The Historians of the Art Form

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Introduction

The idea that there are art-historical precedents for the comic book form is now commonplace and many popular books on the subject, from both the USA and Europe, give an overview of earlier artistic practices that used sequential images to tell stories. Such books include George Perry and Alan Aldridge's *The Penguin Book of Comics* (1967, England), Jacques Marny's *Le Monde étonnant des bandes dessinées* (1968, France), Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993, USA) and Kees Ribbens and Rik Sanders' *Getekende Tijd: Wisselwerking tussen geschiedenis en strips* (2006, Netherlands). They all trace back the origins of the comic book form to Palaeolithic cave paintings, Egyptian papyri, Trajan's Column and the Bayeux Tapestry. They all additionally examine the development of popular religious, political and satirical prints from the 15th to the early 19th centuries as precursors to the comic book form. The fact that these populist works highlight the origins of the form is welcome but it must be noted that they are underpinned by scholarship that has used the discipline of art history to analyze the comic book medium in more depth.

This overview will compare and contrast the development of critical discourses, in both French and English, concerning the origins of the formal aspects of comic books in earlier artistic practices. The key texts examined here show how art-historical approaches towards the study of comic books developed in the 1960s in France and in the 1970s in the English-speaking world (1). Central to any evaluation of art-historical approaches to the study of comic books are the two volumes of David Kunzle's *The History of the Comic Strip,* published in 1973 and 1990 respectively, which still stand out as the most substantial body of scholarship on the emergence of the form in any language. The concluding sections of this overview consider the continuing impact of this early scholarship and how the ideas presented have been critically revised in academic texts from the 1990s to the present-day as Comics Studies has emerged as a discipline internationally.

The debates around the origins of comic book form and the search for examples of proto-comics are here evaluated in relation to two main issues: the specific art-historical methods and methodologies used; and the desire to elevate the status of comic books by establishing a canonical lineage for the form. It additionally considers how such approaches have led to recent developments in comic scholarship that see some comic book practices as forms of art themselves.

Francophone Origins

In 1975 when giving an account of the shifts that had occurred in the production, consumption and critical engagement with comics in France since the 1960s Luc Boltanski noted that

> The care that is taken to establish a connection between high culture and comics, and to confer on comics the antiquity that is constitutive of every legitimate cultural tradition, accounts for the tendency (found primarily among internal commentators), to relocate the origins of comics to the greatest possible historical distance… (Boltanski 1975: 288)

The desire for the cultural recognition of comic books in France described by Boltanski emerged with the formation of the *Club de Bandes Dessinee* (*CBD*) in 1962 and they directly promoted the legitimacy of comic books in their fanzine-like journal *Giff-Wiff*. Key founding members of the *CBD* included the academics Francis Lacassin, a semiologist from the University of Paris, and Pierre Couperie, who had studied art history at the Sorbonne and the Institute d'Art, Paris. In 1964 the

group changed its name to the *Centre d'etude des literatures d'expression graphique* so emphasizing the need to give academic legitimacy to the study of the medium. This group also included many members working in the film industry, and this may have been one of the factors behind a schism in 1966 with some members leaving to form *La societe civile d'etudes et de researches des litteratures dessinee* (*SOCERLID*). This new group included amongst its members Couperie and Claude Moliterni, who taught sculpture at the Faculte de Vincennes, who were both on the editorial board of *Phenix* the new journal published by *SOCERLID* (Grove 2010: 234-240; Miller 2007: 23-24.).

One of the most significant activities of *SOCERLID* was the 1967 exhibition *Bande Dessinee et figuration narrative* held at the Musee des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, which was curated by Couperie and Moliterni and attended by half a million people during the three months it was open. The exhibition displayed enlarged reproductions of comic strips and contextualized these in relation to the current art movements of *Nouvelle Realism* and Pop Art (Grove 2010: 236-8). Although not an attempt to explore the origins of the form, it was clear that the curators wanted to raise the status of the medium through association. Ann Miller's analysis of the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, which was also edited by Couperie, suggests that this link to contemporary art was not a reasoned argument but rather a polemical stance and that the authors were just as keen to make links back to the art of the Renaissance as they were to the present (Miller 2007: 23). A more detailed overview of the critical writings of Couperie and other members of *CBD* and *SOCERLID* reveals that there is some substance to both aspects of their arguments.

