

## “Comics and/or Graphic Novels”—Introduction

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Dany & Greg, Olivier Rameau. *Le Grand voyage en Absurdie*. Paris : Éditions du Lombard, 1974.<sup>1</sup>

The title of this special issue of *Paradoxa* comes most likely from a subconscious association. In a pile of books on the floor of my study lies a copy of American poet Ezra Pound’s controversial 1935 volume *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*. Needless to say, it does not deal with either comics or graphic novels. It does, however, take not two terms, but two

<sup>1</sup> “Tarzan, my good friend, is one of the most indisputable contemporary myths, combining the most beautiful rules of semiotics and of the signifier with an omnipresent oneirism that... But just go to the Sorbonne, they will teach it to you much better than I can, you little dunce!”

names that may seem unrelated—or even opposite—and joins them while leaving open the possibility of an alternative. It is a simple but subtle game between a parallelism and a substitution. One beside the other, one with the other, one from the other, one instead of the other, one better than the other. The reader, or History, will make the final choice. The goal of this collection of articles is not as ambitious. But it does aspire to add to a continuing critical debate regarding the true nature and the future destiny of one of the most appreciated means of expression of our time. To better understand the forces at play in this debate, it may be useful to indulge in a little bit of metacriticism.

The simple choice of putting “comics” before “graphic novels” encapsulates “the struggle for legitimization” (Miller 16) that has marked the history of the medium. This has often been understood as a gradual, historical transition from a devalued commercial product, destined primarily for a children’s audience, to a mature art form, endowed with its own peculiar aesthetic properties and meant for an adult, educated readership. This straight-forward, and therefore appealing, interpretation is best exemplified by the opening sentences of renowned critic Thierry Groensteen’s acclaimed book, *The Expanding Art of Comics*:

Once dismissed as escapist literature for children and disparaged by the cultural establishment the comics medium has matured, as have attitudes toward it. Its standing has greatly improved, to the extent that it is now regarded as a form of literature in its own right. It has diversified by moving into new areas (history, personal life, science, philosophy, sometimes poetry) and by taking on new forms (diary, reportage, essay). It has attracted a new readership and has broken free from the traditional French-style album, still standard for the commercial genre- and series-based sector of production by adopting multiple formats and embracing lengthy works, often designated as “graphic novels”. (Groensteen 1)

This now rather commonly-adopted teleological vision combines a representation of what its object *is*, and a parallel understanding of how it is *perceived*: of the genre, and of the critical reception that grants it legitimacy by recognizing and pointing out the patterns of its gradual, and possibly inevitable evolution. The two are inseparable. Comics and graphic novels now undoubtedly occupy a position within the cultural sphere that would have been deemed impossible just a few short years ago. A recent volume of *Yale French Studies* devoted to the *bande dessinée*, edited by Laurence Grove and Michael Syrotinski,

confirms the genre's "newfound academic status" and considers the "question of its artistic legitimacy [...] settled beyond dispute" (Grove and Syrotinski 1). In a fashion similar to Groensteen's, the equally celebrated Italian critic Goffredo Fofi salutes the ascendancy of the "graphic novel" (using the term in English, lest the Italian translation might cause it to be confused with an even less valued form of popular entertainment, the "fotoromanzo" [photo-novel]—Fofi 10<sup>2</sup>), seeing it as both innovative and "artisanal," distant from commercial considerations, disconnected from industrial forms of production, and therefore all the more symbolically valuable as such. In this gratifying and somewhat idealistic representation—based on a reading of new directions in mainly European comics production since the 1990s—comics are seen as moving from simplicity to complexity in terms of content, material appearance, and audience. The transition is then designed—whether implicitly or explicitly—as going from unworthiness to value. The fact that the original unworthiness may be debated or denied in some specific cases (notably, important works from the past that have been exhumed and then entered into a canon of noble ancestors) does not by itself invalidate the essence of the negative critical reactions with which comics were received at the outset within the cultural world and academia. The value of the modern works—that combine intellectually stimulating content, artistic innovation, original and unusual formats, and the logically consequent and deserved critical appreciation—is defined in opposition to "the morass of mass culture" (Heer and Worcester ix) from which they have emerged. Comics—if we may be allowed to use a metaphor borrowed from the world of 19<sup>th</sup> century popular literature, which served as their initial breeding grounds—are considered to have gone through their own *bildungsroman*-style evolution, like in a redemption plot where the sinful hero overcomes his limitations and finds eventual social acceptance and moral salvation, learning from past mistakes and growing into a more perfect form that only bears a passing resemblance to what he once was (and still is, as far as mass-produced comics are concerned). Or to borrow yet another simile (and it will be the last) from the world of old-fashioned serialized potboilers, graphic novels and comics are twins, apparently identical but in reality, quite the opposite—one virtuous and noble, the other evil and base. The perceptive reader is expected to only take a moment to figure out which is which...

<sup>2</sup> On the photonovel and its relationship to comics, I refer to Curreri, Delville and Palumbo, *Tutto quello che non avreste mai voluto leggere - o rileggere - sul fotoromanzo. Una passeggiata*.

The distinction between comics and graphic novels has been developing over the last two to three decades, in large part due to a rethinking of graphic narratives that shifts the weight from the literary to the artistic component of the works. Thierry Groensteen's *The System of Comics* and other seminal analyses have contributed to creating an understanding of the genre as primarily visual, with text in an important but subordinate position. The emergence in France, during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, of a number of new artists operating outside of the traditional commercial circuit, the creation of independent publishing houses producing non-standardized fare (different formats from the traditional hard-backed 48 or 64-page "album"), in black and white rather than in color, and of much greater (or simply different) length from commercial *bande dessinée*, have led critics to talk about a "revolution" in the world of graphic narratives.

The deliberate adoption of cultural practices borrowed from the artistic avant-gardes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Surrealism or the OuLiPo) have been flagged as signs of a transition to a different kind of creation, self-conscious and aware.<sup>3</sup> And the critical as well as commercial success of essentially autobiographical works (Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*) plus the appearance of new hybrid genres—notably the comic-reportage of Joe Sacco's *Palestine*—have consolidated the image of the new graphic novel as an international phenomenon, equally at home on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as bridging the cultural differences that separated mass European comics from mass U.S. comics.<sup>4</sup> It would be tempting to conclude (borrowing a page from Francis Fukuyama) that the history of comics has now reached its end, and that creations that are truly both artistic and literary to an equal degree—personal reflections of the values of individual authors—are now universally recognized as such, within a mostly globalized culture, and constitute a different species from its crude, early comics ancestor.

For the purposes of our discussion, however, we are going to step back a bit and put aside the aesthetically pleasing trajectory that we have sketched here, although not without some inevitable simplification, leading in a straight line from the undifferentiated mass of comics to the individuality of graphic novels.<sup>5</sup> And by stepping back, as we will see,

<sup>3</sup> For a critical analysis of this phenomenon, see Björn-Olav Dozo's article "La Bande dessinée francophone contemporaine à la lumière de sa propre critique: Quand une avant-garde esthétique s'interroge sur sa pérennité."

