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Romain Becker

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The Killing Joke : la co-construction du comics par l'intention éditoriale

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# Telling *The Killing Joke*: How Editorial Intent Co-constructs a Comic

*The Killing Joke : la co-construction du comics par l'intention éditoriale*

Romain Becker

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## Introduction

- 1 When Alan Moore wrote a script for a stand-alone story called *The Killing Joke*, set in the popular *Batman*-universe, little did he know publishers would make it the basis for not one, but several books. Set in the *Batman*-Universe, *The Killing Joke* revolves around the Joker, arch-nemesis of the masked vigilante called Batman. In his quest for vengeance, the “Clown Prince of Crime” decides to kidnap police commissioner Jim Gordon, a longtime ally of Batman, and cripples his daughter Barbara (whose alter ego is the superhero Batgirl). In the final confrontation, the outraged Batman narrowly comes out on top. Waiting for the police to arrive, the Joker tells Batman one final joke, and both characters erupt in maniacal laughter.
- 2 At first glance, the plot conceived by Moore simply led to the publication of one comic, illustrated by Brian Bolland. In actuality, however, *The Killing Joke* has sparked several revised editions, some so dramatically different from the first publication that, in spite of sporting the same plot and mostly the same title<sup>1</sup>, it would be negligent to believe them to truly be the same comic. Some of the changes can be traced back to interventions by the artist himself, but as this article will demonstrate, publishers and their ambition to target as diverse a public as possible – or on the contrary, to make the same audience double, triple, quadruple-dip – have also significantly affected the essence of the piece. While the original publisher, DC, ordered the piece and is in direct contact with the writer and artists, the foreign publishers who buy the licensing rights may also reconstruct the comic to suit their needs, for instance to adapt it to their own audience.
- 3 Not only was the comic’s art intentionally reinterpreted by the artist, which is the perhaps most fundamental change one must address, but it also changed according to

different publishers' motives. In order to attract different audiences and to position the piece in a certain way, publishers gave the comic various formats, editions of varying rarity, and used different materials and content to construct new versions. Lastly, how the piece is read also changed depending on context (be it historical or textual) and its public's discourse, whether editors chose to adopt or reject it. As editors and publishers have interacted with the *Killing Joke* after its inception, its reading has been de- and reconstructed time and again. Ultimately, editorial intent is an integral piece of how a comic is built, making editors co-creators rather than mere supporters.

## True colors and fine lines: the *Deluxe Edition's* changes to the artwork

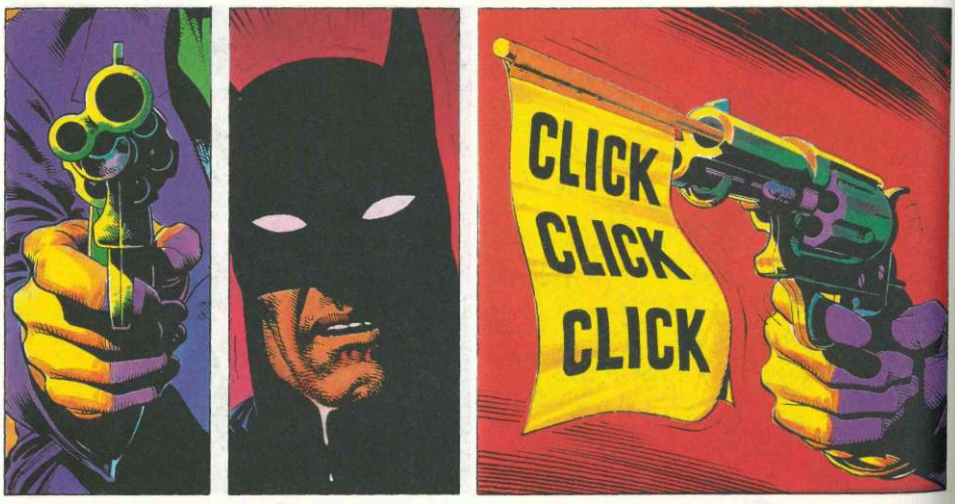
4 First off, one must consider the evolution of the comic's art: it is an essential change *The Killing Joke* has undergone, one initiated by the artist's own volition. As mentioned, although written by Alan Moore, the comic was drawn by Brian Bolland. The latter has consistently remained engaged with this comic throughout the years, and has contributed to its evolution in major ways – contrary to the writer, who has since disavowed the story<sup>2</sup>. Although the comic was met with critical and commercial success for its initial release in 1988 (BOLLAND, MOORE, 1988), Bolland in particular was dissatisfied with it. Indeed, seeing as how the artist is an infamously meticulous and thus slow worker, Dennis O'Neil, the editor for the project, requested John Higgins be brought on board and tackle the coloring in Bolland's stead. While the latter had envisioned a more muted palette and greyscale for flashback sequences, Higgins opted for flashier, almost psychedelic color associations. When in 2008, on the occasion of *The Killing Joke's* 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a new edition of the comic was to be released by DC, Bolland asked to recolor the entire piece in the way he had supposedly planned years prior. Additionally, he touched up the drawings on all but every page of the comic. The resulting *Deluxe Edition* (BOLLAND, MOORE, 2008) of the comic is thus not just any reprint of an older comic, but one completely reworked by the artist, with new linework and colors. Yet the changes between the original version with its 1988 linework and Higgins' interpretation, and the *Deluxe* version, containing new drawings and the more toned-down colors of Bolland's are not only cosmetic, but have consequences for one's reading.

5 The clashing colors of the unrealistic palette used by Higgins reflect the Joker's mental instability: the twisted nature of the character seeps into the very images the readers are seeing, thus giving them a glimpse of how the criminal perceives the world around him (picture 1). By making the story one about the Joker, told from the character's subjective point of view, the artist thus superimposes his very own interpretation upon Moore's story and Bolland's drawings, as he admits himself.

A colorist's job is to make a contribution that presents the art in the best way possible, using color to create a mood and an emotional response in the context of the story to define scenes and to accentuate story elements. [...] I got my interpretation of the story exactly as I wanted it and would not change it. (HIGGINS, 2018, p. 62)

6 This specific interpretation may have been at odds with the main artist's, but was supported by the editorial team of the DC publishing house, who preferred featuring this rendition rather than wait for Bolland to color the piece himself. The title's release

had already been announced and the comic was thus highly anticipated by fans and retailers alike. Additionally, Higgins' trademark style had already defined the successful *Watchmen* series that DC had finished publishing less than a year prior. Hiring the same artist to do the colors not only creates a visual coherence between different comics written by Alan Moore, but it also signals to fans of *Watchmen* that *The Killing Joke* is on the same level of quality as their beloved series. The editorial team choosing Higgins to color the comic may have had a creative impact on the piece, but the choice was undoubtedly prompted by financial incentives.



