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*Hundra år i samma klass*

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ARTICLE

Working-class comics? Proletarian self-reflexiveness in Mats Källblad’s graphic novel Hundra år i samma klass

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ABSTRACT

With the aim of contributing to scholarly discussions about how to conceptualise the relationship between the art form of comics and the working class, this article analyses the Swedish comics artist Mats Källblad’s graphic novel Hundra år i samma klass [A Hundred Years in the Same Class], focusing on its self-reflexive discussion and problematising of the idea about comics as a working-class art form. Special attention is given to intertextual connections to Swedish working-class literature and to Källblad’s questioning of the idea that the opposition between popular and highbrow culture should be analogous with that between the working class and the bourgeoisie.

According to a post by Agnes Smeddon on the blog The Beat on 14 August 2013, at the 2013 Edinburgh Book Festival, comics artist Chris Ware – perhaps best known as the author of the graphic novel Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth (Ware 2000), cited by The New Yorker on 17 October 2005 as ‘the first formal masterpiece’ of the medium – claimed that comics is ‘a working-class art form.’ Similar claims have also been made by other commentators. In an essay about the working class in American comics, the comics artist and scholar Will Allred (2012) argues that the two phenomena are ‘intimately intertwined’ and that comics is an art form ‘created by the working class for the working class.’

It is not hard to find various kinds of links between comics and the working class. As has been pointed out by Mary Wood on the webpage The Yellow Kid on the Paper Stage, already in the late nineteenth century, R.F. Outcault’s comic strips about ‘the Yellow Kid’ depicted proletarian milieu. Thereafter numerous comics in different genres have been centred on working-class characters such as Harvey Pekar or Peter Griffin. Comics researchers, such as Boltanski (2014, 282–286), have also emphasised that workers constitute a key component of the traditional audience for comics and that many comics artists have come from the working class. Nevertheless, Ware’s and Allred’s claims still sound somewhat abstract, one-sided or generalising. What does it mean, one wonders, to describe comics as a working-class art form?
The aim of this article is to make some suggestions regarding how the relationship between comics and class could be conceptualised. These suggestions will be based on an analysis of the Swedish comics artist Mats Källblad’s graphic novel *Hundra år i samma klass* [A Hundred Years in the Same Class] (Källblad 2014), focusing on its self-reflexive discussion and problematising of the idea about comics as a working-class art form.

Of course, the conceptualisation of the relationship between comics and class depends on how the two phenomena are understood and defined. In this article, the former term – comics – is relatively unproblematic, since the main object of analysis is a rather conventional example of a well-established comics genre: the graphic novel. The latter term – ‘class’ – on the other hand, is both vague and contested. For example, the most well-known theorist of class – Karl Marx – never provided any stringent definition of the concept. In fact, the chapter on class in *Capital* is only about a page long and ends, before much has been said, with a laconic comment: ‘Here the manuscript ends’ (Marx 2000, 1186). Since Marx’s death, Marxists have debated the meaning of class, both with each other and with followers of other important theorists of class, such as Weber or Bourdieu. In the following analysis, however, comics will not be related to any already defined concept of class. Instead, the analysis will uncover how one comics artist defines, in one of his works, both class and comics by relating them to each other.

**Comics and working-class literature**

Recently, literary scholars have argued for the inclusion of some contemporary Swedish comics in the tradition of working-class literature. For example, I have claimed that Hanna Petersson’s autobiographical comic *Pigan* [The Maid] could be placed in this context because of its thematic, political and visual similarities with more traditional working-class fiction (Nilsson 2016, 139–146). A similar claim is made by Nina Ernst, in her dissertation about Swedish graphic autobiographies, regarding Mats Jonsson’s work. According to Ernst (2017, 145), the mere fact that working-class heritage is a common motif in Jonsson’s work establishes, at least implicitly, a relationship to Swedish working-class literature. The foundation for this claim is that since the 1930s the autobiographical proletarian Bildungsroman has been a central genre in this literary tradition. However, Ernst also identifies more explicit links to working-class literature. For example, in his works, Jonsson mentions several well-known working-class authors – such as Maja Ekelöf and Kristian Lundberg. Moreover, his graphic novel *Pojken i skogen* [The Boy in the Forest] even ends with a thanks to the perhaps most well-known Swedish working-class author of all times – Ivar Lo-Johansson – for ‘inspiration under arbetet med boken’ [inspiration during the making of the book] (Ernst 2017, 143–146; Jonsson 2005, 223). Based on these observations, Ernst (2017, 173) comes to the conclusion that Jonsson self-consciously places his works in the tradition of working-class literature.

