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War comics beyond the battlefield: Anne Frank's transnational representation in sequential art

Kees RIBBENS

Introduction

In May 2009, the press in India welcomed what they considered to be one of the first graphic novels in the country, *The Hotel at the End of the World* by Parismita Singh. This multi-layered story portrays a hotel in Northeast India run by Pema and her husband. The graphic novel reminds the reader of a nuanced Buddhist fable in which travelers on their way to neighboring China, as well as the couple who own the hotel, all have a story to tell. Pema's husband, a fan of the British *Commando* war comics, recalls World War II in the Manipur region and speaks of homesick Japanese soldiers in the Naga Hills during the war. Among the various sources of inspiration, including local folklore and personal experiences of the author, comic books representing World War II have played an undeniable role.

Although India generally does not stand out as a stronghold of comic book aficionados, there has been a notable comics production based on ancient Indian mythologies. And, as the appearance of the *Commando* comics in this country shows, war comics are no unknown phenomenon in the world's largest democracy. In fact, this specific genre saw a rebirth in 2008, when Aditya Bakshi, son of a high-ranking military officer, launched a series of Indian war comics. These books portray outstanding military heroes from recent decades and the storylines are high on adventure and adrenaline. The purpose of these comics is not only to entertain and inform. The producer was also hoping to restore the general audience's respect for the

glorious Indian army, especially among youngsters.

This Indian excursion shows us several things. First, war comics are a strongly established genre of comic strips that even appear in countries with not such a well-known tradition of reading and publishing comic books. And even there, World War II, functions as content or inspiration for such comics. Secondly, the use of the label "graphic novel" in societies such as India shows a worldwide awareness of relatively new developments or distinctions in the comics field. Regardless of the variety of form, content and regional specificities in comics, this might suggest that, up to a certain level, comics culture is a truly global phenomenon (Sabin 1996).

Thirdly, the distinction that is made between comic books on the one hand and graphic novels on the other hand—whether we agree or not about a strict border between these two—indicates that all forms of sequential art are surrounded with expectations, usually more implicit than explicit, concerning its social and cultural value, its impact on and relation to specific audiences and the development of the medium. That a respectable literary publishing firm like Penguin Books India ventures into the field of sequential art, targeting a well educated adult audience, is a rather different thing than addressing kids with smoking battlefield images, hoping to strengthen the position of the Indian army.

However, what these Indian examples have in common is the presence of war scenes. Although not all comics mentioned refer explicitly to World War II, this conflict remains an often occurring theme in many comic books, and not only within the genre of war comics. The character of World War II as a truly global conflict is reflected in the fact that representations can be found in comic books from around the world. Its character as a total war is obvious when reading the many comic book representations that are situated outside the strictly military framework. In that sense it can be stated that the portrayal of war in comics has gone beyond the actual battlefields.

1. Development of war comics

Nevertheless, the general idea of what "war comics" are, is very much based on the portrayal of battle scenes and male heroism, especially in American comic books since the 1940s like *Jeep Comics* and later on in *Two-Fisted Tales* or *Frontline Combat*

which developed the representation of war to a more realistic, less glorifying level (Riches 2009, Conroy 2009). Europe has seen somewhat similar comics from the 1950s onwards, such as *Garry* in France, the *Hazañas Bellicas* in Spain and so on. Some of these were translated editions of the British *Commando* series, launched in 1961, which appeared across Western Europe and Canada, while the original copies in English were also distributed in countries as diverse as South Africa, India and Australia. Parallel initiatives can be traced in Japan and Chile, where manga and historietas portrayed the experiences of air force pilots and tank battalions in World War II as well. Thousands of these comics have entertained large numbers of readers, fostered their ideas of heroism, encouraged their patriotism, taught them about the experiences of war, and shaped their expectations of comics in general.

As a result of this steady and global production, the general idea of what "war comics" are, is very much based on what can be called the British model. This underlines that it obviously is a strong phenomenon within the UK, one of the few countries where this traditional comic continues to exist. But while the use of the label "war comics" often remains limited to this action-packed, heroic military narrative of the British model, the development of the genre—also including the portrayal of more recent armed conflicts—has continued.

Especially from the 1960s onwards, comics in general have shown an increasing variety of protagonists, situations and narratives, presented in both traditional and more pioneering ways and going far beyond the adventurous and humoristic elements and the (perceived) audience of children. One of the outcomes of this process is what, in the Western world, is nowadays distinguished as the "graphic novel".

