

Cultural recognition of comics and comics studies: comments on Thierry Groensteen's keynote lecture

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This is a revised version of my oral commentary on Thierry Groensteen's Keynote Lecture at the Kyoto conference*. I focus here on the problem of the cultural recognition of comics and comics studies, based on the content of the Keynote Lecture and Groensteen's essay on this issue, *Un objet culturel non identifié* (2006).

1. Comics as un objet culturel non identifié

Groensteen affirms that “without the cultural legitimization of comics, comics scholarship can hardly develop”. The cultural status of comics in France, he says, is still ambiguous, giving the examples that there is no museum devoted to a single cartoonist in France, and that comics have not been taught in French universities for many years. As these signs of recognition have both been achieved by Japanese comics, he suggests that the cultural status of comics in Japan might be higher. However, the criteria for the legitimization of comics, like the amount of national grants in aid for cultural activities and the role of universities in society, differ considerably from country to country. It is therefore difficult to say whether comics truly enjoy a higher status in Japan.

Groensteen, as a long-time editor of the French comic magazines *Les Cahiers de*

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la bande dessinée and *Neuvième Art* and director of the Musée de la bande dessinée in Angoulême from 1993 to 2001, has devoted his energy to raising the cultural status of comics in France and is the author of a book on this very issue, *Un objet culturel non identifié* (hereafter *OCNI*). In *OCNI*, Groensteen explores the reasons why comics in France are not yet recognized as autonomous art or culture.

Given the importance of art in French society and the existence—personified by Groensteen—of discussions on the expertise and politics of comics, he takes it for granted that comics should be recognized as art; however, I did not have time to argue this premise in my comments at the conference. To be fair, I should also add that in *OCNI* Groensteen explains quite persuasively how the cultural field of comics in France has been historically constructed. Although his Keynote Lecture was entitled “Challenges to International Comics Studies in the Context of Globalization”, most of Groensteen’s remarks were fundamentally related to the question of the cultural status of comics. This paper examines, making reference to *OCNI*, conditions that would facilitate international comics studies from the viewpoint of legitimization.

2. On terminology

In the title of the Kyoto conference, “Comics Worlds and the World of Comics: Scholarship on a Global Scale”, the term “comics” is used as a general term for Japanese manga, comics from the English-speaking world, French and Belgian *bande dessinée* and so on. The choice to use “comics” as a generic term is a temporary measure, reflecting the status of English as an international language rather than the consensus of scholars. This stands as an obstacle in the field of comics studies and criticism, and prompt revision of and consensus on terminology are urgently needed. This task is delicate, however, as the names used in each cultural sphere have their own history and meanings.

In *OCNI*, Groensteen points out that American comics have traditionally been thought of as being humorous because of the original meaning of the term “comic”, while the French *bande dessinée*, the term itself taking time to spread, has been considered to be a childish medium due to the abbreviated appellation “BD”. Groensteen suggests that these circumstances are not unrelated to the fact that comics

have been assigned a humble place in culture over a long period (Groensteen 2006: 21-22), explaining why, in the United States, a number of authors have opted to use the term “graphic novel” since the 1970s.¹

Terms for comics in each language have their own meanings and modes of use within society. The Japanese term “manga”, usually designating serial “story manga” today, is also used in a broader sense to refer to caricatures or cartoons composed of one or several panels, and the meaning depends on the context. Although serial manga prevails in the market today, Shimizu Isao’s remark that the spirit of manga consists primarily of play and caricature is still relevant (Shimizu 1991: iii). The French “bande dessinée”, meanwhile, refers only to serial or book-form narrative comics; caricatural drawings in the press belong to a different category.² That the term “manga” is not a precise translation for either “bande dessinée” or “comics” is an issue that must be approached with caution in international comics studies.

We must be more cautious still about the gaps between the first appearance of the term in the language, its first use in the modern prevailing sense, and the appearance of the medium or products designated by the term. The term “manga”, originally derived from the name of a bird in Chinese, was first used to refer to caricatural drawings and serial comics at the end of the Meiji era (Shimizu 1991: 15-28), while the terms “comics” and “bandes dessinées” were coined after the emergence of their respective media³. As a basis for scientific investigation, it is essential to share knowledge of how the comics of each cultural sphere, with their own names, have been constructed as an autonomous field. I have not yet had the opportunity to refer to the international glossary that Groensteen mentions in his lecture, but I do hope a “World History of Comics” will be written one day, describing comics of different countries and relating

¹ The term “graphic novel” first appeared in 1964, but it was in 1978, with Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, that a comic’s artist first applied this term to his own work (Groensteen 2006: 75).

² The term *dessin de presse* [newspaper drawing] in *Système de la bande dessinée* was appropriately translated into Japanese as *shinbun fūshi manga* [caricatural newspaper manga] by Noda Kensuke (Groensteen 2009: 191; 2009: 306).

