La bande dessinée en dissidence
Alternative, indépendance, auto-édition
Comics in Dissent
Alternative, Independence, Self-Publishing

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Introduction

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The present collection brings together essays by authors from varied disciplinary and geographical backgrounds, who are all interested in the complex and ambiguous debates associated with the critical exploration of the idea of "dissent" within the comics field. Most of the contributors gathered for the international conference *Independent Comics Worldwide, Drawing a Line/Establishing Connections* (*Figures indépendantes de la bande dessinée mondiale, Tirer un trait/ Tisser des liens*), which was organized by the ACME group and held at the University of Liège, Belgium, in November 2011. The scholars debated in English and French, two of the languages representative of landscapes where both comics production as well as major critical discourses and commentaries on the form have been blooming for decades. The conference was purposefully bilingual so as to illustrate the terminological confusion and differences between these two sites of production, innovation, and research. Furthermore, the bilingual nature of this international forum was meant to break the principally linguistic barriers existing between these poles and to encourage multidisciplinary and contrastive approaches. [1]

    The scholars examined the varied and innovative efforts of a multitude of cartoonists, comics artists and publishers who can be labeled, proclaim themselves, and/or refer to their works as "independent," "alternative," "underground," "*avant-garde*," or "self-published." In so doing, not only have the critics drawn attention to how this "other" comics scene has developed in various geographical areas throughout the globe over the last decades, they have also shown that the diversity of critical approaches used to discuss, characterize, and examine the activities of these sector actors is far from being exhausted. Despite this diversity, one can find

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1.   To that end, all of the essays' abstracts gathered in this volume were translated into either French or English.

surprising commonalities in the here gathered and prolonged analyses of these various artistic, cultural, socio-economic, and industrial expressions. They include, generally speaking, critical reflections on artists and/or publishing structures that challenge, or at least call into question the existing systems and environments in which they operate, as well as discussions of self-conscious (counter-)cultural discourses that are dedicated to the development of an original catalogue or *œuvre* in which thematic and aesthetic otherness prevail. Moreover, the chapters in this volume present critical analyses of the socio-economic and political dimensions underlying the processes of these "other" comics artists, communities, associations, and/or movements — including discussions pertaining to the diversity of technical methods used by publishing houses in terms of production, distribution and commercialization, the appreciation of and support for these structures by public institutions, the collaborative efforts deployed by these organizations and, last but not least, the ways in which these artists and publishers legitimize and collect their aesthetic, narrative, structural and/or commercial experimentations.

Undoubtedly, what we have decided to designate here as "comics in dissent" can be articulated and understood through various critical lenses; they can also take a number of forms whose implicit or explicit expressions may vary greatly. Several comics "movements," for example, have emerged *in reaction to* a standardized and particular industry, its narrative and aesthetic formats, and/or its specific marketing and distribution strategies. In the Franco-Belgian scene of the 1990s, a wave of "independent" publishing houses such as L'Association, Cornelius, Amok, Fréon, ego comme x or Les Requins Marteaux defended the possibility of a "different" kind of comics. Assuredly, these publishing structures had their precursors; one can think, for instance, of publishing houses such as Futuropolis, les Éditions du Fromage, Audie or Artefact and their attempts at contravening a *status quo* established by an order all too intent on defending its own premises. Unprecedented in the 1990s, however, was the emergence of a group of self-conscious publishers whose *raison d'être* was, and still is, a willingness to counterbalance the massive industrialization of comics. Similar reactions against the norm have emerged elsewhere. The Underground Comix movement that developed in the U.S. in the end of the 1960s, for example, has given rise to important publishers such as Kitchen Sink Press or Fantagraphics Books. From the 1980s onwards, these publishers were home to "alternative" comics whose authors and artists would notably become key figures of the "graphic novel." These two specific examples illustrate, in their own and respective ways, that these "other" comics artists and publishers have rebelled, or perhaps even revolted themselves against two distinct yet inter-related cultural and socio-economic phenomena. First, comics in dissent have provided a critical response to the profit-oriented mentality that has severely changed the principles governing the production and distribution of cultural goods in the last quarter of the twentieth century and, as a consequence, the rationalizing of means in the publishing business that has developed in concert with the emergence of

