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“Angoulême and the ninth Art: from comics fandom to cultural policies”

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Fig. 1 – National distribution of the recipients of the *Grand Prix* awarded at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, 1974-2020.

Fig. 2 – National distribution of the *Prix du patrimoine* [Best Archival Collection/Project] awarded at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, 2004-2020.

In 2020 the Angoulême *Festival International de la Bande Dessinée* (FIBD) affirmed its international dimension even more strongly than usual. Take the poster: it is traditionally designed by the festival president, the winner of the previous year’s Grand Prix de la Ville d’Angoulême, the profession’s major award. In 2020, in addition to the piece designed by 2019 winner Rumiko Takahashi, two other posters were produced: one by Charles Burns, depicting his lifelong fascination with Hergé’s work, and the other by Catherine Meurisse. A major figure among France’s young BD artists, Meurisse embodies the new generation of French creators, whose work is recognized both through the sales figures of her books and through her visibility in the art world (she became, in 2020, the first comics artist ever to join the prestigious French Académie des Beaux-Arts). Through these posters, the FIBD proposed three artists’ representations from the main areas of today’s comic strip art. This symbolic geography sheds light on how the festival envisages its global role nowadays. France, Japan, the United States: these three worlds and their respective comics creations meet every year in January for four days under the gloomy sky of Angoulême.

The “9th Art” (Lacassin 1971) has been the lifeblood of the city on the banks of the Charente River for decades. The story of how a peaceful provincial town of 40,000 has become “the Mecca of the comic strip” (Christin 1998) says a lot about the contemporary status of the medium, and how it has gained respectability in France. Almost half a century old, the Angoulême FIBD is a major nexus in the globalised life of the comic strip medium. Its attendance figures are lower than Tokyo’s Comiket and noticeably inferior to those of the Lucca Comics & Game Festival. Its commercial impact does not compare with SDCC’s. Yet the importance of FIBD lies elsewhere. For decades, it has embodied a cultural relationship to the medium as an art form. The festival has been actually instrumental in making comics the ninth among “legitimate” arts. As Bart Beaty has

pointed out, "the European festival model, with its focus on art exhibitions, has transformed the field in a way that American conventions have not" (Beaty 2007, 122).

Born from a series of encounters and often random occurrences, the festival participated in the emergence of a government policy on comics and opened up French cultural hierarchies to BD. A retrospective glance at the history of the Angoulême festival makes it possible to explore French specificity towards BD and provides a vantage point to understand the process of legitimization undergone by the 9th Art. It also helps apprehending, in turn, the singularities of the international landscape of comics, and the complex circulations of comics cultures.

The festival has had a complex longtime relationship with America. The American comic strip was the original catalyst around which French bedophilia emerged. However, for several decades, US comics remained a minor object during the annual Angoulême event, an exotic form that only aroused interest every so often. The history of the leading French BD festival's programming highlights a surprisingly tardy interest in American comics and their makers. Promoting a highbrow understanding of what foreign comics should be, the festival largely ignored American comics until the rise of the graphic novel.

1° A festival at the crossroads of bedophilia and cultural activism

Before analyzing the role played by the festival as a major scene for the dissemination (and sometimes consecration) of American comics, it is necessary to outline the main elements guiding the history of the Angoulême Salon (1974-1993) and Festival (1993-), in order to understand its role and singular importance in the French comics scene. At first glance, the setting up of a major event in Angoulême dedicated to comics seems incomprehensible. When the festival was born in 1974, Angoulême did not have any particular connection to BD. No publisher was established there, nor did any renowned author live in the modest provincial city. The birth of the salon was in fact part of the emergence of the bedophilia movement; but it also took place during a period marked by the recomposition of cultural policies in France. Through a series of coincidences, the two dynamics dovetailed in Angoulême and proceeded to elevate the comic strip medium to the rank of "9th Art."

The Salon initially stemmed from the movement to legitimize comic strips and the tensions linked to the constitution of French bedophilia (Lesage 2013). This movement was born in 1962 with the creation of the Club des Bandes Dessinées (CBD), after an article written by Pierre Strinati in *Fiction*, France's main science-fiction magazine. Soon after being renamed CELEG (Centre d'étude des littératures d'expression graphique) at the suggestion of famed filmmaker and early

