international comics for adults in the shape of several comic magazines and the publishing company Epix förlag. The company's two best-known periodicals, *Epix* (1984–1992) and

the edgier *Pox* (1984–1993), consisted mostly of international avant-garde and experimental comics, mixed with a number of Swedish contributions.²² Even the Swedish term for adult comics, ‘serier för vuxna’, is attributed to Schröder.²³ It was no coincidence that these periodicals saw the light of day in the 1980s. In this decade the comic medium went through an artistic development in Sweden as elsewhere, and its cultural status increased. Adult comics ranged from conventional superhero comics, science fiction, documentary, and autobiographical works to avant-garde comics with an experimental approach to the medium.²⁴ Public or political opinion against cultural expressions or new media has traditionally originated in a hierarchy between bourgeois culture and popular or mass culture. Protest against comics positions the medium as popular and commercial mass culture. *Pox* can be seen as an example of the conjunction of postmodernism and consumer or popular culture.²⁵ While the comics had none of the commercial appeal of the popular superhero genre, they were still criticized in line with the general disapproval at a general eroding of values and ethics. They also shared typical traits of the postmodern aesthetic such as playfulness, with the use of parody, pastiche, and irony, and the convergence of high and popular or mass culture.²⁶

Schröder had a personal presence in his magazines: he wrote introductions with reflections on the content of the comics, as well as comments on current events in Sweden, the world, and his private life. During the *Pox* trial and its aftermath, he naturally devoted a great deal of editorial space to his own opinions. Usually, he discussed current comic publishing in Europe and the US, and the hardships of being a comic publisher.²⁷

The accused comics and their creators

The *Pox* authors in question were almost all established avant-garde comic writers or artists, several of them known for pushing the limits of decency. Dori Seda and Andrea Paziienza, who both died young in 1988, were important contributors to the alternative

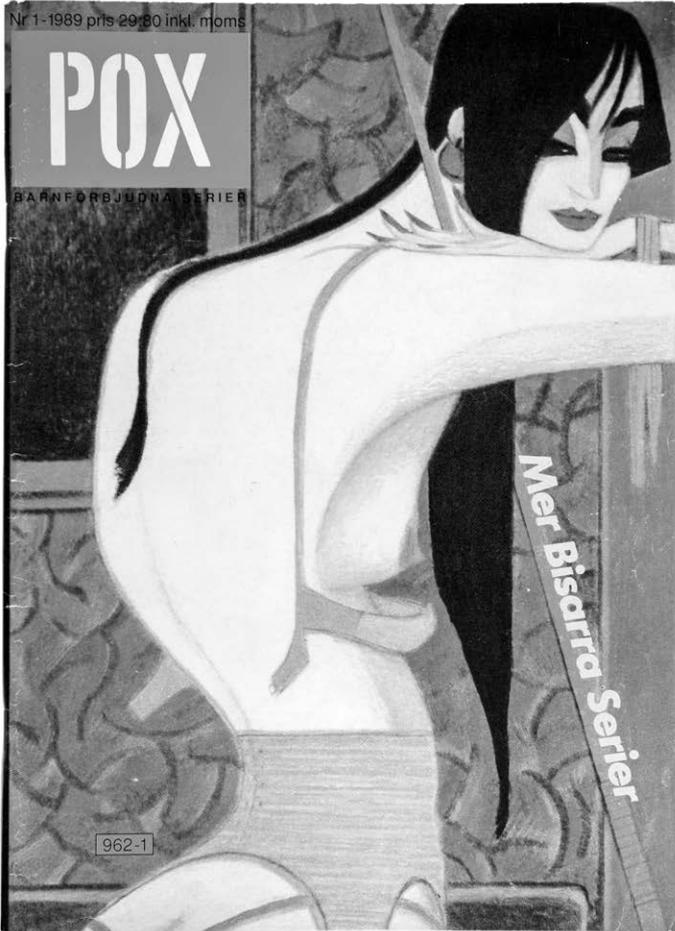


Figure 4.1 The cover of *Pox 1*, 1989, by Lorenzo Mattotti. (With permission of Horst Schröder/Epix förlag.)

comics scene in their respective countries: Seda as an early feminist autobiographical comic writer, her *Lonely Nights Comics* banned from import by UK customs for its sexual content; Paziienza, whose work dealt with drugs and violence, is now regarded as one of the greatest Italian comic artists of all time.²⁸ Damién Carulla was tried in Spain in 1992 for publishing a French graphic novel accused of making fun of the Holocaust.²⁹ Neil Gaiman is however by far

the best known of the five, a renowned author of both comics and novels such as the *Sandman* series and the novel *American Gods*.

