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The ICLA Research Committee on Comics Studies and Graphic Narrative: Introduction

Abstract: The community of scholars and students working on comics studies in the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) was born during informal conference-room conversations at the Hong Kong World Congress in 2004. What started out as a chance meeting of a few scholars interested in comic books has become, through the following iterations of the ICLA world conference and, in very recent years, other major events organized by fellow academic organizations, a constantly growing and truly international group of researchers of comics and graphic fiction in all their different forms. The founding of this group, which was officially recognized as the ICLA Research Committee on Comics Studies and Graphic Narrative in 2015, mirrors in many ways the general international transformation of comics studies, over the last two decades or so, into a respectable research field with all the hallmarks of an academic institution. Comics studies continues to hold much interdisciplinary promise, but it has gained a much stronger disciplinary identity than in the recent past. It is similar to literary studies and film studies in that all these fields are defined by their object of study, rather than by the disciplinary approaches used to study their objects, histories, and respective institutions. Like its neighbouring research fields, comics studies also invites debate about the meanings of its core concept: comics.

Keywords: comics studies, disciplinary approaches, graphic narrative, ICLA, interdisciplinarity, international collaboration, research committee, research group

The community of scholars and students working on comics studies in the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) was born, almost without us realizing it, during informal conference-room conversations at the Hong Kong World Congress in 2004. It was then that a few of us were thrown together on the same panel because we had papers on comics and due to cancellations at our original sessions. The ICLA Hong Kong congress had been postponed for a year from 2003 to 2004 because of the SARS outbreak, and the epidemic continued to have an effect on attendance in 2004. Thus, Stefan Buchenberger, then of Nara Women's University, and Kai Mikkonen from the University of Helsinki felt lucky to have been placed in the same session.

Stefan spoke on "Japan in American Comics: A Study of Japanese Influences in American Mainstream Comic Books and their Superheroes," and Kai's topic was

“Intersemiotic Translation and the Comic Book,” with examples from Enki Bilal’s *Nikopol Trilogy*. Tracy Lassiter, then a PhD student in the English Department at Indiana University, and today Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Mexico (Gallup), gave a paper on another panel on “Gender and Sexuality in Daniel Clowes’ ‘Gynecology’ and Hiroshi Aro’s *Futaba-Kun Change*, ‘Who Wears the Pants?’” The three of us were introduced to each other during post-panel mingling and socializing. A key person in connecting us was Luiz Guilherme Couto Pereira, aka Guile, from São Paulo, Brazil, a comics aficionado and student of Greek literature. Guile did not have a paper, but he came to hear our presentations. Thus, we started a conversation about comics, research, and what to do next.

The Hong Kong congress was possibly the first time that an ICLA congress had ever had the honour of hosting several research papers on comics. It is even possible that our three papers were the first ever presentations on comics to be accepted at these congresses, which have been held since 1955. For the next ICLA congress, in Rio in 2007, we planned and organized a whole panel focused on comics. This was a new disciplinary opening for the Association, even if few people were probably aware of it at the time. However, what needs to be chronicled about our experience in Rio is a pre-congress meeting between Stefan, Kai, and Guile in a side-street bar somewhere near Copacabana. This get-together started and proved something; it made things possible. Drinkeria Maldita has long been closed and forgotten, but we can still recall the occasion and atmosphere vividly. The three of us came to this meeting by our separate ways from different corners of the world. It was already dark in the evening – you may know how fast it can get dark in Rio in August – and it was a bit exciting, at least for one of us, to take the metro, find the right station to get off, walk out from underneath a bridge, find the bar, and get to the corner table with two guys of whom he had only the faintest memory. Once inside, what happened almost instantaneously was that we discovered so much common ground. In fact, the meeting turned into an initiation of sorts, the opening of a possible research community, and a beautiful friendship. There is no denying that cachaças and caipirinhas helped, but that does not explain the whole magic.

