Editorial

Historical Perspectives – Theory and Practices

The five articles in this issue of *European Comic Art* briefly summarised below overlap and complement each other in interesting ways. They all take up a historical perspective, either in relation to comics theory or in relation to the politics of magazine publishing. Three of them have as their point of departure formal characteristics of the medium, offering a reappraisal of some critical terms and concepts. Three are concerned with the Franco-Belgian heritage, whether as repository of childhood memories or ideological battleground, and one with the changing British comics scene of the 1970s and 1980s. All five articles touch upon the question of borders, defended or contested, both on a formal level and in relation to cultural and national identity. This was, as it happens, the theme of the recent, and highly successful, Eighth International Graphic Novel, Comics Conference and International Bande Dessinée Society Conference held in Dundee, over five days of June this year, and we take this coincidence as indicating the continuing relevance of the subject of borders to the medium of comics.

In our first article, Chris Gavalier goes back onto the well-worn terrain of definitions of the comics medium, but by looking at it from a different angle and by calling into question some familiar terms (such as ‘narrative’ and ‘sequence’) and assumptions (for example, the distinction between ‘abstract’ and ‘representational’ or between single and multiple images), he sheds new light on the affordances of the comics medium. He uses a comic of his own, in both a representational and an abstract version, as a test case for various theoretical approaches to abstract comics and to narrative, notably those of André Molotiu and Neil Cohn. He argues persuasively that we underestimate the role of the formal interplay of abstract elements within representational comics, which he categorises as a narrative process that operates at the level of discourse rather than diegesis. Gavalier goes on to investigate the conditions under which a comic, whether abstract or representational, could be regarded as non-narrative, and finally arrives at a taxonomy of

comics types that goes beyond the boundaries of the comics medium as usually delineated, and resituates it within a wider tradition of visual art, including surrealism and abstract expressionism.

A remarkable example of the effects that can be achieved in non-narrative comics, and of a move away from representation, is offered by our second article. Benoît Crucifix revisits debates conducted in *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* during the 1980s over the *case mémorable*, or ‘memorable panel’, in which art historian Pierre Sterckx’s concentration on the single panel, both as fetishized childhood refuge and as the basis for a theorisation of the importance of the image over the sequence, was contested by Benoît Peeters, who argued that the fascination of an individual panel arose not out of its autonomy but out of its simultaneous status as a tableau, a moment seized and framed off, and as part of a linear narrative.¹ The tension between linear and tabular dimensions had been discussed earlier by Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, at the level of both panel and page, and Peeters’s own subsequent, and well-known, elaboration of it into a taxonomy of page layout, has, suggests Crucifix, eclipsed the notion of the ‘memorable panel’, which his article sets out to rehabilitate.² His analysis is centred on Olivier Josso Hamel’s *Au travail* [At work], which is interwoven with panels from Franco-Belgian comics, remembered and quoted. As Crucifix shows, Josso Hamel detaches panels from their original narrative sequence and redraws them, often without their characters, reassembling the fragments into non-narrative networks that not only reawaken childhood memories of the comics themselves but also summon up deeper sensations of absence and loss. Furthermore, non-representational elements such as blotches and squiggles tend to evoke the intense emotion invested in the making of the images over and above their function of replicating the originals. Crucifix ends his article by contrasting the merchandising of decontextualized images by copyright holders with the intimate sense of ownership that readers have over the ‘memorable panels’ that haunt them, and refers specifically to the fear of legal pursuit from the Hergé estate that led Josso Hamel to modify some panels redrawn from

1 Benoît Peeters, ‘La Case mémorable de Benoît Peeters’, *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* 65 (1985), 88–89.

2 Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, *Dessins et bulles* (Paris: Bordas, 1972), 19. See also Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, ‘Du linéaire au tabulaire’, *Communications* 24 (1976), 7–23, trans. Ann Miller as ‘From Linear to Tabular’, in *The French Comics Theory Reader*, ed. Ann Miller and Bart Beaty (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 121–138; Benoît Peeters, *Case, planche récit* (Tournai: Casterman, 1991), 34–53.

a Tintin album. A similar consideration has affected the preparation of this edition of *European Comic Art*, as we relate below.