new participants in the sector (heavy industry, communication groups, investment banks). Secondly, these "other" artists and publishers have generally reacted against comics' lack of cultural legitimacy and, by extension, the denigration of the form that has often been the result of an amalgam between comics, youth, as well as mass and/or popular culture.[2]

Comics in dissent, however, imply a broader focus than these two specific examples. Moreover, the idea of dissent as it can be applied to the comics field goes beyond the fracturing of allegiances that the couples commercialization/rebellion as well as popular and mass-/counter-cutlure entail. Needless to say, the comics market is in constant evolution and has considerably changed since the emergence of these two influential "movements" which have recurrently been analyzed and discussed in the history of this "other" comics scene.[3] The European and North-American comics landscapes, which constitute the two main regional markets analyzed in this volume, have become increasingly fragmented and have given way to a profusion of specific niches. The title of this volume, *Comics in Dissent: Alternative, Independence, Self-Publishing* (*La bande dessinée en dissidence : Alternative, indépendance, auto-édition*), is surely not innocent in that respect. It is meant to be quite generic and rather all-encompassing to reflect the evolving and polymorphous idea of dissent and, more precisely, to illustrate how dissent can be critically explored in relation to the comics field from various particular geographical horizons.

One of the main objectives of this collection is to interrogate comics in their innovative, subversive, or dissident manifestations and to examine the cultural, socio-economic, political, aesthetic or even strategic issues inherently connected and inspired by this creative rebirth of the worldwide "comics in dissent movement." This volume thus intends to go beyond the exploration of the so-called "independent" European comics scene of the 1990s or the American case of the Underground Comix Movement and the "alternative generation" that followed, albeit without denying their importance. More specifically, the present collection notably focuses on the categories of production and reception that animate the comics field; it explores some publishing structures and/or comics artists that have so far been understudied and/or overshadowed by the two "movements" briefly referred to above. In so doing, this volume seeks to reassess the terms "independent," "alternative," "*avant-garde*," "underground" as well as "self-publishing" and problematize how their use can vary in different specific contexts. Taken together,

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2.   For an insightful discussion of comics' lack of cultural legitimacy, see Thierry Groensteen's *La bande dessinée : Un objet culturel non identifié* (2006) and, more recently, Bart Beaty's *Comics versus Art* (2012) in which Beaty notably problematizes the symbolic handicaps of the form identified by Groensteen.

3.   Worth mentioning in this respect are Charles Hatfield's *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (2005), Bart Beaty's *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (2007), and Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *R. Crumb* (2012).

the here gathered contributions thus participate in definitional controversy; each author indeed formulates a position on issues pertaining to the use of these highly divisive terms. The implications and conclusions of these debates are far from being merely theoretical, however. Rather they highlight the ways and means by which the sector actors have, at various times and locations, drawn a line under standardized business practices, under traditions and codes of "mainstream" or "formatted" comics, while often establishing connections with chosen predecessors, local peers or similar enterprises abroad.

