Commentary

Taking Parodies Seriously: A Review of Pierre Huard's *Parodie dans la bande dessinée franco-belge* ("Parody in French and Belgian Comics")

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The parody, a text that mocks another text or genre for comic effect, is as old as cultural texts themselves. As literary theorist Gérard Genette remarks, "The birth of parody, like so many others, is lost in the mists of time" (1997, p. 14). Yet the word itself originated in Ancient Greece, as a combination of *para* and *ode* – "counter-chant." Describing parody as it was practised in antiquity, Julius Caesar Scaliger wrote in 1561, "When the rhapsodists interrupted their recitations, entertainers would appear, and in an attempt to refresh the audience would invert everything that had been heard. They were therefore called parodists, since they surreptitiously introduced, alongside the serious subject, other, comic ones" (as cited in Genette, 1997, p. 14). For ages, then, "entertainers" have made fun of texts for comic effect. The practice is commonplace in comics and graphic novels as well, as exemplified by *Mad* magazine's custom since the 1950s of mocking Hollywood blockbusters. Beyond diverting audiences, parodies have also motivated serious writers to be more creative. Indeed, when an action or image has become so familiar that it has become the object of parody, it is time for an author to think of something new (Cawelti, 1984).

In his doctoral thesis, Pierre Huard wanted to explore parody within a delimited framework, namely Belgian and French comics from the late 1940s to the early 1990s. He used a sample of comic books from this period to explore precisely what cartoonists did when they parodied a genre and how the art of parody evolved over the years. It is a precise agenda, but one of interest to anyone curious about how parody

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functions and art evolves. Huard completed his project before succumbing to cancer in 2010 at age 49. Unfortunately, he passed away before defending his thesis. However, three colleagues saw value in Huard's work and wanted to honour his memory. They were Raymond Corriveau and Jason Luckerhoff at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, where Huard had been an assistant professor since 2005, and Claude Martin, one of his thesis supervisors at the Université de Montréal. These three professors prepared his manuscript for publication (see Trahan, 2016). The end result, *La parodie dans la bande dessinée franco-belge*, is Huard's doctoral thesis accompanied by a preface written by the three editors (Huard, 2016). This book is only available in French.

In his introduction, Huard hypothesized about the evolution of parodies in Belgian and French comics. He sensed that the object of comic-book parodies had changed in the late 1970s, from texts *outside* the comic-book universe (mainly novels, movies, and TV series) to texts *within* this universe. He proposed to explore whether at this time a "formal or aesthetic parody" had followed a "carnivalesque" one (p. 2). In this context, the adjective "carnivalesque" came from Mikhail Bakhtin. The latter author used it to describe reversals of authority that were typical of carnivals in medieval times. During these long-ago events, superiors and subordinates would trade places. Bakhtin believed that this practice helped to diffuse pressures caused by social inequality. Similarly, Huard thought, parodic cartoons from the late 1940s to the late 1970s drew their humour from upending the hierarchy common to such genres as the detective novel and the western. For instance, it was common for such cartoons to feature an assistant who was smarter and more competent than his boss.

Huard's methodology involved conducting an in-depth semiotic analysis of the following 10 representative titles:[1]

1. Franquin, André. (1952). *Spirou et Fantasio : les chapeaux noirs et trois autres aventures.* Charleroi, Belgium: Dupuis. [(2007). *Spirou and Fantasio: The Black Hats and Three Other Adventures.* Mumbai, India: Euro Books.]
2. Morris, & Goscinny, René. (1955). *Lucky Luke : des rails sur la prairie.* Charleroi, Belgium: Dupuis. [(2012). *Lucky Luke: Rails on the Prairie* (Erica Jeffrey, Trans.) Canterbury, UK: Cinebook.]
3. Macherot, Raymond. (1964). *Chaminou et le Khrompire.* Charleroi, Belgium: Dupuis.
4. Gotlib, Marcel, & Alexis. (1970). *Cinémastock : les films de chevalerie.* Paris: Dargaud.
5. Tardi, Jacques. (1974). *Jérome Plumier : le démon des glaces.* Paris: Dargaud. [(2011). *Jerome Plumier: The Arctic Marauder.* Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics.]
6. Lauzier, Gérard, & Alexis. (1978). *Al Crane : le retour d'Al Crane.* Paris: Dargaud.
7. Chaland, Yves. (1981). *Les années métal : la vie exemplaire de Jijé.* Brussels: Champaka.
8. Pétillon, René. (1982). *Jack Palmer : les disparus d'Apostrophes.* Paris: Dargaud.
9. Benoît, Ted. (1986). *Ray Banana : cité lumière.* Tournai, Belgium: Casterman.
10. Desberg, Stephen, & De Moor, Johan. (1994). *La vache : à mort l'homme, vive l'ozone.* Tournai, Belgium: Casterman.