³ The English term “comics” first appeared around 1900 as a synonym for “funnies”. The French “bande dessinée” was coined in the late 1930s, but did not become firmly established until the late 1950s (Gaumer and Moliterni 2001: 50, 183)

the history of vocabulary to the history of forms.

3. Writing and learning history

The question of terminology is also related to the content—that is, the definition of “comics” within each culture. As demonstrated in the passage on the “impossible definition” in Groensteen’s *Système de la bande dessinée* (Groensteen 2009: 14-21), the definition of “comics” differs according to the standpoint of the writer. In the late 1960s, French scholars who were committed to the cultural promotion of comics began to consider ancient works such as Egyptian frescoes, the Lascaux wall paintings, and the Bayeux tapestry to be the origins of comics. The expansion of the definition of “comics” seen during this time is an expression of the desire of comics scholars to legitimize comics and to assign them a valid role in art history (Groensteen 2006: 99-110). The controversy over the origin(s) of comics in the United States and France in 1996 was a result of the same phenomenon.

In many ways, describing the history of a cultural genre requires the establishment of a scientific process. The publication of reprinted editions and translations, facilitating access to past and unknown masterpieces, also contributes to this scientific approach to the medium. However, descriptions of the history of comics depend on the authors’ points of view, which tend to privilege a specific medium (books versus newspapers, for example) or comics with specific formal components (such as balloons, serial publishing, or recurrent characters). It is often observed that somewhat biased historical views are inherited from author to author, and dialogue between different perspectives is not easily achieved (Groensteen 2006: 124-125).⁴ Groensteen, in organizing the exhibition “Great Masters of European Comics”,⁵ held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in 2000, adopted the new geographical and historical perspective on “European comics”. This ambitious exhibition, with parallel displays of original drawings and printed pages and showcasing interdisciplinary approaches to comic works, was not as successful as Groensteen had expected. As Groensteen writes in *OCNI*, possible

⁴ Miura Kazushi, in his doctoral dissertation, “A Study on Winsor McCay’s comic works: *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* and the problem of discourse on comics” (Tōhoku University 2010), picks up this issue, taking as an example the reception of *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* in comics criticism (Chapter 3).

⁵ For the exhibition catalogue, see Groensteen 2000.

reasons for the exhibition's underperformance are that comic readers in general are not interested in the medium's history and that comic art is not considered to be common culture shared by Europeans (Groensteen 2006: 164-166).

In his Keynote Lecture, following the example of comparative literature, Groensteen proposed a comparative approach in comics studies. However, I argue that "comparative comics studies" is not possible before perfecting the historical survey of imitations, translations and adaptations of comic works among countries. For example, American comics have had a profound impact on non-American comics—not only were the form and content of other comic cultures influenced by American comics, but the fascination with and fear of American popular culture were generally followed by a vigorous campaign against American comics (or comics from other countries in general).

Today, the globalization of comics is under way, and it has renewed interest in the history of influences among comics from different cultures. As Groensteen mentioned in his Lecture, the French comics market is very open to comics from foreign countries, a situation in sharp contrast with the Japanese comics market. The massive influx of American comics in the 20th century was motivated by an interest in American culture as a whole. How far, then, is today's cultural globalization motivated by an interest in foreign cultures? The combination of a "culturally odorless" (Iwabuchi 2001: 27-33)⁶ comic style and its reception abroad without any intercultural experience marks a new phase in world comics history.

I have discussed thus far the necessity of perfecting terminology and promotion of historical studies. I would like to put forth another suggestion for comics studies concerning manners of academic writing. It is clearly advisable that authors of comics studies, as in other disciplines, give the source of each of their quotations. My intention is not to raise comics in rank by making it a scientific object; however, it is a shame that interesting essays on comics are not always well documented and that the author himself should believe that footnotes are unnecessary or troublesome for readers.

⁶ The term is used to suggest a strategy for the exportation of Japanese cultural products.

4. Comics and children

According to Groensteen, one of the “five handicaps” which have prevented French comics from being legitimized is that comics were originally targeted at children (Groensteen 2006: 32-47). To be precise, picture stories by Töpffer or Doré, ancestors of modern bandes dessinées that emerged during the 19th century, were intended for adults; however, once comics entered the juvenile press in the early 20th century, adult comics remained largely unknown for the next 70 years until the creation of magazines like *Pilote* and *Hara-kiri*. Intended primarily for children, French comics became the target of severe censorship under the famous *Loi du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse*, which even today continues to be applied to comics for all ages in France (Groensteen 2006: 15). Because of their specific audience, French comics had not been subjected to serious criticism before the 1950s.⁷ Even then, discourse on comics was monopolized by educators, most of whom, until the 1960s, were hostile toward magazines containing comics because of the magazines’ religious standpoint, fear of American popular culture, and fear of the spread of illiteracy.