Through the examination of these various forms of comics in dissent and the many underlying aspects animating their analyses, the authors raise numerous questions such as: Is the "popular" dimension of the form necessarily antithetic to the allegedly political and aesthetic objectives of a certain *avant-garde*? Should comics in dissent always be read *in reaction to* standardized and formatted industrial and artistic practices? Do comics in dissent perpetuate traditional and arbitrary divisions between "high" and "low," or do they rather participate in the redefinition of alternative and/or independent comics artists and structures which can both adopt and adapt some of the aesthetic, narrative and marketing strategies from the "popular" and "mainstream" end of the form's spectrum? This first set of interrogations illustrates that many of the essays of this collection can be located in the continuity of academic works exploring similar issues (Beaty, 2007, 2012; Hillary Chute, 2010; Martha Kuhlman, 2012).[4] But the authors whose texts are here gathered expand on and complicate the approaches and claims of these scholars; they further problematize the tensions between "high" and "low" and investigate how new implications surface at the crossroads and intersections of the various binary models informing the critical exploration of comics in dissent. In so doing, the authors in this volume raise yet other engaging questions such as: How can we think of comics in terms of independent marketing? What are the implications

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4.   In *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s*, for example, Beaty argues that: "[f]rom the perspective that comic books are inherently a part of low-culture, therefore, avant-garde comics production would have to be inherently postmodern. Yet from a different starting point — namely that comic books are not self-evidently kitsch but are a cultural form with as much value as painting or prose — then a comic book avant-garde is no longer a postmodern intersection of high and low, but an attempt to create works in a modernist framework" (2007: 76). In a similar yet different logic, Hillary Chute maintains that "[c]omics's hybridity […] is also something that we see in its admixture of conventional 'high' and 'mass' elements" (2010: 10), or elsewhere: "[c]omics works can deliberately disrupt the surface texture of their own pages — often invoking aesthetic practices of the historical avant-garde — yet they model a post-avant-garde praxis in the very fact of their popular availability, in the 'mass appeal' of the medium" (2010: 11). Finally, in exploring how the very idea of *avant-garde* pertains to the comics field, Martha Kuhlman suggests that "[n]ot everything that is popular is avant-garde, and not everything that is avant-garde is popular. The avant-garde is a moving target, always defined in opposition (aesthetically, politically) from what came before. What is interesting about comics at this particular moment in time is that some of the most innovative contemporary cartoonists position themselves in terms of an avant-garde sensibility even as they simultaneously mock the very idea" (2012).

of self-publishing, a phenomenon straddling both ends of the comics spectrum? Do comics in dissent illustrate that the publishing business, in its broadest sense, may have reached a point of self-contradiction? Finally, can and should the idea of dissent be regarded as a self-legitimizing strategy within the comics field?

In sum, this volume comments on some of the underlying assumptions that usually inform the academic investigation of this "other" comics culture, one that is often rooted in a "small is beautiful" approach to publishing. This volume is far from claiming to present a comprehensive understanding of this "unorthodox" comics culture, however, which constitutes a very wide scope of investigation. Likewise, the variety of critical lenses employed by the authors does not represent an exhaustive list of methodological approaches. Rather, this collection of essays is based on the idea of complementarity. Each article sheds light on some of the aspects and issues animating the multi-faceted and kaleidoscopic phenomenon of comics in dissent. The reader is expected to confront the various stances that the authors take in this volume and, thereby, invited to draw a line and/or establish connections between the essays and the different historical, cultural, socio-economic as well as political realities that they deal with.

In order to lay the groundwork for the previously hinted at debates and reflect on the diversity of the domain under scrutiny, the opening chapter of this collection provides a richly illustrated tableau of the international "comics in dissent" phenomenon. Its author, Erwin Dejasse, reminds us that what he calls "alternative comics" cannot be reduced to a "few particular formats," a handful of "emblematic genres," or specific "narrative strategies." Despite their diversity, Dejasse nevertheless argues that "alternative comics worldwide share surprising common objectives," including a "challenging of two of the most common critical stances directed against a multitude of 'traditional' publishers'" and artists, namely: "their inclination towards ethnocentricity and their cultivation of amnesia." If Dejasse justifies his use of the term "alternative" in his essay, he also raises many questions in terms of terminology and taxonomy. For example, Dejasse observes that "the 'big' publishing houses' creation of labels and imprints whose editorial poetics and strategies find resonance with the alternative press" has considerably blurred the lines of the comics field logic. More generally, he argues that alternative comics cannot easily be defined precisely because they resist pre-formatted identity patterns and pre-established movements and/or categories.

