
THE NINTH ART SEEN FROM THE OTHER SIDE

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Grove, Laurence. *Comics in French – The European Bande Dessinée in Context*. Berghahn Books, New York and London, 2010. ISBN 978-1-84545-588-0. 360 pages.

President of the International Bande Dessinée Society Laurence Grove has persistently worked to promote the knowledge and scholarship about francophone comics in English. As such, his book about comics in French follows the ambitions of the society and adds onto the works of other society members such as Ann Miller's *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (2007), Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (2007), and Matthew Screech's *Masters of the Ninth Art: Bandes Dessinées and Franco-Belgian Identity* (2005). Grove's book recognises these other titles and specifically aims to use different examples in its historical approach to bandes dessinées ("drawn strip"), or BDs as they are known for short. This book only concerns itself with the French language comics of Europe and as such leaves out any comics from for instance French-speaking African countries or French-Canadian comics.

The first section of the book, "What is a Bande Dessinée?," takes the reader by the hand through some of the mechanisms and formal elements of BDs and situates them within a specific French language cultural context so that the reader is conceptually well-dressed to begin the chronological discussion of BDs. Because of this initial explanatory section, the intended audience for this publication can be both comics scholars and readers not at all familiar with either comics or French language culture. Depending on your knowledge about comics, you can skip this part, but for scholars not familiar with the French terms, the explanations are very helpful, and serve as very thorough introductions. Grove convincingly manages to navigate the mined field of comics/literature and comics/film by comparing elements from bande dessinée with the French cinema's *La Nouvelle Vague* and the novel type *Nouveau Roman*, underlining both how they share similarities and how bande dessinée is distinct from both literature and film.

The next section, "The Chronological Approach," takes the reader into an equally problematic part of comics scholarship, the discussion of which comic was the first. This is a question that often leads to heated debates, and one which Grove wisely sidesteps by offering a prehistory of comics instead of a fixation on unique artists, a discussion in French speaking scholarship that often leads to the Swiss Rodolphe Töpffer. In his introduction, Grove underlines his intentions: "By deflecting attention away from Töpffer I have aimed to provide a broader view of the BD's development and current form, one that takes roots in a rich text/image tradition dating back to the Middle Ages" (p. 8). The prehistory chapter of the book opens the reader's horizon and understanding of comics to the innovative uses of the combination of text and image dating back quite some time. Grove proves to be an excellent guide, not least thanks to his analyses of examples, which are reproduced in the book, albeit not in color.



Grove's familiarity with the collection at Glasgow University MS Hunter allows for very interesting connections to be made between older text/image combinations and more recent bande dessinée, a connection Grove is careful to make consistently so that this pre-history sheds a useful light on the connections between the way image, text and narrative have been put together beforehand. The divisions of one image into several moments through the use of dividers or the use of several images to tell a story in collaboration with a text is shown to be old tricks of the trade. This is the case with the illustration chosen for the book's cover, *Miroir de l'humaine salvation* (1455), themed with the virgin vanquishing the devil: "The work's central concern with the doctrine of the Fall and of Redemption is therefore explored through the visual bringing-together of Old and New Testament events. A primitive form of pictorial narrative exists in that the pictures thus provide a chronologically ordered series" (p. 66).

The chronological section then moves onto both the nineteenth and twentieth century which it covers with a thoroughness that is impressive. For anyone interested in the development of French language comics, this methodical and well-written presentation is definitely worth the read. Töpffer still holds a prominent place in the history of BDs, but many other artists are mentioned and the culture of *histoire en images* is carefully laid out, explaining the importance of the magazine format in the developments of French comics from the beginning of the 20th century with girls' and boys' magazines, the rise of *Tintin* and *Le Journal de Mickey* as well as *Pilote* later on. Particular attention is also paid to the Belgian connection, showing the strength of this tradition as part of the francophone comics culture.

One of the fascinating examples provided by Grove is the comics magazine published during the occupation of France, *Le Téméraire*, which for the most part has been left out of French comics history due to its Nazi-supporting ideology. "It is hard not to let the hard-line Nazi ideology cloud our judgment of *Le Téméraire* [...]" says Grove, "[a]rtistically *Le Téméraire* was of the highest quality, as the success of the later careers of its contributors might indicate" (p. 132). This example also appears in the beginning of the book in an opening anecdote about how Grove has used it in his teaching where it serves as a sample of how comics can be used in discussions about history and aesthetics in the classroom (p. 1-4).

In the following chapter on "Contemporary BD: Innovators, Best-sellers, and Prize-winners", Grove discusses the French BD market in the 1990s and 2000s as one characterised both by the continued popularity of album titles and the new experiments of artists reacting against this mainstream. Both the experimental group OuBaPo and the publisher L'Association as well as best-sellers like *Titeuf* and *Astérix* are mentioned, and in order to sample this wide contemporary field, Grove digs into some of the prize-winners of the Angoulême festival, probably one of the most famous festivals in the world of comics and certainly a force of power in the French BD world. Though I appreciate these descriptions



and their placement in the wider field of comics culture, this choice to describe individual works from the perspective of prizewinners risks becoming a more fragmented presentation. Historical surveys of the near past are always difficult, and it is not entirely clear that the choice of some prizewinners covers this period sufficiently. For those interested in finding new titles to read there is more information in Grove's descriptions, but the use of listings of works breaks with a more thoroughly historical contextualisation that would perhaps have been too difficult to carry out so close to its works' publication dates.

This break with the chronological, historical approach is furthered in the last section of the book titled "The Cultural Phenomenon", which includes chapters on the business side of BD and discussions of French language comics as popular culture, a chapter on BD criticism both in French (written out as a time-line) and in English, as well as a chapter on the use of cultural studies and other theoretical approaches to BD that includes a couple of case-readings.

The aspect of BD as business or part of popular culture is certainly an important part of the history of comics in a French cultural context, the review of comics criticism in French is very useful for the understanding of the field, and the case-studies are solid and interesting. My criticism concerns the manner in which these last chapters are thrown together in a way that confuses the reader to some degree. As the chronological approach is left behind, the book takes us down many paths but never completely all the way, and in all these last chapters there seems to be missed opportunities for further expansion that would perhaps have demanded a completely new book on the topic. I would have liked to see much longer texts on the amusement parks and other commercial aspects of BD as part of a general popular culture in French speaking contexts, or for that matter, more thorough readings of the different methods mentioned in the last chapter, but this seems to be for a whole other project, and their inclusion in this book is not entirely motivated.

Comics in French gives a solid and enlightening view of French language comics and their culture from the Anglo-Saxon point of view and it is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in comics or French language culture. Laurence Grove no doubt holds an impressive knowledge about older text/image cultures and I can appreciate the author's decision to contextualise beyond the historical scope, introduce other methods and stray into contemporary BDs as well, though these are perhaps better covered by the titles mentioned in the beginning of this review. As an addition to Beaty's focus on the French comics culture of the 1990s, Screech's artist-centered approach and Miller's theoretical/analytical book, Grove provides a historical angle that is central to the understanding of the field. The book makes the reader want to dig into new, old, and very old French language comics, and provides the tools for such further studies.