comics enthusiast Alain Resnais, the association split up (Demange 2017). The secessionists left to found SOCERLID (Société civile d'étude et de recherche de la littérature dessinée), around Claude Moliterni, who then became the central public figure of bedophilia in France. He pursued the promotion of comic art initiated by CELEG by publishing the SOCERLID magazine *Phénix* (which had 48 issues from October 1966 to Spring 1977) and reprinting a number of “classics.” SOCERLID pushed an agenda that broadened the field of bedophilia to include contemporary and European creation, whereas CELEG primarily embraced the nostalgia-fuelled “âge d’or” of 1930s-1940s US comics). Through an ambitious publishing program (encyclopaedias, historical panoramas), SOCERLID gave an impetus to the historical and critical discourse on comic art (Fronval et Moliterni 1972; Couperie, Filippini, et Moliterni 1974; Moliterni 1980). The members of the association also took part in ICON (International Comics Association), which in 1965 organized the first European comics festival in Bordighera, Italy (before moving to Lucca in 1966). It is significant to note that this event was not placed under the banner of Italian *fumetti*, but of American comics, since it was entitled “*Salone Internazionale dei Comics*” (Ory 2012). From the start SOCERLID relied on exhibitions as a privileged means of promoting comics. The one with the greatest public impact was “Bande dessinée et Figuration narrative”, held at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in spring 1967. One of its organizers was Claude Moliterni, who had started working as a grunt in Hachette's youth department before eventually establishing himself as the (self-proclaimed) “pope” of BD critics and editor of *Phénix*.

At the same time, the city of Angoulême had decided to plow the cultural field in the 1970s, following the path of many French medium-sized towns that were then engaged in a “municipalization of culture” (Urfalino 1996). As early as 1969, contacts were made between Claude Moliterni and Francis Groux, a local BD enthusiast and cultural policy activist (Groux 2011) to organize a “Semaine de la BD” [BD Week] at a local cultural center with exhibits, slide shows and panels. In 1970 the election of a new mayor, Roland Chiron, accelerated the process. In a move that was quite novel at the time, Chiron appointed a deputy mayor for Culture, Jean Mardikian. In 1972, Mardikian and Groux invited Moliterni to bring to Angoulême the exhibition “Dix millions d'images” [Ten million images], curated by SOCERLID in 1965. Simultaneously, they organized a “Fortnight of children's books and BD” [Quinzaine du livre de jeunesse et de la bande dessinée]. The participation of successful comic-strip artists including Fred, Gotlib, Roba, Franquin, Giraud (the future Moebius) made the event a considerable success. The municipal museum was made available for the event by its curator Robert Guichard, thereby drawing an unusually high number of visitors (Guichard 1972, 19). Having noticed the public’s interest in BD, Guichard allowed the venue to be used to feature a small exhibition but also host meetings with

cartoonists, who competed in live cartooning duels (called “*coup sur coup*”) under the gaze of children and adolescents that subsequently queued up for autograph sessions. Although the event targeted youngsters exclusively, the high turnout of children and teenagers (several thousand in two weeks, with a peak of 1400 visitors in a few hours for the public appearance of the two Belgian stars Franquin and Roba) convinced the local organizers that BD was a high potential stake to draw visitors to the city museum, promote comic art, and diversify the city’s cultural policies.

At their request Moliterni took the Angoulême BD zealots to Lucca in 1973. The Italian festival, which at the time was the only large-scale European event devoted to comics, was the model that was to inspire the salon held by the Charente River. The following year, the Angoulême crew imported the Lucca format (exhibitions and lectures) as well as some of its French organizers, assisted by a very lively local network of associations. The time chosen for the “salon” aimed to fill a gap in the city’s cultural calendar: the end of January, when the charms of the city hit their wintery low. Still, regardless of interpersonal contacts, the festival was born from the interaction between bedophilia activists and a city hall committed to initiating a dynamic cultural policy by cashing in on an art form that seemed likely to attract a young public.

In a repeat of the 1972 BD Fortnight, the salon invited creators, organized signing sessions and exhibitions. But due to the influence of Lucca and especially of Moliterni, the show also included a copious programme of scholarly lectures, a classic tool for promoting a minor art and an essential vehicle for the dissemination of BD culture. The municipal theater thus hosted eclectic lectures by ICON members, who presented panoramas on Belgian, Italian, Yugoslav, Portuguese and American comics, among others. Significantly, the term “salon” expressed the event’s aspiration to respectability, both literary (in reference to the 18th century’s literary salons) and artistic (the Salon as a forum for the consecration of painters’ careers in the 19th century). However, if the desire for legitimacy was evident in the choice of the salon model, it was also historically and culturally inadequate: as Patricia Mainardi has shown, the Salon format disappeared at the end of the 19th century under the effect of the structuring of the art market (Mainardi 1993; Moulin 1992). Angoulême pertained in the first place to a model clearly distinct from its US counterpart (Gilbert 2017). Contrary to the comic conventions’ participatory culture shaped by fans, the French-style activism of enlightened connoisseurship was predicated on a more vertical and didactic model. The implicit idea was not to simply commune over a shared hobby but also to impart knowledge about comics. Throughout the decades-long history of the festival, the two forms of commitment to the medium have clashed and overlapped: the Angoulême folklore is partly about the tensions

between those who think it is much too business-oriented and those who dismiss it as much too steeped in snobby elitism.

