

# Challenges to international comics studies in the context of globalization

Thierry GROENSTEEN

The international dimension of comics scholarship is inevitably viewed in a different way according to the region of the world where one lives.

Accessibility to foreign production is indeed very unequal from one continent to another, and even from one country to another. In this respect, there is no doubt that the country where I live, France, is much favored.

First of all, this is because, on the European continent, France has the most dynamic comics market. Therefore, France attracts numerous foreign authors who come to work directly for French publishers, believing that they have reached some sort of comics El Dorado; Hugo Pratt, the Chilean scriptwriter Alexandro Jodorowsky, the Argentinean artist José Muñoz and his Italian colleague Lorenzo Mattotti are just a few examples of this.

However, what is more important is that comics created in North America or in Asia are translated quickly and massively. With some 265 companies, whether small or large, involved in comics publishing in the French language, every talented new artist emerging on the international scene inevitably finds a publisher interested in his work and willing to translate him.

The market has not always been so wide open; the current situation is the result of a step by step process. Until the beginning of the nineties, Asian production was almost completely unknown in our country – as in the rest of the Western world. In about fifteen years, its importance has increased to the point that it has represented

up to 40% of all new titles released. On the French market, Japanese manga, and in a lesser proportion, Korean manhwas and Chinese manhuas, account today for more than 1400 titles a year.<sup>1</sup> English-language comics account for approximately 300 titles, which is 8% of the total production. Other translations are primarily of European works, especially from Italy, Spain or the Netherlands. On the whole, more than one comic out of two that is published in France is a translation of a foreign comic (1.856 titles in 2008, out of a total of 3.592 titles).

All of us here know that neither the American market nor the Japanese market show a similar openness. And thus, for scholars in these countries who are willing to work on comics from an international point of view, the first problem they meet is the very narrow accessibility of foreign production in their own country and their own language.

The situation that I have described, as regards France, leads furthermore to a second conclusion: it has become very problematic to study the differences between national comics cultures, when they have themselves become very heterogeneous.

In fact, twenty years ago it made sense to speak of the French culture of bandes dessinées as something one could easily identify and describe, but it is not the case anymore. One can roughly say that there are four different types of comics that are now popular among French readers: first, series that perpetuate the tradition of classical French-Belgian heroes like Tintin, Astérix or Spirou; second, graphic novels, characterized by a larger number of pages, a smaller format, a literary ambition and by their autonomy, which means that they do not belong to a series; third, manga, that are read both in translation and, by some fans, in the original Japanese language; fourth, American comic books, which are also read either in French or in English. Thus, there are four different markets, four different audiences, each quite distinct (though we have no sociological study telling us to what extent these different readerships coincide, and if manga readers are also interested in graphic novels, for example<sup>2</sup>), and, finally, four

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<sup>1</sup> 2008 figures. Source: *Annual survey* by Gilles Ratier for the Association of Comics Critics and Journalists. For a presentation of the impact of manga on the French market, see Bouissou 2006. For a more general study on the reception of Japanese pop culture in Europe, see Pellitteri 2008.

<sup>2</sup> A department of the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the “Bibliothèque publique d’information”, is

“comics cultures.”

These various cultures differ from each other on multiple levels:

A) The segmentation of the readership from the point of view of gender: In France, American comic books are mainly read by male readers; readers of graphic novels seem more likely to be female, whereas manga are divided between *shōjo*, *shōnen*, *josei*, *seinen*..., a distinction that has no equivalent in Western comics or in the French-Belgian tradition.

B) The sales points or networks: manga are mainly sold in specialized bookstores, graphic novels in more literary, or non-specialized, bookstores, and American comic books by newsdealers.

C) The kind of merchandise and by-products linked to these four types of comics: American comic books inspire Hollywood blockbusters, and shops are invaded by action figurines or trading cards; manga are accompanied by posters and art books; popular heroes from French-Belgian comics are reproduced on dishes, clothes, agendas, and various other products for students. There is no merchandising of any kind generated by graphic novels.

D) The level of cultural legitimization: graphic novels are very much praised by the critics and receive awards, whereas manga and American comics are perceived as products from the entertainment industry and are sometimes criticized with the same arguments that used to bring discredit on comics as a whole a few decades ago when the medium was very much scorned by teachers and the intelligentsia (Morgan 2003: 154-249).

These different comics cultures that exist next to each other in the same country, in this case France, certainly are quite difficult to perceive by a foreign observer. He will tend to see the French market as relatively homogeneous and he will favor the characteristic features on which he will be able to ground an opposition between this supposed “French comics culture” and his own.

