Graphic Narrative and the Imagined Community of Europe

What do comics have to do with the European project? How might comics contribute to Europeans’ understandings of each other, at a crucial moment in which the European project appears to be in jeopardy, with both the fragmentation of the continent’s economies and extreme pressure on its political processes? This is the first of two essays which will address this topic. In this series of essays, I will argue for a particular relationship between Europe and graphic narrative, or comics, or bande dessinée, or whatever your preferred term. Of course, this relationship is not an exclusive one – comics do not belong to Europe, nor is comics culture universal through all the nooks and crannies of the continent. However, perhaps it is exactly this non-exclusivity that makes graphic narrative the ideal narrative for a Europe that seeks to emphasize its own outward-facing nature. In the present essay, I will address the formal properties of the medium and the way that they are well-suited to the characteristics of the European project, first by considering the ‘monstrous’ hybridity of the comics form, which combines both image and text, and second by considering the topological nature of space on the comics page.

An important strand of the historical literature on national integration points to the role of language and print (Deutsch 1953; McLuhan 1962) in the production of a national space (Anderson 1991). This modernist approach to the emergence of peoples and their territories emphasizes print capitalism and its centralizing tendencies; the emergence of certain dialects as ‘national languages’ results from the co-constitution of news media markets and communities of common interest. In other words, pamphleteers would seek the widest audience for their goods, thereby choosing a widespread dialect over a more restrictive one. Then, in order to know what was happening, those who speak less-extensive dialects might learn enough of the ‘major’ dialect to read the print culture circulating through regional distribution networks. Therefore, markets expand until they run into the border of another major linguistic centre, which has itself been consolidating as a linguistic community. These media markets are of interest because these same print capitalists tailor the news and opinion in their pamphlets to be of interest to those in this market; therefore these places become stitched together both as a community (having heard of each others’ good fortune and disasters) and as a national territory (some places far away being more well known that closer areas in another media market). In short, these

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modernist theories of the emergence of the nation-state posit a fundamental role for communicative media in the consolidation of national communities and territories.

When considering the emergence of the European Union, some have argued that the lack of Europe-wide cultural experiences, such as news media, have undermined the elite-led processes of Europeanization (Gerhards 2001). Others have argued that while a series of public spaces have emerged, no European public sphere has emerged to undergird Europe-wide democratic processes (Eriksen 2005). Of course, arguably the EU has gotten as far as it has because of its embrace of cultural diversity, and so a programme of linguistic convergence would only cause support for the EU to evaporate. The Culture 2000 and Media 2007 programmes each tried to thread this needle by creating a unified cultural space through the production and distribution of media. Nevertheless, “scholars have come to agree that the emergence of a genuinely transnational mass media system in Europe is rather unlikely,” (Koopmans/Pfetsch 2007, 61). I would like to argue here that such an approach is overly textual, an artefact of the modernist theories’ object: nation-building during the Enlightenment. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of visual culture in nation-building, especially landscape painting and cartography (Daniels 1994; Smith 2000). It is in this tradition that I would like to proceed.

Graphic narrative resolves much of this tension between political unity and cultural diversity as a result of its own hybrid nature. The definition of comics as either primarily visual or primarily textual is a debate that has unfolded over the past decade (e.g., Varnum/Gibbons 2001). Indeed, the one thing that both camps agree on is that it is impossible to read the text in a comic and look at the images at the same time; rather, our brains process graphic narrative first through one component part (text or image) and then doubles back for the other (Groensteen 2007). Those who argue that comics are fundamentally textual emphasize the narrative dimension of the medium. Comics tell stories. We describe the practice of engaging with them ‘reading’. Nobody says “I’m going to go look at some comics.” This is undoubtedly true. Equally, however, it is possible to imagine graphic narrative without any words at all, but impossible to imagine graphic narrative without any images. It is clear from this that comics are neither reducible to text, nor to image: at its limits graphic narrative is either image-text or text-image. Lesley-Anne Gallacher (2011, 458) usefully links this hybridity to the tradition of the monstrous: “[M]onsters are excessive. As ‘denizens of the borderland’ they represent the extremities of transgression and indicate the limits of the order

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of things.” Similarly, graphic narrative’s status as neither one nor the other has often marked it as “an obscenity of linguistic desire destroy[ing] the image’s aesthetic integrity,” (Groys 2011, 97). Rather than seeing this monstrosity as beyond the pale, it is more productive to consider the special powers that such a monster might have. Indeed, graphic narratives exceed the sum of their words and pictures, serving as an architecture through which readers experience new sensations and produce new meanings.

