

# Italian Adult Comics in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s

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## Abstract

The object of this paper is to present and analyze the main features of the extensive publication of Italian adult comics in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s. Bibliographic and quantitative research has been conducted in order to supplement the bibliography of the Italian literature in Sweden compiled by Schwartz (2013). The results allowed for the conclusion that comics constituted a very significant share of translated Italian literature of the period, and the importance of individual publishers was higher in this segment. Making use of key concepts of Bourdieu, it is shown that adult comics in Sweden were assigned low cultural value compared to Italy. After a brief comparison of the situation of adult comics in both countries, regarding the role of mediators and the issue of cultural legitimacy, it is argued that this cultural transfer eventually led to a clash that culminated with the Freedom of the Press trial against *Pox* magazine. For a number of reasons, adult comics in Sweden have never achieved a sufficient level of cultural legitimacy and have remained on the margins of the cultural scene. The difficulties faced by Italian adult comics in Sweden are illustrated by a brief analysis of the reception of *An Author in Search of Six Characters* by Milo Manara (1992).

**Key words:** Adult comics, Pierre Bourdieu, Fredric Wertham, Horst Schröder, Milo Manara, *Epix*, *Pox*, cultural value, cultural legitimacy, cultural mediators

## 1. Introductory remarks

The period of 1980s and 1990s saw an extraordinary upswing of foreign adult comics in Sweden. Many important artists from France, Italy and USA were for the first time introduced to the Swedish readers. Indeed, the 1980s was a period when the Swedish comics scene had finally “grown up” thanks to a new generation of artists launched by *Galago* magazine and foreign adult comics published by Horst Schröder through his *Medusa* publishing house (Strömberg 2010:81–83). “Adult comics” in this context are defined as a sequential art medium that targets adult readers (Castaldi 2010:11). Adult comics can therefore have different type of content and belong to different genres.<sup>1</sup>

This process of “growing up” of comics involved new subjects, new artists and new groups of adult readers and was far from uncomplicated, as the general public often continued to view comics as a part of the juvenile culture. These opposing views of what comics are and should be clashed during the so called “*Pox* trial” and the following debate in 1989–1990, when the Swedish Chancellor of Justice prosecuted Schröder and his magazine *Pox* for an alleged offence against the

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<sup>1</sup> Terms “comic” and “comics” refer to all forms of sequential narratives that combine words and images. “Graphic novel” is a particular kind of comic narrative, that typically comes in book form and is characterized by its length and thematic unity (Sabin 1993:94).

Freedom of the Press Act. The prosecution regarded portrayal of sexual violence in comic strips of five foreign artists, which included among others, Andrea Pazienza. The introduction of Italian adult comics in Sweden represents therefore a remarkable case of culture transfer, which has so far not attracted scholarly attention.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first step is to map the publication of Italian adult comics in Swedish translation during this period. The next step is to briefly analyze the reasons behind the problematic reception of these particular literary texts in Sweden. The investigation regards different cultural value of comics as art form in Italy and Sweden and the role of cultural mediators. I make use of key concepts of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological analysis such as cultural capital, cultural legitimacy and fields of production of symbolic goods (Bourdieu 1965/1990, Bourdieu 1984). It can be claimed that adult comics in Sweden, for various reasons, have not attained the same level of cultural legitimacy as they did in Italy.

## **2. Italian literature and Italian adult comics in Sweden. Bibliographical and quantitative inquiry**

The reception of Italian literature in Sweden has recently been analyzed in a number of studies, in particular in an anthology edited by Laura Di Nicola and Cecilia Schwartz, *Libri in viaggio. Classici italiani in Svezia* (2013). The volume contains also a detailed bibliographical account of Italian literature published in Sweden in the twentieth century (Schwartz 2013). However, the adult comics analyzed in this paper are to large extent absent from Schwartz’s bibliography. The reasons behind this omission are probably of technical or bibliographical nature. Some of the Italian comic albums were translated from French, while others, in spite of being translated from Italian, were not registered as such in Libris, the Swedish national library catalogue. Some comic albums are all together missing in Libris. A particular problem regarding comics concerns the blurred line between periodicals and books. Some publications in a series may be registered as books, while others were considered as periodicals – in that case, the whole series was considered as book publications in this study and included in the bibliographical account. Otherwise, I do not include Italian comics published in magazines or anthologies of various types, following the same principle of Schwartz’s compilation (2013:142).

In order to compensate for lacunas in the official bibliographical sources as Libris it was necessary to consult such catalogues as seriewikin.se and seriekatalogen.se produced by the Swedish comics community that consists of collectors, critics and comics aficionados. Seriewikin.se is an impressive on-line encyclopaedia about Swedish and foreign comics with almost seventeen thousand articles. This peculiar bibliographic situation reflects the marginalized position of comics in the Swedish cultural context that will be discussed further on.

The methodological decision to exclude texts published in magazines leads, however, to a greater quantitative shortfall in the case of comics compared to the

rest of Italian literature in Sweden. When it comes to comics, the proportion of magazine publications of the total output is much higher. Some Italian artists in this period came out only in magazines and therefore do not appear in the bibliographical account. This methodological decision can however be motivated by a number of reasons. The publication of comics in a book form is the final step of this medium’s evolution that goes from a newspaper strip via a comic magazine. This evolution runs parallel to the process of cultural legitimization of comics as art. Furthermore, once comics are published as books, they get a more in-depth reception in form of critical reviews in newspapers, and we can indeed talk about a Swedish reception of Italian adult comics. As Gisèle Sapiro has pointed out, “[f]or written works, the paratext (preface, postscript), the medium (newspaper, specialized magazine, book), the surroundings (in a newspaper or in a series), are all elements which condition the process of reception” (2012:41). Last but not least, concentrating on comic albums allows for a quantitative comparison of Italian comics of this period to the rest of Italian literature included in Schwartz’s bibliography.