The links to the tradition of working-class literature found by Ernst in Jonsson’s works are present also in *Hundra år i samma klass*. Källblad’s graphic novel consists of three previously published autobiographical works – *Garagedrömmar* [Garage Dreams] (Källblad 1995), *Vakna laglös* [Waking up Lawless] (Källblad 1996), and *Lång väg tillbaka* [A Long Way Back] (Källblad 2011) – and a story about the author’s
grandmother, ‘Ester och ungarna’ [Ester and the Kids], which had not been published before. Since a focus on class is signalled already in the work’s title, it is obvious that it is characterised by the same interest in working-class heritage that Ernst points out as a link between Jonsson’s work and the tradition of working-class literature. There are also more specific thematic connections between *Hundra år i samma klass* and Swedish working-class literature, one of which is that Källblad’s grandmother was a ‘ statare.’ The ‘ statare’ were a class of farm workers who were paid in kind and who constituted the lowest stratum of the rural proletariat in Sweden during the first half of the twentieth century. Several famous Swedish working-class writers – most notably the above-mentioned Ivar Lo-Johansson, but also Moa Martinson and Jan Fridegård – came from, and wrote about this class. The connection between Källblad and these working-class writers is also explicitly accentuated in the publisher’s blurb on the back cover of *Hundra år i samma klass*, where the work is described as a

> serieroman som slår en båge från 20-talets statarsamhälle till dagens Sverige, där det går att blunda för klassamhället om man inte råkar se det underifrån. Det är något så unikt som en seriebok i Moa Martinsons eller Ivar Lo-Johanssons anda, en tecknad arbetarskildring för och om vår tid.

[graphic novel connecting the statare society of the 1920’s with contemporary Sweden, where it is possible ignore the class society if one does not happen to view it from below. It is something as unique as a comic book in the spirit of Moa Martinson or Ivar Lo-Johansson, a depiction of the working class for and about our time, in the form of a comic.]

It is also worth noting that Källblad is a member of Föreningen Arbetarskrivare [The Association for Worker–Writers], which aims at promoting working-class literature, and that he has published an autobiographical article its journal, *Klass* [Class] (Källblad 2016).

However, the inclusion of Källblad’s work into the tradition of working-class literature should not be viewed as an answer to the question about its relationship to the working class. Rather, it ought to be seen as a starting point for its exploration. And this exploration must take into account, among other things, the self-reflexive discussion in *Hundra år i samma klass* of the relationship between the working class and literature.

The autobiographical storyline in *Hundra år i samma klass*, that commences after the story about the protagonist’s grandmother, starts with a scene describing an encounter between, on the one hand, the protagonist and some of his friends, and, on the other hand, three guys who ‘uppenbart’ [obviously] belong to ‘en helt annan samhällsklass’ [a totally different social class] (Källblad 2014, 81, see Figure 1). The two groups begin discussing politics, and the upper-class kids easily win the debate: ‘De var verbala och dribblade lätt förbi våra plötsligt så bleka ståndpunkter’ [They were eloquent and could easily dribble past our suddenly so bloodless standpoints] (Källblad 2014, 81). This leads the protagonist to the following conclusions: ‘Vårt språk räckte inte, och en otrolig ilska växte fram inom mig. I efterhand vet jag att det var klasshatet; ’Jag visste att jag hade rätt, men saknade förmågan att uttrycka mig’ [Our language did not suffice, and an unbelievable rage started growing inside me. In retrospect, I realise that it was the class hatred; I knew that I was right, but I lacked the ability to express myself] (Källblad 2014, 81). This inability to win the debate is
Väl inne i båten hamnade vi intill tre jämvamla malingar, uppenbart från en helt annan samhällsklass.

