statuS Quaestionis
language text culture

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Introduction

When we first pondered the theme of this issue of *Status Quaestionis*, we already knew the focus would be comics and graphic narratives; after all, our paths had crossed at conferences and through scholarly networks dedicated to these texts. But what *kind* of graphic narratives? Given our personal interest in the subject and given that it is frequently the topic of some of our favorite graphic novels, we quickly settled on the theme of history.

Besides our selfish interest in historical graphic narratives like Jason Lutes's *Berlin: City of Stones*, Hugo Pratt's Corto Maltese stories, or Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde*, we liked the questions that analyses of historical graphic narratives allowed; we saw them as an opportunity to generate thought-provoking and challenging prompts to our contributors. In our call for proposals, we raised some of these considerations: Historical reconstruction (or – to some extent – construction) has a complex relation with the times in which it is produced. Historical comics writers and artists must reconstruct the past in order to tell their stories, or to relay others'; how do these creators become researchers? Furthermore, these creators are judged on their ability to conjure long-gone worlds, to resurrect the dead, to unearth forgotten stories, places, and cultures; whose story will be told? From whose perspective? How much and what do we remember of the past? Why do we remember it at all? What present concerns, fears, and hopes make us look back into time and space? What is depicted and what remains hidden? How do artists remain true to historical facts, and how do they decide which ones to remain true to?

The issue that follows represents answers to these questions. We are pleased with the scope of the contributions, and in them readers will find answers to those questions coming from not only the contributors, but by the comic and graphic novel writers and artists themselves.

Even though one might object to the use of the overworked phrase “graphic novel” (which here one might instinctively like to see replaced by “comics,” “graphic narratives,” or “sequential art”), there is something to be appreciated: that the depiction or reconstruction of a past time is not accomplished by novels only. There is such a thing as historical comics. It took some years, but at last historians have come to accept this format as a legitimate mode of scholarship. In his essay “History and Comics,” Paul Buhle (who would later work with Howard Zinn and Mike Konopacki in creating the graphic version of Zinn’s *A People’s History of America’s Empire*) states, “For at least a generation, students have increasingly thought about history (and other disciplines) ‘in pictures’” (2007, 315). He recognizes the validity of this art form, which he predicted “could become a vehicle for non-fictional versions of the big stories as well as the personal tale.” Recognizing this narrative form, Buhle adds, marks a significant cultural turning point (320). Elsewhere, Frederick Luis Adalma notes that these books, particularly those from a multiethnic perspective, “powerfully persuade us to consider how graphic novels...can open our eyes wide to deliberately erased chapters from our past” (2018, ix-x). Finally, Adalma adds, these books provide “new ways of looking back to the past...in order for us to act progressively for humanity today and tomorrow” (x).

When we think of any historical novel, we expect to be told a story set in a distant past. But how far back is “far”? Not even the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, clearly establishes when the past is sufficiently far enough “past” to be a proper setting for a historical novel:

> Historical novel, a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact.

That realistic detail includes elements such as accuracy with costumes, building design, and means of transportation. In adventure stories, their inclusion might serve as simple backdrop or for amusement. At other times, however, these depictions are the result of thorough research and are rendered in painstaking

detail. We wish to recognize this accuracy, demonstrated in, among others, works by Gian Luigi Bonelli in *Tex Willer* and Pratt's *Corto Maltese*. Their attention to detail brings history to life, a history that occurred many decades prior. Therefore, rather than focus on a demarcation that fixes a particular number of years as the boundary of what constitutes "the past,"[1] we prefer the *Encyclopedia Britannica* definition as it focuses on the *zeitgeist* of a given era, valuing the pieces that can transport us to an earlier age, even if that age occurred a few decades ago.

Something else should be said about historical fictions, including historical comics. Describing the historical novel as a genre, the *Enciclopedia Italiana* clearly states that: "Caratteristica di questo genere di romanzo è la mescolanza tra realtà dei grandi fatti storici narrati e finzione degli eventi che accadono ai personaggi" (The mix of the reality of the great historical events that are told and the fictional events occurring to characters is typical of this kind of novel).

The *Britannica* agrees, and quotes examples:

> The work may deal with actual historical personages, as does Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934), or it may contain a mixture of fictional and historical characters. It may focus on a single historic event, as does Franz Werfel's *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1934), which dramatizes the defense of an Armenian stronghold.

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1 The attempt to define a clear demarcation between which narratives are historical and which are "contemporary" is problematic, and ultimately self-defeating. If we said that a novel or a comic is historical when the author sets his or her story in a past that he has not lived, a sort of "grey area" would immediately be created: a young comics artist, born, say, in 1990, might write and draw a story set in the 1970 that would be historical for him or her, but would not be for someone born in 1960. Of course, when we talk of the Great War, or the French Revolution, or the Boston Tea Party, or the life of Queen Elizabeth I, we feel we are on a safer ground: those are events that no living man or woman (as far as we know) can *remember*. So, the idea of a historical narrative seems to have a lot to do with the duration of human life. But such a feeling may be beguiling: the Vietnam War, or the Shoah are still the past, even if many people are still alive to talk about those events. What would we make of *Maus*, then? Art Spiegelman's father could remember his experiences in Auschwitz; but were not those experiences at the same time deeply personal *and* historical for his son? Moreover, does not *Maus* count as a historical comic because it can be read as a memoir? Last but not least: what is contemporary now (e.g., a comic about Hurricane Katrina like Don Brown's *Drowned City*) will ultimately be read as a historical narrative in a more or less far future.

