

The kids of the 90s as represented in the pages of francophone comics: a comparative approach centering technology, sexuality and modern narratives.

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The age of childhood is crucial when it comes to the formation of attitudes and identities, but we often see it portrayed in works made by adults in an extremely idealized and nostalgic way. For years, francophone comics preferred adult protagonists, because childhood was supposed to be something pure and protected, unsuited for big adventures. By the end of the 80s the situation was starting to change. With the introduction of new technologies and the continued influence of the sexual liberation of the late 60s, we gradually see the transformation of the image of childhood as represented in the pages of comic books. Hobbies, sexuality and all the basic aspects of a young character's life are influenced, not just by the newfound artistic freedom of creators, but also from historical reality. Children's cohabitation with the computer, the internet and video games fundamentally changes the manner of play, communication and education and it introduces children to the complicated world of adults at an earlier stage of development, compared to previous eras.

An important aspect of this time period is the Fukuyama-esque quality of the urban or suburban utopia represented in the pages of francophone comic books¹. Economic or social problems are mostly absent or abstracted and the only conflict is either interpersonal or intergenerational. However, the suburban utopia that had already been made a popular setting since the 50s, with titles like René Goscinny's *Le Petit Nicolas* (1956) and Jean Roba's *Boule and Bill* (1959) has now been shaken by three main factors that have been added to the equation. The first is the transformative aspect of modern technology as exemplified by Kid Paddle's strong sense of attachment to commodities and his identity formation that has been made inextricable with contemporary electronic products. The second is globalization, as seen in Nathalie's strong interest in other cultures and the embodiment of the cosmopolitan

¹ We are of course referring to Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*, the influential essay that described the prevailing political feeling at the end of the 20th century, a feeling influenced by the apparent triumph of Western liberal democracy. Fukuyama Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992.

lifestyle in her uncle whom she admires. The third is sexuality and judging from *Le Petit Spirou* and *Titeuf*, the last vestiges of resistance to the cultural force of the sexual revolution seem to have crumbled and raw desire and sexualized bodies can now be openly portrayed even in children's comic books.

A new world and a new generation

The first indication that something was changing in the world of children, as reflected in the franco-belgian *Bandes dessinées* of the period, was *Le Petit Spirou*, created by Tom and Janry in 1987. By all appearances a cartoonish, comedic title in the traditional style of Belgian comic strips, it turned out to be a surprisingly intense and sexually charged series that created a colorful imaginary world where women's bodies (and those of underage girls) were a terrain of *jouissance* and excitement for the young, prepubescent protagonists and the assumed male readership. In its pages adult women are often presented as headless, curvaceous bodies disconnected from any semblance of humanity or characterization. The boys' young female classmates are also shown as helpless faced with these young satyrs. We are already so far beyond the sanitized purity of *Boule and Bill* (1959) or even that of the edgier *Cedric* (1986) that came out one year earlier. Voyeurism and sexual harassment are the order of the day and they are presented as a natural, fun and inescapable reality of boyish behavior; attractive for young readers and nostalgic for older ones. Here all the old barriers, shielding children from the realities of adult life and sexual behavior have dissolved and the (male) sexual ID roams free. The sexual revolution had already made its presence known in the adult francophone comics of the 70s², but here fifteen or twenty years later, we finally see its influence in the world of children. Even before the invention of the internet and the proliferation of pornography, these desires are no longer taboo and there is no greater proof of that than to see them appear in such a frank and open way in a publication addressed to a young readership.

On the other end of the spectrum, *Kid Paddle* was a Belgian comic created in 1993 by Midam (Michel Ledent). It was published in *Spirou* magazine, quickly becoming popular enough to get its own television show, with the impressive number

² Mazur Dan & Danner Alexander, *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to the Present*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2014.

of 104 episodes. *Kid Paddle* captures a young boy's development in a very particular and historically specific time period: it's the early 90s, a period where electronic arcades are one of the main, but not the only, source of stimulation for a young kid, as home video game consoles have also recently flooded the market, supplanting most other traditional interests and steadily making other hobbies obsolete³. The interesting thing about the protagonist of this title is the amount of confidence Kid has and his elevated, almost ascetic idea of himself. The stereotypical shy and introverted nerd is nowhere to be found, as there is a possibly perceptive recognition that he is the man of the future.



