Story-telling through the medium of comics: analyses of Travels of Tintin, Asterix & Manga comics.

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Comics are known to use sequential images more or less aligned with visual narrative grammar that creates panels and organizes hierarchical images for the layout of the story. In comic strips the layout is primary. For example, let us imagine that a girl is reading a book. Her thinking process may then be presented in a sequence, beginning with a stream of bubbles, followed by a series of pictures, displaying the story through a series of actions or scenery. In other words, the narrative is presented through a visual narrative grammar. According to Cohn, if one can delete the text and the visuals retain their overall gist then you can be confident that the visuals do certainly use a visual narrative grammar. Once again, it may be noted that visuals are known to combine image and text and hence signify a meaning which can be representational, implying the presence of a narrative grammar.

Visuals are represented and hence become mimetic as opposed to diegesis, where the narrator tells a story. “In diegesis, the narrator *tells* the story. The narrator presents the actions (and sometimes thoughts) of the characters to the readers or audience. Diegetic elements are part of the fictional world ("part of the story"), as opposed to non-diegetic elements which are stylistic elements of how the narrator tells the story ("part of the storytelling")”. (Wikipedia).

Comics, once again, are visual stories. Any written story, on the other hand, has reference to narrative sequences where the imagination of the reader is invited. In other words, we are talking about modes of representation or a different reading process, where we follow the story through visuals. Again, the comic strips have different dimensions. In drama the poet never speaks directly; in narrative texts, the poet speaks as himself or herself.

"Classical narrative is always oriented towards an explicit *there and then*, towards an imaginary "elsewhere" set in the past and which has to be evoked for the reader through predication and description. Dramatic worlds, on the other hand, are presented to the spectator as "hypothetically actual" constructs, since they are "seen" in progress, "here and now" without narratorial mediation. [...] The distinction is, indeed, implicit

in Aristotle's differentiation of representational modes, namely *diegesis* (narrative description) versus *mimesis* (direct imitation)" (Elam.1980, 110–111).

Travels of Tintin

When I first read Tintin, and Asterix comic strips, I noticed that their mode of representation is primarily comic. You are entertained by their wit and humour. So, we are not talking here of primary narratives but pictures which entertain us on different levels. Let us take the comic strips in Tintin comics. One notices that the name is born of alliteration and he is always accompanied by the duo, Snowy the dog and Captain Haddock, who are quite hilarious. Tintin is a reporter and adventurer, who travels all round the world in search of mysteries. Tintin comics harp on the excitement attributed to a thriller. He is sometimes a reporter, a detective, an adventurer and also one in search of truth. Herge's ploy is to present Tintin's personality in neutral terms, inviting the reader's participation in his " clear line" ('ligne claire')style.

But Tintin is never innocent. He iconizes what is touted as European supremacy and possesses a controversial attitude to race, class and gender. But he has become popular by dint of his investigative and keen acumen, as one,who can solve knotty cases. Yet he is inclined to make fun of American gangsters, Indian Maharajas, Muslim practices in the Arabian desert as well as south American celebrities. He is also critical of Chinese customs in *The Blue Lotus*, of ethnic Red Indians in *The Broken Ear*.

He engages in photojournalism in the Belgian Congo, goes to the Soviet Union and travels to the moon much before Neil Armstrong. His adventures make him an investigative journalist at 26, Labrador Road, sharing similar features with Sherlock Holmes. He is, in other words, an adorable teenage boy of 16 or 18. General Charles De Gaulle considered Tintin as his only rival.

And yet the reasons for Tintin's popularity lies elsewhere. As Kai Mikkonen in The Narratology of Comic Art has stated:

" Even the most prototypical narrative comic , say an action comic or a TIntin adventure, has other dimensions. Comics use symbols and metaphors: they are descriptive, painting-like, lyrical, pedagogical, or abstract rather than narrative,: they can put forward claims about a fictional world or our world: they may function as a commentary , an argument, or tell a joke : they can inform or teach us about something: and so on. All this can obviously happen within a larger narrative compositional frame, but it is not always the case. Not everything in comics is narration , and not all comics are narratives. Instructional comics---do not always tell a story or their narratives may be weak. Furthermore, the reading of comics also regularly involves other aspects than the processing of the story and its telling, such as paying attention to the visual features of the image or style and appreciating the narrative drawings or the spatial composition" (Mikkonen. 110-111).

According to Mikkonen, there is a relation between graphic style and narration. Style often serves a narrative function in comics, but its effects and implications are never exhausted by this function.