Two outstanding well-known works, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Nakazawa Keiji's *Barefoot Gen*, have played an important international role to show the potential of the graphic novel. The way in which they received recognition was, however, remarkable. First of all, these works have often been regarded as so exceptionally intriguing that readers and reviewers who were rather unfamiliar with comics emphasized the literary qualities, while underestimating their comic book roots and by doing so largely separating them from the wider world of comics. Secondly, despite its unmistakable common historical topic—World War II—these books were hardly-

ever described as war comics (Ribbens 2010). I want to make a plea for a more inclusive definition of the war comics genre, to open it up beyond the (largely military) depictions of the battlefields. Any serious attempt to oversee the large worldwide production of World War II-related comics from 1939 till today shows a wide variety in the ways in which aspects of this war were represented. Violence is shown, although not uncommonly, in more abstract ways. War events are usually made visible by focusing on the experiences of individuals, but they can be either soldiers or civilians. And the stage on which their actions took place was not by definition the battlefield. Also the home front, where protagonists were faced with the restrictions of a war society, was portrayed, sometimes very subtle and at other times in simplistic black and white schemes. Political and otherwise ideological messages were represented in various ways (Witek 1989, McKinney 2008).

Maus and Barefoot Gen are significant contributions to this. But an assessment of their role requires a better awareness of the variety in which historical experiences in general, and World War II in particular, are represented in graphic narratives. As representations of World War II can be found in comic books from around the world, the possibility is created to do comparative research regarding the ways in which comics from different countries and continents have dealt with this total war, both during and after the conflict. To what extent can transnational influences be observed and if so, can a common, global comic tradition in representing this war be identified?

2. Anne Frank in sequential art

As a modest attempt to get a grip on the transnational representation of this historical conflict beyond the battlefields, I will focus on graphic narratives representing Anne Frank, the Jewish girl from German descent who lived in Amsterdam when the German army occupied the Netherlands in 1940. She became a victim of the Nazi persecution of the Jews during World War II and from 1942 onwards she and her family lived in a secret annex. During this fearful two year period she kept a diary in which she expressed her day to day observations and hopes for peace. After their hiding place had been discovered in 1944, Anne and her relatives were sent to die in a concentration camp. In the postwar period she became famous after the publication of

her diary (Wertheim 2009). Her biographical narrative embodies the atrocities of the war (in particular the Holocaust), somewhat comparable to the individual experiences portrayed in the works of Spiegelman and Nakazawa.

Despite the lack of a good bibliographical research infrastructure in the field of comics studies, more than fifteen different comic representations of Anne Frank from around the world could be traced. Some of these have been distributed internationally, sometimes in translated editions. As it is hard in the field of popular culture, especially when talking about globalized popular culture, to get a really good overview of what has been produced—in particular when speaking of stories that were not published as separate books—it is difficult to say whether this corpus is complete. But it may certainly function as a solid impression of Anne Frank's legacy in the medium of sequential art.

The comics were published between 1961 and 2009, covering almost five decades of comic book history. The first appearance of Anne Frank in the universe of comics was in the spring of 1961. Anne Frank was represented in the well-known American comic book series *Classics Illustrated*, in a volume called *Teens in War: Famous Teens* (AFc I). In fact Anne herself was not turned into a regular comic book character, but in the context of this comic book her life was described in words, supported by a few drawings. This modest start in comics probably indicates the publishers were aware that certain critical observers—even within the more widely accepted frame of educational comics—did not consider comics to be a very suitable medium for treating such an extremely tragic and recent past, which had been personally experienced by many postwar European immigrants in the United States.

The American awareness of the Holocaust during World War II had recently been stimulated by the 1959 movie *The Diary of Anne Frank* by George Stevens. This was in fact a follow-up of a popular theatre play on Broadway in 1955—by the same title—which was Frances Goodrich's and Albert Hackett's first creative adaptation of Anne Frank's book that had been published in the USA in 1952, five years after the

¹ This article was finished before the publication of Sid Jacobson & Ernie Colón (2010), *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography*. New York: Hill & Wang (AFc XVIII).

original Dutch edition had appeared. The movie was very successful in informing large audiences worldwide about Anne's experiences and reflections. ²

Popular media, in this case a movie and a play, have definitely increased interest in the Holocaust, while at the same time stimulating the awareness of the fact that this tragedy from the Nazi-era was everything but distant from a temporal perspective. Furthermore, it was an historical event which certain newly arrived citizens of the U.S. had experienced themselves. It is therefore no surprise that comic book publishers in the U.S., over the years, have shown a certain cautiousness in presenting the story of Anne Frank in their medium.

