

WHAT ARE COMICS (ONCE MORE, BUT NEVER ENOUGH...)?

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Let us start from a very simple question: what does it mean to study comics today? This question is already a very complex one, for it entails at least two sub-questions. The first has to do with the stakes of such an enterprise: why study comics anyway? The second concerns the very object of study: do we still know what comics are? There is a widespread – and, I think, legitimate – concern to prefer the former question to the latter. Rather than lose more time with matters of definition, one turns to what really matters in comics, namely the possibility to achieve some pragmatic effects in the broader field in which they appear, a gesture that may evoke the fundamental resetting of the research agenda in arts by Deleuze and Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus*¹.

However, definition issues in comics studies are very sticky and are not always easy to get rid of. First of all, they really haunt the field. Secondly, their scope is less technical than heuristic: definitions do not only help circumscribe the field, they also and more importantly help to ask new questions. In that sense, definitional matters are truly important and the distinction between the “what” and the “why” of a given approach is not so clear-cut in comics studies, given the back and forth movement between the look for new objects and the look for new insights. Hence the ceaseless fascination for a question that, in other domains of visual and cultural studies, seems so old-fashioned: what are comics? Newer, more modern or postmodern forms of visual studies turn around other questions: not “what” is a medium, but “when” or “where” or “how” or “why” is it? In this field, however, the question of the object remains vital as well as vitalizing. Questioning previous definitions and proposing new approaches, new histories, or new interpretations is still a very valuable way to explore new territories.

A good example of such a creative rereading of the comics’ corpus is offered by *Naissances de la bande dessinée*², a recent book by Thierry Smolderen, managing editor of *Coconino World*, a website specialized in the multifaceted history of the medium³. Although the focus of the essay is definitely historical – and one will immediately notice the plural of the word “birth” in its title –, the relevance of Smolderen’s new vision of comics for more contemporary discussion, for instance on the distinction between comics on the one hand and graphic novels on the other hand, is blatant as well. By sketching a new theory of the medium, *Naissances de la bande dessinée* helps to understand why the hyped discussion on the graphic novel is actually a false discussion, whose underpinnings may prevent us from understanding what comics really are or might be.

The problem with the graphic novel or, to put it more precisely, with the debate on how the graphic novel can or cannot be distinguished from the comics’ production is indeed dangerously deceiving. At first sight, the discussion is fuelled by good intentions, for it seems to reflect the desire of quality comics aficionados to “save” the high-quality (some would even say the high-

brow character) of the graphic novel from the pulp universe of the low-brow comics. Whatever one's position in this ongoing debate may be, the real problem is less the answer than the question itself. Indeed, the very comparison of comics and graphic novel is only possible if one tacitly accepts that both are narrative media. Yet such an a priori approach freezes the possible plurality and multilayeredness of the medium, which finds itself reduced to the role of a story-telling vehicle. The example of cinema scholarship, where non-narrative readings of the medium have successfully found their way against the long-time hegemonic view of film art as an exemplification of narrative art, may serve here as a serious warning against all attempts to monopolize the reading of comics under the banner of narrative. In this sense, comics studies still have much to learn from film studies, although, as Smolderen's book will suggest, film studies also have a strong interest in the development of comics studies.

Despite the author's interest in the graphic novel debate⁴, *Naissances de la bande dessinée* takes as its starting point the idea that instead of charting the contact zone between graphic novel and comics, one should leap immediately into a very different question, which is the definition of comics itself. Today, it is widely accepted that comics as a story-telling medium can be explained by a precise material infrastructure that of their "sequentiality." Will Eisner's coining of the phrase "sequential art"⁵ to define what comics are, tells us exactly that. Continuing the tradition launched by Lessing in his *Laocoon* (1766)⁶, Eisner infers the story-telling capacities of the medium from a specific way of displaying a set of images on the page: images meant to be read next to another will inevitably produce a narrative, and the reader's job is to see how the *material* succession of the panels on the *space* of the page matches – with or without surprises – the *ideal* succession of an action that is taking place in *time*. It is against this stereotyped vision of comics as sequential art that Smolderen's book will make a very different claim. He does not totally reject the definition of comics as sequential art, but what he foregrounds is the synecdochal illusion dissimulated by the comics' doxa⁷, namely that comics as sequential storytelling do of course exist, but this definition represents but a tiny part of the possibilities of the medium, which can be disclosed by a fresh reading of the medium's past.