Samtalet gled snabbt in på politik.

Dom var verbala och drikande lätt förbi våra platsliga så bleka ståndpunkter.

Vårt språk räckte inte till, och en otrolig ilska växte fram inom mig. I efterhand vet jag att det var klasshatet.

Jag visste att jag hade rätt, men saknade förmågan att uttrycka mig.

Mötet resulterade dock bara i högljud ordväxling. Båten la till i Malmö och vi sov ruset av oss i bilen.

Figure 1. Hundra år i samma klass, p. 81.
described by the protagonist as a result of him and his friends having been pushed ‘genom skolan och in på fabrikerna’ [through school and into the factories], and thus never having been given the chance to acquire a functioning language (see Figure 2). The panel in which this statement is made also includes a description of two workers making ironic remarks about books. ‘Den enda bok jag läst är bankboken’ [The only book I have read is the bank book], one of them says; and the other replies: ‘Det gick väl rätt fort va?’ [That was a pretty quick read, wasn’t it?] (Källblad 2014, 82). The workers’ lack of access to a language that can be used to win political debates is thus connected to alienation from literature.

Workers’ alienation from literature is also thematised in a storyline about two publishers discussing a poetry collection submitted to them by the protagonist (see Figure 3). Here, the world of high literature is presented as being radically different from the working-class world of the main storyline. This difference is coded visually: The publishers are presented in full-page panels against a black background, surrounded only by a few objects – desks, books, a computer and an abstract painting – whereas the characters in the main storyline are placed in more realistically drawn milieus with an abundance of everyday objects. The difference between the two worlds is also expressed linguistically. The poetry collection’s title is a dialectal word – ‘Släppstyre,’ [roughly, ‘cycling without holding the handlebar’] – which one of the publishers does not understand. And it is not very likely that the working-class
characters of the main storyline would be able to understand the publishers, since they speak in a jargon quite different from the vernacular dominating in the main storyline and expressed in the poetry collections title. One of the publishers, for example, argues that ‘texterna saknar nån form av . . . förankring i det abstrakta’ [the texts lack some sort of . . . anchorage in the abstract] (Källblad 2014, 188). His colleague views this not as a problem, but rather as an asset; however, he also argues that ‘[b]räckligheten borde vara vara mer frapperande’ [the fragility ought to be more striking] (Källblad 2014, 188). Eventually, they decide to reject the collection, thereby upholding the border between the working-class world and the world of (highbrow) literature.

Thus, while there certainly are intertextual connections between Hundra år i samma klass and the tradition of Swedish working-class literature, Källblad also describes the worlds of literature and the working class – the latter described, roughly, as the world of those who lack education and work in factories – as being incompatible. Thereby, he seems to short-circuit the very concept of working-class literature. For, if workers are alienated from literature – how can literature be working-class? That it is mainly the
world of highbrow literature that is portrayed as being out-of-reach for workers does not change this, since, in a Swedish context, working-class literature is considered to be an important strand in national literature; and it enjoys a higher status than in perhaps any other capitalist country (Nilsson 2014, 9). In fact, Ernst (2017, 173) argues that Jonsson places himself in the tradition of working-class literature in order to gain status. Further, the worker joking about only reading his bank book is certainly not only alienated from highbrow literature but also from literature in general. Hence, the relationship between *Hundra år i samma klass* and working-class literature appears to be, if not paradoxical, at least unstable.

