Introduction

Comics, the Social World and Challenging Consensus

The Editors

Comics, and in particular European comics, has always engaged with the social world, whether to contest or to uphold its norms. From its antecedents in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century caricature, it inherited a strong current of satire and critique. In the adventure genre that marked the emergence of European comics in its modern form in the first part of the twentieth century, engagement with the world was no less evident, but most often served, rather, to defend the dominant order, colonial or anti-communist, as heroes set off to right wrongs in far-flung places.

It is, then, ironic that one of the most striking of twenty-first-century developments, the massive proliferation of comics blogs (the most widely viewed of which have been snapped up by publishers and made available in book format), has been seen by many as a retreat from the real. In a recent book, Québécoise comics artist and theorist Julie Delporte refers back to the famous discussion between Jean-Christophe Menu and Fabrice Neaud conducted in the journal *L'Éprouvette* [The Test Tube] in 2007 on the topic of autobiography, the tendency associated with the advent of small comics presses at the end of the twentieth century.¹ Neaud claimed that where this had once been a risk-taking enterprise in which comics authors had explored uncomfortable areas of family life, sexuality, religion and politics, it had now become conventionalized and trivialized into a formulaic genre.²

1 Julie Delporte, *La Bédé-réalité* [Reality Comics] (Montreal: Colosse, 2011); Fabrice Neaud and Jean-Christophe Menu, 'Autopsie de l'autobiographie' [Autopsy of Autobiography], *L'Éprouvette* 3 (January 2007), 450–472.

2 Neaud and Menu, 'Autopsie de l'autobiographie', 455.

Delporte takes up and extends this analysis in relation to comics blogs, focusing particularly on those of Pénélope Bagieu and Margaux Motin, whose blandly drawn textual avatars have secured celebrity status for their authors by fretting about their weight and their expenditure on shoes.³ The ‘mise en question du réel’ [calling into question of reality], as disturbing for the reader as it is for the writer, that underlies Menu’s conception of autobiography⁴ has given way in the work of these bloggers to ‘bédé-réalité’, suggests Delporte, on the model of television reality shows, in which the authors construct a personality that they promote to their readers, validating the most banal of consumerist fantasies.⁵ The mode of self-deprecating irony that pervades the work of Bagieu, Motin and their many imitators⁶ wholly lacks the satirical bite brought, for example, by Claire Bretécher in the 1970s to the ridiculing of Parisian intellectual fads,⁷ or by Christian Binet, over the last thirty years, to the demolition of the lifestyle aspirations entertained by his hapless petit bourgeois couple, the Bidochons.⁸ The reproduction by the bloggers of an unremarkable social conformity is less transparently ideological than Tintin’s adventures among evil Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union or grateful colonial subjects in the Congo, but it is far from being politically neutral in its mise-en-scène of the perfect neo-liberal individual whose project is to turn the self into a marketable product. It should be noted that Bagieu’s very high profile as a star comics artist has been rewarded by the prestigious title of Chevalier des arts et des

3 See: <http://www.penelope-jolicoeur.com> (accessed 2 January 2014), available in book format as Pénélope Bagieu, *Ma vie est tout à fait fascinante* [My Life Is Totally Fascinating] (Paris: Gawsewitch, 2008). Bagieu’s blog now includes some socially aware content in the form, for example, of petitions that readers are asked to sign relating to ecological issues, inviting from readers what Pierre Bourdieu has described as ‘des formes de mobilisation purement sentimentales et caritatives’ [purely sentimental and charitable forms of mobilization]. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur la télévision* [On Television] (Montreal: Liber éditions, 1996). This kind of material is not included in the strips collected in the book. See also: <http://margauxmotin.typepad.fr> (accessed 2 January 2014), available in book format as Margaux Motin, *J’aurais adoré être ethnologue* [I Would Have Loved to Be an Ethnologist] (Paris: Marabout, 2009) and *La Théorie de la contorsion* [The Theory of Contortion] (Paris: Marabout, 2010).

4 Neaud and Menu, ‘Autopsie de l’autobiographie’, 363.

5 Delporte, *La Bédé-réalité*, 100–197.

6 See, for example: <http://diglee.com>, published in book format as Diglee, *Autobiographie d’une fille gaga* [Autobiography of a Gaga Girl] (Paris: Marabout, 2011), *Confessions d’une glitter addict* [Confessions of a Glitter Addict] (Paris: Marabout, 2012), and *Forever, bitch* (Paris: Marabout, 2013), all written in French in spite of their titles. See also: <http://bdgirly.fr> (accessed 2 January 2014), which gives access, as its name suggests, to many ‘girly’ blogs by young women (described as ‘filles’ [girls]).

7 Claire Bretécher, *Les Frustrés* (Paris: Éditions Bretécher, 5 albums, 1974–1980).

8 Christian Binet, *Les Bidochon* (Paris: Audie, 21 albums, 1980–2012).

lettres, conferred at Angoulême in 2013 by France's Socialist minister of culture, Aurélie Filippetti.

There are, of course, many comics artists, including bloggers, whose work takes up a more questioning stance towards the world in which they live: Delporte is, in fact, herself a blogger.⁹ If we have dwelt upon a phenomenon that looms very large indeed in current comics production, this is in order to emphasize that its visibility threatens to obscure a far more varied landscape. In this edition of *ECA*, our articles are concerned with the work of comics artists who have challenged consensus, from the nineteenth century to the present day, across different cultures, and who have used innovation on a formal level to disrupt norms and expectations.