Neil Gaiman (b. 1960) (text) & **Steve Gibson** (b. 1961) (illus.), ‘Resan till Betlehem’ (‘Journey to Bethlehem’).³⁰ The comic depicts an event in the Book of Judges. A woman is raped and killed by the men of the village of Gibeon; her husband mutilates her corpse to send to every corner of Israel to show how the villagers acted. **Damián Carulla** (b. 1956), ‘Fe’, a dystopian, futuristic narrative where a woman uses a VR program to live out sadomasochistic pleasure.³¹

Andrea Pazienza (1956–1988), ‘Modershjärtat!’ (‘Cuore di Mamma!’), three young men force the mother of a girl they go to school with to have sex with them so they will not spread rumours about her daughter.³² One of the men is Zanardi, the amoral main character in several of Pazienza’s stories.³³

Karen D’Amico (n/a)³⁴ (text), **Michael Terry Gilbert** (b. 1951) (illus.), ‘Älskade kolli’ (‘Vegetable Lover’), a young woman has been treated badly by men all her life. As a nurse, she has sex with a man in a coma. He wakes up afterwards, but she, driven by guilt, goes mad.³⁵

Dori Seda (1951–1988), ‘Hor på kontor’ (‘Office Tops and Bottoms’). A timid secretary by day is revealed to be a dominatrix by night, dominating her boss.³⁶

A special issue, ‘Accused: A Special Issue of Pox on Censorship’, was published in late 1989, which carried all the accused comics again together with comics and texts on censorship, some of which had originally been published in similar special issues in Canada and the UK.³⁷ With the Swedish special issue, Schröder placed the upcoming *Pox* trial in a context of the trials and bans on comics and literature elsewhere in Europe and in the US.

Comics and the law

The creators of the accused comics were active in a global context where the legal limits of the comic medium were already being tested, for Sweden was not the only country where comics were taken to court in the 1980s and 1990s: it was a period of political and public backlash against the medium. The publishing company Knockabout in the UK, which specialized in underground comics, was subject to police and customs intervention when it imported comics from the US. They were charged with obscenity in 1983, as their comics were deemed to promote drug use, and even though Knockabout was eventually acquitted, it suffered substantial financial damage in the process. In the US, conservative and religious pressure groups succeeded in limiting the distribution and sale of adult comics on the grounds of perceived sexual and violent content.³⁸ One of the most famous prosecutions was in Florida in 1994, when the underground comic artist Mike Diana was convicted for obscenity.³⁹ Some national characteristics can be discerned in how comic books were treated. In both the US and UK, comics have been part of the commercial market, with the underground production of alternative comic books having a smaller circulation. In France, though, *la bande dessinée* has been considered an art form since the 1960s.⁴⁰ The upshot is that comic books have been the subject of greater persecution in the Anglophone world than in France, where there seem to be fewer moral objections to a medium if it is perceived as a form of art, reflecting the privileged position of art in relation to mass-produced culture.

In Sweden, the *Pox* trial took place over two days in January 1990. Witnesses were called to determine whether publication was defensible for reasons of aesthetic value. Carl Gustaf Boëthius (1915–2011), a Christian cultural radical and former head of the organization Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning (RFSU, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education), was the only witness against *Pox*.⁴¹ In its defence *Pox* called five witnesses, almost all with connections to high art institutions. One of them, the artist

Peter Dahl who was a professor at the Royal Institute of Art, was very active in the public debate about the trial.⁴² The jury found Schröder not guilty. To have witnesses with high art connections seems to have been crucial for comic trials: at Mike Diana's trial, none of the defence witnesses, including Diana himself and another professional comic artist, were regarded as art experts.⁴³

There are no transcripts of the trial apart from Schröder's and Boëthius's written accounts. All other information about the trial comes from news reporting and opinion pieces. Unfortunately, this excludes the possibility of giving a detailed account of the trial proceedings.⁴⁴ Several newspapers took the opportunity to republish some of the pictures that were on trial so their readers could form their own opinions. 'Journey to Bethlehem' attracted a great deal of attention both before and during the trial, no doubt because of the sensationalist appeal of the connection between a crime of sexual violence and the retelling of a Bible story.⁴⁵

