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Introduction: Comics and Adaptation

Armelle Blin-Rolland, Guillaume Lecomte and Marc Ripley, guest editors

The articles in the present edition of *European Comic Art* stem from a conference that took place at the University of Leicester in April 2014, with the generous funding of the Society for French Studies, the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France, Intellect and Berghahn.¹ This special issue brings together scholars from Switzerland, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany to provide a range of perspectives on comics and adaptation in the Francophone (Belgium, France and the bilingual non-state culture of Brittany), German, Italian and Iberian contexts. It follows from and complements a previous special issue of *European Comic Art* on comics adaptations of literary works, broadening the scope to look also at comic to film and TV, film to comic, and legend to comic transpositions;² and with this cross-media focus our articles are in dialogue with another previous special issue of this journal, on the dialogue between comics and other arts.³

The present edition therefore makes a contribution to adaptation studies, and before delving into our articles it is useful to sketch out a very succinct overview of the field. Adaptation studies have expanded and developed considerably since the late 1990s, moving beyond and away from concerns with fidelity to the source text and a comparative approach focused on the novel-to-film format. Scholars such as Robert Stam, Kamilla Elliot, Linda Hutcheon, Julie Sanders, Thomas Leitch, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan have re-shaped the field around questions of intertextuality and hypertextuality.⁴ They rethought the relationship between source text and adaptation by positing adaptations as ‘second without being secondary’,⁵ and by drawing on the Genettian concept of the palimpsest and on the poststructuralist idea of an ‘ever-expanding network of textual relations’.⁶ The recent edited volume *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions* is representative of the continuing evolution of the field. It further explores adaptation as a cultural phenomenon; posits the necessity of understanding adaptation and appropriation as a dialogic process and texts as, to use John Bryant’s concept, ‘fluid’ rather than fixed; and it opens up the field by turning to texts, such as screenplays, that have not traditionally been examined in adaptation studies.⁷

The dynamism of the field and the fact that it has expanded beyond the unilateral and restrictive literature-to-cinema approach is also evidenced by the growing body of works on comics and adaptation that relocates the debate within the more broadly inclusive concept of intermediality. In particular, examples can certainly be found in edited volumes focusing on

¹ We would like to thank Catriona MacLeod for her help with organising this conference.

² ‘Comics Adaptations of Literary Works’, special issue, *European Comic Art* 6(1) (2013).

³ ‘Comics in Dialogue with Other Arts’, special issue, *European Comic Art* 6(2) (2013).

⁴ See for instance Brian McFarlane, *From Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Robert Stam, ‘Beyond Fidelity: the Dialogics of Adaptation’ in *Film Adaptation*, ed. by James Naremore (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 54-76; Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003); Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006); Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From ‘Gone with the Wind’ to ‘The Passion of the Christ’* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁵ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 9.

⁶ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 3.

⁷ Jørgen Bruhn, Anne Gjelsvik and Eirik Frisvold Hanssen, *Adaptation Studies: New Challenges, New Directions* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). On the ‘fluid text’, see John Bryant’s chapter in this volume: ‘Textual Identity and Adaptive Revision: Editing Adaptation as a Fluid Text’, 47-68.

adaptation from/into comics and a specific medium, such as *Film and Comic Books* and *Drawn from the Classics: Essays on Adaptations of Literary Works* (which is reviewed in this issue), or the French-language *Bande dessinée et adaptation (littérature, cinéma, tv)*, which offers a broader intermedial perspective on comics' intermedial dialogue through adaptation (and which includes a chapter on 'l'effet BD' [the comic book-effect] in film by Alain Boillat, who contributes an article to this special issue).⁸ Studying adaptation from and into comics enables us to explore the use of codes and formal resources in an intermedial approach, potentially shedding a new light on the possibilities offered by page layout or text/image relations for instance. This is echoed in Hutcheon's comment about David Mazzuchelli's graphic novel adaptation of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* that the 'grid both constrains and enables; it both limits and opens up new possibilities'.⁹ As Stam points out however, an exclusively formalist and comparative stylistics approach to adaptation 'risks foreclosing a more deeply historical analysis',¹⁰ and the analysis of a text must take into consideration questions of its context(s), situating adaptations within a broader framework to understand them as a cultural phenomenon. These two propositions have now become fundamental concerns of the field, and are reflected in our seven articles, as the authors reflect on media specificity in the transposition from or into comic art, as well as situating their discussion in historically-, ideologically- and/or politically-situated national and transnational contexts. In their reflection on the movement of texts across time, media and/or nations, the authors explore questions of transnational circulation of visual, narrative and generic motives; heteronormalisation and phallogocentrism; authenticity of drawn events; identity in a stateless minoritised culture; 'high' and popular culture; reverence in comic adaptations of the literary canon; and documentary and parody.