In comics studies, the reflexion on the medium's borders or, if one prefers, on the medium's "expanded field," takes a temporal rather than a spatial form. The question is not so much to see where comics dissolve into other media, as to determine to what extent previous forms of visual storytelling with fixed images can fruitfully be included in the global discussion of the medium. Once again, such a question may seem hopelessly and naively "genealogical" (as opposed to the theoretically more robust questioning from the standpoint of a medium's "archaeology")⁸, yet in the specific case of comics studies there are good reasons to take these classic genealogical issues very seriously. The historical broadening of the corpus may indeed provoke totally new questions, as Smolderen's book makes immediately clear.

In the medium's genealogy, *Naissances de la bande dessinée* stresses dramatically the work by the 18th century engraver William Hogarth, author of narrative sequences such as the well-known *A Harlot's Progress* (1732). This starting point enables him to foreground quite a new vision of comics as the encounter of two other traditions: the satirical drawing on the one hand, and the emerging mass media of the 18th century, mainly the press and the novel, on the other hand⁹. For Smolderen, the comics as we know them stem directly from new forms of mass culture, which remediate an existing format (the juxtaposition of images that are used to tell a story) and give it a new meaning (the images are no longer just used to tell a story but to engage in a critical dialogue with the visual culture of a given era). The history of the medium as sketched by Smolderen may not be very surprising in itself, for its major steppingstones are, roughly speaking, the ones that one finds also in other histories. After Hogarth's engravings, Smolderen dis-

cusses the graphic novels by Rodolphe Töpffer (around 1840) and the illustrations in the mid- and late-19th century magazines, before analyzing the impact of the grid-model inspired by Eadweard Muybridge's chronophotographical experiences (around 1880), combining moving characters in the foreground and an immobile scenery in the background, and eventually, in the work by pioneers such as R.F. Outcault, the merger of this visual language with a new use of the already well-known technique of the speech balloon. Smolderen's story ends with a study of McCay, who both exaggerates the new format that will fix the rules of the medium in most of the 20th century (in the *Little Sammy Sneezes* series) while simultaneously charting new territories (in his *Little Nemo in Slumberland*). Yet what is totally new is Smolderen's insistence on the gap between the 20th century's forms of the medium and its older models. Contrary to all those who explain the difference between modern and older comics by relying on technical parameters, Smolderen claims that 20th century comics may have forgotten the very core business of the 18th and 19th century comics, which were less devoted to sequential narrative than to critical debate, and this will be the lens through which he reopens the comics debate.

Smolderen's work is not only genealogical. It is also theoretical, and three major ideas can be underlined in this regard. First of all, the author defends the idea that comics provide us with images that are meant to be "read," and reading here must be understood as the opposite of seeing. Of course, Smolderen does not deny that comics' images are also seen, but the emphasis on reading points to the fact that a comic's image can only be understood once it is seen as the carrier of abstract information, instead of being the more or less realistic representation of a visual reality. For Smolderen, the signification of a comic page is not determined by what it shows, but by what it symbolizes, and the symbolic meanings communicated via the image are not determined by the image itself but by the capacity of the reader to decipher and decode the symbolic value of certain elements within the drawing. It is this distinction between representation and symbolization that transforms an image into a text, as well as the act of seeing into an act of reading. The reader is supposed to browse the image in order to find symbolic elements representing not a visual referent but the abstract idea that lies behind them. Such an interpretation of the comics' language, which Smolderen considers indispensable for a good understanding of its 18 and 19th century forms, is of course at odds with the hegemonic format of comics as sequential storytelling as we have come to know them in the 20th century. Although sequential storytelling is part of all comics, it remains essential to make room once again for what has been foreclosed by the 20th century exclusive focus on it, namely the critical reflection on social discourses with the help of visual symbols (Smolderen).

A second major thesis defended by Smolderen is the idea of comics as polygraphy. Indeed, it does not suffice to stress that the comical and satirical images of a comic symbolizes and communicates ideas. One should also underscore the fact that the comics' texts are profoundly polygraphic, a term that Smolderen derives from Bakhtine's notion of polyphony¹⁰. The symbols put forward by the images of a comic are always characterized by a high degree of hybridization: they do not simply symbolize ideas, they also react to other visual symbols that they parody or caricature. Here as well, Smolderen warns us against a too literal or too realistic interpretation of his theses: to establish a critical dialogue with another visual language and its symbolic meanings does not necessarily imply that this language is directly and literally quoted or reproduced in its new context, what matters is the fact that the polygraphic language of the comics refer to the ideas or symbols as they are channelled through the system that is caricatured or parodied. Hogart for instance does not quote the historical forerunners of his *Harlot's progress* engravings (Smolderen's book reproduces fragments of the much older Italian series on the same subject that may served as the primary visual source of this work), he does so in a totally different way.