Kid Paddle (1993) - Midam

Sexuality in *Kid Paddle* is interestingly absent, especially if we compare it with the perverted kids of *Le Petit Spirou*. All the youthful energy of Kid and his friends is sublimated in virtual violence and the intense excitement and masculine socialization and community that form around video games and arcade culture. In an exemplifying scene that shows the huge gap between the sexes⁴, the boys abduct some feminine toys of Kid's sister and by melting the plastic, they transform them into hideous monsters. The main reason for this transgression is that traditional values and

³ Peyron David, *Culture Geek*, France, FYP editions, 2013.

⁴ Condis Megan, *Gaming Masculinity: Trolls, Fake Geeks, and the Gendered Battle for Online Culture*, University of Iowa Press, 2018.

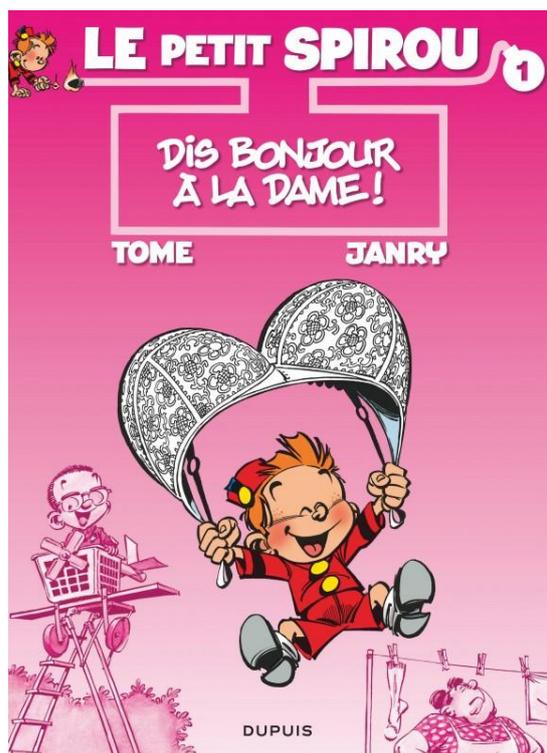
aesthetics have been reversed. For boys especially, the ugly and the monstrous are now considered attractive, whereas the cute and the conventionally beautiful have become conventional and boring. Monsters are good; Mickey Mouse and Bambi have suddenly become cultural artifacts of a bygone era, woefully banal and embarrassing. Aesthetic *goodness* and *badness* are confidently judged not by any moral standard, but by the status or affect that each cultural product affords you.

The classic horror monsters of old have also been gradually demystified and have lost most of their power to terrify and provoke. They are now widely recognizable as iconic, but also as commodified stock figures, to such an extent as to appear friendly and likable to a young audience. This new reality is best exemplified in Joann Sfar's *Le Petit Vampire* (1999) where the dark tone of the series does not contrast with its childish and upbeat nature. Vampires, zombies and werewolves can now be considered approachable creatures and as *Kid Paddle* shrewdly observed the figure of the monster can appear as far less patronizing to a young kid, compared to the more traditional conceptions of what children should consider attractive. Apart from video games the world of the *Harry Potter* books may have also played a part in popularizing these darker, fantasy elements in children's imaginations.