In 1972 Coupiere wrote two articles, "Antecedents and Definition of the Comic Strip" and "Echoes of Modern Art in the Comic Strip", for publication in a special issue of the bi-monthly, tri-lingual Swiss magazine *Graphis* which was devoted to graphic and applied arts (Couperie 1972a, 1972 b). These articles advance similar arguments to those promoted in the 1967 exhibition by directly linking comic books to modern and contemporary art. Couperie is explicit in explaining his methodology

> In reality it is quite possible to follow the in evolution of comics the sequence (or coexistence) of the trends that have characterized art from 1880 to the present day. This sequence and coexistence are very clearly defined in the comic strip if it is subjected to the same critical methods as are applied to painting and other established arts, i.e. if attention is paid only to a minority of important artists, instead of considering the total production at a given point in time (Couperie 1972b: 14).

In emphasizing key individuals and referencing the formal features of canonical works that stand apart from the mainstream, he takes a very traditionalist art-historical approach to the subject of comic books. The sections outlining the origins of the form also highlight canonical works from the past that are linked to the present by referencing *Narrative Figuration,* a specifically French art movement of the 1960s that promoted a return to critically engaged realist painting. Couperie references Classical, Mannerist and Baroque traditions throughout these articles, particularly when discussing the forms used in American newspaper strips. This highlights the fact that these art-historical categories were still privileged by the academic Beaux-Arts tradition still dominant in France during the 1950s and 60s.

The American newspaper strip was also an important reference point for Couperie's *A History of the Comic Strip, co*-written with Maurice Horn in 1968 (Couperie and Horn 1972). This is one of the earliest sources to bridge the gap between French and English-speaking comic book histories and Horn, a founding member of *SOCERLID,* was an important figure in linking these two cultures. In the essay "The Magic of Burne Hogarth,", which prefaced a new edition of Hogarth's comic book work on *Tarzan of the Apes,* Horn drew extensively on French sources such as *Giff-Wiff* and references

both Couperie and Lacassin (Horn 1972: 5-31). Horn quotes directly from Lacassin to emphasize the artistic traditions Burne Hogarth draws on.

> Hogarth is fascinated by...the suffering portrayed by Grunewald, by the vitality of Rubens' compositions...by the classicism of Greek sculpture, and by the ideas of German expressionism (Lacassin 1971 as quoted in Horn 1972: 16).

In contrast to the loose art-historical approaches used by the circle that emerged out of *Giff-Wiff* and *SOCERLID,* art historian Gerard Blanchard's *Histoire de la bande dessinee* from 1969, gave a detailed and nuanced account of the origins of the key features of comics form. Blanchard specifically focused on image-text relationships from the medieval period and examined the importance of methods of reproduction including woodcut, engraving and letterpress printing. Even when examining pre-linguistic cave paintings Blanchard's emphasis is on the iconic symbols and signs that surround the more representational imagery. This theme of image-text relationships is evident throughout Blanchard's study and debates surrounding the integration of image and text in defining the comic book form are legion within comic book scholarship and forms a backdrop to the issues explored throughout this chapter. Blanchard avoided the rather basic interpretations that might follow from seeing the scrolls that appear in medieval sculptures and illuminated texts as being early forms of speech balloons even when the form suggests this might be the case. He relied instead on detailed scholarship of the period to place the works, and image-text relationships, in context (Blanchard 1969).

Another feature of Blanchard's analysis is the focus on framing devices borrowed from architecture in these illuminated manuscripts and how they made their way into engraved images in early printed books in the 15th century. He notes that such books remained the preserve of an elite class of society and that there was a parallel development of underground satirical political and religious pamphlets. He ends this section of his study by suggesting that "The history of this activist imagery remains to be written" (Blanchard 1969: 36). Unknown to Blanchard the writing of this history was already in progress and would be published by the British art historian David Kunzle in 1973.

Anglophone Origins

David Kunzle's two volumes on the origins of comics form still stand as the most significant and scholarly of works on the topic, or as Scott McCloud put it in when referring to the first volume

> Kunzle's book ... has gone virtually unnoticed by the comics community but it is an enormously important work. Check it out! (McCloud 1993: 216).

The first of Kunzle's books; *History of the Comic Strip, Volume I, The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* was published in 1973. It had been in preparation since the early 1960s when Kunzle was a Ph.D. student at the University of London under the supervision of the art historian Ernst Gombrich. As noted in Kunzle's Preface the book was essentially a revised and reorganized version of his doctoral thesis submitted in 1964. It is a monumental work, some 467 pages in length, and examines pamphlets and broadsheets that displayed formal features of modern comic strips and comic book from across Europe over four centuries.