This hesitation was absent from a nearby country like Mexico, where World War II and the Holocaust were considered distant phenomena, but where comics were as popular as in the U.S. Against that background it was less complicated to publish comics devoted to Anne's life. Between 1963 and 1972 no less than three Mexican publishers thought Anne Frank to be an interesting topic for their biographical comic book series (AFc II, III, IV). Like many of these popular pulp comics, often created by anonymous artists, they were a mixture of educational publications and entertainment products. Anne Frank's experiences were shown as an exemplary life, like the saints and other inspirational Christians whose lives were presented in religious publications for a wide audience. In fact, in the series on "Famous Women" the Jewish Anne was placed in an environment that had catholic characteristics like the painting of the Holy Virgin in Anne's hiding place (mistakenly situated in a basement).

The publication of these three comics was partly the result of the Mexican fascination with good and evil, and of the popularity of various World War II themes, even though it was considered to be mainly a European affair. At the same time, the large production of Mexican comics simply seemed to run out of suitable topics for new comic books. Yet, instead of reprinting or plagiarizing the first Mexican Anne Frank comic, new comics were made. Undoubtedly they were all inspired by the U.S. movie and theatre play, but not so much by the previous Mexican comic book

² Although Anne Frank's father Otto, who had survived the Holocaust, wanted his daughter to be played by Audrey Hepburn, the teenage character was eventually played by the actress Millie Perkins.

portrayals.

3. Spreading towards other continents

The next Anne Frank comic appeared in Asia, around 1973. This Filipino edition of *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Rodolfo Lofamia was framed in an American way (AFc V). The U.S. concept of *Classics Illustrated* had already reached the Philippines in the late 1940s where it was adapted to meet local needs and tastes under the name *National Classic Comics*. The Anne Frank comic in this series strongly creates the impression of a romantic story with characters dressed up in fashionable postwar clothing. Although World War II was part of the national history of the Philippines, the Holocaust remained a far away phenomenon. Against this background the comic became a somewhat a-historical narrative based on clichés about "an impossible love under difficult circumstances". The result was a comic that was less educational than entertaining.

Despite the increasing number of translations of her diary, only one Anne Frank comic was published in the 1980s. In the beginning of this decade the first European Anne Frank comic appeared in Italy (AFc VI). In a Christian inspired collection of pacifistic biographical sketches of famous people, Anne Frank was represented amidst Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. This idealistic and educational framing differed from the rather entertaining aim of two more Anne Frank comics that appeared in Mexico from 1991 onwards (AFc VII, XIII).

From then on, Anne Frank also made a threefold appearance in Japan. The first Anne Frank manga, titled *The Girl Who Lives Forever in the Hearts of Peace Loving People*, was published in 1992 (AFc IIX). The title alone suggests a kind of pacifism reminiscent of the comic in that other former Axis-country, Italy.

The important role Anne Frank played in the Japanese perception of World War II, partly due to her positive and pacifistic outlook and her position as a victim, was also underlined in a world history text book created in the manga medium which was devoted to *World War II and Hitler the Dictator* (AFc IX). Her appearance on the front cover—and elsewhere—in the book as the only "ordinary citizen" among war leaders like Hitler, Stalin and Churchill emphasizes not only her appealing qualities as an

individual symbolizing the human costs of man-made atrocities, but also explains to the reader that the Holocaust, even from an Asian perspective, was not just an ordinary detail in the history of this global war. Any hesitation on illustrating the Holocaust with a comic book character was absent here.

The strong educational aim of this book is as obvious as in the so-called Edu-Manga, a publication by Tezuka Production that appeared in 2001 (AFc XI). In this book, Astro Boy shows up from time to time to help young readers understand Anne Frank's experiences. When this *Atomu Poketto* was published in an American edition in 2006 (AFc XIa) the success of this book was rather modest despite Tezuka's increasingly appealing status on the American comics market. The combination of a fictional hero with a historical character who is connected to such a painful, still very prominent episode, may explain its limited popularity. Different from the situation in the early 1960s—and more than a decade after Spiegelman's groundbreaking graphic novels—the problem does not primarily seem to be that comics are not considered suitable for representing the Holocaust, but simply that the reality of the Holocaust is not to be mixed with characters from a fictional background.

