History and Comics

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What if historians and cartoonists teamed up with each other? For such a partnership to work, one might choose to illustrate "great History." Or, better yet, one can find inspiration in graphic investigations guided by a reasoning and based on new sources and original questions.

For the social sciences, comics is at once an ally and a pioneer front. It offers immense opportunities, which are far from being exhausted. A drawing can bring a narrative to life, explain situations, or provoke emotions. As for actual narrative techniques, some of the methods used by cartoonists prove heuristic for the social sciences: ellipse, panorama, zoom, detailed scenography, parallel narratives, dialogues, change of perspective, entry into a character's mind, etc. To draw is to narrate, and to narrate is to help make sense of things.

Unfortunately, comics is often considered a minor art, one that is unfit to convey complex thought. It is, in fact, virtually absent from scholarly reflection. Comics has yet to find its place in the university, in humanities departments, or in journalism schools. However, there do exist training programs in the "ninth art," including at the School of Fine Arts in Paris, the Higher School for the Decorative Arts in Strasbourg, and the European School of Image in Angoulême. In the United States, the University of Florida and the University of Oregon offer "comics studies" degrees that provide students with a perspective on the art of comics, from cartoons to graphic novels.

Pioneers

Among researchers who showed a precocious interest in comics, Pascal Ory was certainly a pioneer. As early as the 1970s, he read and commented historical and non-historical albums for several French magazines. Ory now chairs the jury of the "historical comics" prize that has been awarded at the *Rendez-vous de Blois* since 2004.

As a historian of culture and representations, Ory has also tried to turn comics into a historical object. In his article "Mickey go home!" (1984), he showed how Belgium and France, armed with such heroes as Tintin, Spirou and Alix, had resisted the American model of the post-war era. In *L'Art de la bande dessinée* [*The Art of Comics*], he recalled that the development of comics in the second half of the 20th century accompanied changes in the areas of society and culture (increase in free time, rise in education levels), but also in the fields of politics (spread of

democracy), economics (creation of cultural industries), and aesthetics (expansion of the visual regime).

In France, other pioneers include Serge Tisseron, who took Tintin "to the psychoanalyst," and Michel Thiébaut, who devoted his dissertation (1997) to the representation of Antiquity in Francophone comics. Thiébaut showed, for instance, how Alix , the young "fearless" hero and contemporary of Caesar, was gradually eclipsed by the characters of *Murena* who lived in the days of Claudius and Nero.

Since the second half of the 2000s, researchers have become more interested in the topic. The journal *Labyrinthe* dedicated an issue to comics entitled "What it says, what it shows". A conference on "historical comics" was held in Pau in 2011. In the United States, a "comics forum" was organized at Michigan State University in March 2016. Researchers have studied the origins of comics from William Hogarth to Winsor McCay, the advent of the mutant in the *X-Men* series, as well as the production of images via strip panes, speech bubbles and scenography.[1]

Even more original is Lax and Giroud's album on the Algerian war, *Azrayen*', which is prefaced by French historian Benjamin Stora, a specialist of the colonial Maghreb. Jean-Pierre Filiu, a scholar of Islam, worked with the cartoonist David B on the history of the relations between the United States and the Middle East from 1783 to 1953. Chloé Cruchaudet's *Mauvais Genre* [*Trashy Types*], which is dedicated to a transvestite deserter who lived during the Great War and the roaring twenties, was inspired by *La Garçonne et l'Assassin* [*The Flapper and the Assassin*], a book co-written by two historians, Fabrice Virgili and Danièle Voldman, who combined micro-history with an essay on violence and a reflection on gender.

One could consider a thousand other avenues: studying the status of women in comics based on the groundwork laid by Maurice Horn in *Women in the Comics*, showing how Reiser accompanied the liberation of morals and the press in the France of General de Gaulle, or including Gotlib in the lineage of Jewish revolutionaries, from Jesus to Trotsky through Freud. As a cultural production among others, comics is revealing of a society—its representations, fantasies, and memory—but also of cultural massification, of new modes of reading, etc. It ought to be part of the reflection of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists.