Pox as illegal non-culture

In the material, three different problematizations of *Pox* emerge, resting on different understandings of the aesthetic value of comics and the effects of reading. In the first problematization, the trial against *Pox* was perceived as a way to stop the publication of pornography, and *Pox* was constructed as a publication with harmful intent. This was the tenor of Boëthius's testimony, whose careful analysis of the comics was designed to show that the accused pictures did not qualify as works of art. He took at face value Schröder's statement that the pictures had to be understood in relation to the comics as a whole, and therefore focused on the narrative and how the pictures and text interacted. Boëthius devoted most of his analysis to 'Journey to Bethlehem', arguing that the authors used the Bible 'as a creditable and cultural excuse for inserting an element of sexual entertainment violence in the comic.'⁴⁶ He compared it with the corresponding passages of the Bible and accused the authors of 'systematically embroidering the story.'⁴⁷ He pointed to several



Figure 4.2 Neil Gaiman and Steven Gibson, 'Resan till Betlehem', 17, a panel not included in the sexual violence charge. (With permission of Horst Schröder/Epix förlag.)

anachronistic details in the text, such as the first phrase uttered by the main woman character: 'Hello! Handsome! How about some fun?' (see Fig. 4.2).

Boëthius continued:

What characterizes her response is a cheerful twentieth-century rawness, with a portion of cynicism. The maker of the comic of

course has every right to fantasize in this way, but what it shows us is that he is not interested in making us familiar with the Book of Judges to be able to understand it, but to use the Book of Judges as a vantage point for producing that which amuses him and his readers.⁴⁸

The comics on trial use elements of parody, satire, comedy, absurdism, science fiction, and melodrama in their narratives. In this problematization, the characteristics of avant-garde and postmodern comics were positioned against the serious or artistic intent needed, according to the law, to justify a publication of sexual violence.

Boëthius stated that sexual sadism was the main purpose of the comics. The reader of *Pox* is depicted by Boëthius as a sexual sadist: '[*Pox*] tempts male readers of a certain kind, those who have inherent sadistic tendencies that they enjoy stimulating'.⁴⁹ The problematization is built on the assumption that culture has a direct effect on people's behaviour: in the subjectification process, the reader is gendered as a male. This resembled the highly gendered debates in the 1950s where the reader of comics was constructed as a boy, risking a destiny as either a weakling or a sadist.⁵⁰ The difference in this case was that the subject position of a *Pox* reader was already fixed as depraved. There was a clear dichotomy between high and low culture, mirroring Drotner's conclusions about 'panic discourses', describing a connection between culture and social psychology, with the underlying logic that experience of a cultural expression leads to social action.⁵¹ All of this was evident in one of the prosecutor's statements:

It does not matter that they are drawings. They are skilfully drawn and can have the same effect on onlookers as photographs. The aim of the law is to counter norms that present a wrongful attitude to sexuality and love. These depictions are brutalizing and can shape the wrong patterns in young people, for example.⁵²

These statements can be placed in the contemporary anti-pornography movement in Sweden. As Klara Arnberg has shown, two discourses met in this movement: one a modernized Christian conservatism, purporting equal love between a man and a woman; the other feminist and inspired by the American anti-porn movement. This feminist narrative was used from the 1970s and pornography was here interpreted as the exploitation of women and the female body. Pornography was seen as a threat to the possibilities for men and women to engage in loving, heterosexual relations.⁵³ From the position of the prosecutor, it was not possible to view *Pox* as having any artistic qualities, as it was considered pornography and therefore by definition categorized as non-culture.

The prosecutor referred to research on violent film and video and their effect on the viewer to prove that the comics were not artistic enough. He argued that the public imitated certain behaviours, built up latent aggression, and became numb to violence by viewing or reading certain material.⁵⁴ This was the same sentiment expressed in Swedish contemporaneous debate about video violence.⁵⁵ There was some ambiguity in this problematization concerning the subject position of the (male) reader, for he was seen as having inherent sadistic tendencies, yet at the same time being inspired by his reading to perpetrate violent acts.

