

Researching comics on a global scale

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Historically and geographically, the comics medium seems to exhibit an enormous variety in production, distribution, consumption, and formal and thematic characteristics. Unlike cinema, with its international co-productions and its outsourcing practices, production of comics is still dominantly a local enterprise.¹ Though countries such as Japan, the U.S., France and Belgium cultivate a proper national production, their output is in itself quite diverse and heterogeneous. For instance, in the U.S., publishers, critics and readers alike generally make a distinction between *comic strips* (or *funnies*) published in newspapers, the serial volumes of *comic books* (nowadays associated with superheroes), the one shots, called *graphic novels*, and translated manga. Moreover each category has seen a considerable development in time; for instance, the popularity of particular genres can be quite volatile. In 1950, a quarter of the comic books published were romance comics (Goulart 1991: 172, Robbins 1999: 54), yet today they are almost extinct. So each publication format (Lefèvre 2000) should not only be considered in its local situation, but also in its historical context. Furthermore a comics author usually works on only one type of comic² and a publisher

1 Exceptional examples of transnational productions are the comic book *Silver Surfer* (1988) written by the American Stan Lee and drawn by the French Moebius, and *Ikaru* (2000) written by Moebius and drawn by the Japanese artist Taniguchi Jirō. Arguably the only really important transnational creation enterprise in the comics field is Disney with various local European editions, in which artists from the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and France are producing Disney-like comics or comics with famous Disney characters adapted to their national cultures.

2 The term “comic(s)” is used in this text as a general term involving drawn sequences from every nation, including thus not only English comic strips, comic books and graphic novels but also *bande dessinée*, *manga*, *fumetti*, *historietta*, *Bilderbogen*, *tebeos*, *beeldverhalen*, *manwha*, etc.

often specializes in one particular publication format. For example, some writers such as Stan Lee have always worked for the comic book industry, and press syndicates such as King Features are specialized in comic strips, just as alternative publishers like Fantagraphics are in graphic novels. This division among comics at the production phase is also reflected in the later phase of reception. Different publication types of comics have always occupied a different cultural space and served a different audience (Duncan and Smith 2009: 6-7). It is uncommon for readers to like buying or reading comics of various types; rather, they generally stick to a certain type (Smeets 2009: 75). Likewise, most critics and comics scholars are similarly divided according to particular types of comics, because only an extremely small proportion of secondary literature on comics deals with the comics medium in general or compares various types or national traditions. Even so-called comics specialists are knowledgeable in only a fragment of the total production.³

To form a better balanced view of the comics medium we certainly need more comparative research, but there are several obstacles. Since everybody is raised within a particular culture and language that he or she knows well, it takes a lot of effort to learn about other cultures and understand their language. There are on the whole not enough translations available to have a representative idea of another national production. For instance, almost no manga from the prewar period have been translated into other languages. Thus, except for the especially interested Europeans and Americans who can read Japanese, those prewar manga remain largely unknown outside Japan—though they are shortly mentioned in non-Japanese introductions to

³ This became very clear in the international survey among comics specialists to make a list of the 100 most important comics and comics authors of the XXth Century, organized by the Portuguese Amadora comics festival in 2004. Among the 100 elected comics of the 20th Century were 50 from the United States of America, 19 from France, 10 from Belgium, 6 from Great Britain, 5 from Argentina, 4 from Italy, 3 from Spain and only 3 from Japan. Given the fact that Japan has been the biggest producer of comics for the last decades, this is a remarkably low number. This result can be partly explained by the way the survey was compiled. By and large, the panel was dominated by representatives of two large comics cultures, North America (18) and France (19); then came Italy (7), Brazil (6), Spain (5), Belgium (4), Great Britain (4), Argentina (2), Norway (2) and only one representative each from Canada, Germany, Hungaria, Switzerland, Finland, Japan, Sweden, India and Singapore. So, among the participants there were only three Asians of whom just one was Japanese. Therefore, it was clear that manga did not rank high among the European and North American comics specialists who took part in the survey (Lefèvre 2006).