Comics as a Reflection of History

From time immemorial, people have "drawn" or depicted events. The reliefs commemorating the Battle of Kadesh, Trajan's Column honoring the victory of Rome over Dacia, the bronze column in Hildesheim illustrating the New Testament, the Bayeux tapestry recounting the conquest of England, and the famous "images of Epinal": All of these represent deeds deemed worthy of memory. Today, nothing is more banal than to dedicate a comic book to a hero of ancient times, a great civilization, or one of the world wars.

[1] See in particular Thierry Smolderen, *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2014; and *Critique*, n° 709-710, special issue on "Mutants," edited by Thierry Hoquet.

Such works "put into images" famous episodes in the form of more or less informed drawings. In *The Blue Lotus*, Hergé evoked the Mukden Incident of September 18, 1931, which Japan had used as a pretext to invade Manchuria. We could also mention the various *History of France in Comics*, *History of the Provinces of France in Comics* and *History of the World Cup in Comics*, not to mention the *Picture Stories From American History*. One need only open the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des héros et auteurs de BD* [*Encyclopedic Dictionary of Comic Book Heroes and Authors*] to see that cartoonists from around the world have taken hold of prehistory and the Spartans, the gladiators and the Vikings, Richard the Lionheart and William Tell, d'Artagnan and Cartouche, but also the court of Louis XVI, the French revolution, the Far West, etc.

But might not this encounter between history and comics be merely a trompe l'oeil? What we have here is not history but "History," the latter being conceived as a past known and deemed important—a pretext for adventures that are especially exotic because they took place at a distance of centuries. These "historical" comics are, rather, fictions (or docufictions) whose theatre is the past, just as many "historical" novels are costumed adventures. This is less history than stories-in-the-past, less a method of understanding than a fascination with the distant or the mythical.

Of course, some fictions do illuminate the past. In *Berlin: City of Stones*, Jason Lutes successfully reproduces the Berlin of the late 1920s—its avant-garde, urban modernity, poverty, and political violence. Tardi's works on the Great War or Céline are extraordinary for the atmosphere and feelings they generate and the identifications they prompt. Images become engraved in memory: the dark and mysterious Paris of the Belle Époque in *Adèle Blanc-Sec*, or Jews depicted as mice who wear pig masks when they hide from Nazis in Art Spiegelman.

This dramatic power—which comes close to what Michelet terms "resurrection"—is even more striking when cartoonists represent distant times. As Étienne Anheim explained at the "Fiction and Social Sciences" conference of September 2014, while medievalists know that it often took centuries to build cathedrals, this is a highly theoretical knowledge that comes into bold relief when put into images. The coronation of Philip the Fair in Reims took place in 1286, when the cathedral was still incomplete (and its surrounding urban fabric was very dense). Drawing this episode renders visible a cathedral under construction—a process that we theoretically know took place, but that we have never seen, because there are no iconographic traces of it.

All this is more effective (because it is more rapid, accurate and forceful) than two pages of description. Is it the power of the artist? The powerlessness of the historian? One thing is certain: Comics drives narration and fuels memory without in any way excluding subtlety. A drawing can be dazzling, like an explanation without words. Drawing is inherently pedagogical.

But what do we mean when we say "history"? For it often happens that the past is summoned under the most conventional auspices: "great" men (emperors and conquerors, heroes and geniuses), "great" dates, "great" civilizations, "great" discoveries, "great" battles, events and actors of "History"—approaches that the *Annales* school discarded nearly a century ago. In the words of Paul Veyne: Everything is history; hence "History does not exist." It is not because some comics invoke the Knights Templar or Cleopatra that they help to make sense of things. If the latter are "historical," then the pop group ABBA, which interpreted the song "Waterloo," is a

Napoleonic think tank. Of course, there is still great pleasure to be had from reading those comics, in the same way that Walter Scott's or Dumas's novels leave us delighted and enthralled. But let us not use the wrong word.

In short, while it would be wrong to say that history and comics have ignored each other, it would be quite an exaggeration to suggest that they have explored all the possibilities of their companionship. The encounter between the social sciences and graphic arts is only just beginning. Together, they hold enormous cognitive, artistic and—let it be said—commercial potential.

