Introduction
Re-viewing the Past and Facing the Future

The Editors

This edition of European Comic Art begins by adopting a retrospective viewpoint and ends with a look to the future, not entirely rosy but not wholly bleak. Our first article offers a reassessment of the relationship between Hergé’s Tintin and conservative Catholic discourses of the 1930s. We then move on to a personal recollection of a landmark moment in the legitimisation of comics in France: the Cerisy conference of 1987. In our third article, two virtuoso comics autobiographers reflect (in an email discussion that took place in 2006, here translated into English for the first time) on the loss of the searching, edgy tonality of early comics life writing in favour of something more crowd-pleasing. Finally, a young Brighton-based comics artist shares her love of the medium and her experience of solidarity among her fellow artists but has a cooler appraisal of the current political scene and the health of the comics culture in the United Kingdom.

Philippe Delisle returns to the original black-and-white versions of Hergé’s first eight Tintin albums (published and re-issued between 1934 and 1942) and tracks a number of explicit references to religion (mostly expunged from later colour editions), along with a more general world view derived from the belief system of the young artist. Delisle points out that Belgian Catholicism of the 1930s accommodated diverse viewpoints, from the ultra-right wing, monarchist nationalism of Hergé’s own entourage through to liberal and democratic conceptions of the faith. The early albums show the young reporter invoking God or Providence when in a tight corner, and echoing formulae associated with the medieval crusaders celebrated by conservative Catholics. They also offer evidence of his absorption of the anti-democratic ideas propagated by the French writer Charles Maurras and taken up in Belgium by Léon Degrelle, founder of the fascist Rexist party. Delisle argues that one of
Hergé’s regular characters, the villain Rastapopoulos, is a composite of many of the attributes stigmatised by Maurras, including Protestant capitalist values, Jewishness (through his stereotypical facial appearance) and freemasonry, and he also notes that adversaries of Tintin are given the name of a liberal American cardinal, Gibbons, demonised by conservative Catholics. Furthermore, these albums offer textbook examples of Maurrassian ideology, which condemned both Communism (as portrayed in Tintin’s adventure among the Bolsheviks) and capitalism (as observed in the American odyssey and likened to gangsterism) in favour of the paternalism and charity dispensed by the young hero to various victims of oppression, often through striking images that incorporate elements of familiar Christian iconographic codes. When Tintin embarks on an expedition to the Congo, he displays a concern for the welfare of the natives that accords with an image of colonisation as a benevolent enterprise. His visit to a farm school run by missionaries may be read as an endorsement of the perpetuation of a dependent rural economy at the expense of industrial development or, in a more positive light, as resistance to the expansion of capitalist modes of production. Delisle concludes that although the ideological framework of the stories is recognisably that of conservative Catholicism, the anti-capitalism that is concomitant with it allows for the emergence of some more progressive attitudes.

In this second extract from his memoir,1 Thierry Groensteen discusses two influential conferences on comics held at the chateau of Cerisy-la-Salle in Normandy, and the founding and subsequent development of the Oubapo movement. He begins by setting the scene: Cerisy had attained mythical status among French intellectuals as a place where literary heavyweights came to joust and their would-be heirs came to imbibe the atmosphere. Notably, the theoretician Jean Ricardou influenced a generation of researchers who brought his insights to bear on comics and went on to found Les Impressions Nouvelles publishing house. Groensteen emphasises the expansive, exploratory nature of the debates, which he contrasts with the production-line model that has come to dominate academic conferences, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. The conference on comics, *Bande dessinée, récit et modernité* [Comics, Narrative and Modernity], that

1 This article appears in the original French as Chapter 8 of Thierry Groensteen, *Une vie dans les cases* [A Life in the Frames] (Paris: PLG, forthcoming in 2021, in the collection ‘Mémoire Vive’). It is published here by kind permission of Thierry Groensteen and PLG. The translation is by Ann Miller. See *European Comic Art* 13.2 (Winter 2020), 37–63 for Groensteen’s chapter on his editorship of *Les Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée*. 
he organised in 1987 brought together a plethora of French-language comics specialists and was a key moment in the cultural recognition of the medium. Groensteen’s own presentation at Cerisy considered the possibility of combining images below the threshold of narrativity and proposed the terms ‘string’, ‘series’, and ‘sequence’, the first two of which denote varying degrees of infra-narrativity. The chapter includes a heartfelt tribute to the philosopher Henri van Lier, an eccentric genius, whose coining of the term ‘multiframe’ had a lasting impact. Another presentation, by Marc Avelot, brought overdue recognition to Martin Vaughn-James’s work *La Cage*, which, as Groensteen notes, was created out of constraints (including an absence of characters) and so qualifies as a forerunner of Oubapo experiments. Groensteen went on to co-organise a second conference at Cerisy in 1993 on the topic of *Transécriture*, adaptation across media. His concluding article in the subsequent publication was an early contribution to this field. He ends the chapter with reflections on Oubapo, conceived in a workshop that he ran at the first conference, attended by Jean-Christophe Menu and Lewis Trondheim (who had, famously, just met). Groensteen details the later history of the group, along with his own reservations about the over-emphasis on public performances, the exclusive association of the group with one publisher and the failure to bring to fruition a Perec-inspired project based on *L’Immeuble*. He admits that his own creative impulses do not lead him towards formalism but offers an idea for the use of any budding Oubapian.