Hogarth's work introduces polyphony, his drawings become polygraphic, so that the style of his engravings can perform a social critique in itself. In this regard, *Naissances de la bande dessinée* proposes an amazing reinterpretation of the work by Rodolphe Töpffer, often considered the father of the modern graphic novel¹¹. Töpffer's main innovation, it is often argued, was firstly to merge the technique of sequential storytelling in drawings and the host medium of the book (previous forms were serialized as independent drawings or engravings), and secondly to explore the strip in a very experimental manner, which was no longer a succession of juxtaposed panels but an organic whole, both to be read from left to right and to be read as an overall composition.

Smolderen goes much further in the revalorization of Töpffer as inventor of the modern comics. For him, Töpffer's sequential art is not to be seen as an attempt to shape new, i.e. more dynamic and more medium-specific forms of storytelling, but as a ferocious critique of the very notion of "progress," the key idea of the post-Enlightenment's bourgeois industrial revolution. The idea of progress as well as the related ideas of speed and mobility, which seem to be in perfect correspondence with the language of comics as the representation of movement and action, are violently parodied and criticized by Töpffer, who uses the new language of sequential storytelling to show the absurdity of sequence, progress, movement, rapidity, etc. What Töpffer's stories show is exactly the contrary of the bourgeois ideal of innovation and transformation. They demonstrate instead the inanity of movement and progress, systematically symbolized as something purely mechanical and therefore nonhuman. Human freedom is not compatible with the straightforward application of the principles of technical progress, which Töpffer discards as a menace to liberty. This meaning, however, cannot be derived from the sole visual reading of Töpffer's books. If one wants to decode the satirical ambitions of the author, it is absolutely necessary to analyze the visual intertext of his books. Without this intertextual perspective, it is not possible to disclose the polygraphic dimension of many drawings that parody the dominating social discourse of their times.

This reading principle may seem very simple, but for the modern comic reader who is used and trained to read graphic storytelling as a form of sequential art, comics are images that are supposed to be read one after another, instead of being read as visual answers to certain ideas of their cultural context. The step from a narrative to a hermeneutic or symbolic reading is therefore not always easy to take and Smolderen claims rightfully that in many cases it is even blocked by the strength of modern hegemonic views on comics as the representation of action and movement. The main advantage of the recent graphic novel revolution, which displays the limits of the 20th century models of comics reading¹², is then to reset the agenda and to make room for non-hegemonic readings of older forms of comics.

A third and last element I would like to stress here is the importance that Smolderen gives to the interaction between comics and mass culture. As such, this interaction is not new (can one only imagine the rebirth of comics at the end of the 19th century without taking into account its integration in the newspapers of that day?), but Smolderen's approach is very innovative, not only because he opens new ground to the analysis, (he establishes relationships that have not been studied until now, such as the link with the 18th century novel in England) but he also manages to stay away from a too literal interpretation of the notion of media interaction, which he does not study in the framework of the so-called adaptation studies. Smolderen's implicit theoretical model would be here that of contemporary convergence culture, a notion coined by media theorician Henry Jenkins to conceptualize the blurring of boundaries between media and the systematic migration of ideas, forms, concepts, models, norms, behaviours, works, authors and readers from one medium to another¹³.

What Smolderen actually demonstrates in a truly convincing manner is that our postmodern convergence culture did already exist in the 18th century. Hogarth's polygraphy, for instance,

cannot be separated from the then emerging genre of the modern novel, as epitomized by authors such as Richardson and Defoe, and their intense work of polyphonic decentering of the public debate on all important social issues of the day. Corollary, Töpffer's critique of bourgeois mechanized rationalism has to be read as a polygraphic echo of the typically romantic praise of the arabesque, the oblique line, the unforeseen, in short of the essence what already for Hogarth symbolized human liberty. For Hogarth as well as for Töpffer, to be free means having the possibility to reject all fixed and rigid forms of behaviour and representation as well as having the right to avoid all forms of sterile repetition and systematization. This is the fundamental reason why Töpffer, who was a skilled draughtsman, used such a deceptively simple, if not childish style in his graphic novels: the very naiveté of the style is meant as a critique of all kind of artistic and ideological streamlining.

