

## Tarzan under Attack: Youth, Comics, and Cultural Reconstruction in Postwar France

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Since World War II, the comic book has emerged in the West as a form of popular literature that appeals to both children and adults. Due to its popularity, the comic book hero has leapt from the pages of periodicals as an icon in the art of Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol as well as a celebrity of Hollywood film and television. However, it is a mistake to believe that this is purely an American obsession. In France, the comic book maintains a position of prominence as an artistic and literary medium. A survey conducted by *Le monde* in 1982 revealed that comics made up 7 percent of all reading matter in France. Furthermore, it showed comics more likely to be read by those of higher education or socioeconomic status than those of lower. Indeed, the comic book in France occupies a space of public approval and popularity equaled only in the United States and Japan, and perhaps unmatched in its critical appreciation. In France, the comic book operates as an esteemed element of popular culture of literary and artistic appeal to the young and old alike. Today, there is a section devoted to comics in the Ministry of Culture, a comics commission within the National Center for Letters, and an annual comics salon and archival institute for the study of comics at Angoulême.<sup>1</sup>

Although comics function as pop cultural merchandise consumed

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The author thanks Kimberly Brodtkin, Bonnie Smith, John Gillis, Joan Scott, Jim Gilbert, Belinda Davis, and the anonymous readers for *French Historical Studies* for their valuable comments. In addition the author benefited from the archival assistance of Christine Sibille and financial support in the form of a Bourse Chateaubriand from the French government. Portions of this article were presented at the 2000 Western Society for French History conference and the 2001 France-America conference in Southampton, U.K.

<sup>1</sup> Maurice C. Horn, "Comics," in *Handbook of French Popular Culture*, ed. Pierre L. Horn (New York, 1991), 15.

*French Historical Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (fall 2003)

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and valued as collectibles by adults, the primary audience for comics has been and remains the young. Yet the history of the comic book reveals a tension regarding its suitability for minors. In the West after World War II, campaigns were waged against comics deemed to have content inappropriate for young people. These moral outcries resulted in legislation first in France and then later in Austria, Germany, Britain, and the United States.<sup>2</sup> The first of these campaigns, in France, culminated in the 16 July 1949 law establishing a Commission for the Oversight and Control of Publications for Children and Adolescents. Yet this campaign ostensibly about comics was not specifically about comics at all, but rather about competing conceptions of society and youth in postwar France. This campaign and the subsequent evolution of the comic book in France reveal broader themes of French society's struggle over a new national identity following the devastation and destruction of World War II, and a particular desire to influence the cultural construction of French youth.

As a cultural artifact, the comic book became a point of intervention both producing and reflecting a changing youth identity in terms of nationality and morality within the historically specific moment of the postwar period. By controlling comic books, France sought to control the development of the character of its young and, by extension, culturally reassert a specifically French national identity emphasizing community, social and civic responsibility, rational progress, morality, and integrity. While recent scholarship has traced this "moralization" of the juvenile press, I believe that by carefully contextualizing this development in the postwar period, we can learn how many adults in France imagined cultural reconstruction as well as the conceptualization of youth as a social body participating within it.<sup>3</sup>

### The Moral Reconstruction of Youth

At the midcentury turning point of World War II's end, France self-consciously deliberated on its future, looking beyond the present idyll of the Liberation and the failures of the past to plan a better society. The postwar reconstruction became not just an opportunity to modernize a dated infrastructure, but also a chance to rejuvenate an infirm cul-

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Barker, *A Haunt of Fears: The Strange History of British Horror Comics Campaign* (London, 1984); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, 2001); Anne Rubenstein, *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico* (Durham, N.C., 1998); John A. Lent, ed., *Pulp Demons: International Dimensions of the Postwar Anti-Comics Campaign* (Teaneck, N.J., 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Thierry Crépin, "Haro sur le gangster!": *La moralisation de la presse enfantine 1934-1954* (Paris, 2001).

tural identity.<sup>4</sup> Youth and youthfulness became a key site around which France imagined and planned this future. As a social group, the young became a visible element of the physical, moral, and cultural reconstruction of the nation laboring for recovery; they emerged as an object of state planning and government programs; and they became the subject of scrutiny as the French public sought to understand its future through the study of the young, most famously in Françoise Giroud's 1957 examination of the *nouvelle vague* postwar youth.<sup>5</sup> As an icon of rejuvenation, the creative energy of youth became the reconstruction's motivating spirit. In turn, this societal emphasis on the young and on youthfulness helped produce the contemporary social category of youth. As the supreme representative of the future in the present, youth and youthfulness became mechanisms for cultural reconstruction as France sought to remake itself after the calamities of World War II.

In one sense the postwar baby boom obliged the French state and society to reconsider the young. France experienced a jump in fertility rates, with more than 11 million new births by 1958. After nearly a century of very low birthrates and failed state pronatalism, this demographic shift to a much younger population helped to reposition the focus of French society by creating a demand for products, resources, programs, projects, and activities designed for the young. For decades France had had a disproportionately elderly population, but by 1958 nearly one-third of France was under twenty years of age.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, the reform of juvenile publications grew from the perceived need for a general moral reconstruction of France after the troubled years of World War II. Some vituperative attacks even proclaimed that "the juvenile press of 1938 made ready the treachery of 1940."<sup>7</sup> Louis Raillon hoped to rally educators to the moral reconstitution of the nation. He maintained that the best way to initiate national change was to alter the noxious influence on the young of demoralizing reading material; reforming the reading matter of juveniles would do

<sup>4</sup> This is a point made forcefully by Marc Bloch in *Strange Defeat*, trans. Gerard Hopkins (London, 1949); see also Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France: Plans for Renewal, 1940–1946* (Oxford, 1989); and Jon Cowans, "Visions of the Postwar: The Politics of Memory and Expectation in 1940s France," *History and Memory* 10 (1998): 68–101.

<sup>5</sup> This was first published as a series in Giroud's weekly magazine *L'express* in the fall of 1957 and, due to the attention this study generated, was expanded and published as Françoise Giroud, *La nouvelle vague: Portraits de la jeunesse* (Paris, 1958). For more on the social scientific and media studies of youth in postwar France, see Susan Weiner, "Quantifying Youth," in *Enfants Terribles: Youth and Femininity in the Mass Media in France, 1945–1968* (Baltimore, 2001), 170–96; and Richard I. Jobs, "Youth of Today, France of Tomorrow," in "Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after World War II" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 2002), 17–76.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the postwar baby boom, see Jean-Pierre Rioux, "An Unequal Prosperity," in *The Fourth Republic, 1944–1958*, trans. Godfrey Rogers (Cambridge, 1987), 350–82.