Antoine Roux, in his 1970 essay *La bande dessinée peut être éducative*, argued that rather than causing illiteracy, comics actually helped to encourage reading. From this time on, positive discourse on comics began to be observed in France; however, this revaluation of comics was a double-edged sword—the easy access that characterizes comics is one of the very reasons why the medium continues to be associated with childishness and artistic mediocrity (Groensteen 2006: 38-45). The situation in France can be observed in other countries as well. The fact that comics has expanded its readership to all ages can be appreciated as an accomplishment of comic art, but it can lead inversely to the criticism of adult comic readers, who are stigmatized as childish. Thus, the label of childishness has been an obstacle for those attempting to promote the cultural recognition of comics. However, childishness is not always a vice. To study the degree of legitimization of a medium traditionally targeted at children, we must consider differences in the perception of children in each culture.

⁷ According to Groensteen, the first theoretical work on comics in French after Rodolphe Töpffer’s *Essai de physiognomonie* (1845) was Barthélemy Amengual’s *Le Petit Monde de Pif le chien* (1955) (Groensteen 2006: 11).

The comics industry, making a huge profit on merchandise featuring popular characters, offers more proof of the affinity between comics and children. In *OCNI*, Groensteen expresses his fear that such merchandising elevates the position of comics as entertainment at the expense of an impartial view of comic works (Groensteen 2006: 71-73). However, as the profit and fame of merchandise can exceed those of the original comics, it is necessary to consider the predominance of merchandise as an inescapable reality of the modern comics market (Odagiri 2010: 22-61; Bouissou 2006).

Viewing comics as a communication tool demanding only elementary literacy, or as a source of merchandise, necessarily excludes the approach to comics through the appreciation of each work's artistic value. It is true that comics studies has developed based upon the model of literary studies or art history, which are based on the evaluation of individual works—this is why the main issues of comics studies as a discipline have been the methods of creation, criticism and appreciation, even if comics can also be the subject of sociological or economic interest. However, it seems that social sciences will become more and more important in international comics studies in the future.

5. University and academic societies as authorities

In France, a campaign for the cultural legitimization of comics, along with science fiction and detective novels, has been supported by intellectuals and artists since the 1960s. The first chair of theoretical comics studies, occupied by Francis Lacassin, was created at the Sorbonne in 1971. However, the chair was later abolished during faculty reorganization and was replaced with a chair of film animation (Groensteen 2006: 121). The foundation of a chair of comics studies, however ephemeral, was perceived in France as a sign of the recognition of comics as an academic discipline, while in Japan, the inclusion of comics studies in universities has been considered to be a sign of the transformation of the university's role.

The advance of comics in the Japanese university education system is a truly remarkable phenomenon. Universities with arts programs more and more frequently teach comics, and some departments of humanities have also begun to cover theories

on comics. In France, art schools, or *écoles des beaux-arts*, sometimes include programs on comics; however, these are not “universities”, so “teaching comics in university” in France means teaching comics theory in departments of humanities. Compared to French national universities, the fees for which amount to only several tens of thousands of yen, Japanese universities depend mainly on student fees, and classes on comics are a popular way to attract students. Nevertheless, university-level comics theory education has yet to fully develop in either country.

It is worth noting that individuals working in the field of comics, especially authors, have often cautioned against the legitimization of comics studies because of the long history which has assigned comics to a low position culturally. As Groensteen argues in *OCNI*, quoting the declarations of Morris, Claire Bretécher and Art Spiegelman, authors sometimes express hostility against impractical theories and fear of losing their freedom and loyal readers in exchange for legitimacy (Groensteen 2006: 128-129). Although Groensteen argues that this might be partly an affected sentiment, he is inclined to attribute the insufficient legitimization of comics in France to those most concerned with the field who have not been completely liberated from an inferiority complex (Groensteen 2006: 129).

In Japan as well, those involved with comics are generally wary of authority. In 2001, the Japan Society for Studies in Cartoon and Comics was founded. At the moment of its foundation, the persons concerned and the media argued heatedly about the pros and cons of the Society. The main purpose of the Society is to promote constructive scholarship and exchanges based on the accumulation and maintenance of comic works, comics studies literature and related information. This nation-wide society, which has its own academic journal, has engendered a firm cultural recognition of comics studies in Japan. However, one of the unique aspects of the Society is that its foundation was based on the very idea that comics are by nature remote from authority. The same might be true for every domain of popular culture that now has its own academic society. In the case of comics, the distance from authority might be related to the medium’s origin as satirical cartoons. This also explains why common readers, scholars, and comics authors tend to exercise a certain degree of caution regarding the promotion of manga as part of national cultural policy.

According to its prospectus, “the Society calls into question the very sense of value and the epistemic paradigm which has kept comics isolated from academia” (author’s translation). In this sense, the academic promotion and institutionalization of comics studies do not lead straight to a higher cultural recognition of comics, but rather reflect the society’s choice to go forward with the danger of compromising the independent nature of comics. Here, I have attempted to show that the problem of the cultural status of comics is still a reality in Japan, despite the fact that comics have achieved a relatively secure place within the culture. Comics and comics studies, with their long and memorable history toward cultural recognition, must go on to profit from this dangerous relationship with legitimization.

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