

A BRIEF RUNDOWN OF THE CULTURAL USAGES AND SERVICES OF COMICS

As we end the second decade of the twenty-first century, it should not be necessary to make a case for the cultural value of comics and cartoons. Granted that defending comic art against charges of being morally reprehensible, intellectually degrading, and aesthetically inferior does not have to be made as frequently or emphatically as a generation ago. Comics and cartoons have climbed quite a few rungs of the ladder of respectability with the blurring of the once-firm dividing line between “fine art” and “popular” art, the encouraging (not just tolerating) of the use of comic books and graphic novels in the classroom, and the developing of a wide spread comic art scholarship presence.

Yet, despite these gains, comics/cartoons still face challenges to their acceptance in many parts of the world, especially in some non-Western countries. Comics creators tell me that they still must contend with widely-prevalent beliefs that comics are for kids only, and comics researchers say that they face blank stares or the query, “what is to be studied?” when they state that they study comics or cartoons.

To reiterate, comics have significance beyond entertaining children, contributing greatly to the preservation and advancement of individual cultures and to civilization more generally. They serve vital roles in education, social consciousness-raising, and propaganda, figure prominently in promoting local and global identities, and strive to advance high aesthetic values.

Comic art has a number of characteristics that recommend it for these purposes. They include:

1. Versatility. Comic art embraces many forms, techniques, and sizes and has many uses. Almost a thousand years ago, artists used comic and/or narrative strips in stone sculpture in India, on embroidered linen in France (Bayeaux Tapestry), and on scrolls in China and Japan. The art has employed ink and brush drawings as in China, linoleum cuts, woodblock prints (notably *ukiyo-e* in Tokugawa, Japan), painted cloth and leather strips used by ancient Indian storytellers, pottery, and other techniques and materials.
2. Visualness. At a time when audiences are said to have become very visually oriented as they absorb increasing hours of Internet, cell phone, and television, and when print media have become more graphically conscious, cartoons and comics fit in very naturally.
3. Universality. Art using humorous and/or sequential formats can be found throughout the world and has existed for millennia.
4. Indigenousness. Because much of the comic art came from within the folk cultures of individual countries, it belongs to the people, using their languages, mannerisms, and aesthetic forms.
5. Adaptability. In addition to being adaptable to different techniques and folk and popular forms, comic art can be used in all types of media—e.g., newspaper funnies, illustrations, and political cartoons; Internet platforms; television and film animated and live-action shows; magazine gags, and comic books and magazines.
6. Flexibility. The medium can be shaped according to audiences, uses, and formats. Unlike most film and broadcast media, cartoons can make sense with or without words; they can be static or action-packed, serialized or one-panel presentations.
7. Popularity. Worldwide, comic art is popular, attributable to factors such as their ease of reading, interesting plots, and enduring characters.
8. Inexpensiveness. In one form or another, comics and cartoons are inexpensive and easily obtainable. They either come with other media for which the consumer has already paid—newspapers, magazines, Internet, or television—or they are issued in relatively-inexpensive comic books or magazines. Formerly, to make them even more accessible, comic books were issued on different qualities of paper, the newsprint version for lower-income purchasers (e.g. in Bangladesh), or priced according to the average incomes in

other countries (e.g. *Mâjid*, the pan-Arab comic magazine published in United Arab Emirates). Though not as prevalent as a generation ago, comics still can be rented at reasonable prices in rental shops and kiosks.

Much has been said and written about the cultural pluses and minuses of comic art in the short lifetime of its scholarship. The comments range from the negative vibes of the latter 1940s and 1950s, when comic books were seen as the scourge of children, accused of emphasizing violent content and using substandard English; to the restorative attempts of the 1960s (especially in the United States) to convert superheroes into characters with massive power but also with human physiological and psychological frailties that needed solving; to the cultural/media imperialism concepts generated in the 1970s, claiming that United States media (including comics) dominated countries of the South, bringing in harmful, alien values; supporting a one-way flow of information from the Western world, and taking up time and space that should be allotted to indigenous media.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the cultural implications of comics in many parts of the world related to disparate notions such as globalization, corporatism, and social consciousness raising. Critics of cultural imperialism contended that with modern technology, the world was becoming the “global village” Marshall McLuhan had predicted many years before, that globalization (later, supplanted by glocalization) held sway, stretching markets worldwide, cross-pollinating media and culture, and re-dividing the international labor pool. The move to globalization did see a slight increase in the two-way flow of goods and cultural thoughts and products. In the comics realm, for instance, Americans were becoming familiar with and liking Japanese manga and anime, and to a much lesser extent, Korean *manhwa* and a few Latin American comics. But, for the most part, the business transactions continued to favor comics corporations of the United States and Western Europe, which benefitted immensely from offshore production of animation and comics, because of the less-expensive and strike-free labor existing in Asia and Africa. Actually, these arrangements began as early as the 1960s and continue today, with about 90 percent of United States animation produced offshore, and with large contingents of the Marvel, DC, Disney, and other Western comics companies’ artistic labor pools residing outside the United States.

