Editorial

Among the many new books on comic strips published in the past year one of the most provocative has been Nicolas Rouvière's *Astérix ou la parodie des identités* ['Asterix or the Parody of Identities'].¹ Rouvière provides a fascinating analysis of questions of national identity in René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's famous series of albums. *Grosso modo*, he suggests that the strips undermine hard nationalist prejudices, to create universal understanding between peoples. Rouvière contends that the *Astérix* series encourages the French to question the myths of their own national identity, and satirises their stereotyping of their neighbours (the French image of the British, the Belgians, the Swiss, etc.). He concludes that *Astérix* runs counter to a world based on the 'clash of civilisations' model famously employed by Samuel Huntington. Rouvière's analysis is sophisticated, and it is not possible to do justice to it in this brief editorial. A nuanced writer, he thoughtfully develops his thesis on this pre-eminent example of French and European popular culture. His insights are especially astute when he recognises that employing national stereotypes in comics is a politically sensitive strategy that is difficult to carry out without perpetuating those very stereotypes. For example, Goscinny and Uderzo seem occasionally to repeat prejudices about peoples, cultures and nations, without clearly mocking them. Rouvière worries that there may be this type of insensitivity in *Astérix gladiateur* (1964), wherein Goscinny and Uderzo recycle stereotypes about Arabs and Jews. In addition, Rouvière acknowledges that some of the national representations in *Astérix*, notably of the British and the Swiss, make fun of individualism, *per se*. Here, Goscinny and Uderzo develop a critique that is not exclusively about national stereotypes. Their jokes go beyond making fun of French readers' views of the British and the Swiss, to score a further political point about the need for community. Rouvière also pays special attention to the

1 Nicolas Rouvière, *Astérix ou la parodie des identités* ['Asterix or the Parody of Identities'] (Paris: Flammarion, 2008). The work follows his earlier treatment, *Astérix ou les lumières de la civilisation* ['Asterix or the Lights of Civilisation'] (Paris: PUF, 2006).

narrative and imagery of *Astérix et les Goths* (1963). He suggests that the recent collective memory of the Second World War made it impossible for Goscinny and Uderzo to mock French national stereotypes about the Germans in that book. Nevertheless, Rouvière concludes his study with the claim that *Astérix* promotes 'une véritable utopie constructive du lien à l'autre' ['a genuine utopia that builds links with the other'].² However, it is also worth remembering, as Rouvière acknowledges, that *Astérix* remains a very traditional national hero. He symbolises French wit, creative genius and good humour, and is a patriot who repeatedly defeats the enemy forces, the Romans.³ This fictional narrative is obviously very different from the military facts of so much twentieth-century French history, beyond just the history of the Roman occupation of Gaul.

Readers of *Astérix* who are accustomed to British comics, and therefore primed by domestic war stories of heroism and espionage, and ignorant of French national legends of the Franks and the Gauls, may tend to read the books as metaphorical re-enactments of the French resistance struggle against Nazi occupation. Rouvière does not dwell on questions of international reception of the series. This is a pity, because there are interesting tensions to analyse between ideologies embedded in works by their producers and how different foreign communities of readers receive and consume images and words in imported texts.

Coincidentally, it is also worth mentioning briefly that Rouvière is not the only recent commentator to offer new interpretations of the *Astérix* mythology. Editors at *ECA* noted that in the run-up to the 2007 French presidential elections, Nicolas Sarkozy mentioned the series in his essay *Témoignage*. Therein, he invited the French to stop living up to their reputation of being defensive and inward-looking, like *Astérix* and his fellow villagers. For him, *Astérix* is now a useful shorthand for counterproductive international relations.⁴

The articles published in this issue of *ECA* also address relationships between comic art and national identity. The approaches of most of the authors differ from Rouvière's, and indeed also from Sarkozy's, reading of *Astérix*. The binary logic of the 'for or against the nation?' question is avoided here. Similarly, the majority of contributors steer a course away from analysing where comic art has unproblematically supported grand narrative celebrations of national valour (like *Astérix*, again, or *Superman* in the USA). Instead, each writer unpacks a series of more intricate aspects of representations of national identities. For instance, several contributors site their interventions on the crossroads between national cultural values and powerful trans-national currents. They point to forces such as linguistic conflicts, trans-national colonial oppression (British and French),

2 Rouvière, *Astérix ou la parodie des identités*, 235.

3 See also James Steel, 'Let's Party: *Astérix* and the World Cup (France 1998)', *The Francophone Bande Dessinée*, ed. Charles Forsdick, Laurence Grove and Libbie McQuillan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 201–218.

4 Nicolas Sarkozy, *Témoignage* (Paris: XO, 2006), 270.

and international cultural collaborations. Likewise, several of the contributors highlight how internal community politics have an impact on artists and their works. The images that cartoonists produce of themselves and their communities are deeply coloured by domestic ideological, linguistic and religious coalitions and conflicts. Comics project national images around the world, but they also function as a means through which to negotiate different internal models of the national idea.

Jan Baetens opens the issue with his analysis, 'North and South'. Here he meticulously charts the unique dynamics which are at play in Belgium, a country where many artists avoid celebrating national identity in any conventional or didactic fashion. He explains this absence through an extremely rich theoretical exposition that, we are confident, will renew reflection on the theme. Fabrice Leroy reflects on the concept of the French language as a marker of identity. Among other things, his original study of Cajun community comics demonstrates the role played by the French language in creating a proto-national-linguistic community in Louisiana. Martha Kuhlman's essay also takes up a de-centred perspective, by analysing a cross-national publishing project which brought together French artists and the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal's novella, *Příliš hlučná samota* ['Too Loud a Solitude']. In the innovative French *bande dessinée* adaptation of that story, conventional national boundaries disappear altogether, with images of Lyons standing for original literary descriptions of Prague, and narratives from central European history being retold so as to highlight the global plight of industrial workers.

Similarly, Mark McKinney's work runs counter to the idea that after colonialism, France, Europe and Africa can be separated into neat geopolitical and cultural packages. He explores how comics and cartoons are being created with great passion and style in the French language in Algeria. Just as importantly, his development of the original concept of the 'affrontier' pinpoints how debates over national politics, religion and gender, shape the comic-art scene. This issue also focuses on the ways in which artists promoted their nation's glories in their works, through Annie Renonciat's impressive historical research on the Arthème Fayard publishing house, and its manufacturing of patriotic popular culture. Her detailed analysis of material from Fayard perfectly captures a high point of patriotic fervour in France during and after the First World War.

Finally, in an article-length review Amanda Macdonald eloquently responds to new and important work by Thierry Groensteen. We hope to continue publishing longer interventions of this type in the future. On a sad note, the journal also marks the recent death of Francis Lacassin. As Ann Miller's obituary so sensitively shows, his many contributions literally helped invent our field.

Hugo Frey

Some essays printed herein were delivered at the International Bande Dessinée Society (IBDS) Conference in London, England, in 2007. Work for that original event was very much a team effort, combining the contributions of Laurence Grove, Dominique Le Duc and Hugo Frey. The journal will no doubt from time to time gather together further thematic clusters of papers. Ann Miller and Hugo Frey worked together to bring this issue to completion. The next IBDS meeting takes place again in London, at the Institut Français and the Institute for Contemporary Art, on 19–20 June 2009. Further details are available at www.arts.gla.uk/ibds

Laurence Grove
Mark McKinney
Ann Miller
Hugo Frey