To get a complete picture of Italian comics in Sweden in this period would of course require including the magazine publications. A notable example of this discrepancy is Dylan Dog by Tiziano Sclavi that has been published extensively since 1993 in *Dylan* magazine (named after Sclavi’s hero!) and *Seriemagasinet*, before Ades Media issued twelve of his albums in 2013–2015.

Before presenting the Italian comics in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s, a few words should be said about the earlier history of this little known cultural transfer. Already in the 1950s and 1960s Swedish comic magazines published numerous Italian series from the Bonelli publishing house, such as Tex Willer, Il Grande Blek (Davy Crockett in Swedish translation), and Capitan Miki.<sup>2</sup> These comics belonged to the very popular western genre. The next step was the introduction of Italian adventure comics, which now appeared as albums: in the 1970s Carlsen/If published four volumes by Franco Caprioli based on Jules Verne’s novels, and more significantly the first Corto Maltese album of Hugo Pratt (*Corto Maltese: de vackra drömmarnas lagun* in 1978). In the same years Semic published four Italian albums in the *Äventyrets män* (‘The Men of Adventure’) series. Corto Maltese was probably the most popular Italian comic character in Sweden – from 1978 to 2010, seven albums have appeared in Swedish translation through three different publishing companies.<sup>3</sup>

The bibliographical research that was carried out allowed to compile the following list of Italian adult comics in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s:

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<sup>2</sup> This section is based on information from Libris and articles from Seriewikin.se, in particular [https://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Serier\\_i\\_Italien](https://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Serier_i_Italien)

<sup>3</sup> [https://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Corto\\_Maltese](https://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Corto_Maltese)

*Tchehoff – “Italian Adult Comics in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s”*

*Table 1. Italian adult comics and their Swedish translations 1980–1999.<sup>4</sup>*

Author	Title	Year	Original title	Translator	Publisher
Altan, Francesco Tullio	Macao	1986	Macao	Alonzo, Christian M.	Medusa
Altan, Francesco Tullio	Galna hjärtan	1998	Cuori pazzi	Schröder, Horst	Epix
Brandoli, Anna; Queirolo, Renato	Rebecca	1990	Rebecca	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Bram Stokers Dracula	1993	Conte Dracula	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Emmanuelle	1985	Emmanuelle	Schröder, Horst	Medusa
Crepax, Guido	Emmanuelle, del 1 – Den flygande enhörningen	1989	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Emmanuelle, del 2 – Passionens lag	1990	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Historien om O. 1, De älskande i Roissy	1988	Histoire d’O	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Historien om O. 2, Sir Stephen	1988	Histoire d’O	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Historien om O. 3, Anne-Marie och ringarna	1989	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido & Rochat, Eric	Historien om O. 4, Penthouse	1990	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido & Rochat, Eric	Historien om O. 5, Intim rapport	1991	Histoire d’O 2	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Justine. D. 1	1992	Justine	Ribe, Göran	RSR Epix
Crepax, Guido	Valentinas dagbok	1985	Diario di Valentina	Schröder, Horst	Medusa
Crepax, Guido	Valentina ensam	1987	Valentina sola	Schröder, Horst	Medusa
Crepax, Guido	Venus i päls	1987	Venere in pelliccia	Schröder, Horst	Medusa
Delizia, Marco & Rossi, Rossano	Ramba – Dödlig lusta	1991	n/a	Barsotti, Sahra	RSR Epix
Delizia, Marco & Laurenti, Mauro	Ramba - Dödlig kyss	1992	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Delizia, Marco & Rossi, Rossano	Ramba III - Dödligt begär	1992	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Filippucci Lucio, Romanini Giovanni, Ubaldi	Cicciolina	1989	Les aventures de la Cicciolina	n/a	RSR Epix

<sup>4</sup> Some information about original titles or translators is missing, either because it was not provided by publishers or because the albums are not available at Swedish libraries.

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Jean-Batiste					
Fiorani, Pesce	Sex på tråden	1992	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Frollo, Leone	Mona Street	1990	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Frollo, Leone	Casino	1991	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Frollo, Leone	Casino II – Sex på Orientexpressen	1992	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Giardino, Vittorio	Farliga frestelser	1990	Vacanze fatali	Unwik, I.	Carlsen Comics
Giardino, Vittorio	Operation Istanbul	1986	La porta d'Oriente	Emond, Ingrid	Carlsen/ If
Giardino, Vittorio	Ungersk rapsodi	1988	Rapsodia ungherese	Jansson, Ulf	Medusa
Liberatore, Tanino	Kärleksgungan: erotiska noveller	1988	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Magnus (Raviola, Roberto)	De 110 pillren: [bara för vuxna]	1990	Les 110 pilules	Winter, Simon	RSR Epix
Manara, Milo	Click! tre erotiska serienoveller	1985	Le Déclit	Andreasson, Johan	RSR Epix
Manara, Milo	En doft av erotik	1990	Le parfum de l'invisible	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Manara, Milo	En doft av erotik 2: Vild och osynlig	1996	Le parfum de l'invisible 2	Schröder, Horst	Epix
Manara, Milo	En författare söker sex personer	1992	Un auteur en quête de six personnages	Kling, Åsa	Carlsen Comics
Manara, Milo	Resan till Gwendoline	1987	Quatre doigts (L'homme du papier)	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Manara, Milo	Dies irae: Giuseppe Bergmans afrikanska äventyr	1993	Dies irae	Kling, Åsa	Carlsen Comics
Manara, Milo	HP och Giuseppe Bergman	1991	HP e Giuseppe Bergman	Hansson, Cecilia	Carlsen Comics
Manara, Milo & Fellini, Fedreico	Resan till Tulum	1990	Viaggio a Tulum	Stenberg, Birgitta & Inczedy-Gombos, Adam	Carlsen Comics
Manara, Milo	Skenet bedrar	1986	Trompeuse apparence	Olsson, Stina	Carlsen Comics
Manara, Milo	WWW	1999	WWW	Schröder, Horst	Epix
Mattioli, Massimo	Squeak the Mouse	1989	Squeak the Mouse	[original version]	RSR Epix