<sup>4</sup> On these matters, readers may want to refer to Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture. Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*, as well as to Jacques Dürrenmatt's *Bande dessinée et littérature*.

<sup>5</sup> It should be understood that although this simple bipolar vision has acquired

we may rediscover some local differences in approach whose effects and consequences may still be pertinent in mapping the evolution of the genre.

### *The question of origins*

Indeed, the question of where comics are going is logically inseparable from that of whence they came. And the answer to this question determines in many ways the understanding of the essence of comics—of their very nature. European critics are largely unanimous in considering Swiss author Rodolphe Töpffer to be the true creator of this ever-popular medium with his *Les Amours de monsieur Vieux Bois* (1827—first published in 1837). They further highlight the importance of early works, first and foremost German author Wilhelm Bush's *Max und Moritz* (1865), and, increasingly, the rediscovered presence in late 19<sup>th</sup> century newspapers and magazines of many examples of illustrated, sequential stories combining drawing and text, such as those by French artist and caricaturist Cham.<sup>6</sup> American histories of comics, on the other hand, have traditionally highlighted what they deem the undisputable U.S. birthplace of this phenomenon, pointing to Richard F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* (1895) as the first comic ever produced and identifying the invention of the balloon—as opposed to the concept of sequential storytelling—as its defining characteristic. The defense and illustration of comics truly seem to be “articulated along nationalist lines” (Heer and Worcester xii).

### *The novel versus the mass media*

Although national and linguistic sensitivities are significant and should not be cavalierly dismissed, there is another fundamental implication regarding this basic disagreement about the origins of comics. The European narrative sees comics as being a literary genre from their

much visibility in the media, and is also well represented within comics criticism, individual works and artists have to contend with what Beaty and Woo call “the tension between art and commerce, between the popular and the avant-garde, and between generic traditions and innovation within the field” (Beaty and Woo, 133). As the interview with Giuseppe Palumbo in this issue shows, practice tends to be more complex than some theoretical extrapolations may suggest.

<sup>6</sup> Swiss artist Tom Tirabosco argues for Töpffer's prominence in the interview featured in this volume, and the book review section includes a discussion of a recent reprint of Cham's stories, curated by noted comics historian David Kunzle.

very inception. From this perspective, it becomes appealing to portray this valuable new genre, appreciated by such cultural luminaries as Goethe, as suffering from a fall from grace, going through a long period of decadence where it is bastardized by mediocre authors, reserved for children, and exploited by commercial interests, and then rising again with the birth of the graphic novel, proudly reclaiming its deserved position within the hierarchy of legitimate forms of artistic expression. Its original literary nature then becomes the reason and the justification for its present literary status, coming full circle. One explains and justifies the other. The American narrative, conversely, sees comics as a product of the mass media, inseparable from the newspapers in which they first originated,<sup>7</sup> and unconnected to the world of elite culture and literature. Comics—first of all as comic *strips*, a marginal phenomenon in Europe<sup>8</sup>—are understood as an element of a wider newspaper culture, within which they play an integral but not independent role. In opposition to that, comic *books*, originating in the late 30s and early 40s, are seen from the start as outsiders: cheap, poorly drawn productions more akin to old-time dime novels—dangerous (and possibly immoral) creations in need of strict control and censorship.

This need for control of the medium manifested itself within a few years in apparently similar but somewhat different ways in both North America and Europe. In France, a law was passed in 1949 to regulate the content of *bandes dessinées*, but the support it received from both ends of the political spectrum revealed its true intent: to limit the influence of American culture on French youth, a goal espoused by the Catholic right as well as by the Communist left, for moral and ideological reasons.

<sup>7</sup> “The strip cartoon emerged as an attempt to exploit new colour printing techniques, with Outcault’s main character (the Yellow Kid) being presented in a bright yellow nightshirt” (Edgar and Sedgwick 54).

<sup>8</sup> European papers rarely offer comic strips, and practically never a daily comics page. Popular American comic strips—*Peanuts*, *The Wizard of Id* or *B.C.*—have been mostly published in Europe in specialized magazines, *Linus* in Italy (1965-) or *Charlie mensuel* in France (1969-1986). Strips are not widely favoured by European artists. The first daily strip in France, according to Pierre Couperie, was Pellos’ “Les aventures de Riri, Gogo et Lolo.” published in *L’Intransigeant* starting in 1930, while in the same years, American newspapers published around 10 strips per day (“Bande quotidienne,” in *Encyclopédie mondiale de la bande dessinée*). Exceptions, in the post-war period and up to the 70s, were newspapers like *France-Soir* (that offered a daily strip and a weekly comics page with both French and American comics) or the Italian *Paese Sera* (a daily close the Communist Party that introduced several American characters to Italian readers as well as publishing autochthonous comics, namely Hugo Pratt’s Corto Maltese). A more recent exception was Pétillon and Got’s *Le Baron noir*, a political daily strip which was published in *Le Matin de Paris* between 1976 and 1981.

Similar laws were also passed in Canada (The Fulton Bill, 1948) and in the U.K. (Harmful Publications Act, 1955). In Spain, the “Ley de Prensa” of 1938, stipulating that comics illustrations “must correspond to Catholic morals and ‘to the standards of the highest patriotism’”<sup>9</sup> (Fernández Sarasola 44) remained in place until 1966, only to be replaced by even more restrictive regulations. In Italy, after the end of Fascist control of the press, a bill was almost passed in 1952 to institute new forms of censorship on comics, but did not have time to be approved because of the end of the legislative period. Italy and Spain did not have so much to contend with “the elitist critique of comics as new media of mass entertainment that appeared so frequently elsewhere,” as with a critique of content: “the content of comics was debated much more than the form they adopted”<sup>10</sup> (Fernández Sarasola 237).

In the U.S., the 1954 publication of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham’s book *The Seduction of the Innocent*, leading to the creation of the Comics Code Authority, focused solely on the negative influence of comics, seen as inspiring misbehaviour and crime on the part of young people. The effects of these laws were varied. The French law’s observance, while initially significant, was comparatively lax, and the law itself ended up being widely ignored from the sixties onwards, at least as far as mainstream comics magazines were concerned. The American push for self-censorship on the part of comics publishers, however, guaranteed the emergence and dominance of supposedly morally “safe” superhero fare. It also entailed the disappearance or marginalization of practically any other genre except for the productions of the Walt Disney Corporation and similar children-oriented stories.<sup>11</sup>

### *Cultural acceptance and institutionalization*

This fundamentally divergent understanding of the nature and origin of comics between North America and Europe was also the cause of an equally different degree of societal and cultural acceptance. Indeed, “[i]n comparison with Anglo-Saxon traditions of the comics form the cultural esteem in which *Bande dessinée* is held [in France] could not help but seem strange.” Starting in the 1960s, comics in Europe, first of

<sup>9</sup> “[L]as ilustraciones [...] debían responder a la moral católica ‘y a los dictados del más elevado patriotismo’.” (All translations are mine.)

