

Franco-Belgian comic books in the 20th century European francophone space

Thesis Summary

Key words: comics, narration, graphics, terminology, representativity

Our thesis aims to analyze a controversial and complex field – comic books – concentrating on their narrative dimension. Through our endeavor we wish to approach this phenomenon from general perspectives, subsequently focusing on Franco-Belgian comic books, tracing their representativeness in the 20th century European francophone space. The study extends with the analysis of “*Rahan*” comic books (1969), from the point of view of their affiliation to the narrative genre.

From this perspective, the thesis was constructed in two directions, setting out to demonstrate that:

- ❖ Graphic narration can be considered a narrative genre, meeting all characteristic elements, but at the same time presenting specific features
- ❖ Franco-Belgian comic books are representative for the development of the phenomenon in the 20th century European francophone space

The thesis is composed of an introduction in which we make a brief presentation of the contextual elements, a motivation for the selection of this subject, the scientific interest, the personal interest, the hypothesis and the objectives, as well as the research methodology.

Starting from the set objectives, the thesis is structured on six chapters, aiming to identify the main aspects related to the complexity of the evolution and development over time of comic books in general and that of Franco-Belgian comic books in particular.

The first chapter refers to theoretical aspects and terminology specifications, seeking to define the concepts in the studied field. The definitions of comic books over time and the reasons for the encountered difficulties in establishing a generally accepted form are listed in

this chapter. We analyze the researches in this field and the authors who contributed in time to its thorough studying and its development.

Due to their variety and originality, comic books become to the researcher an inexhaustible subject, both in form and in content. In his studies regarding the various attempts to define comic books, Aaron Meskin ends up rejecting the idea that comic books can be defined in a classical manner, arguing that, in the endeavor to analyze a comic book, the necessity of a generally valid, pre-established definition does not emerge. In the author's opinion, it is more important that each comic book be analyzed according to the style it belongs to, the employed techniques and the intentions identified in its form, taking into consideration a variety of elements which are characteristic, but not necessary and which are used to create it, such as: text, drawings, dialogue and coloration.¹

The chapter then continues by describing the occurrence of comic books and their characteristics. We present the arguments regarding the prehistoric origins of this form of narrative art and we track its evolution to the time when the first classical comic books and graphic novels appeared. It then continues with the elements which characterize a comic book: the panels, the dialogue bubbles and the comic strips, as well as with the presentation of the information regarding the number of pages and the importance of the relationship between image, text and layout.

The second chapter sets out to present a selective history of comic books, starting with the American comics, the Franco-Belgian ones, the British comics, the Italian fumetti, the Japanese manga, Romanian comics and ending with the graphic novel. We describe the social and political context in which comic books were published and their characteristic elements according to the geographical space they emerged from. We highlight emblematic authors and illustrators for each presented region, with their reference work and their defining characters. An analysis is made of the graphic novel and its importance in attesting the comic book phenomenon, by expressing their new and more complex nature. We conclude the chapter with a description of the transition of comic books towards the digital era. We make reference to the occurring of web comics, their importance and their creative role. Web comics prove to be more complex than comic books, offering the public not only pictures and text, but also real-time

¹ A. Meskin, *Defining Comics?*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:4, 2007, https://www.academia.edu/2675773/Defining_comics, p. 369 (accessed on June 23, 2018)

interaction, animation and games. We make a short review of the occurring of web comics, presenting their advantages and limitations.

From a social point of view, the 20th century comic books were a mass media phenomenon. They represented a “mirror” of the times they were created in, highlighting social, political and cultural realities and serving as an instrument of criticism, of good humor, of revolt or propaganda.

The comic books are a form of art based on images, traditions and graphical techniques but, due to their unique and narrative structure and growing complexity, we may assert that they are also a form of literature. The worldwide cultural impact of comic books is notable: their adapting to films and TV series, the extension of the fiction superhero identity in real life groups and the use of comic books to disseminate opinions and ideologies, had a strong effect on society. Through the social message they convey, through the effort of transforming comic books in instruments of personal reflection, due to their contribution in the education of children of all ages, comic books are and will remain a part of the universal culture.

The third chapter presents the theoretical framework which highlights the representativity of Franco-Belgian comic books in the European francophone space, following aspects connected to their first publication and the evolution of the phenomenon during the 20th century. We focus more on the middle of this century, when the comic book phenomenon recorded a period of accelerated growth. The specificity of Franco-Belgian comic books is presented, as well as representative styles and the Brussels and Marcinelle narrative graphics schools, created around two great comic books authors, Hérge and Franquin.