*Tchehoff – “Italian Adult Comics in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s”*

Mattotti, Lorenzo	Eldar	1988	Fuochi	Schröder, Horst	Medusa
Pratt, Hugo	Balladen om det salta havet	1985	Una ballata del mare salato	Wänstedt, Karin	Medusa
Pratt, Hugo	Corto Maltese i Sibirien	1987	Corte sconta detta arcana	Öjerskog, Marianne	Medusa
Pratt, Hugo	Corto Maltese: äventyr i Karibien	1992	Corto Maltese: Suite caraïbéenne	Hansson, Katarina	Carlsen Comics
Pratt, Hugo & Manara, Milo	Indiansommar	1986	Tutto ricominciò con un'estate indiana	Schröder, Horst	Medusa
Pratt, Hugo	Konsert för harpa och nitroglycerin	1981	Corto Maltese: concerto in O minore per arpa e nitroglicerina	Westrup, Jadwiga P.	Carlsen Comics
Pratt, Hugo	Krigsrosor och vinterdrömmar	1981	Les Celtiques	Westrup, Jadwiga P.	Carlsen Comics
Rotundo, Massimo	97 löften om kärlek	1991	[anthology]	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Rotundo, Massimo	Dekadenta nätter	1990	n/a	n/a	RSR Epix
Rotundo, Massimo	En lustresa	1991	n/a	Schröder, Horst	RSR Epix
Tamburini, Stefano & Liberatore, Tanino	Ranxerox	1988	Ranxerox	Öjerskog, Marianne	RSR Epix
Tamburini, Stefano & Liberatore, Tanino	Ranxerox i New York	1989	Ranxerox 2	Öjerskog, Marianne	RSR Epix

A quick glance at this bibliography allows to conclude that Italian adult comics in this period belong to numerous genres such as adventure, erotic comics, historical fiction, horror, humour/parody, spy stories and science fiction. The three most published artists, Hugo Pratt, Guido Crepax and Milo Manara are all big stars of Italian adult comics of 1970s and 1980s.

The list consists of fifty-two publications and constitutes an addition of forty-seven titles to the bibliography of Italian literature in Sweden published by Schwartz (2013). In quantitative terms it gives us a partly new image of Italian literature in Sweden in 1980s and 1990s: it turns out that almost a quarter of all Italian books published in Swedish in this period were comics! If we narrow down the time frame to the period from 1985 to 1993 which includes forty-seven titles and can be considered as the golden age of Italian adult comics in Sweden,<sup>5</sup> the results are even more staggering: 38% of all works originating from Italy

<sup>5</sup> This development was a part of a larger trend that regarded translated European comics in Sweden. By the mid-1990s this cultural transfer from Europe had stopped almost completely (Strömberg 2010:73).

belonged to this category.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the quantitative approach to the published titles does not reflect the whole situation of Italian literature that appeared in Sweden when it comes to artistic value and the cultural impact of these translated texts. Furthermore, some comic albums were as short as forty-eight pages, thereby technically falling below the UNESCO definition of a book from 1964,<sup>7</sup> while others contain more than two hundred pages.

On the other hand, when it comes to the role of publishers, the development of Italian adult comics in Sweden is parallel to the trend that can be observed for the rest of the Italian literature. In the comics bibliography listed above there are only two publishing actors: the Bonnier owned Carlsen Comics (Carlsen/If) with ten titles and the independent publisher Horst Schröder with Medusa and RSR Epix that printed forty-two volumes.<sup>8</sup> As Carlsen Comics decided to abandon the adult comics market after 1993 and Schröder’s publishing house encountered problems with its distribution channels, only three Italian titles would appear during the rest of that decennium. As Schwartz has pointed out in her study of Italian literature in Sweden after the Second World War, since the 1980s the process of disseminating Italian culture in our country was indeed dominated by minor and idealist publishers (2012:672). The bibliographical and quantitative results show that in the 1980s and 1990s adult comics constituted a very significant part of Italian literature published in Sweden and Schröder’s publishing house accounted for four-fifths of this output. Unfortunately, this golden age of Italian adult comics in Sweden came to an abrupt end in the mid-1990s. This development indicates that the role of individual publishers is even more crucial in the comics segment, compared to the rest of Italian literature published in Sweden.

### 3. Adult comics in Italy

Italy boasts a long tradition of distinguished comic artists that have contributed to making comics into an art medium that possesses a high cultural capital. In an international perspective, we can assume that the comics are held in an equally high esteem only in France and Belgium, as was demonstrated by recent tragic events around *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. What makes the Italian case unique, is however the emerging “culture of comics” in the early Sixties, as major publishing houses Mondadori, Garzanti and Bompiani contributed to transforming

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<sup>6</sup> Schwartz lists 169 publications (including five comic albums) for the whole period 1980–1999. From 1985 to 1993 there were forty-seven Italian comic albums published in Sweden and seventy-seven other literary works.

<sup>7</sup> “A book is a non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages, exclusive of the cover pages, published in the country and made available to the public” (<http://en.unesco.org/>). These titles were nonetheless classified as books by Libris national search service. A comic album is usually a folio sized book between 46 and 62 pages (Strömberg 2010:73).