<sup>7</sup> Raoul Dubois, "La presse pour enfants de 1934 à 1953," *Enfance* 5 (1953): 379.

no less than “prepare and develop the soul of France.”<sup>8</sup> In a warning to parents, André Fournel explicitly linked the reform of juvenile publications to the project of reconstruction more generally by demanding that “France, which tends to its reconstruction in all other domains, needs to consider the moral reconstruction of its young generations.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, intervening in the reading habits of young people would ensure “a solid education which would form citizens conscious of their duties and all their civic and personal responsibilities.”<sup>10</sup>

Comic books were, in fact, a medium with significant access to the young people of France. The kind of information and tone of messages conveyed along this medium were paramount to the efforts of moral rejuvenation in part because of the pervasive scale of distribution. Throughout the Fourth Republic many *journaux de jeudi* (they tended to come out on Thursday) and *petit format* comic books had higher rates of circulation than leading newspapers. For example, in 1957 *Le journal de Mickey* alone had a circulation of 633,000, whereas *Le Figaro* had a circulation of 486,500 and *Le monde* 211,500.<sup>11</sup> Thus, depending on the content, comic books could be either an undermining threat or a viable tool in the efforts to shape and mold the young into an ideal citizenry for France.

The Fourth Republic was concerned about what it perceived to be the moral degeneration of France, as reflected in the defeat, occupation, and collaboration, as well as the subsequent damage the high rate of juvenile delinquency could have on France’s future. Notably, the legislation overseeing comic books emerged from the Assembly’s special commission appointed to study the high rates of juvenile delinquency.<sup>12</sup> The National Assembly passed the law of 16 July 1949 as a measure to protect France’s young from debauchery, delinquency, and corruption and, significantly, to protect France’s own future from a mal-adjusted youth. Deputy Paul Gosset stated that the legislator’s duty was to prevent “the publication of texts and images not conforming to morality and contrary to the governing principle of the training and education of French youth.” Moreover, “the problem of preparing

<sup>8</sup> Louis Raillon, “Front commun des éducateurs,” *Educateurs* 1 (1946): 2.

<sup>9</sup> André Fournel, “Alerte aux parents! Les publications enfantines ne doivent pas être une semence de démoralisation pour les générations futures!” *Le Parisien libéré*, 17 July 1946, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Labrusse, “Le point de vue des parents: La presse enfantine, problème délicat, problème soluble,” *Enfance* 5 (1953): 456.

<sup>11</sup> “L’application de la loi du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse de 1955 à 1957,” *Pour la vie* 76 (1959): 17, Centre National de la Bande Dessinée et de l’Image à Angoulême (hereafter CNBDI).

<sup>12</sup> “Le conseil supérieur de la magistrature devant la recrudescence de la criminalité juvénile,” *Le monde*, 1–2 Feb. 1948, 3.

them for their work as citizens,” he emphasized, “is a public responsibility.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, what guided this legislation was the government’s belief in its own duty to shape and construct the identity of French youth into what it believed to be most valuable for France’s future in the wake of the war.

The legacy of World War II featured prominently within the Assembly debates in January and July of 1949, and the experience and conduct of the French during the war helped shape the legislation. For instance, it is significant that during Assembly debates the words “hatred” (*la haine*) and “cowardice” (*la lâcheté*) were added to the paragraph outlining the unfavorable characteristics that indicated a publication warranting censure. In its final form, the article stipulated that publications “should not contain any illustration, any narrative, any chronicle, any heading, or any insertion that favorably presents banditry, falsehoods, thievery, idleness, *cowardice*, *hatred*, debauchery, or any criminal acts or misdemeanors of a nature demoralizing to children or youth.”<sup>14</sup> Neither of these minor amendments was met with any opposition from the floor, which shows that the Assembly was using this legislation as a way to create a citizenry among its youth imbued with a moral sense of what it meant to be French, an attitude that was shaped by the disagreeable experience of World War II.<sup>15</sup>

### Comic Books in France

The concern for the effect of comics on youth stemmed from the interpretation of their content as well as from the very nature of the medium’s reliance on the bold power of the iconic image. Though comics emerged at the turn of the century and reached mass audiences by the 1930s, they were still considered to be relatively new and thus potentially dangerous. Many believed images could be powerfully influential on young impressionable minds because pictures, unlike writing, can be decoded and interpreted without specialized knowledge. Comics were derided for the repetition of images that “hypnotized” and “intoxicated” youngsters while simultaneously encouraging an illiterate population by coaxing young readers away from storybooks.

Comics as a medium rely on sequential images to tell their tales graphically rather than textually. However, whereas the images in a film

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gosset, *Journal officiel de la République Française: Débats parlementaires, Assemblée Nationale* 21 Jan. 1949, 90 (hereafter *Débats*).

<sup>14</sup> *Débats*, 3 July 1949, 4096; emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> *Débats*, 21 Jan. 1949, 97. Solange Lamblin and Jacques Bardoux introduced these terms respectively in the desire to create a new morally upright, staunchly patriotic, and democratically devoted citizenry in response to the specific context of the war and occupation.

occupy the same screen space in a narrative sequence with one image replaced by the next, a comic book uses spatially juxtaposed images to convey its narrative structure. This distinction is significant because it is the empty space *between* the pictorial frames that allows the comic book reader to focus on the completion of an action in his or her own mind. In comics, the reader can deliberate and brood on individual panels. Thus comic books require the human imagination to interpret and transform panels into a meaningful narrative structure. In comic books, therefore, violent or sexual acts are in the mind of the reader more than they are on the page, or, for film, on the screen.<sup>16</sup> More problematically, the popularity of comic books ensured a wide readership and distribution because comic books were portable and capable of entering the home, school, or playground for repeated or shared viewings.