The article by Alain Boillat (translated by Sylvain Portmann) focuses on the relatively little-known editorial context of French-language comics serials for children from the immediate post-war years to the mid-1950s. Boillat examines the prominence of comics adaptation of US films in particular in the magazines *L'Intrépide* [The Dare-devil], which specialised in adaptation, and *Le Journal de Tintin*. He highlights the role played in this context by a publishing policy relying partly on exploitation of North-American filmic imaginaries, in a context shaped by the 1949 Law on Children's Publications. The article explores the use of adaptation as a marketing strategy, and provides detailed analyses of processes of condensation or amplification of the narrative in comics adaptations, in particular of swashbucklers and westerns, contributing to broader questions of intermedial transfers between comics and cinema.

In their study of Julie Maroh's *Le Bleu est une couleur chaude* [Blue Is the Warmest Colour] and its 2013 film adaptation by Abdellatif Kechiche, *La Vie d'Adèle*, Marion Krauthaker and Roy Connolly demonstrate how the process of adaptation lead to altering the comic's statement on womanhood. Building on Héléne Cixous's reading of the figure of

⁸ Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich and Matthew P McAllister, eds, *Film and Comic Books* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); Stephen E. Tabachnick and Esther Bendit Sattzman, eds, *Drawn from the Classics: Essays on Graphic Adaptations of Literary Works* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2015); Benoît Mitaine, David Roche and Isabelle Schmitt-Pitiot, eds., *Bande dessinée et adaptation (littérature, cinéma, tv)* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal, 2015). See Alain Boillat's chapter in this volume, 'L'effet BD à l'ère du cinéma en images de synthèse: Quand les adaptations filmiques de *comic books* suggèrent la fixité de leur modèle dessiné', 179-210.

⁹ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 35.

¹⁰ Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation', *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, eds Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 1-52 (41).

Medusa as a call for female empowerment and radical self-writing, the authors examine how the comic book managed to break free from a gaze traditionally associated with males' fantasies regarding female sexuality; a gaze that was arguably re-appropriated by Kechiche in a film, Krauthaker and Connolly argue, calling on Roland Barthes' concept, that 'readerly' depicts an heteronormalising, patriarchal, and ultimately harmful view on lesbianism and women. For the authors, while the comic gazed at the Medusa, at a dangerous and powerful womanhood, the adaptation is a 'refraction' of its image that perpetuates a phallogocentric perspective.

A concern with the distortion between source text and adaptation is also found in Guillaume Lecomte's paper. Lecomte examines a rare instance of a non-fiction comic adapted for television: Riad Sattouf's *La Vie secrète des jeunes*, an illustrated column published in *Charlie Hebdo* between 2004 and 2014 with a sardonic look at everyday situations its author witnessed involving French youth. Lecomte interrogates claims to truth in Sattouf's comic and its subsequent screen adaptation on Canal +, arguing that, despite the greater degree of indexicality present in the TV series' live action sequences, the drawn image is able to better re-present Sattouf's stories thanks to the narrative and aesthetic modes of representation that readers of comics are familiar with. Examining narrative strategies and paratextual material, Lecomte proposes that Sattouf's comic occupies a seemingly contradictory space that Pascal Lefèvre identifies with factual comics, which derive their sense of authenticity from a specific relational model of ironic authentication that relies on the reader's awareness of the constructedness of the graphic image to stand for *a* view on *the* reality.

Armelle Blin-Rolland's contribution participates in strengthening the relation between Postcolonial and Comics studies by focusing on two comic adaptation of the Breton legend of the flooded city of Ker-Is. Her article examines two comic 're-surfacings' of the myth, *À la découverte de Ker-Is* by Robert Lortac (1943) and Claude Auclair and Alain Deschamps' *Bran Ruz* (1981), works she posits are 'historically-situated, and ideologically-filtered views of Bretonness and Brittany.' While the former promotes an ideal Brittany, using its Christian roots and links with other Celtic nations as means of independence propaganda, *Bran Ruz* ties the legend with political struggles that shook this stateless culture in the 70s, thus making the comic a political tool for reinforcing Breton identity and criticising the French unitary state. In the following of Julie Sanders, Blin-Rolland's article further demonstrates that such politicised comic book appropriations participate in the conversation over the legitimacy of the medium within the contemporary cultural and ideological contexts.