Perhaps that makes it understandable why two other publishers in the very same year, 2006, decided to come up with two new educational comic books on Anne Frank for the American market. The first one, simply titled *Anne Frank* was a joint effort of two writers and three illustrators (AFc XIV). Its publisher, World Almanac Library in New York State, integrated it in its Graphic Biographies series, which obviously tried to profit somewhat from the recent popularity of the graphic novel-phenomenon. The second competitor to the Astro Boy mediated comic was *The Life of Anne Frank*, originally a British comic by Nicholas Saunders (AFc XV) that also appeared in a parallel US edition (AFc XVa). According to the publisher this full-color "factual look at story of Anne Frank" was presented in "a fast-paced, edgy graphic novel format including bright, action-packed scenes". However, additional "fact boxes" and a timeline, glossary and index strongly overshadowed the action-packed scenes, turning the book into a not-so-attractive reading experience.

A less formal and more successful attempt to present her to a young audience, using subtle humor while respectfully trying to represent some central issues of Anne

Frank's Holocaust experience, was Gary Northfield's two page comic strip "Anne Frank. The young girl whose famous diary has inspired millions" (AFc XVII). It appeared in 2009 as part of a comics series on *The world's greatest heroes* in the UK magazine *National Geographic Kids*.

4. An icon in popular culture

In Northfield's approach Anne is introduced to young readers who have probably not heard of her before, and are unlikely to know much about the history of World War II. That may be characteristic of historical comics with an educational aim (be it in various degrees). However, a new development can be observed when studying Anne Frank comics representations from the last decade. In the examples from this latest wave, Anne Frank no longer needs an introduction. She is now easily recognized as an icon in popular culture, whose meaning has grown beyond her own existence. And perhaps equally remarkably here are the cross-media references.

The French *bande dessinée* author Frédéric Boilet was the first to approach her in this way. In 1999 he contributed "Hohoemidô—La Cérémonie du sourire—Smile Ceremony" to the prestigious collection *Comix 2000* from the progressive Parisbased publisher l'Association (AFc X), a world wide state of the art comics collection without any written dialogue. The transnational frame was explicitly visible in Boilet's comic narrative, who as a French artist benefiting from his current residence in Japan, also referred to the historical work of Katsushika Hokusai. Later on, this story was integrated into the collaborative comic book *Mariko Parade* by Boilet and Takahama Kan, which first appeared in Japanese (AFc Xa).

Boilet's comic focuses on the smile—or at least, on the lips—of a number of people whose faces are shown in some well-known photographs and illustrations, redrawn by the artist and gently presented here by a Japanese woman in the intimacy of what appears to be a private home. The pictures include portraits of an anonymous French soldier of World War I, the pilot of the Enola Gay Paul W. Tibbets, and Anne Frank. This comic episode ends with some panels inspired by work of Hokusai from the early 1840s in which the female Japanese presenter transforms into a lion dancer with a sword, holding up a fan with a smile on it, hiding the woman's face as well

as her emotions. The story, apart from playing with the tension between private and public, suggests that a smile, despite its public attractiveness that is generally interpreted in a positive way, can very well hide the tragic historical circumstances of these people's lives. This underlines how much Anne Frank has become a global iconic character, easily recognized, but also reduced to a rather simplistic message of hope despite the circumstances.

Boilet's Anne Frank, reduced to a photograph, was a kind of passer-by in this story, one of several characters each with only a limited number of frames. A somewhat similar appearance occurred in a comic book from 2009 called *Le groom vert-de-gris* [The Verdigris Bell-Boy] by the French authors Yann and Olivier Schwartz (AFc XVI). These comics artists were given the opportunity to make a one-shot story of the classic Belgian characters Spirou & Fantasio, who in the postwar Franco-Belgian comics universe, had been strong competitors to the famous Tintin.