Pox as trash culture

In the second problematization of *Pox*, the magazine was constructed as bad art, but due to freedom of expression not illegal art. This can be exemplified from the following statement by Peter Dahl, one of *Pox*'s expert witnesses:

If *Pox* is to be forbidden, then we have to forbid illustrations of the Marquis de Sade and Picasso, Japanese woodcuts, surrealist paintings, and Hieronymus Bosch, for example. ... The brilliant depictions of sexual violence, the masterpieces of Picasso, the masterpieces of Hieronymus Bosch, are more shocking depictions

of violence than the weak drawings in *Pox*, because they have quality. Most of the content in *Pox* is not sensual and is stereotypically drawn, and the violence and sexuality in the accused pictures offend me no more than the violence in a Donald Duck cartoon. It is just indecent and bad, but as stated, it is not illegal to display bad drawings.⁵⁶

Dahl also argued in his witness statement that since comics were bad, they were not dangerous.⁵⁷ In this problematization there was a distinction between high and low art, where *Pox* comics qualified as the latter, and parallels were drawn with art, film, and novels. An editorial in one of the leading Swedish newspapers stated that 'good art can be a more serious threat to the social order than bad art.'⁵⁸ Another art critic argued that even though comic books can be regarded an art form, they were quite often bad art.⁵⁹ The works of the artist Goya were also contrasted with the comics in question, to exemplify how arbitrary the trial was when sexual violence was only considered illegal in low art.⁶⁰ This problematization was built on a discourse with deep historical roots, whereby good art has the power to affect people's lives, both positive and negative, and the corresponding notion that cultural expressions of lesser aesthetic quality lack such power.⁶¹

Schröder received letters of support from several artists' organizations, including the Swedish Writers' Union and the Association of Swedish Illustrators and Graphic Designers. The Swedish Artists' Association exclaimed, 'Let comics be judged by the public! Not by the courts! Defend freedom of expression and the freedom of the press!'⁶² However, some supporters also distanced themselves from the comics. One of the signatures added 'Stand up for the worst crap I've seen.'⁶³ Radical, avant-garde comic magazine publishers said that the comics Schröder published were in bad taste and gave comics a bad name.⁶⁴ One line of defence was that although *Pox* rightly should be criticized for reproducing misogynistic values, it should remain a question for readers, not for the courts.⁶⁵ The standard *Pox* reader was constructed as someone with bad taste.

The fact that the accused pictures were not photographs but were drawn was also advanced as a vindication. To fantasize and give one's imagination free rein was thought uncontroversial as long as no one came to harm in real life.⁶⁶

Pox as postmodern art

The third problematization conceptualized *Pox* as containing works of art, and that art by definition could not be illegal. Schröder described the proceedings as being in effect two trials, one against him as publisher and one (unofficial) against the genre of adult comics.⁶⁷ The comics on trial were 'deeply personal and multi-layered works of art', in contrast to commercial pornography and entertainment.⁶⁸

The various problematizations made different interpretations of the accused pictures possible. One example put forward by an art critic, Leif Nylén, was a picture from Dori Seda's comic where a male boss is sodomized by his dominatrix secretary using pencils. The comic is in black and white, and Boëthius interpreted the black lines as an illustration of spraying blood, but more in accordance with traditional comic aesthetics, the lines could just as well be interpreted as a conventional depiction of pain (see Fig. 4.3).⁶⁹ Again, the specific aesthetic of comics is interpreted differently. Nylén also claimed that the thoroughness of the comic survey during the trial made him re-evaluate and appreciate certain aspects of the accused comics, but he noted the lack of an aesthetic discussion of style and metaphorical language by the defence. Schröder also wrote that witnesses in the trial 'gave many of the comics a depth that I had missed completely.'⁷⁰

Pornography and works of art are separated in this problematization. Schröder stated that it was impossible to be aroused by the accused comics.⁷¹ He devoted his written defence, as well as editorials in *Pox* and several debate articles, to contextualizing the comics and their authors, placing them in an avant-garde comic book canon. In his testimony, he advocated the serious nature of the comics, as well as the subjects discussed therein. Schröder wrote that '*Pox*



Figure 4.3 Dori Seda, 'Office tops and bottoms', 106, a panel included in the sexual violence charge. (With permission of Horst Schröder/Epix förlag.)

is, as has been said, a very experimental comic magazine. It goes without saying that some comics can offend so-called good taste. This is the privilege of art (not only of art—but art in particular).⁷² An interesting ambiguity is apparent in this line of reasoning. By categorizing the comics as art, their possible arousing effect on the reader was rejected. The comics in *Pox* are thus defined by what they are not: pornography.