Comic strips emerged in France at the turn of the century, essentially at the same time as elsewhere in the West. Until the mid-1930s, French comics usually appeared in weekly illustrated papers for children along with short stories, tales, and articles, a format that extended back deep into the nineteenth century. This configuration radically changed, however, with the introduction of *Le journal de Mickey*, first published in France in October 1934.<sup>17</sup> It had a format twice as large as the traditional illustrated paper (roughly the size of American tabloid papers) and was comprised almost entirely of serial comic strips, most of them of American origin such as “Mickey Mouse” or “Jungle Jim.” *Le journal de Mickey* immediately dominated the French market, crushing its competitors’ circulation and forcing rival publishers to adopt a similar format, style, and content. By the late 1930s, the best-selling and most revered comics in France were the heroic adventure comics *Tarzan*, *Flash Gordon*, *Mandrake the Magician*, and *Red Rider*.<sup>18</sup> The French industry was left reeling from the popularity of American comics and it struggled to match the quality and market appeal of design, style, and

16 For a formal analysis of comic books as media, see Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, Mass., 1993), and Martin Barker, *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (Manchester, 1989); for a more semiotic approach see Jean-Louis Tilleul, *Pour analyser la bande dessinée: Propositions théoriques et pratiques* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1987).

17 For a general overview, see Pierre Couperie and Maurice C. Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip*, trans. Eileen B. Hennessy (New York, 1968); Henri Filippini et al., *Histoire de la bande dessinée en France et en Belgique . . . des origines à nos jours* (Grenoble, 1979); Thierry Groensteen, *Astérix, Barbarella et cie: Trésors du musée de la bande dessinée d'Angoulême* (Paris, 2000); for the place of comics in the history of French juvenile publications more generally, see Alain Forment, *Histoire de la presse des jeunes et des journaux d'enfants (1768–1988)* (Paris, 1987).

18 For an overview of American comics in France, see Maurice C. Horn, “American Comics in France: A Cultural Evaluation,” in *For Better or Worse: The American Influence in the World*, ed. Allen F. Davis (Westport, Conn., 1981), 49–60.

story lines that were being imported; the industry even sought protectionist legislation, unsuccessfully.<sup>19</sup>

During the occupation of France, Germany banned American comics, a move that, in fact, helped to solidify the sputtering French industry. In the Vichy South, however, American comics continued to be available as long as the U.S. government maintained a position of neutrality.<sup>20</sup> In the immediate postwar period, a number of French comics were launched, or relaunched, some of which capitalized on the reputation of the resistance and became quite popular among the young of France.<sup>21</sup> Although *Tarzan* and the *Journal de Mickey* (not relaunched until 1952) would continue to be extremely popular, imported American comics never regained their dominant position of prewar market share. Indeed, the postwar period is often seen as the golden age for French comics.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, following the Liberation of France and the subsequent end of the war, American publishers poured into France and Europe a backlog of comic book production that was greedily consumed by the young. This deluge of American comics created political opposition from both the Left and Right in France as concern mounted regarding France's cultural hegemony in the young's reading material. The Communist Party opposed these comics because they presented values counter to Stalinist orthodoxy; that is, it disapproved of the mighty individual champion who violently and heroically defeats scores of enemies to ensure the triumph of liberty, freedom, and the American way. Meanwhile, the Catholic social-democrats of the Mouvement Republicaine Populaire (MRP) opposed the content of these comics because they supposedly undermined the construction of a new moral, national, and, specifically, French identity. The campaign for the 1949

<sup>19</sup> In 1935, French draftsmen formed a new union to join the two preexisting ones in an effort to defend their positions in the industry and to make protectionist demands on the French government. At the outbreak of the war, there was a project underway to limit the amount of foreign material allowed in French publications. But this legislation remained unrealized after the collapse of the Third Republic. For more on this, see Thierry Crépin, "Défense du dessin français: Vingt ans de protectionnisme corporatif," *Dessin français*, 26–30, CNBDI.

<sup>20</sup> The Nazis published their own comic magazine for French youth. *Le téméraire* was intended to indoctrinate young French readers with Nazi ideals and featured comic strips with dark, hook-nosed villains and blond, Aryan heroes. For an analysis of *Le téméraire*, see Pascal Ory, *Le petit Nazi illustré: Une pédagogie hitlérienne en culture française, "Le téméraire" (1943–1944)* (Paris, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> The communist press published *Vaillant*; the Catholic press reestablished *Coeurs-vaillants* (in which "Tintin" appeared, though in 1946 it graduated to its own publication); and in 1944 Marijac (Jacques Dumas), who would go on to dominate the postwar French industry, began the paper *Coq hardi*, which featured "Les trois mousquetaires du maquis."

<sup>22</sup> For an overview of the dominant publications of this period, see Henri Filippini, *Les années cinquante* (Grenoble, 1977).

law joined together, in an uneasy alliance, industry protectionists, public morality groups, pedagogues, and political parties.<sup>23</sup>

### **Cold War Politics: A Third Way or Anti-Americanism?**

In its first years, the Fourth Republic was politically and intellectually dominated by these two political groups as each desired to build a new and better France out of the ashes of the old. Even though the Communists had been forced out of the tripartite coalition in 1947, they remained the largest party in the National Assembly and generated support from 25 percent of the electorate. The Communist/Gaullist rivalry held the two poles between which the line of Fourth Republic cultural policy tended to be strung. Both groups maintained a leery attitude to American intervention, which they viewed as an insidious threat to French hegemony. America did indeed seem to be everywhere in the late 1940s—from GIs stationed in France, to Marshall Plan advisors, to NATO diplomats, to American products and businesses. In view of this, the law of 16 July 1949 represented a moral concern for juvenile literature intertwined with a concern for American vulgarity influencing the worldview of French youth and the succession of French *civilisation*. Yet it is significant that the Assembly rejected motions to specifically name American publications as the object of this legislation. Repeatedly this issue was raised by the Communist Party and successively defeated by the Assembly.

Despite the Communist/Gaullist rivalry, the Communists and the MRP Catholics (which included many Gaullists) worked together to prepare an initial bill designed to protect French publications.<sup>24</sup> They prepared in conjunction a text whose aim was to prohibit all foreign comic strips, which the French Communist Party presented to the National Assembly in 1948. Furthermore, this bill took up the cause of writers and draftsmen by seeking economic protectionism for a floundering French industry as an indirect way to attack material of foreign origin on an ideological basis. This initial proposal, however, was deemed too extreme and was rejected due to its harsh condemnation of all foreign material. The Catholic MRP party then revised the

<sup>23</sup> See Thierry Crépin, "Le mythe d'un front commun," in *"On tue à chaque page!": La loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse*, ed. Jean-Paul Gabilliet (Paris, 1999), 43–52; and Pascal Ory, "Mickey Go Home! La désaméricanisation de la bande-dessinée (1945–1950)," in Gabilliet, *"On tue à chaque page!"*, 71–86.