For his analysis, Huard drew from *Palimpsests*, by Gérard Genette (1997). In this book, Genette examines what he calls "transtextuality," which applies to any situation where one text refers to another. Among the subcategories of transtextuality is the paratext,

which is a text like a foreword or afterword that only exists in relation to a main text (Genette, 1997). Another subcategory is the hypertext, which results from the transformation or imitation of a text.

In his study, Huard focuses on the hypertext. To do so, he uses Genette's six subcategories of hypertext (as modified by Thierry Groensteen, 1984), which are divided by their relationship to the source text (transformational or imitative) and by their mood (playful, satirical, or serious). *Tintin in Tibet* by Hergé can serve as a model. Within a transformational relationship, a "travesty" (playful) would consist of recounting *Tintin in Tibet* in a different style (as a farce, for instance); a "parody" (satirical) would consist of mocking the original through exaggeration and displacement; and a "transposition" (serious) would consist of adapting the story for a different medium. As for "imitation," a "pastiche" (playful) would consist of telling a new story in the manner of Hergé, while a "caricature" (satirical) would do the same but in a mocking way. As for "forgery" (serious), Huard gives the example of new instalments in a series created by authors different from the original one.

As the title of his book indicates, Huard's main focus is parody, which for Belgian and French cartoonists was already a commonplace practice in the late 1940s. For example, the first of Lucky Luke's adventures to be scripted by René Goscinny of Asterix fame, *Des rails sur la prairie* (1955), is a parody of westerns, as Huard indicates. Goscinny and illustrator Morris take classic situations and stereotypes from Hollywood westerns (the war dance, smoke signals, the attack of a train by Native Americans) and manipulate them for comedic effect. For instance, Lucky Luke uses the smoke emanating from a locomotive to send signals that confound the Native Americans.

To Genette's typology, Huard adds a second layer of analysis, a categorization of the visual image effected by one of his colleagues at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Catherine Saouter. In *Le langage visuel* (2000), Saouter highlighted components of design, narration, and iconicity that a visual artist combines in order to communicate a message to a viewer. Huard adapts Saouter's components to his needs and lists them in a table. Under "Design," he includes such elements of the comic strip as colour, brightness, contrast, lines, forms, graphics, and lettering. Under "Narration," he includes text and dialogue (including tone and names of characters). Under "Iconicity," he includes point of view, scale within a panel, size of panel, background illustrations provided for characters or not, characters within or out of frame. Some of his components appear twice. Under "Design" and "Narration," he includes sectioning (panels, scenes) and time-space articulations (ellipses, flashbacks, cross-cutting between scenes). Under "Narration" and "Iconicity," he includes marks of time (simultaneity of actor and context, simultaneity of actor and other actors, passage of time within a single panel), rhetorical codes (visual rhetorical figures, premises, and arguments) and anchorage or relay functions (where words serve to define an image or move the action forward). Finally, under all three categories, he includes story, genre, and behaviour of characters and objects.

Huard then applies his framework to excerpts from each of the 10 comic books selected for analysis. Using Genette's typology, he compares particular components of each strip

to the original text and comments on the differences. For all of his selections Huard presents two analytical tables, one listing how a comic book takes certain elements from a serious genre and amplifies or exaggerates them, and another listing how a comic book modifies or distorts certain aspects of the genre. In this manner, he highlights the precise nature of the parody (or pastiche, travesty, etc.) in the 10 chosen texts.

One of Huard's 10 choices can serve to illustrate his methodology: *Chaminou et le Khrompire*. This comic book by Raymond Macherot was originally serialized in *Spirou* magazine in 1964. Chaminou is a cat who works as a detective while the Khrompire is a menacing leopard who has escaped from jail. Chaminou's story unfolds in La Zoolande, a place where predators and prey have learned to coexist in harmony. Together, the cat and a mouse conduct an investigation through which they uncover threats to peace and good government. Their search leads them right up to the governor's office.[2] According to Huard, the adventure is both a travesty and a parody of detective novels and melodramas. To satirize these two genres, Macherot preserves some elements of the content and style typical of either the detective novel or the melodrama while changing others. With regard to detective novels, Huard lists the following rhetorical premises and arguments: authority figures (police officers) are curt and no-nonsense in their interactions with others; a negative character undergoes plastic surgery in order to elude the enemy; this negative character is ferocious; and Chaminou wrestles with a shark (p. 105). For melodrama, the story incorporates several clichés: "A profusion of plotlines, misunderstandings, suspense, a succession of problems, tears" (p. 105, my translation). As for genre modifications, Huard notes how the behaviour of the characters differs from the conventional behaviours of characters in detective stories: Chaminou is clumsy, Zonzon the vamp is an absurd extreme, and Crunchblott (the governor of La Zoolande) has a childish attitude, becoming teary-eyed or angry at the drop of a hat. Visually, the strip alludes to film noir, including rainy nocturnal scenes and much use of black. It deviates from film noir through its use of animals instead of humans as protagonists. The above are just a few examples of the many that Huard provides to illustrate how Macherot has amplified or distorted genre conventions.