Picture 1. BOLLAND, Brian (art), MOORE, Alan (story), HIGGINS, John (color). *Batman: The Killing Joke*. New York : DC Comics, 1988. ISBN 978-0-930289-45-4 (as reprinted in *Absolute Batman: The Killing Joke*. Burbank, CA : DC Comics, 2018, p.108).

© DC Comics

- 7 Twenty years later, Bolland finally got his chance to color the comic he had drawn and to provide his own interpretation (picture 2). With the overall colder and darker colors, as well as the black and white flashbacks, *The Killing Joke* becomes a film noir, a grim thriller in which the horrors of the Joker's crimes are shown in a more distant, objective light. John Higgins interprets this as being Batman's vision of the story.

I think this is all pretty cool, as now we have the color from both the protagonist's and the antagonist's perspectives... (HIGGINS, 2018, p.62)



Picture 2. BOLLAND, Brian (art and color) et MOORE, Alan (story). *Batman: The Killing Joke - The Deluxe Edition*. New York : DC Comics, 2008. ISBN 978-1-4012-1667-2 (as reprinted in *Absolute Batman: The Killing Joke*. Burbank, CA : DC Comics, 2018, p.50).

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- 8 With the colors of the *Deluxe Edition*, an interpretive dichotomy is created, and it is further reinforced with the new linework. Most of the changes to the drawings, such as cameos by popular *Batman* characters, may be minor, but they nevertheless alter how the comic looks and – in some cases – may affect the reading of the plot, depending on how much *Batman* lore one is aware of<sup>3</sup>. These details were not added to change how one interprets the story, though, but rather to warrant re-reading a comic one already read in another version. Bolland and the editorial team knew fans expected an incentive to buy the comic again, and thus, had to add some changes. In the newly added postface, Brian Bolland even challenges readers to compare both versions of the comic and spot the differences: “The eagle-eyed may notice that every page has something slightly different on it from *The Killing Joke* of 20 years ago” (BOLLAND, 2008). By announcing that there were changes, these new details could be expected to be analyzed and discussed by fan communities and reviewers, possibly giving this edition more visibility and better sales. The postface also prompts readers to read the piece in a slower, more meticulous way – at least if their ego has been piqued and they consider themselves “eagle-eyed” fans.
- 9 In the case of the *Deluxe Edition*, it was the artist’s intervention that produced an entirely new interpretation of the comic. Nevertheless, it should be noted that while publisher DC may not have initiated the drastic change in art style, only their approval of the changes, as well as their financial patronage enabled Bolland to rework the piece. But beyond mere economic or creative support, the editing and publishing processes played an essential role in the construction of these new interpretations. It was editorial intent that integrated Bolland’s artistic interpretation regarding the colors, just as it was editors who withheld it from the comic’s first outing – the same goes for Higgins’ initial involvement and later erasure, both prompted by editorial decisions.
- 10 The *Deluxe Edition* of *The Killing Joke* was produced by DC together with Bolland with the aim of it being considered a distinct entity. According to Roy Cook and Aaron Meskin, the status as a separate piece is cemented because the comic was received as such: they emphasize the role of readers and critics.

Are these editions distinct artworks? [...] With regard to *The Killing Joke*, the answer to this question is affirmative, and straightforwardly so. [...] Typical comics consumers seem to treat the two editions as distinct works. In particular, fans do not typically forego reading the 2008 version because they have already read the 1988 version [...] Finally, and perhaps most importantly, comics critics reviewing the new edition typically treat it as a (partially) new work, distinct from the original 1988 version [...] Thus, the practices of production and reception within which *The Killing Joke: Deluxe Edition* was produced do aim at producing, and are understood in this case as having successfully produced, an art-instance. (COOK, MESKIN, 2015, p.64).

- 11 If a new “art-instance” arose from this new “edition-instance”, it would thus be due to the triangular relationship between artist, public and editor/publisher. Nevertheless, other editions, where the artists were less involved, emphasize just how much of a role editors play in the relationship between a text and its recipients: although reading a text constitutes a “transaction” between author and reader, as Louise M. Rosenblatt defined it (ROSENBLATT, 1994), this transaction is mediated by the editor.

### Judging a book by its cover and contents

- 12 Indeed, the “editorial gesture”, that Brigitte Ouvry-Vial defines as relating to “the position of the editor as a mediator between author and reader” (OUVRY-VIAL, 2007, p. 71), can be noticed when analyzing other material changes *The Killing Joke* underwent. First, the original edition is squarebound: while it is still a paperback, its binding gives it a more rigid and prestigious feel than regular *Batman* comic books’ pamphlet form, whereas the 2008 book possesses a hardcover and a dust jacket (the actual book underneath is covered in embossed fabric) that further reinforce the impression of quality. Coupled with its heftier price tag –\$18 at release, compared to the original’s initial \$3.5 – the *Deluxe Edition* certainly lives up to its namesake. Furthermore, the difference in length (64 pages instead of the original’s 48) is due to the fact that the revised edition is comprised of the comic itself, an introduction, an afterword, as well as pages with original sketches, and lastly, a stand-alone story titled *An Innocent Guy*<sup>4</sup>.
- 13 These material differences enable the publisher to target a different public or to attract the same public’s attention once again: the new appearance, material, and pricing change the way the comic can be advertised (as a “graphic novel” instead of a “comic book”, for instance), and alter the “horizon of expectation”. Indeed, as Jaussian reception theory emphasizes it, straying from an already familiar genre (in this case, a familiar comic), or abiding by pre-established rules both influence what readers expect from a piece of art and how it will be received (JAUSS, 1978, p.51). The *Deluxe Edition* may stay close to the already well-received *Killing Joke* so as to garner similarly positive reception, yet strays far enough from it to alter expectations.
- 14 Diving into how these elements contribute in altering the way the comic is consumed, one could think they merely detract from the main attraction, Moore’s and Bolland’s comic. In actuality, however, they rather contribute to guiding how it is perceived and read<sup>5</sup>. While the original release starts *in medias res* as soon as the cover page is flipped, Tim Sale’s introduction makes one develop expectations for the story to come. Similarly, the abrupt ending of the original forces one to reflect all by themselves on the contents of what one just read, while in the *Deluxe Edition*, the postface explains how those contents first came to be and, as will be discussed later, proposes a specific interpretation for the comic’s ending. Admittedly, such peritextual elements will not be

