Archiving comics

Preserving heritage or broadening the perspectives of comics studies?

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In January 2014, the well-known Belgian comic book character Tintin celebrated his anniversary. Exactly 85 years ago he had made his first appearance on a train towards Berlin, on his way to the Soviet Union where he would kick off his future adventures that would soon appeal so strongly to the readers of the Petit Vingtième. On various social media Tintin was congratulated by fans and readers across the world. Among them was André Gareau, a Canadian who wished him a Bon anniversaire (happy birthday), a remark wich he combined with a simple question: "Des archives de bandes dessinées, ça existe?" – Comic book archives, do they exist?[1]

The focus in this article is not on the life and achievements of Mr. Gareau, but it is relevant to point out that he is the director of archives at one of the main universities in Montreal, l'Université du Québec, and the president of the Archivists Association of Québec (l'Association des archivistes du Québec). In other words, this is an academically trained archivist, working in a responsible position at a reputable university, and as a respectable leader in his profession an example for his fellow archivists. Yet, it seems to be unknown to him whether comic book archives actually exist.

All academics have certain weak spots in their knowledge so this particular archivist shouldn't be blamed for that. Nevertheless his Twitter message tells us various things. The general awareness of comics archives is limited, and that is not only the case in the Canadian situation. The world of heritage conservation, of archives and even libraries is not as familiar with the phenomenon of comics as we would like it to be. The world of popular culture may have acquired a certain position in the ivory towers of science, archives and libraries; but that appears to be no guarantee that the awareness of comics is guaranteed, and that the a solid bridge has now been constructed between popular culture regarded as volatile and archives generally associated with continuity or even eternity.

But this single Twitter message also shows something else. The fact that a French-speaking Canadian is referring to a Belgian comic strip, illustrates that comics are a transnational phenomenon

1 Tweet from @Andre_Gareau, January 8, 2014, "Des archives de bandes dessinées, ça existe ? Bon 85e anniversaire Tintin !" available at https://twitter.com/Andre_Gareau/status/421062677365280768. Website , consulted 20 December 2015.

- even though in this transatlantic case the interest remains within the linguistic borders of the francophone community. The tweet further confirms that a comic initially largely adressed to children can also be appealing to an adult readership. And finally this message shows that comics, contrary to what is sometimes believed, are not by definition a medium with no memory but that certain comics even decades later continue to reach and engage readers. The positive interpretation is therefore that comic strips, at least to a certain extent, are an established and border-crossing medium. But at the same time the connection between comics and archives for many remains an unknown territory.

Comic book archives are, as it appears to be, especially useful for a rather specific group: for comics scholars (and especially the historically orientated scholars among them) who wish to consult original sources; for specialized publishers that plan to to reprint specific comics; for museums that want to prepare exhibitions; for a single journalist, comics critic or documentary filmmaker; and perhaps from time to time a die-hard fan who, stimulated by his need to see or even touch the authentic sources, may be admitted to the archives[2]. All things considered, that is, certainly in quantitative terms, a relatively small group - although it should be taken into account that some of these archive users function as an intermediary to a larger audience.

With some effort a short list of comic archives around the world can be made[3], but this article doesn't intend to present a complete overview here. It's however worth mentioning that there has been at least one international get-together of a number of institutions that are devoted to the conservation of the comics heritage, though it's remarkable that most institutions involved where actually libraries and museums. One of the best known examples is the Cité Internationale de la Bande Dessinée et de l'Image (CIBDI) in the French city of Angoulême. Here in January 2012 the annual French comics festival hosted around forty representatives of 11 institutions from East Asia, North America and Western and Eastern Europe. This meeting included colleagues from some well-known organizations such as the Kyoto manga museum in Japan, the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library & Museum in the United States, the Bibliothèque municipale de Lausanne in Switzerland and the Serieteket in Stockholm, Sweden.[4] Unfortunately this meeting did not receive much attention from comic scholars, and escaped the awareness or a broader audience. Otherwise Mr. Gareau's Twitter question might have been easily answered – although Archives and Libraries Canada, the national institution in nearby Ottawa, that has both Canadian comic books and comics related correspondence and documents in its collection, did not participate in the French event. One of the main issues that was discussed during the Angoulême meeting was the phenomenon of digitization. Almost all institutions that attended, were involved in projects to digitize parts of their collections, be it original drawings or printed editions. The reason to make digital copies was not only inspired by the wish to aid the preservation of the old materials, but even more by the intention to make old comic strips more widely available, preferably through the internet. However, this is in many cases obstructed by legal