manga (a.o. Schodt 1983, Groensteen 1991, Gravett 2004, Koyama-Richard 2007). However, even if every comic was translated into other languages, the totality of published comics would simply be too large to be read and studied by one individual. A solution therefore is more international collaboration between researchers from various countries. For instance, for an entry of 3000 words on the broad issue “European comics” for an American comics encyclopedia, I not only based my text on primary and secondary sources in six different European languages, but I also sent my first draft to various colleagues from different European countries (Lefèvre 2010). Thanks to the remarks and suggestions of those comics specialists from France, Portugal, Italy, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia, the text gained in quality and became better balanced. Though the basic concept and structure remained mine, it became a text that was impossible for solely one person to deliver. While it is impossible for one person to have a perfect view on all these different national comics productions in Europe, a group of collaborating researchers can clearly surmount this problem—that is, if they are open to such collaborations, which is certainly not always the case. Really international interactions and exchanges between scholars are still quite rare. There are, of course, plenty of international compilations of articles, but generally they don’t involve any intense collaboration or interaction. International comparisons can also make the position of one’s own national production clearer, because not only will variations or contrasts become visible, but similarities among various national productions will also surface. Finally, thanks to such comparisons, a better balanced idea of the comics medium will be obtained.

For a start, this article proposes a model that can serve in comparative comics research. It is crucial to understand that a medium such as comics involves not only aesthetic or thematic aspects but also economic and social ones; hence comics should be studied from three complementary angles. Firstly, on an institutional level, one can look at how comics are produced and consumed. Secondly, comics themselves can be compared on a formal level, by focusing on their formal properties. And finally, the contents can be analyzed by looking for similarities among genres, themes and characters, etc.

Firstly on an institutional level we can find many similarities in the way comics

are produced and consumed in various countries. For instance, all around the globe the creative work on a comic is generally done by a very limited number of people. Contrary to other media such as film or theatre, a small team (or even one individual artist) can suffice to produce the work in making a comic. Though in essence comics involve only a small scale creative enterprise, the authors themselves do not operate in a vacuum. To a certain extent they typically take into account the wishes of their public and their employer, the publisher. The system of editors controlling the line of a particular comics series is for instance well established in the American comic book industry (Rogers 2006: 511) and the Japanese manga industry (Kinsella 2000: 55-61). Except in the case of one shots, a comics artist is generally limited by the publication format in which his comics are published (Lefèvre 2000). A publication format poses not only formal and thematic constraints, it also implies a particular cultural space, but one does not have to consider this influence as purely deterministic because within certain limits enormous variations are still possible. Making a funny newspaper comics strip, a superheroes comic book series, or an autobiographic one shot implies by and large different products aimed at quite different types of readers.

Also on the level of distribution of comics one can see not only many similarities but also some important differences. Before the popularization of the internet in the late 1990s, some larger organization was needed to publish and distribute comics nationwide—and even more on an international scale. In the pre-internet era the two main ways of publishing comics were on the one hand, integrating them as part of a general daily or periodical (sold in press shops and drug stores or mailed directly through a subscription) and on the other hand, producing comics as autonomous commodities (e.g. trade paperbacks, albums, tankōbon) which were mainly sold both in general book shops or in specialized retailers. The first type is quite similar in various countries; one will find, for instance, the same type of short gag strips (of a few panels) in newspapers around the globe. By contrast, the second big publication type, the book edition, varies strongly in its material shape and its visual appearance. For instance, in the French region the dominant format is of forty-eight full color pages with a hard cover. But in Japan, tankōbon, a softcover pocket format of about 200 pages (mostly in black and white) is the dominant type of comic book publication. Yet regardless

of these important production differences, most comics from various nations share a fundamental characteristic, namely the importance of series. Unlike the field of novels or movies, the idea of a comic as work of its own is remotely inferior to the idea of comics as a serial product. In some countries such as the U.S. or France one shots may be growing in numbers these last decades, but they still remain only a very small part of the complete production (*The Comics Chronicles* 2010, Ratier 2009).

