

Preface

The welcome attention paid to Quebec in this issue of *European Comic Art* immediately points to a cluster of intellectual questions concerning identity, territory and academic discipline(s). What need was there for grouping a corpus, and analysis of it, according to this category, and what meanings are implied in that selection? And what problems are evoked by the adjective 'European'? These are familiar questions for all those Quebec specialists working in French ('and Francophone' Studies), as well as, in my case, Film Studies. On the one hand, Quebec culture in all its forms of expression possesses a relevance and richness, due to historical and spatial factors I shall outline below, but is largely off the radar of the disciplines and sub-disciplines it could enrich. This is no more true than in French Studies, where it is difficult, but also necessary, topical (witness the continuing debate, five years after the manifesto, around *littérature-monde*) and urgent, to challenge the hierarchy implied in the centre and periphery generated by '(and) Francophone'. The challenge is to place Quebec in an endlessly comparative relationship with other French-speaking cultures, with other Atlantic spaces etc. in order to break down the barriers implied in an often ghettoised 'specialisation'. Here *bande dessinée* scholarship has an interesting advantage, in that, despite the phenomenal cultural weight of the art form within metropolitan French life, a decidedly non-metropolitan space, i.e. Belgium, offers a central position. The opportunity is there to emphasise lateral connections that bypass as well as include metropolitan France, hence the work here on Tintin in Quebec. To an extent, *bande dessinée monde*, to coin a phrase, is already a reality.

Quebec can be delineated as a territory, and as a nation (now officially recognised as such – 'within Canada' by the Stephen Harper Federal Conservative government): that is to say its imagined community proposes the continuity of a national narrative conveyed through the education system and mass media. One unavoidable component of this narrative, challenged for its simplification by historians but very resilient in the culture at large, is that of the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s 'founding' a new, secular, outward-looking and technocratic Quebec after 150 years during which a prevailing clerical nationalism dominated by rural worthies and the Catholic Church reigned. As elsewhere, that narrative is ceaselessly contested and has to be ceaselessly elaborated, hence for example the recent (2007-8) Bouchard-Taylor Commission on 'reasonable accommodations' which sought consensus on the balance between the now almost wholly secular reality of Quebec society with its charter of rights and freedoms, and the important presence of Moslem and other belief minorities

whose traditions needed to be reconciled. However, the unique characteristic of Quebec, and of the narratives of 'French-Canadianness' on which it draws, is that it is many things at once. It is a territory but also a diaspora, if we take into account the million Francophones living elsewhere in Canada, the role of French speakers in opening up the North American continent to European settlement, and mass emigration to the United States in the nineteenth century. It is 'European' (in its French language and British political culture) but equally 'American' (in its shaping by the landscape and by the cultural encounters made by the French on the 'new' continent, and in of course its adjacency with the USA; the current prominence of the huge hydro-electric and other industrial developments in the *Grand Nord* sub-Arctic project is another example). It is both coloniser and colonised (the characteristic it shares with the Afrikaners is that of one white settler population conquered by another European empire), historically often eager to differentiate itself from the native population, but involved in all kinds of creolised mixity nonetheless. The Franco-Québécois are both a majority in their province (82%) and a minority in Canada (24%), defenders of the French language thanks to the nationalist government's 1977 Bill 101 on commercial street signs and imposition of French language school for immigrants, but living, at least on the streets of the metropole Montreal (67% francophone), bracing circuits of translation in the juxtaposition of, and dialogue with, its Anglophone and other language ('Allophone') minorities.