The originator of the linear/tabular opposition alluded to above, Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, is the author of our third article. Here he returns to the vexed issue of 'specificity' and finds it to be a property not of the medium but rather of the individual artist. He coins the term *scénariographie* to denote the mobilisation by an artist of the (non-specific) codes and resources at their disposal. His chosen example is Hergé's *L'Étoile mystérieuse* [*The Shooting Star*], an exercise in the blurring of boundaries between inner and outer reality, most spectacularly dramatised in the episode of Philippulus's apparent infraction into Tintin's flat (along with the terrifyingly enormous spider), subsequently revealed to be a nightmare. This ambiguity of signs is shown to pervade the entire album, from the opening episode in which emanata (the 'stars' seen by a dazed Snowy) occupy the same space as the celestial body that will later threaten the characters, through to the spider motif, contaminated, it is suggested, by its association with a series of sinister intertextual references, including the Nazi swastika. Fresnault-Deruelle rereads this album, produced during the occupation and originally published in the 'stolen' (i.e. collaborationist) newspaper *Le Soir*, as both evidence of Hergé's antisemitism (both opportunist, given his situation, but also casually assumed) and of a desire to distance himself from the Nazism that was alien to his conservative Catholicism.³

Ideology, this time in the Cold War period, is the focus of Philippe Delisle's article on a Belgian children's comic produced in both Dutch and French in the early 1950s for a readership of Catholic children. As Delisle shows, the overt anti-Communism of pre-war children's comics – most obviously the anti-Bolshevik propagandising of Hergé's *Tintin au pays des Soviets* [*Tintin in the Land of the Soviets*] – had to be toned down in comics published in France, given that the Control Commission set up in 1949 to oversee and potentially censor the content of children's comics included not only Catholic but also Communist members (motivated as much by the need to protect French creators from American competition as by the need to protect children from subject matter deemed violent or otherwise unsuitable). The strictures imposed by the Control Commission inevitably affected most comics produced in Belgium, mainly by Catholic publishing houses, since

3 Fresnault-Deruelle's article should have been illustrated with relevant panels from the album. However, the systematic refusal of the Hergé estate to grant permission for the use of images to illustrate academic articles has ruled this out. Readers are, of course, at liberty to peruse the website of the Tintin boutique.

they did not wish to jeopardise their access to the much larger French market. However, Delisle finds that no such reticence about the inclusion of anti-Communist material is manifested in *Au pays de la grande angoisse* [In the land of great fear], a comic produced by Renaat Demoen in collaboration with a White Canon monk, and intended mainly for Belgian Catholic primary schoolchildren. His analysis brings out both the surprising violence of the comic and its explicit representation of the heroes' Catholicism as a combat against the evils perpetrated by the atheist regime in an unnamed Eastern bloc country.

Our final article, by Nicholas Robinette, also concerns a national comics production that seeks to distinguish itself from an influential same-language competitor, but in a different context and with a very different aim: he surveys two English comics magazines, *Ally Sloper* and *Escape*, published respectively in the 1970s and 1980s. Robinette begins by pointing to the limitations of narrow conceptions of national cultural production but notes nonetheless how the recent vogue for the republication of classic strips has tended to favour work by American artists and so has effectively written British comics out of narratives of origins of the medium. He then considers the context preceding the publication of *Sloper* and *Escape*, that of the dominance of American comics in the post-war period, which not only diminished the chances of British creators in getting their work published but also caused a backlash against the medium itself, led by the British Communist Party, whose determination to combat the cultural invader veered into a general stigmatisation of comics.⁴ Robinette's main focus is on the contrasting approaches of the editors of *Ally Sloper* (Denis Gifford) and *Escape* (Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury) in their efforts to raise the status of comics in the United Kingdom and to support British artists. He suggests that Gifford's vision was nostalgia-driven and aesthetically indiscriminate in its attempt to create continuity from the eponymous nineteenth-century hero to his twentieth-century successors. Moreover, although he gave much space to the work of contemporary 1970s artists, this often betrayed a regressive, racist, misogynist and homophobic version of Englishness. *Escape* magazine, a decade later, had a much wider, more open outlook: while eschewing comics that were pale copies of American mainstream originals, the editors welcomed the influence of the American underground and of European artists. In so doing, they helped create the conditions for a small-press scene that thrived

4 Robinette quotes Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of the British Horror Comics Campaign* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 26–27.

on experimentation and out of which emerged major talents such as Eddie Campbell.

Robinette's concluding statement, which we will leave you the pleasure of reading for yourselves, refers (in a non-simplistic way) to the benefits of an internationalist vision over an isolationist one, a message whose urgency we hardly need to spell out.

—*The Editors*