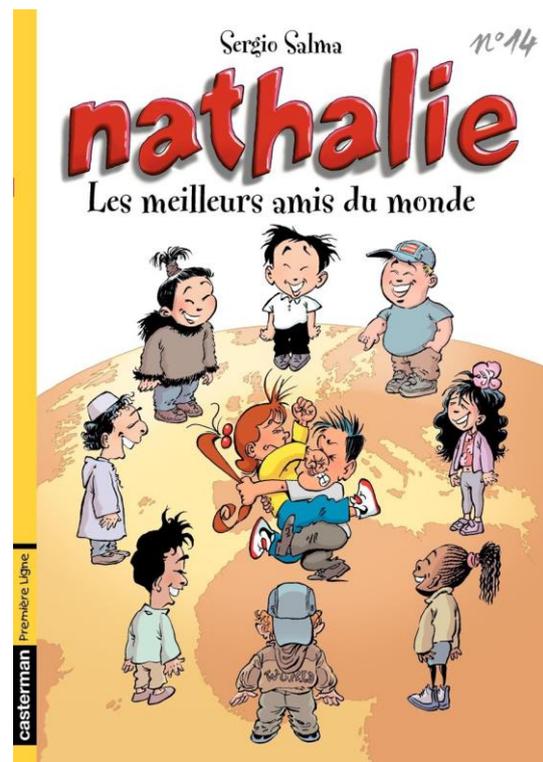
In another scene, the grandfather of Kid, hopelessly out of touch with the new generation, brings him some old fashioned Disney toy, as gifts for his birthday thinking this will please his grandson. Kid instantly melts them in the oven and presents them as grotesque trophies in his bedroom and thus claims them as his own. These scenes can be interpreted as the death of a whole idea of what contemporary children consider attractive. The idea of *coolness* is also extremely important to these boys and softness and kindness are often considered antithetical to it. Kid Paddle might be a nerd, but he is the best at killing virtual enemies, so in this sense he creates an idea of himself where his self confidence can be asserted among his peers. In this reality the jocks and the physically active are like creatures from another dimension, they don't affect his thoughts and there is no competition to be had between them.

In the more pessimistic *Titeuf* there is more of a conflict, as the young protagonist is perturbed and frustrated by images of physically fit and sexually active men. He doesn't feel as confident, or as whole as either Kid or Spirou and the unknown potentialities of the future haunt his mind and those of his peers. *Titeuf* was created in 1992 by Zep and quickly became one of the most popular and instantly recognizable francophone comics of all time. In this series there is a greater sense of

realism and social observation compared to *Le Petit Spirou*, even though the narrative approach is quite similar. Unlike the other titles we already mentioned, transcendence is not achieved. The utopian, perverted *jouissance* of *le Petit Spirou* and the giving yourself wholly to a hobby of *Kid Paddle* are absent here. Titeuf is left in a confusing and complicated world, achieving only moments of happiness and satisfaction. The fascination with sex is ever-present and the hormonal messiness of young bodies is emphasized, though fundamentally unresolved, as there is no easy catharsis.



Le Petit Spirou (1987) – Tom & Janry



Nathalie (1992) – Sergio Salma

Nathalie (1992) was Titeuf's contemporary, created in the same year by Sergio Salma and attempting one of the first glimpses in the mostly overlooked, in the francophone titles of the period, world of young girls. Gender should be considered an important factor here, as *Nathalie* lacks both the wild sexual awakenings of *Titeuf* and *Petit Spirou* and also the violent sublimation that *Kid Paddle* finds in video games. The times are revolutionary enough in the social sphere to explore in a raw (despite the comical tone) and frank manner the urges and hormonal stirrings of young boys, but apparently not those of young girls, as of yet. The attempts at authenticity from Salma are convincing enough, but it would be a mistake not to mention that

throughout this whole period a female artist's voice is almost wholly absent for comics of this type. The family unit is also an important element here as Nathalie's parents face some very contemporary problems. Nathalie's mother is suffering from depression, a fact that slowly erodes her marriage and culminates in a divorce. The utopia of old⁵ is broken and the usually episodic, never ending and self-perpetuating nature of francophone comic strips is revealed to be a very fragile thing.

Technology is also a factor as we see how Nathalie's relationship with the television affords her the opportunity to learn more about foreign cultures and makes her interested in international politics. She is the only one of the children examined in this article to develop a political consciousness and in this sense she has a lot in common with Quino's *Mafalda* (1964), besides the fact that they are both girls. Nathalie also enjoys listening to various types of music (preferably ethnic or folk) through the much easier reproduction and proliferation of CDs and vinyls. Even a few years before the instant access of the looming age of the internet, popular culture is already shown as easily accessible and readily consumed in its new democratizing and reproducible forms. Globalization has also made the barriers between different cultures much more fluid and transparent, with interesting, though unintended consequences for the great tradition of francophone comics, as we are going to see later. What we are also seeing reflected both here and in *Kid Paddle* is a greater ease and comfort in the relationship of children with technology and popular culture. Technology has become a convincing substitute to socializing, as a concrete, though virtual, imaginary friend. As we already mentioned, the passive relationship with television gets gradually updated with the more interactive forms of play that video games offer and there is a crucial historical (and gendered) schism with the appearance of this hobby⁶. In this sense *Kid Paddle*'s historical specificity is greater than the more universalizing qualities of *Titeuf* and *Nathalie*, but in a certain sense they are all firmly rooted in a recognizable reality. This relatively realistic and down-to-earth approach represents a huge gap between these francophone comics and the fantastical worlds of the immensely popular Japanese *shonen manga*⁷.