At the congress, on the wonderful premises of the historical campus, Praia Vermelha, of the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, there were again many “no show” clips pasted on the room doors. Nevertheless, the three of us managed to run a successful panel together, despite two cancellations. Stefan talked about hard-boiled crime fiction with reference to Frank Miller’s *Sin City* and its literary predecessors, Kai’s topic was remediation and the sense of time in graphic novels, and Guile focused on differences in visual narration between oriental and occidental comic art. We had a good audience, many interesting questions and comments, and a lively post-panel informal talk. The experience encouraged

us to move forward. Rio gave us momentum and much new energy: it became evident that we could easily grow from this and have several panels, and possibly workshops or symposia, at the next ICLA congresses, if we so wished. We could even plan joint publications in the future. Rio also proved to us that comics studies could put the fun back into comparative literature. One unique aspect of comics studies, at least in its early years of development, has been its emphasis on the joys of reading and its interest in fandom and comics culture, combined with serious scholarship.

After our first coordinated panel in Rio de Janeiro, things really took off in Seoul at the nineteenth ICLA congress, held at the Chung-Ang University from 15 August to 21 August 2010. Our symposium, organized by Stefan and aptly called “Graphic Narratives: Animations, Comic Books, Cartoons, and Graphic Novels,” took up no fewer than four sessions, with twelve papers being presented. Trying to include more or less all the major different fields of graphic narratives, we were also able to assemble a truly international group of speakers, from Ireland (David Coughlan), Italy (Barbara Grüning and Angelo Piepoli), Japan (Noriko Hiraishi), Finland, Brazil, and the US – just to name those who would become permanent members of the group – in what turned out to be our first major participation at the ICLA. The papers presented would also be collected for the first time, published in a special section of the *International Journal of Comic Art* 13.2 (2011) under the title “Graphic Narrative and Global Ground.” The editor, John A. Lent, was very helpful throughout the process, especially after the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011, which made it impossible for Stefan to continue working on the publication, which was thankfully finished by Tracy and Guile. They were assisted by our latest addition to the team, Lea Pao, who at the time was a PhD candidate and would become another core member of our group.

So, after coming together as a truly international research group in Seoul, we set our goals even higher for the twentieth ICLA conference, which was held at the University Paris-Sorbonne from 18 July to 24 July 2013. Organized by Kai under the title “Comparative and Narrative Approaches to Comics Studies,” our symposium occupied the maximum number of five sessions with fourteen papers. Once again, our group grew larger, with new faces adding to an ever-widening roster of scholars of graphic fiction. This led to our group applying to become an official research committee within the ICLA. The process concluded in 2015 with Kai and Stefan as the co-chairs of the committee. Arguably one of the most beautiful cities on earth, Paris offered many cultural highlights beyond the ICLA, not least the wonderful welcome reception at the City Hall, the farewell dinner on a boat on the Seine, and a tour of the *bande dessinée* bookshops of the Latin Quarter.

Somewhat surprisingly, the next ICLA conference was also held in a major European capital, at the University of Vienna, from 21 July to 27 July 2016. Since

Lea was originally from Vienna, she was in charge of the preparations, assisted by David, Kai, and Stefan. Once again, we had the maximum number of five panels, with fifteen presentations under the heading of “Unsettled Narratives: Graphic Novel and Comics Studies in the 21st Century.” We had already been recognized by the ICLA as an official research committee, but somehow the paperwork was delayed, and so we could not take part in the executive council meeting. That mistake has since been remedied and our group now enjoys full official status. Since all the members of the group are quite busy publishing and presenting, our first official report looked, even if we say so ourselves, rather impressive, as will subsequent ones. The report and further communication between our group and the ICLA was expertly handled by Lisa DeTora, who kindly agreed to be our secretary. Vienna once again gave us numerous opportunities to renew old friendships and form new ones, especially in the beautiful courtyard of the university, where we could spend the whole day talking to friends and colleagues.