<sup>8</sup> Schröder (1943) was born in Germany and obtained his PhD for a thesis on American science fiction from the University of Frankfurt am Main in 1978. In 1980–81 and 1983–84 he was director of *Bild & Bubbla*, the magazine of the Swedish Comics Association. Later he started publishing houses Medusa and Epix dedicated to adult comics and issued magazines *Epix*, *Pox* and *Maxx* ([http://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Horst\\_Schröder](http://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Horst_Schröder)).

comics into a cultural artefact that could be aesthetically appreciated, and was not merely a disposable object of entertainment consumption (Restaino 2004:291). As Franco Restaino points out, a series of ambitious editorial projects supported by a number of important intellectuals, presented comics as a worthy object of scholarly analysis and fostered a new large audience of cultivated readers (2004:291, 296). In 1964 Umberto Eco published his widely acclaimed study of popular (or mass) culture *Apocalittici e integrati*, that contained, among others, chapters on such comic heroes as Steve Canyon, Superman and Charlie Brown. The following year appeared the first number of *Linus*, a monthly magazine dedicated to comics that would revolutionize the way this art has been regarded so far in Italy. The first number of *Linus* contained a conversation between Eco, Elio Vittorini and Oreste Del Buono on comics, an art form that Vittorini had tried to promote as early as the 1940s on the pages of his *Il Politecnico* review, publishing the best American comics of his time (Barbieri 2009:107). The famous writer Dino Buzzati published *Poema a fumetti*, that can be seen as “the first Italian graphic novel”, already in 1969 with Mondadori (Restaino 2004:316). By doing so he crossed the line that separated literature and comics when it comes to art producers and publishers, thereby attracting new readers to this art medium.

According to Daniele Barbieri, the main innovation of *Linus* consisted in its approach to comics, that had a more critical and historiographic character, similar to that of literary reviews, while the entertainment aspect of printed strips was secondary. This important cultural operation allowed the Italian comics to gradually abandon the “ghetto” where they have been traditionally confined (Barbieri 2009:108). Restaino, on the other hand, sees *Diabolik*<sup>9</sup> and *Linus* as two exemplary magazines that promoted different types of Italian adult comics, the first intended for a mass entertainment market (“fumetti neri”), and the second directed to a sophisticated elite audience (2004:287). In terms of Pierre Bourdieu, these two types of adult comics correspond to the *field of large-scale cultural production*, aimed for the public at large and subordinate to market laws, and the largely autonomous *field of restricted production*, with its own criteria for “the truly cultural recognition accorded by the peer group” (1984:4–5). Indeed, some of the comics launched by *Linus*, such as Guido Crepax’s *Valentina*, would later be admired by influential intellectuals as Roland Barthes who wrote a foreword to its French edition, thereby consecrating Crepax’s work as a significant artistic phenomenon (Barthes 2002:839–840). According to Simone Castaldi, Crepax was the most innovative of artists published by *Linus*. Influenced by the *nouvelle vague* cinema and American pop art, Crepax tried to reformulate the comic page grid in order to reproduce the effect of cinematic montage, fragmenting the action and changing point of view in a series of panels of uneven sizes (Castaldi

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<sup>9</sup> *Diabolik*, launched in 1962 by Angela and Letizia Giussani, was the first magazine of the so called “fumetti neri” genre (i.e. black comics). The protagonists of “fumetti neri” were often anti-heroes and their adventures involved crime, violence and sex. *Diabolik* and other magazines belonging to this genre were very successful commercially in the 1960s (Restaino 2004:287–291).



2010:26). This narrative technique was the opposite of traditional linear style of classic adventure comics such as Hergé’s *Tintin*.

This new type of comics pioneered by *Linus* presupposed a new kind of reader. As Castaldi points out, the critics of *Linus* suggested that new adult comics could indeed require “reading strategies as complex and satisfying as those one could adopt for a Faulkner or Conrad novel” (2010:24). In terms of Pierre Bourdieu, this insistence on readers’ strategy, skills and competence can be seen as an important step on the path of legitimization of adult comics, placing this art form in the sphere of fully consecrated arts whose appreciation requires training and commitment, such as classical music, theatre, painting or sculpture. For Bourdieu, “[t]he meanings that fall within the sphere of legitimacy all share the fact that they are organized according to a particular type of system [...] [thereby] organized into a hierarchy, through a methodical organization of training and practice” (1965:96). In other words, fruition of Walt Disney comics or “fumetti neri” did not require any particular training or competence, but appreciation of works of Crepax did. Therefore, by elaborating theories and strategies for reading of new adult comics, *Linus* intellectuals augmented the cultural legitimacy of this art medium.

Next step on the path of legitimization of adult comics in Italy was the academic reception. The promotion of comics as an art form operated by *Linus* has contributed to the flourishing of historical and academic studies dedicated to comics. Many titles featured in the bibliographical account in the previous section have been studied both in their aesthetic and historical contexts, others were analyzed in a particular methodological perspective. The complicated issue of female protagonists in the adult comics has been examined in several works since 1970s, more recently in a gender studies perspective (Strazzulla 1977:253–273, Della Corte & Mazzariol 1978, Zanatta, Zaghini & Guzzetta 2009). Other scholars have analyzed the literary influences on comics, especially on Pratt’s Corto Maltese, whose adventures are reminiscent of Conrad, Melville and Stevenson (Brunnoro 1984, Marchese 2006). Indeed, the albums about Corto Maltese are probably considered as examples of Italian literature *tout court*, in fact *Una ballata del mare salato* was published by Einaudi in their Coralli collection in 1995. This editorial decision can be seen as emblematic of the new position that comics have acquired inside the Italian cultural space since the 1960s. The comics as art form is now seen as an integrated part of the national cultural scene – when *Linus* celebrated its fiftieth anniversary last year, the major Italian daily newspaper *La Repubblica* dedicated three full pages to the magazine’s jubilee.<sup>10</sup> This development illustrates clearly the importance of cultural mediators – critics, publishers, scholars and intellectuals – in the process of allocation and redistribution of cultural capital within the sphere of symbolic goods.