In Schröder's archive there is a faxed copy of the preparatory work on the amendment to the Freedom of the Press Act, including Article 13, with the handwritten note 'NB only porn.' He also published a letter of support from a BDSM practitioner, who stated that from his perspective the accused comics were neither arousing nor sexually sadistic: 'sexual violence possibly, but not sexy violence.'⁷³ To categorize *Pox* as non-pornographic was a way to legitimize its

publication in the eyes of the law. This can be compared with the more recent 'Manga case' in Sweden in 2010. A Swedish translator of manga was charged with possession of child pornography. He had erotic manga (*hentai*) on his computer, and some of them were judged to depict children. This case bore a resemblance to the *Pox* trial, mainly because it was left to the judicial system to decide whether a picture was made with artistic intent, or primarily to sexually arouse someone, again cementing the (questionable) idea that a work of art cannot do both.⁷⁴ However, one difference was that the pictures in the *Pox* trial were part of a sequential narrative, with both text and pictures, and to read the pictures in their context was described as essential by both the defence and the prosecution.

While opposing the label of pornography, the comics published in *Pox* were interpreted as part of the avant-garde and so-called low culture. Many of the contributors to *Pox*'s special issue on censorship referred to the distinction between what they described as high art and low culture, arguing that the latter is more harshly judged. As Arnberg has said, tolerance of explicit sexual content changes over time. Interestingly, though, the arguments for and against such content seem to stay the same. When magazines with pornographic drawings were prosecuted in the early twentieth century, high art, especially poetry, was used as a point of comparison, just as it was in the *Pox* debate. Editors of these magazines remarked that they were being persecuted for publishing what was deemed to be low culture.⁷⁵ Article 13, directed against the unlawful depiction of sexual violence, was also labelled as a 'class law' in 1990, meaning that comic magazines were understood as a lower class in the cultural hierarchy.⁷⁶ *Pox* was defined as underground and avant-garde art, and not the high art thought worthy of protection by a cultural elite.

Conclusions

From the point of view of a legal defence, the regulation of reading is only rational when the magazine in question is defined as non-art, therefore making the issue of aesthetic quality central

to the trial. Thus, the *Pox* trial exposes a conundrum in Swedish literature policy. When state support for literature is distributed, it is always the writers' peers who make the aesthetic judgements; but the judicial system leaves the act of defining art to judges and lawmakers. The postmodern aesthetic of the comics on trial exposed them to the law, which only takes into account a serious intent that may not be present in a postmodern work, where non-serious elements such as comedy, pastiche, and irony are employed. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, obscene and offensive comic books went on trial in several countries where the medium had a low status. The sociohistorical specificities of the *Pox* trial make visible a medium that was in the process of establishing itself as an art form. The acquittal of *Pox* can be understood as a victory for the comic medium, but it had nevertheless had consequences for its publisher. Schröder later described how he was personally and professionally affected by the trial. Sales went down, and as a consequence he had to lay off staff.⁷⁷ Even after the acquittal, one of his distributors withdrew. It is also difficult to pinpoint how the trial affected *Pox's* distribution: Schröder wrote, before the trial, that the sales had more than halved in three years, which he attributed to the wholesale distributor rather than retailers.⁷⁸ This serves as a reminder that not only high-profile events such as trials, but also more mundane issues such as distribution policies, regulate the politics of reading.

In the debate, reading was described as having both positive and negative effects, depending on the quality of the reading material. But when *Pox* was legitimized as a qualitative art form, the effects of reading it were also reduced, because readers were said not to be aroused by the comics. Thus, to not be affected (in a negative or illegal way) was connected to quality—in contrast to the transformative function of high art, whether positive or adverse.

However, in the present-day politics of reading, analogue reading is assumed to have several positive transformative effects, such as furthering and facilitating a sense of democracy and citizenship as well as empathy and education. The negative effects are instead

associated with digital reading and other media.⁷⁹ Putting the *Pox* trial in a larger perspective, the question remains whether it diminishes an art form not to acknowledge that it may have negative, or at least unwanted, effects on its reader. To be classified as art results in a privileged position where transgressions of morality can be disregarded, but this classification seems to entail an understanding of comics and literature as having a predetermined effect on their readers.