The following year saw two more meetings in Europe: the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) congress, held in Utrecht, and the European Network of Comparative Literary Studies (ENCLS) conference, held in Helsinki. Noriko Hiraishi, founding member of our research network, represented the group at the ICLA executive meeting during the ACLA meeting. Angelo Piepoli organized a three-day ACLA seminar entitled “Who’s Bad? Representing Heroes, Villains and Anti-Heroes in Comics and Graphic Narratives,” while Lisa DeTora organized “Embodiment at the Margins: Theorizing Embodiment and/as Subjectivity in Literature and the Arts I,” including a panel devoted to the work of the ICLA Research Committee on Comics Studies and Graphic Narrative.

The ENCLS meeting on “Fear and Safety” saw further work by Umberto Rossi, who organized “Between Fear and Safety: Post-Memory in ‘European’ Comics and Graphic Narratives” with Kai Mikkonen. Its first session included Riccardo Capoferro (Sapienza University of Rome), Takayuki Yokota-Murakami (Osaka University), and Lisa DeTora. The second session included presentations by Shiamin Kwa (Bryn Mawr College), Emanuela Zirzotti (Sapienza University of Rome), Marco Petrelli (Sapienza University of Rome), and Umberto Rossi (Rome). This work continues the truly global character of the research group as well being a further commitment to collaboration and ongoing engagement between our members.

The founding of our ICLA research group mirrors in many ways the general international transformation of comics studies into a respectable research field over the last two decades or so. Today, comics studies has all the hallmarks of an academic institution, with national and international research associations, peer-reviewed journals, conferences, teaching positions, research teams and units, and of course a very lively publication scene in various venues, including many book series dedicated to the field by major academic presses. One of the

few areas where the field is still in its developing stage is the number of university departments and professorships devoted to it. Comics studies also continues to hold much interdisciplinary promise, even if the field has gained a much stronger disciplinary identity than just ten years ago. In the context of comparative literature, one thing that comics studies and our research committee can do is contribute new perspectives and pose interesting challenges to the very concept of literature. Charles Hatfield (2010) claimed that comics studies cannot have a disciplinary identity for two reasons: “one, because the heterogeneous nature of comics means that, in practice, comics study has to be at the intersection of various disciplines (art, literature, communications, etc.); and, two, because this multidisciplinary nature represents, in principle, a challenge to the very idea of disciplinarity.”

Today, this claim seems much less obvious, and perhaps even dated. Comics studies is similar to literary studies and film studies in that all these fields are defined by their object of study, not by the (countless) disciplinary approaches that may be used to study, discuss, and analyse their objects, histories, and respective institutions. Like its neighbouring research fields that focus on literature, theatre, or film, comics studies also invites debate about the meanings of its core concept: comics. Theories in all of these fields are, typically, interdisciplinary. Scholars in all of these fields also have varied disciplinary backgrounds and multidisciplinary interests.

What started out as a chance meeting of a few scholars interested in comic books has become a truly international group of researchers of comics and graphic fiction in all their different forms. At the same time, comics studies has become an established field of study which is no longer browbeaten by scholars of so-called serious literature. ICLA 2019 as well as other international conferences will continue to see rising interest in the study of graphic fiction and non-fiction, not least through the activities of our group, which, we are sure, will continue to prosper. “Excelsior!” (Stan Lee).

Work cited

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Dr Kai Mikkonen is professor in Comparative Literature at the University of Helsinki, Finland. He earned his MA at the University of Iowa in 1991 and his PhD at the University of Tampere in 1997. His research and teaching interests include travel writing, graphic narratives and comics, narrative theory, and the theory of fiction. He is the author of *The Narratology of Comic Art* (2017) and *Narrative Paths: African Travel in Modern Fiction and Nonfiction* (2015), as well as of various articles in periodicals such as *Style*, *Partial Answers*, *Narrative*, *Word & Image*, *Image & Narrative*, *Studies in Travel Writing*, and the *Journal of Literary Semantics*.