But what, concretely, can graphic narrative offer to Europe as a medium? It is precisely this monstrosity that interests us here. The ability of the image to carry most of the weight of the narrative makes comics a resolutely transnational medium. The history of comics in Europe is one of translation and intermixture, with Italian artists drawing Marvel UK comics and with Belgium’s *Tintin* comics translated into circa eighty languages. The minimal use of the written language in most comics – what one comics writer has referred to as “headlines written by a poet” (Morrison 2011, 145) – allows for relatively cheap and easy conversion from one textual language to another. There are of course some limitations imposed by word balloon size and so on, but in general the textual language of comics is easily mutable.

An example of the potential for such an approach can be found in another transnational, multilingual community: evangelical Christianity. Obviously there are many differences between Europe and evangelical Christianity, but for my purpose they share some key similarities: they are both communities seeking to disseminate narratives about the world and their place in it, but equally they are communities marked by internal cultural and linguistic differences. Perhaps the most famous cartoonist in evangelical Christian circles is the controversial Jack Chick. After being ‘born again’ the young Jack Chick found his talent in graphic narrative to be an outlet for proselytizing that circumvented his intense shyness. The now-87 year-old artist has been churning out Christian tracts in graphic narrative form for over fifty years. These tracts have been sold in over one hundred languages and in numbers in excess of 500 million copies, with the images remaining the same in each version but with the text translated (Dittmer 2007). This publishing operation is remarkable in its scope, illustrating (literally) the ability of graphic narrative to cross political and linguistic borders with ease. The sales are even more remarkable given their content; Chick’s anti-Catholic views mark him out from the evangelical mainstream.

Chick is an unlikely, and perhaps ironic, model for a Europe looking to disseminate regional narratives, particularly given Chick’s belief that the EU

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is the advance guard of an emergent global government that will foreshadow the end times (Dittmer/Sturm 2010). Nevertheless, Chick has successfully negotiated the complexities of producing a community without relying on the emergence of a common language, as required by modernist theories of the nation-state. The monstrous hybridity of graphic narrative has allowed Chick to tack between the twin poles of communal identity and linguistic diversity. Therefore, it is worth a more detailed consideration of the way that comics work, and how these formal characteristics can contribute to the narration of a new Europe.

How do comics produce narrative out of images? This is the subject of extensive study and debate (e.g., Dittmer 2010; Groensteen 2007), but for reasons of space I will offer a singular explanation. Graphic narrative is formed from the juxtaposition of panels, each of which includes at least an image if not text as well (in the form of speech balloons, or narration). This montage of panels proliferates across the material space of the comic and indeed can be understood as existing well beyond the limits of an individual comic, spilling over into panels in previously-published comics. Collectively they produce an archive (Venezia 2010): a vast (and theoretically limitless) field of visual and discursive resources from which readers can produce narrative. Comics aficionados will note that I have not framed this in terms of semiotics and the embedding of a linear narrative through the layout of the comic (a la McCloud 1993). This is intentional as I want to re-imagine comics through their materiality and simultaneous co-existence: of panels within the page, of pages within the comic, and comics within the archive. This highlights comics as a topological space, with individual panels linked to one another through connections of varying intensity. For example, panels on a single page are all topologically linked to one another by their co-existence on the page. Of course, these panels are also differentially related to one another through cues embedded by the writer and artist (the kinds of things emphasized by McCloud and Groensteen). However, these topological connections stretch far further than the page. Just as their material occupation of a single page links panels together, they are also linked (if slightly less intensely) with the other panels of the comic book, and with the other panels published in comic books of the same title, or featuring the same character, or by the same writer and artist. All these panels are potentially co-present, called forth by the reader to make sense of the comic they are immediately reading.