Following up on Dejasse's introduction, we thought it fit to continue this volume with a series of critical reflections engaging with the concepts employed to designate and characterize comics in dissent. The contributions of Tanguy Habrand and Charles Hatfield brilliantly take up this challenge. In his article, Habrand reminds us that the terms "independence," "alternative," "*avant-garde*" and "underground" are heavily connoted. These terms, Habrand maintains, can be mobilized in various specific contexts, for various reasons. More importantly, their use can have serious repercussions on the market and on the ways we per-

ceive and understand the latter. As a result, the author argues for an independent comics landscape which has a variable geometry and can be articulated in various "institutions" that nevertheless oppose themselves to what he calls "*l'édition sauvage*." Charles Hatfield proposes similar reflections in his contribution. In examining recent trends in the US and Canadian direct market, Hatfield also explores the terminological confusion and ambiguity animating the study of comics in dissent. More specifically, Hatfield illustrates how the trends he identifies "undermine the genre terms favored by American comics fandom and call into question the familiar avant-garde equation of independent publishing structure with alternative content." In so doing, Hatfield implicitly maintains that the terminology that both fans and the critical community employ to characterize and discuss comics in dissent does not necessarily entail the same ideas on both sides of the Atlantic. In other words, much as the term "graphic novel" does not equate, according to Jan Baetens (2010), "*roman graphique*" — although one is the literal translation of the other — the expressions "alternative," "independence," and "self-publishing" do not necessarily reflect the same realities in Europe and North-America.

The geographical shift operated by Hatfield's text brings the reader to consider the articles of Jean-Matthieu Méon and Christophe Dony, which both deal specifically with U.S. case studies. Méon examines the activities of the publisher PictureBox and the career path of its founder, Dan Nadel. He insists on how the publishing house has engaged in a plurality of alternatives that "combines creative, patrimonial, and critical approaches." Méon therefore argues that PictureBox urges us to "clarify the notion of independence and to precise its heuristic value," notably in maintaining that it can be "reassessed through the identification of structuring oppositions that […] delineate a field of comic books." The dynamics of power relations structuring the comics field are Christophe Dony's concern as well. In analyzing "the editorial policies and ideological agenda of Vertigo," DC's adult-oriented imprint, Dony argues that the "traditional mainstream vs. alternative/independent dichotomy usually employed to characterize the cultural production of comics in the U.S. may have become outdated, and perhaps even obsolete." More specifically, Dony identifies the strategies of rewriting and recuperation that the label seems to have cherished for over twenty years and, in so doing, sheds light on the imprint's "hybrid identity" as well as its "double consciousness." Against the background of these observations, he argues that Vertigo has adopted an ambiguous "poetics of demarcation" in regards to the mainstream/alternative dialectic and therefore proposes to interpret the label as "another alternative" in the American comics field.

While Dony's article closes the North-American strand of this volume, the essays by Rudi de Vries and Gert Meesters operate a second geographical shift in considering comics in dissent from the Dutch-speaking areas of Europe. De Vries' essay focuses on the Dutch artist Joost Swarte and the publishing company Oog & Blik. Drawing on systems selection theory — market selection, peer selection, and

expert selection — De Vries argues that "innovative comics artists and publishers [can] influence their environment in such a way that a certain level of artistic independence can be achieved or sustained." In fact, De Vries' case study suggests that in "endorsing several roles and adapting to their environment," both Joost Swarte and Oog & Blik have been able to "force a change in selection systems." Meesters proposes a similar reflection in examining the two main independent publishers from Flanders: Bries and Oogachtend. In exploring the catalogues of these small-scale publishers as well as the explicit stances taken in interviews by the people in charge of these structures, Meesters maintains that Bries and Oogachtend have helped a new generation of artists to emerge and, in so doing, have participated in the redefinition of the independent comics landscape in Flanders.