The festival turned out to be a successful venture. Moliterni was very well-connected and skillful at attracting media interest. The public followed suit—even though the alleged attendance of 10,000 of 1974 is impossible to verify nowadays. The turnout was even bigger in 1975. It is striking to note that, a year later, just prior to the launch of Angoulême 3, the local newspaper *La Charente Libre*, an attentive observer of the event, seemed to already discern an incipient decadence:

Angoulême 1 was the Salon of enthusiasm; [Angoulême 2] prompted 20,000 people to go back and forth between the museum, the Tréteaux de France tent, the theater, the Philharmonic Hall and the Marengo MJC [youth center]. The organization had improved. The publishers had taken the whole thing seriously. Perhaps too seriously. For in spite of all the talent and the cartoonists' smiles, the second Salon often felt like a market, a trade fair.²

After three festivals where enthusiasm coexisted with trial and error, it was undoubtedly the 1977 festival that definitively established Angoulême's supremacy and fixed its folklore. It was a remarkably eventful salon, with unplanned twists, tears and happy endings. The “bulle” [balloon], the large inflatable tent purchased the year before to accommodate the dealers' booths, was ripped by gusts of wind around noon the day before the opening. The whole sales area was transferred in a hurry into an underground parking lot until, at 7 pm, the fire marshals notified that the new setup was too hazardous and had to be taken down. Finally, all booths were moved during the night to a gymnasium 3 miles from downtown, connected to the city center by a fleet of shuttle buses for the next three days. Fortunately, along came Hergé! At the peak of his almost 50-year career, the presence of the grand master of Belgian BD “rescued” the festival. At the time his visit was compared to a consecration, as evidenced by the local newspaper's editorial: “Angoulême 4 was struggling for air / out of breath. And *Tintin* has arrived!”⁴ The charisma of Tintin's father, who rarely accepted public appearances, made his visit to Angoulême a decisive step that put the festival at the forefront of the high-profile cultural events that were then becoming increasingly numerous in France.

Beyond the “anointing” by Hergé, 1977-1978 witnessed a triple turning point in the history of the festival. On the artistic level, the awarding of the Grand Prix de la Ville d'Angoulême to Jean-Marc Reiser in 1978 was a groundbreaking development. Even though it dated back to the first

² Jacques Guyon, « Pour la première fois le public se mettra à table avec les dessinateurs », *La Charente Libre*, 22 janvier 1976.

⁴ « Angoulême 4 cherchait son deuxième souffle. Et Tintin est arrivé ! » (*La Charente libre*, Jan 24, 1977).

salon, the Grand Prix itself was a last-minute creation on the day of the first award ceremony improvised to reward André Franquin. Ironically the Grand Prix went on to become the most visible Angoulême award, especially since its practical function has been since to choose the president of the jury for the next year's festival. The Grand Prix rewards an entire career, and thus participates in making the French BD canon. From 1974 to 1978, the Grand Prix were awarded to historic "grand masters": the Belgian André Franquin (1974), the American Will Eisner (1975), the Frenchman René Pellos (1976), and the Belgian Jijé (1977), all of them born in the first quarter of the 20th century. The awarding of the Grand Prix to Reiser, a baby-boomer born in 1941 and founding member of the satirical magazine *Hara-Kiri*, marked a 90-degree turn in the hierarchy of values: he incarnated the "new" BD, in touch with reality, and opened the way to an appreciation of the medium oriented toward the present and future rather than only the past.

In addition, the city museum opened a permanent gallery to house the collection of original comic art that had taken shape in a very informal way in the last few years. BD was acknowledged officially for the first time, as the Ministry of Culture, the authority funding the museum through the Direction des musées de France, provided subsidies for the purchase of original artwork by contemporary authors, such as the Swiss Cosey or the Frenchman Philippe Druillet. BD was then no longer just a local fad, but an emerging focus for the development of national museums. At a time when the French museum world fussed over the status of contemporary art, the new curator, Monique Bussac, offered to create a comics-based collection of contemporary art. If, as Bart Beaty observes, the comics' rendezvous with the art world has failed (Beaty 2012), it still found an early incarnation in France beginning in the late 1970s. The collection was exhibited in 1983 in a wing renovated for the occasion and named after Alain Saint-Ogan, who was then considered one of the "fathers" of French BD and the honorary president of the first salon. The collection and the Saint-Ogan wing adumbrated today's *Cité internationale de la bande dessinée et de l'image*.

The salon went simultaneously through a serious political crisis that threatened its very survival. The event, it should be remembered, had been created under a right-of-center mayor. During the 1977 municipal election campaign, the socialist candidate Jean-Michel Boucheron harshly criticized the salon as an event whose overly expensive funding for a couple of days was detrimental to local cultural associations engaged in year-long work. After his election Boucheron cut the salon's subsidies, thereby forcing it to charge admission on visitors. However, the crisis came to an end quickly: the mayor eventually embraced the salon, which he used to rebrand his city. Boucheron was the one who first attempted to make Angoulême "the city that lives in its images" [*la ville qui vit en ses images*]. In a medium-sized city hit hard by deindustrialisation,

culture was a privileged strategy to revive Angoulême's economic activity and restore its attractiveness. As Florian Moine observes, “the Salon de la bande dessinée gave Angoulême unprecedented media visibility. [...] The success of the Festival was an opportunity for the city to engage in redevelopment through culture as of the 1980s” (Moine 2013, 34).