<sup>24</sup> The bill was the result of a combined effort from the Communist-dominated Union Patriotique des Organisations de Jeunesse (UPOJ) and the Catholic Commission d'Etude des Journaux d'Enfants (CEJE).



text. It placed the legislation within a framework that emphasized the moral considerations of the young and established a watchdog committee with the power of censure and the threat of prosecution.<sup>25</sup> This revision illuminates that the debate was really a domestic one, more about France itself than about America in France. To be sure, however, anti-Americanism remained a significant element of this domestic debate.

Indeed, on 2 July 1949, the Communist Party actually voted against the final bill despite its support for the project in general and its sponsorship of the original legislation. René Thullier warned the Assembly that if the legislation failed to ban all foreign work, then the Communist Party would not only abstain but would actually vote against the bill that it had had a hand in producing. The Communists argued for the suppression of all imported material, regardless of innocuous content, on the dual grounds of the corruption of youth and the need to ensure employment for French writers and draftsmen. Moreover, according to Thullier, this would raise the quality of French publications due to the substandard, inferior, and profane work of the Americans.<sup>26</sup>

The debate surrounding the explicit censorship of foreign, specifically American, material emerged in January 1949 when the bill was first presented to the National Assembly. André Pierrard of the Communist Party savaged American comics and, in particular, publisher Paul Winkler of *Opera mundi*, who imported material from King Features Syndicate. Pierrard claimed that “all the publications unhealthy for our children come from America and exclusively America” and that Winkler “controlled the juvenile press in our country.” Pierrard charged that Winkler was a capitalist of the worst kind who greedily profited off the demoralization of French youth via “the great Hitlerophile press of America!”<sup>27</sup> Winkler responded coolly and directly to the attacks of Pierrard with a letter addressed and sent to each Assembly deputy detailing Pierrard’s exaggerations and outright falsehoods, which were legion.<sup>28</sup>

The vitriolic attacks on America did not cease after the bill’s passage and were not confined to Communist extremists nor to the Assembly floor. Partly at issue was the predominance of American products

<sup>25</sup> Couperie and Horn, *A History of the Comic Strip*, 93–95.

<sup>26</sup> René Thullier, *Débats*, 2 July 1949, 4102–3. Interestingly, despite these attacks, the popular Communist comic book *Vaillant*, which was set in the Resistance, took its style and themes from American comics. See Gilles Pidard, “Les illustrées pour la jeunesse de l’après-guerre (1945–1959)” (UER d’histoire, mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Paris X), 20, CNBDI.

<sup>27</sup> André Pierrard, *Débats*, 21 Jan. 1949, 91–92.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Winkler, “Réponse aux accusations du député communiste André Pierrard,” 25 Jan. 1949, CNBDI.

in a French market. It was true that comics of American origin were the most popular in France and enjoyed the largest circulations. Even in comic papers of mostly French origin, the American strips were the most popular.<sup>29</sup> In 1950, a member of the new commission for the control of juvenile publications claimed that American publishers dictated to French editors what material could be altered and what material must remain intact. He essentially suggested that as an economic power, imperial America was controlling the reading material of French youth.<sup>30</sup> Other critics were more plain: "Through open commerce and the fiction of free enterprise, the conscience of childhood is poisoned to the profit of Yankee imperialism."<sup>31</sup>

This "poison" was that of mass American consumer culture spoiling the great tradition of French *civilisation*. Many critics lamented the glamorous "easy life" portrayed in American comics and films as a "universe without any material problems," thus complicating France's lingering material hardship in the wake of the war. The multiplicity of these images of luxury "progressively intoxicated the adolescent with visions of an artificial world."<sup>32</sup> As a result, critics feared, the youth of France learn that to achieve the "good life" one steals, swindles, and kills without a moral conscience—reminiscent of the ethos of the war-time black market.

The campaign against American comics played itself out amid the hottest moments of the early Cold War: the Berlin Airlift, the war in Korea, McCarthyism, the Rosenberg trial and execution, the rearmament of Germany, the Soviet demonstration of nuclear capabilities, and the struggle over the *coca-colonisation* of France by American capitalism. Although the strident anti-American sentiment was led by the Communist Party and its fellow travelers who viewed American comics, with their exoneration of the violent individual superhero, as promoting "fascistic themes," centrists and Atlanticists also hoped that France would maintain an independent national policy free from American domination. Thus, although not everyone supporting the measures against comic books could be characterized as anti-American, resistance to the capitalist behemoth and the desire for French hegemony and an independent national identity in the wake of Nazi, and then

<sup>29</sup> A 1947 survey in *Mon journal* revealed that its readers preferred *Captain Marvel Junior* and *Hopalong Cassidy* to the French counterparts. "Résultats du concours," *Mon journal* 41 (1947): 7.

<sup>30</sup> "Procès-verbal de la sous commission chargée d'examiner les publications, séance du 9 novembre 1950," Centre des Archives Contemporaines à Fontainebleau (hereafter CAC), 900208/art. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Raoul Dubois, "Les journaux pour enfants," *La pensée* 37 (1951): 75.

<sup>32</sup> Philippe Bauchard, *La presse, le film et la radio pour enfants* (Paris, 1952), 95.

Allied, invasion and occupation did inform the debates about foreign comics and the practice of cultural consumption.

Yet this was not simply rampant anti-Americanism. These critics wanted the young to grow up as particularly French, not universally American or German or Italian or whatever. An opinion poll from the mid-1950s indicated that most people in France did not, at that time, consider the United States to be a cultural threat, merely a political and strategic one.<sup>33</sup> Italian comics were similar in style, content, and popularity to American ones and were also the target of the legislation, though directly cited much less often. Wildly popular Belgian comics, however, such as *Tintin*, *Spirou*, *Lucky Luke*, and, later, *Les Stroumpfs* (*The Smurfs*), were not condemned, most likely due to their franco-phone character. In fact, many considered these comics French even though they were produced in Belgium for the French market. Importantly, however, the content of these comics was not objectionable, and, quite frankly, they participated in the French cultural project more easily.