Such an approach emphasizes the event of reading as a moment of becoming (Hones 2008), in which the archive is accessed by a subjective individual,
who brings his or her own cultural capital, interest, and habits of reading to bear on the particular text in front of them. This topological understanding of graphic narrative accounts for the multiplicity of readings available from any given comic, with some readers drawing extra meaning or additional interpretations through their deeper knowledge of characters or genre, and some readers noting artistic homages and other visual connections between otherwise non-related panels. In short, the event of reading may be the simple connection of nearby frames into a linear sequence of narrative, or it may involve making vast leaps through the archive, connecting panels published years prior with the one right in front of your eyes. More precisely, for long-time readers it is probably both of these things, as well as many others besides. The indeterminacy of this process is exactly what should be savoured about it.

What this approach to graphic narrative shares with the semiotic approaches is a concern with the gutter: the space in between panels. The topological approach values the gutter not because its closure by our active minds produces the narrative (as per McCloud), but because the gutter marks the radical difference and singularity of the panels. There is no topological space without a distance to be bridged by the relations established by the reader, and consequently the comic is always a multiplicity: of panels, of relations, of embodied appreciations. Indeed, the comic is always multiple in that it is linked to a range of other comics to which it is not materially congruent. The comic book is a mass of networked relationships that exceed the comic’s own borders.

It is here that we see the utility of the comic as a form of media in understanding the nature of the European project. Our attention now turns to the work done by the European Spatial Planning and Observation Network (ESPON). ESPON is an EU think-tank dedicated to examining spatial patterns in Europe. As such its role is not only descriptive (what is the space of Europe like?) but prescriptive (how should the space of Europe be?). Political geographer Veit Bachmann has been conducting research on the geographic visions of ESPON, in particular its ideal European space: the regional vision (Grasland/Beckouche 2007).

The regional vision incorporates a range of spatialities, from territoriality, to scale, to networks (Figure 1). First, the EU is defined as a territorial actor, like a nation-state, that is defined by its borders. Spatially, the world is divided between EU/non-EU. Simultaneously, the EU is engaged with its neighbours, via the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). In this way the EU seeks to
create a zone of peace and prosperity outside its border. This might be understood as a classic geopolitical attempt to create a sphere of influence in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe (Bachmann/Sidaway 2009). In this spatial formulation, the actual territory of the EU is only one scale at which the EU is manifest – instead we must consider a series of continental, regional, and hemispheric interests with which the EU is concerned. Finally, ESPON also imagines the EU as a network of relations both within its territory and around the world. For example, corporate regulation made in Brussels has begun to reshape markets in North America and elsewhere, as mass-producers re-design both their products and their business models to account for EU regulation (Schapiro 2009).

Figure 1: The regional vision of the EU, as described by ESPON (Grasland/Beckouche 2007)

This regional vision of the EU as a simultaneous multiplicity bears obvious comparison to the topological space of graphic narrative. The territorial vision of the EU emphasizes its common sense, everyday spatiality. In this

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way, it is similar to a page of a comic book or graphic novel, which in its materiality creates a set of topological connections among its panels. This materiality exists at multiple scales, with declining intensities of topological connection, at the meso-scale of the comic book and the macro-scale of the entire back catalogue of that title. Finally, the networked understanding of the EU’s spacality maps perfectly onto my most expansive notion of comic book topography: a web of connections linking together vastly disparate elements of the comic book archive. Of course, it could be argued that in my explication of the topological space of comics everything is reducible to relations among panels, while in ESPON’s framework these are three ontologically distinct spatialities. This is true. Nevertheless, some have argued recently in geography that territory and scale are both ultimately reducible to networks (Marston/Jones III/Woodward 2005; Painter 2010). While this has proven controversial, it nevertheless indicates that the spatiality of comics and the spatiality of the European project share a fundamental ontology.

So what? How to make sense of this commonality, and the hybrid monstrosity described earlier? It means that comics share a fundamental blurriness with the European project. At once neither this (a state/a text) nor that (an international organization/an image), both the EU and comics are composed of a range of sites (panels/places) linked together in a highly variable web of relations. These relations do not exist in and of themselves, but require the daily investment of creative energy and habitual action. In short, without the people who compose these networks, both the European project and the graphic narrative are nothing but inert matter. If Europe is looking to animate its politics with new narratives, comics are the way to go.

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