I would now like to raise a specific point in order to show the complexity of the question of cultural legitimization of comics—without this cultural legitimization,

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launching in 2010 a large survey on manga readership in France.

comics scholarship can hardly develop. I have spoken earlier of an “El Dorado”: it is true that France is usually regarded throughout the world as one of the countries (if not the country) where comics are taken seriously, integrated within the cultural scene and more highly praised than anywhere else. However, the truth is that the level of legitimization that comics enjoy is quite difficult to estimate (Groensteen 2006). It all depends on the criteria one takes into account. For instance, we have but one comics museum in France, located in Angoulême, whereas here in Japan, there are several: not only this beautiful Kyoto International Manga Museum that welcomes our conference, but also others, devoted to major artists like Tezuka Osamu, Kitazawa Rakuten, Yokoyama Ryūichi or Hasegawa Machiko. There is no museum devoted to a single cartoonist in my country. (Belgium has recently inaugurated the Hergé Museum, celebrating the father of *Tintin* and financed by the heirs of the artist.) On the other hand, the Kyoto International Manga Museum is backed by a private university, whereas the Angoulême Comics Museum has been initiated by the French government in a 1983 program to promote comics, and receives public subsidies.

Even more indicative is the fact that, for many years now, comics are no longer taught in French universities, unlike the situation in neighboring countries such as Belgium or Germany. Except for Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, all the most renowned specialists, all the scholars who have been extensively writing about comics these last twenty years, and whose works are considered authoritative—I think here more especially of Benoît Peeters, Harry Morgan, Thierry Smolderen and myself—work outside the academic sphere. None of us have a position as a university lecturer; we are carrying out our research outside academic institutions.

This status of independent scholar can cause financial precariousness, but its main consequence is that we are allowed to follow a more inventive approach toward the media, that we are less confined within the existing theoretical frameworks and their ideological presuppositions. The colleagues and scholars that I have mentioned and I myself tend to develop original concepts, based on an in-depth study of the media and close contact with it; we do not try to verify pre-existing theories by applying them to comics. So, the fact that we are outside the institution gives us more freedom and leads us to some sort of intellectual heterodoxy, which, in turn, confirms our

marginality with respect to hegemonic frames of scholarship as we can observe them, not only in France, but in the academic sphere as a whole.

It is not an easy task for me to explain why French universities are so little interested in comics, because I myself feel that it is an anomaly. But perhaps part of the explanation can be found in the structuring of academic research, i.e. in the degree of development of the various disciplines. One does not always perceive how different the situation is, in this respect, from one country to another. For instance, the domain of Cultural Studies, that has enjoyed an extraordinary expansion in the Anglo-Saxon world in the last decades, is not yet fully established in France, where it is still very marginal.<sup>3</sup> Since the triumph of structuralism in the sixties, we have remained, on the other hand, much more concerned with the semiotic approach to media. I do not know how these two different main lines of research are considered and favored in Japan, but I can assure you that between the Anglo-Saxon academic discourse about comics and the French one, there is a clear distinction, due to the differences in our respective intellectual traditions and academic frontiers. And, to tell the truth, the hegemonic position throughout the world of academic works published in the English language means that the French specificity is equivalent to a cultural exception.

Another discipline that is considered essential in the United States and that is nearly non-existent in the French university is that of Gender Studies. I can illustrate this with an example that concerns me personally. A scholar from Chicago, Amanda MacDonald, signed a long review on my essay “La Bande dessinée mode d’emploi” (Les Impressions nouvelles 2008) in the journal *European Comic Art* (vol. 1, no. 2), published by the Liverpool University Press, in England. Her article starts with the presentation of my “complicity with BD masculinism”, on the pretext that my book “scarcely registers gender as a *legible* element and dynamic within *bande dessinée*, and passes over gender in authorship”. To me, this criticism is irrelevant, because the

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3 In their essay, Mattelart and Neveu (2003) label France a “refractory pupil”. They write: “Cultural Studies seem to have even less chance to become implanted in an academic system when this system has already developed its own frames of analysis of cultural phenomena, and when the objects studied by a body of already institutionalized social sciences leave no space where this interdiscipline could develop” (p. 75).

book deals with comics from a semiological and aesthetic point of view and does not concern the analysis of fiction according to contents, nor does it wish to provide a sociological theory of the media. But the question of *gender* is at the top of the list on Amanda MacDonald's agenda and corresponds to such a strong *doxa* in the Anglo-Saxon academic world that it is impossible for her to admit that an essay about comics does not have to automatically deal with this specific point.<sup>4</sup>

I started my presentation by evoking the problem of the accessibility of the works, and the scarcity of translations in some countries. To live in a country where the international production is accessible, of course not in its entirety, but more widely than anywhere else, is a real advantage for a scholar, but there is a price for this advantage in terms of methodological requests. Confronted with an overabundant production, a continuous flow of novelties, the scholar is forced to make choices and to skip over lots of artists and works, because it has become impossible to aspire to universal expertise. There are just too many comics being published, in all parts of the world, for a normal man or woman to remain aware of all the evolutions of the media and to study, firsthand, all the tendencies, all the schools, or all the genres. The limits one encounters are simply those of human capacity and available time.