⁵ Trousson Raymond, *Voyages aux pays de nulle part. Histoire littéraire de la pensée utopique*, Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1999.

⁶ Burill Derek A., *Die Tryin' Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*, Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2008.

⁷ *Shonen manga* are usually addressed to a young male audience and are characterized by an intense emphasis on action and adventure. In Japanese *Shonen* literally means "young boy".

A different narrative approach

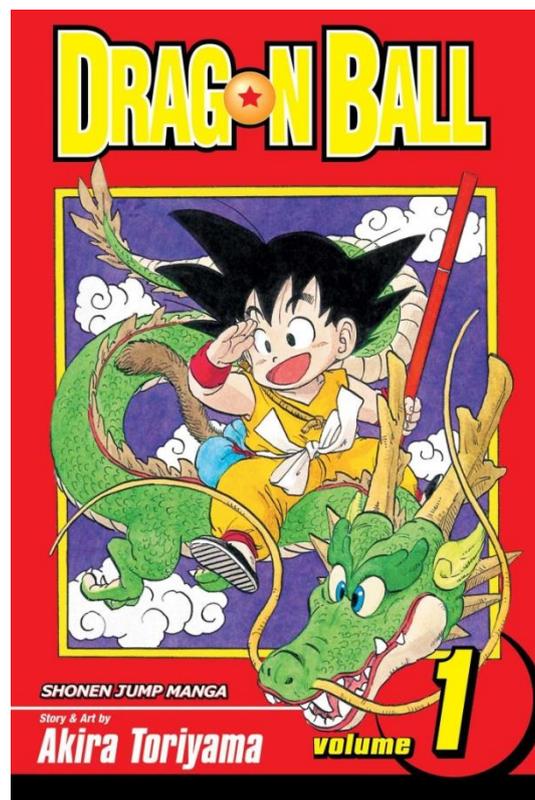
In the *shonen manga* of the same time period, the narrative elements centering on quotidian everyday living and the actual reality of common people are mostly absent and the focus is given to violent battles, competition (either through martial arts or sports) and adventure. *Dragon Ball*, created by Akira Toriyama in 1984, achieved international success and immense popularity throughout the 90s and is the most popular example of the period, with Eiichiro Oda's *One Piece* (1997) and Masashi Kishimoto's *Naruto* (1997) picking up the mantle before the start of the new millennium. The protagonists of these titles are either prepubescent kids or teenagers, but their supernatural strength and ambition far surpasses anything seen in francophone or mainstream American comics with kids or teenagers as protagonists. The sense of scale in *shonen manga* should also be considered an important factor and should be emphasized: these long running series boast of chapters in the triple digits⁸ and of vast worlds with an incredible amount of diverse characters; more crucially though, we are talking about two fundamentally different narrative styles.

Children or teenagers as martial artists, warriors or competitive sportsmen⁹ is a very Japanese idea that is rarely approached in a moralizing way in the pages of manga and is accepted matter of factly as something fun and exciting. The domain of action and violence is no longer restricted to adult Superheroes and Supervillains, or Soldiers and Cowboys, but is *democratized* in this sense to include people of all ages and backgrounds (though still mostly boys). With enough training and perseverance anyone can become a martial arts master or a pirate king of the seven seas. The way to achieve those goals is not glamorized either as the dangers are very real and deadly. However, these young protagonists are usually not passive in the sense of merely reacting to danger and trying to survive; on the contrary, they chase after it with an adventurous glee. Things are not just happening to them, they are active participants in the violent reality of their worlds and the competitive nature of their field of expertise often leads to them making valuable friendships, growing in strength and knowledge and maturing as people. It's an inherently optimistic outlook that finds meaning through perseverance, the honing of skills and the will to overcome.