In fact there is also a third type of comics distribution, and that is the specialized comics magazine, which consists mainly of various serialized comics. These magazines are sold in press stands or mailed directly through subscription. In the middle of the twentieth century they were the most common way of publishing comics. In the U.S. they took the form of comic books, while in Europe and Japan that of various specialized comics magazines (in Europe, famous titles were *Tintin*, *Spirou*, and *Pilote*; in Japan *Weekly Shōnen Sunday* and *Weekly Shōnen Jump*). Today the situation is quite different. While in Europe only very few comics magazines are still being published and in the U.S. comic books became a niche product (Rogers 1997), in Japan magazines are still going on quite strongly. So with the exception of some countries like Japan, in most comics-producing countries the market has shifted or is shifting from periodicals to book publications.

In addition to the way comics are being produced and distributed, comics research should also look at the role comics play in a society. In less democratic or developing countries comics may be used more as an educational or propaganda tool (Douglas and Malt-Douglas 1994, Lent 2006), but in more developed countries, more than 95% of comics are entertainment; however this does not necessarily exclude propagandistic or educational effects. Although in a few countries such as Belgium and France the government is subsidizing the so-called artistic part of the creation, and countries such as South Korea and Japan are actively promoting the international distribution of their comics, publishing comics remains largely a capitalistic enterprise. When the sales of a series are not profitable, a publisher will most likely cancel the publication. In modern times publishing comics alone no longer suffices for an ambitious company; thus the role of merchandising and the adaptation of comics into other media (such as film, animation or game) is of growing importance to maximize

profits. Moreover there are also some very particular practices limited to some countries; for example the system of lending comics in Japan (*kashihon*) and Korea (*manhwabang*) never had an equivalent in Europe or the Americas, except for book cafés becoming trendy in the 1990s.

Linked to the ways comics are distributed, it is also worthwhile to research how comics are consumed. What are the profiles of the readers? What are their motivations? How do they make sense of the comics they read? Though comics production has never been a one-way communication from sender to receiver, the interaction between readers and producers has become more direct and intense in recent decades. Think of fanzines, amateur comics reusing characters, blogs, conventions, cosplay, and communities on the internet.

Though the early comics of the 19th century were destined for an adult readership, comics have mostly been viewed as something for children since the 20th century. It is only in the last decades of the 20th century that more adult oriented material was produced and the medium received more serious artistic recognition. After waves of the foremost comics criticism, the medium became more accepted by the 1970s, and in the 1990s governments began to acknowledge the cultural role of comics, typified by a boom of stamps with comics characters, several campaigns supporting international distribution of national productions, official awards for famous artists, the construction of comics museums (a.o. Brussels, Angoulême, Groningen, Kyoto), and organized courses at universities. This all happened quite simultaneously in the U.S., various European countries and a few East Asian countries (such as South Korea and Japan). Of course there are always variations between different countries, but on the whole one can see some remarkable parallel evolutions. For example, before the start of television, comics reading was a major leisure activity for children in all the comics-producing countries, but some national comics businesses reacted differently to the growing popularity of television. For instance, Japan saw a strong collaboration between manga and the anime business in the sixties, supporting each other (Kinsella 2000). This was, however, not the case in various other countries. While comics weeklies and monthlies in Europe lost readers in the last decades of the 20th century, in Japan there was still a growth in the sales of manga magazines until 1994 (Kinsella 2000: 40-43). In Europe

the album market started to flourish from the 1970s, in the U.S. the so-called graphic novels had started selling by the 1980s, and from the 1990s onward Japanese manga started invading the comics markets of various countries throughout the Americas and Europe, while only very few American or European comics are translated into Japanese.

Summing up this first level of comparison between productions and reading habits of various nations, it has become clear that it is already worthwhile making comparisons on the institutional level, because not only similarities and parallel evolutions can be detected, but also very telling differences or variations between various types of comics or various national productions of comics.