Asterix Comics

If the appeal of Tintin is due to its style of presentation, exotic scenes, and comic elements with specific blurbs, the mesmerism of Asterix comics lies elsewhere. The apex of action in almost all of Asterix comics lie in the indomitable Gauls holding out to the Romans in one tiny village in 50 B.C. Here the panels of visual narrative portrays several discrete images of Gaulish warriors with Asterix in the lead, accompanied by the invincible Obelix, ordered in a sequence with other images, involved in their fight with Caesar and the Romans. All the characters strike a pose with their individual attributes. Getafix can fix magic potions, Obelix has the strength of menhirs, Asterix is emblazoned with the minute image of a star, Vitalstatistix is out of proportion, having no sense of statistics. The popularity of Asterix is due to factors like its fabulous portrayal of comic characters in unique drawings by Uderzo. It also has a great cast and focuses on contemporary thingsas well as idioms, wrapped in exotic Gaelic metaphors. As an example of World War II French culture and nationality, it effectively challenged the authority of Disney comics belonging to American descent.

Yet its appeal lies not in narratives only but in depiction of Gauls in action with the Romans with the jokes acting as satiric commentaries. The contrast between the physical dimensions of characters become a source of perpetual humour as there is not much of a story, the only one being the Gaul's perpetual conflict with the Romans. Jokes sometimes have literary applications. But the principal attraction lies in Uderzo's drawing with fabulous sketches of characters. Goscinny's idea of parody of the names of characters matches with their physical appearance. In fact, the main idea behind the action scenes perfectly synchronizes with their physical appearance and character. The druid, Panoramix/ Getafix is seen sometimes cooking a cocktail of magic potion in times of emergency. Vitalstatistix lacks vital proportions and Unhygienix sells unhygienic fish.

The interest of Asterix comics lie in the parodic dimensions of ancient Rome and its contrast with Gaul, drawn faithfully by Uderzo. Even Caesar sends an all- female force to subdue the Gauls in *Asterix and the Special Weapon*. Reality and fantasy mix together. Almost as in Magic Realism, both exist together. As history is twisted, everything becomes entertaining. Even the drawings are so imaginative and realistic so as to cofuse the reader's categories of perception . Hence, they have become more popular than Tintin The location is exotic. The portraits of women are not only hilarious but full of satire. Their husbands become the source of endless mirth. Icons of female figures are Adrenaline in the recently published , Asterix and the Chieftain's Daughter. Others are , Bravura, Impedimenta and Zaza, among others. It is imperative that we understand the content of caricature behind Goscinny and Uderzo's characters. Benito Mussolini figures as the centurion Nebulous Nimbus in Asterix and the Big Fight. Like the living Mussolini, he is actually bald, fat and always shouts at the top of his voice. Well, no one is scared but it does entertain us.

Mahatma Gandhi is portrayed as Wolisnehm, the fakir in *Asterix and the Magic Carpet*. Arnold Schwarznegger was the inspiration behind the creation of super-clones *in Asterix and the Falling Sky*. *In Asterix and the Big Fight*, Napoleon is cast as the Corsican warrior, Boneywasawarriorwayayix. Tintin figures as a Belgian with a haircut in *Asterix the Legionary*. The list is inexhaustible. The hairstyle of Cacofonix is based on that of Elvis Presley. Sean Connery becomes the spy Dubbelosix in *Asterix and the Land of Black Gold* (Wikipedia. List of Asterix characters).

The interest and humour lies in exaggerated national stereotypes, figuring Romans and Gauls. The Britons are satirized over their habit of drinking tea at 5 o' clock sharp. Romans are foolish and too proud of themselves. The Corsicans are lazy and the Gauls lack sophistication. History is sometimes made fun of in the stories. In later comics, the women of the village play a more important role in the story. The comedy is still a product of its time, though they mostly exist in relation to their husbands.

This brings us to the issue of imagology, which is dedicated to the critical portrayal of cultural stereotypes. Imagology, a special branch of study, originally developed in the discipline of Comparative Literature, studies how certain temperamental characteristics are stereotypically imputed to certain nationalities (Wikipedia).. Typical examples are the European colonization of China in Tintin and the Blue Lotus and Tintin and the Broken Ear . The idea also figures in the portrayal of South American dictators in Tintin and the Prisoners of the Sun where the ignorance of the Red Indians become a source of mirth.

Comics are always associated with socio-cultural features, particular to some countries as in Tintin, Asterix and Manga comics. The resulting "ethnotypes" (frivolous French, passionate Hungarians, thorough-going Germans, happy-go-lucky American gangsters) are commonplaces which change over time and migrate between genres and countries(Wikipedia). Ethno types refer to a complex cultural and historical phenomenon. It is the source of nationalistic prejudice and ethnocentrism.

Manga comics

Western critical thought had annexed the body of manga comics within its own comic art and production by placing it within its own comic genre. Manga is considered an exotic variation of the comic genre with an excess of sex and violence. So it is like saying that Japanese comic strips belong to the comic genre developed by the West and so it must be colonized by the critical assumptions of European/American ideology. In fact, if seen perceptively, '*manga is a medium in its own right'(* Rommens, 2000).