⁸ One Piece is still ongoing and its number of chapters is bordering on the thousands. By now it has surpassed *Dragon Ball* in sales and popularity and is considered the most successful manga of all time.

⁹ Kosaka Makoto, *The Dark Side of the Koshien Dream*, Japan Times, 2014.

Contemporary French comics share very little with that philosophy. On the other hand mainstream American Superhero comics prefer to center conflict and violence as something that makes the world a better place through the eradication of evil or crime and not as a pastime, valuable in itself, that gradually makes the hero stronger and more confident.



Dragon Ball (1984) – Akira Toriyama

Another crucial difference with these immensely popular American comic books is that the super heroic characters involved in these stories are mostly adults. Teenagers, never mind prepubescent children, are very rarely allowed to be involved in adventures of this scale and violence in American comics. Power, violence and death are a purely adult domain. In *Dragon Ball* however, we see the young and usually cheerful and upbeat Goku destroying mercenary armies all by himself, by unambiguously killing their members and officers. *Naruto*, one of *Dragon Ball*'s descendants will later pit its young, colorful protagonists in violent battles to the death. A similar aesthetic dissonance cannot be perceived in mainstream American comic books or in francophone BD. Through unrealistic, but exciting comic book

mythmaking young characters and readers of manga can imagine themselves as powerful actors in their lives.

In this sense it's no wonder that the contemporary European kid, as exemplified by *Kid Paddle*, idolizes these *shonen manga* protagonists. Kid is shown to have a poster of Goku in his bedroom and he even attempts plastic surgery in order to look closer to this idealized male figure. The male role models of the real world seem wholly inadequate by comparison. His dad is presented as a bumbling and spineless office worker and the alternatives are brutish and violent men, whose violence is far more crass and unglamorous compared to Kid's violent, but idealized world that consists of killing virtual monsters and watching *Dragon Ball* fights on TV. These innocent references admit in a metatextual and indirect way the gradual defeat of francophone BD and reveal the loss of their international and even national cultural influence¹⁰. Even European kids prefer reading manga¹¹, a phenomenon that has led to the consternation and befuddlement of some French commentators¹². Even though series like *Kid Paddle* and *Titeuf* became unambiguously popular in their home countries and abroad, they admittedly never reached the heights of the *shonen* titans of the end of the 20th century. We hypothesize that the main reasons for that are the limitations of the comic strip format, the lack of serial storytelling and finally, and quite possibly crucially, the lack of easily marketized violence. In this competitive industry even the narrative force and potential that make a comic book easily adaptable into a video game and various other merchandise, count for a whole lot.

Conclusion

It needs to be emphasized that the last decade of the 20th century offered some extremely important developments in human development that are reflected in the popular culture of the period. The all encompassing nature of the sexual revolution finally reached the world of children's media and technology has become an increasingly important and ever present factor, a constant companion that offers pure

¹⁰ Sutton Elizabeth, «Marché de la bande dessinée 2018 – chiffres clés», 2019.

URL : <https://www.idboox.com/economie-du-livre/marche-de-la-bande-dessinee-2018-chiffres-cles/>

¹¹ «Les 'Parts de Marché' des genres selon l'âge, Une BD sur deux lue par les 15-17 ans est un manga», URL: <http://neuviemeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article597>

¹² Groensteen Thierry, *Retour du Japon: World Manga*, 2010.
URL: <http://neuviemeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article8>

entertainment to millions of people. Young children now have some of their most formative experiences in the virtual world. Interestingly, in the comics of the period, the world of girls is presented as more shielded from these changes, but that may be due to the overwhelmingly male authorship of the comic books presented in this article and not a reflection of lived reality. The emphasis on the everyday and the quotidian is also judged as an important narrative choice and the slice of life nature of these francophone comics is the complete inverse of the vibrant and fantastical world of *shonen manga*, where children and teenagers engage in violent or sportsmanlike competition in immense stories told with serialized storytelling. The defeat of the first style of narrative to the second is going to be one of the most interesting developments in the international comic book industry of the 21st century.

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