

---

# THE CURRENT STATE OF FRENCH COMICS THEORY

By Thierry Groensteen





Comics theory started to develop in France in the early 1970s, which was the Golden Age of Structuralism. The pioneer scholar was Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, and his approach was inspired by semiotics. It was commonly believed at the time that concepts forged by linguistics to describe the mechanisms of verbal language could be adapted to other kinds of languages, including visual ones.

The three main ideas discussed by Fresnault-Deruelle in his first works were, firstly, text-image relations, which were supposed to define the very syntax of comics, and secondly, the discontinuity between images. Long before Scott McCloud, Fresnault-Deruelle tried to distinguish different categories of closure. Thirdly, Fresneault-Deruelle pushed forward the idea that the global composition of the page, as modern artists like Philippe Druillet or Guido Crepax were conceiving of it, was fighting against the linearity of the narrative and thus deconstructing comics as a narrative medium.

Twenty years later, in the early 1990s, Fresnault-Deruelle wrote that he had noticed the recent emergence of a new trend in comics scholarship. Referring to the works of Benoît Peeters and myself, he called this new approach “neo-semiotic critic”, noting that we were especially stressing the “poïetic” dimension of comics. What he meant was that we, the new generation of French comics scholars, were putting more emphasis on the creative process and the concrete choices that a comics artist has to make while working.

I will try to briefly summarise the developments of comics theory in France these last fifteen or twenty years, and I will consider successively five ranges of questions:

- the inherent problem in defining comics
- the importance given to the page and the physical dimension of comics
- the poïetic dimension, already mentioned
- the cognitive dimension, which refers to the construction of meaning by the reader
- and finally, the ‘mythopoetic dimension’, which refers to the importance given by comics to certain content

## PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

During the 1970s and 1980s, the usual definitions of comics were challenged by the emergence of new work that broke away from tradition. These ‘avant-garde’ or experimental comics did away with the need for animate characters, the need for a narrative, the need for drawing, even! More



recently, the rediscovery of comics from the 19th century, whose formats and formulas differ from modern comics, and the flood of comics imported from Asia, which follow different cultural codes, have made defining comics all the more complicated. Finally, recent years have seen the rise of a new standard in western production, the *graphic novel*. All these factors have contributed to making the 'definition' of comics more problematic than ever.

In this context, comics scholars have been inclined to reevaluate certain categories of works that had previously been considered marginal. Pantomime strips (wordless, or silent strips) have been particularly easy to rehabilitate and restore within the comics art domain, and many young artists have regenerated this specific form. Some pantomime artists whose work is popular in the French market include Nicolas de Crécy, Lewis Trondheim, Frédéric Coché, Micol, Winchluss, Thomas Ott, Shaun Tan and Blanquet.

In the recent anthology of critical essays edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester, *A Comics Studies Reader* (2008), there is an essay by Robert C. Harvey in which he strongly disagrees with McCloud's definition of comics. For McCloud, comics are made out of "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequences" and they do not have to contain words to be comics, whereas, for Harvey (2008, 25), the "essential characteristic of comics is the incorporation of verbal content".

This controversy about the importance of text is just one example of how difficult it is to come up with a definition of comics that everybody agrees with. Personally, I do not consider the question of a definition of utmost importance, and I have always been cautious while dealing with the subject. But my position is very similar to McCloud's, since the basic criterion, for me, is what I call "iconic solidarity". I believe that comics are made of images that are both separated from each other and over-determined by their coexistence *in praesentia*. The reader can see several images sharing the same space (the page or the double-spread); plastic and semantic relations between these images are displayed, and it is these relations that make comics into a *text*.

My friends Thierry Smolderen and Harry Morgan refuse the idea of an immanent and over-rigid definition that would confine the specificity of comics. They both hold, with some nuances, a theoretical position grounded in the idea of relativity. It can be summarised as follows:  
*throughout history and civilisations, there have been historic states of comics art, which are equivalent from the theoretical point of view. The current form of the medium is just the most recent one, and one should not give it a greater importance or make it into an autonomous form of art.*

According to Smolderen, comics is a complex object, at once real and imaginary, technical and artistic, and it is an object that has continuously undergone transformations. Every "actor"



implied in the field (historian, scholar, artist, writer, publisher, censor, adult reader or child) has its own definition of what comics are, even if this definition is not explicit and can only be inferred by the relation this person has built with comics, the way he uses and handles them.<sup>1</sup> Each of these definitions is equally valuable – it is interesting to analyse them all and to establish a cartography of definitions.