<sup>10</sup> “la crítica elitista a los cómics como nuevo ‘medio de entretenimiento de masa que resultó tan frecuente en otras latitudes’ [...] “se discutió más el contenido de las historietas que la forma que adoptaban”.

<sup>11</sup> On this period and its implications in the U.S., see Beaty (2005) and Hajdu (2009).

all in the dominant Franco-Belgian sphere, underwent a “shift in status” (McQuillan 7-8). This was a process of intellectualization, initially marked by the creation of a dedicated branch of academic research, spearheaded by such ground-breaking works as those of Umberto Eco<sup>12</sup> or Francis Lacassin,<sup>13</sup> soon followed by many others. University courses in comics studies started proliferating. Comics were approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives—semiotics, psychoanalysis, sociology, narratology, etc.—and the “scientificity” of these approaches served as a guarantee of the seriousness of the field of study. This, in turn, led in the late 1980s and early 1990s to the creation of state-sponsored organisms, such as the “Centre National de la Bande Dessinée et de l’Image” in France, and its equivalent, the “Centre Belge de la Bande Dessinée” in Belgium.<sup>14</sup> It was through these official, government-created and financed bodies and the fairs and events that they sponsored that *bande dessinée* underwent a definitive cultural canonisation. While North American “Comic-Cons” are private initiatives at the behest of industry, mixing comics content with movies and games, the French annual “Festival de la Bande Dessinée d’Angoulême,” Brussel’s “Fête de la BD,” or to a lesser extent the “Salone internazionale dei Comics” of Bordighera (and later Lucca), Italy, take pains to stress the literary value of comics, now called “the 9<sup>th</sup> art.” Lausanne’s (Switzerland) “Festival international de bande dessinée” (BDFIL) is held jointly with museum and library exhibitions, and the French Ministry of Culture named 2020 the official “Année de la BD” (Year of the Comic), promoting a variety of events—now prolonged until June 2021 due to the pandemic.

<sup>12</sup> In particular in his book *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964), including his article “The Myth of Superman” (reproduced in translation in Heer and Worcester) and an analysis of Steve Canyon.

<sup>13</sup> Lacassin, a prolific critic of mass culture, occupied the first Chair for the study of the history of *bande dessinée* at the Sorbonne University in Paris, in 1971.

<sup>14</sup> These centers have since multiplied exponentially. As we write, a new “Centre Cultural Cómic” is being inaugurated in Valencia, Spain, as a joint endeavour between the local university and the city, with the goal of preserving and making known the heritage of Spanish comics. The Spanish Ministry of Culture also awards an annual “Premio Nacional del Cómic” since 2007. In this issue, Swiss comic artist Tom Tirabosco talks about the upcoming creation of a Comics Museum in Geneva, Switzerland. All through Europe, comics have now become institutionalized to various degrees, and this process is far from over.



*The emergence of the “graphic novel”*

The term “graphic novel” appears as an apt term to consolidate this newfound cultural status.<sup>15</sup> Now that any innate generic difference between comics and literature has been disproven, it is indeed possible to conclude that only a qualitative determination will help tell the wheat from the chaff. As Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, one of the earliest French comics critics felt safe to declare, comics, “like literature *stricto sensu*, count accomplished achievements and others that are less so” (p. 5).<sup>16</sup> The label “graphic novel” would hence be used to set apart these achievements, written and drawn by self-conscious authors, and initially issued by up-and-coming new publishing houses, from mass-produced industrial fare created by interchangeable teams of artisans and distributed by traditional publishers. This self-described avant-garde positions itself in competition with the established comics industry, opposing “symbolic capital [to] commercial success” (Miller 68). In terms of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, graphic novels derive their cultural legitimacy from an autonomous principle, the practitioners themselves attributing value to their peers, while the heteronomous principle, based on financial considerations, is devalued.<sup>17</sup>

And as with the birth of comics, the origin of the “graphic novel” is disputed. American critics widely consider Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God* (1978) to be the first real graphic novel. European historians point instead to Hugo Pratt’s *La Ballata del mare salato* (1967—although its influence is said to have been felt primarily after its translation into French in 1975). And it is not unusual to see other credit being given, with some attributing primacy to the Argentinian *El Eternauta* by Héctor Germán Oesterheld and Francisco Solano López (1957) or to works in the margins of commercial production, such as Italian writer and painter Dino Buzzati’s *Poema a fumetti* (*Poem strip*, 1969), a visually stunning experimental rendering of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

<sup>15</sup> “Indeed, the very term ‘graphic novel’ is intended to ennoble the comic book by stealing fire from the better-established art form” (Beaty and Woo, 5).

<sup>16</sup> “Les bandes dessinées ou les dessins d’humour, comme la littérature *stricto sensu*, possèdent des formes abouties et d’autres qui ne le sont pas”

<sup>17</sup> For a Bourdieusian approach to comics criticism, a work to be recommended is Bart Beaty’s and Benjamin Woo’s *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time. Symbolic Capital and the Field of American Comic Books*. In it, the authors “contend that excellence is not a property of works but a judgment asserted on their behalf. Comics are not self-evidently great; rather, they are claimed to be great by powerful actors within the field, and these judgments may be accepted—and consequently reinforced—by certain reading communities” (3).

Apart from matters of national pride and predominance, these divergent views are also due to unresolved questions regarding the meaning of the terms involved. Töpffer's books would not qualify as comics if one were to consider the genre as primarily defined by the use of balloons. But then neither would such influential works as Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* or Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant*, the main attractions of Sunday comics pages in U.S. newspapers for decades. In the Franco-Belgian domain, technical debates of this kind would equally exclude such historically significant works as Joseph Pinchon's *Bécassine* or Louis Forton's *Les Pieds nickelés*. In the Italian tradition, it would automatically eliminate practically all pre-Second World War productions, including Sergio Tofano's *Signor Bonaventura* or Antonio Rubino's *Quadratino*: graphically revolutionary creations influenced by cubism or futurism. Such restrictive views of the nature of comics, based on narrow technical considerations, have been progressively discarded. Most recent histories of the medium eschew these limitations, sometimes going so far in the other direction as to extend the label "comics" to such creations as Frans Masereel's "wordless novels" (1917-), made from woodcuts.

The true meaning of the notion of "graphic novel" remains open to debate, as any customer of a major North-American booksellers' chain (in pre-pandemic times) knows full well. Its common, generic understanding, simply stipulates that "the publishing phenomenon known as the 'graphic novel'—which allows for longer and more complex single-volume narratives in the comics as a medium—has provided a new and more respected outlet for the comics art form" (Booker XXI). Major commercial publishers, having instantly grasped the benefits of the new label, recycle "classic" (meaning old) comic book stories under it, and present them beside books by niche or alternative publishers that loudly declare their literary aspirations. Indeed, we can easily go from all-encompassing definitions in the style of that offered by Stephen Weiner,<sup>18</sup> to much more restrictive and specific ones, such as the one we have quoted by Thierry Groensteen (cf p. 2).

