On the Perils and Promise of Representing Europe in Graphic Narrative

In my previous essay published on the Narratives for Europe website, I argued that if the European Union was looking for new ways to narrate its identity in the world, it could do worse than to turn to graphic narrative. This argument relied on an analysis of the formal properties of comics, both their hybrid nature as image and text in combination as well as the topological (or networked) nature of space within comics. These characteristics not only make comics easily translatable for a range of localities throughout Europe (given the way the image carries most of the weight of the narrative), but also mean that the spatiality of comics mirrors the spatial formation of the European Union itself. This argument relies on the utility of graphic narrative in producing cultural unity across a range of linguistic environments and harnesses the common use of space in both graphic narrative and the European project. The former has a practical value in producing media that can link together the disparate literary communities of Europe while the latter has a more subtle power: habituating readers to think in terms of the relationships between and among spaces. If the European project is about tearing down (internal) European borders, then having Europeans imagine their national spaces entwined in the way that panels are entwined in graphic narrative cannot hurt. In this essay, I turn (largely) away from the formal affinities between graphic narrative and the European project to consider the question of content. If European cultural policy were to veer towards graphic narrative, what kind of narratives should be told?

This question is asked not in a proscriptive manner, but rather as a continuation of the intellectual inquiry already begun. In other words, I am not concerned with limiting the discourse in some way; rather I am interested in identifying the genre of narrative that carries on the affinities between graphic narrative and the European project expressed in the previous essay. What kind of story would complement these affinities? What kind of comics, for what kind of Europe?

One possible answer to this question can be found in the ill-fated online superhero Captain Euro (www.captaineuro.com). Captain Euro was created by Twelve Stars Communications (now Corporate Vision Strategists) under contract from the European Parliament. Only two issues of the digital comic were created, as by then the project had received a tremendous amount of

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negative publicity, largely from a Eurosceptic British public. My use of Captain Euro in this argument relies entirely on the analysis conducted by Robert Saunders (forthcoming), who effectively links Captain Euro to other Anglophone attempts to produce a sense of national distinction by contrasting ‘our’ superhero from the American superhero archetype. Where the American iteration is brash and resolves his or her conflicts through righteous violence, Canadian and British nationalist superheroes have often been scripted as more pacifist and well-rounded (Dittmer 2011; Dittmer/Larsen 2007). Similarly, Captain Euro is the son of a European diplomat and a palaeontology professor, illustrating his intellectual and pacifist credentials. Further, Captain Euro is really Adam Andros, whose “name […] signals both classical – andras is Modern Greek for ‘man’ – and Adamic origins, thus providing the character with a nomenclature that, like the Renaissance-era art of Michelangelo, mixes Graeco-Roman humanism with Judeo-Christian traditions,” (Saunders, forthcoming). He is partnered with a woman whose name is equally laden with meaning: Donna Eden (‘Donna’ is Italian for ‘woman’ and ‘Eden’ of course refers to creation myth). In doing so, Captain Euro grounds European identity in the well-known historiography of the rise of the West (McNeill 1963). Andros and Eden gain their powers from the Spirit of Europe, who appears when a runic tablet is smashed into twelve star-like shards, and charges them with the protection of Europe, from the nefarious Dr D. Vider or any who would emulate his name and attempt to undermine European solidarity. Saunders (forthcoming) summarizes this origin story thus:

*With its imagery and dialogue, the first issue of Captain Euro pays homage to the originary myth of a primordial and pagan Europe, linked together by the peripatetic Celts, who left their mark on everything from the Skelligs to the shrine at Delphi. […] As Michael Dietler has argued, the use of symbols of Europe’s ancient Celtic past is uniquely suited to the promotion of “pan-European unity in the context of the evolving European Community” while paradoxically buttressing “nationalism within member states of the community” and advancing “regional resistance to nationalist hegemony” (1994, 584).*

In order to find a semblance of unitary, common heritage, the creators of Captain Euro had to go back several thousand years, but in doing so they reproduced the model of modern ethnic nationalism that the European project is trying to transcend. Among his other conclusions, Saunders notes that Captain Euro failed to win any political friends (or seemingly, readers) because of its didactic nature. To that I would add that the superhero genre

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is so indebted to its origins in the awakening of a nascent American superpower that it simply is a poor fit for a Europe that aspires to influence through ‘soft power’ (Bachmann/Sidaway 2009; Dittmer, forthcoming; Nye 2004).

Another, more fruitful avenue for narrating Europe can be found in the highly successful Islamic comic *The 99*. This comic was created by Naif al-Mutawa in the wake of the War on Terror to create positive images of, and role models for, Muslims around the world. With this objective, it is similar to Captain Euro, Captain America, and the broad thrust of the project to re-narrate Europe; all of these models are attempts to project an identity out into the world and simultaneously to provide models for behaviour. What distinguishes *The 99* from *Captain Euro* is its commitment to the diversity of that identity.