Although applied to a different national context, the next study pushes in the same direction: Juliane Blank's article focuses on graphic adaptation in Germany in the context of a still prominent, but now narrowing, gap between 'high' and 'low' culture. Blank offers an overview of the development of the medium's cultural legitimacy, from the prejudice against comics as 'Schmutz and Schund' [filth and trash] in the 1950s and 1960s, to the conception of comics as literature. She explores the influence of this context on graphic adaptations of novels, before turning to two recent case studies, Flix's 2009-2010 *Faust* and Drushba Pankow's 2011 *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* [Mademoiselle de Scuderi]. These two texts, representative of a new self-confident approach to graphic adaptations, contribute to the debate about 'high' and 'low' culture by reflecting on their own status as graphic adaptations of canonical literature, and deconstructing the adapted text to provide a new interpretation.

In a similar vein, questions of reverence in comic adaptations of the literary canon are at the heart of Ronald De Rooy's article on Dante's *Divina Commedia* [Divine Comedy]. Surveying key contemporary graphic adaptations of Dante from Europe and the United States,

De Rooy examines questions of fidelity to traditional modes of representation – epitomised by Gustave Doré’s iconic illustrations – that have typically underscored European adaptations of Dante’s *Comedy*. This reverence towards more conventional styles is contrasted with the rich vein of references from popular North American culture that condition contemporary US adaptations of Dante’s work, which see the figure of Dante transmogrified into – among other things – a teenage hoodie and a hard-boiled sleuth. De Rooy highlights the enduring relevance of Dante for the graphic arts in both Europe and the USA, evidenced in his wide-ranging selection of transmedial Dante adaptations, from comics to puppet theatre and video games.

Our concluding article, by Marc Ripley, turns to the Iberian context with an analysis of Fermín Solís’s graphic novel *Buñuel en el laberinto de las tortugas* [Buñuel in the Labyrinth of Tortoises], which imagines the shooting process of Luis Buñuel’s 1933 controversial surrealist documentary *Tierra sin pan* [Land without Bread]. Ripley shows how the medium of comics is used by Solís to expose the relativity of the film’s documentary truth, both stylistically (with a particular focus on vocality and the reification of death) and thematically. The article posits this graphic novel as a hypertext performing a transformative parody of both the filmic hypotext and a range of academic and popular sources that perpetuated the discourse of debasement and degeneration seen as a defining characteristic of the region at the time. Solís’s graphic text appears a unique contribution on the film through its process of demythification of its form and content, ultimately proposing a new reading of Buñuel’s *Tierra sin pan* in a twenty-first century context.

‘The Comic Book was Better’, reads the title of Kyle Meikle’s review of Liam Burke’s book on the recent lucrative trend of Hollywood adaptations of comics, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre*.¹¹ Within the contemporary context of the abundance of blockbusters inspired by comic book serials, it is not difficult to imagine – or, indeed, hear – Meikle’s title reflected in the opinions of moviegoers and avid comics readers. However, beyond the undeniable mainstream success of Marvel and DC comic-to-film adaptations, the articles in this special edition demonstrate the considerable flexibility that comics have to offer to the process of adaptation both into and out of the medium. If, as outlined above, adaptation studies as a discipline is now embracing a more capacious interest in intermediality, beyond solely filmic adaptations of literature, the range of articles detailed above reflects the increasing variety of source and target texts that comics are adapted from or that they themselves inspire. Indeed, whilst Henry John Pratt writes that the majority of critical attention given to comics and adaptation has focused on comic-to-film transpositions (in that direction),¹² this special edition is intended to feed into the growing body of scholarly inquisition within the field of comics studies focused on new directions of intermedial cross-pollination.

¹¹ Kyle Meikle, ‘The Comic Book was Better’, *Adaptation*, 9.1 (2015), 113-115; Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2015).

¹² John Henry Pratt, ‘Comics and Adaptation’, in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy T. Cook and Aaron Meskin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 230-238 (230).