Belgian *Bande dessinée (s)* Industry, Policy & Legitimacy

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Abstract

The production of books has a millenary history and the publishing industry is one of the largest cultural industries in Europe. Therein lies a medium which can be a book and not a book. A medium with links and crossovers with multiple art forms and mediums: comics. Back in 1975, French sociologist Luc Boltanski academically baptised the *Bande dessinnée* as a separate cultural *field*. Since its advent and continuing into the present day, comics went through a quest for recognition of its cultural value which has found many setbacks in the way and still today does not enjoy full unanimity.

In this thesis I explore the social process of legitimation with the help of the concepts of "field" and "art worlds". I follow a biographical perspective by highlighting changes in the way from creation to further evolution, understanding what and who determines the transitory value associated with comics. The study follows an interdisciplinary approach mainly fed by cultural economics, economic sociology and political economy. By conducting a case study, the thesis makes sense of a scenery in which transition is shaped by local recognition, political economy aspects and, changing partnerships. I particularly focus on two main actors, the publishing industry and the state and unveil recognise their influence in the way the comics artistic expression evolved.

Belgium serves as a double case study in the present qualitative study. The cradle of the European comics tradition has two major language groups (French and Dutchspeaking) with separate politics, policy and administrative determinants, historical traditions, artistic conventions, cultural practices, industry structures, commerce modes and, markets. Both sides display distinct legitimation paths and coinciding strategies.

This variety provides for an array of answers to the two research questions, namely "How do the Belgian publishing industry and the state legitimise respectively the comics field?" and "What is the role of partnerships and networks in the legitimation processes?". Big and independent publishers justify their strategies differently, towards the commerce and the art poles respectively, but hostility is somewhat fading. Today, we can assert that timid and scattered, the state actively intervenes and shapes the field, towards the art pole. The thesis ends with an evaluation of partnerships that have existed throughout history, as they can shed some light on the constraints, weaknesses and opportunities for promoting a field that despite everything remains contested.

Keywords: comics, publishing industry, legitimation, cultural field, political economy.

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Preface, on terminology

Definitions matter. In this particular case, the absence of an uncontested definition *defines* a field which after all, remains *contested*. Names reflect qualities and that will be discussed at length. Names matter. Many discussions in the field take place around names¹. It is hazardous to pretend that the terminology used internationally, *comics, bande dessinnée* and *mangas*, capture continental cultural traditions. Terminology translation, in this particular case adds confusion. As for now, regardless of the contestation and the connotations, I note that I will consistently use the word "comics", for that is the least discriminative term commonly used in English and this is the language in which this thesis is written.

¹ See for example, Labio, C., (2011), What's in a Name? The Academic Study of Comics and the "Graphic Novel". *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 123-126.

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1. Introduction

If we ask a general public what is Belgium internationally known for, most probably we will hear a few items from the food and beverage category: *French*-fries (I admit the adjective can create some confusion), beer, waffles and/or chocolate. If something else was added, would it be comics? Belgian comics are the focus of this thesis.

Today, the comics field is extremely broad and includes as diverse works as political-social commentary *Mafalda* by Quino; superhero comics like *Spiderman* or *Capitan America*; adventurous albums by *Tintin* (by Hergé) or *Spike and Suzy* by Willy Vandersteen; historical graphic novels like *Maus* by Spiegelman; auto-biographies like *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi; journalistic reportage like *Safe Area Gorazde* by Joe Sacco; portraits collection *Chronographie* by Dominique Goblet; best ever selling manga (and comics overall) *One piece*, by Eiichiro Oda (Mateo, 2021); pioneer non-*shōjo* style of Kuniko Tsurita; or, a Phd dissertation (Education, interdisciplinary studies) exclusively written and drawn in comics form, *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis. Admittedly, the comics landscape can as well mirror the general books landscape in terms of genre variety (A, C Publish, 2021) as appear in museum exhibitions and theatre performances (E Expert, 2021).

If the publishing industry has attracted scant scholarly attention in comparison to other cultural industries, the comics field has been even less studied. The medium does not easily fit into conventional disciplinary structures, giving the study of comics a decidedly interdisciplinary streak. A dominant strand in comics' research seems to derive from the model of literary studies or art history (Beaty, 2007; Morita, 2010), with an approach to evaluate individual works from an *auteur* perspective, thus focusing on creation, criticism and appreciation and increasingly towards visual art in detriment of its literature nature (Baudry, 2015). Format, intermediality (with press, edition, cinema, radio, video games, digital), focus on multimodality (verbal, visual, spatial, reflexivity, universe creation), a focus on marginal or experimental tendencies (independent publishing houses, newest literature categories) are recent lines in Francophone-European academia (Baudry, 2015). The attention to the medium from a cultural industries perspective seems to be modest.

Since its advent and continuing into the present day, comics went through a quest for recognition of its cultural value which has found many setbacks in the way. Comics were first published in newspapers, in a mass-produced fashion, for an audience of children. Over time, several mechanisms that encouraged recognition of the medium, perhaps not as an art form but surely as a legitimate cultural genre. Many different actors intervened in this process, from creators to the publishing industry, from the state to curators, critics and scholars. However, as sociologist like Becker and Bourdieu remind us, value in the field of culture is not purely intrinsic, and legitimation is a primordially a social process (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1983). Both authors advance the notions of "art world" and "field" respectively, which serve as prime theoretical markers to analyse the struggles, agreements, conventions and dynamics that enhance the recognition of comics. But a mere focus on "legitimisation snapshots" misses out on the historical changes in value and legitimisation, which is why I added the biographical perspective (Kopytoff, 1986), highlighting the changes in the way from creation to further evolution.

In cultural economics, the study of change of status of a cultural good due to changes in tastes and in the industry as a whole can take the form of "valuation studies" (Dekker, 2016). As such, this thesis applies this basic insight in one concrete cultural genre, the comic. In light of extensive work in this area (Klamer 2004; Karpik, 2010), we know that cultural goods have a history and a path that leads to its current state of affairs. This thesis aims to track one such path, and understand what and who determine the transitory value associated with the Belgian comics. By conducting a case study, the thesis makes sense of a scenery in which transition is shaped by local recognition, political economy aspects and, changing partnerships, alliances and leaderships. My approach is interdisciplinary, and mainly fed by cultural economics, economic sociology and political economy perspectives. It contributes to the domain of cultural economics by revealing: i) how a specific cultural industry grows as a result of niche development; ii) what determines the (time and geographical) variability of a goods' cultural status, and iii) what can be the role and the form of political support.

I purposefully did not research the comics countries that attract the most attention globally. Instead, I focused my attention on a small, yet meaningful player: Belgium, the country with probably the highest comics creators per capita². The country shares with France the honour of being the cradle of the European tradition of the *Bande dessinée*: it is not for nothing called the *Franco-Belgian* tradition, in which "historically, France is the junior partner" (The Ninth Art, 2011)³. On linguistic grounds half of Belgium shares, at first sight, a market with France, in regards to producers and consumers. But Belgium cannot be assimilated to France. The country has two major language groups (French and Dutch-

² "With some 800 BD artists, has more per capita than practically anywhere else in the world. For a country of only 10 million inhabitants, that's a big number". De Graeve, former curator of the Belgian Comic Strip Center in Brussels. Interview quoted in The Ninth Art (2011, June, 7). *France today.*

³ De Graeve, former curator of the Belgian Comic Strip Center in Brussels. Interview quoted in The Ninth Art (2011, June, 7). France today.

speaking) with separate politics, policy and administrative determinants⁴, historical traditions⁵, artistic conventions⁶, cultural practices (2007), industry structures, commerce modes and, markets. Two different scenes exist close enough to each other to have a shared crossroads (Brussels), certain "cross-border" experiences, visible rapprochement attempts and, a country diplomacy. The spotted similarities and differences allow to recognise the industry and the state influence in the way the comics artistic expression evolved.

I worked out the negotiations between the fields and their evolution through the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the Belgian publishing industry and the state legitimise respectively the comics field?

RQ1A: What strategies do agents undertake in order to transform comics into a more recognized form of art?

RQ1B: How this has historically changed and which main events contributed to the legitimation evolution?

RQ2: What is the role of partnerships and networks in the legitimation processes?

To undertake this exploratory qualitative inquiry on the legitimization of this cultural sector I organised semi-structured interviews with sixteen people that I found through typical case and snowball sampling. The latter, motivated by the interviewees themselves reflected a field with a relatively small collaborative network (Karpik, 2010). They altogether had the following roles: publisher, distributor, bookshop holder, state advisor, editor, public servant, curator, journalist, author, illustrator, historian... currently or in the past, in existing and disappeared organisations, in big and small structures. For the operationalisation of the research questions I nevertheless distinguished them within 3 categories: publishing industry, state and experts. They almost all commented about the French or the Dutch-speaking respectively, with rare insights on the other scene. All the interviews took place remotely because of COVID mobility restriction measures. This certainly limited further biographical reflections, access to additional resources (specialised libraries) and further narrative context.

⁴ Belgium is a federal state with two types of federated entities (Regions and Communities). The three regions (Walloon Region, the Flemish Region, and the Brussels-Capital Region) are competent for matters related to the notion of territoriality, including economic affairs and employment. The three Communities (the French Community, the Flemish Community and the German-speaking Community) are responsible for matters related to the individuals, like culture and education. Social security is a federal responsibility.

⁵ See for example Bellefroid (2016).

⁶See for example Baetens (2007).

The present study is structured in four subsequent chapters. Chapter two presents the theoretical framework divided in three subsections: first, the legitimation of cultural goods through art and commerce provides an overview of the cultural capital's approach introducing the notions of legitimation and field (Bourdieu, 1983) and the dynamic art worlds (Becker, 1982) which allows for introducing the role of the state and the biographical approach of things (Kopytoff, 1986); the second subsection presents justification logics (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) with insights on the relevance of networks in the valuation mechanisms (Karpik, 2010), and political economy of goods which introduces the motivation and intervention of the state in supporting culture (Frey, 2003).

Chapter three presents the research's qualitative design, which made use of semi structured in-depth interviews that captured the own vision and narrative of the field practitioners. Those were subsequently analysed thematically by the use of special coding software.

Chapter four presents the results of the study by first describing the industry and the state. The industry is split in two in the sense that the big publishers and the independent publishers represent opposite poles and thus justify their strategies otherwise. I also discuss the state, its layers, roles and interventions throughout history. This is followed by a subsection on legitimation processes that analyses a few legitimisation mechanisms that are and have been used throughout Belgian history. The chapter ends by focussing on the challenges for the future, especially on what seems to be the elephant in the room, namely digitalisation.

Finally, chapter five presents the conclusion and the discussion on how legitimation has taken place differently in the Belgian French and Dutch-speaking scenes and which has been the roles of the publishing industry and the state. I also comment on the networks that have been activated in the past and in which direction they have gone. Finally, I enounce the main limitations encountered throughout the research and I outline some suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. A snapshot on Belgian *Bande dessinée*

It is risky to demarcate the history of comics as illustrated by specialised scholars and practitioners' endless discussions: some point to the US born "Yellow Kid", a character talking through speech balloons, published in The New York World newspapers for the first time in 1895; others refer to the Swiss Töpffer (1799-1846), who published the first illustrated books; other go much backwards up until the Egyptian hieroglyphics. I will skip the original sin and will concentrate in the Belgian case instead; whose origin seems much less contested.

The early 20th century witnessed the appearance of several publications, showcasing both local and foreign characters and series (*Mannekensblad*, 1911, with illustrated texts by Seghers, *Kindervriend*, 1911, *Bulletje en Bonestaak*, 1922, by George Van Raemdonck, in the daily newspaper *Het Volk*). The genre developed during the 1920s through youth magazines across Belgium, following in the tradition and developments from the US (De Weyer, 2015). That influence evolved differently in the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking masters (Hergé and Willy Vandersteen respectively).

A turning point in the Belgian milieu that would become the *Bande dessinée franco*belge (or its recognisable abbreviation: *BD*) was the appearance in 1929 of *The adventures of Tintin.* This later became one of the most celebrated albums and which was initially published in *Le Petit Vingtième*, the youth supplement of the catholic newspapers *Le Vingtième siècle.* Hergé's exploration and codification of the medium (Bellefroid, 2015) instated the main features which would come to define the Franco-Belgian tradition: the *ligne-claire* (clear line), use of speech balloons, serial publications in magazines and later publication in albums. Specialised comics magazines started publication in the 1940s in French and were immediately translated into Dutch. *Spiron* was first published by Dupuis in 1938 (*Robbedoes* in Dutch, 6 months later), was paused during the occupation and restarted in 1946. The same year that *Tintin* weekly magazine was published by Lombard. In Flanders, comics were mostly published in daily newspapers and in weekly newspapers' supplements. Gradually, those magazines created clubs and commercial tricks to attract and retain young customers. The Belgian market took off autonomously, parallel to the disruption and interruption of American comics imports during the Second World War. Belgian comics published in both languages evolved in an increasingly independent manner (De Weyer, 2015), as well from subject matter as the release form (French-speaking with daily and weekly newspapers having a full page dedicated to comic strips and, Dutch-speaking daily strips strongly influencing the sales of respective newspapers). Belgium also attracted creators from all over the world, including the US and France (De Weyer, 2015). The rivalry between *Spirou* (130,000 copies at its peak) and *Tintin* (600,000 coipes at its peak) contributed much to the Belgian comics boom, and the making of a new generation of comics' authors through the constitution of studios. Their personages transcended the linguistic barriers (De Weyer, 2015). The short-lived character of the press publication had started cohabiting with the more lasting album form in 1934, from the hand of *Tintin*, Hergé and publishing house Casterman. Originally, the publication of the album was considered as nothing else than a complement and, in any case, exclusively reserved to the best masters and most popular authors (Groensteen, 2009).

The generalised production of albums in the 1950s and 1960s boosted even further the popularity of the medium, created, professionalised and developed a market niche, implied a turning point in the industrial production mode and, undertook a commercial rising spiral (Bellefroid, 2015). If up until 1950-1960s, comics was a popular mass media product aimed at children, there was a turning point whereby they were oriented to a professionally and socially diverse adulthood that contributed to the legitimation of the field (Boltanski, 1975). Similar to France, in those years Belgium saw the appearance of adult oriented magazines (*A suivre*), fandoms (Jan Smet different publications), awards (*Prix Saint Michel*, 1971 and *Bronzen Adhemar*, 1972) and comics departments in art schools (*Institut Saint Lue*, was the first in Europe, 1969). Market wise, whereas the French-speaking side saw a decline of the established genre during these decades, the Dutch-speaking market remained stable and dominated by established irremovable authors (De Weyer, 2015). Flanders was last in undergoing the ultimate decline of the Belgian traditional periodical publication systems (*Suske en Wiske Weekblad*, 2003 and, *De Kiekeboes*, still published today).

During the late 1960s and 1970s we observe the renewal of the medium. Parallel to the maturation of their audience, the characters grow up, lose some of their "superpowers" and become more sensitive. New magazines appear like *Pilote* (originally French, with a Belgian edition in 1972) and specially, (\hat{A} Suivre), published in 1978 for the first time (*Wordt*

vervolgd, Dutch-speaking edition in 1980) by publisher Casterman, with the declared ambition to be recognised as literature. Some of the stories are later on published as albums with the title "the Novels" (*Les Romans (À Suivre)*) announcing the local birth of the graphic novel.

