

Introduction: ICLA Research Committee on Comics Studies and Graphic Narrative

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The community of scholars and students working in Comics Studies within the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) was born, almost without us realizing it, during the informal conference room talks at the Hong Kong 2004 World Congress. It was then that a few of us were thrown together at 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 at the same session.

Stefan spoke of "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 University of New Mexico (Gallup), gave a paper at another panel on "Questions of 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 Sao 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 honor 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 probably quite few people were 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 meet 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 from underneath a bridge, find the bar, and get to the right 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, an opening of a possible research community, and a beautiful friendship. There's no denying that Cachaçais 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 by way of 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, have several panels, and possibly workshops or symposia, at the next ICLA congresses, if only we so wanted. We could even plan joint publications in the future. Rio also proved to us that Comics Studies could put 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 19th ICLA Congress, held at the Chung-Ang University from August 15th to August 21st 2010. Our symposium, organized by Stefan and aptly called “Graphic Narratives: Animations, Comic Books, Cartoons, and Graphic Novels” took up no fewer than 4 sessions with 12 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 USA—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* under the title “Graphic Narrative and Global Ground” (Fall 2011, Vol 13, No.2). 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 at the publication and 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 Ph.D. 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 20th ICLA Conference, which was held at the University Paris-Sorbonne from July 18th to July 24th 2013. Organized by Kai under the title “Comparative and Narrative Approaches to Comics Studies”, our symposium occupied the maximum number of 5 sessions with

14 papers presented. 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. This 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 of them the wonderful welcome reception at the city hall, the farewell dinner on a boat on the Seine, and a tour in 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 July 21st to July 27th 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 5 panels with 15 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 got delayed and so we could not take part in the executive council meeting. That mistake has since been remedied and now our group does enjoy full official status. Since all the members of the group are quite busy publishing and presenting, our first official report looked, we dare say, rather impressive and will continue to do so. 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 actually 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), held in Helsinki. Noriko Hiraishi, founding member of our research network, represented the group at the ACLA executive meeting. Angelo Piepoli organized a two-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 Graphic Narrative Research Group.

The ENCLS on “Fear and Safety” meeting 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 De Tora. 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 as 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 scene of publications in various venues, including many book series dedicated to this 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. 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 to contribute new perspectives and pose interesting challenges to the very concept of literature. In 2010, Charles Hatfield 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” (Hatfield 2010).

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 analyze their objects, histories, and respective institutions. Like its neighboring research fields that focus on literature, theatre or film, Comics Studies also invites debate about the meanings of its core concept, i.e. 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 nonfiction, not least through the activities of our group, which, we are sure, will continue to prosper.

Excelsior! (Stan Lee)

Reference

Hatfield, Charles. “Indiscipline, or, The Condition of Comics Studies”. *Transatlantica* 1/2010, 27 September 2010. <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4933> (25 April 2018).