In the introduction to this volume he examines the origin of the term *comic strip* and then provides his own terms for these proto-comics which he calls variously *narrative strip, narrative sequence, picture story* or *picture sequence*. He goes on to note the fact that contemporary books on the comic strip contain only brief overviews of the pre-history and that these give the general impression that

the comic strip only starts in the 1890s (Kunzle 1973: 1-2). Interestingly he does not refer to these contemporary books by name or include any existing histories of the 20th century comic book in his introduction (or bibliography) apart from John Paul Adam's *Milton Caniff, Rembrandt of the Comic Strip* from 1946 and Stephen Becker's *Comic Art in America* from 1960. The lack of references to the increasing number of books on comics produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggests that this volume was substantially completed by 1968 when the Preface was written but only published in 1973.

The introduction to this volume also outlines Kunzle's definition of the medium in which he highlights four key features.

> ...I would propose a definition in which a comic strip of any period, in any country, fulfills the following conditions: 1) There must be a sequence of separate images; 2) there must be a preponderance of image over text; 3) The medium in which the strip appears and for which it is originally intended must be reproductive, that is in printed form, a mass medium; 4) The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical. (Kunzle 1973: 2-4)

This definition is often referenced and equally as often criticized, but these criticisms can say more about the position of the commentators rather than Kunzle's work itself. For example, Thierry Groensteen has recently taken Kunzle to task for the insistence that comics are mass-produced only because he wants to include contemporary limited edition small press works within the scope of comics rather than being seen within the tradition of the artist's book (Groensteen 2012: 93-114).

Some of the conditions Kunzle used for his definition were necessary to set the scope of his study. The idea that works must be in reproducible printed form was essential if they were to be distinguished from earlier illustrated manuscripts. It also sets the starting date for his study as 1450 in a post-Gutenberg world of the mass media, a point he emphasized at some length. A more difficult aspect of the definition is the idea that these proto-comics must be both moral and topical. Kunzle is quite specific in considering modern and contemporary comic strips to have a strong moral content and justifies the idea of topicality by stressing the transformative potential of narrative strips that comment on social and political issues and thereby excluding traditional subjects such as biblical stories. These approaches are reflected in the organization of the book which has major headings such as "Politics" and "Personal Morality."

Kunzle directly acknowledges the influence of his Ph.D. supervisor Ernst Gombrich on his choice of subject and he was equally influential in terms of Kunzle's choice of art-historical methods. Best known as author of *The Story of Art* (1950), Gombrich's greatest impact within the discipline of art-history was in promoting a new approach to cultural history. Previously culture was seen as a universal and consistent whole within any one period that could therefore be represented by a small body of canonical artworks. Gombrich rejected this idea in favor of a more fractured conception that required a detailed knowledge of all aspects of a culture if one was to gain any understanding of its key aesthetic features. One result of this new idea of culture was the fact that popular imagery, once rejected by art-historians as insignificant, became worthy of attention (Gombrich 1979) (2). In the introduction to *Art and Illusion* (1960) Gombrich directly referenced the value of comic books as an object of study and included a chapter titled "The Experiment of Caricature," which examined of the work of the Swiss cartoonist Rodolphe Töpffer, who developed new formal devices in his innovative proto-comic books published in the early 19th century (Gombrich 1960: 7, 279-303). The implications this new art-historical approach had for the study of the origins of comic book form in popular print is evident in Kunzle's work (3).

Although studying popular culture and comics books was new within art history Kunzle used traditional art-historical archival research in terms of the methods employed when contextualizing the prints that form the core of his study. He specifically used the iconographic methodology of the German art historian Erwin Panofsky, which relied on a detailed use of documentary sources to establish the content and context of the works being examined (4). Following this iconographic methodology Kunzle made a detailed analysis of the imagery employed in the printed works but always in relation to the social and political context of the period using available documentary sources. This focus on the social became even more important in his second book, *History of the Comic Strip Volume II: The Nineteenth Century* published in 1990. There is a clear tension in this volume between the traditional art-historical methods used and his social and political concerns. Kunzle is quite explicit about this problem in the introduction.