To make choices means to work on a corpus of reference. You meet, inevitably, the question of how representative your corpus is, and where you have to end it. It is a question that is easy to answer if you work on a topic that is naturally delimited, a topic that concerns, by definition, a given corpus. You can, for instance, be interested in the feeling of power in superhero comics, in the theme of childhood memories in autobiographical comics, or in the aesthetics of black and white in contemporary graphic novels. But the question of the corpus becomes much more complex when your ambition is to build a general theory of comics, or when you want to deal with “the art of comics” or “the comics phenomenon” as a whole. In the past, some French scholars

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<sup>4</sup> The accusation of “masculinism” is especially irrelevant, as far as I am concerned, since I am the French publisher who has the largest proportion of female artists in his catalogue and who campaigns for the feminization of the comics scene. I am also a member of the Artemisia Jury, who every year reward the best comic produced by a female artist.

rejected, without laughing, the superhero comic books as not being true comics; others wrote that a comic had to be epic and adventurous, and that humor comics had nothing to do with the very definition of the media but belonged to the tradition of caricature;<sup>5</sup> and all of them ignored manga, in all good conscience. Nowadays, one can no longer imagine such exclusions.

But how can you treat, as an undifferentiated whole, a media that admits so many different formats and channels (newspaper comics, standard comic books, hardbound albums, pocket editions, comics on the screen of your computer or your mobile phone)? How can you apply the same frames of analysis to industrial production, marketed to entertain the largest possible audience, and to alternative, experimental, avant-garde works, with a very small circulation? And finally, how do you verify that a theory grounded on the in-depth study of a limited number of examples can be rightfully extrapolated to the complete body of works conceived in various cultural areas, with significant differences between them?

I confronted this last question with the theoretical propositions I make in my book *Système de la bande dessinée*. Published in France in 1999, the book has been translated in the United States by the University Press of Mississippi in 2007 and has just been released in Japan by the publishing company Seidosha. As far as I know, it is the first essay about comics, written by a European scholar, that is available on these three continents. It makes me very proud, but at the same time a little apprehensive.

The American translation has already encountered a few terminological problems. To mention just one of them, the American tradition places the daily strip and the Sunday page in contrast, as two different formats. In France, the word “strip” designates any of the tiers (or strips) that make up the page in an average lay-out. The page is thus made of three or four superimposed strips, so that the panel is a sub-unity of the strip and the strip a sub-unity of the page. It is in that sense that I have continuously used the word strip in my essay; my translators have retained the word, and, even though the word is borrowed from the English language, it is a source of confusion for American readers.

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<sup>5</sup> I refer here to remarks made by Pierre Couperie and Francis Lacassin in *Giff-Wiff*, the first French journal about comics, in the early 1960s.

My most recent work raises the same kind of difficulty. Indeed, the topic of my next essay, to be published in a few months by Skira and Flammarion, is parody in comics. I realize that in the Anglo-Saxon world, the concept of parody is used in a much broader meaning than in France. If you read, for instance, Linda Hutcheon's authoritative book *A Theory of Parody* (University of Illinois Press 2000), you will observe that she does not establish any clear difference between what she calls parody and what we, French scholars, name more generally, intertextuality. As soon as a work of art or a fiction refers to a former work or fiction, whatever the nature of this reference might be, Hutcheon identifies this link as a case of parody. She writes, for example, that modern writers like Borges, Robbe-Grillet or Nabokov used in their works "parodic versions of the structures of the detective novel". For the French-speaking community, parody is not separable from the idea of mockery and satire. It consists of an imitation of a preexisting work, which transforms it in a satirical or comical way. Thus, if my essay is to be translated in English one day, to maintain the term of parody will, inevitably, be a source of misunderstanding. The best equivalent of the concept of parody in the French version is probably the term *lampoon*.

No doubt that the translation and the critical reception of my *System of Comics in Japan* will meet the same kind of terminological and conceptual problems, but I am unable to anticipate them and I will only discover them through the reviews that will be devoted to my book – in so far that someone will be so kind as to translate them for me.