read by all, especially since their form as a text differs from the illustrated comic. Brian Bolland's side-story *An Innocent Guy*, on the other hand, standing in visual continuity with the main comic, may attract a larger audience, and it, too, leads readers towards a specific vision of the comic. In this short story, a young man confesses he would like to murder Batman one day. Apart from being a comic set in the *Batman*-universe and having been drawn by the same artist, it would have no diegetic link whatsoever with *The Killing Joke*. With its presence right next to Moore's story, however, a connection is *de facto* established. The short story could be seen as a continuation of sorts, or as a counter-argument to the *The Killing Joke*'s moral<sup>6</sup>, perhaps... While the reasoning was most likely economic – how else would the publisher justify quadrupling the price of the book other than with this addendum? –, readers may likely blend out such production-related justifications and could establish an intradiegetic link between these two very distinct stories, believe the inclusion to hold some significance.

- 15 Here, the editors' interpretation of what *An Innocent Guy* represents (A follow-up story? A showcase for the artist's quality? Mere bonus content?) has influenced the very form of *The Killing Joke*. Editorial intent has changed the composition and thus the reading of the book. The same could be said for other editions that collect different works, like Eagle's *Batman: Killing Joke* (AZZARELLO et al. 2016) and its *The Legend of Batman: The Man Who Laughs & The Killing Joke* (BOLLAND et al., 2019). In any case, the association with other stories and additional content changes one's perspective on Moore's and Bolland's take. Focus is placed by the editors on the comic's influential and supposedly groundbreaking nature, on the consequences it had for the *Batman* storyworld, not on its merits as a standalone story.

## Different Jokes for different folks: how to appeal to casual and hardcore fans

- 16 Positioning the comic as an influential piece is the editorial and commercial strategy at play here, as a closer look at the *Deluxe Edition*'s cover already shows. First, a flattering quote by movie director Tim Burton on the very top of the cover can, of course, attract Burton's fanbase, more particularly people who appreciate his 1989 blockbuster *Batman* and are not necessarily avid readers of comic books. His name on the cover is a testament to how his movie was inspired by the comic. On the bottom of the cover, it is also mentioned that the introduction was written by Tim Sale, who is not just any comic artist, but one of the most critically acclaimed illustrators for *Batman* comics. This comic is thus made to look more enticing for fans of anything related to the *Batman* franchise. That very logic may also explain why the *Deluxe Edition* specifically came out for *The Killing Joke*'s 20th anniversary: its release coincided with *The Dark Knight's*, directed by Christopher Nolan, hence why the publisher could expect comics sales to profit off the movie's marketing campaign and success. By establishing a (textual or contextual) link with other parts of the multimedia franchise, the publisher may lessen *The Killing Joke*'s status as a stand-alone story (which is how it was initially conceived), but also emphasizes its reading as a plot set inside a pre-established universe, on which it had a lasting influence.



## One small book for a Joke...: how pocket formats change more than just size

- 17 Publishers are not only responsible for cover designs and release dates, but also, as briefly mentioned, format, which not only impacts what one expects of the reading, but also the reading experience itself. Most notably, in 1990, French publisher J'ai Lu decided to release a pocket edition of *The Killing Joke*, at almost half the size of the original. Adapting a piece for a foreign market necessarily entails changes – in a sense, translators write script entirely distinct from Moore's – but ones to the format are rather uncommon. Other than contractually obligated respect for the original publisher's format, this may be due to the transformation process not always being a straight-forward task: as Sylvain Lesage rightfully notes in his article on pocket editions of comics, "simply scaling down the pages would render the text and the illustrations illegible." (LESAGE, 2011). Thus, as with most other comics published in this format, pages were entirely rearranged: some panels were blown up to become spread pages, others reduced in size, some cropped, and on a few occasions, entire panels were added. Thus, Lesage remarks:

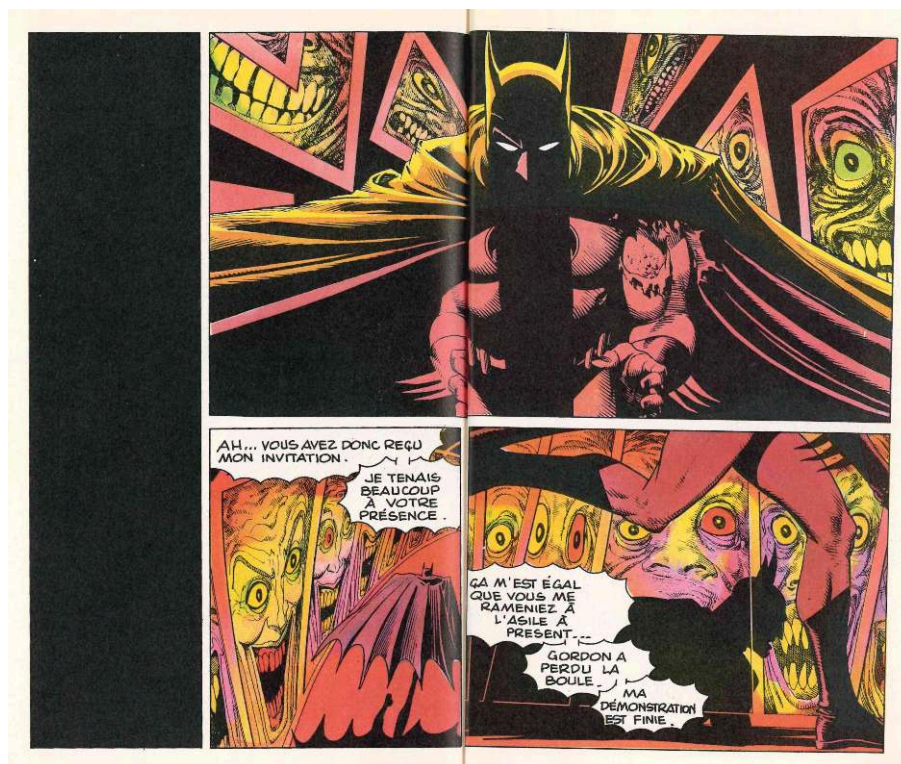
Whereas literature adopting the pocket format likens it to a new edition, in the case of the comic, we have a new creation, a new piece on our hands. (LESAGE, 2011)