The attack on American comics was only one part of a larger ongoing debate about French youth and the bad influence comics had on them. That some seized upon this issue is understandable, significant, and very much consistent with the historical moment. It is also significant, however, that the National Assembly voted *not* to target American comics specifically. In fact, the only editor ever prosecuted under the 1949 law published comics of French origin exclusively. Nevertheless, French publishers were encouraged to drop American material, especially translated versions of American comic books such as *Superman*, *The Phantom*, *Tarzan*, or *Flash Gordon* (known in France as *Guy L'éclair*).<sup>34</sup>

### A Moral Panic?

The moral outcry damning comic books for their nefarious influence on the young also raged in the French press. This media campaign against comics not only anticipated and stimulated the Assembly legislation but also carried on for years after the new law was promulgated. *La croisade de la presse*, which published the Assembly proceedings, was

<sup>33</sup> For more on the French postwar debates about America's role in France, see Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993); Kirsten Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York, 1997); Jean-Philippe Mathy, *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis, Minn., 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Horn, "American Comics in France," 51, 57–58.

a review founded with the very mission of reforming juvenile publications. By the late 1940s, the crusade to reform juvenile publications rallied increasingly around the problem of juvenile delinquency. The number of juvenile delinquent court cases immediately after World War II had doubled that before the war. "If [comic books] are not the essential source of the juvenile delinquent," one critic wrote, "they too often furnish him with the model. The detonator is not the explosive, but it has a responsibility in the explosion."<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Jean Chazal, the prominent *juge des enfants* of Paris, claimed to recognize an undeniable connection between the content of comic books and the wrongdoers who made their way before him in the new juvenile justice system.<sup>36</sup>

In the fall of 1945, the government established a new juvenile justice system that favored education and socialization over strict penal sanction.<sup>37</sup> The Ordinance of 1945 established the system of "reeducation," which was not merely an attempt to reduce juvenile crime, but also an effort to apply a standard of homogeneity to the daily lives of young people. Meanwhile, a long chain of juvenile crimes captured the public eye in the postwar period and helped maintain an ongoing debate about problem youth. In fact, this fixation with juvenile delinquency suggests that the delinquent was perceived to be as much, if not more, of a threat to France's future than was America. Thus, the concern and outrage for comic books was, in part, an element of this larger ongoing obsession with postwar delinquency and its potential deleterious effect on France's future.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout 1947, the journal *Educateurs* sponsored a five-part series to evaluate the quality of juvenile publications. To its dismay, the journal reported that some papers, such as *Pic et Nic*, had "a crime per page!!!" Of the twenty-four publications reviewed, fourteen were condemned outright as dangerous to the morality of youth.<sup>39</sup> In a *Combat* editorial, Louis Pauwels demanded of publishers, "How many children do you kill each week?" He counted, on average, twenty-three murders out of every eight pages, including victims of busted guts, cut throats,

<sup>35</sup> Henri Wallon, "Préface," *Enfance* 5 (1953): 26.

<sup>36</sup> Jean Chazal, "Le point de vue d'un juge des enfants," *Enfance* 5 (1953): 451–53.

<sup>37</sup> This measure was initially passed by the Vichy government but never implemented. For a history of how this transformation of the French juvenile justice system came about, see Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for Children: World War II, Youth Crime, and Juvenile Justice in Twentieth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); for an analysis of the law's effectiveness, see Francis Bailleau, *Les jeunes face à la justice pénale: Analyse critique de l'application de l'ordonnance de 1945* (Paris, 1996); and *Livre blanc sur la jeunesse: VI partie: Inadaptation sociale et délinquance des jeunes* (Paris, 1967), CAC 910333/art. 3.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the culture of delinquency in the Fourth Republic, see Jobs, "Enfants Terribles: Rehabilitating the Young Delinquent," in "Riding the New Wave," 134–89.

<sup>39</sup> "Savez-vous ce qu'il y a dans les journaux d'enfants?" *Educateurs* 7–11 (1947): 126–39.

strangulation, and machine gun fire.<sup>40</sup> *Combat* even noted that comic books were the favorite reading material of imprisoned criminals.<sup>41</sup> The simple conclusion was that violence and criminality in comics inspired the same behavior in children, such as the regrettable incident of a ten-year-old boy in Melun who accidentally killed his friend with a loaded .22-caliber rifle while playing Zorro.<sup>42</sup> In 1948, the prefect of the Rhône sent the Ministry of the Interior the Ballandras Report, a study sponsored by local family associations that detailed the state of juvenile publications and concluded that “it is above all on [youth’s] moral sense that this criminal prose exerts its greatest damage.”<sup>43</sup>

In light of the rise of delinquency rates and the ongoing media frenzy, the Ministry of the Interior began to consider juvenile publications and the need “to preserve the morality of children and adolescents.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, the government sponsored an exhibition on the juvenile press in the summer of 1948 to show the public the dreadful state of juvenile publications and the need for moral intervention.<sup>45</sup> Because of its success in Paris, the exhibit was then sent as a traveling exhibit through the provinces. In 1949, the Communists organized their own exhibit that toured the Parisian *banlieue* and outlying factories. Not to be outdone, a Catholic group, also in 1949, sent a traveling exhibition of ideal and wicked juvenile literature through several French parishes.<sup>46</sup> In 1951 three filmmakers put together a short film titled “They Kill on Each Page,” which circulated in France and Europe for screenings before educators, student and parent associations, social workers, doctors, and youth organizations.<sup>47</sup>

Along with the late-forties delinquency issue came the simultaneous and related sexuality concern of the early 1950s. Like the juvenile press, films, publicity posters, and the media were condemned for

<sup>40</sup> Louis Pauwels, “Combien d’enfants tuez-vous par semaine?” *Combat*, 30 Dec. 1947, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Louis de Philippe, “Que lit-on ‘A l’homme’?” Tarzan, Zorro, et les Trois Mousquetaires,” *Combat*, 23 Aug. 1949, 1–12.

<sup>42</sup> “Un garconnet de 10 ans abat son petit camarade avec le pistolet de son pere! en voulant imiter Zorro,” *Parisien libéré*, 17 June 1954.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Ballandras, “Le report Ballandras,” 1948, CNBDI. The Ballandras Report was subsequently quoted frequently during the Assembly debates.

<sup>44</sup> Jules Moch aux messieurs les préfets, “Publications dangereuses pour la moralité publique,” 8 Apr. 1948, CAC 760173/art. 40.

<sup>45</sup> “Les bons, les moins bons, les mauvais journaux d’enfants sont exposés rue de Château-dun,” *Le monde*, 20 May 1948, 4.

<sup>46</sup> For more on the rivalry between Catholics and Communists concerning policies for youth, see Susan Brewster Whitney, “The Politics of Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France” (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> Christophe Chavdia, “La loi du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse: Le sexe des anges ou l’enfance philosopale” (Paris X Nanterre, 1997), 42 and 52, CNBDI.