A third and last example of this critical interaction could be the reinvention of the speech balloon by Outcault in 1895. As it is well-known today, the speech balloon as a technical device was known since at least the Middle-Ages, and it had been used quite frequently till the 19th century, even in the magazines that published various forms of illustrations. Yet before Outcault none of those who experimented with comics as polygraphic storytelling seemed to have used this form, whose function seemed incompatible with the laws of the emerging medium. In older visual languages, the speech balloon did less denote a speech act than an act of (non-uttered) self-representation. In other words: it did not refer to what a character was saying, it represented what the author of the drawing wanted to have said by a character who had to be presented to the audience. The modern function of the speech balloon, which shifted from self-description to speech-act, was less an invention of the comics themselves than a polygraphic response to the invention of the phonograph (and it can be useful here to remember, as Smolderen does, that before his career as a cartoon artist, Outcault had been working in the advertising department of Edison).

If *Naissances de la bande dessinée* is a fascinating rereading of the comics history, it is always a study that helps raise new questions for contemporary comics, more precisely for the recent debate on the graphic novel. In order to show the importance of Smolderen's work, I would like to briefly sketch four types of inquiry that can be usefully tackled in the light of his ideas on the tension between the older forms of comics and its hegemonic 20th century form.

First of all, Smolderen suggests very clearly that comics and storytelling are two different things. They may of course coincide, but their collusion is far from being an inescapable necessity. If one accepts the author's main thesis, namely that polygraphic satire might be as important as sequential narrative to understand what comics are, it may become possible to start thinking of a paradigm shift in comics studies. Instead of endlessly focusing on the medium's storytelling capacities, one might then think of the revolution that was made possible in film studies by the rediscovery and reappraisal of the non-narrative cinema of attractions¹⁴. We might welcome such a paradigm shift in comics studies as well, not because we want to break with narrative analysis, a field in which a lot of useful research is still to be done, but because the hegemony of narrative readings is definitely harmful to a more encompassing approach of the medium. In this regard, it should be stressed that the very concept of "graphic novel," which has been invented to promote the more high-brow, perhaps even literary, forms of the medium is highly ambivalent. Its explicit insistence on narrative, after all, is not a graphic novel in the very first place a novel, could soon become very dangerous, once it is understood as enhancing the storytelling capacities of the medium. If the difference between comics and graphic novels are located at the level of storytelling – formulaic in the former case, original and personal in the latter case –, then the success of the graphic novel, whose domain is now expanding at the expense of that of the comics, might very well be a Pyrrhic victory, since it implicitly adopts the hegemonic narrative model that already

determined the shift from the 18 and 19th century comics to 20th century sequential storytelling.

A second remark, inextricably linked to the first one, has to do with the discussion on the *literary* – and thus no longer *paraliterary* – quality and status of the graphic novel and perhaps even to the comics in general. As we know, such a discussion rapidly boils down to fundamental questions on the definition of literature itself, for the question whether the graphic novel should be considered a literary genre or not, has less to do with the graphic novel itself than with how we define or redefine literature. The most interesting aspect of the graphic novel debate in the field of literature is then the following one: how is it possible to call a medium literary if it in many cases – sometimes very experimental ones, sometimes more mainstream ones –¹⁵ tends towards wordlessness, i.e. towards the very exclusion of what is supposed to be essentially literary, namely the word. If we accept the graphic novel as a literary genre, this can only mean that we reduce literature to something that is not medium-specific: storytelling. The debate on the graphic novel points not to the mere expansion of the literary field, but to its paradoxical closure and narrowing-down: instead of opening the literary field to other forms and media, it also imprisons it into the prison-house of storytelling.

A third idea that Smolderen puts on top of the agenda is the definition of comics as sequential art. As we have seen, comics theoreticians tend to oppose two major models of page lay-out and montage: the linear model, allegedly representative of the daily multipanel strips, and the tabular model, supposedly made possible by the use of the multistrip page, the former, according to a traditional teleological way of thinking, being seen as a more complex form of the latter. Either possibility, however, strongly relies upon the key importance of sequential storytelling. Smolderen's approach, which has the big advantage of not presenting the recent forms of graphic novel as more evolved or more sophisticated than older, pre-modern forms of comics, may promote a totally different view of comics and the graphic novel in which symbolism and polygraphy may happily take the leading role.