The renewal impregnated by the last wave of magazines soon takes off in the last decades of the 1900s and the first of 2000s which mark the ultimate decline of the Belgian periodical publication systems and the orientation towards albums and graphic novels. The topics evolve (more social and political) and so do the narrative and aesthetic techniques, with radically new page layout and colouring techniques. In this regard, we see the rise of a new phenomenon, small press, alternative or independent⁷ comics, congregating those authors not wanting to succumb to the commercial dictate and which becomes the cradle of a new modern comics genre, with Dutch-speaking authors prominence (De Weyer, 2015).

2.2. Legitimation of cultural goods through art and commerce

2.2.1. The cultural capital's approach

According to Bourdieu cultural field's theory (1983), fields are contexts constructed by individuals, with a defined set of positions and practices, whereby people relate to each other, mobilise their capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) and based on that, compete for a status. Fields are created and structured by individuals and, in turn, they are affected and impacted by them – this is their essential relational nature. Each field values differently the various forms of capital determining the power hierarchy. Furthermore, in each of these fields, individuals struggle for acquiring capital and for defining the very value of capital. In the particular field of cultural production, this occurs in such a way that, as posited by Bourdieu, "every critic takes part of the struggle for the monopoly of legitimate discourse about the work of art, and consequently in the production of the value of the work of art" (1983, p. 317). Thus, the value of capital is inherently relative, field-dependent and dynamic. In this sense, it is most common that each generation of artists struggles to overrun their predecessors, and installs a new movement whereby it will gain a more powerful position.

⁷ Small press relates to a quantitative economic value, in terms of revenue or number of titles. In the 1980s these group of publishers were known as "alternative" or "independent" comics, in opposition to the large publishing groups. In this study I will consistently refer to independent publishers, because this is a determinant trait in their strategy within the field, more than their size.

According to Bourdieu, the fields of economics and politics are major fields in the sense that they have a direct and powerful impact on all other fields. Bourdieu maintains that this struggle intrinsically defines the field of culture and divides it into two sub-fields, each of them dominated by a particular logic of hierarchisation: i) the restricted production, dominated by the notion of cultural capital and the autonomous principle of legitimation (art for art's sake) and; ii) the large-scale production, dominated by the notion of economic capital and the heteronomous principle of legitimation, based on external signs of success. This struggle stands as a quest for legitimacy, or "the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products" (Bourdieu, 1983, p.323). Historically, the field of cultural production has progressively been more self-determined by its own logic and, thus acquired more autonomy from the field of power. This has not led however to total independence and the field is sensitive to the principles of hierarchisation typically ruling the economic sphere. The autonomous and heteronomous dichotomy defined by Bourdieu (1983) is informative for the present research as far as it suggests a continuum and not an exclusive dual categorisation.

When looking into the field of comics more specifically, Boltanski's (1975) "The establishing of the cartoon field"⁸ in which he applies Bourdieu's field theory to the comics, is of particular relevance. He argued that from its origin until the 1960s, the comics had been dominated by large-scale production, showing little autonomy in regards to the economic field. The comics producers and production were led by market laws and success was pecuniary measured. Concurrently, cultural capital was irrelevant, the products were not appreciated, the profession was not considered such, the occupation was often a negative choice and the skills and talents were unnoticed. According to Boltanski (1975), contemporary evolutions of the audience, the creators, the publishers, the commentators and the scholars allowed for the advent of a comics *field*. A new generation of producers developed a new kind of relationship vis-à-vis their activity, with a greater cultural predisposition that defied their modest cultural status. In parallel, older and more educated readers approached comics more considerately, they recognised and respected the producers, commented upon the works and collected them. The university and intellectual field got interested in the comics, which was thus academically and aesthetically upgraded. Boltanski (1975) maintains that these evolutions, accompanied by the establishment of a mechanism that included awards, events, specialised press, museums, new publishers, and learning institutions, facilitated, in turn, the cumulation of symbolic capital and hence, the

⁸ In his original article (in French), Boltanski refers to Bande Dessinnée, which in the English abstract is translated as cartoon.

legitimation of the field. All these changes resulted in a new relationship between the producer and the product, henceforward becoming artists and artworks.

2.2.2. Dynamic Art Worlds

Bourdieu (1983) shares with Becker (1982) the importance of symbolic capital and the fact that art is not intrinsically so, but socially constructed and valued: art is "what an art world ratifies as art" (Becker, 1982, p.156). Whereas Bourdieu argues in terms of struggle, dispute and, conquest, Becker reasons in terms of social interaction and cooperative networks. According to Becker an *art world* is constituted by "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organised via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of artworks the art world is noted for" (1982, p.x). The artworld is thus constituted by all these actors interacting, the tangible and intangible resources needed for the creation, production and distribution of artworks and, the conventions that facilitate the understanding of their sustaining social organisation.

The state, in the name of the public welfare, is one of the actors interacting with and within the art worlds. Becker focusses on the law-making authority and the direct intervention through open support (heritage safeguard, grants for artists, production costs, training institutions, etc) or censorship. According to Becker (1982), the state, like any other agent in the network, pursues its own interest. This can relate to the preservation of public order, to encourage collective action or to develop a national culture, be it as an internal unity construction or to the eyes of other nations. The political goals and the possession of resources that can be distributed make the state a particular actor in the art world cooperative network. State intervention, including its likelihood and the preceding negotiations, give rise to a political dimension or art works. The present study will explore the role and tools of the state within the comics network and in which way it contributes to shaping it.

Furthermore, Becker (1982) sustains that art worlds are lively and, following shifts in the constituent elements, they can be -socially- upgraded and downgraded, appear and disappear, in a continuous or revolutionary fashion. Their success does not depend on the intrinsic characteristics of an innovative feature but rather on its collective recognition and mobilisation. Similarly, the sustainability of an art world depends on "an organisational basis that preserves it and protects it" (Becker, 1982, p.350). The historical evolution of an art world and its legitimation quest implies that the medium and the industry have a history or, a biography (Kopytoff, 1986). According to Kopytoff, enquiring about the biography of things implies interrogating about when did it appear or when was it done, who made it or was involved in its creation, for which reasons was it done, and what is its appreciation, or contestation. The biographical approach sets a continuum that includes past experiences but also a basis for future prospects. The cultural responses to such biographical details *-unquestionably* culturally constructed, according to the author- expose a series of aesthetic, historical and political judgements (valorisations, justifications, institutions ...), that shape our attitudes to objects labelled "art" (Kopytoff, 1986). The biographical approach along the commodity-singular continuum (Kopytoff, 1986) may for example detect a path-dependency pattern (North, 2005) amongst members of the field in the sense that any changes to the value chain as it was traditionally conformed may provoke inertia and even reluctance to a changing status.

2.3. Justification Logics & Political Economy of Goods

Central to the cultural economics discipline is the study of the value of art and culture. Historically, mainstream approaches studied the arts either with the economic analysis toolbox (Towse, 2010), or by looking at the place of culture within society, particularly the commercial and industrial world (Dekker, 2015). More contemporarily a third approach, combining the earlier ones, the "valuation approach", focuses on agents, devices and processes of valuation (Dekker, 2015). What is important for this approach is the "valuations, evaluations, deliberating, negotiating and conversing about the exchange" (Klamer, 2004, p. 145), whose ultimate outcome might be the price, or not. In line with the aforementioned biographical approach (Kopytoff, 1986), whatever the value is, it is not at all static but dynamic and context sensitive (production modes, funding, policy support, etc) and thus, subject to (de-)valorisation (Klamer, 2004). In this sense, for example, the valuation approach pays much attention to changes of status of a cultural good due to formation and changes in tastes and in the industry as a whole. Much importance is given to the coordination mechanisms needed to establish an exchange between supply and demand. Within this constellation, intermediaries are key players in the sense that they shape quality recognition and thus establish conventions (Dekker, 2015). Finally, another characteristic of this approach is the assimilation of cultural goods to symbolic goods and so their contribution to shape communities and identity (Dekker, 2015). We will see in subsequent sections how comics contribute to the shaping of identity in the case study.

Karpik adds to the valuation approach the notion of "singularities" -which at an earlier stage of his work, he would call qualities (Karpik, 1989) -. These are goods and services that are structured, uncertain and incommensurable (2010, p.10) and they lay at the core of an alternative market functioning in which quality competition prevails over price competition. The quality of those goods and services is assessed through a series of personal and impersonal judgement devices, based on trusted individuals or experts or critics opinions respectively. For them to be functional and reliable, these devices need to be coordinated, through a series of regimes that enable knowledge circulation and thus facilitate consumer decisions. Both types of judgement devices are active in the field of comics. We will see for instance how relevant the bestsellers lists are, not only for the valuation of titles or genres but for the very functioning of the industry. The activation and functioning of personal devices, "the knowledge circulation" (Karpik, p. 184) in the comics field, embodied by family and friends, is most noticeable in the "family series" and the nostalgia frequently evoked. The trade network, made up of sellers and buyers that by sharing and relating to a shared reality, establish mutual trust (Karpik, p. 185). In this regard, it is noticeable how relevant selling points are in defining the comics field, the medium, the quality and judgement devices. This proximity and thrust is particularly relevant for the small and independent players. Finally, the practitioner network (p. 186) allows peers and actors in the field to share standards, benchmarks, trends in a coordinated manner so that their structuration allows comparisons and correction of practices. The latter is not formalised in the comics field and it is uncertain how much shared criteria exist and order establish. The current study will show certain features that show the existence of such networks, with different examples throughout history.

Whilst Boltanski' early work (1975) is broadly credited as the comic's foundational legitimation following Bordieu's field theory, (1983) his later work (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) on "the orders of worth", is more closely associated with the valuation approach. Both scholars distinguish between the civic, the inspired, the domestic, the market, and the industrial worlds, and the world of fame. The established conventions and quality standards are the base for the mode of justification used to advance the respective worlds' position. Thereafter, their interactions become sources of tension and conflict that eventually lead to concessions and turn into compromises. Not only it is possible that multiple worlds dispute in a concomitant way but also that the same person, with different hats, can promote different value logics, at different times. Thus, multiple modes of justification evaluate the agreements between the different worlds and their respective

legitimacy claims. The intersection between the market and the inspired worlds is typical for the cultural industries. Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) pragmatic sociology offers thus a framework to analyse the actors' justifications in market and non-market arrangements, swinging from working routines and standardisation; to marketability and public appeal; using industrial yet hand-craft production modes; aspiring to financial viability; purchased by public opinion, yet hardly notorious; showing creativeness and pushing for innovation; getting the attention of policy through mobilisation; permitted to being inspired and creative and being recognised for creating artworks.

The two researchers offer us a series of dichotomies that delineate a course whereby legitimacy has acquired different meanings throughout history and geography. The notion of justification moderates the art versus market discussion, by incorporating other values than commercial ones. The latter, frequently signified when justifying commerce or art, bring us to the terrain of intrinsic motivation (Frey & Jegen, 2001). Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) provide the theoretical tools to interpret multiple combinations of the negotiations between art and commerce and, within political economy considerations.

Whereas the notion of fields and worlds are basis to understand the negotiations and compromise between art and commerce, I take from the political economy the insight that any field is affected by the State, through policies and regulations and also while being immobile. Government direct intervention is manifold and is only but one of the political aspects influencing the arts. As suggested by Frey (2003), the influence of political aspects in the arts goes beyond the state. His political economy approach focuses on the links between market and politics and, the causality issues between both institutions. He addresses this influence through different angles: i) political considerations leading to state support of the arts; ii) the state support schemes (e.g. direct, indirect); and iii) the institutional role of market, politics and bureaucracy in providing, generating and/or facilitating art. In regard of the latter, one of the Government's approaches to supporting art is, "making market more marketable" as expressed by Frey (2003, p.116). Thus, an approach that contributes to improving production and sales conditions and thus facilitates the market.

The notion of "cultural industry" is yet another example of the negotiation between worlds of worth. In Throsby's words, by putting the concept within the sphere of economic activity, with links to knowledge economy, creativity, innovation and new technologies, the concept "might help to legitimise culture in the eyes of hard-headed economic policy-makers" (Throsby, 2010, p.7). Precisely, the label "industry" is key in exploring the place and value of culture within society and the economy with an economic development perspective (Dekker, 2015).

Focusing on the subject of the present study, Throsby's concentric circles model (Throsby, 2001) itself, shows the negotiation and justification struggle by placing literature and visual arts at the core of creative arts and publishing and print media in the wider cultural industries. He acknowledges though the porosity and cross-fertilisation between the circles. Indeed, the publishing industry is generally led by the market, with allegedly little public intervention. The example of comics will bring us back and forth from these lines and signify a role of the state in the provision of the book content.

3. Methodology

The present research project is an attempt to address legitimation of the comics medium in Belgium with a particular insight in the role of the publishing industry and the state. The negotiations therein and their respective evolution are operationalised throughout the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the Belgian publishing industry and the state legitimise respectively the comics field?

RQ1A: What strategies do agents undertake in order to transform comics into a more recognized form of art?

RQ1B: How this has historically changed and which main events contributed to the legitimation evolution?

RQ2: What is the role of partnerships and networks in the legitimation processes?

I used two complementary techniques to unwrap the contestation and legitimation of comics. Firstly, public reports and other publicly available information provided contextual information. Secondly, qualitative semi-structure interviews supplemented the literary review. Both techniques are key in answering all the research questions.

I purposely distanced the present research from the most notorious comics countries by focusing the attention on a small, yet, significant player: Belgium. The country certainly shares with France the honour of being the cradle of the European tradition of comics. Half of the country also shares, at first sight, a market with France. But Belgium cannot be collapsed into France. The country has two major language groups (French and Dutch-speaking) that separate politics and policy determinants⁹, historical traditions¹⁰, artistic conventions¹¹, commerce modes, industry conducts and, markets. Henceforth, Belgium is a comparative case-study in itself, with an insight into the French and Dutchspeaking scenes. The existing similarities and differences have been fertile ground for analysing the comics quest for legitimation and the result is presented in the further sections. The existence of a federal intersection makes the case study richer and also more challenging. Furthermore, the solid institutional and market segmentation make it even

⁹ Belgium is a federal state with two types of federated entities (Regions and Communities). The three regions (Walloon Region, the Flemish Region, and the Brussels-Capital Region) are competent for matters related to the notion of territoriality, including economic affairs and employment. The three Communities (the French Community, the Flemish Community and the German-speaking Community) are responsible for matters related to the individuals, like culture and education. Social security is a federal responsibility. The Communities and Regions have sole jurisdiction over the international aspects of the areas under their responsibility.

¹⁰ See for example Bellefroid, T. (2016). The Belgian comic book is dead, long live the Flemish comic book?, RTBF, 15/06/2016.

¹¹See for example Baetens, J., (2007). Vue de Belgique francophone, la bande dessinée flamande n'est pas une... bande dessinée.

arduous to refer to "Belgian" comics. Yet, historical references, foreign recognition and national pride seem to support the value of a Belgian label. In a pioneer global comics publication Berndt (2010) reflects about the frequent tendency of comics discourse to nationalise its subject. This tendency, she argues, has been useful in two unrelated struggles: advancing the domestic cultural status and gaining international market shares. The choice of the present case study does not intend to nationalise the subject but rather show diversity within one single "nation" and how legitimation is so context sensitive. We will see whether domestic cultural status and international market shares have been and are differently affected.

