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# Comic Strip Studies as a Comprehensive Cultural-Historical Insight and Model for the Future



Stefanović, Zoran; Topolovački, Vladimir (bibliographer) (2023): *Liberty! Equality! Comic! Serbian-French Relations in the Art of Visual Storytelling*. Belgrade: Institute for Cultural Development Research. Expanded edition of the book: Stefanović, Zoran; Topolovački, Vladimir (bibliographe) (2022): *Liberté! Égalité! Bande dessinée!: Les relations serbo-françaises dans l'art de la narration visuelle*. Belgrade: Institut pour l'étude du développement culturel.  
Cover illustration: Aleksa Gajić.

The famous slogan of the French Revolution *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, which is also the principle of the French Republic, in the title of the book *Liberty! Equality! Comic!*, confirms its associative appeal. On the one hand, it evokes France, but on the other,

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it replaces fraternity by elevating the comics and graphic novels to the status of one of the highest values. The subtitle of this precious publication, *Serbian-French Relations in the Art of Visual Storytelling*, more precisely points to the broader framework in which, alongside the comics, other closely related forms of visual storytelling also appear. Book was published by the The Institute for Cultural Development Research in Belgrade, with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia. It was authored by the versatile Zoran Stefanović, a historian and theorist of culture, visual storytelling expert, founder of the Project Rastko digital library, and playwright, alongside bibliographer Vladimir Topolovački. The first edition of this publication in French, *Liberté! Égalité! Bande dessinée: les relations serbo-françaises dans l'art de la narration visuelle* (2022), was presented at the Serbian Cultural Centre in Paris in 2022. Compared to the French edition, the Serbian edition is expanded both in text and bibliography. The Serbian edition was presented at the Gallery of the Institute for Cultural Development Research in Belgrade on March 31, 2023, as part of the four-day event "Literature and Comics". The book contains a touching dedication: Dedication to the heroes of the great adventure – I dedicate this book to the memory of the main heroes of this story, my noble teachers: Đorđe Lobačev (1909-2002), Srećko Jovanović (1930-2008), Žika Bogdanović (1932-2021), and Zdravko Zupan (1950-2015), as well as to the memory of the equally noble Snežana Zupan (1957-2023).

The extensive monographic study by Zoran Stefanović is written clearly, engagingly, and dynamically, with comprehensive cultural-historical insights, as well as a deep dive into details and

the uncovering of some lesser-known facts. In addition to the study, at the end of each section, the book also includes a selection of illustrative references with cover illustrations or graphic novel panels that allow the reader to indulge in the enjoyment of the masterful pictorial language. The thoroughly compiled bibliography by Zoran Stefanović serves as a foundation for future research and attests to numerous authors who have written about comic strips and cultural connections. Stefanović compiled the comics and graphic novels bibliography of Serbian and Yugoslav comics in France, while the bibliography of French comics in Serbia was authored by Stefanović and Vladimir Topolovački.

The study of cultural and historical ties between two nations, in broader or narrower contexts, requires knowledge not only of the two cultures but also of the wider cultures connected to them. French-Serbian cultural relations have strengthened and weakened in waves. Their golden age undoubtedly spans the decades around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when French cultural influence easily and fruitfully spread throughout Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania. France's support for Serbia in World War I made these ties even stronger in political, cultural, and social aspects. The author of the monograph systematically emphasizes the social circumstances in various types of transmedia storytelling throughout the text. The book uncovers bidirectional connections, and its uniqueness lies in revealing to the French the hidden presence of Serbian comics authors and the contributions of Balkan comics to French culture. In the introductory section, the author uses the metaphor of "underground rivers" for this purpose.

By mentioning the names of comics in the leading comic cultures of the world, it is pointed out that Dušan Duda Timotijević coined the term “strip”, shortened from the English “comic strip”, with a shared Indo-European root with Slavic languages, which is reflected in Serbian *strizati/strići*, and Proto-Slavic *strigti* “to strip, to cut out”.

In the first chapter, “The History of Serbian Comics: From the European Genome to National Treasure”, it is pointed out that the image as storytelling has had a long duration, even dating back to Palaeolithic drawings in Mediterranean Europe. The phenomenon of Serbian-Byzantine frescoes from the 12th to the 15th century is presented as the era of proto-comics. The author has proposed a culturally and historically conceived periodization of Serbian comics, i.e., a periodization embedded in the main cultural-historical currents, along with the factors that comics creators have incorporated into it with their talents and ideas, enriching the creativity of their era. Zoran Stefanović opted for figurative names of epochs that recall Hesiod’s titles in the *Theogony*, and the idea of how the original world of the Golden Age deteriorates from the Silver to the Bronze and Iron Ages. However, Stefanović’s periodization does not adhere to any preconceived idea. Although he implemented the idea very successfully, surprisingly, the author never emphasized that the proposal for the periodization is his own work. The Platinum Age (1880–1934) was marked by Jovan Jovanović Zmaj, painter Josif Danilovac, Branislav Cvetković, “marked by a genius trait” Stanislav Vinaver, and, in transition, editor Dušan Timotijević, whose light strokes of drawn portraits are complemented by praises of their contribution to the distinguished beginnings of visual