Finally, it is good also to read in Smolderen's book such a vibrant praise of humour and satire, perhaps the most forgotten (the most censored?) aspect of comics in its shift to the graphic novel. It seems to be accepted as a universal truth that the decisive difference between comics and the graphic novel is the latter's *gravitas*. And although there is nothing wrong with seriousness, the exclusion of humour in the contemporary avatars of what used to be called the *funnies*, can be seen as crippling, for the authors as well as for the readers. The idea that in order to achieve a literary status, which seems to be the ambition of numerous graphic novels, one has to drop laughter, is crippling. Smolderen's essay should teach us a different lesson. Does not *Naissances de la bande dessinée* make clear that the basic opposition is not that between funny and serious but that between monographic and polygraphic forms of comics? Smolderen's analyses advocate that humour is not an inherent feature of a given work, but that it can only be assessed in relationship with another work or a broader visual or cultural framework that it relates to in a comical or satirical way. His comparison between the work by Töpffer and that of his French imitator, Cham, who copies Töpffer's images without taking into account the dialogue with their specific intertext and who thereby completely mechanizes Töpffer's drawing style, is very telling in this regard: although Cham draws the same jokes as Töpffer, these jokes do not work due to the mechanical – less childish perhaps, but also less vibrant, less human, less playful – streamlining of his images.

Smolderen's book does not give the definitive answers to what comics are. But it helps avoiding many pitfalls and dead-ends, and by doing so it powerfully sets up a new agenda, which is not only of interest for theoreticians. *Naissances de la bande dessinée* is more than cultural history; it can work also as a springboard for all those eager to find new solutions to unsolved problems.

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1980 (engl. ed. *A Thousand Plateaus* Continuum, New York 2004).
- 2 Thierry Smolderen, *Naissances de la bande dessinée*, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Brussels 2009.
- 3 <http://www.coconino-world.com>, last visit 1 June 2011.
- 4 See, for instance, Thierry Smolderen, "Graphic novel/Roman graphique: la construction d'un nouveau genre littéraire," in *Neuvième Art*, no. 12, 2006.
- 5 Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Poorhouse Press, Tamarac 1985.
- 6 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon: or, the Limits of Poetry and Painting* (1766), Ridgeway, London 1836.
- 7 As always, one cannot underline enough that the doxa in question is context bound, i.e. limited in time and space. In the 1970s, when comics studies became for the very first time an issue in academic research, the main features of the medium under discussion were quite different. Scholars of that time emphasized either the role of the speech balloon (as a distinctive feature separating modern comics from their premodern ancestors) or highlighted the relationship between time and space, such as illustrated through the distinction between *linearity* (allegedly linked to the daily strip format) and *tabularity* (supposedly fostered by the gradual shift to larger publications formats in the Sunday comics as well as in the magazine serials). See Charles Dierick, Pascal Lefèvre (eds.), *Forging a New Medium*, VUB Press, Brussels 1998, for a seminal critique of the first idea, and Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, "Du linéaire au tabulaire," in *Communications*, no. 24, 1976, pp. 7-23, for a discussion of the second idea.
- 8 See Thomas Elsaesser, "Early film History and Media History," in Wendy Hui Kyong, Thomas Keenan (eds.), *New Media, Old Media*, Routledge, London 2006, pp. 13-26.
- 9 If the role of the mass media in comics history is well documented, the interaction with the world of caricature is less often acknowledged. An exception in this regard is the book by David Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, Penns State University Press, Philadelphia 2000.
- 10 See Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *La Poétique de Dostoïevski* (1970), Seuil, Paris 1988.
- 11 See Benoît Peeters, Thierry Groensteen, *Rodolphe Töpffer. Naissance de la bande dessinée*, Hermann, Paris 1994.
- 12 It will not come as a surprise that Smolderen quotes as his first and most important example the work by Chris Ware, an author who has challenged the notions of sequentiality, linearity and action in the language of comics dramatically. See Benoît Peeters, Jacques Samson, *La Bande dessinée réinventée*, Les Impressions Nouvelles, Brussels 2010.
- 13 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York 2006.
- 14 For an historical assessment of this revolution, see Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2007.
- 15 On the more mainstream forms, see David Berona, *Wordless Books. The Original Graphic Novels*, Harry N. Abrams, New York 2008.