There are a number of studies¹² about the comics legitimation process in the case of France that are likely assimilated to the French-speaking part of Belgium and, by extension, sometimes also the whole country. However, the literature review prior to this research revealed a certain vacuum in the study of the country particularities.

The literature consulted includes but is not limited to academic sources, both general and with a very specific focus on comics. The literature review includes also many non-academic, yet specialised, sources like policy documents, institutional reports, blogs, directories, bulletins, etc. The theory of this thesis is based on sociological and cultural economics concepts that support understanding of the legitimation processes, the industry and the role of the state. The literature review is enriched with secondary data mainly collected from official statistics (supply and demand) and industry data (industry sales, market concentration, product distribution, etc.). These figures support a descriptive strategy in regards to the industry, the market and their respective weight within the broader publishing industry. The collecting process was simpler in the case of Frenchspeaking industry. The size of the industry and the market in the French-speaking context facilitate the existence of data and the interest about them. However, the intertwining of French-speaking Belgian industry and market with those of France, complicates the analysis: 74% of the book market is made of imported books while 62% of the national production is exported -87% in the case of the comics production- (ADEB, 2020). Most important, French-speaking Belgian publishing houses are actually owned by French groups¹³. Note that figures collected by the Belgian French-Speaking publishing houses include also books written in Dutch.

¹² See for example Boltanski (1975), Groensteen (2006).

¹³ French groupe Média-participations owns Dargaud, Lombard and Dupuis, whereas Gallimard owns Casterman.

On the other hand, obtaining similar statistics for the Dutch-speaking sector proved far more complicated as this is not centrally available and disaggregated in such a detail. Boek.be gathers the Flemish booksellers, the general publishers and the educational and scientific publishers but they are in a bankruptcy procedure and it was impossible to reach them. Their reports, based on GFK figures (GFK, 2020) from earlier years gather data from the main bookselling surfaces and not independent bookshops and thus, data, in terms of comics, are partial. A very detailed analysis about titles published is offered by a specialised website that collects those figures in a handcrafted way (Steenhuyse, 2021). Similar to the French-speaking scene, the industry and the market are partially infused to the Netherlands. Although audiences seem to differ very much, certain processes are cross border (prizes, statistics collection, etc). Although challenging, the data collection did not negatively affect the identification of trends – some of them were moreover complementarily confirmed by interviewees. Ultimately, this different collection process provided clues into the research questions themselves and the various recognitions in two different linguistic communities.

The research questions were operationalised through a series of semi-structured interviews with sixteen actors which entailed almost fifteen hours of recording¹⁴. I interviewed slightly more women than men, which was not intentional and which seems to contest the common idea that comics is a men's world (also mentioned during several interviews). Initially, I used purposive and typical case sampling thus sampling cases in a strategic way so that the persons interviewed are relevant to the posed research questions (Bryman, 2016). Participants were strategically identified because of their positioning within the comics milieu, and the role they represent. Initially, I distinguished between institutional agents (supporting in one way or the other the creation and/or publication of comics) and industry (small and big publishers as well as association of publishers). Early in the process, however, I realised that frequently, their position was not at all static and that often, one person had had a professional role in a given moment and a different one some other time. Some of them held different functions simultaneously. I enquired on that through the research process. Very early in the research process, I also realised that I had to integrate snowball sampling in my methodology. As I contacted relevant actors, they would suggest additional interviewees. This process also introduced into my research a

¹⁴ The interviewees signed a consent form agreeing with the research procedure and treatment of their data on tape. These forms are available upon request.

third category of interviewees: the experts. In-text citations in this thesis follow these three categories preceded by a letter to individualise them.

In an anthropologist approach, Boyer (2008) defines experts as follows: "an actor who has developed skills in semiotic-epistemic competence for, and attentional concern with, some sphere of practical activity" (2008, p.39). In the present study, these are curators, directors of museums/galleries/centres, specialised journalists, critics, historians and authors. I interviewed authors, less in their creating capacity but rather as editors and actors in the political economy of comics. These experts also share the fact that they have acquired their expertise *processually* (Boyer, 2008), often throughout different positions and that this *expertisation* is part of the comics' political economy at play. In a strictly market framework these experts would probably also be gatekeepers, understood as those intermediaries that "provide information and form consumers tastes for all sorts of cultural products" (Towse, 2010). In the present research though, the expert category indicates an influence beyond consumption, consumers and market.

Additionally, this methodological spin-off reconfirmed that the medium is a relatively small field with a fairly small collaborative network. It is noteworthy mentioning that the relative communitarian balance of interviewees does not imply a mirror in their respective roles. The categorisation of interviewees was instrumental in highlighting the role of each of the agents throughout history and, also confirm the establishment of partnerships and networks, albeit temporal. The present account does not claim to be history but a story constructed by the accounts of the different agents, following the place they occupy within the comics network (Bourdieu, 1986). In this case, oral history and open-ended questions were most useful in capturing interviewees' respective narrative.

I based the interviews on scripts that included two main topics, mirroring the research questions. The interview guide was adapted to capture the specificities of the respective agents' groups and linguistic group (an all-inclusive guide can be consulted in Appendix 1). They were also adapted on the go, depending on the topics addressed by the interviewees themselves, which incited follow-up questions.

Given the COVID-19 sanitary measures in place at the time of doing this research, the interviews took place digitally (some with camera, others with only audio and one via email following interviewees' preferences). Whereas this certainly facilitated the planning and organisation of the interviews, I consider this to be a limiting feature added to the "zoom fatigue" (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020). Meeting the actors in their milieu could have first, enlarged their biographical reflections and secondly, given me access to additional resources and further narrative context. Finally, I was not able to visit the Libraries of the *Centre belge de la bande dessinée*, the Flemish Documentation Centre for the Comic Strip (Turnhout Library).

The methodology used in this research involved elements of ethnography (Bryman, 2016) research method whereby I was an active part immersed in the research. I have certainly listened and engaged in conversations (Bryman, 2016), interpelling interviewees and contrasting opinions with given responses. My prior knowledge about the topic and also about the country and its governance structure has helped me in understanding the context and grasping the nuances therein.

Data was mainly analysed thematically, meaning that themes detected within the conversations from the interviewees were identified, analysed, organised, described and reported (Braun & Clarke, 2017). The analysis of the interviews proceeded according to the structural coding method (Saldana, 2009) as it fit the diversity of participants and the semi-structured interview style. The codes identified related generally to the roles, responsibilities and competencies (eg. public institution, advisor, big and small publishing houses, etc.); those events, processes that marked a change; keywords (eg. quality); definition (eg. medium, genre, field, art, etc.); processes (industry, market, creation, etc.); specific features (eg. gender, nostalgy); legitimation strategies (eg. prizes, education instances, heritage, visual art, etc.); comparisons with neighbouring countries with (eg. France and Netherlands); or a keyword to denote change for example. Whereas some codes derived from a deductive analysis (eg. legitimation strategies) others emerged from an inductive analysis (eg. gender perspective) and thus data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2017). This coding method has been useful in associating topics, detecting patterns and categorising themes.

The codes were subsequently ranged in themes. The themes were labelled in a selfexplanatory fashion, facilitating an immediate understanding by the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Themes and codes can be consulted in Appendix 2. The analysis of the data structured throughout the themes has thereafter been described and interpreted in connection literature (Braun & Clarke, 2017). The results are organized such that I first start describing definitional concerns; Secondly, I describe the industry and market structure; Thirdly, I portray the state's positions and evolutions; Fourth, I address legitimation processes; and fifth, I reflect upon challenges and future perspectives.

4. Results

4.1. Definition, what's in a name...

"It's not because I call the shack in my garden a castle, that it becomes one" (B Expert, 2021).

In the course of this research, I crossed tens of diverging definitions of comics and mostly ambiguous. I also encountered a supposedly non-definitional definition one proposed by Groensteen (2006), *un objet culturel non identifiable* (an unidentifiable cultural object). The latter nonetheless delineates a *cultural* nature, which as we will see, but one of comics traits. The multiple definitions seem to coincide with referring to the visual (image, illustration, graphic) and the text (words, story, literature, narrative). Or, plainly described: "it's a kind of bastard between literature and visual arts" (E Expert, 2021; Groensteen, 2006). In the absence of explicit categories, exemplary authors serve the purpose of embodying a combination of qualities which supposedly are broadly understood and accepted (Dekker, 2016), like in the following interview: "Everybody feels that a work of for example, Judith Vanistendael or Brecht Evens is really equal to literary fiction. You can say that Over from *Jommeke*, the real commercial, is not" (B Public, 2021).

Worldwide, the words used for the medium (if we assume there is one) have different departing points and stress the medium, the format or the attributes differently. *Bande dessinée* literally means "drawn strips" and refers to an European tradition which is strongest in the French-speaking countries. Contemporary American *comics* are a lot broader than the original humoristic stories no longer limited to the humoristic strips. *Manga* are internationally known as anything originated in Japan whereas domestically it refers to one single genre amongst the tens if not hundreds of them. Translation of those names, adds confusion to the definitional struggle because it integrates other cultural layers that refer to different traditions: "It is not only about the youth consuming books. It is about importing an entire culture, with its rituals and specific derived products" (Groensteen, 2006). Use of foreign names can also imply hierarchization like for example, both Dutch-speaking literary institutions, in Flanders¹⁵ and in The Netherlands¹⁶, refer to *graphic novels* (in English), in their Dutch-speaking websites. Unlike the Dutch *beeldroman*, the

¹⁵ https://www.literatuurvlaanderen.be

¹⁶ http://www.letterenfonds.nl

English original is believed to carry a bigger cultural capital that directly connects it to the art (C Public, 2021). This perception seems confirmed by the interviews "it seemed that a lot of authors (and editors) saw it as an appreciation and revaluation of themselves and their work if they could enter the graphic novel Pantheon" (B Expert, 2021)

The unclear definition has many implications, industry, social and institutional wise. Institutionally, for example, because comics are books, they generally fall into the Literature institutions where the medium's other qualities get shadowed. All comics are considered fiction in the *Nederlandstalige Uniforme Rubrieksindeling*¹⁷ (Dutch Uniform Classifications), including autobiographies, journalistic works and history accounts. Comics' creators can be artists, authors or nothing of the kind, with dissimilar working patterns than their "peers" in terms of dedication, temporality performance and pecuniary gains (A, C Publish, 2021) with very concrete impact on their social and fiscal realities. In the following sections, we will see how this absence of uncontested definition and the ambiguous references have implications in a largely contested field.

4.2. Comics publishing industry: a regional importance4.2.1. A snapshot of Belgian books-comics industry

"Comics is part of the Belgian DNA" (A Publish, 2021) or how a cultural good contributes to shape communities and identity (Dekker, 2015).

The book industry is characterized by a chain of activities performed by a series of actors that subsequently add value to the product (Thompson, 2012). Whereas the complexity of the value chain tends to determine stability within the chain, changes in working practices, economic developments and technological advances can all impact the publishing chain (Thompson, 2012). Traditionally, the publisher is the node of the book business that deals with aggregation, presentation (reading, editing, designing), pricing and marketing of books, and liaises or integrates other intermediaries and specialised workforce (authors, agents, wholesalers and retailers). Contemporarily, this node has been shaken with the introduction of e-books and the break-through of online retail.

Whereas all forms of capital are important for a publishing firm, the economic and symbolic are the ones determining its position in the trade publishing field. The value of a book can be twofold: its economic viability and profitability (economic capital); and its quality or potential for recognition, reviews, prizes, etc. (quality, symbolic capital)

¹⁷ https://www.boek.nl/nur

(Thompson, 2012). The weight of these two is relative to the publisher and the positive or negative relation between the two depends very much on external actors' reaction to it.

The book publishing market is characterised by a cohabitation of an oligopoly and monopolistic competition, illustrated by a high concentration (Hoskins et al., 2004) and high fragmentation. The earlier is shown by the 62% of the general book French-speaking publishing industry being dominated by four firms and 87% of the total market being dominated by the biggest eight firms (Livres Hebdo, 2018). Note that only one of those, Media participation, also publishes comics. These big groups coexist with many small players, which is partly explained by the low (if not free) entry barriers to the industry (Navarrete, 2020). For example, in Belgium, where there are 489 enterprises, the average of employees is 5,4 (Eurostat, 2021). Self-publishing has diminished even further the entry barriers to new authors, especially on the e-book markets (Towse, 2010), although the impact of this on the European market¹⁸ (Association des éditeurs belges, 2020) and particularly the comics is still "peanuts size" (A Publish, 2021). However, this size is the one that is captured by the official statistics. Said dual pattern has been further amplified in the last two decades with a wave of acquisitions and mergers and further atomisation of small publishers occupying many niches. The only disaggregated data available in the comics publishing sector is for French-speaking Europe, where there were 384 specialised publishers in 2016. The three biggest and twelve other important structures made up for 67% of the market, which would suggest a slightly smaller concentration than in the general publishing sector (Ratier & ACBD, 2017).

Today, most of the Belgian big publishing houses are, in one way or another, in French hands (Madrigall and Media participations) but they are led and run from Belgium and by Belgians. More than 75% of albums production in Belgium is exported. 75% of the comics sold in France are produced by the three Belgian main publishers (Dupuis, Lombard and Casterman). Belgian authors and Belgian-made comics saturate the French bestselling lists. Despite the abundant translations, original Dutch-speaking authors lead the bestselling list in Dutch-speaking Belgium. The phenomenon of independent (alternative) publishing houses is very vibrant in French-speaking Belgium and a number of them, most commonly originated from collective artists groups, are frontrunners in creative comics art¹⁹.

 ¹⁸ For example, 25% of French-speaking Belgian production is digital but 94% of it is production is on the Human Sciences book sector (which is an important publishing sector in Belgium). This production entails 8% of the total book annual revenue.
 ¹⁹ Partenariat interprofessionel du livre et l'édition numérique : BD alternative et microédition (https://pilen.be/sites/default/files/documents/maisoneditionbelge-bdalt_microedition.pdf)

Belgium has a population of almost 11,5 million inhabitants (Statbel, 2021) with a roughly 60%-40% Dutch-speaking and French-speaking divide. French-speaking publishers'²⁰ turnover in 2019 was slightly over \notin 270 million, both for the domestic and international market and paper and electronic format. From this, \notin 86 million were comics²¹ related, which shows the prominence of this genre within the overall publishing market size (26%). \notin 72.65 million euros were published in French language for export and \notin 10.13 million for the domestic French-speaking market. Some of the comics classics have sold as much as 300 million copies (*Lucky Luc*) or 200 million copies (*Tintin adventures*, *Bob and Bobette*) and translated to more than 70 languages (*Tintin adventures*). 1,136 comic books titles were published in 2017 out of a total of 9,876 (Association des éditeurs belges, 2020). The books and press publishing represent about 23% of the total creative industries in Wallonia and Brussels (Lazzaro & Lowies, 2014).