In manga comic strips, 'every image tells a story', so to speak. Following Gaudreault (1984), one might term this the 'micro-story', based on analogy.

Dialogue, as textual information, is part of the intradiegetic story layer, as it is directly integrated in the visual make-up: as in the balloon which points to the characters/speakers as story entities. This is the intra-diegetic use of the verbal code' (Rommens. 2-3).

If the Manga comics are closely read, it follows that mimetic features have two aspects. On one hand, each image enacts a micro-story and the macro-story is configured by presentation of plates which follow the sequencing of montage.

" Still within the visual narrative layer, one can distinguish 'translinear sequences' "(Lefèvre & Baetens 1993). In manga comics story and meaning is the product of combined recurrent visual elements in some sort of pattern, a visual motif as it were.

The other pattern evident in Manga comics is the occurrence and recurrence of verbal captions. The authorial voice here becomes omniscient as she/he distances herself/himself spatially and temporally. It means that the verbal code is reserved for dialogue and never interferes with the flow of the story. Indeed, the visual integration with the verbal is effected by the manner in which the story is presented through the principle of ' analytical montage'(Grenstein 1991). In analytical montage the story is scattered over different frames. For example, in manga comics there is no textual interference. The descriptive medium has been reframed. A scene in a Western comic strip is integrated whereas the same scene is generally cut up and fragmented over different frames in manga comics. Thus, a picture of a cloud might extend over several pages from alternate camera angles. Panels with alternating camera angles are incorporated in a visual continuum or narrative pattern, thereby elaborating the story, which would be captured on a single plane in a Western comic strip.

One example is the narrative in *Crying Freeman* which is presented through a rapid succession of images in the visual chain(Koike & Ikegami 1994). Such sweeping visual arrangements are the forte of manga artists.. Actually, Japanese artists use the technique of ' analytical montage' in which the sequencing of plates become flexible, enabling the artist to portray his story in his visual narrative language or grammar. Here the text never impinges or controls the visual layout. The visual representations , on the other hand, control the texting as for instance, in prolonging the action templates over a certain time through its images. As commented by Engelhardt,

" Building upon the existing literature, we are suggesting to regard the building blocks of all graphics as falling into three main categories: a) the graphic objects that are shown (e.g., a dot, a pictogram, an arrow), b) the meaningful graphic spaces into which these objects are arranged (e.g., a geographic coordinate system, a timeline), and c) the graphic properties of these objects (e.g., their colors, their sizes). Such syntactic categories of graphic objects can explain the permissible spatial relationships between objects in a graphic representation" ((Engelhardt.23).

The layout or the mise-en-page, therefore, admits of endless variation unlikely in the comics of Disneyland or Tintin because the story is told through the narrative. The typology of comic strips follow, according to Peeters, a definite page layout: the conventional, rhetorical, decorative and productive. In Western comics, therefore, the story is given primary importance and determines the panels of painting. In other words, the plates form a picture-story. This makes the manga artist more productive and innovative. He also has 30 pages at his disposal per week.

However, Tintin's comic stories are embedded in certain contexts. Asterix comics are always a product of a locality-The story characteristics in Manga tradition follow a different pattern. You can always isolate a Manga character in different ambiences. It does not matter whether a Manga character is Western or Eastern. For instance, *Yo Hinomura* or the *Crying Freeman* cannot be said to be strictly Japamese as he has been portrayed visually. This deepens the mystery surrounding the Manga characters.

We can always say that the code of representation in manga is in sharp contrast with Euro-American comics. In Western comic strips the visual language conforms to an author's individual style, whereas manga becomes a visual narrative style, which can give rise to various experiments by any author. Manga is therefore a subsystem and a language, in the best traditions of the ninth art. According to Francophone artists, ninth art refers to the art of comics which combines visual arts with narratives, called the (le neuvième) in France.

Conclusion

Finally, we can safely say that comics and graphic novels do occupy a significant niche in today's literature as well as media. Comics may be placed, also, in a lively dialogue with contemporary theory. We not only follow a narrative but also we extend our attention to trans-medial storytelling. In other words, we conclude that the applicability of narratology extends to other forms of media, other than that of printed material. In the course of this paper, I have attempted to highlight some of the dynamics which makes visual language unique. Today's media does not merely stress on verbal communication but also on animation and visual narrative grammar, leading to visual language patterns. Thus we clutch Tintin or Asterix before going to sleep. Or we engage with manga comics while waiting at platforms or during our spare moments. I hope I have answered the question which has haunted me always in my childhood days , that is, what makes a comic a comic?

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