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(Ultra)Minor Comics? Opening Up the History of (Post-)Yugoslav and Bulgarian Comics to Outsiders

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### Author

De Dobbeleer, Michel

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**Title:** (Ultra)Minor Comics? Opening Up the History of (Post-)Yugoslav and Bulgarian Comics to Outsiders

**Author:** Michel De Dobbeleer

**Affiliation:** Ghent University

**Abstract:** The last decade saw the publication of more and more monographs (partially) devoted to the history of comics (and/or graphic novels) in smaller or larger geographical/cultural areas around our globe. In this article I first focus on what – if anything – (the relevant chapters in) several of these books tell their readers about the history of comics in the former Republic of Yugoslavia and its successor states, and in Bulgaria, the other Slavic country on the Balkan Peninsula. In doing so, I discuss a ('Cold War') misperception about East European comics. In the second part, I probe the usefulness of extending the application range of the terms 'minor [literatures]' and 'ultraminor [literatures]' to the field of comics. After that I put forward some suggestions on how future contributions – scholarly and other – to the cultural transmission or opening up of the history of (post-)Yugoslav and Bulgarian comics, as well as those of countries/nations/language areas with comparable traditions, could look like.

**Word count:** 9,854

## **(Searching for) Eastern Europe in Recent Comics Histories**

Six years ago, Boston-based Dan Mazur and Alexander Danner's *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to the Present* (2014) was hailed as one of the first overview monographs, albeit only from 1968 onwards, that treated comics as a global phenomenon *without* splitting up the attention in a country-by-country style. As comics historian Pascal Lefèvre put it in his review of the book: "Most historical overviews focused on one country (or even one region of a country),<sup>1</sup> one genre, one publication format, one author, one publisher ... If they tried to give an international overview [...], they just dedicated a chapter to each country (written by a specialist of a particular national production) without trying to interrelate the various texts" (2014, 86).

Like so-called world histories of art can quite easily jump from, say, the Flemish Primitives to the later Italian Renaissance painters, Mazur and Danner's comprehensive global perspective allowed them to jump from the US to Japan or Europe and back as often as they wanted. In an interview answer on a question about influences, shortly after the publication of their 319-page book, Dan Mazur refers to a (now somewhat notorious)<sup>2</sup> classic of art history writing:

DM: For me, the model was probably art history surveys like H. W. Janson's *History of Art*. More broadly, I have at various times read extensively on art and film history as well as comics history. I felt [...] that there are national or regional "schools" in every art form, but that movements and influences cross borders, oceans, language barriers as well.

I can't imagine being a serious film watcher and not being versed in French New Wave, in the films of Kurosawa, Ozu, etc. [...] Or to be unaware of the influence of Hong Kong cinema on Tarantino, or of French New Wave on British "kitchen sink" cinema of the early '60s, German expressionist film on film *noir*. So it just seemed the pleasure of comics appreciation and scholarship was limited by the lack of this approach in books about comics, which, in English, offer so little about European, Asian, or other cultures' comics. (Moura 2014, online)

Mazur's comparison with art histories on the one hand, and film histories on the other, is interesting also for other reasons than those explicitly dwelled upon in his answer. While in the traditional visual arts, language

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<sup>1</sup> Given the fact that Lefèvre is a Belgian, he probably refers to the situation in his complex country, where there is a Flemish (Dutch-language) and a Walloon (Francophone) comics tradition and scene. There are indeed 'Belgian' histories that almost exclusively deal with one of these two traditions, such as Derscheid and Pasamonik 2009 (on the Francophone one).

<sup>2</sup> For the woman-unfriendliness of Janson's 1962 *History of Art*, see Sears and Schoell-Glass (2013, 220).

differences normally do *not* play a decisive role – although of course *visual* languages can differ from region to region –, in film history, the (main) language of a film is often a key parameter in the composition of a film historian's corpus. If comics history was only about the evolution of *visual* language, the art historian's approach could be adopted much more easily – or, in fact, comics history could then just be included in art histories. But apart from silent comics, comics always come with a language, and this language 'sticks' to the image in another way than in films. Whereas in films spoken language (I make abstraction here of written language, such as on placards, and – on another level – of subtitles) is not visible, in non-silent comics it always is. Dubbing is another question, but at least subtitling of films may be considered 'easier' than translating, – and re-lettering a comic book or graphic novel (and getting the result published). As is the case with dubbing – not with subtitling –, translating comics so to say 'deletes' much if not all of the original language. All this contributes to the fact that writing comics history beyond language barriers is generally more complex than writing (traditional) art and even film history beyond (certain) language barriers. And this can also explain why Mazur and Danner virtually limited themselves in their monograph to the comics of three (albeit big) language traditions: the English, French, and Japanese.

Yet, regarding their defensible switching attention between comics in four essential centres: the United States, the United Kingdom (often treated together), 'Franco-Belgian' Europe, and Japan, chronologically structured into three parts ('Part One: 1968-1978', 'Part Two: 1978-1990', and 'Part Three: 1990 Onward'), one can always ask whether comics from more peripheral regions could not have been dealt with a little more.<sup>3</sup> Mazur and Danner's own answer to this question seems affirmative, for they admit, in the final sentences of their 'Preface': "we know that this is by no means the whole story: Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, China, India, the Philippines, Mexico, Australia and many other regions have comics traditions that are well worth exploring. We look forward to the great comics of every part of the world being incorporated into the broader global framework we hope this book helps to support and to strengthen" (2014, 9).

"Eastern Europe" (cf. *infra*) is mentioned explicitly in their enumeration, and thus it does not surprise that we read nothing about the comics traditions of Bulgaria or former Yugoslavia in *Comics: A Global History*, not even in the paragraph 'Similar Ventures Across the [European] Continent' (2014, 257-265), where Eastern Europe remains totally absent. I will not blame the authors here for having not touched upon East European comics, but it may be regretted that in their treatment of Enki Bilal (134-135) they did not point to the East European roots, now and then manifest in his themes, of this Belgrade-born 'Franco-Belgian' artist. If only very modest, this could have been a beginning step towards the 'cultural

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<sup>3</sup> Comics in other languages *get* some attention, especially those in Italian and Spanish, as well as – to a lesser degree – those in German and Korean.

transmission' (cf. *infra*) or incorporation "into the broader global framework", as they put it in the quotation above, of (post-)Yugoslav or other East European comics.