For comic books creators, due to the marketing and distribution strategies, the Franco-Belgian market created a favorable environment for experimenting and surpassing personal limitations, both in what concerns the subjects they addressed, the target audience and from the point of view of graphic illustration techniques they employed.

After 1964, comic books were regarded as „the ninth art” in France. This expression was first used by Claude Beylie in the second article of the series, entitled “Are comic books an art?”, published in the „*Lettre et médecins*”² magazine, marking the acknowledgement of comic

² C. Beylie, *La bande dessinée est-elle un art?*, Lettre et médecins magazine, janvier-septembre, 1964, p. 23

books as a form of expression and as a self-standing narrative art. Comic books authors and illustrators start receiving the same respect as writers or artists.

The end of the century is marked by “the renewal of comic books”, a movement aiming the continuous improvement and experimenting, as well as the permanent adapting of the narrating and graphic style according to the approached subject. “Silent” comics then appear, aiming to draw attention towards “the new manner of reading” promoted by these comics, a sequential reading, their reader becoming the narrator, becoming actively involved in the unwinding of the action.

The fourth chapter presents the famous creators of Franco-Belgian comics and their influence on the phenomenon. The selected authors are representative, bearing impact both on the genre, the readers and magazines which consecrated them and on the next generations of screenwriters and illustrators.

We highlighted throughout the entire chapter the representativity and the rich contribution of Franco-Belgian comic books authors to this phenomenon within the 20th century European francophone space. Each of the presented authors significantly changed the world of comic books, lifting it from a niche field to an acknowledged and appreciated one.

The featured authors are truly remarkable. Some of them, such as Hergé and André Franquin generated the creation of representative schools around the styles that consecrated them. “Brussels School” thus came into being, promoting “the clear line” style as well as the “Marcinelle School” which promoted the caricatural style. In these schools, comic books artists worked together to contribute to the improvement, the development and acknowledgement of the quality and importance of comic books, encouraging young talents to take up this domain. René Goscinny contributed to the birth of an entire generation of screenwriters and illustrators due to his vision and their unconditional promotion. Enki Bilal and Marjane Satrapi contributed to the evolution of comics, creating one of the most appreciated graphic novels.

The influence exerted by Franco-Belgian comic books authors throughout the 20th century is undeniable. They decisively participated in the birth, the development and evolution of comic books in the European francophone space.

The fifth chapter presents characters such as Tintin, Astérix and Obélix, the Smurfs and Pif. The social and political context in which they were created is described herein, along with their story, analyzing their impact on the readers, but also the novelties they brought in the

screenplay and the manner in which they were sketched and represented. We show the transition from comic books to the animated motion picture and to movies. The role of comic books and that of consecrated authors in the development of the cinematographic field is highlighted, along with the first animation studios and the criticism and the challenges of the first trials.

Franco-Belgian comic books characters impress through their complexity. Characterized by realism or phantasy, they succeed in creating a universe with which readers easily relate. The simplicity and the humor with which these characters face their adventures, as well as the approach they have on subjects such as friendship and compassion, make them easy to understand and to appreciate.

The manner in which these characters are portrayed, their traits, but also their vocabulary, often add to the humor and the success of a comic book series, bringing notoriety to these characters. They are representative for the “clear line” style, being accomplished by simple and well-defined lines. The panels they are illustrated in are airy, without any excessive details.

Through their style, the complexity of approached subjects and the influence they have over the readers, the characters are defining for the Franco-Belgian comic books, contributing to the development of the phenomenon within the 20th century European francophone space.

The animated movies and the motion pictures were profoundly influenced by comics. The majority of cartoons in the 20th century originated or were inspired by them. Famous characters in animated movies, such as the Smurfs, Marsupilami, Astérix or Tintin, first acquired their notoriety as Franco-Belgian comic book heroes and only later as animated characters.

The greatest part of Franco-Belgian comics creators did not respond to the challenge represented by the animated movie, not finding themselves in the audio-visual field. However, there were also examples to the contrary, of creators who successfully embraced the new challenge, writing screenplays and directing the first animated adaptations of their own comic books, such as René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo.