In the last chapter of his book, Huard returns to his claim that the later parodies in his sample, the ones published between 1978 and 1994, tend to refer more to texts *within* the comic-book universe than the earlier parodies do. As noted earlier, Huard had hypothesized that comics from the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s tended to imitate genres popularized in novels, movies, and television series, whereas comics from the late 1970s and 1980s tended to refer back to their own past.

The author singles out *Pilote* (1959-1989) for aiding in the evolution of comics in French-speaking Europe. During its existence, this magazine showcased the works of such influential creators as Alexis, Marcel Gotlib, René Goscinny, Jijé, Gérard Lauzier, Morris, René Pétillon, Jacques Tardi, and Albert Uderzo. It played a central role in changing attitudes toward cartoons, especially as the 1960s drew to a close. During that time, the magazine found a ready audience among maturing baby boomers who, unlike readers of previous generations, did not necessarily want to outgrow cartoons. These young fans were relatively literate, politically engaged, and practised at reading comics.

As a consequence, in contrast to its rivals like *Spirou* and *Tintin*, *Pilote* featured stories that were less linear and more complex, that addressed sociopolitical issues, and that included sex and violence. *Pilote* also experimented with layout, exploring alternatives to the conventional left-to-right sequencing of panels separated by white spaces.

This transition also reflected a broader acceptance of popular culture in academe, as exemplified by the early practitioners of cultural studies who challenged class, gender, and racial biases that had dissuaded earlier academics from taking popular culture seriously. With regard to French and Belgian cartoons as expressions of popular culture, the earliest critics started reflecting on and writing about comics at the end of the 1960s. Huard notes in particular the impact of *Cahiers de la bande dessinée* (1969-1990). The title of this magazine was a nod to *Cahiers du cinéma*, a monthly famed for its focus on the auteur and its rehabilitation of genre movies by the likes of directors John Ford (westerns) and Alfred Hitchcock (thrillers). *Cahiers de la bande dessinée* sought to do for comics what its namesake had done for cinema. Huard observes that cartoonists responded to this critical attention by improving their work, sometimes creating stories that required specialized knowledge from its readers.

By the end of the 1970s, cartoonists and their fans were familiar with the history of French and Belgian comics. For instance, one of the cartoonists whom Huard chose for his sample was Yves Chaland (who died in 1990 at only 33 from injuries sustained in a car accident). With his character Ray Banana, Chaland was consciously evoking Tintin, both through his storylines and his adoption of *la ligne claire* ("the clear line"), a manner of drawing used by Tintin's creator Hergé that embraced sparseness, avoiding superfluous lines and shading. In sum, cartoonists of the late 1970s and 1980s who engaged in parody drew on decades of Belgian and French comics in an effort to appeal to readers who were familiar with their history.

In overview, Huard in *La parodie* draws on Gérard Genette's research into hypertexts and Catherine Saouter's study on visual language to conduct a semiotic analysis of excerpts from 10 comic books. In doing so, he shows precisely what the creators of a new text have amplified or modified relative to an original text or genre. His observations are relevant to any creator or reader curious about parody, not only in comics but in any cultural text. His process can also serve as a model for researchers with an interest in examining not only how parody works, but also more generally how comics communicate meaning. In addition to his meticulous semiotic analysis, Huard highlights how French and Belgian comics evolved, particularly in the late 1970s and 1980s. Here, there is an opportunity for an enterprising scholar to take up where Huard left off, exploring parody in Belgian and French comics *since* the early 1990s or in the comics of other countries.

At times, I found Huard's book challenging to read. It is after all a thesis that was written for a supervisory committee comprised of experts in the field. It makes extensive use of specialized language. Also, the 10 analyses go into more detail than a non-specialist might desire. And for copyright reasons there are no illustrations. Perhaps had Huard lived, he could have adapted his work for a broader audience, simplifying the prose and eliminating some of the more esoteric passages. All the same,

in his book Huard demonstrates a remarkable depth of knowledge of comics and of the scholarly research based on them, as well as an engaging enthusiasm for his chosen topic. He also revived my curiosity about Belgian and French comics, and I spent much time online reading up on them and their creators. It is sad that Huard did not live to see his work to publication, but it is to the credit of his colleagues that they succeeded in doing so in his memory.

Notes

1. Huard made his selections on the basis of their standing among critics and scholars. The list is in chronological order of first publication in French, and I have included English translations when available.

2. As the *Nouvel Observateur* has noted, this story resembles the 2016 Disney feature film *Zootopia*, which also takes place in a town where predators and prey have learned to coexist in harmony. Instead of a cat and a mouse, a rabbit and a fox conduct an investigation through which they uncover threats to peace and good government. Their search leads them right up to the mayor's office (Gonzague, 2016).

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