After this excursion in the landscape of the European Dutch-speaking comics world, the volume finally moves to the Franco-Belgian comics field whose market, history, and traditions are the heart of the concerns raised by Sylvain Lesage and Benoît Berthou in their respective articles. Lesage's essay interrogates the perhaps more amateurish, yet still marginalized small-scale business activity of self-publishing, which has notably given way to vivid scenes of "minicomics"— either xeroxed or published online — on both sides of the Atlantic and has extended the field of possibilities for cartoonists willing to make comics without resorting to the ubiquitous studio system. More precisely, Lesage raises key questions relating to the nature of self-publishing itself in examining the phenomenon through the Franco-Belgian production of the 1970s and 1980s — notably in exploring the career paths of figures such as Jean Tabary and Albert Uderzo. In so doing, he challenges the all too common claim that "self-reliance is synonymous with individual freedom" and argues that "the [self-publishing] phenomenon is neither restricted to an economy with very limited means, nor to a mere strategy to make market entry." As such, Lesage continues, self-publishing constitutes an "interesting lens through which one can analyze the tensions permeating the industrial publishing business." In a similar line of reasoning, Berthou focuses on the seemingly paradoxical issue of "independent commercialization" in examining the *Gazette*, that is, the catalogue of the "Comptoir des Indépendants" — the now defunct French comics distributor for L'Association and other small-scale publishers. More precisely, Berthou's article challenges the familiar rejection of the terminological association between commercialization and independent publishing in shedding light on how the "Comptoir des Indépendants" — and by extension the publishers and artists that it advertised in its *Gazette* — not only "withdrew itself from the usual distribution network," but also "distanced itself from the comics field and its traditional commercialization."

The double awareness of the market and the realities influencing the publishing business that pervade the essays by Lesage and Berthou constitutes the focus of Thierry Groensteen's critical discussion as well. Similarly to Lesage and Berthou's essays, Groensteen's contribution is placed under the auspices of what one could

describe as a strategic type of independence and/or alternative. A noted comics historian but also the founder of a comics publishing company — Les éditions de l'An 2 — Groensteen's article surveys his own publisher career choices. More specifically, he explains the positions that have supported the diversity of his catalogue as well as his reprinting and rehabilitating of chosen predecessors. Additionally, Groensteen draws conclusions from the financial failure of his undertaking in commenting on how "l'An 2 has been absorbed by the literary group Actes Sud, where it has become an imprint of its own." According to Groensteen, "this process of assimilation illustrates another model, namely the extension and renewal of comics publishing within a larger literary publishing environment," which he qualifies as "an alternative to the alternative."

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As suggested by this brief description, the present volume constitutes an attempt to bridge the many gaps that exist between the various disciplines, areas of research, linguistic fields, as well as the scholarly traditions and perspectives that animate comics studies in general and, perhaps more specifically, the academic investigation of comics in dissent and its many facets, including the increasing difficulty to agree on a terminology that qualifies this still growing and worldwide creative phenomenon. May this volume encourage other similar studies focusing on aspects that have here only been hinted at such as the ways in which comics produced in actual postcolonial spaces can demystify a (dominant) cultural heritage, or how mini-comics, blogs, D-I-Y comics communities and abstract comics surfacing around the world may also participate in the development and critical reassessment of this "comics in dissent" culture. Regardless of the chosen object of study and the approach that one may use to examine it, it is obvious that, as a constantly evolving and ever-expanding phenomenon, the exploration of comics in dissent cannot claim to render definitive meanings. Nevertheless, we truly hope that this volume will help the people engaged and/or interested in comics scholarship to better understand the effects and implications of this "comics in dissent" culture, a worldwide "movement" that is fascinating notably for its calling into question of hegemonic discourses and practices as well as its challenging of pre-formatted identity patterns.

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