

H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 180

Laurence Grove, *Comics in French: The European Bande Dessinée in Context*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010. xiv + 346 pp. notes, bibliography, and index. 100€ (pb). ISBN 978-1-84545-588-0.

Review by Chris Reynolds-Chikuma and Kenneth Mouré, University of Alberta.

Opportunities to write about comic books in a serious journal are still rare. Writers often start such an article or book review by claiming that although comics are not yet “there,” books like Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* have shown that comics are a significant media/art form. *Maus* was published in 1986 and its second volume was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Since then, interesting and challenging graphic novels have been published in many languages and cultures, reinforcing the point that they deserve more attention, including from historians.

Grove focuses *Comics in French* on *Bande dessinée* (or BD; comics or graphic novels) in three European, French-speaking countries—Belgium, France and Switzerland. BD is a major cultural and economic phenomenon in French-speaking countries.^[1] Their importance and their broad appeal (across ages, education levels and social classes) in French society makes this media/art one interesting means to understand French culture in ways that other documents/arts/media do not. While he deals thoroughly with BD in these three francophone countries, Grove explains that he did not include other francophone BD, because “rather than do [French-language comics of non-European origin] an injustice, [he] ha[s] preferred to say that they would make an excellent subject for another book that is yet to be written” (p. xiii).

Grove’s study is a very good complement to another interesting study just published by Joel E. Vessels, *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*.^[2] The fact that two books came out just last year confirms that comics, and French comics in particular, are becoming a hot topic in the academic world. While Vessels is a cultural historian, Grove is a cultural studies specialist. However, Vessels’ perspective is limited not only in the period he covers (from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century) but also in the way he studies comics, primarily from an ideological point of view. Hence he starts with the nineteenth-century rich French tradition of political caricatures as a forerunner of comics. There are undeniable connections between the two fields, but while these connections might fit his political analysis, they seem overdrawn and his examples are not always convincing. Moreover, Vessels tends to treat comics as if the problems of definition of the field did not exist. Similarly, he does not deal with the image in general, and with the relation of image to text, specifically in comics, which is a key issue in the world of BD. Therefore, while Vessels’ book is well done, full of new and important information, Grove’s study puts comics and debates about them at the centre of a larger historical perspective.

Grove has written on the relationship between text/image and “emblems,” to which he later added comics.^[3] Several parts of the book under review draw on chapters in these previous publications. In going back to sixteenth-century emblems and associating that tradition with contemporary comics, Grove seeks to “provoke awareness, or maybe just remind the reader, of the fact that text/image interaction can be traced back to the earliest forms of written culture” (p. 67). This is what is most interesting in Grove’s contribution to recent works on the history

and/or theory of *Bande dessinée*.^[4] Of the many books on *Bande dessinée* in French, few are written by full-time academics. As Grove notes, comics are still “virtually a taboo subject in French universities” (p. 7). Therefore, even if in the past decade this has been changing, particularly in departments of English, British and American Studies, as demonstrated by Jean-Paul Gabilliet’s masterpiece, Grove’s academic study is even more necessary.^[5]

For specialists and non-specialists alike, Grove provides a list of vocabulary and definitions, with concrete examples to illustrate the concepts (pp. 15-40), as well as a detailed index and a twenty-seven page annotated bibliography including a list of some forty films related to comics and twenty websites at the end. Several pages of precise and useful endnotes also follow each chapter. The book covers an amazing array of “images/texts,” from medieval times to 2009, from mainstream to avant-garde, and from caricature to intellectual gay porn comics. His history of “French” comics ranges from one possible beginning in 1455 (see the illustrations entitled “Women Vanquishing Evil,” and “Miroir de l’humaine salvation,” p. 67) to the present day (see the avant-garde *Bande dessinée* movement OuBaPo sample entitled “Strips-Acrostiches” by Etienne Lécroart, p. 48). In many books on comics, authors try to find glorious ancestors in prestigious earlier forms or media, stretching back to Egyptian hieroglyphs. Grove emphasizes that manuscripts and emblems are not precursors of *Bande dessinée* per se, but to study them next to each other is a way to put BD within the larger context of the relationship between text and image. He places BD within the tradition of the “visual,” and this visual tradition within a larger cultural and social context. At the same time, while giving a context to the visual, he succeeds in keeping close to the comic books and even the specific pictures with which he deals. Hence, the book is full of concrete examples of an incredible variety of styles and themes of *Bande dessinée*, beautifully and smartly contextualized.

Indeed, the analyses Grove provides throughout the book make it a very good tool for the study of French culture. Even when his examples are less convincing, they are useful for an understanding of French society and for persuading academics of the necessity of taking pictures and especially comics into account in their evaluation of French history. For example, Grove draws repeatedly on the case of the journal *Le Téméraire*, about which Pascal Ory had written some years ago.^[6] *Le Téméraire* was an illustrated journal for youth published from January 1943 to August 1944. Written in French by French authors and illustrators, it was used as an organ of Nazi propaganda. Grove is partly right when he writes that historians, and especially French cultural historians and specialists of culture, have downplayed the role of *Le Téméraire* as an important influence on comics after the war. But one can be sceptical about the weight he assigns to the journal. First, we have long known from the studies of Vichy by Eberhard Jäckel, Robert Paxton and Henry Rousso that Collaboration was downplayed in France until the 1970s.^[7] We know little about the reception (i.e. the readers’ actual interpretation) of *Le Téméraire* during those two years of war, exactly when the prospects for the war’s outcome were changing and, with them, French public opinion. In addition, if *Le Téméraire* artists such as Poivet, Gire, Matt, Erik, and Licquois had a certain influence during the war, they earned little discernible interest compared to contemporaries like Hergé, Jacques Martin, and Edgar Jacobs from 1945 to the present.