History with a Small "h"

To push the reflection further, one ought to question the nature of history as a social science. It is an intellectual adventure that has at its core, not great men, chronology, scholarship, or a note at the bottom of a page, but *reasoning*.

History with a small "h" consists in understanding what humans do—from Anne of Brittany and Napoleon I to a modest and illiterate clog maker, and even to ourselves who are caught in our own historicity. The aim is not to magnify History or to remember famous kings, but to produce new knowledge. History with a small "h" is not necessarily the study of the past, since historians and their readers belong to the present, as do sources and questions. So long as history is defined by reason, it can be embodied in a report, an autobiography, a life narrative or a series of drawings.

Thus, a truly historical comic is not the illustration of a past "reality" (even if grandiose or confirmed by professional historians), but the source of a new knowledge, itself the result of a document-based investigation.

> This approach that consists in seeking, comparing and checking sources [...] resembles quasi-scientific work. [...] I always try to crosscheck information. [...] These books—my own and those of others—are wonderful media for debate and discussion.

Is it George Bancroft or Robert Darnton speaking here? Neither of them. It is Étienne Davodeau, one of the masters of documentary comics. Echoing Georges Duby in *History Continues*, Davodeau adds:

> My "I" is precautionary. I do not pretend to show the truth, and I learn by doing myself. [...] It is my way of being honest with the reader. [...] Questioning things is important, so I make sure that the source of the narrative is always clear.[2]

[2] "Sources et appareil critique de la bande dessinée. Entretien avec Étienne Davodeau, 3/4," September 27, 2013, available at http://www.nonfiction.fr/article-6709-sources_et_appareil_critique_de_la_bande_dessinee___entretien_avec_etienne_davodeau_34.htm; and "Authenticité et subjectivité en bande dessinée. Entretien avec Étienne Davodeau 4/4," September 27, 2013, available at http://www.nonfiction.fr/article-6710-authenticite_et_subjectivite_en_bande_dessinee___entretien_avec_etienne_davodeau_44.htm.

The historical approach along with its various methods—distanciation, archive and testimony collection, fact-checking, crosschecking of sources, emplotment—is not the exclusive property of historians. In the case at hand, it is implemented by a cartoonist.

If we are to favor the encounter between comics and history, then let us turn away from History, great kings and other "memorable" things, and focus our sight instead on methods, problems, sources, evidence, and explanatory power. Defined in these terms, history is far more present in graphic investigations and reports than it is in *Viking* or *Northlanders.*

Comics as Investigation

Graphic investigations have the same objectives and face the same difficulties as do international reporting, investigative journalism and social science research: All must understand, demonstrate, and represent.

The international reporter Benoît Collombat and the cartoonist Étienne Davodeau investigated the 1975 assassination of Judge Renaud, navigating the murky waters of the Fifth Republic between the members of the Lyonnais gang and the spooks of the Civic Action Service. In *Les Mauvaises Gens* [*The Bad People*], the same Davodeau traced the journey of two former factory workers of seventy years—his own parents—who had been leftist activists in the Mauges, a rural-industrial region located between Angers and Cholet, in Western France. Like all their friends, the couple had belonged to a generation marked by Catholicism, church youth club activities, early factory work, trade-union involvement, as well as activism in the JOC (Young Christian Workers movement) in the 1950s and in the CFDT union and the Socialist Party in the 1970s.

Les Mauvaises Gens tells the story of an emancipation, not from religion in general, but from patronesses, reactionary priests, and bosses born to command. This battle was fought in the JOC, described in the book as a "small university," *Action catholique ouvrière* (Catholic Action Workers), faithful both "to Christ and to the working class," and periodicals that transmitted "a more 'social' vision of faith." This is also the story of women's emancipation, as the Mauges factories exploited "maidens" of humble origins who had been educated by nuns and were unaccustomed to revolt.