Yann and Schwartz's retro-oriented story was loaded with tongue in cheek references to the rich history of Belgian comics. Their story took place in and around the Belgian capital in 1942 and 1944, in the middle of the German occupation of Brussels and immediately after the liberation by the Allied Forces. The protagonists Spirou and Fantasio are resistance fighters against the Nazis but as Spirou is performing an under cover operation, he appears to be collaborating with the Germans. Once the Germans find out that Spirou is betraying their secrets, they try to arrest him. While escaping over the rooftops of Brussels, he discovers a young Jewish girl, apparently hiding from persecution, who helps him to stay out of sight from the Nazis. Never having kissed a boy, she asks him a favor. After their kiss, she wishes him good luck and they part. Two years later, right after the liberation, Spirou returns to the house where they met, only to find out she was deported to the east and killed. Thinking of her he walks away sadly, among ignorant crowds celebrating the liberation. Once he runs into his old pal Fantasio, the girl isn't mentioned anymore.

Although the fifteen year old Jewish girl is named Audrey in the comic—referring to the actress who was supposed to play her character in the 1959 U.S. movie—she is easily recognizable as Anne Frank. The artistic freedom of the creators to rename her, as well as to move her from the Dutch to the Belgian capital, expresses

how much she has become an icon in popular culture. Her meaning reduced to a few elements, she can now easily be placed in a different context. Nevertheless, this mixed presentation of an indirect reference to a real-life Holocaust victim in a fictional story caused a certain amount of unease among critical observers, somewhat comparable to the lack of American enthusiasm for Astro Boy's involvement with the Anne Frank story in the US.

The most far-reaching example of placing Anne in a different context, finally, is the underground web-comic *Anne Frank Conquers the Moon Nazis* (AFc XII). This U.S. production by Bill Mudron remains unfinished up to this day, but started to appear on the Internet in 2003. In this what-if narrative Anne Frank's remains are discovered in the former concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen and flown to a U.S. laboratory in 1955. A mad German scientist working for an unnamed American agency receives the order to bring her back to life, but his secret goal is to turn her into an invincible robot that will destroy the United Nations assembly, so that Hitler can return to earth to conquer the world. In the 1980s Anne Frank is finally resurrected as a killing machine, although that does not stop the lab's young janitor from falling in love with her. This fictitious and politically incorrect web-comic goes way beyond the facts and established interpretations of Anne Frank, but can still be placed within the regular narrative scheme of good American citizens versus the evil Nazis.

Conclusion

Exploring the comic book representations of Anne Frank shows how creators and publishers have ventured beyond the battlefields in their portrayal of World War II events. Atrocities like the Holocaust have been dealt with both before and after Spiegelman's *Maus* and Nakazawa's *Barefoot Gen*. This case study also makes us aware of the diversity in aims, such as entertainment, educational purposes or a mixture of both. More recently, a more distanced and liberal approach can be noted, characterized by literary elements, intertextuality and cross-media references. The reception of these diverse graphic narratives indicates a variety in expectations visà-vis comics, concerning what is possible and suitable. That is an important cultural phenomenon which is developing over time and shows national and regional

differences. The continuously changing expectations concerning what (both mainstream and subcultural) comic books can present and should present deserves further attention.

Topical cross sections—such as the representation of global events like World War II—may help us to understand the transnational developments in comics history. Yet, this case study indicates a rather limited awareness among comic creators of previous and foreign Anne Frank graphic representations. Apart from exceptional characters like Tintin, Superman and Astro Boy, the comics universe does not seem to have a strong historical consciousness of previous characters and narratives. Up to a certain degree comics have been a medium without a memory. But the recent examples by Boilet and Yann suggest that this is changing somewhat, though it remains to be seen whether this is a worldwide development. Transnational influences in comics are still hard to identify. Nevertheless, the references that comics make to other media emphasize the wider international context of both popular culture and high culture in which they operate. Analyzing the meaning and role of comics, including the transnational similarities and differences, demands attention for this larger context, in order to establish its ever changing position as a cultural phenomenon.

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N.N. (1967): *Ana Frank. Mujeres Célebres* [Famous Women] Vol. VII, 74. México: Editorial Novaro.

AFc IV (Mexico 1972)

N.N. (1972): *Ana Frank. La Judia* [Anne Frank: The Jewess]. Muertes Tragicas [Tragical Deaths] No. 46. México D.F.: Editorial de La Parra (EDPA).

AFc V (Philippines 1973), AFc Va (UK 2009)

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