Whereas the 'global(izing)' structure of Mazur and Danner's monograph apparently did not allow them to dwell upon comics from Eastern Europe, the approach in the three years younger *The Routledge Companion to Comics* (Bramlett, Cook, and Meskin 2017) is, expectedly, different. For convenience, its opening part, 'History and Traditions' (2017, 7-115),<sup>4</sup> can be considered a multi-authored comics history on its own. Taken together, the first four chapters (1. 'Origins of Early Comics and Proto-Comics', 2. 'Newspaper Strips', 3. 'The Comics Code', and 4. 'Underground and Alternative Comics') could be regarded as partially chronological, partially general theme-based comics historiography (with chapter 3 understandably and chapter 4 somewhat surprisingly focusing on the US). The last eight chapters, then, all concentrate on comics produced in a well-defined – in several cases huge – geographical area: 5. 'British Comics', 6. 'French and Belgian Comics', 7. 'Canadian Comics: A Brief History', 8. 'Comics in Latin America', 9. 'A Brief History of Comics in Italy and Spain', 10. 'Comics in India', 11. 'Eastern/Central European Comics', and 12. 'East Asian Comix: Intermingling Japanese *Manga* and Euro-American Comics'. What could strike one here, apart from the somewhat asymmetrical titles, is the absence of a chapter on American (US) comics, but as I partly indicated: the first four chapters already deal with them to a great extent. Instead of discussing here whether or why other parts of the world – Africa, the Middle East, the German-speaking world, Scandinavia ... – would have deserved a chapter too, I will limit myself to the welcome – especially in the light of the title of this article – presence of a chapter (the shortest of the *Companion's* region-focused chapters) on "Eastern/Central European" comics, by José Alaniz (2017, 98-105), an American Slavist well-known in the comics field for, among others, his monograph on Russian comics (2010; cf. *infra*).

For the question of defining Eastern Europe is relevant (although often thorny) in almost all scholarly publications about the vast area east of the current Finnish-, German-, and Italian-speaking parts of Europe, I quote Alaniz's pertinent second paragraph in full:

In short, the vagaries of history have kept the very definition of the region discussed in this entry debatable – to put it mildly. Less open to conjecture: the notion – demonstrably wrong – that the countries of Eastern Europe (as I will call it here, and including Yugoslavia, the former Soviet bloc, and the "European" portion of the former USSR) have historically had no comics cultures, or at any rate underdeveloped ones. A series of repressive regimes, cultural and

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<sup>4</sup> The other three parts being 'Part II: Comics Genres', 'Part III: Issues and Concepts', and 'Part IV: Other Media and Other Disciplines'.

political backwardness vis-à-vis the West, and in the twentieth century the malign influence of communism have been trotted out as rationales for that misperception. (Alaniz 2017, 98)

Since the notion of Central Europe normally does not include the parts of the former USSR that belonged to Europe on the one hand, and often not the Balkan countries on the other, it is strange that the word *Central* has ended up in Alaniz's chapter title, all the more since Central Europe – especially when conceived as the translation of the German term *Mitteleuropa* (mentioned in the opening sentence of Alaniz's article) – can also include the German-speaking 'middle' part of the continent. Therefore, because Alaniz does not deal with German-language comics, and because he touches upon the Soviet and Yugoslav traditions, it makes indeed more sense to speak about Eastern Europe than about Eastern/Central Europe. On the other hand, since many Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Slovenes and Croats, for historically understandable reasons do not like to be called *East Europeans*, I realize that this may be why *Central* was included in Alaniz's title (and last paragraph; cf. infra). As for the – geographically also East European – Greeks: their comics (just like those of *semi-European* Turkey; cf. Benice 2018) are *not* included in Alaniz's overview chapter, for the obvious fact, I suppose, that during the Cold War Greece and Turkey did not belong to, but were capitalist neighbours of the Eastern Bloc countries. In that respect, it deserves to be mentioned that a thematic issue (#11, June 2011) of the Polish *Zeszyty Komiksowe* (*Comics Notebooks*) on “Komiks w Europie środkowo-wschodniej”, as the issue title (literally translated: “Comics in Central-Eastern Europe”) reads, devotes a chapter to comics in Greece.<sup>5</sup>

### **'East European equals Communism' As a Cold War Legacy**

How then to treat, or even just open up, the history of East European comics, which as we saw (cf. note 5), appear in about twenty countries? Alaniz must have asked himself this question, and the search for potential answers to it is one of the aims of this article. Do these many 'national' comics traditions share one essential, exclusive characteristic? Or is it better, maybe, to treat them in specific *subgroups*?

Evidently, in the narrow space of a companion chapter there cannot be a lot of information about particular comics traditions. Alaniz has chosen to start with a general intro on the origins of the medium in the area, and the difficulties it faced due to totalitarian regimes and, decades later, in the context of the challenges of the post-communist transition to market

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<sup>5</sup> Moula 2011. The other (all of them also short) country-specific chapters deal with comics from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Russia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and [now North-] Macedonia. Present-day East European countries *missing* in this list are Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, and the partially recognized Kosovo. Poland is not included either, because the Polish magazine wanted to devote this issue to East (and 'Central', cf.; supra) European comics *from abroad*.

economy. After that he focuses on Czech(oslovakian) and Ukrainian comics (2017, 100-104), since these two – to quote his conclusion of the chapter – “testify to the variety of productions, attitudes, commercial opportunities, and talents in the region. In sum, the comics cultures of Eastern/Central Europe provide many fascinating opportunities for further study. They deserve greater attention from scholars” (2017, 104).

To concentrate, in comparison, on the two ‘traditions’ in the title of the present article: Bulgaria is not even mentioned whereas from former Yugoslavia only the history of Serbian comics gets proportionally reasonable attention, from its Golden Age, launched in the 1930s by the ‘Belgrade Circle’, a group of Russian artists who had fled the Soviet regime, until its flourishing around the turn of the millennium with famous artists as the Serb Aleksandar Zograf. About Croatia and Slovenia we merely read that comics scenes there, too, have recently thrived; and also *Stripburger* is mentioned, a Slovenia-based anthology of alternative comics from the region (Alaniz 2017, 99-100). That the flourishing nowadays in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia “owes much to the acceptance and devotion to the art form decades earlier” (Alaniz 2017, 99) suggests that the ‘Tito-Stalin split’, from 1948 onwards, not only had political and economic, but also ‘comics-related’ consequences, the medium being less maligned in Yugoslavia than elsewhere in the Eastern Bloc.

Definitely, this shared Yugoslav past is a rewarding means to group Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Serbian, Slovenian, and Macedonian (and Kosovar)<sup>6</sup> comics. Moreover, the former four all make use of the pluricentric language formerly/still known as ‘Serbo-Croatian’ and currently (in Academia) as Bosnian-Croatian-(Montenegrin-)Serbian; or BC(M)S.<sup>7</sup> As for such (sub)grouping, a mutually intelligible language is also what connects the comics traditions discussed in the above-mentioned chapter *Comics in Latin America*.<sup>8</sup>

The commonality *par excellence*, however, by which the East European countries/nations are taken together in histories or overviews of their comics production is their *communist* heritage. For indeed, how particular their individual twentieth-century fates may have been, the above-mentioned (see esp. note 5) countries comprised under the not unproblematic term *Eastern Europe* –except for Greece and Turkey— all

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<sup>6</sup> See Salihu (2019) for a recent online piece about comics in Kosovo and their relation to the Yugoslav past.