> Even art history, that most recalcitrant of disciplines, has begun to engage in the 'social history of art' and to become tainted with questions of ideology and sociopolitical contexts of production and reception. This volume is intended as a 'social history of art' but not of art as defined by our vanguard social art historians, for whom art is still painting and sculpture, the media that commanded such bounteous criticism. The comic strip, however (which is certainly a distinct –perhaps distinguished – genre, if not art), is déclassé;..(Kunzle 1990: xix).

His new allegiance to the social history of art, an approach drawing on Marxist theory and exemplified by the German art historian Arnold Hauser, shows how far he had moved away from Gombrich who was one of the most critical opponents of this ideological approach to the discipline (Gombrich 1963: pp. 86-94) (5). Kunzle's new volume had sections titled: "Politics and Farce;" The 'Lower-class' Audience;" "Means of Distribution;" and "The Artist and Conditions of Work," all of which reveal his ideological concerns. In terms of his methods the new volume was remarkably consistent with the previous one, the imagery was again analyzed in detail but now the magazines that published these early comic strips provided much of the documentary context.

There were also some differences between the two volumes. The introduction and conclusion to the second volume gives more attention to the context in which these comic strips were sold, brought, and most importantly read than was evident in the first volume. However, the most significant differences between the two volumes lie in their concluding sections. The first volume highlights the lack of information on the authors, artists and publishers of these proto-comic strips before noting the key themes of political violence and social criticism that run throughout them. In contrast, the second volume has a section where Kunzle, for the first time, directly examines the visual languages employed in the early comic book and focuses specifically on the representation of movement. The conclusion also has significant sub-sections on viewpoint, framing, sound and captions which are contextualized in relation to ideas of mechanical movement as exemplified in the 19th century by the coming of the railways.

When considering the critical reaction to Kunzle's work, it is worth remembering that there were no academic journals devoted to comics scholarship at the time. The first volume was reviewed in the journals *Art Bulletin* (Adhmar 1975: 301-2): *The American Historical Review* (Mayor 1975:960) *The Burlington Magazine* (Fox 1976: 38); *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (Paulson 1975: 479-489) and *The Journal of Modern History* (Wellman 1977: 301-303). This indicates the range of different academic disciplines taking an interest in the emerging subject of comic studies and the clearly art-historical discourses it was positioned within. The second volume was also reviewed in *The American Historical Review* (Smith Allen: 1991: 1508-1509)but was additionally examined in *The Journal of Popular Culture* (Browne, 1992:p. 174); and the *Journal of Social History* (Rearick 1992: 661-3)*.* The fact that it was reviewed in these new academic contexts parallels the changes in art-historical discourse noted earlier and demonstrates the emergence of popular culture as an academic discipline.

Impact and Reappraisal

Kunzle continues to have a significant impact on both British and European scholarship in Comics Studies. In a British context this is openly acknowledged by Roger Sabin in both *Adult Comics: An Introduction* from 1993 and *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: The History of Comics Art* from 1996, which both clearly adopt a cultural history approach to the subject, as exemplified by Kunzle and with its roots in Gombrich's writings (6). Other scholars such as Martin Barker take their cue from Kunzle by focusing on production, consumption and audience reception and share his ideological concerns if not his art-historical methods (Barker 1989). More recently James Chapman references Kunzle and uses his work to look at 19th century comic books, but again does not draw specifically on his art-historical approach but on a broader application of the idea of cultural history (Chapman 2011: 14-29).

In recent scholarship there has been a shift to focus primarily on the 19th century and not go back to earlier periods when examining the origins of the form. This is evident in the title of Pascal Lefèvre and Dierick Charles' *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the 19th Century* (1998) and was also the focus of a special issue of the journal *European Comic Art* titled "The Nineteenth Century and Beyond" (Grove, McKinney and Miller 2009: v-viii). Kunzle himself has contributed to this shift and has in recent years published articles and books that both examine and reprint work by Töpffer from the early 1800s (Kunzle 2007a, 2007b). Töpffer has now become the much disputed focus for many historians looking for an originary point for the 'Modern' comic book form and his work is examined in many articles and conference papers (7).

Kunzle's work is also a key reference point for the French language comic book scholar Thierry Smolderen in *The Origins of Comics: From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay* from 2014. At one level he is referencing the final section of Kunzle's first volume in choosing William Hogarth as a focal point. More interestingly, he takes Kunzle's ideas about comics form in the 19th century being intrinsically linked to technological innovation based around movement, sound and time and extends these to include other developments such as x-rays and the phonograph. Smolderen also considers comic books to be a graphic hybrid form owing much to caricature and cartooning rather than sequential imaging and is building a new framework for understanding the medium in the cultural context of the 19th century (Smolderen 2014: 47-61).