2° The making of the 9th Art: from the Salon to the Cité

Although Angoulême at first replicated the Lucca format, the Salon soon developed an identity of its own. Its agenda has always been to legitimize the comic strip medium. The construction of a 9th Art-friendly activism has assumed two specific shapes: awards and lectures. Creators and their works were rewarded as of Angoulême 1 but the naming and nature of the awards have evolved constantly since. Until 1980 they were simply termed “prix” [prizes]. From 1981, the main awards started bearing names. The first one was Alfred, after the pet penguin (technically an auk) that followed the protagonists of Alain Saint-Ogan’s landmark pre-1960s BD *Zig et Puce*. As of 1989, the new name was “Alph’art,” after Hergé’s never-completed last Tintin album. After various name changes from from 2003 to 2009, the official prizes have been called “Fauves d’Angoulême” since 2010 (after a cartoony wildcat designed in 2007 by the then festival president Lewis Trondheim). Despite the successive names of its awards, the festival’s prize list has consistently rewarded books. This may be seen as paradoxical insofar as the BD market had by no means yet adjusted to the album format by the 1970s. In practice the Festival has accelerated and amplified the artification effect inherent in books (as opposed to periodicals), which has been one of the key singularities of the French comics market (Gabilliet 2005; Lesage 2019). By distinguishing books, the Salon also honoured authors. From the start the Salon exemplified a deliberate desire to promote the 9th Art by rewarding its most legitimate manifestations. Focusing on the book, a “noble” medium, and promoting *auteurs*, whose Hergé, the “star” of the 1977 festival whose works actually resulted from collaborative studio authorship, was a paradoxical paradigm. The Salon's prize list thus contributes to the auteurization of comics and the de facto perpetuation of the romantic myth of the work of art produced by a single author, in contrast to the Eisner Awards, which much more often spotlight works co-produced by multiple creators.

On another level, the festival's programme has traditionally given pride of place to lectures and the development of a scholarly discourse on the medium and the construction of its history. The various cultural dimensions that have since shaped the Salon were already embedded in the 1972 *Quinzaine du livre de jeunesse et de la bande dessinée*—the dialectical tension between legitimization by means of exhibits (all the more symbolical when they are housed in a

quintessential locus of legitimate culture such as the local fine arts museum) and emphasis on the “popular” essence of comics, implicitly considered as a playful hobby enjoyed by youngsters. This intermediary positioning was particularly visible in the meetings of creators and readers for *dédicace* (book-signing) sessions and the showmanship of the “coup sur coup” cartooning duels, 1970s counterparts to today’s *concerts de dessins* (cartooning performances during which a comic artist will draw on a stage in interaction with a singer’s musical show).

As far back as Angoulême 1, the event exemplified coexistence between logics of legitimization (specialized exhibitions, lectures) and participation (autographing sessions, sale of vintage BDs). In 1975, Luc Boltanski, a close colleague of Pierre Bourdieu’s, argued that the emergence of the field of BD (*le champ de la bande dessinée*) predictably gave rise to polarization between avant-garde and academicism, younger and older creators (Boltanski 1975). Angoulême mirrored the coexistence between the two poles schematically shaping the field, the popular and the legitimate. The festival has historically typified various relationships to BD: consumerist (dealers’ booths), fannish (particularly through *dédicaces*), artistic (exhibits), showmanship-driven (yesterday’s cartooning duels, today’s *concerts de dessins*). By comparison with the San Diego model, Angoulême’s has therefore fostered a less consumer-oriented vision of the comic strip: “Angoulême is much more anchored in artistic creation and culture” (Beaty 2007, 122).

The importance of Angoulême lies in the mainstream media’s celebration of BD for a few days every year in late January, but also, more broadly, in the way in which the festival has spawned a policy to promote comic art. The Salon was the departure point of novel initiatives for local cultural institutions. The most conspicuous one was the acquisition of original comic artwork by the city museum. In the 1970s original art used to have little market value. Yet, after the Salon debuted, it became a tradition for many creators to donate one or several pieces of original art to the city museum, where the key exhibits used to be held until the early 1980s. The curator systematically asked the creators that had received awards to donate at least a page. Even Hergé, when he was honorary president of the festival in 1977, donated a Tintin page—a highly symbolic gesture from a man notoriously reluctant to part with his original artwork. The collection of original art was exhibited as of 1978 (although its official inauguration as “Galerie Saint-Ogan” took place only in 1982). Yet the museum initiated a consistent acquisition policy as of the second half of the 1970s: by 1981, the museum held 465 pieces, 84% of which had been donated by creators and collectors (it is important to note that French law imposes the inalienability of any piece entering a museum collection). While the first pieces came from BD greats Jean-Claude Forest, Caran d’Ache, Benjamin Rabier and, once again, Hergé (Moine 2013, 42), US comic artists

were already present in the collection by 1981 with pieces by Milton Caniff, Charles Schulz, Wallace Wood (1977 guest), John Buscema (1979 guest), and Gilbert Shelton (guest of honor in 1981).