2 Literature on comic book archives is rare, in particular comparative internationals overviews are hard to find. One of the few titles worth mentioning is Robert G. Weiner, *Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries and Archives: Essays on Readers, Research, History and Cataloging* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010).

3 The CIBDI offers a helpful overview of comic museums [“musées et centres spécialisés”] on its website: http://www.citebd.org/spip.php?rubrique34, consulted 20 December 2015.

4 Three reports are available: Boris Bruckler, Frédéric Sardet. Le réseau de la bande se dessine. Échos d'un symposium patrimonial. *Bulletin des bibliothèques de France*, nr. 3, 2012: http://bbf.enssib.fr/consulter/bbf-2012-03-0092-006, consulted 20 December 2015; http://www.citebd.org/spip.php?article3673 ; Reserapport från Seriefestivalen i Angoulême 25-29 januari 2012, http://www.biblioteksforeningen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/IngdenRingselle.doc, consulted 20 December 2015.

complications, touching the rights of creators and publishers. Bringing back the global comics heritage, especially from more recent decades, into the public domain is not an easy thing to do. That must be, without any doubt, a frustrating experience for these archives and other devoted institutions. While the social demand for getting access to original material seems to be increasing – as is also clearly reflected in the vivid market of auction houses selling old comics and drawings for amazing prices, usually to private collectors – the very institutions that try very hard to make this material publicly visible and widely available see themselves confronted not only with limited budgets but also with legal obstacles.

However, these developments do not seem to have blocked a growth of such archives. A recent global overview of 45 comic archives, libraries and museums can nowadays be found at the website of the CIBDI. This list is not complete, general state archives holding comics related collections are not included, while corporate archives, such as the Walt Disney Archives in Burbank, California, are also missing. Latin America is included, but Africa and Oceania are not present. Yet this available overview confirms that archives are a minority among thesis Institutions - which are mainly museums, added by some libraries. Combinations of these functions do exist and that can be a fruitful mixture. The listed institutions are important elements of the infrastructure that's simply essential for constructing a solid environment to further facilitate and promote scholarship in comics. The devoted efforts of these specific heritage Institutions deserve respect and appreciation. Yet, it can be helpful to make a first attempt to evaluate their (possible) role.

Comic archives preserve printed publications, original drawings and scenarios, cover illustrations, advertisements, portraits, relevant correspondence, interviews, diaries etcetera. It often concerns impressive numbers of documents in each archive category and most of the institutions are very well able to precisely quantify the total amount of the items – the comic treasures! - they preserve and try to make accessible. The collections of virtually any comic archive also contain some foreign material, but the focus is usually on (parts of) their "own" national comic strip production. I will come back to this observation. But the question that, in addition, is particularly relevant is largely a qualitative one. What meaning do are archives have for comics scholars, how do these archives relate to comics historiography, and how can this meaning be strengthened in order to further contribute to the development of comics historiography?

This article finds its starting point in two issues: the historiography of the comic strip and the role of archives in this historiography. This may sound as if I will touch mostly on the past, but that's not entirely true. I want to gaze forward as I consider it necessary to look to the future. I realize that this is somewhat unusual for a historian. But we should not forget that historiographical statements are always designed to evaluate the current state of affairs, the production of historical knowledge so far, with the intention to improve the questions with which we confront the past, with the intention to improve our accumulation of knowledge. Orienting ourselves to the future is not the same as creating science fiction, though it might sound a little bit like the time travelling which certain comic creators are so fond of. But to prepare ourselves for possible future critique from inside and outside, we need to see how we can improve our current practices in comics scholarship.