The story of *The 99* begins in 1258, when the Mongols sacked Baghdad, then the centre of culture not only of the Caliphate but arguably of the world. The librarians of Baghdad’s library devise a technique for storing all the knowledge and wisdom of that about-to-crumble world in ninety-nine stones, which are set in three strands of beads and smuggled to Andalucia, where they remain for several hundred years. In 1492, when Grenada is lost to the Reconquista, the stones are split up – one-third go to the Americas with Columbus, while another one-third go along the Silk Road to Asia. The remaining third are spread through Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. These ‘noor’ stones each choose a champion that represents the knowledge and wisdom contained therein. Consequently, we have heroes such as Hadya (the Guide), Jami (the Assembler), Jaleel (the Majestic), and Sami (the Listener), each hailing from a different country such as Hungary, Ghana, or Yemen. Importantly, despite all coming from different places, the 99’s powers resonate and are amplified when they work in teams of three. While each is an individual (as signified by their unique attire and special powers), they must work in concert to achieve their goals. Further, the stones update themselves with newfound knowledge and wisdom that emerges over time, although this process is opposed by the primary villain of the comic, who wants to freeze our understandings of wisdom in the past (al-Mutawa believes the Koran is an open-ended text, rather than something to be frozen in time).
This narrative, with its emphasis on diversity and cosmopolitanism (the librarians were not only interested in Islamic knowledge, but in the wisdom of all texts), has spread far and wide, being translated into English, Arabic, Turkish, Indonesian, and Mandarin (see Figure 1), with a theme park in Kuwait, a cartoon series viewed in many countries around the world, and a range of merchandising opportunities. While this certainly is a money-making enterprise, al-Mutawa is a psychologist who is concerned with religious extremism and authoritarianism in Islam and other religions. He hopes to create positive associations with the Koran to prevent a future in which Muslims self-identify as an extremist religion. His efforts have garnered a great deal of media attention, with President Obama hailing a crossover between The 99 and DC Comics's Justice League of America as the most innovative outcome of his 2009 Cairo speech on religion.

What is it about The 99 that has made it so many friends? Of course, the context in which it has appeared is key; whereas Captain Euro was perceived as pro-European (and therefore anti-British) propaganda by British Eurosceptics, The 99 is perceived by many elites as a much-needed ‘moderate’ Islamic role model in a range of countries where that identity...
does not directly contradict established national identities. Of course, those who might object to this plural representation of Islam within the comic’s pages are often effectively excluded from the public sphere. The only negative publicity has come from an Islamophobic campaign organized through the right-wing U.S. website World Net Daily that succeeded in delaying the U.S. release of the animated cartoon version of The 99 on the Cartoon Network. Setting that aside, why has The 99 been successful at narrating a role for Islamic principles in the world? Al-Mutawa’s decision to not have any particular character bear the burden of representing the entire religion allows a multiplicity of Islams to emerge from the narrative without any particular geographic centre or central tenet. The 99 can thus accommodate Batina (the Hidden), whose face is veiled, as well as Darr (the Afflicter), a wheelchair-bound blonde-haired American whose real name is John Weller. Earlier iterations of this formula include Marvel Comics’s Alpha Flight, which was a team of Canadian superheroes, each of whom hailed from a different province (at least in the original lineup – see Dittmer/Larsen 2010). Even with Alpha Flight, however, there was a centre (the leader of the team was from Ontario, and wore a costume ripped straight from the maple leaf federal flag). If there is a centre to the 99, it is Dr Ramzi Razem, the psychologist/historian based in Seville who works to assemble the 99 into a force for good. However, he is not one of the 99 himself. This is no accident; al-Mutawa’s emphasis on plurality and anti-authoritarianism suffuses the comics and provides an ethos that lacks the didacticism of Captain Euro.

If there is a lesson to be drawn from the examples of Captain Euro and The 99, it is that new narratives of Europe in the comics medium ought to avoid the didacticism and Manichean morality associated with much (but not all) of the superhero genre, and embrace a plural, diffuse understanding of political identities. Greice Schneider (2010, 39-40) argues persuasively that comics have made a turn towards the analysis of everyday life over the past several decades:

"Although incredible heroes, exciting adventures and distant worlds have never lost their supremacy, ordinary life started to appear as a fairly representative theme in the 1960s, when comic artists, like Harvey Pekar or Justin Green, began to incorporate their own lives into panels. In France, although it is possible to find isolated cases of ordinary, rather than extraordinary, subject matter in the 1970s [...], the autobiographical tradition only gained force in the 1990s, first with works by Edmond Baudoin, and now with an entire generation of French-speaking nouvelle bande dessinée. In Japan, autobiographical"
mangas [...] are also a growing trend. The presence of ordinary people and their daily routines in contemporary comics in recent decades seems to be an undeniable and global phenomenon.