Morgan denounces the:

evolutionist error, of describing the history of the medium as a series of conquests and improvements, and the teleological error, frequently associated with the first one, of describing the evolution of the medium in a retrospective way, as a continuous progress towards a current form assumed to be perfect. Ancient or exotic forms of sequential art were perfect and fully accomplished from the point of view of their authors and users. (Morgan 2003, 151)

In 1845, Rodolphe Töpffer was already positioning his picture stories (*histoires en estampes*) as another form of literature. Harry Morgan makes this approach his own motto and speaks of “*les littératures dessinées*”, drawn literatures, in the plural (see Morgan 2003; 2008). Comics are only a subset of this vast domain, together with satirical etchings, popular imagery and cartoons. The very notion of literature refers, of course, to the idea of the book and the print – or its modern substitutes, the computer screen or the e-book.

## THE PAGE LAYOUT

French theory is characterised by the attention given to the page as a physical, graphic and narrative unit. For all of us French scholars, the page is the reference unit of the comics language. This is an important difference with Scott McCloud’s approach, for instance. In *Understanding Comics*, McCloud examines very carefully and pertinently panel-to-panel relations, but without ever having consideration for the complete page.

All of us have adopted the term and concept introduced by Henri Vanlier at the Cerisy Conference in 1987 for the comics page: ‘*multicadre*’, a multiframe. The relations that the artist displays between the panels are of utmost importance, from the geometric as well as from the semantic point of view. We pay specific attention to his choices, regarding the shapes, surfaces and positions of the respective frames.

---

<sup>1</sup> I quote from my correspondence with Smolderen.



I suppose that even for an American scholar, it is quite clear that Winsor McCay, Jack Kirby and Chris Ware, to name just these three major artists, have very different conceptions of the page, and therefore it is strange that the question of page layout has not been raised as a major issue in comics theory.

As most of you probably know already, Benoît Peeters has proposed a typology, a model opposing four different conceptions of the page, which he called *conventional*, *decorative*, *rhetorical* and *productive*. I discuss these categories in my *The System of Comics* (Groensteen 2007, 93–95), because it appears to me that, in practice, the identification of these four categories encounters some difficulties, since quite a lot of pages fall into several categories at once. In his latest book, *Ecrire l'image*, Peeters (2009) agrees with my criticism, but nevertheless believes that his model, because of its simplicity, keeps a certain pedagogical value – which is absolutely true.

My own opinion is that, to describe the layout of a comics page, one has to start by answering some simple questions: firstly, is the layout regular (with frames of a strictly constant format) or irregular, and secondly, is it discrete or ostentatious, spectacular in some way or another? For a more precise description, you have to examine more specific phenomenon, which do not necessarily affect the globality of the page. This could include the suppression of a frame, thickness and regularity of inter-iconic space, the recourse to an insert, location of speech balloons, the number of strips and the regularity of their height, the number of panels, which define the denseness of the page, etc. None of these criteria is neutral in respect to our appreciation of the layout. They are all part of what I have named the ‘spatio-topical system’. *Spatio-* refers to the space, *topical* comes from the greek *topos*, which means place. (I realise that this terminology can be confusing for English readers because *topical* has another meaning in English, whereas the word ‘topique’ doesn’t exist in French and has been created by me for the purpose of my demonstration.) In my view, space and place must be considered separately, although they are connected. A panel has a certain shape and surface, but it is also located at a given place on the page and in the book, and these placements matter. Spatio-topical parameters open a choice of possibilities for the artist, but also set certain rules or constraints.

In his most recent works, Thierry Smolderen has studied the history of speech balloons (Smolderen 2006) and the various and competing conceptions of the page layout in comics from the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries (Smolderen 2007). With these in-depth studies of a technical or an aesthetical problematic, he was able to untangle the mixture of cultural, ideological and symbolic determinations at given periods. Therefore the solutions that we usually see as belonging to a certain artist’s credit appear like responses to new problems or like ‘leading metaphors’ of a medium that is in constant regeneration.



## THE POÏETIC DIMENSION

As I said earlier, most of us French scholars try to take into consideration the creative process, the very action of conceiving a comic, the intellectual, technical and artistic aspects of the craft.