Towards the end of the 20th century, renowned directors of famous science-fiction movies admitted to having cooperated with the artists of the well-known “*Metal Hurlant*” magazine (1974) in the production of the settings and characters,

The sixth chapter includes a case study focusing on Rahan as a character. Extremely controversial at the time of the first publication because of the fact that the screenwriter shared the ideas of the French Communist Party, Rahan evolves in time, succeeding in leaving behind these interpretations. We study the social and political context in which the character appeared, the screenwriters and illustrators who impacted its existence and the affiliation of “*Rahan*” (1969) comic books to the narrative genre. We highlight the fact that it meets the characteristic elements for this genre: the presence of a narrator and of characters, the existence of a narrative thread, the style and subjects which are treated.

Regarded at first as a secondary comic book series, in just a few years “Rahan” (1969) succeeds to enter in the Pantheon of comic books, being devoured by young readers. Rahan, the main character, is the main attraction with his ivory dagger, his animal leather briefs, his five-claws necklace, long and blonde hair and his savage cry: “Rahaaaaa!”³

³ A. Gonzague, *Mais pourquoi „Rahan” est-elle une BD culte?*, 2017, <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/bd/20171218.OBS9447/mais-pourquoi-raham-est-elle-une-bd-culte.html> p. 1, (accessed on 25.03.2019)

The universal human values conveyed in the pages of “Rahan” comics series (1969), such as: passing on knowledge, fraternity, the respect towards nature, remain current.

The style of the drawings of André Chéret is incredibly current and exudes energy. Rahan seems to get out of the page, highlighted by a close up which serves as an action frame, by panels without borders, in a succession of cinematographic scenes and narrative coloration.

Rahan is not a static character, but quite the contrary, it is extremely dynamic. It never ceases to evolve along the series of adventures in which he participates. Thus, the readers are part of the character's life, witnessing his childhood, his becoming mature, his marriage and the birth of his first children and even his death, although it was all a consequence of a misunderstanding.⁴

Numerous contemporary comic book authors were influenced and inspired by the "Rahan" comics series (1969). For instance, in his biography, Christian Hincker alias Blutch, a screenwriter and contemporary comic book artist, declares himself as a great admirer of the "Rahan" series (1969) from his early childhood, not only of the scripts written by Roger Lécureux, but also of the illustrations created by André Chéret. "I carried out a thorough research and Rahan has no equivalent in children's comic books! Nor does he have a successor! Of course, if you discover the series after reaching maturity, that is debatable. However, for a young person, the script and the staging are a sheer dare, constantly reinventing himself, under the reader's eyes. We can certainly state that we are in the presence of a masterpiece."

According to Christophe Blain, a French comic book illustrator, the great merit of the "Rahan" series is that of unwinding, under the image of an apparent fluidity, the script of strange and exciting stories, sometimes frightening, bordering the fantastic, but without crossing that border. In the "Rahan" comics series (1969), reason is always triumphant over the obscurity fueled by tribal shamans.

The "Rahan" comic books (1969) are unique not only due to the scripts signed by Roger or Jean-François Lécureux, but most of all through the drawings created by André Chéret. Christophe Blain noted the use of innovative manners in which the lines are drawn, with the intention of bestowing credibility upon his characters. The choice of colors is extremely bold and the manner in which the scenes are presented is incredibly sensual. The cinema-like realism

⁴ J. Wacquet, *Eternel Rahan. Pourquoi lire Rahan?* extras din Trésors de Rahan, 2020, <https://www.editions-soleil.fr/actualites/eternel-raham>, p. 1, (accessed on 15.11.2020)

of the drawings impacts the reader. The fire, the water, the stones, the forest, the characters, they are all represented upfront and bluntly.⁵

⁵ A. Gonzague, *op. cit.*, p. 1

Due to all these, that who is referred to as “fire-colored haired”, will remain one of the most popular characters in the rich French comic books collection and Roger Lécureux and André Chéret will remain among the top creators of Franco-Belgian comic books authors.⁶

In the last part of the thesis, we present the conclusion of this research, highlighting aspects regarding the originality, the limitations in approaching this subject, the degree in which objectives were reached as well as suggestions for the continuation of research in this field.

The conclusions are followed by the bibliography, which is structured in two parts: printed resources and electronic resources.

The Annex Section of the dissertation includes images from the comic book series we cited, offering visual support for the addressed subject.

⁶ J. Wacquet, *op. cit.*, p. 1