The American understanding of what a graphic novel is, incorporates different parameters from the European view. The dominant superhero genre is arguably the one where the transition from comics to graphic novels was first accepted in media and academic discourse. Frank

<sup>18</sup> "Graphic novels, as I define them, are book-length comic books that are meant to be read as one story. This broad term includes collections of stories in genres such as mystery, superhero, or supernatural, that are meant to be apart from their corresponding ongoing comic book storyline; [they are] heart-rending works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus*; and non-fiction pieces such as Joe Sacco's journalistic work, *Palestine*" (Weiner 2012, 7).

Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-1987) are widely considered to be the first real critical and commercial successes of this new genre, although they were originally published in separate issues and only afterwards collected into single volumes—what has now come to be considered a “graphic novel format.” These stories, while they undoubtedly present novel elements, both graphically and in terms of content, can however be considered examples of “revisionist superheroes” (Weiner 2010, 8)—a subgenre that harks back to Neil Adams' and Dennis O'Neill's take on the characters of Green Arrow and Green Lantern (1970-1972), introducing social and racial themes in their stories—or even akin to Stan Lee's adding of “psychological complexity” (really, basic human frailties) to Marvel superheroes. Reminiscing about his beginnings, Scott McCloud talks about “a sort of ground level independent movement that emphasized creativity and personal vision, but still hovered close to the superhero genre and related genres” and concludes that he—and they—were “playing it safe” (McCloud 9).

That conception of the graphic novel as a more evolved form of a superhero comic—quite opposite to the Franco-Belgian understanding where new authors presented themselves as diametrically opposed to their own cultural sphere's dominant comics formats and genres—must be contrasted with what “[c]reators like Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, the Hernandez Brothers, and Harvey Pekar [...] were creating,” that McCloud calls “something entirely new, working with subject matter utterly unrelated to mainstream superheroes” (McCloud 9-10). That is where the underground element, the comix influence most obvious in Spiegelman's *Maus* (and partially introduced in France through *Pilote*), gets added to the mix. French influence also plays a role in this regard, in particular through *RAW*, the magazine issued by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly, which led to “the mood for Francophilia in the later 1980s” through their publication of works by such artists as “Tardi, Baru, Swarte, and others” (Baetens and Frey 89).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, “an injection of cosmopolitanism was part of the graphic novel's rising fortunes and its public media persona” (Baetens and Frey 91).

Generally speaking, appraisals seem to vary, once again, depending on the geographic origin of the critic. North American criticism appears as

<sup>19</sup> Ironically, another influence that helped graphic novels acquire cultural legitimacy in the U.S. was the publication in translation of Hergé's Tintin stories, that “avoided the familiar genres and visual styles of American comics—and thus side-stepped pejorative assumptions about what a comic book should be” (Weiner 2010, 6). These were precisely the stories and the formats against which the French authors of the new “romans graphiques” were positioning themselves.

a whole quite willing to include mass cultural products within the field of the graphic novel, while Europeans highlight notions of “maturity” and generic evolution that reserve the label for productions outside, or in the margins of, the commercial mainstream. Comics, bandes dessinées, fumetti, tebeos or historietas—as they are known with significantly important semantic variations in different linguistic areas—and their critical reception, thus appear to differ depending on national histories and aesthetic preferences, not to mention cultural politics, publishing strategies, degrees of institutionalization, and the search for symbolic power within educational institutions, museums, and the media. In spite of the use of apparently identical labels, there are at least as many differences as there are similarities.

*A model of evolution based on literary history*

Indeed, even in the Franco-Belgian area (the most important and influential region in Europe, widely translated and trendsetting), the narrative of the transformation of unsophisticated comics into literary and artistic graphic novels needs to be considerably nuanced. Apart from the passage from children’s fare to “adult” productions—often marked by thematic and graphic moves towards more violent or sexually explicit subjects—usually connected to the magazines *Pilote* and then (*À Suivre*)<sup>20</sup>—*bande dessinée* did go through at least one previous transformation not unlike its most recent incarnation as the “graphic novel.” The attempts by the authors belonging to the 90s generation, connected to publishers *L’Association*, *Frémok* or *Égo comme x*, to establish a new identity by stressing their difference from the aesthetics of historical magazines *Tintin* or *Spirou*, had an unlikely ancestor in those same publications. During his tenure as Editor of *Tintin* from 1966 to 1974, Michel Régnier (better known under his pen

<sup>20</sup> A move most likely due to the progressive ageing of the original public for comics, wanting to continue enjoying their favorite genre but reticent to simply keep consuming the same kinds of stories they read in their youth. On this transition, and the role the magazines *Pilote* and (*À Suivre*) played in it, I refer to Wendy Michallat’s *French Cartoon Art in the 1960s and 1970s*, “*Pilote hebdomadaire*” and the *Teenager* “*Bande Dessinée*,” and to my own book *Bande dessinée et littérature: intersections, fascinations, divergences*.

<sup>21</sup> Both a scriptwriter and an artist, Greg created some of the best-known and internationally successful characters of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, including the series Bruno Brazil, Comanche, Bernard Prince, Luc Orient, and the humorous Achille Talon. His influence in the development of the genre cannot be underestimated and is comparable to that of Stan Lee in the U.S. comics world.

name Greg<sup>21</sup>) proposed a discourse aimed at consolidating the cultural status of *bande dessinée* through articles dealing with the history of the medium, as well as the first publication, a page or two at a time, of the “Encyclopédie mondiale de la bande dessinée” (World Encyclopedia of Comics) realized by Pierre Couperie, Henri Filippini, and Claude Moliterni. Considering comics to be a natural continuation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century serialized novel, he credited the adoption by the practitioners of exact and demanding standards, principally the “album” format with its set number of pages, for allowing comics to reach a degree of quality as yet unattained, leaving behind the disjointed writing that characterized comics only meant for magazine publication. This, he opined, made *bande dessinée* “more demanding than the simple novel one reads in a single sitting; more demanding than the serialized novel that is not meant to be collected in a volume, where the words ‘The End’ appear arbitrarily when inspiration dries up. [...] [A]n author of *bandes dessinées* is first and foremost an author, and in literature, whether it is graphic or not, reflection—meditation, even—is a necessary prerequisite for all writing.”<sup>22</sup> This, in his view, gave *bande dessinée* the possibility of achieving both “quantity and quality,” following the example of “those generous authors Alexandre Dumas or Victor Hugo.” That is how it could become “a true means of expression, the shape of a work that could stand being compared to that of the great novelists.”<sup>23</sup>

This representation of the *bandes dessinées* published in *Tintin* weekly has to be historicized to be fully understood. Greg drew a crucial distinction between his notion of a carefully thought-out and well-structured work and previous comics that relied on rambling or garbled plots, carried by widely-read magazines of the *Intrépide* or *Hurrah!* variety. These had been the main competitors of *Tintin* or *Spirou*, issued by international publishers in the mold of Cino Del Duca<sup>24</sup> or Lotario Vecchi—an Italian publisher responsible for the spread of comics (including American ones) in Europe in the first half of the twentieth

<sup>22</sup> “La Bande Dessinée devint un article difficile: plus difficile que le simple roman fait pour être lu d’une traite: plus difficile que le feuilleton sans prolongement livresque, où l’on pose arbitrairement le mot ‘fin’ n’importe où quand l’inspiration se tarit. [...] [U]n auteur de bandes dessinées est d’abord un auteur tout court, et [...] en littérature, qu’elle soit graphique ou non, le temps de la réflexion, de la méditation même constitue le préalable obligatoire à toute écriture” (Greg. “Le Dossier Edgar-Pierre Jacobs.” *Tintin* Weekly no. 1198, 14-10-1971).