In contrast to this increasing focus on the 19th century one of the few writers to have extended the debate around the emergence of proto-comic books in the medieval period is Laurence Grove. He explicitly acknowledges Kunzle as the foundation on which much of his research is built and applies many of the same methodologies in outlining the tradition of text and image relationships through detailed archival research. In effect he utilizes the iconographic approach of earlier art historians such as Panofsky but is also influenced by the cultural studies and social history of art approaches of Kunzle (8). There are also differences in his approach in that he primarily confines himself to those works produced in French-speaking countries and that he is concerned with the emergence of formal devices regardless of medium so includes illuminated manuscripts in his studies as well as printed materials (Grove 2005; 2010: 59-92).

Potential Futures

Scholarship from the 1960s and 1970s is still relevant today as the issue of the origin(s) of comic book form(s) and the medium's relationship to art history continue to be debated within Comics Studies (9). In 2015 two of the keynote speakers at the inaugural Amsterdam Comic Conference, titled *Comics Interaction,* examined some of these issues. In "Hollow Man, Modernity, and Comics" Joyce Goggin examined the continuing impact of William Hogarth on our understanding of comic

book form drawing on many of the same idea's as Kunzle and Smolderen. In contrast Bart Beaty's talk "Comics Studies, Here Be Dragons" looked at the marginal status of Comics Studies as a sub-category of literary studies. He concluded by noting that comics books have even less cultural capital within the discipline of art history and that there is much potential value in drawing on art-historical methods to advance study of the medium (10).

In 2010 two panels on *Comics in Art History* were included in the *College Art Association Annual Conference* in Chicago in 2010. This is the major art-historical conference in the USA and the inclusion of comic books is a significant contribution to their position within the canon by art historians. Two of the papers presented, one by joint panel organizer Patricia Mainardi titled *From Popular Prints to Comics* and Marianna Shreve Simpson's paper *Comics in 3-D from the Medieval Islamic World*, directly engage in debates around the origin of the form. However, the majority of papers presented show how art history has developed as a discipline in the last 50 years. These papers stressed the importance of theoretical approaches to art history, using ideas such as appropriation and conceptualism that would have been unimaginable in the 1960s, and focus on the relationship between comics and contemporary art practices (11).

Focusing on the contemporary was also central to the art-historical approaches suggested by Pierre Couperie and Claude Moliterni in the 1960s and 1970s where they also compared comics form directly with current art practices in an attempt to elevate its status as a medium. Couperie, along with Maurice Horn and Francis Lacassin, also applied terms such as *Classical, Baroque* and *Expressionist* to comics from the 1930s to the 1970s. Subsequently, these categories have only been very loosely applied in comic studies and there is some future potential in applying art-historical methodologies in a more systematic way to examine the medium of comics.

Notes

1. Until recently many of these texts have not been available to English speaking scholars. This has changed with the emergence of a substantial body of work on French comic books in English since the mid-2000s including Miller and Beaty's recent *The French Comics Theory Reader* containing translations of key texts into English and the formation of the *International Bande Dessinee Society* and the *European Comic Art* journal. I personally would not have been able to write this chapter without the assistance of these translations and new research in the area. This overview focuses entirely on Francophile and Anglophile texts but I am aware that there are sources in Spanish (both European and South American), Italian, and German that deal with the origins of the art form but they are not translated into English and consequently their impact on the international field of comic studies is more limited.

2. For an overview of Gombrich's contribution to art history and re-evaluation of cultural history see Eric Fernie (1995) *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, London: Phiadon, pp. 223-226.

3. Töpffer continues to be a key figure for Kunzle who has published two books about his work and reprinted his cartoons and writings.

4. For an overview of Panofsky's approach to iconography as an art-historical method see Eric Fernie (1995) *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology*, London: Phiadon, pp. 181-195; 345-6.

5. For an overview of Hauser and the social history of art see Andrew Hemmingway (ed.) (2006) *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, London: Pluto Press. Interestingly Kunzle was appointed to a professorship at the University of California, Los Angeles, 1977 and worked alongside Albert Boime and O. K. Werckmeister both instrumental in the emergence of social history of art in the discipline in the USA.

6. I am indebted to Roger Sabin for our discussions about the impact of Kunzle on his own research and comic scholarship in general.