A term like ‘the historiography of comics’ does actually not feel completely comfortable. My inconvenience lies in the use of the singular form of the article. When someone uses the term 'historiography', he or she implicitly suggests that there is such a thing as a unified or one single history. Such an interpretation does not do justice to the diversity of the

historywriting in all its variety[5], but also does not do justice to the versatility of the medium that appeals to us all: comics, a word which in English is quite rightly used in the plural form.

Coming from different backgrounds – i.e. different disciplines, different national and cultural contexts, - we are, as comics scholars, intrigued by the medium of comics. Intrigued by the story they tell, by the use of imagery - or rather the specific sequential combination of visual and textual elements, by more or less literary and artistic ways in which comic book authors (try to) tell stories, by the changes and developments in topics, genres and approaches comics have shown in the past decades, whether carried by paper, digital or other means. All these elements, in various proportions, are reflected in comics historiography, but with some undeniable accents.

To put it briefly: we are primarily fascinated by the medium itself - the comics - and its creators - the artists and scriptwriters. That is, not surprisingly, also the dominant focus of many comics archives. By now, comics studies have reached a stage of maturity characterized by a widening of our view. We no longer look solely to individual creators, who in the past were perceived too often as a kind of unique and isolated stand-alone artists, but we now increasingly position the artists and scriptwriters in a wider context in which there is also an eye for the publishers, magazine editors and, at least in cautious extent, for the economic aspects that are not only intertwined with the artistic process but that are essential for the conversion of handmade drawings into cultural products that can be marketed, sold and read. Are all these aspects equally strongly represented in comics archives? That is doubtful. The comics themselves, the outcome of the creative process in different stages, are certainly present, as well as documents and images that give us a glimpse into the lives of their creators. But the economic and social setting in which they operated is often much less well documented. This means there is a certain limitation in the archive - which reflects the look that is strongly present within comics studies. And an important element is still largely missing.

Long gone are the times in which the medium of comics itself was accepted at face value as the result of an almost unquestioning admiration for its creators. Theory has obtained an important and legitimate position in our discipline. Comics studies has learned us how to critically question how image can ceate meaning; which visual, textual, spatial and other aspects are used to construct such meaning; in what ways (elements of) comic narratives refer - and otherwise connect – to other (elements of) comic narratives, as well as to other images and narratives, and to the reality.

Actually, I'm not expressing myself precise enough here. It is not so much the comic (or elements thereof) which creates meaning, that is of course done by the people who are involved as user or producer. Comics are a human medium. It can tell a highly individual story, but it is, above all, a social medium, since usually we define comics as printed or otherwise duplicated sequential narratives – which presupposes that the

5 To mention a few more recent titles: James Chapman, *British Comics. A Cultural history* (Reaktion Books 2011); David Michaelis, *Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography* (HarperColloins 2008); Eckart Sackmann, *Jahrbuch deutsche Comicforschung 2015* (Sackmann Und Hörndl 2014); Thierry Smolderen, *The Origins of Comics. From William Hogarth to Winsor McCay* (University Press of Mississippi 2014).

reader, who tries to make sense of what he sees, is not the same individual as the creator.

As researchers we are by definition to be placed in the category of readers – even though some of us have made attempts to act as a comic book creator. And as researchers, especially the semiotic, iconological and literary oriented theorists among us, we not only reflect on how the structure of comics is organized by the creators, but also on how combinations of images and texts in various subtle relationships can be read, and what effect this has on possible interpretations. So in the two latter elements the researchers' own role as a reader is an important one, thoughs perhaps, I would argue, it takes up a proportionately too large place in comics studies.