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<sup>10</sup> “50 anni di Linus” in *La Repubblica* (2015.03.22).

#### 4. Adult comics in Sweden

The late development of adult comics in Sweden was probably caused by the lasting impact of the American Fredric Wertham’s ideas exposed in his book *Seduction of the Innocent* from 1954. This work, presented as scientific research, claimed that comics had a corrupting influence on its readers and lead to juvenile crime and overall moral degradation. The ideas exposed by Wertham were hugely influential in the paranoid atmosphere of McCarthy years and comics became the target of the US Senate hearings on juvenile delinquency (Sabin 1993:157–159). In the face of impending government censorship and falling sales, as many newsstands and shops refused to distribute comics, American publishers instituted the Comic Code that would regulate contents of publications admitted to the distribution network (Sabin 1993:160–161). The Code explicitly forbade depiction of crime, violence and sex, and thereby outlawed content that later would contribute to the commercial success of Italian “black comics” (“fumetti neri”). According to Roger Sabin, as a result of these censorship measures, the American comic industry “went into a steep decline from which it only began to recover in the 1980s: comics content was sanitised, homogenised and essentially juvenilised” (1993:163).

The Swedish comic scene was never subject to any content regulation, but the image of comics as medium predominantly for children or family entertainment would persist for many years. As Fredrik Strömberg puts it in his history of Swedish comics,

...a lot of people in Sweden accepted, even welcomed, Wertham’s conclusions about the dangers of comics. Several Swedish books were written in this spirit – books that permeated the debate and had long-lasting effects. The damage done by overzealous authors, journalists and other critics would last for a long time, and would influence publishers, librarians, teachers etc. to such extent that it was not until the 1980s that a more nuanced way of viewing comics would appear in the debate (2010:65).

This shows that the role of critics and intellectuals in the development of adult comics in Sweden was of an opposite character, compared to the Italian case in the same period. Furthermore, the impact of Wertham’s ideas was not only direct as stated by Strömberg, but also indirect, since the American “juvenilised” post-1954 comics published in Sweden set the standards for this medium in the eyes of general public.

Historically, this double American influence has undoubtedly contributed to the low symbolic status of comics as art form and its isolation from the rest of the national cultural space. The influence of Wertham’s ideas was still perceivable in Sweden in late 1990s. Kristiina Kolehmainen, the first director of Serieteket, a specialized comics library in Stockholm, stated in an interview that “moral panic from 1950s” was still present in Sweden and that fear of violence and sex has prevented comics from being regarded as an art form (*Svenska Dagbladet* 1996.06.26). Significantly, the article started by claiming that comics in other countries are more than a pastime for children and have to be taken seriously as

art. This indicates clearly that comics in Sweden were still not a part of legitimate cultural sphere, or as Bourdieu put it, “[a]s distinct from a solidly legitimate activity, an activity on the way to legitimation continually confronts its practitioners with the question of its own legitimacy” (1984:24).

However, facing the low interest from local intellectuals that could contribute to the legitimation of comics, two other protagonists acquired major importance for the development of the Swedish comic scene: the state and the readers’ organizations. Since 1975, comics publishers can adhere to the system of state financial support, which has permitted publication of many albums and graphic novels that were not commercially viable (Strömberg 2010:73). The Swedish Comics Association, active since 1968, has been promoting comics as an art form, notably through its magazine *Bild & Bubbla* (“Picture & Balloon”) and the yearly award *Urhunden* (Strömberg 2010:66). Its very first prize to an international graphic novel was actually awarded to the Italian artist Vittorio Giardino for his album *Operation Istanbul (Porta d’Oriente)* in 1987.

In spite of the efforts of the readers’ association in this period, the Swedish comic scene remained an isolated cultural “ghetto”, that the comics in Italy have successfully abandoned. Critical reviews of comics on the pages of newspapers were nonexistent until 1980s. When Gunnar Krantz, a young comic artist and editor of Schröder’s *Epix* magazine, saw the first review of a comic album in *Dagens Nyheter* in 1983, he felt that it was “as unreal as seeing a flying pig” (Krantz 2011:30). As Stefan Helgesson has noted some twenty years later, the comics in Sweden are “the most modest of art forms” that exists in the silent contact with the readers and without any institutional support from universities, museums or grant institutions (*Dagens Nyheter* 2002.07.12). This has not hampered appearance of many prominent Swedish artists through the years, but has been detrimental for the public debate on comics and emergence of academic research on the subject. According to Strömberg, serious research on comics in Sweden was “virtually non-existent” in early 2000s (2003:9) and nine years later, *Svenska Dagbladet* noted that there was not much progress in this field.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Culture transfer or culture clash?

An early attempt to explicitly counteract Wertham’s influence on the Swedish comic scene was made by Sture Hegerfors and Hans Sidén in their anthology of erotic comic strips *Sex och serier* from 1970. According to the authors, “it was incomprehensible that Wertham’s writings on sex and violence could have had such an impact”.<sup>12</sup> In this thematic collection ample space was given to the artists from Italian “fumetti neri” magazines (*Satanik, Kriminal, La Jena, Gesebel, Isabella*), while the only local representative was the Swedish-Austrian Hans Teuschler. The two critics observed that the 1960s exhibited new moral attitudes

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<sup>11</sup> ”Trög forskning om tecknade serier” (‘Slow research on comics’) in *Svenska Dagbladet* (2012.08.12).