Notes

- 1 This study was conducted within the project ‘The Making of the Reading Citizen: Public Debate and Policy 1945–2017’, funded by the Swedish Research Council, 2018–2020 (ref. 2017-01542).
- 2 ‘TT’ 1990; Lisinski 1990b.
- 3 *Expressen* 1990.
- 4 The director of the *Guardian of the Galaxy* franchise, James Gunn, was fired in 2018 for jokes made on Twitter almost a decade earlier, and then reinstated a year later. In Sweden, the battle rapper and comedian Anton ‘Mr Cool’ Magnusson was reported for a rap song written from a paedophile’s perspective, the song was removed from Spotify, but the charges were withdrawn. Two things can be noted for these current cases of protests against immorality, although falling outside of the scope of this chapter: in the current media landscape in the Western world, paedophilia or child pornography seems to be the most contentious issue, rather than sexual violence in general; and distribution seems to be the most successful way of stopping unwanted cultural expressions without resorting to the law courts or political measures (Anton Magnusson’s song ‘Knulla barn’, or ‘Fucking children’, is at the time of writing still not available on Spotify).
- 5 Cf. ‘Introduction’ in this volume; see also Heede and Schatz-Jakobsen in this volume.
- 6 Folkaktionen mot pornografi. The organization was active between 1985 and 1999.
- 7 From the case file: ‘p. 22 upper part of the page, p. 27 lower part of the page, p. 46 upper part of the page, p. 60 with the exception of the top left picture, p. 61 top picture row, p. 106 with the exception of the top left picture and the bottom right picture’ (JK Dnr 1233–89, 1990). Photographs in twelve pornographic magazines were also reported, but JK did not prosecute because their editors were not based in Sweden.
- 8 Article 13 of the Freedom of the Press Act concerns the unlawful depiction of sexual violence or coercion with the intent of distribution, unless there are

- extenuating circumstances. See Regeringens proposition 1986/87:151, *Om ändringar i tryckfrihetsförordningen m.m.* (1987, 8). The unlawful depiction of violence in moving pictures such as videos is regulated in chapter 16, Article 10b of the Penal Code. In Sweden there are only jury trials for cases concerning freedom of expression or freedom of the press, and only the Chancellor of Justice can bring such cases.
- 9 JK Dnr 3163–89–30, *Ifrågasatt tryckfrihetsbrott* (1989); JK Dnr 3722–91–30, *Ifrågasatt tryckfrihetsbrott* (1991).
 - 10 Darnton 1986, 5–30.
 - 11 See ‘Introduction’ in this volume.
 - 12 ‘Special knowledges’, as Foucault 1990 puts it, are the combination of knowledge and power that make different understandings of problems possible.
 - 13 The method is inspired by Bacchi & Goodwin 2016.
 - 14 Still, a certain aesthetic built on ideals of *Bildung* is visible in the Nordic countries, see Hylland & Bjurström 2018, 1–24.
 - 15 Lindsköld 2013; Lindsköld et al. forthcoming.
 - 16 Drotner 1999, 603.
 - 17 Lindsköld 2013; for educational policy in the twentieth century, see Lindsköld et al. 2020.
 - 18 Arnberg 2013, 96–7, 107–109.
 - 19 Nyberg 1998. No major publisher has followed the CCA since the early 2010s.
 - 20 Jalakas 1980, 171–2.
 - 21 For a further example of a Swedish trial against pornographic material, see Arnberg in this volume.
 - 22 Other examples are *Samurai* with Japanese comics (1988–1992), *Topas* with erotic comics (1988–1992), and *Tung Metall* featuring science fiction and fantasy-comics (1986–1990). *Tung Metall* was influenced by the French magazine *Métal hurlant*, also published in the US as *Heavy Metal*.
 - 23 Atterbom 1990, 2.
 - 24 Ernst 2017, 59; Sabin 1993, 69–86.
 - 25 Featherstone 2007; McRobbie 1994.
 - 26 Featherstone 2007, xv, 7; McRobbie 1994, 3.
 - 27 Schröder was appreciated by Swedish comic fans, he was awarded the title ‘Comics promotor of the year’ three years in a row (1987, 1988, 1989), and his publishing was voted as the ‘greatest comics event’ of the 1980s by the industry (*Bild & Bubbla* 1990, 16–20).
 - 28 Gaiman 1999, 8; Moliterno 2000, 426; Castaldi 2010, 89.
 - 29 Blanca 1992.
 - 30 Gaiman & Gibson 1989, 17–25, published in *Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament*, ed. Carol Bennett & Tony Bennett (London: Knockabout, 1987).
 - 31 Carulla 1989, 27–8. Made in 1983, no other information available.
 - 32 Paziienza 1989, 39–46, first published in *Comic Art*, 28 (1986), 25–39.