The Belgian Dutch-speaking book industry is very much interwoven with the Dutch one, adding 17 million Dutch-speaking inhabitants to the 6.5 million Belgian Dutch-speakers (Flanders literature, 2021). The overall turnover of the Flemish book industry in 2019 was € 190 million (GFK, 2020), which equals around 11% of the creative industry in Flanders (Flanders literature, 2021). The Belgian creative industry is economically stronger in Flanders (59%) than in Wallonia (14%) and Brussels (27%) (Lazzaro & Lowies, 2014). Comic books were almost 7% of the total revenue and 13% of the book units sold (GFK, 2020). 1,410 comic books were released (85% of which were new releases) of which 500 were from Dutch-speaking authors (Steenhuyse, 2021) from around 11,000 new book titles (Flanders literature, 2021). Five out of the twenty bestsellers in 2019 were comics (GFK, 2020). However, statistics collected by GFK do not include all the independent comic bookshops and thus the figures do not adequately reflect the reality.

In comparison, in France the global turnover in 2019 was \in 2.8 billion. Comics was the 6th publishing category with 15% of the market share (\in 307 million). In the US, the revenue for printed comics reached \$ 1.21 billion in 2019 (Statista, 2020), out of a net revenue of the US book publishing industry of around \$ 26 billion, which means a meagre 5% of the total book market for comics related sells. In Japan, according to the All Japan magazine and book publishers and editors' association (2020) the manga industry earned about \$ 5.7 billion in 2019, which entailed a rise of 23% from the previous year and equals around 40% of the overall publishing market (\in 14.12 billion in 2019). Comic Book Market

²⁰ According to the French-speaking Belgian publishing houses (ADEB, Association des Editeurs belges) "French-speaking publishing house" are those whose headquarters are in Féderation Wallonie-Bruxelles.

Research Report 2020-2026 (Industry Growth Insights, 2020) presents a total market size of \$ 3.8 billion in 2020, from which Asia Pacific represented about 41%, North America about 28% and Europe 23%.

The e-book market is estimated to represent a scarce 6-7% of the total European book market, in comparison to a 25% in the US (Statista, 2020). In French-speaking Belgium this is less than 8% but almost in its entirety it relates to scientific, school and professional social sciences editions (Association des éditeurs belges, 2020). The digitization rate of comics in Europe is generally very low and it is very difficult to have access to the figures (Eudicom, 2021). French-speaking comics publishing houses get less than 1% of their revenues from the digital books (Association des éditeurs belges, 2020). Izneo is the biggest digital platform in Europe aggregating content (*Bande dessinné*, comic books, graphic novels, *mangas*, webtoons, etc.) from around 250 publishers²². Their declared objective is to bring digital comics book to the digital entertainment arena and attract new readers.

The figures presented above do not add up and highlight different aspects which are not consistently comparable (number of titles, revenues, exports, % of book industry, % of creative industry, etc.). That is an illustration of how difficult is to collect adequate figures worldwide of a market which is both rich and a niche, with intersections with other mediums and industries counted for differently, with categories that are not standardised nor counted for equally, with blurred ownership following a massive trend of mergers and acquisitions and, with substantial digital-paper world-wide divide. Nevertheless, we can safely assume that: i) the comics global market is sizeable and represents a considerable proportion of the overall book publishing industry; ii) there are three main poles and the European is the smallest; iii) the comics production, its weight in the overall books domestic production and its consumption is moderately important in the Dutch-speaking part and is relatively diluted in a significant creative industry landscape; iv) the Frenchspeaking comics industry is a remarkable leading sector within the book publishing sector, which in turn has a prominent position within the creative industries in the region; and, insofar, digital production and consumption is not a relevant issue.

4.2.2. Diverse actors and strategies

"Finding a way to publish an artefact is always less a problem than producing it"

²² It is available in French, Dutch, English, German and Italian.

(B Expert, 2021).

Or rather... "Creating, anybody can do it. Selling, that is something else!" (A Publish, 2021).

4.2.2.1. Big publishers

The modest size of Belgian market stimulates the search for collaboration and joint ventures to ensure economies of scale (A Publish, 2021). Several models of collaboration have historically existed in the Belgian publishing arena: merging roles within the value chain, international cooperation with language peer markets and, domestic collaboration with a different language but with similar cultural patterns (A Publish, 2021). We find an example of the first category type in Dupuis and Casterman, two of the main comics publishers which were originally printers (Groensteen, 2009). French-speaking publishing houses (e.g. Dupuis, Casterman) became bilingual publishing houses developed *Tintin* and Spirou in Dutch and subsequently they developed a Dutch-speaking catalogue. For decades Lombard collaborated with French Dargaud and with Dutch-speaking publishing houses like Standaard Uitgeverij. Dutch-speaking publishing houses started their own production and catalogues, which also included bilingual products like Suske en Wiske (Bob et Bobette in French). Authors and series were published in both languages but French-speaking publishing houses were the market leaders. Dutch-speaking publishers were not successful in finding alliances in the Netherlands for joint publishing initiatives. Today, there are no longer bilingual publishing houses but translations are produced by subsidiaries or licensing. Licensing is particularly relevant for attaining some profitability beyond a market the size of the Dutch-speaking one (C Publish, 2021). The licensing capacity of independent publishers is however limited and thus their vulnerability is amplified.

The advent of the comics publishing industry is the fusion of an industrial production model that supposes rationalisation and standardisation with an artisanal one, using more rudimentary tools (Berthou, 2010). The early comics publishing houses used a dual management model, typical with cultural organisations, to address what is often considered an unbridgeable dual mission: the quality of artistic content and, the operational, organisational and economic viability (Cray et al., 2007) and which is frequently meant to preserve the autonomy of the artistic pole (Kleppe, 2018). The dual management model embodies the market and inspired worlds (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006), which implies constant negotiation and compromise between both creation and publishing production modes' needs and possibilities and their impacts. The vanishing of

the model in the contemporary industry posits the question of the existing poles, whether there is tension, how is this negotiated and how compromises are reached, or not (Berthou, 2010). Traditionally, the independent publishers had a single person undertaking the two functions with an open priority on artistic creativity above industrial rationality.

The comics publishing sector, like the general publishing sector (Canoy et al., 2006), and despite the generous statistics, shows signs of stagnation, with constant increased publications (Association des éditeurs belges, 2020) but steady readership (C Publish, 2021). Although the COVID-19 pandemic sanitary measures restricting mobility showed an increase in sales, this has not been accompanied by an increase in audience (A Publish, 2021). Similar to other cultural goods, the books experience uncertain reception by the consumers - the *nobody knows principle* (Canoy et al., 2006)-. Nowadays, this uncertainty is confronted with a supply-only logic based on a prototype-based model. In the past, the series model offered the possibility to monetise the work in progress in the comics sector (Groensteen, 2009). Nowadays, the research and development of the prototypes take place live in the bookshop and the fact that many series start and finish abruptly is a proof of it as suggested by an interviewee (A Publish, 2021). This investment on new authors, new paths and graphic styles, more likely to be non-profitable, is compensated by bestsellers (D Publish, 2021).

The "bestsellerisation of the market" (D Publish, 2021) is only possible for big publishers and the possibility of cross-subsidising books within a portfolio turns into one of the main advantages of big publishers in regards to independent publishers (D Publish, 2021). This strategy, common to other cultural industries, prioritises the marketplace hunting over quality concerns (Lungheretti, 2019). Additionally, this strategy is leading to the authors' decreasing remuneration and thus, worsening working conditions (Lungheretti, 2019; D Publish, 2021).

The bestseller phenomenon brings along another phenomenon which is the "locomotive", meaning that bestsellers increase sales of other titles. Asterix, which is the best seller in the global French-speaking market (1,5 million copies in France of the last album), by itself can have an impact on the increase of the general book sector' sales figures. As it happens, it is frequent in the sector to use "Asterix indexes", to disaggregate

sales figures broken down into "with" and "without Asterix" and, refer to annual trends as "(non-)Asterix year" (A, D Publish, 2021)²³.

These phenomena are coupled, as much in the trade book in general as in the comics sector in particular, with a super production strategy that entails a fast rotation of novelties. This, critically favours big publishers and shadows independent publishers with competition from the industrial weight, all the scale production' benefits (marketing, commercial, communication, etc) and the cross-subsidising possibilities. The continuous growth of the comics production also has as a consequence the growth of opportunities for authors to get published. Being published however, does not necessarily mean making a living out of it. As a matter of fact, and acknowledged by the industry, the profession is increasingly pauperised (D Publish, 2021). The authors' poor economic conditions, and thus the underfinance of creative production, results in a deconstruction of the market and weakens the creative production' legitimation process (A Publish, 2021).

4.2.2.2. Independent publishers

The 1990s saw new expressive means that pushed the boundaries of the comics towards other arts developed visually (etching, photography, sculpting, etc.), literary (new genres appeared as the autobiography) and format-wise (escaping serialisation and standardisation of albums, multiplying the 48 pages album and reducing its size, avoiding categorisation and printing in black and white). In the past, serialisation had been determinant in imprinting the Franco-Belgian comics tradition and two of its most distinguishable characters: the clear line drawing tradition and the album as a standardised 48-pages format (Guilbert, 2011). Transcending that tradition involved an artistic approach which was accompanied by a refusal of commercial rules, in a clear articulation of the commerce versus art dichotomy. "For us, from the moment there were commercial constraints, that would lead to concessions and precisely what we were artistically aimed at was to shake concessions and norms" (A Expert, 2021). Admittedly, this move aimed at finding an intellectual legitimation and abandon the entertainment sphere. The establishment of independent publishing houses was seen by the art groups as the only solution beyond the classic structures. In this context, Frémok was funded in 2002, as

²³ See for example : "Astérix» dope le marché de la BD francophone" (Asterix stimulates comics market), Le Figaro 30/12/2009 ; "Le marché de la BD sauvé par Asterix » (Comics market saved by Asterix), Le Figaro, 29/1/2014 ; «évolution du secteur hors Astérix : +6" (The evolution ofhte market without Asterix was +6%), in "2019, année féconde pour le 9ème art ", Syndicat de la Librarie française, 21/1/2020 ; "L'indice Astérix, le ratio Sattouf, le coeff' Adèle" (Index Asterix, ratio Sattouf and Adele coefficient), Livres Hebdo, 2/2/2021.

fusion of prior associations *Amok* and *Fréon*, both funded in 1994)²⁴, *L'Employé du mois* in 2000²⁵, *La Cinquième couche*²⁶ in 1993 and a series of micropublishing initiatives. Whereas they share the objective to not be categorized and the realization of group survival (some economies of scale after all), they are very different structures, made of very diverse identities with varied goals and interests (Dony et al., 2014) "They are creative conveyors but also political players with a vision of what comics field is. These are certainly actors that have done much for the recognition of the field as we know it" (H Expert, 2021).

The growing interest in these new actors by the audience triggered interest from everyone in the field, from bookshops to festivals, from scholars to press and from public institutions to big publishers. The latter started adopting artisanal methods, innovative forms and formats created by independent publishers causing independent publishers' resentment for what they considered misappropriation. Leading actors admit that the relationship between the two types of publishers, exemplary of the art and commerce poles, were for years very much contentious (A Expert, 2021; A Public, 2021). Independent publishers awoke the interest of the public institutions and demanded compensation of the produced symbolic capital for the lack of economic capital. What independent publishers brought into the field -the continuous creative renewal, riskier, newer, younger talent (Rolland, 2009).- was henceforward recognised by the state.

Albeit with different origins from the French-speaking collective initiatives, the Dutch-speaking independent publishing houses *Bries*²⁷ and *Oogachtend*²⁸ have been critically influential in the renewal of the Dutch-speaking comics scene and the international breakthrough of Dutch-speaking authors (Meesters, 2014). Both French-speaking and Dutch-speaking independent scenes share an artisanal production mode, a taste for departing from classic standards and their imprint for a changing field and its institutional recognition. The multiple hats phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the independent publishing scene *Bries* publisher doubles as a gallery and a comics bookshop whereas *Oogachtend* triples with a bookshop and a distribution company.

A new type of independent publishers is now arising, different from the creation oriented type mentioned earlier as they are not authors-led or independent from the big publishers. They are commercially led but focused on specific genres and thus smaller

²⁴ www.fremok.org

²⁵ www.employe-du-moi.org

²⁶ www.5c.be

²⁷ www.bries.be

²⁸ www.oogachtend.be

niches markets, like music related comics (Concertobooks²⁹), nonfiction comics (Soulfood³⁰), etc. (C Publish, 2021).

4.2.2.3. The present juncture

Historically, publishing was a steady industry that had established a strong value chain (publishers, distributors, bookshops, etc.). "The book industry is characterised by relatively few market failures and these can be relatively easily corrected with market instruments" (Canoy et al., 2006, p.757). Not differently from the general books field, that was for a long time how the comics field was perceived by public institutions: autonomous, popularly appreciated, profitable market, solely supported by the industry, mainly big publishers and no need to be publicly supported. However, the whole chain is now observing a series of serious impacts. First, the impact of digital revolution as well in the creation as in the production and distribution strands. Secondly, the constant advance of foreign competitors (mangas, webtoons, etc.) with a different cultural and economic model. Thirdly, the endless choice makes the competition for audience's attention most fierce (Lanham, 2006). And fourthly, an unbalance between the different strands with increasing vulnerability on the creating actors. The COVID-19 pandemic and the related measures reducing mobility have put everything on hold, affecting some agents in the production chain more than others. The movements are slow and modest and they respond to a conservative determination of actors whose survival depends on the perpetuation of the industry as it is and hence they act as constraints on present choices (North, 2005). This is confirmed by actors in the field who refer to the present approach as "damage control" with increasingly more conservative and less risky initiatives (E Expert, 2021). Another one concedes while everybody hopes for new chances, new position in the market and new audiences the movements are very much shy (C Publish, 2021).

4.3. The multi-layered state

Public institutions have their own interest in supporting culture and arts (Becker, 1982). The political goals and the ownership, use and potential allocation of resources make the state (in all its levels) a particular actor in the art world cooperative network (Becker, 1982). Political considerations leading to state support are manifold and can relate to cultural heritage safeguard, promotion of national identity, public and cultural

²⁹ https://concerto.amsterdam/en/concertobooks/

³⁰ http://www.soulfoodcomics.nl

diplomacy, social impact (promotion of readership), economics (dynamism of a certain economic sector). The ways these considerations operationalise have an impact in providing, generating and facilitating art (or not) (Frey, 2003). State support to the art can take the following forms: i) advancement of arts and cultural education (within the general curriculum and in specialised forms in Higher education); ii) legislation on creators and artists' statutes; iii) direct or indirect support measures to the cultural industries; iv) other less obvious like local development support or cultural diplomacy; and v) support to creation. In Belgium, state support materialises in different legislative and administrative levels that do not necessarily lead to policy unicity and coherence.

Belgium is a federal state with two types of federated entities (Regions and Communities). The three regions (Walloon Region, the Flemish Region, and the Brussels-Capital Region) are competent for matters related to the notion of territoriality, including economic affairs and employment. The three Communities (the French Community³¹, the Flemish Community and the German-speaking Community) are responsible for matters related to the individuals, like culture and education. The Communities and Regions have sole jurisdiction over the international aspects of the areas under their responsibility.

For long time, comics as a field was publicly unnoticed with outstanding exceptions (see below about the original comics collection in Liège). Nowadays, scattered and humble as it can be state intervention on the comics sector touches upon several components: institutional recognition, working conditions for artists (in general), artistic and cultural education policy, promotion abroad and heritage policy. Cross-sector interventions are unnoticeable and cross-country initiatives are an exception.