The creation of an embryonic museum of comic art made it possible to institutionalize the city's cultural policy and create the blueprint of a national policy to promote comics: "The opening of the first permanent infrastructures within pre-existing institutions (municipal library, school of fine arts, municipal museum) enabled the long-term extension of the dynamic originated by the Salon" (Moine 2013, 37). The local implantation opened the way to the creation of an official institution dedicated to comics: the *Centre national de la bande dessinée et de l'image* [National Center for Comic Strips and Images] was announced as a project in 1982 and opened in 1990, before morphing into the *Cité internationale de la bande dessinée et de l'image* [International City of Comic Strips and Images] in 2008.

The 1981 election of the socialist president François Mitterrand was a major turning point in the country's cultural policy. The new Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, advocated an open-ended approach to culture and support for new artistic forms: photography, street dance, comic strip, etc. Lang's broadening of the scope of culture coincided with major public works. Its highlights in Paris were the Grand Louvre and the Opéra Bastille but the Ministry also pushed the creations of national centres dedicated to new art forms in the provinces. Angoulême was awarded the future National Centre for Comics, thanks to the Salon's strong local roots and the good relations between Mayor Jean-Michel Boucheron and President Mitterrand.

Despite recurring conflicts, the Salon and the Cité have had strong long-term ties. The Cité was conceived in the first place as an establishment with a year-round and long-term agenda to promote comics, unlike the festival's annual short-but-intense media climax. David Caméo, a ministry of Culture official and deputy-mayor in charge of culture from 1977 to 1989, once explained,

The leading idea was that Angoulême's BD identity should not be focused solely on the Festival. There had to be permanent structural elements, a museum collection on the one hand, and creative activism on the other, so that Angoulême's inhabitants could gain a year-round view of their city's BD-related activity.⁵

⁵ "L'idée, c'était que l'identité BD d'Angoulême ne soit pas uniquement polarisée sur le Festival. Il fallait absolument qu'il y ait des éléments structurels qui restent, patrimoniaux d'un côté, de création de l'autre, de façon à ce que les Angoumoisins puissent visualiser sur une année l'activité de bande dessinée de leur ville." Quoted by Didier Pasamonik, « Ségolène Royal, reine de la Cité de la Bande Dessinée ! », *ActuaBD*, 22 juin 2009, <http://www.actuabd.com/Segolene-Royal-reine-de-la-Cite-de-la-Bande-Dessinee> (consultée le 17 octobre 2011).

National policies have thus coincided with the local elected officials' agenda to cash in on the impact of a high-profile annual half-week-long festival on a twelve-month basis. Thierry Groensteen, former curator of the museum, once pointed out that even though the festival had not spawned the CNBDI per se, "its location in Angoulême [was] a direct upshot of the festival... If there had been no festival, the CNBDI would have existed for sure, but somewhere else" (quoted in Veschambre et Gravari-Barbas 2005).

The relationship of the festival to the city is a complex one. Although it was at first criticized and instrumentalized, the festival was a golden opportunity for the city to create a cultural policy focusing on comics, which proved a long-term means of economic redevelopment and urban renewal. Even though the CNBDI has attracted disappointing numbers of visitors (Groensteen 2006), the image-related industries (film, animation, cartooning) have proved powerful boosts to the local economy and BD has positively redefined the public image of the city, not only as a tourist destination.

3° The Uncle from America

America and US comic strips occupied a central position in the early days of French Bedephilia. The Angoulême festival was initially a manifestation of France's then still young *bedéphilie* movement. However, just like the French cinema's *Nouvelle Vague* a few years before, bedephilia was born from some Frenchmen's obsession with America (Baecque 2003). Its departure point was an article by Pierre Strinati about the French magazines that retraced the appearance of *Le Journal de Mickey* in 1934 and its disappearance during the war (Gabilliet 2016). Nostalgia for the US comics they used to read in weekly *illustrés* before the war was the driving force that gathered those thirtysomethings that had never gotten over the demise of their childhood funnybooks. Just like the young generation of postwar French movie critics found the masters of the 7th art in Hollywood, early bedephiliacs found their sustenance in the United States—François Truffaut elevated Alfred Hitchcock to stardom and bedephiliacs extolled *Flash Gordon* and *Brick Bradford*. The rift between the first two French comic art appreciation groups, CELEG and SOCERLID, occurred over the relationships to the United States and to the past: the CELEG crowd were hung up on nostalgia for 1930s and 1940s US comics whereas the SOCERLID's young Turks advocated a broader outlook, both geographical (to include Italy, France, Belgium) and historical (oriented to the present). It was the latter group that gave birth to the annual event held in Angoulême.