Schneider is quick to note that autobiography is not necessarily an account of the everyday, with its banality and arbitrariness. The lack of an obvious story arc is, in this formulation, the key indicator of its authenticity; its mimicry of daily existence, with its indefiniteness and fuzzy signification, is paradoxically what is definitive and concrete in tying these accounts of the everyday together as a genre.

The spectacular has long been associated with comics, and perhaps not surprisingly given the cheapness of ‘special effects’ on the comics page in comparison with television and film (McAllister 2006). The everyday is, paradoxically, equally suitable to graphic narrative because of the medium’s formal properties. Given that graphic narrative is composed of a topological space that is transformed by the act of reading into narrative, there is the possibility of a disconnect between the amount of time it takes to ‘read’ the story and the amount of time meant to be conveyed by the story: “The pace would then be not only present at the level of the story, as an element in the life of characters, but also replicated at the level of discourse, and performed at the level of narration, affecting the very experience of reading” (Schneider 2010, 51-52). In other words, comics are able to stretch and manipulate time in ways that may predispose readers to particular emotional orientations, such as excitement, ennui, and melancholy. Graphic narrative can thus be a powerful medium for communicating what it feels like to be someone occupying a particular time and space.

Recalling from my previous essay that the topological production of space within graphic narrative mirrors official discourses of European space, it becomes possible to imagine a new graphic narration of Europe that emphasizes the everyday life of Europeans. Utilizing the topology of the page both to signal the un-heroic, and yet the utterly significant, nature of everyday life can provide points of recognition and connection between readers and the characters portrayed on the page. Further, the topology of panels can be used to show how these everyday lives are interconnected with the lives of other Europeans occupying discrete sites within the topology of the European Union. In other words, the relationships between panels can be used to highlight the rhizomatic linkages (Deleuze/Guattari 2001) that stretch across space and time in every moment of our lived experience. Such an approach emphasizes connection over territorial concerns and even
provides opportunities to integrate those outside the EU into the European project.

What would this look like, specifically? Everyday lives in Europe are connected through numerous relations, most obviously through face-to-face interactions (as a result of the freedom to travel and migrate for work), but also through complex social networks (such as extended families sprawling across and beyond the continent, or friendships made through exchange programmes, or within the structure of transnational corporations). Geographer Marco Antonsich (2009, 789) argues further that “the simple fact of living together within the same politico-institutional bounded space generates ways of thinking, acting and being in the world which in turn contribute to the process of society-building.” In other words, the simple act of existing within the European Union networks everyone who does so through an array of regulatory and legal mechanisms. Portraying these lives, and the relationships among them, could be a powerful source of ‘soft power’ for Europe in that it avoids overt claims to uniqueness or superiority, while nevertheless embedding a particular geopolitical vision of European life as interconnected and plural within the very structure of the narrative.

By avoiding the didacticism and over nationalism of *Captain Euro* and highlighting the plural, de-centred nature of Europeans, European life, and European space (as per the portrayal of Islams in *The 99*), a new narrative of Europe as something unique in the world could be woven without raising the hackles of British (or other) Eurosceptics. Avoiding the trap of territorial thinking, with its associations with the state-building projects of the last few centuries, is the only way to do justice to the European project, which resembles a state in many ways but nevertheless exceeds that definition. The role of space in the European project indicates the need for a medium that can embed a healthy disrespect for territorial thinking within whatever narrative it contains. Graphic narrative, built on topological connections between panels, pages, and comics, is ideal for this purpose not only because it too is a product of topological thinking, but also because it is so heavily reliant on the visual dimension of reading. This threads the needle of linguistic barriers by allowing a transnational community of readers to emerge with only minimal effort at translation (as seen in the example of Jack Chick’s evangelical readership – see my previous essay).

This formal synergy between the needs of the European project and the possibilities of graphic narrative is buttressed by the argument made in this essay. Here I have argued that an emphasis on everyday life is not only suited
to the form of graphic narrative, but suits the need for any narrative of Europe to avoid overt claims to superiority or exclusivity. Instead, tales of everyday life within and across the boundaries of Europe can speak to the ways in which all our lives are contingent, unscripted, and arbitrary. Nevertheless, this can be done in a way that embeds the uniqueness of Europe within graphic narrative’s form itself, rendering the stories politically innocuous with regard to storyline and all the more palatable for being such. This suggestion, that a European cultural policy should emphasize graphic narrative of the everyday, is offered in the hope that performing such a radically inclusive topological space through a creative programme would reshape European space to be more inclusive itself (Ferrer-Gallardo 2008; Moisio 2007; van Houtum 2010; Vaughan-Williams 2008).

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