As part of his investigation, Davodeau unearthed local newspapers, consulted the archives of the CFDT union and the Socialist Party, scrutinized issues of *Ouest France* and *Courrier de l'Ouest*, reconstructed the large protest of 1972 (in support of workers who had been laid off by the shoe store chain Eram), and met several witnesses, activists, and priests. In other words, he mobilized new printed sources and engaged in oral history. His homage-investigation—a saga of workers' rights and freedom of association from the rise of the JOC to the election of François Mitterrand—uses drawings to bring back to life vanished factories and workshops, small daily humiliations, and silent revolutions (such as the defrocking of a young priest). The interest stems from all that one learns, but also from the emotions aroused by the narrative construction, the son's inquiry into his parents' past—between affection and distance, between respect for their struggle and indifference to their religion—and the selflessness of all those activists of the 20th century who gave their lives for something greater than themselves.

At the beginning of Patrick de Saint-Exupéry and Hippolyte's *A Whim of the Gods*, we see President Mitterrand pronounce a speech at Oradour-sur-Glane on the theme of "Never Again." The scene takes place in June 1994, fifty years after the massacre perpetrated in the village by a Nazi Waffen-SS company, but also just as the genocide in Rwanda is ending. This strip pane provides one of the best angles for thinking about the attitude of France vis-à-vis the Tutsi genocide: In the age of triumphant "duty to remember," the country supported the criminal Hutu Power government that was in the process of committing a new genocide. "Never Again," you say?

Historical reasoning thus infuses comics that investigate the recent past: political assassination, labor struggles, the Tutsi genocide, or the coexistence between a team of Doctors Without Borders and the Mujahideen in Afghanistan (in *The Photographer*, Emmanuel Guibert and Didier Lefèvre's masterpiece).

This understanding of reality, in combination with a new form, explains the success of magazines and "mooks" (contraction of "magazine" and "book"), which mix comics, investigation and great reporting. These Herodotean collectives remind us that conducting research entails traveling, seeking, digging, and meeting people, in a back-and-forth movement between the present and the different strata of the past. Thus cartoonists can venture into the more distant past: the French Revolution, the 19th century, or World War II.

In *From Hell*, Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore recounted the criminal career of Jack the Ripper, based on a solid critical apparatus that is presented at the end of the volume. Similarly, the scriptwriter Jean-Louis Bocquet and the cartoonist Catel Muller worked in tandem to trace the lives of free women—Olympe de Gouges and Kiki de Montparnasse—in narrative portraits that rely on solid documentation.

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* tells the story of Vladek—the author's father—between pre-war Poland, his odyssey in concentration camps, and the New York apartment where he now lives. This biographical testimony comes in the form of an animal fable, a fictional method that can be found in La Fontaine, but also in Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Calvo's *The Beast is Dead*!—two classics of the 1940s.

Similarly, Tardi collected the memories of his father who had been imprisoned in Stalag II-B in Eastern Pomerania. As for Emmanuel Guibert, he "drew the memory" of a US soldier catapulted from Fort Knox to a devastated Le Havre at the end of World War II, and later sent to the four corners of occupied Germany. *Alan's War* goes beyond ordinary military adventures by showing that the war was also a crossroads for lives, a centrifuge of destinies, a catalyst for encounters, losses, reunions, intellectual and artistic discoveries, and that it managed to transform the existence of a man faced less with misery and despair than with the infinite diversity of the world.

All these works are historical in the true sense of the term. A historian or a sociologist who would want to express his or her reasoning in forms other than a journal article might approach these artists-researchers who have gone looking for that which is lost or unknown, or for that which has disappeared without leaving a trace.

Gaza 1956

Joe Sacco occupies an important place within this family. Born in Malta in 1960 and currently living in the United States, this cartoonist has produced several reports on the war in Bosnia and the occupied territories, including *Safe Area Goražde* and *Palestine*. He also published a book-panorama on the first day of the Battle of the Somme (July 1, 1916), which he "reconstructed hour by hour" from General Haig's morning walk to the burial of the dead. The 7-meter-long drawing is printed on accordion-fold paper and accompanied by a booklet that includes legends as well as the commentary of a historian.

