

Comics and War

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Abstract

Recounting war has always played a role in European comics, whether as an instrument of propaganda, heroisation or denunciation. But it is only in recent decades that the number of stories about war has proliferated, that the range of subjects, spaces treated and perspectives has increased, and that the circulation of stories across Europe has become more pronounced. For this reason, comic books feed into a shared collection of popular narratives of war just as they fuel anti-war representations.

Article

In Europe, there is growing public interest in what is known in France as the 'ninth art'. The publishing of comic books and graphic novels is steadily increasing, including a growing number which deal with historical subjects; comic book festivals are increasing in number and the audience is becoming larger and more diverse. Contrary to received ideas, the comic is no longer merely 'an entertainment product'; it is part of culture in its own right, and a valid field of academic research.

These phenomena suggest that the comic, even if it is yet to gain full recognition in all European societies, at least meets with less reticence than it faced in the second half of the twentieth century. It has evolved from an object arousing suspicion, even rejection, into a medium which has gained wide recognition in contemporary European societies.

War illustrated: themes and messages

As in other media in European popular culture, war has always been a favourite subject in comics, whether at the heart of the narrative or in the background. Recent years have even seen a proliferation of war stories, making them representative of the evolution of the comic book as a whole.

While the military conflicts in which European countries have been involved have been treated to unequal degrees—most works focusing on the conflicts of the twentieth century: the World Wars, the Holocaust, or colonial wars after 1945—increasingly numerous, diverse new perspectives are constantly appearing. On the one hand, comic books are covering an increasingly wide range of

geographical spaces affected by war, reaching zones on the periphery of continental Europe or even further afield (Tahiti, La Réunion). Some stories speak of symbolic and well-known spaces like the battle of the Somme, the Warsaw Ghetto and the concentration camp of Natzweiler. Others shift the perspective to little-known areas which have been passed over in silence or simply forgotten, drawing them out of the shadows of European collective memory. Tracing the journey of Czechoslovak legionnaires across Russia during the revolution, *Svoboda!* (Kris and Jean-Denis Pédant) refers to the Eastern Front unknown to a non-Russian-speaking readership and neglected by historiography.

On the other hand, an increasingly broad range of themes is being treated. While the classic subjects of the history of war are still dealt with, whether at the front, the home front or in the camps, new subjects are also being treated: desertion (Chloé Cruchaudet, *Mauvais genre*), the banishment of homosexuals in Mussolini's Italy (Luca de Santis and Sara Colaone, *In Italia sono tutti maschi*), as well as the post-war period (Maël et Olivier Morel, *Revenants*). At the same time, new kinds of characters are being represented, including soldiers from the colonies, who now appear alongside 'classic' soldier figures (Appollo, Serge Huo-Chao-Si, *La grippe coloniale*). Women are also increasingly being put on centre stage (*Notre Mère la guerre*) and questions of gender are being treated: homosexuality (*In Italia sono tutti maschi*), transsexuality (*Mauvais Genre*). The generational dimension has also been taken into account, in the case of both war and of contemporary testimonies of past events (*Les enfants sauvés. Huit histoires de survie*).

Just as the themes treated have evolved over time, so have the messages put forward by comic books. A means of propaganda during the First World War (*Pieds-Nickelés, Bécassine*), comic books subsequently contributed to the mythologization of the victors (*Baron rouge*) before beginning to denounce war (*Charley's War* broke new ground in this respect). They can even be seen as a veritable documentary source, like the works of Joe Sacco on the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The evolution of the figure of the hero is symbolic in this regard. While the superhero of American comics has never really taken root in European comics, there has nevertheless been a gradual shift from the triumphant hero to the anti-hero, and from the anonymous character, lost in the masses like an unknown soldier (Jacques Tardi, Art Spiegelman), to the portrayal of an individual character, whether fictional or real as in the case of the transvestite character of Suzanne drawn by Chloé Cruchaudet (*Mauvais Genre*). Concomitant with the move from black and white to colour by a large number of authors, these developments have followed the social, political and mental transformation of European societies since the Cold War.

From the "travelling" comic to shared memories of war

The comic book about war is not only an account of war. It is also a journey. Firstly, the account circulates between different media: a comic book can be adapted to cinema just as it can itself adapt literary, historical or other forms of testimony. The story of *Mauvais Genre*, for example, was directly

inspired by the historical account of Fabrice Virgili and Danièle Voldman, *La garçonne et l'assassin. Histoire de Louise et de Paul, déserteur travesti, dans le Paris des années folles* (Payot, 2011). Secondly, the story told by a comic book travels between the wider public and diverse sites of production, circulation and reception of knowledge, and travels across linguistic and cultural boundaries, notably through translations. In this respect, festivals reveal the convergent, even common, interest that European societies see in accounts of war. These international events also demonstrate the existence of growing exchanges and transfers, moving towards a common space of production and dissemination: the objects themselves circulate, as do techniques, knowledge, representations and even memories. These transfers, of a commercial, cultural and social nature, tend to feed off each other: the award of a prize can lead to translations or, conversely, the publication of a work in translation can increase its chances of winning a prize.

However, within a European framework where demand and exchanges are increasing considerably, it is difficult to assess the degree of actual appropriation of historical knowledge, images, sounds, representations and memories which circulate from one place or person to another. The real impact of comic books thus remains unclear. What is certain, however, is that recounting war in the form of comic books helps widen perspectives on the past, and it does so well beyond the frontiers of the European continent. This form of narrative also fuels *anti-war* discourses in Europe, a feature common to all these stories, whether they are called *bandes dessinées*, *fumetti*, *tebeos historietas*, *quadrinhos*, *beeldverhalen* or, quite simply, comics.

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