<sup>23</sup> “[U]n véritable moyen d’expression, la forme d’une œuvre qui soutiendrait la comparaison avec celles des grands littérateurs.”

<sup>24</sup> About this press magnate and his influence on the development of European comics, see Isabelle Antonutti’s study, *Cino del Duca. De Tarzan à Nous Deux, itinéraire d’un patron de presse*.

century, whose commercial ventures extended also to Spain and as far as Brazil, where he exerted considerable influence.<sup>25</sup> Del Duca or Vecchi, as well as the Florentine publishing house Nerbini that first introduced Mickey Mouse to Europe, only created comics magazines as a side to their main commercial activity: churning out popular novels. The comics they featured, often drawn by artists who had been working as illustrators for their collections of popular novels (for instance Giove Toppi<sup>26</sup>) were indeed themselves in many ways simply popular novels with pictures, reproducing the plotlines, the language, and the strong, melodramatic appeal to the heartstrings of the reader typical of such productions.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Greg situated modern comics in opposition to comics inspired by old-fashioned, cheap mass novels and in line with the works of great literary authors. That, in his view, was the transition when *bande dessinée* achieved maturity.<sup>28</sup>

The authors of the 90s, for example Jean-Christophe Menu or Lewis Trondheim, killed their fathers symbolically by appealing to the power of the revolutionary avant-garde which was opposed to what they denounced as fossilized novelistic conventions. The “struggle for legitimization” in the world of comics, to quote once again Miller’s words, appears to be marked by a delayed reproduction of mechanisms borrowed from literary history. In 1972, Greg concluded that “there are comics publications just for children, others just for adults, and others

<sup>25</sup> See Antonutti, 27-29.

<sup>26</sup> Toppi was the first Italian artist to draw Mickey Mouse, and created many original stories for the Nerbini publications, in particular their weekly *L’Avventuroso*.

<sup>27</sup> “The patron saints of the *Intrepido* were Edmondo De Amicis, Hector Malot, writer of *Sans famille*, Michel Zévaco. This tearjerker of a publication served however as the place where large numbers of comics authors learned their trade.” (“Numi tutelari dell’*Intrepido* sono stati De Amicis, l’autore di *Senza famiglia* Malot, Michele Zévaco. Il lacrimevole giornalino è comunque servito come palestra a una schiera di disegnatori di fumetti [...]” (Favari 66). The *Intrepido* or its French version *L’Intépide* only published comics, plus some commercial ads, much in the style of U.S. Comic books. *Tintin* or *Spirou*, in contrast, were meant to be more than just comic books and strove to appear educational, interspersing their *bandes dessinées* with articles of general interest designed to appeal to a wide readership, “from 7 to 77 years-old,” as per *Tintin*’s slogan (“Le journal des jeunes de 7 à 77 ans”).

<sup>28</sup> *Tintin* criticism (almost an industry in itself) has basically adopted the same evolutionary model in discussing Hergé’s creation. To quote Benoît Peeters quoting Hergé: “I would just go off on a tangent, with no script, no plan at all: it really was piecemeal fashion.” (“Je parlais moi-même à l’aventure, sans aucun scénario, sans aucun plan: c’était réellement du travail à la petite semaine” [Peeters 26]). Hergé’s status as a professional author is considered to be the result of his redrawing his initial work—which had been published in installments in *Le Petit Vingtième*, the children’s weekly supplement of the Belgian newspaper *Le Vingtième Siècle*—to make it fit the mold of the then new 62-page “album”.

yet, the greatest number, for a public that is no longer limited by age, social status, formal education or any other boundary whatsoever, with simply the desire to have all partake of an amiable art, open-minded, without danger nor pedantism. In the final instance, we will not have disappointed Mr. Goethe, but it was Mr. Hearst who was right.”<sup>29</sup> Comics could then be literary, and at the same time function within the modern world of mass media.

The tension between “artistic” creation, unbound by commercial exigencies and considerations, and “industrial” production has, however, rarely been resolved in any definitive and permanent manner.<sup>30</sup> The critical success of the “nouvelle bande dessinée” (a term that brings to mind the “nouveau roman,” that also tried to overtake and replace the traditional novel), spawned many attempts at renewal, some of which proved quite successful. Old-time comics publishers, starting with Dupuis, created new collections reserved for creations “in the style of” the new genres, such as the “Aire Libre” collection (Glaude 2011), also managing to attract some new authors who had made it their initial calling to operate outside the realm of commercial publishing. Jean-Christophe Menu blames “commercial publishers who, by dint of overproduction, under-production, and blurring of boundaries, have jeopardised the real gains of the early days.” The success of the new themes—autobiography in particular—often colonized by blogs, seems to have stimulated such an abundance of imitators that some of their initial practitioners are now

<sup>29</sup> “En 1972, il existe des publications de bandes dessinées pour les seuls enfants, d’autres pour les seuls adultes, et d’autres enfin, les plus nombreuses pour un public qui n’est plus limité par l’âge, la situation sociale, le degré de formation scolaire ou quelque frontière que ce soit, si ce n’est la vocation d’apporter un art aimable, ouvert, sans danger ni pédantisme, à tous. En somme, nous n’aurons finalement pas déçu monsieur Goethe, mais c’était monsieur Hearst qui avait raison” (“Les bandes dessinées d’hier.” Unsigned but certainly by Greg. *Tintin* Weekly no. 1220, 16-3-1972). It should be noted that Greg’s definition, in particular his reference to the absence of “danger” in the comics published in the magazine, stresses a morally safe kind of production that the whole family could enjoy. It is in reaction to this family-oriented, often educational understanding of *bande dessinée* that the authors of *Pilote* tried to create “a different kind of *bande dessinée*, more caustic, more inspired by the news.... In a nutshell: more ‘adult’.” (“Une bande dessinée différente, plus caustique, plus inspirée par l’actualité... Bref, en un mot comme en cent: plus ‘adulte’” [Dayez 415].