One of his main works, *Footnotes in Gaza*, is a graphic novel about civilian massacres that were perpetrated by the Israeli Defense Forces on November 3 and 12, 1956, in Khan Younis and Rafah in the Gaza Strip. More than a graphic report, *Footnotes in Gaza* is a "systematic investigation" in search of a forgotten, denied truth to which both Israelis and Palestinians are now indifferent ("We don't care about the past; what about today?").

Though we may not like what Sacco reveals of the young Israeli state, from the point of view of method there is little we can reproach him for: lengthy investigation, meticulous maps, the gathering of a wide range of accurate testimonies, confrontation between actors, questions regarding the credibility of this or that individual, fact-checking, admission of impotence or doubt (there are no eyewitnesses to confirm the executions committed in the school in Rafah on November 12, 1956). All of this is supplemented at the end of the volume with written documents—"documentary evidence" which puts the individual testimonies into perspective.

The appendix offers documents and sources providing contradictory versions of the events: the letter by a US soldier who was present in 1956, official reports, press articles, debates in the Knesset, the denials of Ben Gurion, and an interview with a close relation of Moshe Dayan. This is complemented by archives of the UN, the Israeli Defense Forces and the Knesset, as well as by a bibliography containing the works of professional historians, including *1949: The First Israelis* by Tom Segev and *Israel's Border Wars* by Benny Morris.

Boundaries become blurred. Is Sacco a researcher, a reporter, a cartoonist, a historian? This matters very little. At the intersection of these different activities lies *Footnotes in Gaza*, a work which shows that graphic arts can embody historical reasoning.

The conception of history presented in the book is nevertheless revealing of the misunderstandings that divide journalists, cartoonists and researchers. According to Sacco, historians study "History" (the official narrative of events deemed important), when one should venture instead into the "margins" of History so as to discover at last the life of the anonymous, the humble, the forgotten, the victims. Hence the title *Footnotes in Gaza*. The table below details the counter-history with which Sacco seeks to break free from the commonplace narratives of "History."

	Great "History"	The "margins" of History
Object of the narrative	Events: Second World War, the Arab-Israeli conflict	Anonymous lives: human dramas, family histories and other « appendices » of History
Content of the narrative	Official narratives, public speeches, national commemorations, textbooks	Things ignored or forgotten, ordinary lives, everyday experience
1956 Context	International Suez crisis	Massacres of civilians in Gaza
Actors	"Great men": Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Nasser, Eisenhower, Eden	Anonymous people, forgotten actors; in this case, older witnesses who relive the scene and return to the site of the massacre
Narrative mode	A ready-made narrative, administered data: the "lesson" of History	An inquiry into the past conducted by an individual living in the present: a knowledge constructed and embodied in a new form
Nature of the past	A past that is distant, frozen in time, irremediably divorced from the present	A past that is alive, close to us, still vibrating in our present moment
Feelings aroused in the reader	Disillusionment, high school boredom	Identification, interest, passion

This "history of the margins" can be found in other authors. Through his father, Tardi paid tribute to the private soldiers, the vanquished, and the other "nobodies" who had been swept away by the cataclysm of the war. As Jean Vautrin writes in his preface to *Le Cri du peuple* [*The Cry of the People*], a book about the Paris Commune illustrated by Tardi, "I wanted to narrate a crucial episode of our History—a flawed episode, 'forgotten' by textbooks—through showing its impotence and its miseries. [...] From an early stage, I wanted Great History to give way to the familiarity of the characters."

The roller of History crushes the little people, substitutes the event for minute destinies and "infamous men." Ordinary lives must therefore be rehabilitated. This idea can be found in novels such as Pierre Michon's *Small Lives* and Jean Rouaud's *Fields of Glory*. More radically, Julian Barnes warns in *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*:

> History isn't what happened. History is just what historians tell us. There was a pattern, a plan, a movement, expansion, the march of democracy; it is a tapestry, a flow of events, a complex narrative, connected, explicable. (p. 240)

This explains why many readers—including journalists, writers and cartoonists—turn away from history, which is likened either to patriotic propaganda or to the high school rehashing of battle History, tedious chronologies and lessons learnt by heart.