- 18 Indeed, *Batman : Souriez !* (Bolland, Moore 1990)<sup>7</sup> dramatically changes the rhythm of the original layout: it erases parallel constructions, suspenseful moments<sup>8</sup>, as well as forces a new reading rhythm upon the reader – especially when considering the various added passages. Indeed, in a few instances, panels were split in two, non-consecutive parts, and on other occasions, when a panel's format does not fit within the pocket format's specific layout, a black panel is placed next to it (pictures 3 et 4)<sup>9</sup>. While these panels are only supposed to fill gaps, a formal necessity, nothing indicates they were not created by the artists and these black panels must thus be integrated into one's reading of the plot and not be seen as voids: do they indicate a time lapse? Do they represent a character's psyche? Here, decisions taken by the editors have esthetic repercussions that will change the way one reads the story. Since foreign license-holders do not have as direct a line to artists as original publishers do, and seeing as how J'ai Lu was but one of numerous publishers, one can wonder whether the artists were even consulted in the first place. Just as was the case with the *Deluxe Edition*, one may consider this edition to be a distinct "art-instance" (COOK, MESKIN, 2015), one not initiated by the artists, but by editors wanting the comic to adapt to a format not intended for it by its creators, all in order to respect the conventions associated to said format, and to relate to a different public.



Picture 3. Page layout in the original version, to compare with picture 4. BOLLAND, Brian (art), MOORE, Alan (story), HIGGINS, John (color). *Batman: The Killing Joke*. New York : DC Comics, 1988. ISBN 978-0-930289-45-4 (as reprinted in *Absolute Batman: The Killing Joke*. Burbank, CA : DC Comics, 2018, p. 102-103).

© DC Comic



Picture 4. Page layout in the french pocket edition, to compare with picture 3. See the added black panel on the left. BOLLAND, Brian et MOORE, Alan. *Souriez !*. Paris : J'ai Lu BD, 1990, p. 100-101.

© DC COMICS / J'AI LU (TRANSLATION AND LAYOUT)/ EAGLEMOSS

- 19 Indeed, the change in size, the paperback binding, as well as the lesser quality paper lead to a lower price tag, which could be enough to warrant a purchase, regardless of how much has been altered – after all, nothing signals the layout being different from the template. Such material changes in pocket editions were made specifically in order to attract a different public, as Lesage explains:

The main objective of the [J'ai Lu BD] collection is thus to gain (or rather to regain) clients who had turned their backs on comics: children and youth. First of all, its price facilitates acquiring them; it also encourages impulse purchases. The pocket format's distribution network allows for comics to be distributed in other places as book shops: train stations, newsstands, tobacco shops... Lastly, its format encourages spontaneous reading, nomad reading; the pocket comic fits into a backpack and is traded during recess [...] (LESAGE, 2011)

- 20 Given *The Killing Joke*'s mature contents, the targeted audience most likely weren't children, but rather comic aficionados with a tighter budget or casual readers. Whether it is due to the price not being as comparatively low as pocket novels (Lesage 2011), because fans would usually prefer full-sized artwork, or because the general public was not interested in purchasing comics in such a format, J'ai Lu's pocket collection eventually failed to meet sales expectations and was discontinued in 1995.

### Always bet on black and white: attracting collector-speculators

- 21 New editions are however not only marketed to appeal to new readers, but also to long-time fans of the comic. Sharing never-before-seen behind the scenes or remastered illustrations is more than enough to make fans double-dip, if not even to buy even more iterations of the same comic and to start a collection. The aim here is not to simply reprint the same comic, but to create a somewhat novel version of it, all to create a new horizon of expectation. For instance, black and white renditions of *The Killing Joke* were published, supposedly to shed new light on Bolland's art, without the color filters superimposed on it. But *Killing Joke - 75 ans* (BOLLAND, MOORE, 2015), published by Urban Comics and based on the 1988 art, as well as DC's *Batman Noir: The Killing Joke* (BOLLAND, MOORE, 2016), based on the 2008 linework of the *Deluxe Edition*, are constructs made by the publisher: the arbitrarily chosen color scheme was not the one the different artists opted for themselves. The demand for these versions was artificially boosted by making *Killing Joke - 75 ans* a limited print run of only 3000. Creating an uncommon item may have helped attract the customers who already possessed multiple editions of the same comic: some simply wanting to complete their collection, others to acquire a rare artifact, possibly to sell it at a higher price later – a financial investment of sorts. In such cases, publishers may not even expect a new edition to lead to a reading experience in the first place: because sealed comics in mint condition fetch a higher price, some collectors may hardly ever open, let alone read them. The positions of some buyers and publishers are rather similar, for such limited editions: there is not necessarily a sincere desire to discover/present a new take on a beloved comic, but rather one to possess/publish a piece whose public appeal – and thus its value – increases.
- 22 The aforementioned behavior is most certainly one the publishing house tried to take advantage of, when they changed the color scheme for every new print of the original series of *The Killing Joke*<sup>10</sup>, prompting die-hard fans to even buy prints in bulk. Discussing the first issue of *Legends of the Dark Knight* and its alternative cover, Jean-Paul

Gabilliet points out that especially in the 1980s, “publisher[s] exploited the irrational comportment of speculators to artificially boost sales” (GABILLIET, 2013, p.154). Because of “collector speculators”, publishers are more inclined to publish new editions of older comics rather than invest in a piece they cannot be sure will sell. This holds especially true for new editions that alter a lot of elements, as they are more likely to be reviewed by critics and be put in the novelty section of book shops. Seeing as how compiling and/or altering material to which one already owns the rights is comparatively inexpensive, especially for a big publisher like DC, it makes financial sense to mix and match different combinations and create new products based on old comics.