From censorship to education

In 1955, following the steps of France, the US, Portugal, West Germany and New Zealand, the Belgian Ministry of Education published a pamphlet (Decaigny, 1955) warning about the dangers of the comics form in terms of school development, mental health and even delinquency (De Weyer, 2015). This pamphlet was largely distributed amongst publishing chain actors, schools and libraries and was accompanied by several like-minded articles in both the French and Dutch-speaking press. The Government awareness campaign didn't prevent the comics to broadly develop but, as Guilbert (2011) argues referring to the analogous wave in France, by showing a public concern about the

³¹ The Constitution (Art. 2) refers to the French Community (*Communauté française*) but the French Community Parliament adopted a resolution on May 25, 2011 to publicly adopt the name *Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles*. This reassembles the French-speaking Community of two regions (Wallonia and Brussels).

comics' negative impact on children, the law had nevertheless the effect of infantilizing the medium. The contemporary nexus between comics and education policy is positive albeit discrete with few public, private and associative attempts to connect comics with the education curriculum³². Also, reading promotion that includes comics, is modest, both publicly and privately, but there is no thorough study analysing its impact on reading habits and, particularly on comics-reading habits.

More modern state support to comics field took the form of promoting specialised education and the promotion of comics departments (Commission d'aide à la Bande dessinée, 2009). As a matter of fact, *Institut Saint Luc* in Brussels was the first in Europe to offer a specific Comics discipline in 1969. Today, Belgium counts with a large network of international renown schools: in Brussels (École de recherche graphique), Gent (Sint Lucas), Hasselt (Pikoh), Liège (Saint Luc) and Tournai (ACTournai). Promotion of education also took place within Universities' curriculum in disciplines like Arts history. Finally, at a local level, lots of communal arts academies offer workshops and courses on comics. The latter not only offer complementary job opportunities to authors but are determinant in awakening and early training of future authors (H Expert, 2021).

Artist statute, social and fiscal measures

The Belgian Federal government is responsible for organizing social security and hence regulates on issues related to unemployment, pensions and health insurance. Artist statute, in the sense of a separate social statute for artists does not exist in Belgium. There is however a special regime that determines intermittence conditions in regards to unemployment benefits. The Finance Act of 24 December 2002 "established a new statute of artists in relation to the social security system, enabling them to make a choice between the salaried worker's statutes and self-employed statutes, depending on proof of their socio-economic independence" (European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual, 2020) Non-profit organizations like Smart³³ were created to facilitate implementation of this and act as employers so as to ensure social security coverage. The current Government program includes an overhaul of the artist-related regulations and the creation of a policy that addresses their specific working conditions (Belgian government, 2020). At the time of writing negotiations are ongoing and the comics authors are represented in the negotiation table through several artists associations (French and Dutch-speaking). The positions of

³² See for example: https://stripgids.org/project/onderwijs/

³³ https://smartbe.be/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/le_statut_social_de_l_artiste.pdf

French³⁴ and Dutch-speaking comics authors and, between them and other artists do not always coincide but the general objective is to establish a general regime that considers the job specificities in terms of temporary employment and investment time for creation. In addition to social security protection, artists demand a fiscality which is comprehensively adapted to their revenues structure (e.g. delayed revenues).

At the time of writing there exists a preferential tax system for books royalties since 2008 (Belgian Government, 2008). The systemic advantages and the broad definition in the law has had as an effect that numerous other professionals like marketing and publicity, layers, journalists, etc. also apply this system. The excessive resort to this system by other professional categories that the ones originally intended has had as an effect that the Government is considering its revision, and even its cancellation (A Publish, 2021).

Fiscal support to the book industry

Japan has a very prominent and comprehensive agenda on making the "content industry" a leading Japanese industry and this strategy is backed by industry and economy, tourism, diplomacy and cultural policies (Matsui, 2014). Less comprehensively, France has historically supported quotas for national creations and enforced investments within the industry. Nothing of the like exists in Belgium.

Tax shelters exist for the audio-visual sector since 2002 (Belgian Government, 2014) and for the performing arts since 2016 (Belgian Government, 2016). The publishing industry has requested and lobbied for getting similar facilities than the peer industries. They argue that the audio-visual industry was positively affected by them, and that the quality of the productions and their market penetration improved. The tax shelter is considered by some as a money influx potential that would renew the list of players and would boost the industry's quality and market outreach (B Publish, 2021). There is no indication that this is going to change soon.

The law of the fixed book price is in force in the Flemish Community since January 2017 and in the French Community from January 2018³⁵. The books price is thereafter fixed by the publisher for the first six months in the case of the books in Dutch and twenty-four months in the case of the books in French. Arguments given in support to this

³⁴ See for example https://abdil.be/documents/Statut-Trav-Arts-Upact.pdf

³⁵ The State Council advise in the framework of the implementation of both Community laws was that the single price legislation applicable to the bilingual bookshops in Brussels was the residual competence of the Federal government. Subsequently, there was a cooperation agreement between the two Ministries of culture and the Federal Minister of Economy and Consumers. This agreement was approved by the National Parliament and the two Communities respective Parliaments. This is in force since 2019 and bicultural bookshops in Brussels must align themselves to the single price respective linguistic policies.

policy were to stimulate a large variety of books, facilitate fair competition between small and big retailers (Canoy et al., 2006) and, particular to Belgium, the elimination of a difference in price between books sold in Belgium and France³⁶. The VAT on books is 6% which is a reduced rate in comparison to the regularly applicable 21%³⁷. The reduced rate is applicable to cultural products in general and it entails an indirect form of government subsidy to stimulate consumption (Navarrete, 2020).

Cultural Diplomacy

The Communities and Regions have sole jurisdiction over the international aspects of the areas under their responsibility which includes culture. Both Ministries of Culture and their departments have services in charge of promoting cultural actors and goods abroad. But the Communities do not have cultural representatives in all Embassies around the world and thus Federal services liaise with the Communities' structures in Belgium. The complex Belgian administration abroad complicates the operationalisation of collaboration and also leads to ad hoc support actions instead of more structural paths.

"Belgium is known abroad for the frites, the beer and the comics" (A Expert, 2021; C Publish, 2021). This frank commentary encapsulates a recognition that, for the comics share, has been gradually being assumed by federal public authorities. These have organised several expositions around the world. For example, it recently enthused the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights' campaign "Spirou for Human Rights"³⁸, which included an exhibition and a special publication by Editions Dupuis. In collaboration with the Centre Belge de la Bande dessinée, they have developed itinerant expositions, amongst which "the Ninth art is born in Belgium" or "Comic Strip Tour of Belgium" which promotes the image of Belgium as a comics country and has been displayed in countries like Finland and Jordan. This exhibition displays scenes of Belgium illustrated by well-known artists, classic and contemporary from all the country Communities. The Schtroumpfs have also been displayed by the Foreign Affairs services in several world locations like Lebanon, Morocco, Israel, Kazakhstan and Russia. Besides the exhibitions focusing on the golden past, the contemporary authors that travel and display their art abroad help perpetuating the image of Belgium as a country of comics. As argued by one expert: "If Belgium is still in a pole position in the comics arena is thanks to its authors. (...) When we travel abroad we also act as sort of Ambassadors of Belgian image"

³⁶ www.prixdulivre.be

³⁷ www.belgium.be/fr/impots/tva/taux

³⁸ https://www.standup4humanrights.org

(A Expert, 2021). In addition, the quality and amount of renowned education schools (cursus are often provided by acclaimed authors) contributes to the constant rise of new authors, to on whom publishing houses keep an eye. And yet, the cultural diplomacy strands the art collection from the Foreign Ministry³⁹ does not have comics or comics-related pieces.

Heritage

The state heritage policy is mostly away from the comics field. In response to a vacuum perceived by the comics community, especially the creators but also scholars, students, etc., the French-speaking Community is planning to go further in its institutional role and establish a Reference centre. This would be built around the comics collection of the Liege museum with the objective to enable the understanding and study (both amateur and scholar) of the creation process in its entirety and not only the finished and published pages. The objective is to assemble all elements of the creative process, including the preparatory ones like the sketches, the script, etc. by becoming the recipient of documents, archives, publications, etc. about comics as well as original work. The idea to create such a centre was at the basis of today's celebrated collection in Liège (see subsequent sections) but this was annulled following the political choice at the time, which was the creation of the *Centre belge de la bande dessinée* in Brussels.

Subsidies for creation

Whereas for a long time, legitimation was inscribed between publishers and audience without the interference of the public institutions, the appearance and development of the independent publishers in the 2000s shaked the balance and triggered the reaction of public authorities (A Public, 2021). These admit not to be the frontrunners but follow the trends in the field and accompany the course of creativity (A Public, 2021). Since then, Belgian public support for comics stems basically from the perspective of its artistic value, the policy is carried by the respective Cultural Ministries. Despite some small grants to publishers, the industry as such is left unattended and the art pole is openly prioritised by supporting those initiatives considered to have less (or none) financial viability without governmental support but that allegedly have cultural value and literary interest (Canoy et al., 2006). This position is not left uncontested from the point of view of the industry, who sees in it a patronage approach away from its interests - "If it is creation without public, this is patronage and industry cannot support it" (B Expert, 2021).

³⁹ https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/belgianartanddiplomacy

Admittedly, state aims to support "the authors' voice, instead of the publishers" (B Public, 2021). This position is not only contested by the big publishers but also by experts who argue the biggest potential of popular comics to conquer international markets, as a trigger for rising Belgian comics' international profile as a whole (D Expert, 2021).

Today, the most visible support to comics is the direct support to creation implemented by the Literature and Book service (*Secteur des Lettres et du Livre*⁴⁰), a service created in 2002 by the French Community, with the objective to support the "so called comics '*de création*', as its little commercial success is not enough to ensure its existence, but it is determinant in the new graphic quest and a promising discipline" (Commission d'aide à la BD, 2009). This is in line with the recurring dichotomy commercial versus art, whereby the quality of the first is dismissed and, so as to maintain the quality of the second, the state is to intervene (Frey, 2003). The Commission on Support to Comics analyses the grants applications and gives advice to the Ministry for a set of grants (to authors, to publication, heritage valorisation, translation and the support of events devoted to comics).

In the Flemish Community, similar tasks are implemented by *Literatuur Vlaanderen*, an autonomous governmental institution, attached to the Ministry of Culture department of Arts and cultural heritage, in charge of "facilitating a widely accessible literary landscape and to ensure better visibility for literature from Flanders at home and abroad" (Flanders literature, 2021). It has two main services, one oriented to the domestic scene and the other one internationally oriented. They give grants to authors, translators, publishers, literary magazines and events in Flanders and abroad. Budget wise, comics receive similar attention than other books categories⁴¹. *Literatuur Vlanderen* collaborates with the Dutch Foundation for Literature (Netherlands) by keeping a joint translation database and working for a cross border translation policy (Flanders literature, 2021).

Public institutions rely on the consultation of various professional groups and/or individuals to validate their decisions by advising Commissions. The composition of public institutions advisory committees, similar in both communities, needs to keep a certain balance in terms of actors (authors, big publishers, small publishers, etc) but also in terms of gender. Publishing houses are part of the advisory mechanisms as experts and actors within the field.

⁴⁰ In 2007, this became the Commission on Support to Comics (*Commission d'aide à la bande dessinée*, 2007), which was officially replaced by the Writing and Book Commission – Session Comics (*Commission des Excitures et al Livre, Session Bande dessinée*) in 2019 (Décret sur la nouvelle gouvernance culturelle, 2019).

⁴¹ From the 2020 budget: 25% children books, 22% to fiction, 16% to comics, 13% to poetry, 11% to drama and 13% to mixed genres.

Both Communities' public institutions have clearly placed comics within the institutional bodies in charge of promoting and supporting literature. Despite the recognition of the comics hybridity, the literature approach is being prioritised in policy terms. Both Wallonia-Brussels and Flemish institutions promote respective national comics abroad by putting those willing publishers together in a national boot in the main international festivals. In the case of the Dutch-speaking *Literature Vlanderen*, their role is close to that of an agent, doing the work of small publishers round off the support for international promotion. This acknowledgement of the limited Dutch-speaking outreach, by means of translation grants to foreign publishers, is very much appreciated as it is key in facilitating foreign licensing and audience.

Communities' contemporary realities are perceived as being very much a part: "the global policy in this country is almost a border, as the wall between the US and Mexico" (A Expert, 2021). The literature and the interviews collected for this study, do not show a true operationalisation of the Cultural cooperation agreement that foresees collaboration between the Community Cultural Ministries and the administrations in the field of comics (2012). The structures of the services in charge of promoting comics are rather different, while the French-Speaking one is embedded within the Ministry, the *Literatuur Vlanderen* is an autonomous institution with relative decision-making sovereignty and agility. Joint initiatives, including abroad, are more the exceptions than the rule. The cultural cooperation agreement also includes a series of grants addressed to partnerships formed by actors from both communities, who receive the grant from their respective community. In this framework some activities related to comics have been awarded grants in the past.

4.4. Legitimation: poles and toolbox

In the sections above, we have seen that how the definition of comics introduces a series of dichotomies and negotiations between poles: literature versus visual art. Both worlds create different conditions to which comics' actors respond and align to. The first is recognised by the publishing industry and by the literature departments in charge of supporting comics creation while the latter is promoted by experts, museums and artists to highlight the artistic nature. The true is that the medium comprises a wide variety of genres, as eclectic as literature styles exist (A Publish, 2021) and significantly aesthetically diverse. This hybrid *and* blur contours plausibly lead to zigzag justifications. Artistically speaking, confronting and trespassing the contours can be part of an active and purposed artistic

demarche (A Expert, 2021). The artistic *demarche*, however, can also be elsewhere: "I tell stories and use books as a medium. The shift from album to book, or humour to serious, or children to adults, is something that happens automatically. (...) The goal is to make it attractive for the reader" (B Expert, 2021).

The second dichotomy is allegedly based on quality judgements: good versus bad. This is frequently presented as professional versus amateur, particularly in the way the field is structured as posited by one interviewee: "the art form is not amateurish. But the people surrounding it are amateurish" (D Expert, 2021). Another actor in the publishing industry seems more severe when talking about events: "you know the guys who sell their comic books in banana boxes. It's not like a very professional". More substantially, the good versus bad commonly implies an alignment with the art versus commercial axis (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006; Bourdieu, 1983) as best exemplified by the graphic novel versus classic comics, which frequently is understood similarly to intellectual versus entertainment (A Expert, 2021). These tensions are in fact central to the production, reception but also the very creation of the book. As shown by the vanguard movement that led to the diversification of the field, first in the 1970s, and then in the 1990s, implied a refusal of comics' aesthetical tradition as well as the related production and market practices (Hutton, 2015). We have also seen how the industry and the interaction therein (big and independent publishers) has had a determinant role in the evolution of the comics in its art form.