Comics scholars in general are all too familiar with the reality of the academic reading – and hopefully enjoying - comics. But this particular analytically operating comic strip user is, in all likelihood, not the typical audience for comics. It's not surprisising to say that there is a distinction between these two groups of readers, but we seem to underestimate or even ignore rather structurally that both groups have an almost fundamental difference in their approach towards comics. Academic close reading of a sequential narrative is quite a different thing than passing time with a comic. This does not mean that our private interpretation of comics, and thus the effect of these stories, differs by definition from the experience of other readers. But to assume, somewhat implicitly without much reflection, that the reading experience of the common comic reader – in all its variety - would be similar to that of trained specialists does not seem plausible, and therefore demands revision.

The conclusion we can draw from this, is that it deserves serious recommendation to create substantially more space and devote more attention, especially in the historical dimension of comics studies, to the comic reader, the non-specialist reader and his or her experiences. To understand the reach and effect of comics, it is not enough to just know the circulation figures and the numbers of reprints, or to study the granted awards and the reviews in the specialized press. The aim should be, based on empirical research, to identify and analyze the actual experiences of regular groups of comics readers in all their possible variety. The content of most comics related archives tell us too little about that.[6]

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6 Already in the first decades of comics studies attention was paid to readers. Among the more well known examples are: Florence Heisler, A Comparison of Comic Book and Non-Comic Book Readers of the Elementary School, *The Journal of Educational Research* Vol. 40 Nr.6 (February 1947) p.458-464; Katherine M. Wolf and Marjorie Fiske, The Children talk about Comics, In: Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton eds., *Communications Research, 1948–1949* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948) p.3-50. During the next few decades readers somewhat lost their visibility within academic research. In the late twentieth century, fan studies helped to re-focus on the reader, although certainly not exclusively on their reading experiences, for example: Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999). By then, new inspiration for researching comic readership came from librarians and language teachers across North America. This resulted in various brief publications: Joanne Ujiie, Stephen D. Krashen, Comic Book Reading, Reading Enjoyment, and Pleasure Reading Among Middle Class and Chapter 1 Middle School Students, *Reading Improvement*, Vol. 33, Nr.1 (Spring 1996), p. 51-54; Bonny Norton, The motivating power of comic books: Insights from Archie comic readers, *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 57 Nr. 2, (October 2003) p.140-147; Philip Crawford, A Novel Approach: Using Graphic Novels to Attract Reluctant Readers and Promote Literacy, *Library Media Connection* , Vol.2 Nr.5 (February 2004) p.26-28; Olivier Charbonneau, Adult Graphic Novels Readers. A Survey in a Montréal Library, *Young Adult Library Services*, Vol.3 Nr.4 (Summer 2005) p.39-42. More recently specific comic reader groups, such as adults and collectors, have been studied, predominantly in the United States: Stergios Botzakis, *Reading when they don't have to. Insights form adult comic book readers*, (Doctoral Dissertation, Athens GA, 2006), also reported in Stergios Botzakis**,** Graphic Novels: Who Likes Them and Why, *Adolescent Literacy In Perspective*, February 2014, p.6-7, http://www.ohiorc.org/adlit/; Benjamin Woo, Understanding understandings

Some types of relevant studies deserve to be mentioned here. The recent studies on reading experiences I'm aware of, not only question how people read (given the highly visual nature of comics it of course remains the question to what extent the textual experience-based term "reading" is appropriate), but also how they interpret stories presented in this medium, and what knowledge and emotion it triggers. One can think of examples, either based on field research or on a more secluded kind of laboratory situations, looking at the effects of comics in literacy campaigns, or of studies monitoring the introduction of new educational comic strips, for instance about socially sensitive topics such as the memories of the Second World War. But the results of such studies, coming from different disciplines, quite often do not reach an audience of comics scholars.