### The Absolute edition: forging a classic

- 23 One last edition seems particularly noteworthy, as it shows editors wanting to provide multiple versions of the same comic. The *Absolute Batman: The Killing Joke* (BOLLAND, MOORE, 2018) edition’s real novelty lies in the fact that this publication compiles both the original and the Deluxe versions of *The Killing Joke*, as well as Alan Moore’s original script: one can read all three main renditions of the same piece and thus experience it in its entirety, closely to what all the involved artists envisioned. At first glance, it would even seem that in order to provide as faithful a read as possible, the publisher went the extra mile and even reproduced material qualities of the original releases. The book indeed contains two different kinds of paper for the original and for the *Deluxe* versions: whereas Bolland’s coloring was printed on high-quality, glossy paper, Higgins’ was on old-looking, pulpy, yellowish paper. This is apparently the publisher’s attempt to closely mimic the original reading experiences, but also to emphasize the piece having endured through the ages: with the difference in paper quality, the age difference between each version is plain to see and feel, and the comic is shown to be a true classic.
- 24 However, this is one forged antiquity: even when it was released over thirty years prior, *The Killing Joke* was actually printed on so-called Baxter paper stock, a heavy (and costly) high-quality material – a testament to the trust put into his art by the publishing house<sup>11</sup>. Using reinforced newsprint for the *Absolute* edition thus makes this piece look older than it actually is and gives the impression that it was a run of the mill comic when it was released, not a highly anticipated best-seller by some of the most acclaimed artists of its time. *The Killing Joke* was a product of the modern comic industry, but by lessening its quality here, DC forges the myth of it being a “classic” piece of art, in the sense that it cements its status as a genre-defining comic, and as a precursor for stories to come. Clearly, the choice of paper was made in order to correspond to the public’s expectation of what 30-year-old newsprint should feel like, rather than to resemble authentic newsprint, as it is much sturdier and heavier, not as easy to rip and crumble. It is an idealized version made to appeal to nostalgia, not in order to present the art in a favorable or unbiased light. Paradoxically, this newest edition will most likely be the one to age the most in the years after its release, making it the only one to actually truly embody what one expects a comic from the 1980s to look like. As the acidic paper used in *Absolute Batman* ages, colors will bleed even more, lines will fade, and fingerprints will leave indelible stains: in a way, this patina will provide yet another impression of the same comic, yet another publisher-induced experience-altering element<sup>12</sup>, and no “absolute” way to view the piece.

25 While all of the previously cited changes to *The Killing Joke* throughout the years could be seen as corrupting the original piece, they must also be considered visible signals of change, deliberately put there for potential readers. Even though because of prior reading experiences, a piece “never appears as an absolute novelty” (JAUSS, 1978, p.50), especially in the case of re-editions, the elements added in the editorial process give the impression that a particular book is at least different enough to justify re-reading it. The perks are not only economical: in a sense, these alterations enable long-time fans to rediscover a piece they appreciate under a new light, albeit an artificially created light, and can also help attract new fans that were not necessarily interested by the piece’s former appearances. This may be one of the reasons why new editions are not only supported by publishers, but generally also by the artists, as Lesage notes:

In spite of the transformations the pieces undergo, adaptations into the pocket format are not really contested among authors. Two hypotheses can be made to this regard: either contracts with the publishers force them to comply or, more seriously, they find objective reasons not to oppose the pocket format. [...] On the one hand, fetishizing pages is less common among authors than among fans: since authors have a concrete knowledge of the fabrication process and the editorial system, they generally consider the page to be the result of a game between various (technical and editorial) constraints – before being a support for art. On the other hand, authors quickly understand that pocket editions of comics do not pose a threat to financial income, but on the contrary, provide an additional source of revenue. (LESAGE, 2011)

26 Apart from Moore, who in general has withdrawn from the mainstream comics industry, Bolland and Higgins have consistently remained supportive of *The Killing Joke*’s new editions. Even after the latter was effectively erased from the *Deluxe Edition* and its offspring, he still offered support for the *Absolute* edition. Of course, financial incentives and strict contracts with a powerful publisher may be at play here, as Lesage suggests, and they may not be aware of some of the more outlandish editions, but it is nevertheless remarkable that none of these artists have openly criticized the changes made to their art.

27 This may indeed be due to the fact that comic artists are acutely aware that even the original publication was constructed and transformed through an editorial and technical process, they know their “work always shows signs of that cooperation [between creators and editors]” (Becker 1988, p. 27), as Howard S. Becker emphasized it in *Art Worlds*. Indeed, *The Killing Joke*’s art is the result of Bolland’s and Higgin’s work, of course, but also the letterer’s (Richard Starkings), the manufacturers’, the printers’, etc., all coordinated by the editors (Len Wein and Dennis O’Neil for the first edition) working for the publisher (DC). The signs for this cooperation are still visible in the piece, as was shown in this article, but the artists’ role is voluntarily foregrounded in comparison to the other instances, the less visible and valued “support personnel”, as Becker calls them. Indeed, as he reminds us, our “dominant tradition takes the artist and art work, rather than the network of cooperation, as central to the analysis of art”(Becker 1988, p. 23), hence why editorial decisions, but also the intended audience’s impact are generally downplayed. The materials and constructions of the many editions have always been determined by a collective who worked not in a vacuum, but in accordance with their audience’s expectations, or in order to guide said expectations. This mechanism enacted by the editorial team is what Ouvry-Vial calls “editorial gesture”:

“interpreting the intentions of the author and the piece’s horizon of expectation, while at the same time evaluating the reading competences and practices of the readers” (OUVRY-VIAL, 2007, p.71).

- 28 The readers, however, did not only have an impact on editing the piece by being its target audience, but also more actively. Indeed, readers shaped the discourse on the comic and, thus, the interpretation editors wanted to emphasize in the various renditions.

## How public discourse affects *The Killing Joke*’s plot

- 29 After having addressed the changes *The Killing Joke*’s drawings, color, content, format, and material underwent, it would indeed be time to address the discourse around it. While contrary to the art, the plot has not budged throughout all versions of the comic (disregarding its translations), reading this story in 2020 is not the same as it was in 1988. This, of course, could be said for every piece of art: new interpretations and expectations arise as times change, independent of the artists’ or the editors’ original intent, but depending on the context of the reading. In the case of *The Killing Joke*, mediatized interventions from actors of the comic industry and beyond have particularly shaped the ways the story is read and received. More precisely, two plot points in particular have been publicly commented on and thus been re-constructed by the discourse on them: Barbara Gordon’s fate and *The Killing Joke*’s ending.

## From superhero to woman in a fridge

- 30 The prime female character, Barbara Gordon, being shot could be seen as a standard narrative device back in 1988, an event written to motivate the hero, in line with quite a few other popular comic books. However, the inherent sexism of this trope became especially apparent after 1999, when Gail Simone created a website dedicated to listing the numerous women abused or killed in superhero comics, Gordon being among them. Simone coined the term “Women in refrigerators”<sup>13</sup> to condemn the all-too common plot point of female characters being treated in particularly gruesome manner. While it cannot be said that the comic industry’s usage of misogynistic tropes has fundamentally changed since then, the public’s knowledge and interpretation of *The Killing Joke* certainly have.



Picture 5. Page 26 of the original version, as edited, to compare with picture 6. BOLLAND, Brian (art), MOORE, Alan (story), HIGGINS, John (color). *Batman: The Killing Joke*. New York : DC Comics, 1988. ISBN 978-0-930289-45-4 (as reprinted in *Absolute Batman: The Killing Joke*. Burbank, CA : DC Comics, 2018, p.90).