Sacco and the others, however, seem ignorant of the fact that historians are more and more interested in the anonymous, the vanquished, "our family histories," and that the method they use is very effective in rescuing these from oblivion. Without going as far back as Michelet, we can mention the works of Carlo Ginzburg, Eric Hobsbawm, Michel Foucault, Alain Corbin, Michelle Perrot, as well as my own *A History of the grandparents I never had*.

Historians no longer believe in "History," and they are the first to investigate its "margins." Nowadays, history has all it takes to be a counter-History. It has been democratized, in every sense of the word.

Graphic social sciences

Since cartoonists already engage in history (understood as an investigation into the past or the present that is guided by a reasoning), all that is left is for historians to draw. Of course, the objection may be raised that one can be both an excellent researcher and a poor artist. But does that really matter? Let us form multidisciplinary teams, like those that already exist in numerous programs funded by national or European agencies. A scriptwriter as prolific as Alan Moore has spent much of his career working with cartoonists.

Nevertheless, it is important in this kind of partnership to ensure that no one is cheated. The historian is not a consultant who checks the conformity of "History," but a social scientist engaged in an investigation who can stand back, formulate a question, and make an original argument based on new sources in order to produce knowledge. Conversely, the cartoonist is not a history aficionado who cannot write. He or she is not merely a full-fledged artist, but also a researcher, an interpreter, a scriptwriter, a reader, and sometimes a witness: He or she shows through drawings what the historian cannot say—or cannot say as effectively. The narrative and graphic dimension of comics is part of the historical demonstration. And the same could be said of photography or video art. In this regard, the possibilities offered by the Internet are endless.

In addition to building these multidisciplinary teams, we need to reform the educational structures. In the coming decades, partnerships might be established between humanities departments and schools of drawing, fine arts, design or journalism. Unfortunately, it seems that blockages are not only institutional, but cultural and professional as well. As long as comics is regarded as a minor art—as a teenage pastime—and as long as a comic book is less "profitable" than a journal article for an academic's career, it is to be feared that these dreams of partnership will remain in limbo.

And yet the time is ripe. As mentioned earlier, many historians have already embarked on the adventure with enthusiasm. The "graphic novel" is one of the forms through which one can express a historical argument or conduct an investigation into a vanished world, an elusive truth, or a forgotten social fact. The encounter between comics and the social sciences might help us to renew modes of inquiry and writing, while also retaining a dwindling audience.

Scholars now work in professionalized disciplines, in collectives organized around methodological requirements. All this is necessary. Conversely, in the prefaces they write or the interviews they grant, cartoonists recall that they have an identity to which they cling: They are not historians, sociologists, documentary makers or journalists, but cartoonists. Comics is a full-fledged "field" which, incidentally, is struggling for recognition—a slow process of legitimation previously undergone by serials, children's literature, cinema, crime fiction, jazz, rock, and rap.

Borders therefore do exist, and everyone is entitled to hold onto his or her specificities and professional traditions. But must borders necessarily be sites of contempt, resentment, and ignorance? They could also be made into a frontier, in the sense of a pioneer front. Hence the

importance of locating the no man's land where history and comics might meet—that is to say, to define the theoretical prerequisites on the basis of which researchers might cosign comic books without compromising on method or standards.

This might give birth to truly historical comics (but also sociological and anthropological ones), namely cartoon investigations or graphic social sciences. The day might come when researchers would be able to express their reasoning in comic books, photo exhibitions, video installations or theatrical plays, without ridiculing themselves or upsetting their peers.

The good orator, Cicero claimed, must be able to prove his allegations (*probare*), rouse the feelings of his audience (*movere)* and win the latter's favor (*conciliare*). This could be an avenue for reinventing writing in the social sciences and, perhaps, for safeguarding the future of those disciplines. The aim would be to reconcile demonstration, emotion and pleasure, in a sort of neo-Ciceronism that could become the watchword of the social sciences in the 21st century.

One could then also refuse easy dichotomies, such as that which opposes popularized "History," enamored of great men and aimed at the general public, to the technical and tedious "history" of specialists locked up in their ivory tower. Researchers could open up to original forms, conduct fascinating investigations, and attract new audiences. What could be more normal for social science research than to also investigate its own forms?

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