<sup>30</sup> These terms refer, of course, to the battle that opposed the Romantic writers to the supporters of “art for art’s sake” towards the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France. That is when literary critic Sainte-Beuve famously denounced, for the first time (1839), what he considered the selling-out of writers who published novels in installments in daily newspapers for the newly literate public that devoured the daily press.

denouncing their banalization: “autobiography as a narrative form has become calcified into a genre” (Menu and Neaud, 42, 46).

On the flip side, several authors belonging to the 90s generation have created contemporary reinterpretations of “classic” heroes for mainstream publishers. Joann Sfar and Christophe Blain have produced a new adventure of Jean Giraud’s western, “Blueberry.” Blutch took over one of *Spirou* magazine’s main series from the 1950s, “Tif et Tondu.” Régis Loisel and Lewis Trondheim signed “alternative takes” on Mickey Mouse. Trondheim also created a one-shot reinterpretation of the character of Spirou himself, as did Émile Bravo. Manu Larcenet created an album of *Pilote*’s lead series “Valérien.” The appeal of the traditional heroes, combined with the somewhat different graphic representation of these authors, has proven a commercial (as well as a critical) success.

Finally, literature itself has introduced comics into its own universe. Michael Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Klay* (2000) focused on America’s comics industry around the time of the Second World War. Umberto Eco’s *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* (2004) is an homage to the Golden Age characters whose stories were published in the Italian weekly *L’Avventuroso* in the 1930s: Tim Tyler’s Luck, Flash Gordon, or Mandrake. Famed Canadian writer Margaret Atwood has written an original comics trilogy, *Angel Catbird* (2016). Chuck Palahniuk and William Gibson have penned graphic novels, or graphic adaptations of their work. Gone are the times when it was rare and unusual for a novelist of Dashiell Hammett’s reputation to work with an artist like Alex Raymond on the daily strip of Secret Agent X9.

### *Comics as a transnational genre*

Comic book characters, their authors, and their publications have crossed national and linguistic boundaries to an extent rarely if ever seen in the world of “high-brow” literature. This should not come as a surprise. Mass culture is and has always been, by definition, a transnational enterprise. As studies have shown, the heroes of the popular novels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—the era of the first development of comics—have circulated broadly within all western linguistic areas and beyond. Transmediality reigned and characters travelled far and wide. Raffles, the master thief could be anagrammatized into Laffres in Italy, or become John C. Sinclair in France, or Lord Lister in Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Turkey, Argentina, Brazil, and Indonesia, in translations or starring in apocryphal stories. Sherlock Holmes could be transformed



into Herlock Sholmès in France, or his stories be retold under the name of Harry Dickson for Scandinavian or Russian audiences, and as Giuseppe Petrosino (“Il Sherlock Holmes d’Italia”) in Italy,<sup>31</sup> because, or in spite of copyright laws. And Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Tarzan alone gave birth to dozens of comic book “kings of the jungle,” male and female, that spread to the four corners of the world. From Will Eisner’s Sheena to the more obscure Akim, Zembla, Ultus or Banga, they were baptized with the neologism “tarzanides” (Tarzan-inspired characters) by Francis Lacassin—satirized by Greg in the image on the opening page of this Introduction—and got taught in the hallowed halls of the Sorbonne. The new cultural industries spawned common transnational mythologies.

Not only did characters move around, but styles did also. Golden Age American comics have been crucial in their impact on the development of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, either as aesthetic models (George McManus’ influence on Hergé, Milton Caniff’s influence on Jijé and other artists of the realistic school of drawing) or as competitors whose symbolic dominance led, in reaction, to the development of an autochthonous industry, based on imitation combined with variation. American underground comics and the authors of *Mad* magazine inspired the creators of the French magazine *Pilote* and opened the doors to the transformation of the medium for the tastes of an older audience. In return, Franco-Belgian “ligne claire” informs some of the most notable contemporary North American creators (Jeff Smith, Chris Ware, Seth...) and crosses the line into the international art world (Dutch illustrator Joost Swarte).

Publishing houses have crossed borders with varied success, often adapting their approaches to the peculiarities of the new markets or morphing their publications into “mixed” magazines, featuring both original imported work and local productions. Cino Del Duca’s publishing ventures changed the face of the French magazine industry in the 1930s. Hungarian immigrant Paul Winkler created an altogether new relationship between French readers and their magazines with his revolutionary *Journal de Mickey* (1934). The very successful British magazine *Eagle* was translated literally as *Arend* for the Dutch market in 1955, but the public did not respond and it disappeared shortly thereafter; however, this same magazine transformed into the Italian *Il Giornò dei Ragazzi* for an influential decade, from the late 50s to the late 60s, presenting side by side traditional *Eagle* stories like Dan Dare’s very

<sup>31</sup> These examples and many more can be found in the catalog of the show EPOP (Popular Roots of European Culture), held in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium) in 2010 and edited by Federico Pagello.

British science-fiction adventures, and a bevy of Italian productions—first of all Benito Jacovitti’s home-grown, surreal western parodies; the Italian *Corriere dei Piccoli* modernized itself in 1968 by reducing its size to that of its Franco-Belgian counterparts, *Tintin* and *Spirou*, and translating many of their leading series; the Belgian weekly *Tintin* morphed into the German *Zack*, incorporating elements of the Italian *Corriere dei Ragazzi*, notably Castelli and Tacconi’s stylish series “Gli Aristocratici”; the French *Pilote* was repurposed in Italy as *Pilot* by a joint venture between Bonelli and Dargaud in the mid-80s, but was not able to reproduce the success it had found in France; its contemporary German version, also titled *Pilot*, did not manage to have a longer life in spite of spicing up its content with erotic material “für erwachsene” (for adults), as its subtitle specified; then again, the Italian magazine *Linus* was reborn on the other side of the Alps as the French *Charlie mensuel*, bringing with it the first examples of serious comics criticism for the general public; the French *Métal hurlant* turned into the American *Heavy Metal* and strongly influenced the graphic counterculture of the crucial Italian underground magazine *Cannibale*. Argentine and other South American artists, many since recognized as precursors to literary comics, filled the pages of the cheap, mass-marketed Italian publications *Skorpio* or *LancioStory*. DC, Marvel, and Disney comics have known innumerable international incarnations, sometimes highly different in format and presentation from their original models. The competing forces of globalization and national identity have been fighting it out in the world of comics, with varying results, from the very beginning. Although attempts to simply reproduce traditional national formats in foreign markets have mostly failed, sometimes cross-pollination has produced surprising offspring.

In some extreme cases, characters originating in one country have had more durable success in another. Disney’s Mickey Mouse comics are now drawn predominantly by Italian artists, achieving greater popularity in Europe than in the United States. In Italy, a school for comics artists, the Disney Academy, was created in 1993 and operated for 20 years. In a type of cultural offshoring, 75% of the Disney periodicals sold each year in the world—upwards of 200 million on average—are produced in that country.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See the interview with Italian Disney artist Tito Faraci published in the daily *Il Fatto Quotidiano* on March 22, 2019: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/03/22/topolino-vs-zingaretti-co-tito-faraci-la-sinistra-ha-spesso-snoobbato-il-divertimento-in-se/5056580/> (accessed May 30, 2021).