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- 31 First, fans learned more about the creation process behind the plot point through an interview for *Wizard* magazine in 2004, where Alan Moore himself revealed how female superheroes were considered throwaway characters and treated with contempt by the mostly male editorial team. He admitted how he believes his editor, Len Wein, “should’ve reined [him] in” (Moore, 2004, pp. 62-64), whereas instead, the latter supposedly approved of his plan to make the Joker harm Batgirl in the comic and replied “Yeah, okay, cripple the bitch”. New knowledge on the production resurfaced alongside preliminary artwork that suggested the Joker may not only have shot, but also raped Gordon. The published comic only shows that the Joker took photographs of her, and there is not explicit mention of rape (picture 5), whereas in the inked artwork for the comic shown on Twitter in 2013 (picture 6), the photographs show Barbara Gordon topless, hence further sexualizing and objectifying her. According to Bolland himself, the drawing was deemed too explicit and thus edited out in the final release – given how it is already inked, this must have happened late into the production process. This pre-publication drawing and Moore’s statement about believing the story to be “too violent and sexualised a treatment” (MOORE, 2016) give further credit to the story being a rape narrative<sup>14</sup>. These elements also change how one reads the problematic panel in question, now knowing what had been altered in it during the production.



Picture 6. Original inked artwork for page 26, before editing (see picture 5). Picture by Billy Hynes, in his Twitter account, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. [consulté le 27/02/2021], URL <[HTTPS://TWITTER.COM/BILLYHYNES/STATUS/407262919760805889/PHOTO/1](https://twitter.com/BillyHynes/status/407262919760805889/photo/1)>

© BOLLAND / MOORE / BILLY HYNES (PHOTOGRAPH)

- 32 This specific reading became more widely publicized with the release of the 2016 animated movie adaptation directed by Sam Liu, where some viewers interpreted a scene as implying the Joker had raped Barbara Gordon. As the movie's creative team responded to the allegations, further media attention was garnered. One cannot disregard the fact that additionally, this movie was promoted while the trial for the publicized *People v. Turner* sexual assault case<sup>15</sup> took place: in such a context, the *Killing Joke's* treatment of Batgirl could reasonably be seen as the manifestation of the same rape culture tried in court.
- 33 In the end, whether Moore and/or Bolland intended for there to be a rape does not matter as much to the reading as the fact that, as time goes on, the Joker's assault on Gordon is recognized by readers and commentators as being of sexist and sexual nature. The aforementioned facts and their media coverage, combined with current times being at least apparently less complacent with sexual assault, make it so that one cannot read the Joker's crime the same as when it was first published, albeit already controversial then. In 1988, editors already knew the comic could spark outrage and toned its art down before publication – on the other hand, one editor spurred Moore on to have his character be treated cruelly. This made sense from an economic perspective, as controversy means publicity, which equals sales: Gordon's fate was made to be violent in order to attract attention, not only to serve the plot. In subsequent editions, in spite of the backlash, publishers chose not to refute, acknowledge, or add comments to the issue of sexual violence, albeit as widely discussed as it is: there is no editorial intent to tackle this issue, hence why it is not emphasized in any edition.



## If the *Joke* is going to have an ending, I prefer it to be multiple choice!

- 34 When, on the contrary, the story's ending was reinterpreted time and again, albeit for different reasons, editors decided to intervene and to include elements playing with that reading. In the last few panels of the comic, the Joker and Batman have a good laugh together and the perspective progressively pans away from the characters, down into a puddle. A rather open-ended finale that lets one linger for a few glances, reflecting on the meaning of that fraternal laughter: are the antagonists more similar than they appear? Do they laugh at the tragicomic nature of their situation? Readers have also pointed out that the panel in which Batman's hand is positioned at the same height as the Joker's neck could suggest the hero breaks his vow never to kill, and murders his foe. The fact that the laughing onomatopoeia stops after this panel supposedly corroborates said interpretation, but it only gained real traction with the help of comics creators.



Picture 7. BOLLAND, Brian (art), MOORE, Alan (story), HIGGINS, John (color). *Batman: The Killing Joke*. New York : DC Comics, 1988. ISBN 978-0-930289-45-4 (as reprinted in *Absolute Batman: The Killing Joke*. Burbank, CA : DC Comics, 2018, p.90).

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- 35 As previously mentioned, in the 2008 *Deluxe Edition* (and in most following editions), an afterword by Brian Bolland was added. While it mostly explains how the comic first came to be, the last paragraph seems to refer directly to this fan theory:
- Speaking of which: it's time I revealed what really happened at the end of THE KILLING JOKE: as our protagonists stood there in the rain laughing at the final joke, the police lights reflecting in the pools of filthy water underfoot, the Batman's hand reached out and... (BOLLAND, 2018, p.55)
- 36 The sentence remains intentionally incomplete, but suggests something unspecified, other than the friendly laugh happens at the end of the plot. Bolland could have only thought this statement to be a sympathetic nod to a popular interpretation, or perhaps as a recognition of the comic's open-endedness. He may also have wanted to attract the attention he does not usually get<sup>16</sup>. However, by putting his statement at the very end of most of the following editions, editors permanently altered the way the plot is read. The fifth panel on the 46<sup>th</sup> page of the comic (in the non-pocket formats) could

previously be seen as one panel among others, but because Bolland mentions this particular one, it is now imbued with a sense of gravity other illustrations do not have. The drawing's supposed importance is further accentuated with a change made on the frontispiece of the *Deluxe Edition*: beneath the dust jacket, the cover is actually embossed with the outlines of the aforementioned panel. Curious readers who want to discover what is hidden under the emblematic cover illustration of the Joker taking a photograph, are confronted with a drawing actually present inside the book they're holding. Since it is also mentioned by the artist in his postface, it cannot but be considered the comic's keystone and a clue to interpret it.