storytelling in Serbian culture. The Golden Age (1930–1941) represents an era of great illustrators and scriptwriters, a time of significant intertwining of American influences and the presence of Dashiell Hammett and illustrator Alex Raymond in the *Politika* paper, as well as Eastern Slavic influences with indigenous contributions from scriptwriter Branko Vidić, and illustrators Đorđe Lobačev (Yuri Pavlovich Lobachev), Vlasta Belkić, Đuka Janković, Momčilo Moma Marković, and others. The Dark Age of Serbian Comics (1941–1951) encompasses the war years of Nazism, during which the partisan comic and the activities of Sergey Solovyov are mentioned, as well as the years of communist repression, during which it was believed that comics were reactionary and anti-Marxist. The Silver Age (1952–1970) consists of the return of Disney and the West, the revival of *Politikin Zabavnik* (1952), and a series of magazines such as *Dečje novine*, *Veseli zabavnik*, *Kekec*, *Plavi vjesnik* in Zagreb, and *Mali jež*. The Bronze Age (1971–1990) is made up of comics from the significant publisher called Dečje novine, and the first works of the highly influential Enki Bilal, who achieved great success in France. It was also a period of flourishing comic studies in the major cities of the former Yugoslavia, with particular emphasis on the work of Žika Bogdanović as an editor, theorist, translator, and publisher, as well as the importance of the humorous Serbian comic “Svemironi” by Lazar Stanojević, and the theoretical journal “Kultura”, which was edited by Ranko Munitić in 1975. The work of several comic artist groups in various cities is highlighted, as well as the significance of the Yugoslav comic exhibition organized at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1986. Zoran Stefanović places the Iron Age (1991–2010) in

the years of wars and wild transition and highlights many activities in which, alongside Zdravko Zupan, he himself participated with Serbian and foreign comic artists. It is emphasized that the French pan-European award received by Goran Skrobonja, Vladimir Vesović, and Dražen Kovačević for the series "Točak" served as an impetus for further promotion of Serbian comics in France, as well as the success of the first Serbian feature-length animated film, *Technotise: Edit i ja* by Aleksa Gajić. The Silicon Age (after 2011) was marked by a series of Serbian editions on the global level and the first comic lexicon in Eastern Europe, *Comics We Loved*. Comic festivals in Serbia and in countries on the territory of former Yugoslavia testify to the success of the comic scene and the persistence of comic authors and publishers.

The second chapter, "The Engagement Lasted Long: Serbs in French Comics, French in Serbian", highlights the significant contributions of Serbian authors to the renowned French comic scene. It illuminates the artistic paths and intersections of Đorđe Lobačev's work in the 1930s, the mediating influences of various European cultures, and emphasizes that Yugoslav comics were under the decisive influence of the French scene. In the 21st century, according to the author, a merger of the French and Serbian comic scenes occurred, confirmed by the large number of Serbs and other Yugoslavs in French comics. In the main stream of French comics, Enki Bilal, a major creator of European culture, is joined by significant works of Igor Kordej, Zoran Janjetov, Rajko Milošević ("Guéra"), Vladimir Krstić ("Laci"), Gradimir Smuđa, and Dražen Kovačević. The cultural role and work of Zoran Tucić, an architect-conservator, who was the

author of the comic "The Third Argument" based on the prose of Milorad Pavić and the first president of the revived Association of Comic Artists of Serbia, are also highlighted.

The third chapter, "Case Study: Nightmares of the European Avant-Garde – the Comic Novel 'Vampire' and the Essay 'Genesis of Art' by Miroslav Feller", presents in detail the unusual short comic novel by Zagreb native Miroslav Feller, which was first published in the Belgrade magazine "Svedočanstva" in 1925, under the theme "Records from the House of Darkness (The Creation of Madness)". Thanks to the French translation by Monny de Bouilly, a Belgrade Jew and Serbian avant-garde artist, this work was published in the surrealist journal "La Révolution surréaliste". The author raises a series of provocative questions about the connections of this work with the "paper film", avant-garde films, and the influence of this comic novel about incest and subsequent patricide in the conflict between the Zenitists and Surrealists over the understanding of reality and ideology.

A huge propensity of Serbian comic authors toward French comics and their two-way connections in the past incite one to consider their personal and collective influences. Artists as individuals certainly find their own way to personal role models and partners in French, American, and Italian comic world alike. A study by Zoran Stefanović answers how France came to possessing such an important place. Personal connections are and will continue to be important, but the French never assumed a superior colonialist or manipulative stance in their relations with others, and so, that was an opportunity to look at the possible development of mutual cultural ties without the burden of the past.

The book *Freedom! Equality! Comic! Serbian-French relations in the art of visual storytelling* represents a significant cumulative image of past relations of artists from the two cultures that were very fruitful, with incentives for additions of new facts and interpretations in further advancements of knowledge about transmedia storytelling. It contains questions directed both towards the future and uncertain paths in the search for new civilizational models. It is about opening questions concerning the future of humanity in a world of technology,

which increasingly casts a shadow and threatens to limit its creator, as well as questions of values in the future world. Given the dual French-Serbian perspective, the book raises issues not only related to the further cooperation of Serbian comic authors with French publishers, who have immense reputation, success, and circulation in the global market, but also provides a new research and production methodology across all other bilateral fields of culture.

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