A certain publication format not only occupies a particular cultural space, it is also typified by some formal characteristics concerning the arrangement of panels or page lay-out, the way the scenes are represented, the way texts are combined with visual elements, and the way short gags or longer stories are constructed. Formal analysis is thus the second level of comparative Comics Studies. Indeed, each publication format contains an aesthetic system with a set of norms that offers a bounded set of alternatives to the individual creator of comics (Lefèvre 2000, Lefèvre and Meesters 2008, Hebert & Lefèvre 2008). Today's publication formats such as the daily strip, the Sunday page, the comic book, the European album or the mangazine use conventions not only regarding the dimensions of the publication or the arrangement of panels, but use also conventions regarding drawing styles or narrative structures. For instance, let us take a closer look at the aesthetic system of the comic strip or *koma manga*. Nowadays the typical comic strip in a newspaper or weekly consists of just a limited number of panels (usually three to four panels), and these panels are arranged in a horizontal direction (U.S. and Europe) or in a vertical direction (Japan). The Japanese use four identical panels of the landscape type, while the panels in American and European gag comics prioritize the portrait or square type. In fact various American, European or Asian creators (a.o. *Peanuts*, *Ferd'nand*, *Sazae-san*) work with identical panels. Sometimes this makes it possible to print the gags in two tiers (of two panels) or as a vertical row of four panels. Some (such as Bill Watterson for *Calvin and Hobbes*, or Alfonse Wong for *Old Master Q*) use the four identical panels quite often but not

systematically. On the whole, these days there are two big groups within this category of newspaper strips; the largest group has always been the gag comic, the smaller group consisting of continuing stories. The prototypical core of each type consists of proper stylistic and thematic elements. For instance, gag comics are usually rendered in a uniform and sober but caricatural clear line drawing style, and backgrounds are only minimally represented. Furthermore, most are long-running series based around a limited cast of recurring protagonists. Though originally conceived for publication in a newspaper, the one tier gag comic can be also published in other types of periodicals. For instance, there are Japanese *yon koma manga* (lit. four panels gag comics) such as *Azumanga Daiō* (Azuma Kiyohiko 1999-2002), which was conceived for the monthly shōnen magazine *Gekkan Komikku Dengeki Daiō*. Almost all contemporary comic strips in newspapers use the concept of the balloon to incorporate dialogues of the characters. Concerning the narrative structure of comics in the case of gag comics, a joke is prepared in the first panels and the punchline is reserved for the final panel. In the case of a continuing story comic, each episode will present a part of a developing story and the last panel of an episode will generally be reserved for some kind of cliffhanger, so that the reader is motivated to look for the next episode (and to buy the daily or weekly again). Such formal analyses could be conducted about other types of comics as well.

On a third level, international comparative comics analysis can also focus on the content, because it can be very fruitful to analyze to what extent similar types of protagonists or antagonists are applied, to determine the favorite locations or time periods of stories, and to see which themes are more often played on than others. One can try to find out if the *kyara* is just a typical characteristic of some Japanese comics (Itō 2005), or if there are traces of *kyara* in other national traditions too. One can also compare the international similarities or differences within a particular genre. For instance, some genres such as the funny family comic are quite universal. Some very famous titles are *Bringing Up Father* and *Blondie* in the U.S., *La Familia Burron* in Mexico, *Sazae-san* in Japan and *Andy Capp* in the UK. It is interesting to determine which aspects they all have in common and to what extent they are very different from each other. Such comparisons can also be made for many other widespread genres such

as the funny animal comic or the mischievous child comic.

By way of conclusion I would like to stress again that for a better theoretical and historical understanding of the comics medium, far more transnational comparative research is needed. Though I have pointed out the importance of looking for similarities between various national productions, this must not be interpreted as a classic reductive structuralist approach, because variations and historical context should also be taken into account. It would be especially interesting from a historical viewpoint to find out how some genres or styles traveled from one country to another and to see what kind of variations this global evolution has produced. For this kind of global comparative research, international teams of researchers should closely work together, hence it seems evident researches will have to conduct some original archival research, and some empirical, quantitative methodology seems appropriate as well. These are two definite fields where comics scholarship is still particularly weak and underdeveloped, since quite personal close readings based on a limited number of comics are still prevalent in the field.⁴ In any case, historical and international contextualization, both in the narrow sense of comics history and in the broad socio-political sense, seem to me of paramount importance. To learn more about ourselves, we will have to cross borders!

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⁴ However, there are also signs that things may be changing. The European Commission's Culture Program 2007 is subsidizing an international research program about the popular roots of European culture through films, comics and serialized literature. This sounds very promising, but we still have to wait for the first round of publications to evaluate the results.

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