- 33 Moliterno 2000, 426, s.v. 'Pazienza, Andrea.'
- 34 Regrettably, and despite considerable effort, I have been unable to obtain reliable biographical information on Karen D'Amico.
- 35 D'Amico & Gilbert 1989, 55–62, first published in *Bizarre Sex, Kitchen Sink Press, 1972 series*, 8 (1980).
- 36 Seda 1989, 105–106, first published in *Weird Smut Comics*, 2 (1987).
- 37 The special censorship issue *Pox, Åtalad! Ett specialnummer av Pox om censur* (*Pox* 1989, nr 1, 18–19) also included Neil Gaiman's reflections on the prosecution. Gaiman 2008 was his later blog post about the event.
- 38 Sabin 1993, 84–5, 178. Knockabout also published a special issue on censorship trials.
- 39 Adolphson 2013, 297–308; Comic Book Legal Defence Fund 2018.
- 40 Heikkinen 2008, 84.
- 41 He was also a teacher, journalist and editor-in-chief of *Vår kyrka*, a Church of Sweden weekly magazine.
- 42 The other witnesses were Gert Z. Nordström, professor at the University of Arts, Crafts and Design; John-Henri Holmberg, chief editor of the publishing company Bra böcker; Isabella Nilsson, editor of the art journal *Paletten* and member of the working group on state support for comics; and Magnus Knutsson, comic book author.
- 43 Adolphson 2013, 306.
- 44 Compare with the exhaustive whitebook on the 1957 trial of Agnar Mykle's *Sangen om den røde rubin* (1956) (Schjødt 1958); see also Schatz-Jakobsen and Arnberg for accounts of other trials where similar questions have been raised.
- 45 Nylén 1990; Söderhjelm 1990.
- 46 Boëthius, written statement, JK Dnr 1233–89 (1990), 2.
- 47 Ibid. 3.
- 48 Ibid. 4.
- 49 Johansson 1990.
- 50 Arnberg 2013, 96–7.
- 51 Drotner 1999, 610–11.
- 52 Lisinski 1990a.
- 53 Arnberg 2010, 237–261, 279.
- 54 Lisinski 1990b.
- 55 Dalquist 1998, 178–196; for the Swedish political debate on video violence, see Blomgren 2019, 322–36.
- 56 Dahl 1990.
- 57 Lisinski 1990c. Dahl's criticism of *Pox* was satirized in a comic where an artist named 'Peter Skandahl' is gifted wrongly labelled colour pencils and is confounded when 'the sea is red, the sun is green' (Kamagurka 1989, 16).
- 58 Åman 1990.

- 59 Nylén 1989.
- 60 Weigl 1990.
- 61 Belfiore & Bennett 2008.
- 62 Johan Höjer, Joakim Pirinen, Gunna Grähs and Ola Lindahl ‘Upprop av svenska serieskapare!’ in JK Dnr 1233–89, (1990).
- 63 JK Dnr 1233–89, (1990).
- 64 Pirinen & Classon 1989, 83.
- 65 Sundkvist 1990, 33–5.
- 66 Johansson 1990.
- 67 Söderhjelm 1990.
- 68 Schröder 1989a.
- 69 Nylén 1990.
- 70 Schröder 1990, 48.
- 71 Larsson 1989.
- 72 Schröder 1989b, 5.
- 73 ‘Magnus’ 1990, 10–11.
- 74 Jönsson 2012, 134.
- 75 Arnberg 2017, 10–11.
- 76 Elvsén 1990, 32; Lisinski 1990a.
- 77 Schröder 1989d, 2, 30
- 78 Schröder 1989c, 1, 52. He would go on to sue the company in 1994 for having a monopoly on distribution; Schröder lost. After 1994, his publishing company Epix has only published comic books, not magazines (see Schröder n.d.).
- 79 Lindsköld et al. forthcoming.