<sup>7</sup> For recent evolutions in the post-Yugoslav language situation, and the stability of Macedonian vis-à-vis Bulgarian (by many considered to be the same language), see Voß 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Focusing on comics from Mexico, Argentina and Cuba, author Ana Merino (2017) only talks about Spanish-language traditions, thus leaving aside, a.o., the Lusophone Brazilian tradition. The only other chapter in the *Companion's* ‘Part I: History and Traditions’ concentrating on a huge, ‘multinational’ area, ‘East Asian Comix: Intermingling Japanese *Manga* and Euro-American Comics’ unites the geographical entities in question (apart from Japan, also “Thailand, South Korea, China, Hong Kong, and the Philippines”; Kern 2017, 107) by departing from one, the so-called ‘manga’ style.

share a past under communist rule, somewhere between 1917 and 1992. More than it is the case in histories of the literatures of the diverse region (cf. Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, 2004-2010), these shared decades behind the Iron Curtain constitute a connecting factor in comics histories, the present-day 'naturalness' of which could be considered a Cold War legacy.

Whereas the majority of the literatures from the eastern part of the European continent already *before* the arrival of communist rule had become fully-fledged or had even reached a peak, most famously in Russia, comics only became a clearly distinctive (mostly vilified) medium *during* or little before the communist period in the countries at stake.<sup>9</sup> This situation in point of fact makes the association of the very development of the medium in all these diverse nations with their communist (and 'thus' anti-American and 'thus' anti-comics) rule all the more understandable. The misperception put forward by Alaniz, and "trotted out" in terms of "the malign influence of communism" (cf. *supra*) is warned of in his chapter, but nevertheless this influence seems to remain the unavoidable link when grouping East European comics traditions.

I do not dispute at all that comics cultures all over Eastern Europe have been thwarted by the meddling of communist rulers. I only want to point to the side effects of the 'comics-historical practice' to group these more than twenty comics traditions *just because* of the communist phases in their respective developments. Together with the (relative) smallness of the languages they are created in, this communism-related history 'condemns' them to the status of minor or ultraminor comics traditions (cf. *infra*). As has been done in the histories of East European literatures<sup>10</sup>, *comics* histories of the region as well should be written from the perspective that communism was not an essential component, but rather an incidental (though indeed often dramatic and far-reaching) circumstance. And this is exactly what happened in two recent monographs on the comics history of two adjacent (former) East European countries: former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria.

### **Opening Up the History of (Post-)Yugoslav and Bulgarian Comics As Traditions on Their Own**

Živojin Tamburić (b. 1957), Zdravko Zupan (1950-2015), and Zoran Stefanović's (b. 1969) *Stripovi koje smo voleli: izbor stripova i stvaralaca sa prostora bivše Jugoslavije u XX veku / The Comics We Loved: Selection of 20th Century Comics and Creators from the Region of Former Yugoslavia* (2011) – the English title is the authors' (/editors') –, and Anton

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<sup>9</sup> It is true, there *were* pre-communist precursors in several East European traditions (e.g., the *lubok* or woodblock print in prerevolutionary Russia; Alaniz 2010, 16-26), but these were not (yet) considered comics.

<sup>10</sup> Notably in Cornis-Pope and Neubauer (2004-2010). On how the (Western reception of the) literature of the region, too, has been affected from its too one-sided association with its communist past, see Raabe 2009 (what she says about East-Central European literature applies to all East European literature).



Staykov's (b. 1962) *A Short History of Bulgarian Comics (Kratka istoriia na bulgarskiia komiks)* are two voluminous, brightly-coloured, carefully edited (almost coffee-table) books, published respectively in the capitals Belgrade (2011; 312 pp.) and Sofia (2013; 239 pp.).

As their long book title indicates, Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović rather wanted to be nostalgic (*The Comics We Loved*) than exhaustive (*Selection*). Nevertheless, the book still contains some four hundred 'entries' (all of one or a half page), each of them showing a scanned comics page of a particular twentieth-century (post-)Yugoslav work. Altogether, works of around two hundred (post-)Yugoslav comics artists are covered. "It was decided", the authors say in the 'Introduction', "that the 20th Century would be the time boundary of this selection because that century witnessed the full affirmation of comics as an art form" (2011, 10; their emphasis). Apart from (a) the scanned comics page, each entry contains (b) an information table with meticulous bibliographical details, and (c) some – mostly two or three – judgments/assessments by comics artists/scholars. Often Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović wrote these "microreviews" (2011, 10) themselves, specifically for this book. The entries have been ordered alphabetically by the name of the artist. Understandably, the language of the vast majority of the comics presented is Serbo-Croatian, now also called 'BC(M)S' (cf. supra). I could discern several works in Slovene (by Saša Dobrila, Kostja Gatnik, Tomaž Lavrič, Nikolaj 'Miki' Muster, Jelko Peternelj, and Iztok Sitar), a few in Macedonian (by Dime Ivanov ('Dimano'), Aleksandar Sotirovski, and Zoran Tanev), but none in Albanian (so as to represent Kosovar comics).<sup>11</sup> After the entries, three short sections follow: 'Distinguished creators' (Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović 2011, 263-267; with minibiographies of and/or comments on sixteen important artists), 'Distinguished magazines and comic books'<sup>12</sup> (269-273), and 'Distinguished writing about comics' (275-279). An extensive bibliography and index (281-307), a short summary, and a note about the three authors conclude the book. These three sections, together with the 'Foreword', by the well-known British editor of *1001 Comics You Must Read Before You Die*, Paul Gravett (2011; cf. infra), the 'Introduction', and the end matter are bilingual: in BCMS and English, whereas in each entry only the central comics title and the genre label are translated in English – as well as, rather needlessly, the BCMS word "scenario" as "script".

Several comments can be made on how the three authors introduce their book: "This book – despite all its limitations and its primary aim to be

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. note 6. Kosovo is left out in the enumeration of the successor states of Yugoslavia (Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović 2011, 309). Of Slovenes Marjan Amalietti and Iztok Šušteršič, and of Macedonians Ljubomir Filipovski and Marjan Kamilovski, the book contains scanned comics pages in BCMS. Of Macedonian Igor Toševski we see a wordless erotic comics page.