- 37 As other prominent figures of the comics field responded to this reading of the ending, either to support or contradict it, be it in podcasts (Grant Morrison in *Fatman on Batman*), articles (BROOKER, 2013), or entire books (DARIUS, 2012), this theory inevitably altered readers' expectations. While this interpretation was brought about by imaginative readers, editors chose to provide a platform for it, intended for *The Killing Joke's* ending to be the mystery it now is. Had they not wanted the ending to remain controversial, publisher DC could have removed the afterword (or part of it) in subsequent editions, changed the book's frontispiece, or added Moore's statements that contradict the fan theory (MOORE, 2016). While Moore's script that mentions no murder is present in the *Absolute Batman* edition, the afterword suggesting some meaningful action to happen accompanies the comic, too, and keeps the debate lit.
- 38 Contrary to the Joker potentially being a rapist, Batman being a killer is a controversy endorsed by editors and thus *de facto* integrated into the comic. Rather than outright acknowledging or refuting the theory, maintaining a discussion around it helps the comic stay relevant and helps selling it. Of course, readers have not necessarily heard of all the analyses put forward by scholars and creators, but editorial intervention made the debate seep into the very composition of the comic. While discourse on the sexual assault on Gordon may also alter how one perceives *The Killing Joke*, editors did not include intra-textual elements relating to the potential rape, and it may thus not be as inextricably linked to the reading experience as its mysterious ending.
- 39 Editors have also decided to integrate parts of this comic, originally conceived as a stand-alone story, in the cannon continuity, for example by deciding Barbara Gordon's paralysis should be permanent, whereas others, such as Jim Gordon being tortured and sexually humiliated, were essentially wiped from the storyworld's history. While Moore merely wrote his personal take on the Batman mythos, thinking of it as an independent piece, editors chose to retire Batgirl for all other writers and to turn Barbara Gordon into the now wheelchair-bound superhero Oracle<sup>17</sup>. On the contrary, editors chose for the perhaps more surprising SM humiliation undergone by Jim Gordon to not have permanent consequences, which may be why it remains a less discussed subject among readers as Barbara Gordon's trauma.

## With great editorial power comes great co-authorship

- 40 To conclude this exploration of *The Killing Joke's* production and reception through time, one must once again insist on the obvious: a comic's interpretation does not stem solely from an esthetic transaction between author/artist and reader, but is also guided by editors'/publishers' intent. This mechanism is particularly at display in *The Killing Joke's* case, where on the one hand, the artist decided to entirely rework the piece and

changed how it is *viewed*, yet on the other hand, editors hand-picked elements to accompany or present the comic so as to change how (and by whom) it is *read*.

- 41 While every comic is constructed by the abovementioned instances, new editions are usually only rarely considered new artwork. In their article, Cook and Meskin insist that *The Killing Joke's Deluxe Edition* is an exceptional “contra-standard” case (COOK, MESKIN, 2015, p. 64), where producers of the edition, among whom the artist, specifically aimed to create a new piece of art – and where it was received as such. Thus, Cook and Meskin may not consider other iterations new “art-instances”, seeing as how the artists themselves were not directly involved in their publication. Still, some versions of *The Killing Joke* do pose the question of whether editors can be fully considered creators of comics alongside artists. *Batman: Souriez!*, for instance, was structured so differently by its editors that their role as co-creators can hardly be denied.
- 42 Straying from the case of *The Killing Joke*, there are other instances where editorial work has resulted in a heavily altered appearance or reception of a comic. Drawing on Gilles Ciment’s analysis (CIMENT, GROENSTEEN, 1987, p. 100-101), Sylvain Lesage detailed how the editorial team in charge of the pocket edition of Hugo Pratt’s *Sous le Signe du Capricorne* added entirely new elements to the panels, and changed the perspective and framing on several occasions (LESAGE, 2011). Localization, too, can profoundly change a comic’s esthetics: in the case of the French editions of Quino’s *Mafalda*, as Claire Latxague argues, turning the black and white strips into colored full-page comics, as well as changing the chronological order in which the stories initially appeared, skewed their reception (LATXAGUE, 2014; 2018). Because they can alter the visuals, but also the text and the paratext of a piece, not even needing the artists’ approval, couldn’t one see editors as even more than mediators, but as actual writers? This is at least what Anne Réach-Ngô explains about editors’ growing influence during the Renaissance.
- Editorial communication does not limit itself to being a simple mediation [...] Sometimes, the editorial instances contribution to the texts’ publication is accompanied by the claim for a form of paternity of the piece, which the editorial paratexts testify. (RÉACH-NGÔ, 2007, p.51)
- 43 The traces of this vindicated “editorial auctoriality” are called “editorial writing” by Réach-Ngô. As the present article has tried to convey, the concept could be applied to modern comics as well, as interventions by editors in paratextual elements or even inside the comic itself can sometimes be likened to co-authorship.
- 44 Although in some cases, editors’ roles as producers may have been downplayed, the contrary can also be observed in the comics industry: editors and publishers claiming complete authorship of some pieces, sidelining comic writers and artists. Even the times he was more of an editor and less of a writer, the late Stan Lee took credit for several characters and storylines, and is celebrated as the creative brain behind publisher Marvel’s success, largely diminishing the role of artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. Likewise, Walt Disney completely eclipsed most writers and artists working for his company “even though [he] never drew a single panel of the several thousand strips published under his name” (GABILLIET, 2013, p.67): in fact, until the 1960s, authorship for comics was rarely publicized for anyone but editors or publishers. What transpires in all of this is the great agency editors and publishers possess. Without minimizing the obvious agency of artists and readers, one must insist that far from

being passive mediators for texts created by artists, far from being mere counselors or “support personnel”, editors and publishers wield a certain authority on comics, and actively construct a piece and its reception.

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## NOTES

1. Some of the editions published after the original from 1988 have a slightly altered title, such as the 2014 Urban Comics release that shortens the title and is simply called *Killing Joke* (BOLLAND, MOORE, 2014), or foreign adaptations that change the title in the localization process, as evidenced by the French *Batman : Souriez ! ("Smile!")* (BOLLAND, MOORE, 1989) and *Batman : Rire et*

*Mourir* (“Batman: Laugh and Die”) (BOLLAND, MOORE, 2000). On top of solving licensing right issues, the change in name may be linked to publishers wanting to openly signal that their edition is different from others.

2. In interviews and Q&As, Moore has gone on record saying that he does not believe *The Killing Joke* to be a particularly good story and that he found it to be distastefully violent. In general, Moore has now distanced himself from the comics industry and does not contribute to the many pieces (comic series, TV series, movies...) based on his comics.

3. For instance, the newer illustrations change up Batman’s bat-logo on his chest: the yellow oval that surrounded the symbol in 1988 is notably absent in 2008. Although this was most likely done to adapt Batman’s look to the one sported in more modern comics and movies, it ultimately leads to changing the story’s chronological placement inside the series’ cannon continuity. In *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986, the logo with the oval was said to be a heavily armored target for evildoers, while in *Gotham Knights* issue 44, released in 2003, it was revised retroactively (“retconned”) to be an homage to Jason Todd, Batman’s adoptive son who was (apparently) murdered by the Joker. Thus, the hero’s logo not having the iconic yellow oval characterizes him as being more reckless, and places *The Killing Joke* at another point in the timeline as it originally had, a point during which Batman was not yet quite as driven by revenge when confronting his archenemy.