**Popular culture as working-class culture?**

In the scene describing the protagonist reflecting on his encounter with the upper-class guys, which has been discussed above, the narrator talks about how he ‘började inse att det saknades berättelser om oss’ [began to realise that there was a lack of stories about us] (Källblad 2014, 82, see Figure 2). Since this comment is made in the panel following the one in which workers talk about how little they have read, it could be connected to the description of workers’ alienation from literature. However, Källblad’s description of this alienation goes hand in hand with an association of the working class with another art form, namely comics. For example, the same workers that bragged about not reading express appreciation of a satirical cartoon about their boss that the protagonist has pinned up on the factory wall and encourage him to become a ‘serietecknare’ [comics artist] (Källblad 2014, 82, see Figure 2). And this is exactly what he does – he quits his job and starts making comics (see Figures 2 and 4).

Consequently, in *Hundra år i samma klass*, comics appears to be a more suitable art form than literature for telling stories about workers and, perhaps, even for talking back to upper-class kids and bosses. Versions of this argument – which can certainly be viewed as a variety of Ware’s and Allred’s claims that comics is a working-class art form – have also been put forward by other comics artists. In his essay ‘The Working-Class and Comics,’ the prominent French comics artist Baru (pen name for Hervé Barulea) describes comics as an art form that has allowed him to ensure ‘that mine and I myself’ – i.e. workers – could ‘affirm our cultural dignity.’ One thing that Baru found especially appealing with comics was that workers – who, according to Marx, are defined by the fact that they do not control the means of industrial production – had access to the means of comics production. This sets comics apart from other art forms. Film, for example, was rejected by Baru (2008) because he lacked the ‘technical skills,’ the ‘social relations,’ and the ‘financial means’ necessary to take up that medium. However, he also emphasises that there was a cultural proximity between comics and the working class since, unlike ‘tasteful literature,’ the former was not associated with bourgeois culture (Baru 2008, 241). A similar story is told also by Polish–Swedish comics artist Daria Bogdanska – author of the graphic novel *Wage Slaves* (Bogdanska 2016; published in French as *Dans le noir* 2017) – in the podcast *Arbetarlitteratur* on 8 March 2017. According to Bogdanska, comics is a good medium for people like herself, who, just like the protagonist in *Hundra år i samma klass*, have grown up without access to literature and who do not have access to cultural capital but nevertheless, want to tell their stories.
Baru’s association of comics with the working class is based, at least in part, on its status as a popular art form that is not associated with ‘tasteful’ or ‘bourgeois’ culture. Bogdanska also conceptualises comics as popular culture. A division between highbrow/bourgeois and popular/working-class culture can be found in *Hundra år i samma klass* too. One example of this is Källblad’s description of how the world of high literature is incompatible with the world of the working class, whereas comics can be used to describe worker’s experiences and to promote their interests. Another example is his representation of the world of fine art. One of the protagonist’s friends, Molly, pursues a career as an artist. However, her working-class background makes her feel like an outsider in the world of art, and she tells the protagonist that those who are at home in that world despise ‘såna som oss’ [our lot] (Källblad 2014, 283). At her art school, she also witnesses class prejudices, for example in the form of other students speaking condescendingly about the cleaners (Källblad 2014, 265). And when her work is not mentioned in the reviews of an exhibition in which she has taken part, the protagonist calls the reviewers ‘jävla medelklassstöntar’ [fucking middle-class jerks], thereby accentuating the gap between the working class and the world of fine art.

*Hundra år i samma klass* also contains two scenes describing a bohemian artist being interviewed on a stage, which also contribute to establishing an opposition between fine art and the working class (see Figure 5). The artist presents herself as someone who in her youth experienced ‘ett starkt utanförskap’ [a strong feeling of exclusion] because she had nothing in common with ‘bönder och raggare’ [roughly: rednecks and youth gangs who ride around in cars], who could not even ‘stava till ångest’ [spell the word anguish]
This statement is juxtaposed with a comment by the narrator, who argues that the protagonist and his friends – who belong to the very social group from which the artist distances herself – felt excluded 'i skolmiljön med dess koder,'
språk och hierarki’ [in school, with its codes, language and hierarchy] (Källblad 2014, 288). In that world, however, the artist probably did not feel alienated, since her parents were teachers (Källblad 2014, 297). Thus, an opposition is established between the working-class world in which the protagonist lives and the world of fine art. And, just like the storyline about the publishers, the scenes describing the interview with the artist are drawn in a different, ‘cleaner’ style than the main storyline, which further emphasises that workers and artists inhabit different worlds.