We begin with an article by Philippe Willems on Cham, the pseudonym adopted by nineteenth-century caricaturist Amédée de Noé. Willems draws attention to the transition in print culture that took place between the 1830s and the 1850s, allowing for a new flexibility in format and new relations between word and image. Within this wider context, Cham was an innovator who adapted literary techniques such as *mise en abyme*, oxymoron and synecdoche to visual storytelling. The article focuses on links between Cham's work and *Tristram Shandy*: Willems shows how Cham introduces Sterne's reflexivity into his comic strips, using unorthodox framing and inserting blind panels as a deliberate interference in transmission, impeding the reader's privileged point of view. Cham deploys a number of parodic devices to demystify canonical texts: for example, in an incursion across diegetic boundaries, he kills off characters from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* with a few well-aimed swipes from a vast pen.

Domingos Isabelinho, in an article about Héctor Germán Oesterheld (1919–1977), stresses the Argentinian writer's determination that his comics should be a force for education and thus for change in society. Isabelinho considers, in particular, the limitations imposed by the mass-cultural publishing context within which Oesterheld was working and identifies a recurrent motif of sacrifice, which has an aesthetic and ethical resonance that raises the stories above the predictable. Oesterheld's war comics were resolutely anti-war, and, at a time when the ethnic and class Other was habitually depicted through racist stereotypes, he gave a voice to those who were marginalized by setting his

9 See: <http://ledernierkilometre.blogspot.co.uk> (accessed 2 January 2014). For some comics by women authors covering a range of subject matter, see: <http://www.actuabdd.com/Catel-recoit-le-Prix-Artemisia> (accessed 24 January 2014).

stories at the periphery, not the centre. He favoured collective heroes over individuals, and used the medium to overlay political readings onto the literal events: the rich profit from the wars that they force the poor to fight on their behalf. His commitment, which included a critique of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, eventually cost him his life when he was murdered by the dictatorship in 1977, along with his four daughters and in two cases their husbands.

In an article about the new Spanish memory comics, Anne Magnussen explicitly raises the issue of how far comics both shape and are shaped by debates around dominant and dissenting versions of history. Since the early 1990s, these new comics have disputed official memories of the Civil War, and in particular the narrative constructed after the end of the dictatorship in the 1970s, according to which blame had been apportioned to a designated group and Spain could now move forwards into modernity. Rejecting both a decontextualized close reading approach and a view of comics as mass-cultural object that simply mirrors the society within which it is produced, Magnussen adopts a framework drawn from the American semiotician Charles Peirce, arguing that as a diagrammatic sign, a sub-category within the iconic sign, comics can represent society but can also allow for the creation of new meanings through reordering and selectivity. She then focuses specifically on *Cuerda de presas* [Rope of Female Prisoners], written in 2005 by Jorge García and Fidel Martínez,¹⁰ consisting of stories that move between the immediate post-war period and the date of publication. Magnussen shows how the resources of the medium, such as verbal/visual dissonance and the blurring of time frames, are brought into play to cast doubt on the reliability of narration and ultimately on what is knowable.

Finally, Alexandra Gueydan-Turek discusses a fascinating cross-cultural phenomenon: manga produced in Algeria for an Algerian readership, which she refers to as Dz-manga. Like our other contributors, she is concerned with the capacity of comics to effect societal change, and, specifically, she asks whether Dz-manga reinforces normative gender roles or proposes alternatives. Her analysis shows that whereas Dz-*shōjo* manga targets female readers and emphasizes traditional roles, Dz-*shōnen* manga is open in its address to readers of both sexes and, moreover, represents gender identity as fluid. Some take up critical distance from conventions of masculine performance, a significant departure at a time when the economic crisis has led to increased anxiet-

10 Jorge García and Fidel Martínez, *Cuerda de presas* (Bilbao: Astiberri Ediciones, 2005).

ies around masculinity. Gueydan-Turek goes on to argue that cosplay, highly popular among Algerian comics fans, provides opportunities for the subversion of gender roles, since girls can dress as their favourite male characters or as sexualized and violent female characters. The parody of gender identity works against the fixity of binaries and, furthermore, the performing of Japanese characters disrupts Algerian frames of reference.

On the evidence of these articles, comics may not be able to change reality, but it can change the way that we see that reality. Some may feel that we have been hard on the mainly female bloggers who have, after all, achieved success (judged according to the criterion of number of hits per day) in a profession hitherto dominated by men.¹¹ But if the art form that we believe comics to be persistently locks artists and readers into a relationship of recognition as ‘members of the society of consumers who are themselves consumer commodities’,¹² then what is it for? The brilliant imaginativeness of Cham, the courage and vision of Oesterheld, the refusal by García and Martínez to seek reassurance and closure, and the playfulness of the authors and fans of Dz-manga offer vistas that are considerably more inspiring.

11 However, for a more robustly worded opinion, see what Chantal Montellier has to say about ‘La Bande dessinée “girly”’ at: <http://www.montellier.org/spip.php?article207> (accessed 3 January 2014). Montellier includes a section from an even more strongly worded article by the female comics artist Tanxxx entitled ‘Les Pétasses, l’abêtissement et les éditeurs’ [Airheads, Dumbing-Down, and Publishers], which can be found in its entirety at: <http://tanxxx.free-h.fr/bloug/archives/4961> (accessed 3 January 2014).

12 Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 57.