*Comic creators as artistic vagabonds*

The role of Comics Artist appears to have been in many ways, from early days, a transnational profession. Authors at all levels of recognition have consistently travelled and worked abroad. Scores of minor Spanish or Italian artists worked for the French “petits formats” publications — cheap small-size popular comics — or for Britain’s Fleetway Publishing (that employed such subsequently well-known names as Chilean Arturo del Castillo, Italians Guglielmo Letteri, Nevio Zeccara and Hugo Pratt). Spanish Victor de la Fuente worked in Chile, New York, London, and France. Argentinian Walter Fähner pursued his career in Italy and acquired international recognition in France. Italian Alberto Giolitti was one of the most prolific authors of the American Dell/Western Publishing line of comics, and his “Giolitti Studios,” featuring some 55 artists, produced works for German, British, and American publishers, including such series as “Star Trek” and “Gunsmoke.” Rinaldo Dami (Roy D’Ami)’s equally large “Studio Creazioni D’Ami” worked extensively for both Fleetway in the UK and Lug Editions in France. René Goscinny worked in New York with Harvey Kurtzman and the team of *Mad Magazine* before becoming the father of *Astérix*. Patrice Serres started off as assistant to American artist Frank Robbins before achieving recognition as a major figure in the field in his native France. The studio of Rolf Kauka, the so-called “German Walt Disney,” creator of the series “Fix und Foxi,” employed artists from all over Europe, mostly Spain and Italy. The German magazine *Primo*, featuring amongst others Hal Foster’s “Prince Valiant,” renamed “Prinz Eisenherz” (Heart of Steel), relied extensively on artists belonging to the Spanish Bardon Art Agency (Jesus Blasco, Jose Ortiz and more), who later became pillars of the Italian Sergio Bonelli Editore. The examples are endless.

The growing acceptance in mainstream media of the label “graphic novel” has also favoured the emergence of an essentially international or supranational category of authors, frequently hailing from previously underrepresented communities. Amongst these, Iranian author Marjane Satrapi, Franco-Syrian author Riad Sattouf, or Marguerite Aboutet from the Ivory Coast, and Didier Kassai from the Central African Republic, all working in France, and whose work is best known for investigating political or social questions related to their homelands.

Historically, a constant whirlwind of reciprocal influences has marked the evolution of the comics genre across the world, principally North America and the major European markets, as well as important markets in Latin America, Argentina first of all. Hugo Pratt, Alberto Ongaro, and Mauro Faustini contributed considerably to the development and

popularity of the genre in that country, working in Buenos Aires and publishing in widely-read weekly magazines (*Hora Cero*, the *Ediciones Frontera*). In the other direction, the translations of the visually stunning creations of acclaimed Argentinian author Alberto Breccia have helped move European comics towards cultural and artistic recognition.

### *The pitfalls of translation*

This worldwide circulation of titles, series, and authors, should not, however, lead one to believe that comics production and consumption operates essentially along the same lines in different countries or on different continents. As we have seen, not all transnational experiments were equally successful, and in particular, the North American market seems destined to remain *terra incognita* even for the most thriving and critically acclaimed European productions. In 1971, on the initiative of Franco-American critic Maurice Horn, the New York Cultural Centre organized an exhibition entitled “75 Years of the Comics” which featured major Franco-Belgian authors, including Hergé, Edgar-Pierre Jacobs, Hermann and Morris, alongside U.S. artists. Michel Régnier (Greg) saluted it on the pages of *Tintin* weekly magazine as an epic event where “for the first time, visitors are able to discover European productions” and concluded in triumphant tones: “It took 75 years for world comics to become one and indivisible.”<sup>33</sup> But Greg—whose picture illustrated the article with the very French Statue of Liberty in the background—declared victory too soon. Dargaud Publishing’s attempt to gain a foothold in the American market in the early 1980s backfired and proved to be an expensive commercial mistake. Spanish publisher Catalan Communications attempted to introduce a selection of particularly well-received European authors to the U.S. public between 1983 and 1992 (Vittorio Giardino, Milo Manara, Guido Crepax, Enki Bilal, Jordi Bernet and others), but its impact was limited, as were the sales. Moebius (pseudonym of French author Jean Giraud), invited by Stan Lee to draw the famous Silver Surfer, was largely shunned, if not roundly criticized, by the U.S. public and the experience came to a sudden end. Periodic attempts at translating even the most celebrated series, *Tintin* and *Astérix*, for an English-speaking public (often following popular

<sup>33</sup> “75 ans auront été nécessaires pour que la bande dessinée mondiale devienne une et indivisible.” It should be noted that in French, the expression “one and indivisible” dates from 1792 and refers to the Republic (Greg. “Tintin à New York. 75 ans de bandes dessinées: une grande exposition internationale au ‘New York Cultural Center’.” *Tintin* Weekly no. 1195, 23-9-1971).

movies like Spielberg's *The Secret of the Unicorn*) cannot come close to duplicating the success of these characters in their respective native countries. The iconic Italian western Tex Willer is a runaway best-seller in many countries as different as Finland and Brazil, but just one story has ever been marketed in the U.S., and then only because it was drawn by the well-known American artist Joe Kubert.<sup>34</sup>

The one apparent success of the Franco-Belgian school in the U.S., the Smurfs, only achieved popularity as a TV cartoon series. The publication of Peyo's original stories in translation failed to attract the expected public. Two leading artists of the Italian contemporary graphic novel, Gipi and Davide Reviati, had one of their books appear respectively on the best-sellers' list of the American *New York Times* and the British *Guardian* in 2020. But the two books were originally published in 2013 and 2016 in their home country.<sup>35</sup> Why did it take so long for them to be recognized abroad?

The new digital economy has spawned alternative and less financially risky joint enterprises. The most significant is Europe Comics, a collaborative venture by 13 European comics publishers from 7 different linguistic regions supported by the European Commission, with the goal of creating "a collective digital imprint, replicating European comics' variety, richness and originality, in English and digital format."<sup>36</sup> Time will tell whether it will achieve its desired goal. French comics scholar Jean-Paul Gabilliet explains this puzzling phenomenon by arguing that there are fundamental differences in the collective imagination between the two sides of the Atlantic, as well as different expectations as to the kind of experience comics should provide.<sup>37</sup> Cultural barriers do exist, although their nature is not always simple to determine, and they may be easier to cross from

<sup>34</sup> The case of *The Lonesome Rider*, the title of this story, would deserve a detailed analysis in itself, as a conscious attempt on the part of the writer, Claudio Nizzi, to alter the universe of his character in order to make him fit the mold of the traditional American western comic. The result is an almost unrecognizable story for habitual readers of this series, with a simplified hero, largely devoid of psychological complexity and separated from the bevy of secondary characters that inhabit the original Italian stories, as well as a fragmented storyline clearly meant to allow for possible publication in the traditional U.S. comic book format, as separate "chapters."