This should also apply to historical comics: they must be made up by a combination of historical reconstruction (which compels comics artists to research their narratives) and fictional invention, with a variable proportion of the two ingredients. This also implies that a historical comics artist must be endowed with at least three skills: to those of the visual artist and the writer, s/he must add the talent of the researcher.

By trying to frame a satisfactory definition of historical comics, we have also touched – not always explicitly – on all the theoretical issues discussed by the articles in this special issue of *Status Quaestionis*. Ascertaining what is factual and what is fictional in a historical graphic narrative is only part of the question: our contributors have also striven to understand *why* the author resorted to inserting fictional tesserae in their verbal-visual mosaic. This is what can be found especially in Tena L. Helton's "Genre and Truth-Telling in David Wong's Escape to Gold Mountain," in Umberto Rossi's "Drawing (and Researching) the Great War", as well as in Marco Petrelli's "Landscape of Fear," wherein he argues Alan Moore's *From Hell* is a commentary on the perils of modern times.

Fundamental questions surrounding the discussion of historical comics begins with addressing the "Why?" – that is, why does an artist select a particular era to write about? The artist's choice to depict a certain historical era, whether 50 BCE or 1914 AD, is never arbitrary – actually, it is a tremendously meaningful decision. Other essays in this collection explore why comics artists chose particular historical moments to write about,[2] and what insights readers like us today can glean from them. Essays like Adam W. Darlage's "A Fixed *Astérix*" address these questions, as does Petrelli's again. A transnational dimension of both artists and scholars enables them not to subscribe to a single historical narrative, the so-called history written by winners (or hegemonic cultures, or privileged groups, and so on). It is then interesting that Julie Higashi, in her essay on Kouno Fumiyo's *In This Corner of the World*, focuses on the private dimension, we might say the individuals' history, of greater historical events

2 Of course, also the choice of a place is important and adds to the effects of sense that the comic generates; but asking why that artist chose to set his graphic narrative in Naples or Bangkok is not something that is only done when analyzing historical comics. It is a highly relevant question when dealing with any graphic narrative, be it set in Coconino County or in Paris, France.

(the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima); similarly, Rossi shows how Tardi has highlighted the plight of little men fighting in the trenches of the Great War, but never forgetting History with capital H. Historical graphic narratives also support a national history, which Nilakshi Goswami explains in her essay, "Ideological History, Contested Culture, and the Politics of Representation in *Amar Chitra Katha*." The "why" questions are crucial to Tracy Lassiter's groundbreaking essay about what we might style pandemics comics, "Of Pencils and Pandemics", where the relation between historical comics dealing with the Spanish Flu and our present beleaguered by the Coronavirus is paramount.

Other contributors address the "How?" – that is, how do writers and artists construct their narratives? Claudia Cerulo's "Ink on Silence" explores how the intertextual use of documents, photographs and other artifacts can be assembled to form a narrative from the gaps or silences of what is unspoken. Anne Cirella-Urrutia's essay takes a similar tack, exploring Jean-David Morvan, Igor Kordey, and Walter's books on World War I which use artifacts like trench newspapers to help convey their narrative. Like Goswami, Cirella-Urrutia explains that these elements contribute to these books' inclusion in a country's national narrative. Last but not least, Francesco-Alessio Ursini's "Roman Emperors Across Comics Traditions" argues through rigorous theoretical framing that the answer to "how" various Roman emperors are depicted depends on culture, audience, and genre.

To conclude, we would like to underscore the truly transnational dimension of these essays. We collected essays written by American, French, Italian, Japanese, and Indian authors, who often work on comics that were not created and published in their own countries (cf. Darlage's essay, dealing with a classic of French *bande dessinée*, or Cerulo's discussion of two graphic memoirs by German female artists reconstructing family histories). Comics studies are rightly considered part of comparative literature studies, in as much as they work on a hybrid medium conjugating pictures with words (in very sophisticated ways); but we should always remember that comics are created by artists and writers working for a globalized publishing industry, and that they tend to have an international circulation[3]. This may be the reason why such

3 The reason for this easier "exportability" of comics is that their translation is much cheaper than that of a novel. Pictures do not of course need to be translated.

Historical comics seem to be able to deal with histor*ies*, not just with histor*y*: to give voice (and visibility) to minorities and to all those whose stories might otherwise be forgotten. We honor those stories, hoping one day our own will treated as well by scholars of the future who examine our present as history.

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