The latter part of the twentieth century also witnessed a hefty spike in corporatism related to comic art. Multi-faceted, multi-national conglomerates, such as Disney, Time Warner, Bertelsmann, Viacom, Bonnier, Egmont, Holtzbrinck, DC

Thomson, Shueisha, Kadokawa, Kodansha, Shogakukan, and Televisa, increasingly bought up and/or merged with smaller publishers, in some cases, helping marginal companies survive; more often, hindering free enterprise and homogenizing comics contents and styles.

The third cultural phenomenon related to comic art in the 1980s and 1990s, was the augmented use of the comics for social consciousness raising purposes. Especially in South Africa with its Storyteller Group, but also throughout the rest of the continent, and in India, through other NGO-supported organizations and government agencies, campaigns primarily using comics were initiated to bring awareness to villagers about HIV-AIDS, sanitation, nutrition, the girl child, gender and racial issues, and education. Such usage of comics for instruction about these and other problems date to at least the 1960s, in the Philippines, with a plethora of *komiks* advocating family planning, and persist until today, one of many examples being the Chilean cartoon magazine *Clitoris* that deals exclusively with the rights and welfare of women.

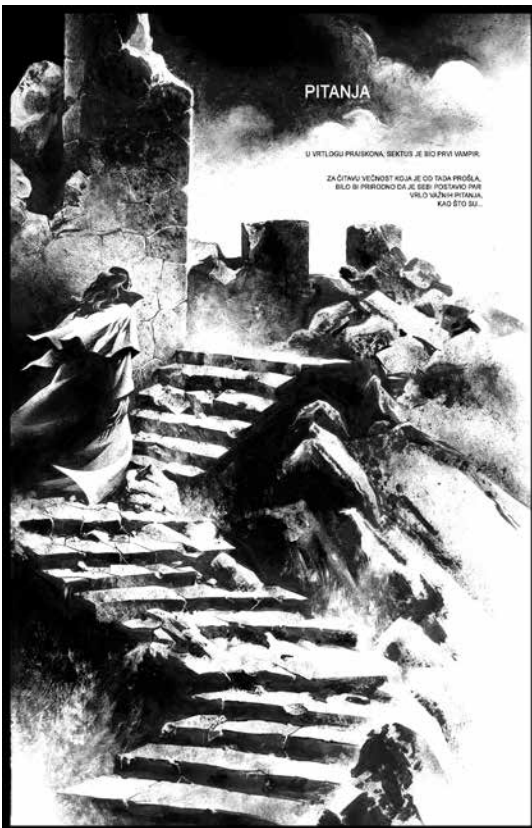
What we have seen emerge in the new century is very encouraging. Though corporatism (often corrupted) has become rampant in a number of quarters, it has not deterred the enthusiasm of individual and small clusters of cartoonists bent on preserving or reigniting comics cultures. Small comics collectives and publishers make and otherwise advance comics in at least Lebanon, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Australia, India, Indonesia, Peru, Philippines, Singapore, and South Korea. They have been responsible for making possible the networking of cartoonists, aided greatly by the Internet; rebirthing comics in some instances through new formats (graphic novels, digital comics), different genres (more adult, more localized), and relatively new readers (particularly, women); fitting comics and cartoons more snugly into their countries' respectable cultural institutions—museums and libraries (in some countries, such as China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Taiwan, all over Europe, and Cuba, among others, such institutions exist strictly to house comics), and schools and universities as research and educational resources, and further upgrading the comic art profession through well-organized training schemes, sophisticated academic programs (including at the graduate level), cartoonist associations, awards, exhibitions, comic cons, and other events.

In recent times, the question is raised: *Will comics survive?* It is the same concern expressed by radio enthusiasts when television became popular and later by television viewers with the advent of the Internet. The comics more than likely will survive, and as

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with radio and television, will take new forms in line with the axiom that each medium is an extension of a previous one. This has already begun.

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Синиша Радовић, *Питања*, перо и туш, 2005.