The great secret of the French-Canadians/Québécois is that by the time of the Conquest of 1759-63 they were not or no longer French, and there was no 'major' identity that was lost here. Jocelyn Létourneau is one of the leading contemporary Quebec intellectuals to articulate this minor, 'in-between', even creolised reality of French-Canadian then Quebec culture, a reality characterised by alliances rather than with filiation vis-à-vis France:

Ni désireux d'assimiler totalement leur devenir à celui de l'Amérique ni soucieux de rompre complètement avec leurs attaches françaises, mais se déployant allègrement dans le lacis des deux continentalités; refusant tout à la fois la perspective de l'autochtonisation (cesser d'être Européen en Amérique) et celle de la reproduction à l'identique (rester Européen en Amérique), mais (re)composant leur stock de références dans l'entrecroisement des deux civilisations, les Canadiens, avec le temps, se créent graduellement une identité.¹

In this way, therefore, Quebec is a particularly revealing example of those complexities and contradictions shared by all nations and even perhaps identities. On the one hand, there are centripetal forces which would pull identity into a solid, unassailable core; on the other, there are always centrifugal forces which would scatter and disperse these. In my writing on film, I spoke of a ‘national-allegorical tension’ at work in cinematic narratives in which the text allegorises not national ‘identity’ as such, but the web of forces that simultaneously assert and call into question that plenitude.

This tension plays itself out in various ways of course, and it would be interesting to see to what extent *BD* production expresses it in terms I used for cinema, such as recognition (shared visual codes), space (that of geography, country, city, region, borders, but also that of the film or *BD* frame) and time (its different versions, from progressive to monumental, cyclical, dissonant, return of difference, etc.). I have found particularly useful certain Deleuzian terms such as deterritorialization/reterritorialization, line of flight, alliance rather than filiation, in my exploration of these. Létourneau’s analysis continues with a Deleuzian flourish:

En fait, la Nouvelle-France n’est pas un lieu où l’univocité de l’agir et du dessein prend racine. La société qui s’élève – appelons-la canadienne – se situe au contraire comme dans une ligne de fuite par rapport à elle-même, ce qu’expriment bien les couples sédentarité/nomadisme, francité/américanité et tradition/envie d’altérité qui la définissent fondamentalement.

The one element I shall emphasise here, for it provokes useful questions to ask of other cultural production, is that of major/minor, closely linked to Oedipal (‘filiation’) or anti-Oedipal (‘alliance’) concepts of gender and sexuality. In Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975) but also *Mille plateaux* (1980, where Quebec is specifically discussed), the position of ‘minor culture’ is seen as refusing and questioning fixity and positions of mastery (associated with ‘major’). Quebec French is minor in relationship to the vast North American anglophone majority, but also in relation to standard French. Individual utterances always imply collective assemblages or *agencements*, and ‘minor’ or ‘major’

attitudes can be adopted toward any language or culture. Quebec French, for example, can fall back on Oedipal and masculinised reterritorialisations, but it can also undermine the ‘major’ culture’s pretensions to the natural, normal and universal. It is therefore particularly revealing to analyse the ways in which nation, gender and sexuality come to be narrativised and symbolised, an issue which is no doubt as relevant for *bande dessinée* as it is for cinema and the other arts.

Finally, *BD* scholars may be interested in a curio. While there have been adaptations in Quebec cinema of pulp fiction (*IXE-13*, dir. Jacques Godbout, 1973), the only crossover with *BD* of which I am aware is a feature film by the much respected *auteur* Jean Pierre Lefebvre, who in 1991 was given a larger budget than for his usual intimist dramas and produced a critical and box office calamity, *Le Fabuleux Voyage de l’ange*. Here the singer Daniel Lavoie plays a *BD* artist and part-time taxi driver who, short of inspiration, composes an album based on his real-life (and problematic) relations with his girlfriend and teenage daughter, transposed to a science fiction realm. In turn, the daughter gets hold of the unpublished text and attempts to live out its narrative via a fantasy journey down the St Lawrence. Once the film becomes available again it may, beyond its rather simplistic investment in the ‘imagination’ and its capacity to reinvigorate the ‘real’, make an intriguing addition to work on the mutual comparison of cinematic and *BD* framing and story telling.

¹ J.Létourneau, *Que veulent vraiment les Québécois? Regard sur l’intention nationale au Québec (français) d’hier à aujourd’hui* (Montreal: Boréal, 2006), p. 24.