Although many of these studies are relatively small scale (it usually concerns rather tens of people instead of thousands), they can nevertheless help to widen the scale of single individual reading experiences many comic strip theorists are currently operating in. Such empirical upscaling can contribute to strengthening the cognitive basis on which we operate. However, integrating both approaches requires a careful matching of various methodological principles of both approaches and mutual willingness to connect these two knowledge domains - but the results may be a very fruitful innovation.

The next question we see ourselves confronted with concerns the historical dimension of this proposed joint approach to bring the reader back in comics studies. How can we integrate the experiences of the twentieth-century readers in the historiography of comics studies? Many of the readers we are talking about, especially those who read comic books primarily or exclusively during childhood or young adulthood, are not alive anymore and thus cannot be observed while reading in that life stage. But that does not leave the researcher disarmed. First, the current research on reading practices, which to a large extent focuses on teenagers or others with a not very long history of being able to read, can be expanded towards older age groups. We can thus monitor what they read, how they read this and we can ask how they came to choose the comics they are reading, in what context they read and what they derive from this reading experience. Secondly, we can ask present readers, and certainly the adult readers among them, to give an impression of what they have read in the past and what it is they still remember about it. Though human memory has deficits and biases, and is undeniably influenced by re-interpretations, issues that must certainly be taken into account, but with a critical attitude such a retro-active approach should not be avoided – also because the number of alternatives is limited. Thirdly, we can intensify our search to find other sources, often written sources about comic reading experiences in the past. Readers' comments and letters to (editors of) comic magazines, contributions in fanzines, and letters from readers to comics artists deserve our attention and can, in addition to comic book reviews by more or less professional critics in various media, make clear how the receiving end within the broad comics spectrum out there looked like and functioned.

Based on what we now know, there is an unmistakable - quantitative and qualitative - problem

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of comics: Reading and collecting as media-oriented practices, *Participations. Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, Vol.9 Nr.2 (November 2012) p.180-199. An entirely new, though controversial way to analyse (specific) elements of comic reading, gathering empirical data by means of electroencephalograms (EEG), has been introduced by Neil Cohn, *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Visual Images* (London etc: Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2013).

with our sources and that observation should affect the collection and acquisition policy of comics archives. But of course it deserves acknowledgement that various comics archives already contain important information about the communities of comic book fans, as reflected for instance in collections of fanzines. Fan culture has recently received increasing attention, which it certainly deserved, but that still leaves us with the question if that is a suitable source of knowledge concerning the regular mainstream comic readers, who do not necessarily identify so strongly with such subcultures.

Regarding the experiences of more average readers, it will be noted with a certain regularity – and also with a certain frustration - that the available resources are simply scarce, incomplete and colored. But if we don't start searching for reader-related sources more intensively, they certainly will not automatically appear on the surface, and as a result our view will remain (too) limited. If we are successful, we may perhaps find some so-called ego-documents from individual readers who for some time have chronicled their experiences reading comics. That kind of source material will allow us to sharpen our understanding of comics readership. Only then will we get a better view of the diversity and development of readers and we can then ask the essential question how readers themselves may have influenced both the creators and their cultural products.

An important aspect here is that we also increase our awareness of the cumulative reading experience. In addition to the look of the creator and the perspective of the academic comics scholar, we need to look more through the eyes of the comics reader. While the scholar himself, partly for pragmatic and understandable reasons, usually focuses on one comic book or on the oeuvre of one particular comic artist, and by doing so usually operates within the range of one particular genre or language area, the average comics reader on the other hand can be much more like a kind cultural omnivore, at least based upon my observations in the Euro-American realm. Someone may both read contemporary boys manga boys as well as older American superhero comics, and may consume a new German graphic novel in translation after having read a wordless webcomic from a country he did not even notice. Such versatility in reading experiences may seem exceptional but crossing linguistic, cultural, genre and time limits is more common in real life than is reflected in the delineated research corpus of many comics scholars. The reader who blends comic strips of different origins into a cumulative reading experience - and for reasons of convenience I'll neglect here the additional consumption of other media - exists and deserves our attention. Comics history does not stop at the moment when a comic book goes to press in a specific cultural and historical setting. It goes on when that comic is translated or republished. That's what makes comics a dynamic cultural and historical phenomenon deserving a wider frame for analysis – in order to be able to find out to what extent there have been collective experiences and on what scale this occurred.