The role of the industry is noticeable in the categorisation of books into genres and sub-genres for that this is expected to signal a certain value to the consumers. The intermediaries strengthen this signalling further. Admittedly, in a field with blur contours, "a label given by critics or other gatekeepers is loaded with meaning and perceptions of meaning" (H Expert, 2021). This meaning does not equal the value of the good but rather (de)valorises it by adding (or subtracting) value from it (Dekker, 2015). Pulitzer award winner Spiegelman was very much aware about the symbolic consequences of categories as he publicly requested his book *Mans* to be categorised as non-fiction⁴² and he invested in the book to be published and distributed outside the classic comics circuit (Hutton, 2015). The commerce pole for example, is also instrumental in the availability of data, as exemplified by the contrast between the French and Dutch-speaking data.

⁴² Maus is an autobiographical account of the Holocaust depicted throughout a dialogue between the author and his father about his experiences as a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor.

The following are but a few mechanisms and devices that have contributed in shaping the field. These have mainly been operated by the industry and/or by the state in all their respective diversity throughout constant negotiations that recognizably also involved the creators. As one respondent put it in regards to the art versus commerce exemplified by the independent versus publishers' axis: "as far as authors is concerned, they are straddling both worlds" (C Expert, 2021).

4.4.1. The age dilemma

"Almost all Belgians after the second world war were immersed in the comics field, in one way or another" (A Publish, 2021).

When asked about their link with comics, almost all interviewees referred first to their childhood. Some of them would have a big collection at home whereas others did not or, only discovered the medium later in their lives. Some of them referred also to their parents, whether they had incited them to read comics or not. Despite the variance, almost all of them decided to start answering about their connection with the comics in their childhood. Several generations have grown up with similar personages and that tradition is evoked as part of the culture and that explains its enduring validity. It is precisely the childhood reminiscence that is commonly evoked as the distinguishing pattern between Belgium and the Netherlands and that would explain the slower and more modest acceptance of contemporary comics forms in the Dutch literary institutions (D Expert, 2021).

The appeal to nostalgia has historically trigged the rise of collectors' clubs, which in turn were determinant in legitimising a certain author, certain school, certain genre, etc. (H Expert, 2021). In this way, nostalgia fixes the standards of tradition and what in the future will be considered heritage. The industry has capitalised the link between adulthood and childhood by developing and maintaining long-lasting "family series", called so "because they are read by everybody" (B Publish, 2021), that ensure continuous novelty yet recognisable type of reading. This is capitalised even further by ensuring regular republication in several ways (old sold-out editions, completed series) for commercial purposes (Guilbert, 2011).

As much as comics turn back grown-ups to childhood through the mechanism of nostalgia, reference to childhood is frequently used to discredit the comics field. And it is only adulthood that can recognise the comics to its full extent (E Expert, 2021).

Legitimation is worked out and endorsed by an adult audience who are active actors in the legitimation instances and are paying consumers.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a whole group of authors who wanted to address a more adult public. It is precisely when the maturation of medium parallel to its audience that the field legitimation process started being recognised. The movement from kids to adults' content was also accompanied by a change in the format: magazines lead to albums, luxurious albums and eventually, the album became the objective itself. The advent of the album and its higher price meant the founding of a distance with the least wealthy public, notably young people (Groensteen, 2006). The children audience is discarded as a vector of legitimation to the extent that during the 1980s when legitimation process was on its way and adult audience ensured a commercial success, the comics scene lost its attention to the children audience almost completely (D Publish, 2021). Admittedly, it is the *mangas* today that have recuperate interest for this audience (D Publish, 2021).

Still very popular nowadays, the Dutch-speaking family series reflect a catch-all strategy whereby they appeal to nostalgia so as to keep the old audience and to novelty to gain a new audience. The Dutch-language landscape is much defined by a few names and a few long-lived series with no radical evolution since their origins (Suske en Wiske, 357 numbers, Jommeke, 304 numbers) and that still dominate the market. Siske en Wiske is published since 1945. The three Siske en Wiske albums published in 2019 were amongst the twenty bestselling comics in 2019. Jommeke is published since 1955 and nowadays is published in three newspapers whereas albums are published by Standaard Uitgeverij. The five albums published in 2019 were amongst the twenty bestselling comics (GFK, 2020). De Kiekeboes is published since 1977, nowadays it is published in two newspapers and the albums are also published by Standaard Uitgeverij. The three albums published in 2019 were amongst the 6 bestselling comics and two of them were amongst the 20 bestselling overall books (GFK, 2020). Whereas Jommeke and Suske en Wiske are also successful in the Netherlands it is not the case for *De Kiekeboes*, which has largely remained a local phenomenon. These longstanding bestsellers "have also shaped the idea that people have about comics", meaning for children and a large audience and that influence on how comics are perceived has remained (B Publish, 2021). It is noticeable that the exceptionally durable success of this catch-all strategy does not seem to have any spill over effect on the audience of other comics genres and, the recognition of new emerging genres and styles is barely taking place.

4.4.2. Art & heritage... which art?

Creatively speaking, the 1970s implied an opening from the field tradition. This openness decayed in the 1980s and exploration outside the contours of the discipline took up again in the 1990s. There is a general agreement, in both the European *Bande dessinnée* and the American comics traditions, in posing the 1990s as an innovative inflexion point in the field of creation and production (Hatfield, 2005; Mouchard, 2017). The press labelled this movement as the *New Bande dessinnée, New comics, Alternative comics* or *Graphic novels*, all of them referring to new forms (format and content) that were conceived beyond the comics' traditional canons and formats. Today, it is the whole field of comics that works on the extension and renewal of codes and stereotypes (A Expert, 2021). What is more, the public institutions admit to consider the perspective of not considering the "book" as support for comics (B Public, 2021).

Whereas comics are frequently associated with books and literature, the curation work highlights its visual feature and contributes to the critical analysis and research and to the creation of the field memory (Groensteen, 2006). In this sense, museums and exhibitions, in general, have been determinant in the artistic legitimation of the field by moving the comics outside the book groove. This action however, naturally contradicts the very aim of comics, which is not uniqueness but printed reproduction and diffusion (Groensteen, 2006).

The inauguration of this recognition mechanism took place with the exhibition *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative* (Comics and narrative figuration), in the Louvre (Museum of decorative arts) in 1967, which had a great influence on how the field was going to be perceived. Around the same time, in Belgium, some authors approached their work in artistic terms and not so much in market terms. Significant in Flanders was the group ERCOLA (Experimental Research Centre of Liberal Artists), initiated in Antwerp 1968, who emerged with the objective of "being a productive and informative center through the distribution of sound, color, light, time and space" (Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, 2021). The Centre became a hub of multidisciplinary artists that worked with visual art, music, theatre, costume and set design, architecture, film, performance, photography and, also comics. The group organized comics expositions in their studio and published six issues of the comics magazine *Spruit* (1971-1972).

Today, in Belgium, there exist several museums devoted specifically to comics, mostly to a specific author or a particular personage and thus have as objective to keep and promote memory. There is the *Hergé Museum*⁴³ (Louvain-la-Neuve), *Suske en Wiske Museum*⁴⁴ (Kalmthout), *Jijé*⁴⁵ (Brussels), *Moof*⁴⁶ (Museum of original figurines) and others. There are still some in the making like the *Chat Cartoon Museum*, from Philippe Geluck, in Brussels, whose public funding and exclusive location are precisely controversial because of its ambivalent position in the (non)cultural creation axis. Temporary exhibitions take place as well in specialised centres like the *Centre belge de la Bande dessinée*, with United Comics of Belgium⁴⁷ as in general fine arts museums like *Bozar*, with *Mille sabords et casrtats* about censorship and comics⁴⁸, both ongoing at the time of writing. Exhibitions about Belgian comics scene have also taken place in other countries like France, *Ceci n'est pas la BD flamande* (This is not Flemish comics, Angôuleme, 2009), or *Génération spontanée, la nouvelle bande dessinée belge francophone* (Spontaneous generation, the new French-speaking Belgian comics, Angôuleme, 2011). This national grouping owes much to the Belgian tradition and international recognition and has tangible effects in the impact on licensing and translations of authors and titles (C Public, 2021).

The museums' curation of comics pieces and authors owes very much to a success that in a printed, reproduced and diffused medium as the comics, is very much measured in commercial terms. Not only commercial success is more easily valorised but it is also the result of a contrasted collective recognition and mobilisation (Becker, 1982). In the name of art safeguards museums are however sustaining an ambiguous valorisation. In this regard, the authors whose works are to be found in the museums, have been successful not only because of their cultural value but also the economic value mobilised by publishing houses, in their distribution, marketing and communication strands. One of the interviewees reflected on this in the following way: "it's as if the Food museum would select McDonald's and Burger King because they sold most of the hamburgers" (H Expert, 2021).

The *Centre belge de la Bande dessinée* was the first in its kind in Europe (1984). However, since their establishment, the Centre has lived in a constant ambiguity between its private governance and funding and public function, its museum ambitions and centre' mission and also, its artistic and commercial approach. This ambiguity obstructs the donation for collections, the possibility for the museum to borrow and circulate the pieces,

⁴³ https://www.museeherge.com/en

⁴⁴ https://www.suskeenwiskemuseum.be

⁴⁵ https://www.jije.org

⁴⁶ https://www.moofmuseum.be ⁴⁷ https://united-comics-of-belgium.comics-exhibitions.be

⁴⁸ https://www.bozar.be/fr/activities/173939-mille-sabords-et-castrats

and the means to conserve and research about them, adopt an acquisition strategy, undertake inventory and archives work, etc. and a constant struggle for financial autonomy. Public funding is but less than 10-15% of its overall funding (both Communities and the Brussels region) and the main share does not originate from the Communities' Literature institutions but form the Brussels Image Promotion Office (F Expert, 2021). The Centre' business model rests more concentrated on the building and the ticket office than its content. The Centre performance has been criticised by the authors' community who welcomed the nomination of a new director in 2019 with an open letter criticizing the Centre's coldness in regards to their collective needs and ambitions as a field (50 Auteurs Bande dessinée, 2019). The Open Letter also demanded to re-align the Center's early mission which is to « defend European comics' creation, that of yesterday and that of tomorrow" (50 Auteurs Bande dessinée, 2019). The Centre leadership publicly concedes that lots of work needs to be done to catch up with original ambitions and combine a heritage approach with a reconnection with the contemporary field and its future. The most recent exhibition (United Comics of Belgium, 4/9-2021) is not accidentally curated by two authors' groupings (ABDIL and AKA, representative from the French and Dutchspeaking communities respectively) that showcase Belgian contemporary diversity in all its dimensions (gender, age, Community, styles).

When a correspondent told me "comics are a sort of patrimonial thing" (D Expert, 2021), she referred to the country's intangible cultural heritage and the reading comics tradition. Comics as tangible heritage, however, that is a different story. Insofar there is no heritage policy, including legislation and funding, concerning comics but also no consciousness and resources within the field. The latter is only scattered and emerging slowly, even amongst the authors, not always conscious about the value of archives (C Expert, 2021). There are in Belgium several Foundations created around the work of a specific author, like Moulinsart, Franquin, Hergé, Philippe Boon, Jacobs, etc. These foundations, created to preserve the oeuvre of the author have had different degrees of success in their mission. The lack of inventory of certain archives has led to critical cases like the case of Jacobs Foundation, accused of selling board originals, against the authors' will (ActuaBD, 2018). The controversy around the *Centre belge de la Bande dessinée*, its ambiguous mission and lack of resources devoted to it, make that authors look elsewhere

to preserve their archives. In this regards, *Foundation Roi Baudouin* has become the recipient of some comics collections from authors like Schuiten⁴⁹ or Comes⁵⁰.

The Museum of Liège is an illustrative case because it reflects an accidental coincidence in history. Its comics collection was reassembled between 1971-1973 by a group of people, authors, academics, journalists, publishers and connaisseurs, led by at the time Minister of Culture, with the objective to establish in Liège a national museum about comics. A modest three-year budget was invested in acquiring a collection of more than 100 original works which were expected to be the basis of said museum. This museum did not see the light, the organisation that had assembled the promoters vanished and the collection remained forgotten in the cellars for decades. This was only rediscovered in the early 2000s and a thorough work has been done since then in inventorying, conservation andrestoration. Owning this collection has been key in attracting attention from private collectors and from public institutions which recently declared it a National treasure (French Community Government, 2019). The museum is now the recipient of a private collection with comics and illustrated books, from Michel Defourny (2021), and have public -modest- funding to enlarge its collection with contemporary works. The spill over effect is such that the Community is considering the creation of a comics centre in Liège to promote memory, to facilitate access to the collections to the public and to enhance study and research, both general public and specialists.

4.4.3. Cultural cross-fertilisation... with what?

Allegedly, the intersection of comics with other cultural fields is originated and developed by artistic or commercial motives and their respective implications and impact diverge very much. In the quest for legitimacy as an artistic expression comics authors began investigating and investing in other art fields, leaving behind the entertainment aim and ambitioning an artistic narrative. Like in any other artistic field, the first mission was to question the field codes, calling into question the previous movement and perpetuate so. In that context, it was the comics field that found interest in working with other fields while the reverse direction was not the case as there was no need (A Expert, 2021). Thus, the field needed first to be legitimised in order to be attractive to and enrich other established fields correspondingly. As signified by an artist, when cross-fertilisation occurs as an artistic demarche the result becomes an expression in itself, with its own specific traits, beyond the

⁴⁹ https://www.patrimoine-frb.be/collection/fonds-darchives-francois-schuiten

⁵⁰ https://www.patrimoine-frb.be/collection/le-patrimoine-artistique-de-didier-comes

original art fields (A Expert, 2021). Seemingly, public authorities are vigilant about crossfertilisation and intersection possibilities with several options are being explored, like supporting synergies from an audio-visual and literature perspective or abandoning the book support as a criterion (C Public, 2021).

The historical pioneers of comics and cinema juncture in Belgium were the studio Belvision⁵¹, created in 1954 by Raymond Leblanc who paired it with Lombard publishing house and *Tintin* magazine. The embryonic cinema industry in Flanders enabled the creation of a team of animators that were mainly Dutch-speaking (De Weyer, 2015). The studio was one of the few professional studios of the genre in Western Europe. The studios collapsed in the 1970s because the foreign competition offered better quality, the studio stars ended up leaving and the enterprise was financially nonviable. What was left from the studio for some years turned its production into short-animated commercials and eventually merged with Dupuis Dreamwall studios. The latter had been founded in 2007 in partnership with the national TV broadcaster (RTBF) and makes 2D and 3D animation for films, documentaries and series. Belvision today mainly produces for cinema and TV and with some big titles like *Asterix* and *Spirou*. Also, Studio100 a Flanders-based TV production company turned into a wide-ranging entertainment company delocalised its animation productions abroad, arguably because of a lack of any industry advantages in Belgium (De Weyer, 2015).

Transmedia is an opportunity that is strategically used by big corporations, which include own studios and licensing specialised departments. As a matter of fact, an important share of the sectors' increases in revenues of the last two decades has been throughout the exploration and expansion of transmedia opportunities (FEP, 2021; IPA&WIPO, 2020). The size of these big groups makes possible the multiplication of products and the large cross-marketing campaigns that have a snowball effect and get more media attraction. Admittedly, this may have an impact on comics sales figures (D Publish, 2021). At the industrial and commercial level, the maximum cross-fertilisation is talked about in terms of 360°, and it can include albums, movies, licensing, merchandising, video games, Youtube channels, Netflix (animated series). The multiplicity of channels can produce differentiated yet supporting products or, generate a transmedia story-telling process "where a fiction is dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins,

⁵¹ Its history was portrayed in a Documentary: *Behision, la mine d'or au bout du couloir* (Belvision, the gold mine at the end of the hallway (Capart, 2002).