“saturating the general atmosphere with an eroticism” that exerted “a harmful influence on pubescent youth.”<sup>48</sup> At times critics combined their sexual and violent analysis of comic book imagery, such as with the Italian superwoman import *Blond Panther*. Her aggressive sexuality was displayed “in a general atmosphere of brutality . . . sadism and sexual perversion.” Indeed, *Blond Panther* was interpreted as a voluptuous dominatrix: “Booted and armed with a whip, she engages herself in acts of violence that yield nothing to her masculine colleagues.”<sup>49</sup> These heroines “with their painted nails, provocative breasts, and their legs in the air” set a terrible example for young French women and created dangerous expectations for young French men.<sup>50</sup> This imagery of “silky mane[s] of hair, large saucer eyes, sweeping eyelashes, enormous sensual mouth[s], provocative breasts, long uncovered legs, and doll-face[s]” brought “eroticism to the cradle.”<sup>51</sup>

In 1949, *Les temps modernes* published a translated essay by American Gershorn Legman on the psychopathology of comics, and in 1955, it published translated excerpts of Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* indicating the growing international consensus of the danger of comics for youth. With shrieking alarmism, Legman outlined the perverse sexual universe of comic books by detailing the prevalent homosexual, sadist, and masochistic themes. These sexualized images “incite masturbation” and create unhealthy appetites in young, unformed libidos while perverting the norms of sexual and gender roles. For example, Superman had “ridiculously swollen genitals” and “the lesbian” Wonder Woman “desired to dominate males.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, comic books not only created a sexually charged atmosphere dangerous to immature libidos, but also transgressed appropriate gender roles.

The Abbé Pihan, a member of the commission and Catholic publisher, lamented this transgressive nature of female gender roles in comics. Either a woman was depicted as a point of struggle between men or as “a superwoman who fights against men, with cruelty and an absence of feminine sensibility.” Moreover, “mothers and wives do not really exist” in the comic book universe, a deficiency that “is particularly grave” for girls.<sup>53</sup> Sexuality and gender roles became a growing

<sup>48</sup> Commission, “Thèmes généraux inspirant les représentations et recommandations aux éditeurs des journaux pour enfants,” 1950, 2, CAC 910258/art. 159.

<sup>49</sup> Bauchard, *La presse, le film et la radio pour enfants*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> René Masson, “La presse enfantine,” *Le populaire*, 16 Dec. 1947, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Jean Pihan and Gabriel Soumille, *La presse enfantine: Les surhommes, les gangsters, les bagarres, les comics et petit commerce* (Paris, 1952), 6.

<sup>52</sup> Gershorn Legman, “Psychopathologie des ‘comics,’” *Les temps modernes*, May 1949, 916–31.

<sup>53</sup> L’Abbé Pihan, “Observation sur le projet de représentations et recommandations aux éditeurs,” 1 Oct. 1950, CAC 900208/art. 1.

concern in the commission's work more generally. In 1954 and again in 1958, a subcommission sought an expansion for Article 14, which listed the unfavorable characteristics warranting government intervention. These members wanted to include homosexuality, lesbianism, sadism, and masochism in order "to defend youth against precocious eroticism, sexual obsession, sexual excess, and sexual deviations." This "perturbation" of youthful desire and sexual energy created "erotic impulses" and a "sexualized" environment that "debase[d] the moral and virile potential of the entire population."<sup>54</sup> Through these editorials, articles, interviews, and polemic books, members of the commission became active participants in the more general public discourse that condemned the state of juvenile publications and defined gender roles.<sup>55</sup> In fact, the commission conceived its duty to be that of maintaining and normalizing the social order for young people.

### The Commission

Even though Communist deputies rejected the final legislation as too lenient toward America, the law of 16 July 1949 passed easily with a count of 422 votes for and 181 against. It created a commission of twenty-eight members, symbolically including a husband and wife, to oversee juvenile publications. Though not empowered to ban publications outright, the commission could discourage publishers from running certain strips and could recommend prosecution of offending publishers to the French Attorney General. One of its duties was to differentiate "adult" publications from "juvenile" ones. The law stated that "it is forbidden under penalty . . . to promote, to give, or to sell to minors under eighteen, publications of a nature dangerous for youth, by reason of their licentious or pornographic character, of their immoral character, or of their criminal character."<sup>56</sup>

The Commission for the Oversight and Control of Publications for Children and Adolescents met for the first time on 2 March 1950. Notable among its twenty-eight members were Jean-Louis Costa, the director of the new "reeducation" program from the Ministry of Justice; Michel Le Bourdelles, a high ranking *juge des enfants* from the juvenile justice system; Father Jean Pihan, the head of the Catholic comic

<sup>54</sup> "Notice sur l'application de l'article 14 de la loi du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse" (1954; rev. ed., 1958), 3–4, CAC 900208/art. 1.

<sup>55</sup> For the discourse on sexuality and gender roles in postwar France, see Janine Mossuz-Lavau, *Les lois de l'amour: Les politiques de la sexualité en France de 1950 à nos jours* (Paris, 1991); Claire Duchén, *Women's Rights and Women's Lives in France, 1944–1968* (London, 1994); and Susan Weiner, *Enfants Terribles: Youth and Femininity in the Mass Media in France, 1945–1968* (Baltimore, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> *Débats*, 2 July 1949, 4099.

books *Coeurs vaillants* and *Ames vaillantes*; Jean Chappelle, an independent Lyonnais editor; and Alain Saint-Ogan, the creator of *Zig et Puce* and head of the draftsmen's union. Other members included representatives from youth organizations, family interest groups, government departments, and local magistrates. René Mayer, the Keeper of the Seals, opened the commission's inaugural meeting with an address confirming its great need and outlining its purpose while describing the legislation's design and elucidating its fundamental principles. Mayer recalled the widespread concern for juvenile delinquency and the deleterious effect on the young of over a decade's worth of upheaval: economic depression, military defeat, occupation, and material hardship. Above all, he said, the commission's responsibility was to the "public welfare, which turns now toward the interests of youth. You must help youth find the inspiration that will assure its fidelity to the ideals of a national and republican tradition." Thus, the commission's ultimate project was to recreate French citizenship in the wake of fascism.<sup>57</sup>

The commission had two basic responsibilities: to identify and prevent the sale of adult publications, such as pornography, to minors, and to improve the quality and content of juvenile publications, notably comic books. The first responsibility was rather simple and straightforward; the second, however, was complicated and ambiguous. All publishers were obligated by law to deposit periodical issues with the commission's archival collection. In 1950, its first year, the commission examined 42 publications that it identified as restricted for sale to adults only. Meanwhile, there were 127 juvenile periodicals (29 weekly, 20 bimonthly, and 78 monthly) provided for inspection.<sup>58</sup>

The commission's strategy to improve juvenile publications was, in theory, more preventive than repressive. After reviewing several issues of a particular comic book or publication, the commission would send a report of its findings to the publisher. These reports were of four types: praise for the educative quality and moral tone of the publication, general recommendations for improvement, a warning to modify the publication or suffer reprisal, and an official sanction demanding that the editor extensively modify the comic book or strip, cease pub-

<sup>57</sup> Commission de Surveillance et de Contrôle des Publications Destinées à l'Enfance et à l'Adolescence. Séance du 2 mars 1950, procès-verbal, 2–3, CAC 900208/art. 2.