<sup>12</sup> ”Egentligen är det ofattbart att Werthams skrivelser om våld och sex fick en sådan gemomslagskraft” (1970:7).

in literature, cinema and comics compared to the conservatism of the previous decade. Nonetheless, the authors had an ambiguous attitude to the Italian artists, supposedly driven by a desire “to crush the old clerical yoke” and counterposed to the “exuberant naturalness, eager to experiment and playfully pervert” approach of the Scandinavian artists and filmmakers of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

As we could see from the bibliographical account, the central figure in the process of introduction of Italian adult comics in Sweden was Horst Schröder. According to Strömberg, in the 1980s and early 1990s “he managed to build a comics publishing powerhouse with seven monthly comic magazines. He also published hundreds of quality albums with the world’s greatest comics” (2010:83). A fascinating testimony from within of this period is offered by Gunnar Krantz, one of Schröder’s collaborators (Krantz 2011:24–32, 221–225). In 1984, *Epix*, the first Swedish adult comic magazine surprisingly turned out to be commercially successful. Next year, the Bonnier owned *Comet* entered the market, but was closed down after just three issues; the same destiny was shared by *Pulserande Metal* from Lund. Schröder was now the only publisher of foreign adult comics in Sweden, and embarked on the path of extraordinary expansion (Krantz 2011:32). From Krantz’s testimony emerges an image of an idealistic publisher guided by his own aesthetic preferences and keen on bringing as many foreign adult comics to Sweden as possible. Other kinds of related activities such as marketing, business strategy, customer care and human resource management were secondary, if not neglected. One aspect that Schröder, however, never compromised on was translation (2011:225). Krantz was critical about the high number of magazines and Schröder’s reluctance to close down the unprofitable ones. Furthermore, in Bourdieu’s terms, he thought that Schröder should limit his activities exclusively to the *field of restricted production*: “We did not aim at the mass market, but at the connoisseurs that were ready to pay well for high quality products”.<sup>14</sup> Schröder’s solution was, on the contrary, to subsidize unprofitable publications by those aimed for the public at large.

The publication of erotic comics, an important ingredient of *Epix* and *Pox*, was motivated by multiple reasons. Some erotic comics, created by important foreign artists (Crepax, Pazienza) were artistically valuable, others were profitable. At the same time all these comics were a political statement directed against the Swedish state and its prohibitions and paternalism, according to Krantz (2011:221). These erotic comics could be mainstream, feminist, gay, lesbian and queer.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> ”en frustande naturlighet, experimentlysten och lekfullt pervers [...] de katolska ländernas konstnärer intog den hjärtlösaste och mest beräknande hållningen till den s.k. nya moralen. Italienarna t.ex. verkade – åtminstone inom film- och seriemedierna – vara ute efter att krossa det gamla klerikala okei” (1970:9–10).

<sup>14</sup> ”Vi riktade oss inte till massmarknaden, utan till kännare som var beredda att betala bra för att få högklassiga produkter” (2011:221).

<sup>15</sup> ”We published hbtq comics before this concept even existed”, (“Vi gav ut hbtq-serier innan begreppet ens fanns” (Krantz 2011:224).

Paradoxically, the expansion of adult comics in Sweden was paralleled by adverse changes in the cultural climate. Some fifteen years after the publication of Hegerfors’s and Sidén’s book, the “exuberant naturalness, [and] eager[ness] to experiment” of the Swedish 1960s had evaporated and the “playful perverseness” of adult comics came under attack. The growing influence of feminist movement and its criticism of the way women were portrayed, the discussion of possible effects of video violence on youth coupled with Wertham’s lingering influence, have all clashed with the foreign adult comics introduced by Medusa and Epix publishing houses. In 1989 the Swedish legislation against portrayal of sexual violence was extended to all printed media and the Chancellor of Justice Hans Stark chose to prosecute Schröder after a complaint from “The People’s Organisation against Pornography” based in Malmö.<sup>16</sup> The prosecution concerned comic strips published in the first number of *Pox* magazine in 1989, authored by such foreign artists as Neil Gaiman, Andrea Pazienza and Dori Seda. Pazienza (1956–1988) was, according to Barbieri (2009:121), the most gifted and innovative author in the group around the *Cannibale* magazine while his hero Zanardi, unable to possess moral values and addicted to drugs, has become a symbol of his entire generation (Restaino 2004:310). Pazienza’s groundbreaking work, that in Italy was regarded as an example of linguistic innovation by an important theoretic of postmodernism Omar Calabrese (similarly to the oeuvre of Dante and Rabelais) (cit. in Castaldi 2010:90), was now an object of inquiry for Swedish justice. As noted by Sapiro, “[t]rials are interesting for the study of reception because they reveal the limits of what can be expressed or represented in a given sociohistorical configuration” (2012:41). The history of the *Pox* trial sheds light on the position of adult comics in the Swedish cultural field.