Benoît Peeters has emphasised the difference between the work of a single creator who both writes and draws his own comic (what we call “un auteur complet”), and the collaboration between a scriptwriter and an artist, each of them a professional in their own domain. For Peeters, the complete author has the privilege and the “irreplaceable chance” of inventing his narrative while working on the page, because from the very beginning this narrative can take the form of a comic. “Text and image are not two separate moments of the elaboration process, they are born simultaneously, the hand of the creator moving from one to the other without even clearly noticing it”.

Peeters illustrates this by a few examples borrowed from Rodolphe Töpffer and Hergé. Töpffer conceived the story of *Mr Crépin* while looking at a profile he had been sketching without any specific purpose; the doodle inspired him to create an entire graphic novel. In the unfinished *Tintin et l'Alph-Art*, Tintin visits an art gallery and knocks at the door of the office where the book-keeper is working. In three panels, we can see how this “Monsieur Sauterne” transforms into a woman, “Madame Lajot”, and the scene takes an unexpected turn: because of her sour-tempered and acrimonious personality, Hergé imagines that this woman can do nothing but complain about her job: “I have been working like a slave for 25 years...”, etc.

For Peeters (1988; see also 1998, fifth chapter), these instantaneous exchanges between text and image constitute, for the creators who work in collaboration, something like a lost Paradise. They can only be nostalgic for this privilege of the complete author. Being himself a scriptwriter who has worked with François Schuiten for almost 30 years, Peeters credits his friend and colleague as co-inventor of the story, since they had long discussions about the themes, the characters, and the situations. The specific role of Peeters is to give the narrative its final form and structure, and to write dialogues. He insists that the scriptwriter has to be in the service of the artist. For him, the definition of a good script is that it proposes a strong “drawing machine”.

I make a digression to point out the fact that this opposition between complete authors and professional writers or artists structures the profession in France in a very remarkable way. If you look at catalogs of independent or alternative publishers, you will find that 95% of the books are made by single authors, whereas big publishers, on the contrary, encourage collaborations and have writers attached to their company who work simultaneously with a vast number of artists.



Smolderen's opinion is very much like Peeters' in his development of his own theory of what he terms 'stereo-réalism' (Smolderen 1988). *Stereo-réalism* is the name given to a certain number of techniques in story-inventing and scriptwriting inspired by the ambition of creating fiction that would be "turned towards image" ("*fiction orientée image*"). Such fiction does not address the linguistic capacities of the reader but tries to activate mental faculties that trigger visual imagery. The techniques Smolderen discusses are concerned with actions, objects, places, movements and characters.

His theory is based on scientific works about cognition, such as Harry Jerison's essay *Evolution of the Brain and Intelligence* (1973) and Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind* (1983). What makes his approach so original is that he applies this scientific knowledge to the specific process of artistic creativity. So far, the theory of "stereo-realism" has only been outlined in a few not-too-recent articles, but it should be fully developed in Smolderen's forthcoming essay to be published by Les Impressions Nouvelles.

Another theory I'd like to refer to is the one Philippe Marion introduced in his Ph. D. thesis at the Belgian University of Louvain-la-Neuve in 1991 (a work that was published two years later under the title *Traces en cases*; see Marion 1993). Marion discusses the problem of graphic style as the individual expression of an artist. He is interested in the *trace* left in the drawings by the artist (or, in Marion's own terminology, the "enunciator"), a phenomenon for which he invents a neologism, namely the concept of *graphiation*. He tries to demonstrate that the emotional and empathic response of a reader towards a comic is founded on this graphic trace expressing the subjectivity of the artist. He believes that in a drawing, we have to distinguish between two different dimensions: the monstration (the act of showing, representing something – which is the transitive dimension) and the graphiation, turned towards the graphic trace (the reflexive dimension).

For Marion, our passion for comics is explained by the memory of our own experiences as a child. The reader is a 'graphiateur' who ignores himself. When we read a comic and we perceive the graphic trace of a specific artist, we are sent back to the traces we produced ourselves in our childhood and to a given psychic context. Through the reactivation of these memories – even if it is a subconscious phenomenon – we identify with the artist. Marion's theory – summarised, defended and much praised by Jan Baetens (2001) in the collection *The Language of Comics* – is clearly psychoanalytical.



## THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION

By ‘cognitive dimension’, I refer to the decoding of a comic by the reader, the process of production – or reconstruction – of meaning in the reader’s mind. With your permission, I will deal here only with my own work.

Science tells us little about how the human brain reads a sequence of images. Several scholars working in the fields of linguistics or classical semiotics claim that, in order to understand an image, our brain has to translate its message into words. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze agreed with this idea of the necessary ‘mediation’ by verbal language. However, this has never been proven, and in my opinion it is only a matter of faith. My own intuition, reflection and experience as a reader have led me to other conclusions.

In my book *The System of Comics*, I write that an image is not necessarily polysemic. This is especially the case when it is a drawing, an artefact where every line is the product of the artist’s will, whose purpose is to express something; and more so when the image does not stand alone but is part of a sequence. The semantic relations between an image and its neighbors anchor the sequence in but one specific meaning. Moreover, I underline the fact that, in most cases, comics artists are not using just any kind of drawing, but what I call a *narrative drawing*. One of the characteristics of narrative drawing is that it “obeys an imperative of optimal legibility. It uses different parameters of the image (framing, composition dynamics, color placement, etc.) in a manner that mutually and concurrently reinforces them to the production of a unique effect” (Groensteen 2007, 162).

So, most of the time, drawings in a comic have a way of communicating their message directly and do not need the mediation of the language (I do not speak here of the additional functions of speech balloons, but of the way the intrinsic message of the drawing is decoded). Nevertheless, it is true that an image can be considered an *utterable* which means that it can be translated, paraphrased in the language of words. Apart from being an utterable, it is also a *describable* and an *interpretable* (Groensteen 2007, 107). The description of the image, though, is never fully accomplished by the reader, because he attaches priority to the chain of events, the dynamic of the story. A full description would suppose that the reader is more attentive and establishes an inventory of information contained in the panel, not to mention the fact that the specific style of the artist must also be considered (Groensteen 2007, 121–126).

I am weak enough to believe that I have been able to somewhat clarify how the meaning of a comic is constructed by the reader by bringing to light the phenomenon of *retroactive determination*. Sometimes, the meaning of the panel is determined by the panel that follows,





because it allows the reader to verify if his first interpretation was correct, or even it gives the key *a posteriori* of a complete sequence.

This is why I was led to the conclusion that the construction of meaning is staged, especially when we take into consideration a sophisticated comic. There are different *planes of meaning*: my understanding of a panel at first glance is always to be verified and adjusted on the basis of the information given by the preceding and following panels, which constitute a frame of interpretation, but also on the basis of the complete sequence that allows new inferences and leads to the production of a global meaning.

## THE MYTHOPOETIC DIMENSION

*Mythopoeia* is the name given to the creation of myths in literary works. In a broader sense, when I speak here of the ‘mythopoetic dimension’ of comics, I refer to the fact that comics, as an art form, tends to generate specific kinds of content. For instance, superheroes and funny animals are two categories of characters that are especially favored – although none is the exclusive preserve of comics: superheroes have become very popular in the movies in recent years, and funny animals have always been a favorite in animated cartoons.

Philippe Marion and Harry Morgan have both worked on the problem of this specific correlation between the art form and the narrative content: in how far can we say that the art form determines or generates the themes and structures of the stories being told.

Marion introduced in 1991 the concept of mediageny (*médiagénie*). When you say that someone is photogenic, it means that their face is treated kindly by the photographic images taken of them. Similarly, a specific theme, topic or character, will be mediagenic in relation to a given medium if the medium reserves it a preferential treatment. Later, Marion developed a symmetric concept, namely that of mediativity (*médiativité*). He defines it as “the intrinsic and ontological capacity of representation proved by a given medium”, its “specific potential” (Marion 1997).

I have criticised these two notions in an article published by the electronic journal *Belphegor*, devoted to the study of popular literature and mediatic culture (Groensteen 2005). In my opinion, mediageny and mediativity are properties that are almost impossible to measure; moreover, in the best case they can be described as relative, which means that they admit various degrees but no absolute form.

One could think that there is something such as a ‘degree zero’ of mediativity, which would refer to what the medium is unable to express, what it excludes. But I believe that there is no such



exclusion. I agree with Christian Metz, the famous researcher in the theory of cinema: from an aesthetical and even an ethical point of view, one must recognise that every medium is capable of expressing anything (Metz 1984, 52), but uses different means to achieve its narrative ambition, and sometimes waits for the right artists to enlarge the scope of its achievements.