<sup>58</sup> For these, the commission established seven principal genres: police/crime (which featured an investigative reporter, detective, or spy); adventure (stories of voyages and exotic exploration, including science fiction); superhero (a protagonist with magical or superhuman powers); Western (stories set in the American West); historical (often set in the chivalric Middle Ages); war (modern conflicts); and children's (animal characters and popular cartoons). *Compte rendu des travaux de la Commission de Surveillance et de Contrôle des Publications Destinées à l'Enfance et à l'Adolescence au cours de l'année 1950*, 10, 12–15, CAC 900208/art. 2.



lication, or suffer prosecution under Article 2 for the demoralization of youth. The final two types of warnings also stipulated that the editor must appear before the commission to discuss the details of the case and to develop a timetable for the suggested improvements. A publication, in general, was granted a three-month compliance period to make necessary changes before the commission would resort to such measures as recommended prosecution by the Attorney General. Thus, the commission entered into a dialogue with editors, however one-sided, to improve the moral tone of juvenile reading material. In the end, though, the editors, not the commission members, were responsible for making the appropriate changes in their publications. Hence, the commission's powers were not, strictly speaking, censorial. In its first year, the commission issued sixteen warnings and thirty-five sanctions for a total of fifty-one publications considered to be in violation of the new law. Over the course of that first year, the commission met with twenty-nine different editors (several editors published more than one periodical under review). By the end of 1950, twenty-nine publications had already disappeared, seven had been suspended, and others were scrambling to make improvements amenable to the commission.<sup>59</sup>

In the official account of its activities, the commission outlined twenty-three general considerations it compiled for the improvement of the juvenile press. In addition to the obvious concerns for violent and erotic content, other themes emerged that seem pertinent to the context of postwar France. Notably, the commission was worried by the prevalent tone of pessimism in comic books, because, for young people, optimism was "vital" and a "primordial need" for "hope and yearning." The commission noted that this pessimism left young people with a malaise and despair for the future, which could, potentially, ensure just such a future for France. Furthermore, the distinction between good and evil was often blurred, rendering a confused sense of morality, appropriate behavior, and recognition of right and wrong. Likewise, the distinction between fantasy and reality was obscured, leading young imaginations into an "absolutely false universe" with a misapprehension of "plausibility" in regard to the laws of science. The commission feared that the ambiguity of comic books confused young readers and left them ungrounded in the realities of daily life and ill prepared to participate within it.

The commission also worried that the complexity of the human condition was undermined in comics as well. In most comics, there was "an atrophy of emotion" along with an "equaled atrophy of intellect."

<sup>59</sup> *Compte rendu . . . 1950*, 18–20.

The characters of comic books were too often emotionally “motivated by hate” and intellectually dominated by “instinct” rather than reason. Because of the simplification of its characters and the violent end so many of them met, the comic book denied their “human dignity,” did not convey “a respect for human life,” and encouraged readers “to accept human massacre as a normal incident of any endeavor.” Instead, young readers should learn “the sentiment of human solidarity” and “community,” which was so important in the wake of recent tragedies.<sup>60</sup>

The commission’s catalogue of deficiencies showed that it was most concerned about shaping youth into an idealized social body prepared for the responsibilities and duties of adult daily life and ready to accept the mantle of France’s future. This expressed need for optimism, for clear differentiation between right and wrong, for plausible reality, for intellectual and emotional balance, and for the values of cooperation, community, and social solidarity are indicative of the larger efforts of cultural reconstruction and rejuvenation in the fifteen years following the war.

To help guide the industry, the commission developed a standard of elementary recommendations for editors to improve their publications. Even the recreational press, said the commission, needed to recognize that it had an educational responsibility to the young of France. Comic books should “avoid excessive fantasy,” “remain logical,” and not contradict the “laws of science.” No happy result should be obtained “without effort, work, and intelligence.” There should be not just action or conflict between two parties, but “a place for labor, for the pursuit of an ideal, for struggle against the elements, [and] for work.” “Vulgarity and rudeness” should be proscribed. “Scenes of horror, torture, and bloodiness” should be avoided, as should characters who are “hideous, monstrous, or deformed” or women with “provocative attitudes.” Characters should be shown in a “familial, professional, and social milieu.” Heroes should never commit “reprehensible acts.” They should abstain from “summary justice,” “help the weak and oppressed,” and use “intelligence rather than force.” Finally, comics should increase the amount of written text, have no faults of syntax, spelling, or grammar, avoid onomatopoeia, and adjust the drawn image to avoid “tortured and tensed lines” or “shrill colors.”<sup>61</sup> It seems that, in essence, the commission was asking editors to deny the very nature of comics in substance and style in their desire to promote a society of responsible workers and citizens living in a rational and national collective harmony. In effect,

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 22–30.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 31–34.

the law and the commission sought to codify social customs for the social order through the medium of juvenile literature, as exemplified by the incredible assault on the Lord of the Jungle, or *L’Affaire Tarzan*.

### The Tarzan Affair

The first conspicuously significant target for the commission was the comic book *Tarzan*. By the early 1950s, *Tarzan* enjoyed a huge circulation of approximately 300,000 weekly issues, twice that of its closest competitor *Vaillant* and easily the largest in France. *Tintin*, for example, had a circulation of only 76,000. Of course, *Tarzan* had the marketing advantage of a popular ongoing Hollywood film series. In its first few months of existence, the commission identified *Tarzan* as its “n. 1” priority. Due to its wide circulation, the commission evaluated *Tarzan* as being the “guiding periodical” of the undesirable juvenile press, serving as a kind of “prototype that more or less directly influences the other publications.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, by attacking *Tarzan*, the largest, most visible, and, evidently, the most offensive of comics, the commission hoped to demonstrate its determination to set a standard for the industry at large.