It seems ironic in retrospect that the winner of the 1975 Grand Prix was Will Eisner, who at the time had not yet been published in album form in France.⁷ Harvey Kurtzman and Burne Hogarth were present at Angoulême 1. Eisner, Vaughn Bode, and Joe Kubert attended Angoulême 2. The early Angoulême salons seemed promised to become an important space of transatlantic exchange between comics and BD. Yet, after the 1977 Wallace Wood exhibit, the US presence shrank spectacularly. A delegation of US cartoonists was invited in 1982 (including Charles Schulz, Milton Caniff, Gilbert Shelton) but it took a decade for a substantial US group to show up again.⁸ By the late 1970s the Salon's international focus turned to closer countries, in particular Spain, whose artists were frequent guests in Angoulême. It is hard to believe that when R. Crumb and Aline Kominsky were invited in January 1986, their presence stirred little response. Reporting about a roundtable panel featuring the two creators, a journalist wrote in the local newspaper *La Charente libre*: “the attendance was underwhelming: the Crumb era is long gone and only a hundred-odd hardcore fans on the hippy side showed up.”⁹

The United States was the Salon's guest of honor only in 1992, after Japan and Great Britain the two previous years. Jean-Pierre Dionnet, the historic editor of *Métal Hurlant* and longtime specialist of US comics, curated an exhibit about contemporary American creators, which featured (among others) Kyle Baker, Lynda Barry, Charles Burns, Robert Crumb, Kevin Eastman, Will Eisner, Matt Groening, Gilbert & Jaime Hernandez, Ben Katchor, Joe Kubert, Dave Mazzucchelli, Gilbert Shelton, Art Spiegelman, and Bill Watterson. Watterson won the Best Foreign Album award for a *Calvin & Hobbes* collection. The exhibit already exemplified a broad view of “American” comics since it also featured Canadian creators like Julie Doucet and Chester Brown. 1999 was a triumphal year for US comics in Angoulême. The Best Foreign Album award went to Dave McKean's *Cages*;¹⁰ the awards for comics journalism and best committed comics went to the second volume of Joe Sacco's *Sarajevo*. The Grand Prix was awarded to R. Crumb, thirteen years after the missed opportunity of 1986. Since Will Eisner's award in 1975, all Grand Prix recipients had been European. Only one album signed by an American author had been awarded the prize for best album in 1986: *La Femme du magicien* [*The Magician's Wife*], written by Jerome Charyn—but the artist was François Boucq, an important figure in the renewal of French BD in the 1980s, and the graphic novel had been serialized directly in French in the Franco-Belgian

⁷ A number of Spirit stories had appeared in the weekly *Tintin* in 1973 and 1974 but the first “albums” featuring Eisner's masked detective were published by Humanoides Associés only in 1977.

⁸ The creators alluded to here are those that are “official” guests of the festival and thus appear in the printed programs, not those that are invited by publishers or attend the event as private visitors.

⁹ « l'événement s'est un peu dégonflé : l'ère Crumb date un peu et il n'y avait guère qu'une centaine de passionnés super-branchés et un tantinet soixante-huitards »

¹⁰ Alongside Bart Beaty, I include Canada and Great-Britain in the American comics market (BEATY p. 111). It is particularly the case in the French perception of Anglophone comics.

monthly (*À Suivre*). Even *Maus* and *Watchmen*, when they were rewarded in Angoulême, received the awards for the “best foreign album,” a category so ambiguous that it implies that the French production is distinct from that of the whole world.¹¹

However, R. Crumb and the FIBD were an ill-matched couple. Crumb, notoriously reticent to honours and the folklore of comics fandom, refused to play the traditional role of the festival president, a sort of goodwill ambassador that shakes hands in front of TV cameras and gives interviews all over the place. Moreover, the festival itself was going through a crisis of sorts, with the temptation to go less cultural and more commercial. The president traditionally designs the poster of the year’s festival, supposedly to endow it with his artistic identity. Crumb portrayed himself sitting in his studio, surrounded by many of his creatures, including a small demon with a sizable penis. The organizers, fearing for the FIBD’s family-friendly image, asked Crumb to delete the objectionable organ—in vain (Gabilliet 2012, 196). Crumb’s poster was pulled and replaced at the last minute by an abstract design adorned with corporate logos. During the festival, Crumb refused to play host to local and national media, remained away from the public light and appeared in public for one performance with the band Les Primitifs du futur. The traditional exhibition devoted to the president’s career—ironically entitled “Who is afraid of Robert Crumb?”—was “relegated” to the space usually regarded as least attractive to children and families, the municipal theatre, the only spot in the entire city center where visitors had a chance to behold the rejected poster. The censorship achieved under the festival’s aegis reflected a more general malaise. Crumb, who had deliberately isolated himself from the US alternative scene by moving to France in the early 1990s, did not play the president’s other expected role as tracker and promoter of new talents. It was a case in which the Franco-American dialogue took other channels.