Other points where Grove corrects Franco-centrism in the comic world are more convincing. For example, for a long time, there has been a disagreement between American and French authors about the date of the first comic. Americans argue that it was 1896, with the publication of American artist Outcault’s “The Yellow Kid” in William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal American*. When the US celebrated the centenary of this cartoon in 1996, French specialists wrote articles to criticize that date and claim that the French-speaking Swiss, Töpffer, invented the *Bande dessinée* in the 1830s. Grove writes in the chapter, “Töpffer: L’inventeur de la BD?,” that “...to single out one individual is to deny the notion of a general cultural movement that

progresses in step with social changes, and in that sense the critical hagiography of Töppfer is little more than an easy solution to the complex question of the evolution of a mentality” (p.86). Of course, although Grove does not say it explicitly, this remark also applies to Outcault.[8] Grove situates Töppfer and others within a longer trend that gradually switched (back) from text domination to image/text interaction, and recognizes that “French culture [was] at the forefront of that dynamic” (p. 88).

On another key issue, Grove disagrees with the position of some theoreticians of comics (especially French-speaking, like Thierry Groensteens; see pp.17-19) who give priority to the picture over the word in their definition of *Bande dessinée*. [9] This “elitist” definition greatly limits the number of comic books that one considers worthy of being called *Bande dessinée*. It is true that there is a strong tendency in recent BD to try to elevate the picture above the word in order first to emphasize its specificity and second to cope with its inferiority complex by trying to recreate the modernist look that thus would bring it a status similar to modernist painting. However, Grove argues that one has to recognize that comics are overwhelmingly a complex mixture of both words and pictures.

Finally, Grove advocates opening a new field of “French Visual Studies,” to further the study of French culture and history through systematic and thorough use of visual images. Indeed, the brilliant analyses that Grove makes throughout this book make this study a very good tool for studying French culture. Some historians, such as Marc Ferro, have already studied images not just as pure transparent documents, but more subtly as media/art that have specific ways of representing the “real.” [10] As Grove acknowledges, more research is needed, especially about the development of the *Bande dessinée* in the nineteenth century (p. 97). He observes several times that we still have many issues to tackle before we can have a complete view of the role of pictures and the interaction between pictures and words. On the one hand, the pictures do not always “say” the same thing as the words. Therefore, pictures need a specific reading, separate from the words, sentences, and text. This specific treatment is not easy to conceive for generations of scholars trained during the period of the “imperial word”—the period when the word reigned alone (without competition from the image)—which paralleled the rise of history as a social science. On the other hand, because most comics were intended for children or working classes (although in the case of France, often beyond, even if it was not always acknowledged), for us historians, they often conveyed important contemporary views that represented the views of a vast segment of the population which were not necessarily the same ones as the elites’ perspectives. Visual studies can give new insight into popular understanding of historical events, as do studies of popular fiction.

Comics in French is well written, rich in new material and analysis, and well illustrated with carefully contextualized examples. One note of regret: the copy reviewed was badly bound and fell apart in the process of reading and annotating for this review. The book’s back cover and forward state that “in English-speaking countries comics are for children or adults who should know better.” Thanks to Grove, we know that comics merit serious attention from adults and scholars.

NOTES

[1] This is less so in other European countries, where other forms can be more important. The *Hörspiel* (radiodrama), for example, was big in Germany and German-speaking countries beginning in the 1950s.

[2] Joel Vessels, *Drawing France: French Comics and the Republic*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

[3] Laurence Grove, *Emblematics and Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press at the University of Virginia, 2000); Laurence Grove, *Text/Image Mosaics in French Culture: Emblems and Comic Strips* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005).

[4] For the most recent, see Robert Petersen, *Comics, Manga, and Graphic Novels: A History of Graphic Narratives* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), a world history of comics with several chapters on the “French” tradition.

[5] Jean-Paul Gabilliet, translator: Barty Beaty, *Des Comics et des hommes: histoire culturelle des comic books aux Etats-Unis* (Paris: Editions Du Temps, 2004) and Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2010).

[6] Pascal Ory, *Le Petit Nazi Illustré* (Paris : Ed. Albatros, 1979).

[7] Eberhard Jäckel, *La France dans l'Europe d'Hitler*, (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1984); Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1972); and Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[8] Grove offers an English artist, Thomas Rowlandson, as an earlier example of predecessors or forerunners of comics artists, perhaps falling prey to a similar ethnocentrism.

[9] Thierry Groensteens, *Système de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1999).

[10] Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et histoire* (Paris: Messageries du Livre, 1988).

Chris Reyns-Chikuma and Kenneth Mouré
University of Alberta
reynschi@ualberta.ca

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