<sup>12</sup> "Comic books" is the ill-chosen translation of "sveske" ('notebooks', or here rather 'volumes' or 'fascicles'). Elsewhere too, the English translation is not always flawless.

useful to the *widest* audience – can be viewed as a first attempt in the history of popular culture studies to produce a *critical* lexicon of Yugoslav comics” (Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović 2011, 10; my italics). First, one can only call the lexicon ‘critical’ in the sense of commented by specialists (and/or colleagues) in the field. After all, as the authors announce, the book’s “only ambition is to celebrate comics and their creators”, as we read some fifteen lines further. Second, “the widest audience” can only apply to readers with an excellent knowledge of BCMS. Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović seem to have realized that the translation work was unfortunately half-and-half: “Unable to publish a fully Serbian-English edition, the authors have decided for the sake of the basic usability for international readers, to publish this first edition in the Latin alphabet instead of the standard Serbian Cyrillic” (2011, 10). However, notwithstanding the translation efforts put in (cf. *supra*, and note 12) to open up the (post-)Yugoslav comics traditions, the book can hardly be read/consulted by “international” readers *without* knowledge of BCMS. Interestingly, the authors present the main language of their book as Serbian, most likely because Živojin Tamburić and Zoran Stefanović are Serbs, while the late Zdravko Zupan, though born in Zagreb, did mainly live and work<sup>13</sup> in Serbia as well. By the way, since Serbian is an actively digraphic language, it is not special to see it printed here in the Latin alphabet.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas a general East European chapter such as Alaniz’s in *The Routledge Companion to Comics* could actually not go further than concisely outlining the political-historical situation of Yugoslav comics, it is striking how apolitical Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović have been in *The Comics We Loved*. Admittedly, one can expect that the people who ‘loved these comics’ all know that Marshal Tito’s Yugoslavia was a special case within the communist Eastern Bloc and that this positively affected the comics scene in the Socialist Federalist Republic (cf. *supra*). But does this mean that the so-called international readers, the ‘outsiders’ for whom they wanted to open up the Yugoslav comics tradition, do not have to acquaint themselves with this extremely relevant part of East European (political) history?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> A.o., as a comics artist. His humorous, Disney-based “Miki i Baš Čelik (Mickey and Steel Man)” was devoted an entry in the book (Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović, 2011, 257).

<sup>14</sup> Of the variants of BCMS, only Croatian always uses the Latin alphabet. That Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović apparently preferred to call it ‘Serbian’ instead of ‘Serbo-Croatian’, or ‘BC(M)S’, should not be interpreted politically; cf. their remark: “for the sake of political correctness, [...] the term ‘Yugoslavian’ in the book is used only technically, in its scientific meanings – ethno-cultural and geographical – without any implications related to current or future (geo)political situations or anyone’s national feelings” (2011, 10), and their ‘Geopolitical and Cultural Note’ (281).

<sup>15</sup> The international readers must content themselves with two sentences in the ‘Introduction’ and some basic historical facts in the brief ‘Geopolitical and Cultural Note’ introducing the bibliography (Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović, 2011, 10, 281), which is very different from the approach in a shorter publication by Zupan (2009, 27 and *passim*), specifically directed to such outsiders.

Remarkably apolitical, too, is the section *Distinguished creators*, which contains no less than four artists who belonged to the already mentioned Belgrade Circle: Konstantin Kuznjecov, Đorđe Lobačev, Nikola Navojev, and Sergej Solovjev. Nowhere in this section can we read about the Russian descent of even one of them, and it is mentioned either in the many entries devoted to their works, even not when Kuznjecov's comics adaptations of, a.o., Pushkin's *Queen of Spades* or Tolstoj's *Khadzhi-Murat* are commented on (Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović, 2011, 113-116). When reading the pieces about all sixteen artists in that section, one could get the false impression that the careers of Yugoslav artists were never affected by politics, or more specifically, communism (cf. De Dobbeleer 2020).

Anton Staykov's 2013 *A Short History of Bulgarian Comics* is a completely different book – which is of course one of the main reasons of presenting it here together with *The Comics We Loved*—. Right from the start, it is clear that Staykov only addresses his fellow countrymen, or at least those people who can read Bulgarian. Unlike Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović's book, Staykov's fully Cyrillic monograph seems to count far less on nostalgia among its readers. When the author states that comics are “a carrier, also, of collective nostalgia” (2013, 11), the reader gets the impression that he says this rather with regard to how comics function in countries that *have* embraced the medium, a condition yet to be fulfilled in Bulgaria. In contrast with (the successor states of the former) Yugoslavia, Bulgarians have never considered their country to be significant in European comics history. Staykov indeed admits the influence from neighbouring Yugoslavia, from which Bulgaria “received inspiration and ready-made stories” and where comics at the end of the 1930s experienced their “Golden Age”, their national production being “enviable” (Staykov 2013, 10).<sup>16</sup> In spite of the fact that his country since the end of the nineteenth century can boast, according to Staykov, more than four hundred comics artists and script writers, “[t]he ninth art in Bulgaria is not classified, archived,<sup>17</sup> and analysed” to this very day (2013, 11).

With its 239 pages, Staykov's chronologically structured (not so) *Short History* is in fact the first serious attempt in this direction. Since Staykov's achievement is pioneering, the chronological perspective was probably the most natural. Eleven chapters span the period between 1878, the year of Bulgaria's liberation (by the Russians) from the Ottoman Turks, and 2013. That the first chapter, “1878-1941” (2013, 18-33), covers the longest period is less surprising than that the second, “1941-1943” (34-51), covers the smallest number of years. The fact however that Staykov considers these three years “a golden period to Bulgarian standards” (2013, 35)

<sup>16</sup> Unlike Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović, Staykov *does* mention the important Russian contribution to the early Yugoslav comics successes (2013, 10).

<sup>17</sup> As we all know, the archiving of (national) comics (traditions) is not a self-evident process (certainly also in the US, cf. Weiner 2010). A monograph such as Staykov's can raise the awareness of policymakers and (academic) librarians in the field.

explains this ample attention. In a richly illustrated survey of more than 130 years of comics history, there is of course no place for in-depth analyses of individual works, but the respectful way in which these comics and their authors are presented, and the thorough embedding in the complex historical context so to say *prepare* all these works for future academic analysis.

As for the role attributed to political regimes in the history of Bulgarian comics, this appears to be far bigger than one could infer from Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović (2011) with regard to former Yugoslavia. Staykov's third chapter opens with these baleful sentences: "In 1942-1943 Sofia is bombed. The buildings of Rakhvira and Izkustvo – printing and publishing houses of comics – are destroyed. The editors, among whom Zmei Gorianin, are sued by the People's Court, and comics publications for children are labelled as 'pro-fascist and right-wing'.<sup>18</sup> For long years to come, they are inaccessible to readers in the libraries, and the word 'comics' ['komiks'] becomes the symbol of Western culture 'in decline' and ceases to be used" (Staykov 2013, 53).

Literally one sentence further, however, Staykov starts to describe how picture stories remained to be published in Bulgaria and how the medium, now deprived of its 'too American/capitalist' name, would be exploited "to blacken the political opponents of the communists and the Soviet power" (2013, 53). The aesthetic principles of socialist realism had to be complied with, but as a form comics survived, as did literature and the other arts. Artistically speaking, from 1962 onwards the situation improved (2013, 68), and here as well, the 1990 collapse of the old system went hand in hand with "chaos" (136). The book's ending, where Staykov hails the very first national exhibition of Bulgarian comics (Sofia, 10-25 Sept. 2013) as a hopeful event (2013, 232-233), is optimistic.