The Swedish Freedom of the Press Act (§4.13) states that the following acts should be deemed as offences if committed by means of printed matter: “unlawful portrayal of violence, whereby a person portrays sexual violence or coercion in pictorial form with intent to disseminate the image, unless the act is justifiable having regard to the circumstances”.<sup>17</sup> The key issue of the trial were the last words of the paragraph, namely if the depicted content was justifiable with “regard to the circumstances”, i.e. if the comics had any intrinsic value as artistic objects. Many Swedish critics, journalists and intellectuals followed the trial and raised their voices in support of the persecuted publisher. The *Expressen* newspaper backed up *Pox* in its editorials and the famous painter Peter Dahl testified as a defence witness in court, stating that a comic drawing is a result of a thought or a fantasy, and as such should not be censored (*Expressen* 1990.01.19). Leif Nylén in *Dagens Nyheter* defended *Pox* comics as an art form with an original style and an unconventional way of storytelling, as a way of legitimizing the whole medium (1989.11.29). The adult comics were now finally at the centre

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<sup>16</sup> <http://seriewikin.seriefamjandet.se/index.php/Pox-rättegången>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.riksdagen.se/en/Documents-and-laws/Laws/The-Constitution/>

of national cultural debate, as the Freedom of the Press trial was perceived by many as an attempt to curtail the liberty of artistic expression.

With a hindsight of twenty five years, the *Pox* trial may be seen as lost opportunity for the adult comics to advance on the national cultural scene from their earlier marginalized position, thereby acquiring more visibility and cultural capital. In 1990 an *Expressen* editorial regarded both *Pox* adult comics and Salman Rushdie’s novels as tangible proofs of free artistic creativity that characterized a vital society (*Expressen* 1990.07.22). At first glance it could seem that comics had entered the sphere of legitimate cultural production. On the other hand, the intellectuals that supported *Pox* and its right to free artistic expression, did so as a matter of principle and were hardly interested in this art form per se. In 1990 Schröder was acquitted on all charges, but has later lost a large part of his distribution network as Kooperativa Förbundet (KF) retailers (Swedish consumers’ cooperation) started to boycott Epix magazines in the wake of bad publicity around adult comics during the trial (*Expressen* 1991.11.07). In a certain way the situation was now reminiscent of the moral panic faced by American comic publishers of the 1950s before the introduction of the Comic Code (Sabin 1993:160–161). Since the magazines before the boycott used to have a wide audience that allowed both to subsidize and advertise the albums, the disruption of the magazines’ distribution meant that fewer new albums could be introduced. The final blow to Schröder’s publishing house arrived in 1994 as the Bonnier dominated distributor Tidsam refused to handle low circulation magazines for business reasons<sup>18</sup> (*Göteborgs-Posten* 1995.01.24). The golden age of Italian adult comics in Sweden was over.

The *Pox* trial has shown that the cultural value of Italian adult comics was hardly recognized in the Swedish context in the 1990s, while their commercial value was reduced after the distribution boycott. This circumstance is the starting point for Stefan Helgesson’s reflection on the conflict between Epix and Tidsam.<sup>19</sup> Helgesson argues that Bonnier would never stop the distribution of small publishers that deal with “serious” literature, even if it were technically possible.<sup>20</sup> But when it comes to the more commercial field of cultural mass

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<sup>18</sup> This rather technical issue has been object of legal proceedings (*Dagens Nyheter* 1999.04.30). The new rules imposed by Tidsam required a certain number of copies to be sold for every magazine. Otherwise, the magazines would be channelled to a more expensive distribution system (Krantz 2011:224).

<sup>19</sup> Helgesson’s argument regards Epix’s foreign adult comics in general, and not only the Italian ones.

<sup>20</sup> ”The commodity character of «serious» literature is ideologically concealed when it is published. [...] Because of this concealment of the commodity character Bonniers would never block the distribution of small publishing houses as Gedins or Ordfront, even if it was technically possible. But the closer we come to the «mass culture», the less is the need to camouflage the crude commercial conditions. Comics have been placed in that corner, and it is there Epix is forced to exist”, (“Vid utgivning av ’seriös’ skönlitteratur sker en godartad ideologisk maskering av dess varukaraktär. [...] Denna maskering av varukaraktären gör också att Bonniers aldrig skulle blockera distributionen för småförlag som Gedins eller Ordfront, även om det vore tekniskt möjligt. Men ju närmare ’masskulturen’ vi kommer, desto mindre behov finns det att kamouflera

production, where the comics have been placed in Sweden, the economic motivations of protagonists do not need to be disguised, and Tidsam’s boycott aims at protecting the comic publishing houses of its owners, Semic and Serieförlaget. This means that the Swedish readers now had access only to the most traditional and homogenised publications, as the foreign adult comics, previously published by Epix, could no longer find their way to the Swedish audience.

## 6. Culture transfer and the importance of cultural mediators

In the case of adult comics in Italy we have seen that there were two distinguished cultural fields, corresponding roughly to “fumetti neri” with their significant commercial value and the more sophisticated adult comics of *Linus*, characterized by their high cultural value. The national specialization that leads to emergence of distinct fields of production is dependent on both producers, consumers and cultural mediators. Once a symbolic good migrates to a foreign cultural context, it loses its position in the domestic cultural field and has to be transplanted into the new cultural field by such mediators as critics, journalists and publishers. That this process is complicated and full of potential difficulties shows the Swedish reception of Milo Manara’s album *An Author in Search of Six Characters* published by Carlsen Comics in 1992.

First of all, a few words should be said why Manara and this particular album was chosen for a case study when only two Swedish reviews are available. The choice of this author is motivated by the fact that he, according to Castaldi, is the most commercially successful and the most translated Italian comic artist of the period (2010:28). Newspaper reviews of foreign artists were rare in the 1990s: the only Manara album with a higher number of reviews (i.e. five) was his *Viaggio a Tulum*, but this was of course due to the collaboration with Fellini, and therefore hardly representative for the Swedish reception of Italian adult comics. Furthermore, Manara is both a sophisticated artist and works in a genre that came under attack during the *Pox* trial. These two aspects could have had contradictory effects in the struggle for cultural legitimacy.