7. See for example Laurence Grove "Töpffer's Travels" presented at *Voyages* (*Sixth International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference* and *Ninth International Bande Dessinée Society Conference*) which specifically built on Kunzle's ideas in relation to modernity and the emergence of new visual forms in the early 19th C. Töpffer is also central to a forthcoming chapter by Grove titled "Ferdinand de Saussure's Unknown *Bande Dessinée*" in the forthcoming volume of *Yale French Studies*: Grove, L. and Syrotinski, M. (eds.) (2017) *Bande Dessinée: Thinking Outside the Boxes*, Yale University Press: New Haven.

8. Interview with Laurence (Billy) Grove conducted at *Voyages* (*Sixth International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference* and *Ninth International Bande Dessinée Society Conference*) on 24/6/2015 in which we discussed the impact of Blanchard, Couperie and Kunzle on his own work and the discipline of Comic Studies in general.

9. Interestingly Thierry Groensteen will publish a reappraisal of Blanchard's ideas titled "From Stories in Pictures to *Bande Dessinée*: Questioning the Blanchard Theory" in the forthcoming volume of *Yale French Studies*: Grove, L. and Syrotinski, M. (eds.) (2017) *Bande Dessinée: Thinking Outside the Boxes,* Yale University Press: New Haven.

10. Two other papers at the conference, Barbara Uhlig's "The Art of Comics: References to 20th Century Art and their Narrative Significance in Lorenzo Mattotti's Comics" and Patricia Ayala's "Sequentiality in three paintings of The Renaissance" developed art historical themes and one of the

round table discussions examined the cultural capital of comics in relation to exhibitions and notions of art history.

11. These two panels were organized by Andrei Molotiu and Patricia Mainardi. See Programme for the College Art Association Annual Conference 2010 (Download of the Conference sessions available at http://www.collegeart.org/conference/history). I would like to thank Maggie Gray for drawing my attention to these panels.

Sidebar One

Comic Art
Recent comic scholarship has stressed the notion that comic books can be considered as an artistic practice and has promoted the work of practitioners such as Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman and Chris Ware as leading this development. It is significant that Crumb emerges from the Underground comic scene of the 1960s and that Spiegelman before the fame of *Maus* was co-editor (along with his wife Françoise Mouly) of the avant-garde comic book anthology *Raw*. This notion of comics existing outside the mainstream has been most notably analyzed in English by the Canadian comic scholar Bart Beaty in his works *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* and *Art versus Comics,* where he analyzes the factors of production and consumption that allow works to be considered as art practice rather than popular culture (Beaty 2007; Beaty 2012). More recently this idea of comic books as art has been promoted by Paul Gravett in the British Library exhibition *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* and the book *Comic Art* published by the Tate Gallery (Gravett 2013).

In France the idea of comics as art has its roots in some of the ideas of Coupiere and Moliterni from the 1960s and has mainly been promoted since the 1980s by Thierry Groensteen who as editor of *Le Cahier de la Bande Dessinée* was keen to stress the avant-garde potential of the medium. More recently he has written about the need to include small press work in the definition of the medium and considered the potential of abstract comic books to break new ground for the form (Groensteen 2007; Groensteen 2012).

Sidebar Two

Bande Dessinée and the Problem of Form
The term *bande dessinée* is now universally accepted within the French speaking world, but this was not always the case. Jean-Claude Glasser has traced back the use of term to the 1930s but notes that it only gradually emerged as standard terminology and was initially reserved only for the newspaper strip and not the comic book album that has become the mainstay of the Franco-Belgian publishing industry (Glasser 1988: 8). This term's disputed nature in Francophile comic book scholarship relates directly to the idea of the strip as opposed to page layout with the strip being privileged over the comic book in the period when the origins for comics form were most keenly pursued. As Couperie suggested in the fanzine cum journal *Giff-Wiff* in 1964

> The comic book is not a bande dessinée , it succeeds in being at once an inferior by-product of the newspaper, an inferior product of the comic and an inferior by-product of the book. (Couperie quoted in Groensteen 2012: 97).

The primacy given to the idea of the bande dessinée, or comic strip as opposed to the comic book page, has implications for tracing the origins of the medium. If the strip is seen as more culturally significant then sources that reflect this interpretation might be more dominant. This might go some way to explaining why the Bayeux Tapestry and Trajan's Column are constantly referenced as examples of proto-comics when other less linear forms might be just as important (Fresnault-Deruelle 1976: 121-138).

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