Let me finish this paragraph on these two carefully edited books with two obvious remarks. (1) Both in their own way, they are treasuries of information, waiting for (comics) scholars of the region taking advantage of them. (2) That they are both written for insiders – that is, (mainly) in languages actually only known by inhabitants of or emigrants from the countries under question, and foreign Slavists specializing in South Slavic languages – does evidently not facilitate the incorporation of (post-)Yugoslav and Bulgarian comics "into the broader global [comics] framework", Mazur and Danner are hoping for (cf. *supra*).

Of course, one could try to find financial support for the translation of these and other monographs on East European comics into one or more 'big' languages. This will definitely open up little-known comics traditions to foreign comics scholars. In what follows, however, I will analyse

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<sup>18</sup> The most famous victim was probably cartoonist Raiko Aleksiev (1893-1944) of whom Staykov laconically says that he was "killed because of his political caricatures in *Shturets* (*Cricket*), some of which ridiculed Stalin" (Staykov 2013, 32).

approaches that are less time-, money-, and labour-consuming and that may reach scholars as well as fans.

### **How to Open Up and Culturally Transmit ‘Minor’ Comics Histories to an Outsider Audience?**

A substantial part of the debates about the canon(s) of world literature centres around the traditional distinction between major and minor/small literatures. World literature specialist David Damrosch has specified the “threefold sense” in which the term ‘minor literature’ can be used: “[1] minority-group writing such as Gaelic or Yiddish within major powers (Deleuze and Guattari’s sense), [2] the literatures of smaller countries such as Guatemala or Hungary (what Kafka meant by “Kleine [‘small’] Literaturen” [...]), and [3] more generally works from languages and regions rarely represented on North American syllabi” (Damrosch 2009, 194).

His example for the third sense is the literature of Indonesia, a huge country with more than 250 million inhabitants and a rich literary heritage. In the field of comics, so far, there has not been a real distinction between what may be called “major” and “minor” comics traditions within world comics.<sup>19</sup> It is not my ambition to start such a distinction or a debate about it here. However, what I want to do is to use the parallel with the *major versus minor* literatures question as a bridge to discuss the difficulties and/or ways of opening up, whether scholarly or not, lesser-known (call them “minor” and “ultraminor”) comics traditions to a broader audience.

When transposing the qualifications “major” and “minor” from literatures to comics, many readers and even scholars of comics worldwide would probably accept to consider the Anglophone (esp. North American and British), Francophone (Franco-Belgian, Swiss) and Japanese comics, *bandes dessinées*, manga, graphic novels, etc. to be major comics traditions. This certainly does not mean that all comics in these languages are canonical. Unquestionably, however, most canonical comics so far have been created in one of these three languages. Whether or not canonical, Gravett’s *1001 Comics* merely contains around 150 works that were originally published in *another* language than English, French or Japanese, among them two Yugoslav works: Andrija Maurović’s *The Old Tomcat* (1937) and Zvonimir Furtinger and Julio Radilović’s *Herlock Sholmes* (1957); and three post-Yugoslav: Croat Danijel Žeželj’s *Rhythm of the Heart* (1990), Slovene Tomaž Lavrič’s *Bosnian Fables* (1998), and the already mentioned Aleksandar Zograf’s *Regards from Serbia* (2007); no Bulgarian.<sup>20</sup> The attention which the corresponding traditions receive in Mazur and Danner’s above-discussed *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to*

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<sup>19</sup> The (rather uncommon) term ‘world comics’ itself, by the way, does not seem to fully correspond to that of ‘world literature’, see, e.g. Sabin (1993, 183-209).

<sup>20</sup> Gravett (2011, 106-107, 204-205, 558-559, 700, 864). Zograf’s collection *Regards from Serbia* originally appeared in English.

*the Present* testifies to this. Yet, this does not have to imply that all other traditions are automatically ‘minor’. Italian and Spanish(-language) comics, for example, both often in the Franco-Belgian style, and (for that reason?) considerably covered by Danner and Mazur too, can be said to take an in-between position.

As could be expected, the application of Damrosch’s threefold sense of *minor* to the medium of comics is not self-evident. First, for several literatures within [1], “minority-group writing” à la Deleuze and Guattari, Damrosch might now probably rather use the term *ultraminor* (cf. Moberg and Damrosch 2017). An example of an East European minority group which, albeit modestly, produces comics are the Komi, a Finno-Ugric people living in the northeast of European Russia.<sup>21</sup>

If Damrosch himself includes Hungary within [2], “the literatures of smaller countries” (à la Kafka), then countries such as Bulgaria and former Yugoslav countries Serbia and Slovenia, to name two of them with a vibrant comics scene, can quite easily be put in the same category, and – following that logic – be regarded as minor comics cultures. Staying in Eastern Europe, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was definitely not a small country, and the same goes for present Poland and Romania.<sup>22</sup> Taking also into account the Nobel Prizes in Literature granted to writers born in these countries,<sup>23</sup> makes it even harder to speak of their literatures as *minor*. As for the comics traditions of these –not so minor— countries, when we limit ourselves to continental Europe with its particular comics history, few connoisseurs would dispute that the medium was of cross-border importance in Yugoslavia, like it is nowadays in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and Serbia among others.

When looking at East European comics in terms of Damrosch’s category [3], however, “works from languages and regions rarely represented on North American syllabi”, it is hard to imagine that Western syllabi on comics or graphic novel history or other comics-related courses – the ‘comics equivalent’, let us say, for the syllabi and *The Longman Anthology of World Literature* Damrosch is talking about – would ever contain, or treat, a lot of original work in Slovene, BCMS, Macedonian or Bulgarian, (whether or not specifically for the occasion) translated in a Western

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<sup>21</sup> Komi comics, as well as comics from more than ten other Finno-Ugric peoples, mostly in Northern European Russia and Western Siberia, have been created within the framework of the *Finno-Ugric Comics* workshops (Hukkanen 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Coincidentally or not, it are only the four then largest East European countries, Poland, Romania, the USSR, and Yugoslavia, whose comics traditions are devoted a (small) paragraph in the volume on comics of the famous encyclopaedic French series *Que sais-je? (What do I know?)*; Baron-Carvais 1985, 46-48).

<sup>23</sup> ‘Polish’ Noble Prizes were those for Henryk Sienkiewicz (1903), Władysław Reymont (1924), Isaac Bashevis Singer (1978), Czesław Miłosz (1980), Wisława Szymborska (1996), and Olga Tokarczuk (2018), the Polish-born Jewish-American Singer however, writing in Yiddish. Ivo Andrić (1961) wrote in Serbo-Croatian, the main language of former Yugoslavia. Romanian-born Herta Müller (2009) writes in German.

language.<sup>24</sup> Zograf's *Regards from Serbia* (2007) would be a likely candidate, especially because of the Western/US involvement in the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, the major theme of this collection. However, several of Zograf's works, including *Regards from Serbia*, originally appeared in English (cf. note 20). Maybe ironically, Eastern Europe would certainly be much more present in such syllabi or manuals as a *dramatic historical background* in several non-East European comics: think about the presence of Poland in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980-1991) or that of Bosnia and Herzegovina in several works of the renowned graphic journalist Joe Sacco.