<sup>35</sup> Gipi's *One Story* was published by Fantagraphics, while Reviati's *Spit Three Times* was published by Seven Stories.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.europecomics.com/about-us/>

<sup>37</sup> In his online conference "Tintin, Astérix & Cie. La timide aventure américaine de la BD franco-belge au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle" (organized by the Toronto Comic Arts Festival and the Toronto Public Library on February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021), Gabilliet posited that "some affinities with European culture in its widest sense are necessary to appreciate" Franco-Belgian comics, and that the American public may not like them the same way it does not like frogs' legs or escargots...

one side than from the other. In any event, it would appear the “universal language” of comics does not always translate as well as might be expected.

*Comics criticism as a national endeavour*

Comics criticism itself is still overwhelmingly concerned with national productions, and within it monographs abound on clearly defined themes: single authors, publications, specific genres with a strong local tradition. Even a cursory look at any current bibliography on the subject is enough to show that most studies tend to focus on clearly circumscribed geographical or linguistic areas.<sup>38</sup> Theoretical approaches can and do vary, but different critical traditions generally work within a defined national identity, often concerned with establishing genealogies of indigenous creators and creations, and highlighting what are felt to be the peculiar traits and qualities of home-grown productions that set them apart from what is being done elsewhere. In specular fashion, the opposition between graphic novels and comics within each national tradition strives to systematize—in a scientific manner, having recourse to aesthetic models and sociological analyses—the nature and development of the genre as largely autonomous from the original comics mold: a theory of evolution that often tends to put as much distance between the two as there is between contemporary man and his hominid ancestors.<sup>39</sup> In both cases the goal, whether avowed or not, is the creation of some type of symbolic primacy, not devoid of very real and concrete advantages in terms of social and institutional acceptance within the academic and wider cultural and art worlds.

*For a blurring of borders*

The project of this thematic issue was dictated by a desire to experiment with a blurring of borders—national, historical, or generic. Our hope being that comparative studies, focusing on more than a single national comics tradition, more than one genre, more than one understanding of what comics should be, could prove useful in revealing some specificities of the medium that are not apparent when it is explored in isolation or on

<sup>38</sup> The multilingual bibliographical bulletin *Marginalia*, by Norbert Spehner, is an excellent place to start: <http://marginalia-bulletin.blogspot.com/>

<sup>39</sup> A more balanced and sensible opinion would argue that “the graphic novel, though not necessarily a sharp break at the level of form or market conditions, represents at least some level of self-knowing ‘play with a purpose’ of the traditional comic book form, and in some cases a radical reformation of it” (Baetens and Frey 19).

the basis of a set identity. A map of the world of comics would now be equal to the famed map in Jorge-Luis Borges' story "On Exactitude in Science" and would cover the world itself. The Japanese Manga tradition, and the emerging comics markets in Africa are not represented in this volume, but the essays appearing here travel far in the international (and inter-generic) spheres of the comics/graphic novels universe. Adopting a variety of critical approaches and perspectives, they explore the protean medium of comics and its transformation over time in several very different national and cultural contexts—and most importantly, between them—as well as the space between comics and graphic novels, between tradition and innovation, between popular mass aesthetics and avant-garde sensitivities. How do transnational markets and international influences change what comics are and how they are perceived? And is a graphic novel simply a better mousetrap, as the saying goes, or does it catch something that regular comics do not?

Fabrizio Foni and Irene Incarico show how a hyperlocal Italian artist, rooted in a very specific alternative scene and working within the confines of a marginalized provincial setting, has been able to appropriate and transform cyberpunk aesthetics, and to produce a body of work imbued with social criticism and universal values, where comics and illustration jump off the page and mix with music, cinema, and performance art.

Carlo Gubitosa illustrates the challenges faced by the relatively recent editorial phenomenon of comics journalism through several comparative case studies, in the U.S., Italy, and France, analyzing the reasons for the chasm between the great potential of graphic narrative put in the service of reportage, and the reality of an industry struggling to find a sufficiently wide public to be financially viable.

Justin Wadlow tells the story of the unusual friendship of two graphic artists, one French and one American, and how their long-distance relationship has overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and has become reflected in their works, in a game of discrete and productive mutual influences.

Anna Marta Marini delves into the recent decades of one of the most American comic genres ever—westerns—to compare the treatment of several thematic commonplaces with that of a selection of contemporaneous European creations, drawing some surprising conclusions as to historical accuracy, processes of mythification, and different publics' expectations of a strongly connotated genre.

Pierre-Alexis Delhaye examines the many lives of American superhero comics in France and the pratfalls of cultural transfers, both when it comes to matters of content (particularly ideology), and format—a too often ignored but crucial element.

David F. Richter discusses the case of a Spanish graphic novel to examine not just how the medium of comics can be applied—as is being done more and more commonly—in the service of biography, but how graphic narrative can put to use its own peculiar means to interact with poetry, not simply to illustrate an opus, but to espouse a vision and create a poetic narrative that doubles as a critical analysis of a poet's personal aesthetics.

Marcia Cristina Esteves Agostinho takes us to South America, retracing the steps of an Italian immigrant author who took a popular U.S. comics character and adapted him to the realities of Brazilian life, revealing how popular comics can be used as sure guides in the study of history and sociology.

Felipe Gómez explores the post-apocalyptic worlds of three graphic novels from Mexico and Argentina, offering a transnational analysis of the representation of urban centres—traditionally the *locus* of progress—and demonstrating how catastrophic decay can serve to illustrate new strategies of resistance and different models of social interaction.

Dona Pursall brings back to the fore some of the most popular British children's comics produced since the late 1930s, showing how the reputation for excessive simplicity and unsophistication that they were saddled with—in the context of a comics criticism narrative that stipulates unilinear historical progress towards “adult,” self-conscious productions—minimizes and hides their peculiar narrative strategies and prevents a correct analysis of the reasons behind their continuing success.

And last but not least, Zak Waipara makes the case for a new indigenous scholarship of comics in New Zealand/Aotearoa, discussing the adaptation or borrowing of Maori terms and cultural concepts in recent graphic novels, and arguing for a new understanding of comics creation: one in which legitimacy is not granted from the outside by the fields of art or literature, and the distinction between high and low art loses its pertinence.

Graphic literature, whether the humble comic or the critically acclaimed graphic novel, belongs to a species that can boast of being the first truly global cultural phenomenon. It is the many complex paths and interactions that marked its development that the articles collected in this special issue aim to explore.

Vittorio Frigerio, Emeritus Professor of French at Dalhousie University (Halifax, N.S., Canada), has published extensively on 19th century novelists and on anarchist literature. He created the multilingual journal *Belphegor* on popular literature and media culture (<https://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/>). His main contribution to comics studies is the book *Bande dessinée et littérature: intersections, fascinations, divergences* (Macerata : Quodlibet, Elements, 2018).



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