Workers in Hundra år i samma klass are, as has been demonstrated above, described as being alienated from high literature and fine art. At the same time, however, they are associated with popular art forms, such as comics. But the popular art form receiving the most attention in Hundra år i samma klass is popular music. In fact, the working-class world described by Källblad is filled with popular music. For example, the lyrics to Black Sabbath’s ‘Paranoid’ appear in a panel describing the protagonist and his friends riding in a car, thereby signifying that they are listening to that song on the radio (Källblad 2014, 94). The protagonist and his friends also often sing, or mention songs. When out rowing on a lake, for example, the protagonist sings Men at Work’s ‘Down by the Sea,’ and mentions that it was released in 1981 (Källblad 2014, 98). In addition to this, the protagonist plays guitar in several bands and even, at one point, quits his factory job to pursue a career as a musician. He is also active in a rock club that organises concerts in his home town.

From class cultures to class struggle in culture

The working-class world depicted by Källblad in Hundra år i samma klass is described as being cut-off from highbrow culture – in the form of high literature and fine art – at the same time as the workers populating it are associated with popular culture, in the form of comics, and, above all, popular music. At a public reading organised by the aforementioned association for worker-writers, Källblad (2017) also emphasised that he viewed the use of popular cultural forms as a necessity for artists wanting to reach an audience in the working-class. To exemplify, he gave his own use of comics and the fact that he published them not only in graphic novels but also in commercial comic books and in a magazine about motorcycles. However, Källblad does not equate the opposition between popular and highbrow culture with that between the working class and the bourgeoisie. For example, the link between popular music and the working class is weakened by the protagonist’s description of the music industry as ‘medelklassens lekstuga’ [the middle-class’s playground], as well as by his feelings of not fitting in when auditioning for a rock band whose members clearly belong to a higher class (Källblad 2014, 271–273). Thus, he experiences, in the realm of popular culture, the same feelings of not fitting in that Molly experiences in the world of fine arts. Furthermore, the fact that the protagonist speaks negatively about TV (Källblad 2014, 264) – arguing that his friends are addicted to it – creates a distance between him and (at least one form of) popular culture; moreover, his attempts to get his poetry published show that he wants to gain access to the world of high culture. In addition to this, the references to working-class literature in Hundra år i samma klass establish links to highbrow culture, as does the novel’s self-characterisation (on the back cover) as a ‘serieroman’ [graphic novel] (instead of, for example, a ‘comic’).
These blurrings of the line between popular/proletarian and highbrow/bourgeois culture could be related to the kind of class politics brought to the fore in the philosopher Jacques Rancière’s analyses of nineteenth-century French working-class literature. According to Rancière (1988), the political force in this literature came less from its ideological content than from the fact that a ‘worker who had never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times’ liberated himself from the ‘role of the worker-as-such.’ That the protagonist in Hundra år i samma klass tries to become a poet and that Källblad (as well as his publisher) emphasises the connections between his work and (more traditional) working-class literature could perhaps be viewed as attempts to abandon the ‘role of the worker’ as someone who is alienated from the world of high culture. However, such an interpretation fails to take into account that the conceptualisation of the relationship between classes and cultures in Hundra år i samma klass is much more dynamic and multifaceted than in Rancière’s work. For Rancière ‘the worker-as-such’ is not only radically alienated from the world of literature – alienation of this kind constitutes him (or her) as a worker. It is this idea that forms the foundation for the idea that workers who commit themselves to poetry thereby liberates themselves from their status as workers. In Hundra år i samma klass, however, the situation is different. There too, workers are described as being alienated from the world of high culture. But they are also described in terms of education and occupation: as those who were rushed through school and ended up in the factories. Furthermore, it seems to be possible for the workers described in Hundra år i samma klass to overcome their alienation from highbrow culture without ceasing to be workers. Molly, for example, manages to become an artist, without experiencing this as a change in her class position – as evidenced by the fact that she, as has been discussed above, feels like an outsider in the world of art. And even if the protagonist does not get his poetry published, Hundra år i samma klass does still signal that the border between the working class and the realm of literature is not impenetrable, for example, through its allusions to Swedish working-class literature and its self-presentation as belonging to this literary tradition.