2007). From an inspired word, this strategy would only be valid if artistically motivated as inversely the commercial considerations run over creativity (H Expert, 2021) however does not enjoy unanimity and it is criticised from the artistic pole as derived products is also Publishing group Dargaud-Dupuis-Lombard is also a partner of an innovation centre around integral and transversal storytelling: R/O^{52} which is supported by public funds from an economic development perspective.

In the Dutch-speaking scene we find a remarkable example of a TV series (not animated) being converted into comics: *FC Kampionen* (1990, turned into comics in 1997). Three out of the four comic albums published in 2019 were on the list of twenty best sellers in Flanders (GFK, 2020). Another very popular phenomenon is K3, that originally started as a music band for teenagers (2000). Its success encouraged the promoters to transpose the story to other mediums like TV and also comics. It is unsure whether these comics have any impact on broadening audience of the comics field or remain circumscribed to its fiction.

4.4.4. Prizes

Prizes, which can be state or privately promoted, are recognisable legitimation mechanisms (Boltanski, 1975) that valorise works (Dekker, 2015) by emphasizing their cultural value (Canoy et al., 2006). The Pulitzer award to Spiegelman' graphic novel Maus in 1992 is referred to by many as an inception point in the comics recognition quest (E Expert, 2021). It is still the only graphic novel having been awarded the prestigious Pulitzer prize (note that he did not receive a prize from the Letters category but a Special citation).

The *Bronzen Adhemar* prize was first awarded in 1972 to a Dutch-speaking comics author. The prize was historically linked to the *Stripgids* magazine⁵³ (still published today) and it led to the creation of Turnhout Comics Festival. Awarded by the Ministry of Culture up until 2017 it is nowadays awarded by a private initiative on the occasion of the Comics Festival in Brussels. On the same occasion, the Atomium prize, which declines in several categories, is awarded, since 2017 by the French-speaking Community.

While the above-mentioned prizes are evidently restrained to the comics field, there are examples of general books prizes noteworthy mentioning in the context of a legitimation in global publishing sphere. At the time of writing, there is a controversy in the

52 http://www.ro.institute

⁵³ www.stripgids.org

Dutch-speaking scene: the new Boon prize. The prize, organised by *Literatuur Vlaanderen*, was announced on March 2021 to be awarded for the first time in March 2022 in three categories: fiction, non-fiction and children and youth literature. Comics were not eligible for any categories. An open letter was published by several publishing houses complaining about the non-eligibility of comics in none of the categories (Stripsspeciaalzaak, 2021). The signatories of the letter allege that comics are penalised from a restrictive use of the Dutch Uniform Classifications (*Nederlandstalige Uniforme Rubrieksindeling*). It is unclear how this controversy will end and whether the Flemish authorities will reconsider their decision by admitting comics eligibility and if so, fully or only some categories. Whatever way it goes, this evidences how comics is on the edge of fields' recognition. A similar case occurred in 2008 with the Libris Prize (given by the association of independent Dutch booksellers, The Netherlands) when *Verder*, from Marc Legendre was nominated by the jury for the best book. The book was not awarded and the following year the organisation changed the rules by which comics were no longer eligible for being shortlisted, thus confirming an approach whereby comics cannot compete with other literature categories.

4.4.5. Public events- Festivals

Festivals and other events are another mechanism that contribute to the fields' legitimation by strengthening the interaction within the field (Boltanski, 1975). These events are not only the opportunity for reinforcing the collaborative network (Karpik, 2010) but also the opportunity to attract new audience and media attention (Frey, 2003). Throughout history, Belgium shows a series of festivals with different justifications, promoters and also fortune.

Stripgids Turnhout was the first (1979) and biggest festival in Flanders. The Festival, which was generously subsidized from 2006 onwards, went through turbulent times with dramatic drop of visitors and eventually stopped in 2016 with the termination of governmental subsidies. *Stripgids* was a Festival, a prize and a specialised magazine and was key in bringing together the practitioners' network in the Dutch-speaking comics scene (C Publish, 2021). As the name resonated, the organisers were invited to talk about comics on the mainstream media multiplying attention further. The state added up to the practitioner's alliance and the audience attention and provided with a substantive grant in 2006 (E Expert, 2021). It is unclear which were the reasons and the precise sequence but the Festival lots its audience, the media attention and the state support. In 1994 the independent small structure *Fréon* organised in Brussels *Autarcie comix Premier rencontre*

européenne des labels independants de Bande Dessinée (First encounter of comics' independent labels). This was organised with the primary aim strengthen practitioners' network (Karpik, 2010) by reassembling all authors sharing the same alternative vision on comics. The initiative lasted for a few years with the form of *Autarci comix* events alternating between Brussels and Paris. A quite opposite example is the Comics Fair in Brussels (*La Fête de la BD*) an event organised since 2009 by the Wallonia-Brussels Tourist Office and that attracted 100,000 people in its 2019 edition (Belga news, 2019). Finally, it is worth mentioning the *Boekenbeurs* in Antwerp, a trade book fair that attracted around 125,000 visitors in a 2019 edition. Some of the bestselling books were comics (C Publish, 2021), underlying the high-income effect of such events (Frey, 2003).

4.4.6. Points of sale

In the eyes of the broad public, legitimation is stimulated by public big publishing houses and their respective strategies. For example, price not only demarcates a market and an audience but also a direction in the legitimation course: luxurious hard-cover albums contrast with € 7 softcover magazines that can be bought at each check out of the store. In this regard, the price, the format and the point of sale interwind in the same direction and reinforce value recognition. Historically, as a media product, comics were sold in kiosks. It was only when they moved to the bookshops that they started being appreciated by the audience and their trade books publishing peers (E Publish, 2021). In the case of comics, bookshops acted as significant mechanisms in two different circumstances. First, the advent of specialised bookshops created the "means for erudition and cultural cumulation" (Boltanski, 1975, p. 44). That meant however that comics readers were confined to specific places and audience development could only take place by increasing and/or intensifying the engagement of already existing audiences (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012). Secondly, the entry of comics into mainstream book-stores facilitated the diversification of audience (Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012) as the publishers targeted an adult general public which up until then had been unattended (Mouchart, 2017).

The landscape of selling points is different in Wallonia, Brussels and Flanders. The French-speaking scene follows the French model whereby there are comics specialised bookstores and general bookstores also sell comics. In this constellation, it is noteworthy mentioning that independent publishers consider that the attention that (specialised) bookshops started paying to them in the 1990s -meaning they made space available for them next to the big publishers' albums- was partly responsible for triggering the interest of public institutions for the new scene (A Expert, 2021).

The panorama is quite opposite in Flanders with general bookstores being reluctant to sell comics, troubled with confusing categories and formats (B Publish, 2021). Instead, most popular comics series are sold in kiosks and supermarkets while the rest are sold in relatively few specialised comic bookshops. Being sold in a supermarket for an affordable price means that "lots of people buy it without thinking much about it" (B Publish, 2021), the economic value clearly influencing the cultural value. The difference in selling points also had an impact on the how COVID-19 restriction of movement' related measures affected sales since supermarkets, contrary to bookstores remained open throughout all the period (B Publish, 2021). Those bookshops that did not provide webshop facilities suffered the most during this period. That seemed to be relatively more important in the comics specialised bookshops because of their smaller size (C Publish, 2021).

4.5. Digital challenges and future

The centrality of the publisher within the book publishing value chain has been moved towards downstream domination by new actors (distributors), mainly US-based technology companies like Amazon, Google and Apple Furthermore. In this regard, scholar Farchy signals that in this new model the economic profitability does not lay on those investing in content (industries and creators) but on "firms (telecommunications, technical industries and so on), which are often strangers to the world of culture and take advantage of this content to sell anything and everything" (2011, p. 150). As recognised by somebody from the industry, digital distribution, and not as much digital reading, has been further strengthened by COVID-19 and the related mobility restriction measures (C Publish, 2021).

Books publishing business models are traditionally based on the supply, which requires an accurate demand prediction. The financial viability of publishing a book is estimated at a given average sales which considers the fix costs related to content and production. While replication and distribution costs started approaching zero with the rise of e-books the value chain, and especially the act of artistic creation, which would explain why e-book prices are not dramatically lower than print ones. Comics creation adds relatively more to the fix costs because of the multiplicity of jobs involved (writing, drawing, inking, colouring, lettering and editing). Utterback's argument that "industry insiders have abundant reasons to be slow to mobilise in developing radical innovations" (1990, p.161) seems to apply to the comics publishing industry. An industry insider put it this way: "At this moment, most of publishing houses are with both feet on the clutch" (A Publish, 2021). A recently published research on the open digital comics market develops this argument further. The report finds that although publishing houses have plans to go digital, they are cautious, wait for conditions to be ripe and do not consider the pure digital option (Eudicom, 2021). Their concerns mostly refer to the readers' showing attachment to paper –"the reading practices have not changed yet in Europe, contrary to Japan where that revolution has already taken place" (E Publish, 2021)-, piracy risks, shift of business models and risk of wrong placement of product (Eudicom, 2021). Timid initiatives like Europecomics⁵⁴ propose digital catalogues to the final reader and to foreign publishers interested in licensing the titles. This particular case is publicly supported at the European level in an initiative to promote European cultural expression in a digital shift and results, according to the promoters, seem to show an increasing appetite as well from the audience as from foreign publishers (E Publish, 2021)-.

The value chain has also observed the arrival of new types of agents proposing new blurring means to create and publish without actually distinguishing between the both: innovative services such as content aggregation, social network platforms or publishing tools for aspiring writers. Furthermore, digitalisation has facilitated disintermediation and thus opened new possibilities for authors, like self-publishing. Platforms like Grandpapier.org (promoted by the independent publisher *L'Employé du mois*) offer this space, an editorial board ensures the overall quality of projects but giving full autonomy to authors in regards to their projects. The web however, is seen as a means to experiment, test the audience, pre-publish and let oneself known before submitting something more consistent to a publisher. As noted by one of the interviewed experts "it is not about a final work" (C Expert, 2021). Digital co-creation solutions and the resulting proximity between readership and authorship poses an additional challenge for authorship to create value (Misemer, 2019). New formulas of engaging with consumers should instigate new ways of interpreting value within the business model (Bakshi & Throsby, 2012).

Strictly creation wise, digital formats posit some limits to the traditional comics narrative (the page translates difficultly in different screens types). McCloud (2000), in his book "Reinventing comics", reframed these limitations as an opportunity to open new

⁵⁴ www.europecomics.com

narrative and storytelling options, no longer confined within a page frame but within an "infinite canvas". The screen, together with the addition of sound and, animation and interaction capture the formal digital innovations (Boudissa, 2016). Although many innovative possibilities are explored, they are not necessarily radically endorsed. In that respect, beyond the formal innovations, Baudry (2018) recalls that artists are not necessarily technological focused or digital savvies which is confirmed by different surveys (EGBD, 2016). As a matter of fact, the generational gap is mostly noticed within the educational structures, with a manifest need to update themselves rapidly so as to able to confront incoming students with great technological familiarity and appetite (A Expert, 2021). Creation and digital can interrogate the artistic world in terms of techniques, as argued by an interviewee: "some people protested because of the use of photoshop in the making of that album" (B Expert, 2021). If as we have seen earlier, comics already challenge the muscal context in terms of uniqueness and reproducibility, the digital amplifies this debate with issues like what and how to showcase and conserve.

As Becker recalls "to understand the birth of a new art world, we need to understand, not the genesis of innovations, but rather the process of mobilising people to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis" (Becker, 1982). As we have seen, the mobilisation will need to include consumers, creators and the industry, both incumbents and newcomers. Eventually, the sustainability of new worlds will depend on the value creation and recognition and distribution along the value chain based on business models that all actors can defend.

5. Conclusion and Limitations

When selecting the case study one of the assumptions was that the French and Dutch-speaking scenes would show a different landscape. After concluding the study, I note that those differences are indeed sizeable, and that they influence the legitimation process. What we have seen in the earlier sections is a common birth and increasingly diverging biographical paths (Kopytoff, 1986). Answering the first research question and in particular the role of the state: when comics first appeared (independently from the American tradition) and as they became popular in the 1930s and 1940s, the state had no role nor interest. To the contrary, the first public positions in the 1950s were against the new medium as it could harm children' school development, mental health and they were even accused of triggering delinquency (De Weyer, 2015). The Government was open about this and the Ministry of Education even published a pamphlet (Decaigny, 1955) that was largely distributed to publishing chain actors, schools and libraries, and was accompanied by several like-minded articles in both the French and Dutch-speaking press. Except for some noticeable exceptions (eg. Fine Arts Museum of Liège collection) the state's awareness and support for the field timidly started with the turn of the century.

The first research question in the context of the comics inception moment is answered by the role of the publishing houses and the strategies they followed. Originally, recognition took place on the basis of an unquestionable commercial successes: *Spirou* sold 130,000 copies at its peak, and *Tintin* even 600,000. The rivalry contributed much to the Belgian comics boom and the making of a new generation of comics' authors through the constitution of studios. This incipient industry was distinguished by several traits. First, it established a uniform and recognisable graphic style, la *ligne-claire* (clear line) in opposition to the American tradition (Rolland, 2009). Second, the comics were clearly aimed at children. Third, comics were published in newspapers, newspapers supplements and magazines. Fourth, several models of collaboration were put in place, merging roles in the value chain like the merger between printers and publishers (Groensteen, 2009) and bilingual publication from both French and Dutch-speaking publishing houses. Fifth, the comics publishing industry involved the fusion of an industrial production -rationalisation and standardisation- with an artisanal one -rudimentary tools- (Berthou, 2010). Sixth, the dual management model commonly used in the cultural organisations was very early adopted by the industry, signalling a division of labour between the artistic production and the economic viability (Cray et al., 2007).

Whereas the budding industry was very much similar in both linguistic scenes, the leadership and the most noticeable innovations were French-speaking (A Publish, 2021). The influence of the French scene and actors was increasingly noticeable which facilitated a closer association with one side of Belgium. For the most part, we can concede that the Dutch-speaking scene has remained in the above-mentioned scenario, except for the disappearance of bilingual publications and other collaborations, the current domination of one single publisher and the disguised evolution from children to "family series". Those authors and books that divert from this mainstream struggle to attract media and audience attention (D Expert, 2021; C Publish, 2021).

Although there have been earlier artistic movements contesting the comics field boundaries, it was in the 1990s that this artistic contestation occupied a role within the industry role in Belgium. The new forms of expression highlighted nearness with the visual arts (etching, photography, sculpting, etc.), new literary forms (eg. autobiography) and new formats (away from serialisation and standardisation of albums, black and white prints, etc.). Admittedly, this move was a quest for intellectual legitimation and an abandonment of the entertainment sphere (A Expert, 2021). The growing interest of the audience in this new genre triggered interest from everyone in the field, from bookshops to festivals, from scholars to press and from public institutions to big publishers. For years, the relationship between big and independent publishers, exemplary of the commerce and art poles respectively, was very much contentious. The big publishers' emulation of genres, forms and formats was considered fake and a misappropriation, because not based on an artistic demarche. The independent publishers influence was such that they demanded public authorities' compensation of the produced symbolic capital for the lack of economic capital. By inaugurating grants to the authors, the state recognised the value of what independent publishers bring to the field - continuous creative renewal, riskier, newer and younger talent (Rolland, 2009)-.