One could argue that (East) European countries that remain untreated even in works *specifically about* (East) European comics could be classified as ultraminor comics traditions. On the basis of the already-mentioned *Komiks w Europie środkowo-wschodniej* (Błażejczyk and Traczyk 2011) this would apply then to, among others (cf. note 5), Albanian – purportedly, the language does not even have a (loan)word for 'comics' (Govaerts 2011, 18) – and Bulgarian comics. Since there would, much understandably, always be opponents of such qualifications of comics traditions as ultraminor, I propose it is better to conclude that on a continental – European— scale, *most* East European comics traditions are “just” *minor*. Particularly the Yugoslav heritage may be one of the exceptions, which would not make it automatically *major*. On a world scale, it seems reasonable to state that all East European comics traditions are minor. Needless to say, this does absolutely not mean that the works of all comics artists and authors born in Eastern Europe are of minor significance.

In the remaining part of this contribution, I will use this tentative *major/minor* parallel between literature and comics as a bridge to discuss some ways of opening up lesser-known *minor* comics traditions, such as the (post-)Yugoslav and Bulgarian, to a broader audience. I will therefore advocate the application of two perspectives also used to open up the history of specific minor literatures<sup>25</sup> to the practice of comics history writing:

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<sup>24</sup> Even Russia, the biggest country in the world with a literary tradition boasting authors, such as Dostoevskii and Tolstoi, who are always present in best books ever lists, would most probably be totally absent in such syllabi. For what it's worth: Gravett's *1001 Comics* does not contain any originally Russian work.

<sup>25</sup> I discussed both perspectives in De Dobbeleer 2017, the main illustrations being an old and a new non-academic literary historical work: the German world literary history writer Johannes Scherr's 1851 *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart: Ein Handbuch für alle Gebildeten* (*General History of Literature from the Oldest Times to the Present: A Manual for All Educated People*) and the American(-Turkish) journalist/academic Elif Batuman's 2010 *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*, in which it is not so much her bold approach of Russian (of course not a minor) literature, but the opening up of *Uzbek* literature (in the Samarkand chapters, 2010, 83-109, 139-178, 213-250) that was illustrative for both perspectives.

- (1) a rather personal –not multi-authored— perspective, and
- (2) a rather transnational perspective.

(1) First, comparing on the one hand (a) *The Routledge Companion to Comics's* 'Part I: History and Traditions' to Mazur and Danner's *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to the Present*, and on the other hand (b) Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović's *The Comics We Loved* to Staykov's *Short History of Bulgarian Comics* can bring us to observations about the effect of the number of authors on the comics historical narrative. The twelve historical chapters (cf. supra) of the *Companion's* opening part are written by as many different scholars. As one may already infer merely from some incongruities between the above-quoted titles of chapters 5-12, the individual authors were given the freedom to approach and structure the pieces of comics history assigned to them in their own way. Unsurprisingly within the given format, this makes ('Part I' of) the *Routledge Companion* highly *polyphonic*.

Probably the best-known polyphonic literary history to this very day is Denis Hollier's *A New History of French Literature* (1989), in which chapters or essays, by separate scholars, each departing from a specific date in French (literary) history replaced "[t]he overarching narrative of the 'grand récit'" (as Neubauer puts it; 2008, 16). For a *Companion* offering the voices from as many specialists as possible on as many facets as possible of a particular (sub)field, here comics, it is an asset to be polyphonic, whereas for a (work as Hollier's) literary history it might be a drawback, especially for readers expecting an overview with a beginning, middle and end (*à la* Aristotle, *Poetics* 7, 1987, 10). If so desired, in Mazur and Danner's *Comics: A Global History*, the three chronologically divided parts (cf. supra) could be conceived as such a beginning – more precisely, thanks to the start of the "Underground comics movement" (2014, 23) – middle and end.

Since Hayden White's 1973 *Metahistory* all humanities scholars (should) know that narrative histor(iograph)y is *emplotted* (White 1993, 7), literary history not excluded. However, that such (traditional) literary, or art, or, for that matter, comics histories contain a certain, more or less apparent (story) plot, does not *per se* mean that these plots are teleological. This was the case with many older, national(ist) literary histories, and has also been pinned on Stephen Weiner's 2003 *Faster Than a Speeding Bullet: The Rise of the Graphic Novel*, for bringing a narrative of continuous development and increasing complexity, as if comic strips could not have developed into something else than graphic novels (Groß 2012, 5). If nowadays, in general, teleological plots are judged negatively, a non-teleological plot can still be regarded as engaging, more likeable, so to say, than (multi-authorial) plotlessness.

In edited, multi-authored works, such as *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, the individual chapters may all have (mini-)plots, the book as a



whole is of course plotless. *Comics: A Global History*, for its part, is only literally pluri-authored, for throughout the book Mazur and Danner speak with one narratorial voice. Their tone never becomes more personal than in the preface (2014, 6-9), but in sentences like “In the most highly lauded fictional graphic novels, such as David Mazzuchelli’s *Asterios Polyp* (2009) or Dash Shaw’s *BodyWorld* (2010), narrative content tends to be overshadowed by formal properties (such as use of color as a narrative tool) that, while impressive, do little to expand the medium’s appeal to general readers” (Mazur and Danner 2014, 295), the readers can nevertheless sense what their guides during these more than three hundred pages think about the prominence, in certain works with regard to certain audiences, of formal properties.

The comparison between the ‘Yugoslav’ *The Comics We Loved* and the Bulgarian *Short History* brings us to similar results. The pluri-authored work of Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović only occasionally succeeds in absorbing the reader. This obviously has more to do with the above-described fragmentary approach, allowing little or no room for any substantial narrative, than with its multi-authoredness. Nonetheless, that they –in the judgments/assessments in the entries— gave voice to so many other artists and critics did not help on this point. The readers, especially those not really acquainted with (post-)Yugoslav comics soon risk getting lost between these innumerable, almost by definition laudatory, often nostalgic voices. Personal takes on milestones of (one country’s) comics history are often engaging reads, but here saturation already lurks after some ten or twenty of the attractive pages. This danger of self- or better one’s own nation propaganda, is alluded to also in an online follow-up article by Staykov on Bulgarian comics in the 2010s, six years after the publication of his *Short History* book.