Consequently, in Hundra år i samma klass, the division between popular and highbrow culture is not equated with the division between classes. Rather, both popular and highbrow culture are described as being marked by internal class differences and antagonisms. In fact, these differences and antagonisms are especially emphasised in Källblad’s (meta-) representation of the art form of comics, for example in the scene discussed above describing the confrontation between the protagonist and his friends and the upper-class guys. Here, the division between the two groups (classes) is coded visually (see Figure 1). Not only do the upper-class characters look different (being ‘tidier’) than their working-class antagonists, but they are also portrayed in a different style. This style resembles the ‘ligne claire-style’ often associated with Hergé’s Tintin. The working-class characters, by contrast, are drawn in a ‘looser’ and ‘rounder’ style, with more hatchings. This association of characters belonging to different classes with different styles problematises the description in Hundra år i samma klass of comics as a proletarian art form: instead of connecting the working class with comics, Källblad here links different classes to different (kinds of) comics.

In order to understand this establishing of links between social classes and specific types of comics, it is important to note that one of the upper-class characters is not only
drawn in a style resembling the ‘ligne claire’ of Tintin, but that he also actually resembles Tintin himself. As comics scholar Mark McKinney (2008, 18) has pointed out, ‘[t]ensions over ideology and politics helped structure the field of French-language comics in recognizable ways up through the 1950s, with Catholic and middle-class publications competing against working-class and left-leaning ones to reach the minds of French youths.’ In these conflicts, Tintin was positioned in the middle-class camp: ‘Tintin magazine (founded in 1946) was often considered to be a middle-class publication, whereas Vaillant (founded in 1945) and its successor Pif Gadget (from 1969) were left-wing-publications affiliated with the French Communist Party (PCF) and geared more toward the working class’ (McKinney, 2000 17–18). Thus, at the same time as Källblad describes comics as a more proletarian art form than literature, he also establishes – by associating upper-class characters with Tintin – class distinctions within comics.

Conclusion

Several commentators – including comics artist such as Chris Ware, Daria Bogdanska, and Baru – have argued that comics is a working-class art form. However, the exact meaning of this is often unclear, among other things because class is a contested concept. Mats Källblad’s graphic novel Hundra år i samma klass self-reflexively discusses the relationship between the working class and comics, thereby giving one possible answer to the question what it might mean to describe comics as a working-class art form. One starting point for Källblad’s discussion is his description of workers as being alienated from highbrow culture: mainly literature and fine arts. Another is an association between workers and popular culture, including comics. However, rather than arguing that it is its status as popular culture that makes comics a working-class art form – an idea that has been articulated by other comics artists, such as Baru and Bogdanska – Källblad complicates things by emphasising that popular culture – like its highbrow counterpart – is characterised by internal class conflict, and that this conflict cuts through the very art form of comics. Therefore, even if Källblad expresses a highly ambivalent relationship towards the phenomenon of working-class literature – by simultaneously establishing connections between his own work and this literature, and arguing that it belongs to a realm from which workers are excluded – his understanding of comics as a working-class art form seems to be modelled on the conceptualisation of working-class literature, namely as a proletarian phenomenon existing within an art form or medium in which one also finds its social and ideological other.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Magnus Nilsson is professor of comparative literature at Malmö University, Sweden. His main research interests are working-class literature, the relationship between culture and class, and comics. His latest book is Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives (edited with John Lennon) which is available at https://doi.org/10.16993/bam.
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