You certainly know the famous conclusion of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractacus logico-philosophicus* (1921): "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence". Now, the French writer Valère Novarina has turned Wittgenstein's proposition upside-down: "What we cannot speak about is precisely what has to be said". And this sentence applies perfectly to the matter we are dealing with here. For an artist, it is always a challenge to deal with a subject or theme that is supposed to be a little mediagenic, in relation to the medium he works in.

Innovative comic artists like Chris Ware, for example, tell us the kind of stories that have never been told in the comics form before. So, I would say that what a given medium is not supposed to be able to express is precisely what ambitious artists will tend to make it say. And that is the reason why modern graphic novels are not confined to superheroes and funny animals.

In his Ph.D. thesis about *Mythopoeia*, Harry Morgan approves of my criticism of the concepts of mediageny and mediativity, but wonders in his turn about the "optimal use" of the medium. He tries to demonstrate that the 'very genius' of comic art leads to the creation of imaginary worlds and myths. (The corpus he investigates is made out of the work of two French artists, Alain Saint-Ogan and Jean-Claude Forest, and of two American works: one newspaper strip, *Little Orphan Annie* by Harold Gray, and one famous superhero series, namely *The Fantastic Four* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.)

In my view, Morgan's answer to the question of interaction between the medium and its content is accurate but not complete. I believe that one important aspect of the question has been left in the dark. If one of the natural tendencies of comics is to give birth to original worlds in fiction, and lend its content the form of mythic narrative, then another tendency of comics is to use derision, caricature, parody – for mockery is also a component of its 'genius'.

The lack of realism in drawn literature favors both fantasy and lampooning. This is why the *topoi* comics deal with, whether borrowed from our cultural heritage or more specifically created, are so often treated with an ironical or satirical distance. I develop this idea further in my essay *Parodies: la bande dessinée au second degré* (Groensteen 2010).



## REFERENCES

- Baetens, Jan. 2001. "Revealing Traces. A New Theory of Graphic Enunciation." In *The Language of Comics. Word and Image*, edited by Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, 145–155. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2005. "Médiagenie et réflexivité, médiativité et imaginaire: comment s'incarnent les fables." *Belpégor* 4 (2).
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2007. *The System of Comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Groensteen, Thierry. 2010. *Parodies: la bande dessinée au second degré*. Paris: Skira Flammarion.
- Harvey, Robert C. 2008. "How Comics Came to Be: Through the Juncture of Word and Image from Magazine Gag Cartoons to Newspaper Strips, Tools for Critical Appreciation plus Rare Seldom Witnessed Historical Facts." In *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer & Kent Worcester, 25–45. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Heer, Jeet, and Kent Worcester (eds). 2008. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Marion, Philippe. 1993. *Traces en cases. Essai sur la bande dessinée*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Académia.
- Marion, Philippe. 1997. "Narratologie médiatique et médiagenie des récits." *Recherches en communication* 7: 61–87.
- Metz, Christian. 1984. *Le signifiant imaginaire*. Paris: Christian Bourgois.
- Morgan, Harry. 2003. *Principes des littératures dessinées*. Angoulême: Editions de l'An.
- Morgan, Harry. 2008. *Formes et mythopoeia dans les littératures dessinées*. Thèse de doctorat, Université Paris.
- Peeters, Benoît. 1988. "L'écriture de l'autre." *Les Cahiers de la bande dessinée* 81: 40–43.
- Peeters, Benoît. 1998. *Case, planche, récit. Lire la bande dessinée*. Tournai: Casterman.
- Peeters, Benoît. 2009. *Ecrire l'image*. Bruxelles: Les Impressions nouvelles.
- Smolderen, Thierry. 1988. "Le stéréo-réalisme." In *Bande dessinée, récit et modernité*, edited by Thierry Groensteen, 85–107. Paris: Editions Futuropolis.



Smolderen, Thierry. 2006. "Of Labels, Loops, and Bubbles: Solving the Historical Puzzle of the Speech Balloon." *Comic Art* 8: 90–112.

Smolderen, Thierry. 2007. "Trois formes de pages", *Neuvième art* 13: 20–31.