4. The latter, initially published in 1996, is featured in colored form for the first time in the *Deluxe Edition*.

5. Jauss speaks of “guided perception” to describe how the horizon of expectation changes one’s reading of a text (JAUSS, 1978, p. 50). This article chooses to underline how editorial decisions instead impact the text’s material getup, taking into account the horizon of expectation editors want to instill.

6. It could perhaps contrast with the Joker’s argument in *The Killing Joke*, being that becoming a criminal is not something people choose to be, but something anyone could be forced into – *An Innocent Guy* seems to suggest the very contrary, as the protagonist wishes to become a criminal, just in order to do something impactful in his life.

7. Although a comic by the same name was released just a year prior by Comics USA (Bolland, Moore 1989), it was a regular-sized edition of the piece without modifications to the page layout.

8. For instance, doors in *The Killing Joke*’s original page layout are always on the bottom right panel of pages. Whenever a character opens a door, the reader thus has to mimic the gesture represented on page by flipping it, reinforcing identification with them and raising the tension. This effect is entirely lost in *Batman : Souriez !*.

9. Sylvain Lesage cites instances where entirely new details were added to panels in the pocket edition Hugo Pratt’s *Sous le Signe du Capricorne* in order to fit the pocket layout. There are no such elements in *Batman : Souriez !*, only the mentioned black panels.

10. To be more precise, the color of the title and of the artists’ names were intentionally changed for every print run. While the writing was in green for the first print, it was pink for the second, yellow for the third, etc. After the 13th printing, the cover illustration was touched up a little, to be more in line with the *Deluxe Edition*’s. Not only do these variant covers incentivize buying all of them, but for collectors, they can also be used in order to identify which printing one’s issue comes from, which facilitates sales and trading for a particular printing.

11. Brian Bolland was the first artist whose work was printed on such paper using modern offset printing, when in 1982, the first issue of his *Camelot 3000* series, written by Mike Barr, was printed on this paper stock and not on lesser quality newsprint.

12. Art historian Daniel Arasse believes the patina, cracks, and deteriorations formed on paintings to be a part of the artwork. “The original with its patina is not more original than the original without its patina, because the patina is part of the original” (ARASSE, 2006, p. 300). One

could thus also argue that a comic book with a worn look does not so much deteriorate the original's look as it simply alters it, making it no less legitimate an appearance.

13. This is a reference to superhero Green Lantern's girlfriend being brutally killed and stuffed into a refrigerator. The character of Alexandra DeWitt remained largely unexplored and seemed like a mere tool to motivate the superhero.

14. Of course, whether depiction of rape is sexualized or not, this does not lessen the gravity of the crime represented in a piece of fiction. As the character does not consent to her being undressed and photographed, the crime would legally qualify as sexual assault. The Joker is thus undoubtedly characterized as a sex offender, and Gordon is portrayed as a victim whose body and intimacy have been violated, whether there was sexual intercourse or not.

15. The case gained particular attention thanks to Channel Miller's victim impact statement being shared on the internet. Media coverage also focused on the lenient sentence given to the rapist, Brock Turner, as well as on the prevalence of sexual assault in universities such as Stanford.

16. "Bolland is right that writers usually get the attention. My feeling is that, understandably, he quite enjoys this platform [...] What Bolland knows, I suspect, is not that Moore intended the scene to be ambiguous, but that fans have read that scene as ambiguous. So he decides to play with that knowledge." (BROOKER, 2013)

17. It is interesting to note that sidelining a female character in one comic led to a disabled female character being highlighted in others, perhaps due to editors wanting to have a more diverse cast. However, as Carolyn Cocca rightfully emphasizes it, Oracle is still sexualized and not the greatest representation for disabled people (Cocca 2016, p. 65-73).

## ABSTRACTS

Throughout its 30-year history, *The Killing Joke* has undergone major changes in its different editions: colors and linework differ, as do paper quality, formats, but also the length and the actual structure of the piece. This comic in particular reveals how reception can be guided by editors, sometimes independent from artists' will. This article explores a few of the comic's outings and shows how depending on what audience publishers want to attract and what kind of reading they want to emphasize, a comic's material and esthetic properties may be changed. Fan and expert discourse may alter the horizon of expectation, as well, and, depending on editorial intent, can be incorporated into the piece's composition or not. In the end, *The Killing Joke* reminds us to what extent editors can truly be considered co-creators of a comic.

Depuis trente ans, *The Killing Joke* a subi d'importants changements dans ses différentes versions : les couleurs et les traits varient, ainsi que la qualité du papier, le format, mais aussi la longueur et la structure même de l'œuvre. Cette bande dessinée en particulier révèle à quel point la réception peut être guidée par les éditeurs, parfois indépendamment de la volonté des artistes. Cet article examine quelques-unes des variations de cette bande dessinée et montre comment les propriétés matérielles et esthétiques d'une œuvre peuvent varier, à la fois en fonction du public visé par les maisons d'édition et de la lecture que celles-ci souhaitent mettre en avant. Le discours tenu par les fans et les experts peut également modifier l'horizon d'attente et, selon l'intention éditoriale, peut être ou non intégré à la composition de l'œuvre. Finalement, *The*

*Killing Joke* nous rappelle à quel point les éditeurs peuvent réellement être considérés comme co-créateurs d'une bande dessinée.

## INDEX

**Subjects:** DC, Eaglemoss, J'ai Lu, Marvel, Comics USA

**Keywords:** publisher, editor, reception, pocket book, materiality, paratext, color, feminism, collector, comics fandom, discourse

**Mots-clés:** adaptation, maison d'édition, éditeur, édition, édition, réédition, réception, collectionneur, format, livre de poche, matérialité, paratexte, couleur, bédéphylie, féminisme, discours

## AUTHORS

### ROMAIN BECKER

Romain Becker is a PhD candidate at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon and a professeur agrégé in German studies. His doctoral thesis on German comics publisher Reprdukt is under the supervision of Anne Lagny and Jean-Paul Gabilliet.

Romain Becker est doctorant à l'École Normale Supérieure de Lyon et professeur agrégé d'allemand. Sa thèse consacrée à la maison d'édition de bandes dessinées allemande Reprdukt est dirigée par Anne Lagny et Jean-Paul Gabilliet.