My apprehensions also concern the nature of the examples that I commented upon in my book. These examples are not numerous; there are only about ten comics pages that are reproduced. They are from French, Belgian, Swiss, Spanish, Argentinean and American artists. They have been selected, not with the intention to meet the requests of a pre-defined corpus, but because of their exemplary nature or pedagogical efficiency, with regards to the theoretical questions I raised at one moment or another in my reflection. There are two reasons why the book does not include a single page of manga: first, because the pages reproduced and analyzed do not, in any way, pretend to constitute a sample that would stand for comic art in its diversity; second, because



during the years when I worked on this book (from 1994 to 1996), the presence of manga on the French market was still marginal. I can imagine that my choice of examples will look foreign, if not exotic, to the Japanese audience, in respect to its own culture of comics. I do hope it will not keep potential readers away from reading a book that nevertheless tries to question the “Ninth Art” – as we call it – in its universal foundations.

My ambition, while writing this essay, was to provide a “toolbox” that everyone could use and that would help reach a more sharp and precise approach to every singular work. The methodic, reasoned description of all the various units that are involved in the language of comics takes a very important place in the book. Maybe I have been too long on this preliminary matter, at the risk of letting people believe that this description was the very heart of my theoretical approach. In reality, it is nothing more than a starting point. I am much more attached to the hypothesis and developments that come next, which concern the two fundamental operations of *breakdown* and *page lay-out*, the way they interact and influence each other, and the cognitive mechanisms through which the reader constructs the meaning and uses the elements of information scattered in panels that are either adjacent or distant.

I have absolutely no idea of the distance between my essay and the propositions that Japanese scholars might have made on similar questions. The popularity gained by manga on the French market has not extended to an interest in essays about manga written by the Japanese themselves. We do not know how you describe and analyze your own production and what lines of reflection about comics you follow, since no academic work has been translated. It seems to me that it would be very beneficial for us all if some university press would take the initiative of an anthology in which important articles or fragments of books would be collected and translated into English, in order to establish, for the international community of scholars, a sort of survey of the research about comics in Japan. Such a collection would be a very useful and invaluable basis for future exchanges.

The model for such a volume is *A Comics Studies Reader* (Heer and Worcester 2009), which is described on the back cover as “a survey of the best scholarly writing on the form, craft, history and significance of the comics”. There are about

thirty contributors. I have the honor to be one of them, but there is only one author representing Japan, namely Mrs. Fusami Ogi, from the Chikushi Jogakuen University in Fukuoka, who sits in this room today.

How much do Western comics and manga differ from each other? Does their respective singularity allow us to dream of a unified theory of comics as such, or do they lead us to build different theories, to invent specific concepts? This question is still open, it seems, and I guess it will put many of us to work in the coming years. The historical situation that we are living is characterized by a massive spreading of manga culture throughout the world (some observers describe manga as the ferment of a new world pop culture). This situation is calling for a development of comparative studies. We are waiting for the emergence of “comparative comics” on the model of “comparative literature,” and I believe that this new discipline will encourage international exchanges between scholars and resource places.

I have no intention to go to the root of this new field today, but I would like to share with you a very stimulating remark that I heard from the mouth of my friend, the British scholar Paul Gravett, during a conference that was held earlier this year in Sweden. According to Gravett, “in Western comics we read what happened next; in manga, we read what is happening right now”. In other words, the narrative techniques and processes that are used in manga give the reader the feeling of being immersed in the action, whereas Western comics create a more distant relation between the reader and the narrative.

I wish to remind everybody here that, as a prelude to the comparative research that I await, I published in 2001, for the comics museum in Angoulême, an *International Cartoon Museum Guide* that not only describes some twenty-six institutions devoted to comics and caricature in the whole world, but also includes—thanks to the collaboration of Pascal Lefèvre—an international lexicon in which more than a hundred technical terms used in the comics sphere are translated into nine languages, including Japanese.

The European School of Image (École Européenne de l’Image), where I teach, also in Angoulême, has set up since last year an “Observatory for Asiatic Comics” for

graduate students. In this context, the French scholar Nicolas Finet gives a course about the history of Japanese graphic narratives and the Korean professor Wan Kyung-sung comes especially from Seoul to conduct a workshop.

If everybody among us is convinced that it is necessary to promote exchanges between scholars and tries to contribute to this common ideal at the place where he or she is, we can expect very fruitful results.

Comic art has a long history, that starts even before the invention of the cinematograph.

The history of comics has its own history. Thanks to a better knowledge of the distant past, thanks to the fact that different cultural areas are now taken into consideration, and thanks to new approaches of the media itself, we do not write comics history as our predecessors used to do it.

Finally, the theory of comics also has its own history. Rodolphe Töpffer (1799-1846), the main inventor of the media in the 1830s, was also its first theoretician. He wrote several texts which contain fundamental intuitions that are still relevant today. Nevertheless, when, more than a century later, the university started to study the media, we were in the middle of the semio-structuralist period, thus the theoretical presuppositions were somewhat different. It is our task, now, to think comics over, in the new context of globalization.

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## Thierry Groensteen

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