In their 2006 email exchange, Jean-Christophe Menu and Fabrice Neaud, both accomplished comics autobiographers, discuss the evolution of what they had seen as a radical practice into a commercial ‘genre’. Neaud traces the emergence of autobiographical subject matter as part of a movement that began in the 1990s with the aim of renewing form and content, the latter being his particular concern. He regrets that the exploration of transgressive subject matter relating to family life, religion or politics has subsequently undergone a ‘calcification’, a transformation into banal self-display that has become encoded into ‘autobiographemes’. In contrast, the endangerment to which Menu had exposed himself had led to legal action and the curtailment of his autobiographical project. Menu suggests that the debased version of


life writing in which authors represent themselves as ‘characters’ with whose nerdy preoccupations readers are expected to empathise, should more accurately be called ‘sociobiography’, since the ‘I’ is merely a social type. Neaud embarks on a metaphor in which he likens comics autobiography to an ecological niche that has been colonised by species better adapted to commercial survival, to the detriment of more fragile and distinctive organisms. This evolution towards a form of ‘low-fat’, consensual production has had an unfortunate side-effect: the terms used by critics to castigate the pioneering work by Neaud and others (‘narcissistic’, for example) really do apply to the current output. In reaction, Neaud has ceased to publish. Menu offers a different take on the critical response, suggesting that while the traditional comics press has shown its habitual philistinism, the media of the liberal establishment have welcomed, indiscriminately, a fashionable new ‘genre’. Neaud laments that a style of rapid, slapdash drawing is hailed as a marker of ‘sincerity’, a facile precept that has caused him to doubt his own abilities. The two artists finally summarise some of the clichés in which debates around comics autobiography have been couched, including the issues of ‘decency’ and ‘privacy’, moralising external judgements that have little to do with the pursuit of artistic truth. Neaud lists traits to which he is averse, notably the construction of a series of anecdotes around a congenial narrator-character. For him, the autobiographical narrator is not a ‘character’ but a subject in process, valuing incompleteness and questioning over-simplistic resolution.

In an interview with Ann Miller, the prize-winning half-Ecuadorean comics artist Hannah Berry talks about her role as UK Comics Laureate. Although her plans to use comics to promote literacy have been thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic, she has achieved one of her objectives, a survey of the conditions of work of comics artists in the United Kingdom. The results are alarming, indicating that the future of comics is being jeopardised by the impossibility for all but a few artists of making a living, but Berry has also looked for solutions, hosting online discussions within the comics community, whose mutual supportiveness she emphasises: the Comics Creators Network is one recent initiative. Berry’s own circumstances have changed in the last two years since she became a mother and has been forced to curb the incursion of work into private life, an issue that loomed large in the survey. The interview moves on to a discussion of Berry’s three published graphic novels. She talks about the influence of films on her visual style and how the need to balance a play upon the codes of the medium with realism varies according to the subject matter: satire
demands a more documentary approach than crime, for example. She describes the sheer excitement of planning out pages once the script is in place and the concern for narration to be carried by images as far as possible, which can mean sacrificing carefully written lines of text. She elaborates on her use of the paratext and the gutters, liminal spaces that are particularly exploitable in a comic, and even more so in a horror comic, in order to unsettle the reader. Berry’s most recent graphic novel, *Livestock*, is her most political yet, and she explains how a grant from Arts Council England enabled her to engage with specialists in order to do the considerable amount of research required. Her pessimism and anger about the current political situation are tempered by a belief in the power of comics, which are not subject to the censorship imposed on newspaper cartoonists. And readers of the brilliant *Livestock* have the extra pleasure of identifying the fifty or so UK comics artists who have walk-on parts, a tribute to the practitioners of what we hope is not a disappearing art.

These articles may lead us to some conclusions: comics scholarship is firmly entrenched and even flourishing. Groensteen reports that in 1987, the publication of the Cerisy conference papers was greeted by derision from the comics journalists working for *Pilote* magazine, who reacted with hilarity at what they saw as pseudo-intellectualism. Over thirty years later, it is clear that an emblematic branch of comics study, Tintinology, has long since ceased to be confined to hagiography and now benefits from erudite politico-religious analysis. On the other hand, the hard-won gains of comics artists, who have ventured into challenging subject matter and formal innovation, are under threat. Over ten years ago, Menu and Neaud were concerned that the artistic experimentation initiated by small presses of the 1990s was being drowned out by a sea of blandness as commercial publishers saw an opportunity for expanding their readership. And in 2020, we find that talented comics artists are struggling financially and that some are giving up the fray. The results of Hannah Berry’s survey, relating to the United Kingdom, accord with the findings of an enquiry undertaken by the SNAC BD (Syndicat National des Auteurs et des Compositeurs Bande Dessinée [National Union of Artists and Composers: Comics Authors]) in France in 2019. Comics artists find themselves in increasingly precarious circumstances, due in large part to a decrease in advance payments and to lower levels of remuneration per page.

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5 Paul Curie, ‘Rions un peu...’, *Pilote* 29 (Oct 1988), 95.
The SNAC BD claims that this is a matter of policy on the part of major publishers, who, it says, treat their authors with contempt by insisting that making comics is not a profession but a passion from which artists should not expect to make a living.\textsuperscript{6} Let us support our comics artists in any way that we can. In the times that we are living through, more than ever, we need their sanity and their disruptive energy.