Coming to my conclusion, I would like to emphasize that I don't want to create the impression that the existing comic archives are not, or not sufficiently valuable. I see comics archives above all as a rich source of information, as an accessible resource that is an essential foundation for the work that we as comics scholars - and I am not only referring to the historians among them - perform. I fully realize that these devoted archives are faced with various challenges that also require a response.

Comics are flourishing in many countries and have become, in their various appearances, a highly versatile medium. As a result, this medium leaves behind many traces, even more traces than any comics archive could ever gather and preserve. Furthermore, comics not only have a cultural, artistic, social and historical value but they also have a commercial value. Precisely because of the increased appreciation of

popular culture in general, and the recognition of comics in particular, a market has emerged in which the interest of wealthy private comic fans results in the sale of comics heritage which sometimes subsequently disappears under the radar of our observation.[7]

Both developments affect the collections of comics archives. On the one hand there is more material available than can be preserved and made accessible, on the other hand there is a risk that a specific selection of authentic sources is becoming inaccessible for a wider audience. These phenomena also deserve our attention as scholars.

It will be clear that I am strongly in favor of considering comics as a dynamic and wide-ranging cultural phenomenon. This means we have to broaden our scope. However, that does not imply that I cherish the illusion that we can preserve all comics related material. Not only do we lack the physical space and financial resources, also the research time available for studying such material is usually limited. Making choices and reflecting on the process of selection is therefore inevitable.

Establishing selection criteria is an important issue that requires the commitment and involvement of comics scholars, of archivists, librarians, museum curators and others. This demands an open discussion in which we explain as explicitly as possible what each of us, from our view on the current state of the research (while trying to take into account future research), considers essential for maintaining the access to the (comics) past as open as possible. In addition, the diversity of collections in comics archives deserves our constant attention, precisely because such archives (can) have an essential function, both for our research and for more general reflection on comics and comic history. Our view of the past can never be but selective (and therefore limited), but our selectiveness in archiving and in researching should therefore be thoroughly re-considered from time to time to guard our preservation policies and understanding against repeating a possible unreflected short-sightedness.

As a historian, I endorse the significance of authenticity, though the value attached to it is sometimes too absolute: the information value does not always depend on the originality of the material. It is important to maintain the possibility to consult the original source material. At the same time, we also have to be practical. If we find good and affordable ways to digitize at a large scale and to disclose the results as much as possible, many research questions can be answered by the use of digital copies, even without physical visits to the archival institution. In addition, it is important to realize that comics heritage is also preserved outside the limited number of specialized archives.[8] This can range from government archives with broad collections to websites where volunteer groups of highly motivated fans publish and arrange (and sometimes even translate) scanned comic strips. More structural cooperation with various parties, also outside the borders of the own country of origin, deserves further exploration. The same is true for comics scholars, when we try to reflect on the best possible selection and accessibility of the heritage we cherish so much. Comics studies are definitely not scientifically isolated, but that does not mean that we can't seize the opportunity more strongly than before to use the expertise in the neighbouring disciplines of media studies, cultural studies as well as art studies, film and tv studies and literature studies.

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7 Some examples of valuable comics and original drawings auctioned in recent years can be found here: Ed Mazza, 'Action Comics' No. 1, First Superman Appearance, Sells For $3.2 Million In eBay Auction, *The Huffington Post*, 25 August 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/25/action-comics-superman-ebay_n_5707081.html , Christie's Tintin Sale, 14 March 2015, http://www.christies.com/Tintin-25890.aspx, websites consulted 20 December 2015.

8 For example: http://digitalcomicmuseum.com and http://comicbookplus.com