In the second decade of 21st century [...] the academic field failed to produce in depth analysis and texts [on Bulgarian comics (history)], so the recording of the ninth-art events unfolding in front of our eyes, was confined to the prism of *advertising and PR texts*, editorials, and short information booklets from either editors or the authors themselves. In Bulgaria there are now several distinct hot-spots, concentrated with the strong presence of individuals that publish and communicate *as propaganda* the art of comics and the comics product, either by presenting or *emphasizing on their own achievements* as well as ones of other mini-centers and groups. To the most part, none of them are well placed in world-, European-, Balkan-, or any larger historical and relevant Bulgarian context. (Staykov 2019, online; my italics)

It is hard to catch Staykov in his 2013 monograph – or in this follow-up article – trumpeting the praises of the comics artists of his native country, undoubtedly because he is fully aware of the modest place his nation

takes in the world's, European or even East European history of comics. At the same time, his overall modest attitude may also be one of the reasons why Staykov, our conscientious guide throughout Bulgaria's whole comics history, has refrained from telling this history in a personal voice. It is to the credit of Staykov as an academic that he manages to enthuse the reader far more through the facts he mentions and the illustrations he shows than by the tone of his narrative or the judgments about the artists and works he discusses. This sincere choice emphasizes the respect for and dedication to his subject matter, but it reduces the chances that a reader, even one definitely willing to grasp (parts of) a foreign country's comics history, will be lastingly absorbed by such a narrative. Be that as it may, it remains to be repeated: Staykov has not written this monograph for an audience of outsiders (the language in which it is written and the study's exhaustiveness obviously indicate this). If the audience consists of outsiders, then the second perspective (too) must consciously be taken into account.

(2) The second perspective advocated here for the opening up of minor comics histories is the transnational one. In fact, this perspective is already touched upon at the end of the long quotation from Staykov, where he regrets that the snippets of information on recent Bulgarian comics are so poorly contextualized, among others, within world-, European or Balkan (comics) histories. Such transnational confrontation with foreign traditions is certainly one of the assets of Staykov's own history.<sup>26</sup> Definitely transnational, not only in the sense of referring to other nations' comics traditions, but also in the sense of regularly shifting the focus from one comics tradition to another is Mazur and Danner's *Comics: A Global History* (although it has been regretted that these traditions are limited to four; cf. supra). Further, the writer of the above-treated *Routledge Companion* chapter on East European comics, José Alaniz, briefly though unmistakably opens up several lesser-known comics traditions to an audience of what could be regarded outsiders, in this case: comics scholars and students mainly from or well up in Anglophone Academia. In this respect, he can be characterized as what Petra Broomans calls a cultural transmitter:

A cultural transmitter basically works within a particular language and cultural area. She/he often takes on various roles in the field of cultural transmission: translator, reviewer, critic, journalist, literary historian, scholar, teacher, librarian, bookseller, collector, literary agent, scout, publisher, editor of a journal, writer, travel writer, or counsellor. Transmitting another national literature and its cultural context to one's own national literature and cultural context is the central issue in the work of a cultural transmitter. Transmission often reflects a bilateral situation. (Broomans 2009, 2)

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<sup>26</sup> Not only to well-known (American, Franco-Belgian) traditions, also to, e.g., Hungarian and Soviet (Staykov 1993, 82).

It goes without saying that the enumeration in Broomans's definition can easily be supplemented with 'comics historian'. Given the necessary aspect of transnational transmitting, neither Staykov nor Tamburić, Zupan, and Stefanović, all of them treating their own traditions for an audience of insiders (fellow-countrymen), qualify as cultural transmitters in Broomans's sense. Yet, in fact, when a Western reader, or an African for that part, with knowledge of Bulgarian or BCMS consults their works, a cultural transmission unquestionably takes place. With his enthusiasm and reputation, Paul Gravett, the author of the foreword of *The Comics We Loved* could have been a suitable cultural transmitter à la Broomans, but he unfortunately lacks, as he himself admits, sufficient knowledge of the tradition to be transmitted: he does not know BCMS.

A middle position seems to be taken by authors who write about their own comics tradition, but clearly address an audience of foreigners who (supposedly) know little or nothing about the subject matter. As an example<sup>27</sup>, I refer to Yana Genova, who starts her five-page introduction on Bulgarian comics as follows: "Bulgarian comic artists?! You may have met them at events around the world. You may have spotted their bizarre names with an '-of' ending in the credits at Cartoon Network or at the hardcovers of exclusive children editions printed somewhere in Thailand or China. You may even be a great fan of Johnny Bravo and not knowing there is one of these '-of' names [i.e., Rumen Petkov (1948-2018)] behind it" (Genova 2009, 37). Typical in such texts, and substantially facilitating the transmission process, are comparisons with, connections to, often in terms of influences, or sometimes just mentions of comics authors and works from the audience's own tradition, here Johnny Bravo, actually an animated television series character.

A particular technique of referring to familiar authors, works or series is what Roumiana Stantcheva (with regard to literary history; 2011, 306) has coined "comparison-'labeling'". This technique consists in the use of their names or titles as a metaphor and, by doing this, not uncommonly as a form of appreciation or even quality label. This technique is applied in Victoria Grieve's *Little Cold Warriors*, where she refers to the Soviet Russian series *Pet'ia Ryzhik* the "Russian Tintin" (Grieve 2018, 43). Although she entitled one of the paragraphs in this book on childhood in the American fifties 'Cold War Comics in the Soviet Union' (43-46) Grieve herself cannot, given the goal of her book, be considered a cultural transmitter of East European comics. The scholar to whom she owes the connection between *Pet'ia Ryzhik* and *Tintin*, however, José Alaniz (2010, 65; cf. supra) can be said to virtually embody, in his 2010 monograph *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia*, what one may expect from a cultural transmitter opening up an unfamiliar comics tradition. As a transnational

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<sup>27</sup> Other comparable East European examples are Zupan 2009 (see note 15) and Chmielewski 2015, as well as all country-specific articles in Błażejczyk and Traczyk 2011 (see note 5).

guide, Alaniz recognizes in Russian work X the style of Richard Corben or in work Y that of Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* (Alaniz 2010; 97, 150). His book, as is clear from the start, could not have come about without his experiences during his visits to several Russian comics events or without his many interviews and conversations with Russian comics artists. Because he does not refrain from emphasizing these, in this case necessary, personal connections with the actors in the field, Alaniz's overview – in spite of its, and by the way, realized academic intentions – gives the reader the feeling to be taken around by a personal guide (cf. perspective 1).