More than “Grand Prix”, awards and exhibitions have been important means to spotlight American comics for the festival's audiences. In this respect the 2000s were an undeniable turning point. In the 1990s, besides the large exhibit on contemporary US comics organized in 1992, one was devoted to Winsor McCay in 1990 and another one to George Herriman in 1997. After the two exhibitions dedicated to R. Crumb and the Peanuts in 2000, 2001 featured a large Popeye exhibit and 2002 witnessed two major exhibitions shown at the CNBDI (along with an exhibit of Joe Sacco’s *Gorazde* original art): *Comics, génération indépendants* [US Comics: the Independents’ Generation] (featuring works by Jeff Smith, Mike Mignola, Jill Thompson, John Porcellino,

¹¹ From 1981 to 1985, the Salon only awards one « best album », without distinguishing between nationalities. But the artists awarded during that period are all European: Carlos Gimenez (Spain), Didier Comès (Belgium), Cosey (Switzerland), Michelluzi (Italy), Benoît Peeters and François Schuiten (Belgium) – the only exception being José Munoz and Carlos Sampayo, whose second career in the 1970s-1980s was largely set in France, where the duo met fame in magazines such as *Charlie* and (*A Suivre*).

Roberta Gregory...) and *Maîtres de la bande dessinée américaine* [Masters of American Comics] (Herriman, Kirby, Eisner, Crumb, Schulz, Foster, Raymond, Ditko, Kelly...). Similarly, the list of awards reveals a progressive opening to Anglo-American creation from the end of the 1980s. Whereas the early 1980s was dominated by Hispanic (Gimenez, Munoz and Sampayo, Bernet and Abuli) and Italian (Micheluzzi, Manara, Pratt) creators, the end of the decade saw the celebration of authors associated to the US market. The prize for best foreign album was awarded to *Maus* in 1988, *Watchmen* in 1989, *V for Vendetta* in 1990, a *Calvin & Hobbes* collection in 1992, *Maus* vol. II in 1993, *Bone* in 1996, *Fax de Sarajevo* in 1998; the same year Chris Ware was awarded a minor prize, the *Prix de l'école de l'image*. The foreign comics distinguished in Angoulême more and more frequently hailed from the United States.

Franco-centrism biased the list of awards for a long time. Until 2001, the list included two distinct categories, "best French album" and "best foreign album." US comics were thus mechanically relegated to second-class status; even Spiegelman's *Maus*, which was celebrated in Angoulême as enthusiastically as everywhere else, was only awarded the best *foreign* album prize. It was not until Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan* was awarded the "Best Album" prize in 2003 that the chauvinism holding French BD in a class by itself next to the rest of the world's output came to an end.

At that point, under the leadership of Benoît Mouchart (artistic director from 2003 to 2013), the festival started developing an increased international influence which had been heralded by the name change from *Salon* to *Festival* in 1993. The early 2000s witnessed an acceleration of globalization in the publishing world (Sapiro 2009). In this changing context, the graphic novel format became a lingua franca of sorts that facilitated the crossing of borders and decreased the prejudices of French readers towards American comics still often perceived as inevitably "lowbrow" (Baetens and Frey 2015).

Throughout the festival's history French creators have accounted for 70% of the prize winners¹² (Fig. 1). Among those, only two women: Claire Bretécher (who was awarded a special prize in 1982 but did not preside over the salon the following year) and Florence Cestac (2000 Grand Prix and president of the 2001 Festival). The international opening has had a discernible impact: in the last ten years the share of French authors has dipped to under a third of all winners.

The phenomenon is particularly evident in the *rencontres internationales*, on-stage dialogues between one or several leading international creators in front of live audiences. The new format

¹² This tally includes the "special" prizes, such as the 10th Anniversary Prize awarded to Claire Bretécher in 1982 and the Millenium Prize awarded to Asterix co-creator Albert Uderzo in 1999.

was inaugurated in 2003 by Neil Gaiman and Art Spiegelman, Dave McKean, Todd McFarlane and Jirô Taniguchi. The following year, Chris Ware and Seth took part in them, along with Chris Claremont and Taiyou Matsumoto. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s the Salon's international outlook was essentially limited to the European neighbours (Belgium of course, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, Switzerland), the festival by the early 2000s embraced a new symbolic geography that included Japan and, above all, the United States.

The heyday of this transatlantic dialogue between comics traditions was arguably 2012, with the presidency of Art Spiegelman. Unlike R. Crumb in 2000, Spiegelman fully played the part of a president fostering new talents - a role facilitated, of course, by his past co-editorship of *RAW* and his status as a festival regular, previously invited in 1992, 2003, 2005. The festival hosted *Co-Mix*, a monographic career-spanning exhibition. Spiegelman organized panels about *RAW*, in which transatlantic exchanges were highlighted, with leading American creators (Charles Burns, Aline Kominsky-Crumb and Chris Ware) as well as with non-US authors such as José Muñoz, Joost Swarte and the little-known French outsider artist Francis Masse, whom he brought back into the spotlight. But the heart of the dialogue was undoubtedly the exhibition curated by himself, *Le Musée privé d'Art Spiegelman [Art Spiegelman's Private Museum]*, which occupied the entire premises of the new museum that had opened in 2009. Spiegelman proposed an alternative history of comics, a "Bizarro version of a patrimony."¹⁴ In his presentation of the exhibition, Spiegelman underscored the importance of the transatlantic dialogue:

It seems that I have been allowed to hijack the Centre of BD Museum [sic] to replace what is primarily the Francophone patrimony of comics with my own perverse and private map of what comics are. There are things about French comics that have been very very important to me, that shaped me as an artist, and shaped to a degree the way comics have been perceived at least in America.¹⁵

According to Benoît Crucifix, the reappropriation of the Museum by an author-historian produced an "alternative cartography": "Spiegelman is given a carte blanche to replace the contents of the permanent exhibition so that it reflects his own perception of the past of comics, giving it an American yet transnational twist and spotlighting his personal canon of great comics artists" (Crucifix 2020, 75). Spiegelman's historiographical journey relied simultaneously upon the Museum's collections and the site's spatial configuration. While sticking to a chronological timeline, Spiegelman nevertheless highlighted authors and moments that in his view stood out in

¹⁴ Art Spiegelman, « Le musée privé d'Art Spiegelman », *YouTube*, April 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRIASI8PAD0&list=PLJWCjsENkVUzDAjIClcfndyJgDpA7OLQu>.

¹⁵ Idem

this singular chronology: Bill Griffith, Harvey Kurtzman, Chris Ware, but above all Justin Green, whose complete *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary* was featured through its forty original pages in the exhibit's last segment (Crucifix 2020, 74). Spiegelman thus proposed in a French museum an American reinterpretation of the history of comics and broke with the decades-old French model whose canon gave pride of place to the 1930s' US newspaper adventure comics (Raymond, Gordon, Caniff). This major anthological exhibition thus confirms Bart Beaty's contention that the internationalization of the comics medium has been mediated by alternative comics and their creators, whereas mainstream US comics are still largely perceived as "crassly commercial products of mass culture" (Beaty 2007, 112). France is a heavy consumer of American comics though: 552 US titles were translated in 2016, accounting for 14% of the national BD publishing market (Ratier 2016). Yet almost 90% of this amount belong to mainstream comic-book genres, which get hardly any recognition in Angoulême.

The Festival's clearest affinity with the festival is conspicuous in the Prix du Patrimoine (similar to to the Eisner Awards' Best Archival Project). Since its creation in 2004, the prize has been awarded four times to contemporary French reprints of American comics: an A. B. Frost anthology in 2004, Jaime Hernandez's *Locas* in 2006, Carl Barks' *La Dynastie Donald Duck* in 2012, and George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* in 2013—a score matching France's four awards in the same category. A similar phenomenon has been discernible since 2017 in the high-profile original art exhibits showcasing heavyweights of American comics: a major Will Eisner retrospective titled "Will Eisner, génie de la bande dessinée américaine" was held at the Cité in 2017. In 2019 and 2020, the festival's historic shrine, the municipal museum, hosted two prestigious exhibits devoted to Richard Corben (2019 FIBD president) and Wally Wood under the curatorship of FIBD artistic director Stéphane Beaujean.

But the place of the United States is especially visible in the nominations, which outline a geography (however incomplete and subjective) of archival reprinting. With 28% of nominations, the United States comes first (Fig. 2), ahead of Japan (23%) and France (21%). The mapping of the Grand Prix winners and the *rencontres internationales* interviewees, which bears out the outstanding positions of the United States, France and Japan as the three major poles of comics creation, is therefore also reflected in the archival preservation of the medium's past.¹⁶

¹⁶ One should note, however, that a number of authors and archival projects have been nominated repeatedly. For instance, BDArtist(e)'s *Terry et les pirates* series was nominated in 2011, 2012, 2013 yet never won an award. R. Crumb, for one, was nominated three times for solo works (2008, 2012, 2014) and once in 2010 as co-author of *American Splendor* with Harvey Pekar.

CONCLUSION

The FIBD has played a key role in the French recognition of the United States' new graphic novel scene. Art Spiegelman, Charles Burns, Alison Bechdel, Daniel Clowes and a few others are regarded as first-rate creators in France. The festival has aided and sometimes even triggered the acclimatization of a generation of American authors on the French cultural scene. The huge critical and public success of Emil Ferris' *Moi ce que j'aime c'est les monstres* [*My Favorite Thing Is Monsters*] (Fauve d'or 2019) was thus largely made possible by the Festival, which quite unexpectedly enabled a sophisticated graphic novel released by an almost confidential publisher, Monsieur Toussaint Louverture, to become a high-profile best-seller.

But this legitimization, like the Festival itself and the museum, is not without ambiguity. What has been acknowledged by the FIBD is much more the graphic novel *per se* than American comics as a whole. The cultural/institutional validation of the graphic novel is not a self-evident process in the country of BD. From the French point of view, the constitution of a transnational space of graphic narratives, somewhat paradoxically, cannot happen without a raising of symbolic borders. The American graphic novel does get celebrated while mainstream US comics are relegated to a lowbrow zone of which the FIBD steers clear deliberately. Despite the popularity of US mainstream comics with French readers, Angoulême keeps focusing on alternative products and promoting “restricted” readings of the otherwise variegated output of the US comics industry.

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