A competent reader of this album of Manara would immediately recognize that its title contains an intertextual allusion to the drama *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) by the Italian Nobel laureate Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936). This piece of information is crucial for a correct interpretation of the text, since Manara engages in a playful commentary to the work of his distinguished compatriot. What strikes the Swedish reader before he opens the book is however the paratextual aspect of the album’s title, since the publisher chose to type the word “sex” (i.e. “six” and “sex” in Swedish) in red letters, drawing attention to the word pun that was absent in the original text. This editorial decision is not gratuitous, since Manara indeed is the master of erotic comics, but could still

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de råa kommersiella villkoren. På den kanten har man placerat serierna, och där tvingas Epix befinna sig”) (*Dagens Nyheter* 1996.03.31).

confuse the expectations of a potential reader. The album’s story is complicated and takes place on several narrative planes. This is an adventure story with erotic elements that plays with literary conventions, contains meta-narrative remarks about its own end and the characters’ ontological status, as well as allusions to Brecht’s theatre and Fellini’s cinema (especially *Eight and a half*). As such it was obviously an art object destined for the cultural *field of restricted production* in Italy and France<sup>21</sup>, while the Swedish publisher chose, as we have seen, to highlight the paratextual elements that would appeal to the readers belonging to the *field of large-scale cultural production*. It is clear that this sophisticated adult comic album by Manara was struggling to find its place in the Swedish cultural field. This difficulty can be illustrated by two Swedish reviews of the text. Karl-Erik Lindkvist, the reviewer of *Bild & Bubbla*, admitted frankly that he didn’t grasp more than a third of Manara’s symbolism and allusions, while appreciating his criticism of the adventure genre’s traditional portrayal of women. The reviewer’s general judgement, however, was negative, since this ambitious album gave a too sprawling impression (1992.06.01). Maria Sundkvist, reviewing the album in *Dagens Nyheter*, also appreciated Manara’s mocking of adult comics’ stylistic conventions: “While women’s bodies are placed as objects, the comics are imbued with a critical view on objectification of women” (1992.04.26).<sup>22</sup> However, the emancipative message of the album could hardly be taken seriously, as the artist’s pictures are too pornographic, concluded the reviewer. We can see that the first critic dismissed *An Author in Search of Six Characters* on structural or narrative grounds, while the second did so for ideological reasons. For the *Bild & Bubbla*’s reviewer Manara’s work was too arty, and for *Dagens Nyheter* it was too pornographic. In both cases the reviewers refused to acknowledge that this cultural artefact belonged in *their* field of cultural production. The process of cultural transfer, which in a best case scenario transplants the artistic object in the corresponding production field of the receiving culture, had failed. The Italian adult comics did not succeed to find an adequate position in the Swedish cultural field, because Sweden lacked the cultural mediators that could have educated the national audience. This peculiarity of the Swedish cultural scene came to its most clear expression during the *Pox* trial, when the cultural legitimacy of adult comics, i.e. their right to be regarded as cultural artefacts, came under severe attack.

## 7. Concluding remarks

The bibliographical and quantitative inquiry has shown that there were fifty-two Italian adult comics albums published in Sweden in the 1980s and 1990s, forty-seven of them between 1985 and 1993. During this so called golden age of foreign adult comics, they amounted to 38% of Italian books published there. Behind this impressive output stood only two actors: Schröder, an independent publisher with forty-two titles, and the Bonnier owned Carlsen Comics. The relative importance

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<sup>21</sup> The Swedish translation was based on the French edition of the album.

<sup>22</sup> ”Samtidigt som kvinnokropparna ställs ut som objekt, genomsyras serierna av ett kritiskt perspektiv på objektifieringen av kvinnan.”



of small independent publishers was thus higher in the comic segment compared to the rest of the Italian literature published in Sweden. This golden age came to an end and the publication of Italian adult comics almost ceased shortly after the Freedom of the Press trial against Schröder’s comic magazine *Pox*, where Andrea Pazienza was one of artists whose work was indicted. The *Pox* trial can be considered as emblematic for the lack of cultural legitimacy enjoyed by adult comics in Sweden in this period.

A short review of the adult comic scene in Italy and Sweden has shown a number of significant differences. In Italy, already in the 1960s, there was a large number of cultural mediators (publishers, critics and scholars) who contributed to the cultural legitimacy of adult comics by demonstrating the aesthetic value of this medium. The *Linus* magazine was crucial in this development, both launching innovative artists and elaborating theories about comics, thereby placing this art form in the sphere of other legitimate arts, such as literature and painting. Sweden, on the other hand, suffered the conservative influence of Fredric Wertham’s ideas, and comics were considered as a medium with low cultural capital and predominantly for children. There were no established publishers, critics or intellectuals to create “the culture of comics” as happened in Italy.

The case of Italian adult comics in Sweden, its rise and fall, shows clearly the importance of cultural mediators that together attribute certain value to artistic objects and thereby assign them a position in the national culture field. That cultural value would later be decisive for an art form’s chances to survive the transfer to the new culture and enjoy an adequate reception.

In the new millennium Italian comics in Sweden are represented mostly by Dylan Dog. The adventures of this popular investigator of paranormal phenomena contain less eroticism and violence compared to the works of Crepax and Pazienza, and may be less innovative when it comes to the narrative technique. In other words, these comics can be seen as less “adult” compared to those of the 1980s and 1990s that were published by Schröder. On the other hand, the albums about Dylan Dog take full advantage of all expressive possibilities offered by the comics as art medium. Or to quote one man, who has done more than anyone else to show the aesthetic potential of comics and thereby contributed to their cultural legitimization: “I can read the Bible, Homer and Dylan Dog for several days without being bored” (Umberto Eco in *Corriere della Sera* 2016.02.20).

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