Historically, publishing was a steady industry that had established a strong value chain (publishers, distributors, bookshops, etc.). This robustness implies that changes are slow, modest and conservative because actors' survival depends on the perpetuation of the industry as it is, acting as constraints on present choices (North, 2005). The comics publishing sector, like the general publishing sector (Canoy et al., 2006), and despite the generous statistics, shows today signs of stagnation (Association des éditeurs belges, 2020)

with noticeable steady readership (C Publish, 2021). There are several challenges: the impact of digital revolution, the advance of foreign competitors and the competition for audience's attention (Lanham, 2006). While the strategies displayed by the big publishers are super production and "bestsellerisation of the market" (D Publish, D., 2021), the independent players have a smaller margin of manoeuvre. Specially in the Dutch-speaking market, where printings of 1,000 copies are the norm, with bestselling authors at around 3,000 copies, economic profitability is at stake (C Publish, 2021).

As shown previously, since the 1950s and the decades following it, the state remained quite unaware if not downright negative about the comics field. Since the comics field showed little autonomy in regards to the economic field (Boltanski, 1975) it was popularly appreciated, profitably marketed, solely supported by the industry, and with mostly big publishers there was no need for public support. Two exceptions are worth noting: the original comics collection in Liège (which was eventually abandoned in the cellars) and the recognition of comics through the establishment of educational tracks and careers. As a matter of fact, *Institut Saint Luc* in Brussels was the first in Europe to offer a specific Comics discipline as early as 1969. Today, the country counts with a large network of renowned schools in Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia. These contribute to the constant renewal of the artistic form and the country's international reputation.

Since the 2000s, Belgian public support for comics stems basically from the perspective of artistic value recognition, and thus the policy is carried by the respective Cultural Ministries. Despite the recognition of the comics hybridity, the policy chiefly approaches comics from a literary perspective, as a branch of literature. Both Communities count on a specialised service in charge of promoting comics creation (*Literatuur Vlanderen* and *Secteur des Lettres et du Livre*). Both departments are supported and guided by committees composed of comics field authors and experts. The position of both departments is not ambiguous and clearly supports the artistic demarche of authors (A, B, C Public, 2021). This is in line with the recurring dichotomy between commerce and art, whereby the quality of the first is dismissed and, so as to maintain and protect the quality of the second, the state is to intervene (Frey, 2003). Additionally, these departments also support small publishers and events.

Although support for creative sectors is the responsibility of Communities and thus takes place separately, both Communities agree on the symbolic value recognition and the need for legitimation via subsidies to creation. In addition to the direct grants to creation, there are other important issues that are dealt with at federal level and that have direct impact on the creation and the industry: first, the authors and the artists in the form of social and fiscal measures that allow for sensible working conditions for artists (and thus creation beyond intrinsic motivation); second, the publishing industry in the form of support to production, distribution, export or fiscal advantages attracting investors; third, other agents in the value chain (eg. specialised bookshops), in the form of policies like the fixed price for books; four, all of the actors in the chain in the form of international promotion and cultural diplomacy. The described policy fragmentation, however, complicates a comprehensive support approach and a concerted action from the field in formulating their demands. According to the several actors, the networks to advance those demands are seemingly weak: publishers are divided and so are authors (C Publish, 2021). In both groups however, interviews suggest some changes towards a collective direction: the open war between big and independent publishers is fading (A Expert, 2021) and authors are showing structured collective initiatives in the form of open letters, curation of exhibitions (F Expert, 2021), and an active lobby in the negotiations with the state about the artist statute (A Public, 2021).

In regards to the second research question, we have encountered several networks and partnerships that contributed to advance the fields recognition. As we have seen in previous chapters, partnerships have taken different forms, with different justifications, actions, objectives and leaders. I will recall here but a selection.

First: the Liège museum original comics collection. Its foundation reassembled a practitioners' network around the *Signes et Lettres* non-profit organisation that included artists, authors, academics, journalists, publishers and *connaisseurs*. This multidisciplinary group organised exhibitions and public debates, wrote articles and critiques in the press and undertook academic research (G Expert, 2021), all of which played an important role in the legitimation of the field. The city of Liège and the non-profit organisation established a partnership with the objective of creating a collection that would be the basis for a future museum of comics in the city. Agreeing on a particular valorisation of comics, the state (the city) provided with the means and the group provided with the expertise in a collaborative network initiative that would contribute to ratify comics as an art (Becker, 1982). The Minister of Culture at the time was member of this group and that certainly helped in aligning those interests and resources. Eventually the political decision at the time was to establish the museum in Brussels and not in Liège. The collective network however, showed its weakness when it vanished following the decision not to establish a comics museum in Liège. The network was not capable of preserving and protecting the at the

time incipient art world and, the recently established collection was placed in the cellars of the Fine arts museum where it was going to remain for the next thirty years.

In the course of these three decades the comics field advanced in its legitimation processes. After its rediscovery, the collection is again at the centre of a network that is determined to certify the artistic character of comics. In this case, the state (the Community) seems determined to encourage collective action and to develop a national culture, providing the initiative with a clear political dimension (Becker, 1982). First, the state, for the first time ever, recognised the heritage character of comics and declared the collection National Treasure in 2019 (Gouvernement Communauté Française, 2019). Secondly, there is a willingness to ensure adequate conservation, make the collection accessible to the public and promote study and research. Thirdly, there is a commitment to contribute to creation by allocating budget for contemporary acquisitions. The collaborative network in this case includes several state layers, artists, authors, experts and scholars. If successful, this initiative would institutionalise the link between valuing the classic tradition and contemporary creation.

On the Dutch-speaking side one example of partnership contributing to advance the legitimation of the comics field that resonated throughout the interviews and is the case of De Stripgids. This private initiative activated in parallel several mechanisms that contributed to the field legitimacy: a specialised magazine, a Festival and a prize. The specialised magazines contributed to the erudition and celebration of the field (Boltanski, 1975). The Festival, by reassembling the field professionals (authors, publishers, experts) it facilitates the exchange of information and the structuration of the field. The prize has the capacity to valorise the comics work, consecrate authors and shape the conventions (Karpik, 2010) hierarchising the field. The precise economic or political reasons for the state to decide to massively support the initiative and remove it after a decade are unclear. Nevertheless, the example shows: first, the recognition amongst actors in the field of the importance of cohesive structures in advancing legitimacy (in both the art and the commerce poles); second, the importance of a private initiative determined to elevate the comics field and consciously activate multiple, parallel, legitimating mechanisms; and third, the vulnerability of such an enterprise and the importance of a strong organisational basis for its survival, including support by the state.

Finally, it is worth noting a third exemplary alliance, with an outstanding artistical motivation: the umbrella of actions around *Frémok*. A group of students from the art school Saint Lucas in Brussels created *Fréon* to collectively reflect and act upon the

boundaries towards other arts. It stimulated visual, literary and format innovations, basically transcending the established norms of creation and production. In this sense, this generation of artists did what is typically in the arts, namely overrunning their predecessors by installing a new movement whereby it will gain a more powerful position. In this case, transcending the comics tradition involved an artistic approach which was coupled with a refusal to play by the commercial rules, and a complete abandonment of the entertainment sphere, in a clear articulation of the commerce versus art dichotomy. The search for intellectual legitimation left little space for concessions and compromise (A Expert, 2021). The realization that group survival was more likely than individual survival and a higher impact potential of collective action led to a continuous growth in terms of network: first, the creation of a publishing structure; second, the organisation of a Festival Autarcie comix: Premier rencontre européenne des labels independants de Bande Dessinée (First encounter of comics' independent labels) to mainly bring together all European authors sharing the same alternative vision on comics; third, the union with a similar structure from France (Amok) with whom they united forces for the publishing and the event organisation. The reputation they had built through the years amongst practitioners eventually attracted the interest of the state. The latter took the at the time radical decision to initiate support for the comics field by prioritising the independent and alternative scene, a move which was not applauded by the more traditional industry and authorship. This network of likewise practitioners, with very little economic means but lots of intrinsic motivation, significantly reshaped the field, as noted by one of the experts interviewed for this study: "They are creative conveyors but also political players with a vision of what the comics field is. These are certainly actors that have done much for the recognition of the field as we know it" (H Expert, 2021). Some of the changes that they incited were thereafter emulated by the big publishing houses, and thus reached a larger audience.

Following the above, the Belgian case showed particular traits about legitimation process that other larger and more dominant cases would not have shown. First of all, the relevance of networks in such small markets entails a constant exploration of networks formats. The size of the networks also has an effect, in that agents play multiple roles and have different hats. It is difficult to imagine a strict specialisation without any cross-overs with such a limited number of actors. This results into authors being editors, curators and state advisors and, publishers being distributors, bookshop holders and gallerists. In the best of scenarios artists also teach in art schools and ensure transmission of their *savoir faire*. In other scenarios however, artists work in a supermarket (A Expert, 2021), resulting into a limited added value to the field. The case of Belgium also shows a comparative study in itself: two different paths, divergent art and market dominations, diverse comics' support policies yet coinciding in their principles and joint federal policies in progress.

This research is subject to several limitations that I acknowledge and note. The first concerns the focus on one particular actor within the publishing industry (publishers). In recent times, the centrality of the publisher within the book publishing value chain has been moved towards downstream domination by new actors, namely online distributors like Amazon or Bol.com, which is a category that I have only briefly touched upon in the section addressing the digital challenge. Secondly and related to this, the dominance of institutional and professional actors in this thesis does not do justice to the increasing role of users' commentary, which is an aspect that I have left aside in my analysis. Finally, I have focused my interviews and literature review on the cultural ministries of the French and Dutch-speaking Communities whereas as we have seen the role of state is multi-layered. Further attention to the Federal level could possibly have benefited the comprehensiveness of the analysis.

Following the limitations that I just mentioned, the relevance of the cultural economics and political economy disciplines in the analysis of said field need to be stressed, and they suggest future research avenues in three main directions: exploring further other valorising agents, other key actors like actors and, contrasting the findings internationally. The present study has not focused on two main actors in the field which are the audience and the authors nor other agents along the value chain. The first could be approached by means of a quantitative study and detect for example generational insights, a central aspect that has already been detected in the present study but would require further study. The second could share their perspective and how artistic creation interacts with considerations on production, distribution, sales and audience. And the third avenue could look at distributors and retailers, focusing on the digital cleavage. Finally, given that value recognition is context sensitive (Karpik, 2010) it would be interesting to reflect on the paths proposed by this research from a global comparative perspective.

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Appendix 1

Interviewees profiles

- Publish A (Publishing): Director, publishers' association (FR)
- Publish B (Publishing): Editor, big publisher, member of public advisory committee (NL)
- Publish C (Publishing): Editor, small publisher, distributor, specialized bookshop, member of public advisory committee (NL)
- Publish D (Publishing): General director, big publisher (FR)
- Publish E (Publishing): Director, European digital publishing alliance (EU)
- Public A (Public institution): Official, administration in charge of comics support (FR)
- Public B (Public institution): Official, administration in charge of comics support (national) (NL)
- Public C (Public institution): Official, administration in charge of comics support (international) (NL)
- Expert A: Author, teacher, member of an independent publishing house, member of public advisory committee (FR)
- Expert B: Author, chief editor comics magazine (NL)
- Expert C: Curator exhibitions, archivist, heritage, member of public advisory committee (FR)
- Expert D: Comics specialized journalist, (general media) (NL)
- Expert E: Editor of a specialized magazine, varied projects with a comics perspective (NL)
- Expert F: Director comics centre (BE)
- Expert G: Curator comics collection (FR)
- Expert H: Gallerist, documentalist, independent publisher (FR)
- * NL: Dutch-speaking, FR: French-speaking; BE: overall country; EU: European.
- * 15 Belgians and 1 French.
- * 9 women, 7 men, age estimation <35-65>

Appendix 2

Interviews' script

This script has been slightly adapted depending on the interlocutor (publisher, public authority and experts)

1. Introduction

I am investigating about the Belgian Bande dessinnée and particularly, about its legitimation process as an artistic expression.

The existence of two major language groups (French and Dutch speaking) divides Comics historical traditions, artistic and narrative conventions, policy determinants and, indubitably, markets. I assume that the similarities and differences that will be identified along the research process, are a fertile ground for analysing said legitimation processes and, unveiling the factors that lead to nowadays realities. Through literary review and a series of interviews, I will enquire whether the Comics is a legitimised artistic expression in the eyes of publishing houses, public institutions and experts. I want to recognise how agents justify this legitimation, which events contributed to the change of its status and which partnerships or cooperative networks were created in the way and made that possible.

2. Presentation

- Could you briefly introduce yourself?
- What is your career, what do you do? And how do the comics relate to your activities?

3. RQ1: How do the Belgian publishing industry and the state legitimise respectively the comics field?

RQ1A: What strategies do agents undertake in order to transform comics into a more recognized form of art?

RQ1B: How this has historically changed and which main events contributed to the legitimation evolution?

- How were they recognised when comics were a popular medium?
- How are they recognised today?
- How was historically the transition?
- Which were the changes in the way? How did it change?
- Which main events contributed to this change?
- What did it entail the change of format (magazine to book)? the change of narrative (humour to "serious")? the change of readers (children to adults)?
- Did this change in the field, changed your personal path along the lines of the field?
- What does it imply today?
 - For the industry?
 - For the public authorities?
 - For the creators?
 - For the audience/consumers?
- Was there an industry strategy? How did they and they do reach consumers? New consumers?
- And another actors' strategy?

- Was there a role for the public institutions?
- Did public support -if any- contribute to the legitimation of the art form and its creators? Did it interfere? Hampered a positive evolution?
- What does it take to make it subsidisable? When do subsidies come into being?
- Were these strategies in Dutch-speaking and French speaking sides different? Opposed? Was there collaboration? Or animosity? Were there bridges between the two?
- Is it Dutch-speaking and French-speaking a completely different thing or not? Are there bridges?
- Is there a place for the federal level?
- Statute of the artist? Social security is a federal responsibility. Does it make sense and would it make an impact?
- Could censorship, tax shelters or any other measure help? Protectionism vs promotion?
- Does it make any impact cultural diplomacy?
- Is there any Belgian specificity?
- How do you foresee its evolution? Does it help of being considered an art form, does it negatively interfere or does it matter at all?
- Bande dessinnée? comics? graphic novels? What does the change of name invoke and how does it relate to the legitimation process?

4. **RQ2:** What is the role of partnerships and networks in the legitimation processes?

- Which were the agents that contributed to that change? And which were the networks and partnerships that contributed to that?
- How they did it? Why did they think it was important to do it?
- Which were the strengths and vulnerabilities and how sustainable were them?
- I have realised that sometimes actors have several hats or have had several hats in history, why do you think is that?
- How does the BD interact with other mediums (TV, advertising, cinema, videogames, internet) and what does it entail? does it elevate BD? does it penalise it? is it useful? is it mutually enriching?
- Given all the doors opened at this moment (movies, games... attention economy) What about the comics future and sustainability?

Appendix 3

Codes examples