The fact that the American Alaniz – contrary to cultural transmitters such as Genova<sup>28</sup>— has *another* nationality and mother tongue than the (Russian) comics artists he discusses, diminishes the risk that the reader, as the transmission's recipient, considers the transmitter's appreciative words as a kind of one's own nation propaganda (cf. *supra*). Narratives about one's own literature/arts/comics indeed always risk to be considered (possibly) biased, which is then a reason to distrust the transmitter or guide. To my knowledge, such book-length explorations *by* an outsider (as for nationality) *for* interested outsiders do not exist yet for any post-Yugoslav or the Bulgarian comics tradition, and it is unlikely that they will appear in the following years. As I already suggested, however, a scholarly, exhaustive treatment<sup>29</sup> is not required in view of the "opening up" in this article's title. Quite the contrary, *shorter* –one is inclined to say article-length<sup>30</sup>— attempts by cultural transmitters from outside *and* within Eastern Europe, and from outside *and* within Academia, are actually preferable, first of all because they can be written more quickly, with a finger on the pulse, than monographs, and secondly, because the resulting contributions would be more easily digestible.

To conclude this analysis of the effects of both compatible perspectives, I have to briefly draw attention to the choice of the transmission language. Worth discussing, in this respect, is Broomans's use of the word *own* in her already quoted definition: "Transmitting another national literature and its cultural context to one's *own* national literature and cultural context is the central issue in the work of a cultural transmitter" (2019, 2; my italics). What Alaniz did with Russian comics was more than opening them up to his *own* cultural context. As his references to the Belgian *Tintin* (cf. *supra*) or (a.o.) the Uruguay-born Argentine Alberto Breccia (Alaniz 2010, 85) demonstrate, Alaniz also refers to comics (artists) from outside the

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<sup>28</sup> Or the authors referred to in the previous note, all of them "specialist[s] of a particular national production", as Lefèvre said in the first quote of this article (2014, 86).

<sup>29</sup> How engaging Alaniz's transnational, personal approach may be, he has also been (mildly) criticized for being too exhaustive (Mandaville 2011, 10).

<sup>30</sup> The term 'article', however, may be too much associated with Academia, while such contributions, especially if 'too' personal (subjective) will certainly be rejected in (peer-reviewed) academic journals. Therefore a para-academic project is being prepared to collect and circulate such shorter treatments ('testimonials').

American, or broader: Anglophone, sphere. It goes without saying that he would not have done this, if he did not expect his academic American readership to know these names. Of key importance for the opening-up process is of course the language in which *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* was written. Alaniz's choice for English is evident for two reasons. First, it is the mother tongue of his fellow Americans, and second it has been, already for decades, the language *par excellence* for academic and all other publications aiming to reach an audience as big as possible. Unlike those writing in Chinese or Hindi, but also Spanish or French, all cultural transmitters using English today realize that their writings can and will be read by people all over the world, even if they merely have an audience of native speakers in mind from, say, Ireland or the state of Texas. Only in the latter case we actually have the "bilateral situation" about which Broomans talks (cf. supra). If, on the other hand, a Flemish cultural transmitter writes about foreign minor comics traditions in her/his mother tongue, her/his audience will obviously be limited to Dutch-speaking readers (interested in comics). This is what happens in Jo Govaerts's *Strips in de Balkan, de Balkan in strips (Comics in the Balkans, the Balkans in Comics, 2011)*. In this 36-page Dutch publication on the occasion of a Balkan festival in Antwerp (Sept.-Dec. 2011), the second target part of Broomans's bilateral situation indeed consists of an audience from a limited geographical space – Flanders and the Netherlands.<sup>31</sup> Hence why Govaerts can perfectly confront an episode from Romania's comics history with the comics situation in Flanders during the 1950s-1960s (2011, 7). The more a cultural transmitter geographically / language-wise limits her/his target audience, the more (s)he can afford to refer to specific (e.g., Flemish) comics historical names, titles, characters publishers, and so forth. One could consequently say that in cultural transmission a more limited scope makes the transmission network – and at the same time Mazur and Danner's "broader global framework" (cf. supra) – more ramified.<sup>32</sup>

### **An Appeal in Lieu of a Conclusion**

I have tried to explain why a personal, or at least individual guiding (perspective 1) of an outsider audience through a *minor* comics tradition is preferable to a multi-authored, or *too* polyphonic presentation of this tradition. The guide or cultural transmitter can engage her/his audience by means of an absorbing plot-driven historical narrative, but should avoid the pitfall of merely singing the praises of the tradition to be transmitted.

<sup>31</sup> Only the first third of the publication deals with comics in the Balkans as a whole. In the other parts we read short one- to three-page pieces (interviews) about the comics history/situation of/in specific Balkan countries. All of them offer very 'personal takes' (cf. supra) and one could argue that the addition of two 'Balkan comics reading lists', too, contribute to Govaerts's engaging, 'personal', non-exhaustive approach.

<sup>32</sup> Another example is Pavel Kořínek's recent introduction of Czech literature to a Dutch-speaking audience (2019). A Czech himself (his article has been translated), he certainly had his audience in mind where he refers to Marten Toonder's Dutch *Tom Poes (Tom Puss; Kořínek 2019, 55-57)*.

This risk decreases when the transmitter does not treat her/his own comics history, but operates *transnationally* (perspective 2), as a cultural *transmitter*. In the purposeful addressing of the readers unfamiliar with the comics history in question, it is of vital importance to refer to authors and works they know, perhaps the more nation-specific the better –if the audience is Chilean or Danish, then also make use of Chilean or Danish comics-related reference points—. Of course, a cultural transmitter embeds the (hi)story of his subject –in our case, a minor comics tradition— in the broader history of the nation or region. Thus, the unfamiliar reader not only learns a lot about some specific comics, but in passing also about historical events and other curious oddities. An exhaustive covering of the comics produced in that tradition is not required and often even counterproductive, because it may numb the reader. A personal, subjective take, on the other hand, is usually more stimulating. It really helps when the cultural transmitter is a guide of flesh and blood, to whom nothing human is alien, as the phrase goes. If you read a comic book about which the guide has voiced a bluntly subjective judgment, you already have a point of departure to base your own opinion on.

Finally, this appeal should be combined with the opinion expressed in the first part of this contribution, that East European comics traditions can better be treated separately, per language/nation/region/etc., than all of them together, as East European as a whole. The latter, Cold War approach threatens to overestimate the importance of communism in the diverse comics histories of all these nations. Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, communism understandably remains a key topic in (re)telling the overall history of East European comics. The communist rule and the struggle against it made the region very specific during more than forty years or longer, but for example the imperative case of the Yugoslav comics tradition demonstrates how short-sighted it would be to bracket its comics history together with that of other former Eastern Bloc countries. Hence an appeal to everyone who has a story to tell about a peculiar reading experience within one of the many Eastern European comics traditions. Write it down – *narrate* it – and communicate and pass it as a cultural transmitter and personal guide. Admittedly, such activity would not change the minor status of the comics tradition in question into a major one, but it nonetheless helps making some works from it circulate, albeit in some cases only among fans, connoisseurs or scholars of other minor comics traditions (think about the Govaerts case). In the best-case scenario, these works can be picked up in due time, along with and through the guide's narrative, by another kind of – often neglected – cultural transmitters: comics *translators*. The specific things they have done, do and can do for the opening up of minor East European (and other) comics traditions are subjects for another contribution.

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