The commission’s determination to attack the most popular comic book in France—one of American origin that featured a seminude animalistic superhero—coincided with the broad campaign in the French media criticizing the content of the comic book, bemoaning its ill effects on French youth, and pressuring its publisher to pull *Tarzan* from circulation. Commission members participated in this public inquisition by writing books and articles attacking Tarzan. The commission and its supporters accused the hero created by Edgar Rice Burroughs, as drawn by Hal Foster and, later, Burne Hogarth, with all kinds of transgressions of a sexual, animal, and savage nature. Cino Del Duca, the head of Editions Mondiales, the publishing house responsible for the translation and French publication of *Tarzan*, fought back, attempting both to stem the wave of protest as well as to make minor modifications amenable to the commission. In the end, however, these tactics merely served to delay the inevitable. In 1952, Editions Mondiales pulled *Tarzan* from circulation to avoid legal prosecution under Article 2 on the 1949 law pertaining to the demoralization of youth. Apart from a few months of publication in 1953, *Tarzan* would not reappear as an independent publication in France for over a decade.

Tarzan had first appeared in France in the publication *Hop là!* in

<sup>62</sup> “Procès-verbal . . . séance du 9 novembre 1950,” 8.



*Tarzan, vu par Hogarth:  
un des sommets  
de la bande dessinée  
Le roi de la jungle  
tout en muscles  
et en mouvement.  
(U. F. S. — U. P. I.)*

**Figure 1** Tarzan was identified as “enemy n. 1” by the commission. TARZAN © UFS.  
Reprinted by permission



**Figure 2** In response to criticism, French editors covered young Tarzan's bare bottom with a leafy wrap. TARZAN © UFS. Reprinted by permission

1937. The serial quickly gained popularity and evolved into its own weekly publication, which was suspended in September 1941. After the war, Cino Del Duca relaunched *Tarzan* in 1946 to great success, but the rage of journalistic outcry began soon after. For example, in its 1947 study of the juvenile press, the respected journal *Educateurs* singled out *Tarzan* as especially “dangerous” for young people.<sup>63</sup> As pressure mounted, Cino Del Duca opted to end publication due to the overwhelming public support the commission enjoyed in its efforts to con-

<sup>63</sup> “Savez-vous ce qu’il y a dans les journaux d’enfants?” *Educateurs* 11 (1947): 452.

demn *Tarzan* in the early 1950s. In its final 1952 issue bidding “Adieu to Tarzan,” the editorial management defied “anyone to find a single attitude of Tarzan that was counter to the regulations.” Moreover, “we will always consider Tarzan to be an honest, loyal, courageous, just, and irreproachable man.”<sup>64</sup>

Notwithstanding this view, specialists in professional revues as well as the popular press had thrashed *Tarzan* between 1949 and 1952.<sup>65</sup> Tarzan was described as a “public danger,” a “national catastrophe,” and an “evil.” He was blamed for the 1947 killing in the Loire Valley of a five-year-old boy by a twelve-year-old boy after a stack of *Tarzan* comics had been found in the latter’s home. In 1950, a father lamented that he worked long hours in a factory and could not adequately supervise his thirteen-year-old son, who had accidentally killed a nine-year-old boy. Offering an explanation, the tearful father revealed a pile of *Tarzan* comics his son had purchased on a weekly basis. Tarzan was even denounced for causing boys to break bones by inspiring lads to swing Tarzan-style from tree branch to tree branch.<sup>66</sup> Unfortunately for the ape-man, the only defender of *Tarzan* was the publishing house itself.<sup>67</sup>

The editorial management of *Tarzan* responded in an open letter published in April 1950. They maintained that *Tarzan* was targeted simply because it was the most popular and most important publication of the juvenile press and referred to the widespread criticism as “the ransom of success.” They accused the commission of steering a conspiracy that focused the public’s attention solely on *Tarzan* when there were, in fact, other truly harmful publications that warranted censure. “How could Tarzan,” they asked, “corrupt the moral and human development of juveniles” or “cause their perversion?” Tarzan, rather, incarnated “all the best qualities of a modern hero: admittedly, physical strength and love of a healthy outdoor life, but also honesty, sincerity, and defense of the weak and oppressed.” They accused Tarzan’s critics of “hypocrisy,” describing their attacks as “irresponsible” and inspired by either “malevolence” or “ignorance.”<sup>68</sup> This editorial defense of

<sup>64</sup> “Adieu à Tarzan,” *Tarzan*, 3 May 1952, 3.

<sup>65</sup> Editorials attacking *Tarzan* appeared in *Le monde*, *Le Figaro*, *Educateurs*, *L’éducation nationale*, *Rééducation*, *Enfance*, *Les temps modernes*, *Combat*; and in books such as *L’enfant en proie aux images*; *Le monde étonnant des bandes dessinées*; *La presse, le film et la radio pour enfants*; and *La presse enfantine: Les surhommes, les gangsters, les bagarres, les comics et petit commerce*.

<sup>66</sup> Vigilax, “Le mythe de Tarzan,” *Educateurs* 28 (1950): 396; Pihan and Soumille, *La presse enfantine*, 15; “Toujours la presse enfantine, encore un exemple!” *La croisade de la presse* 28 (1950): 51; and Armand Lanoux, *L’enfant en proie aux images* (Paris, 1949), II-2.

<sup>67</sup> See Tarzan communiqué, “A bon entendeur . . .,” 29 Apr 1950, CNBDI; and “Adieu à Tarzan,” 3.

<sup>68</sup> Tarzan communiqué.

*Tarzan* only inspired a renewed and even more vitriolic counteroffensive, however.<sup>69</sup>

The quasi-nude sexual representations in *Tarzan* were the most obvious and visible point of attack. Tarzan himself wore only a shockingly small animal skin over a physique that bulged muscularly (fig. 1), but even more licentious and dangerously provocative were the female characters, who were suggestively “undressed” indicating “the insistence of the draftsman to underline the sex and breasts of principal characters.”<sup>70</sup> The sensual curves, prominent breasts, long legs, torn skirts, and suggestive attitudes of the female characters offered young readers a comic book version of the “pin-up”<sup>71</sup> that was “dangerous for the imaginations of twelve- to fifteen-year-old boys.”<sup>72</sup> Critics charged that voluptuous female forms perverted the decency of the young male readership, wickedly distorting their morality. Editions Mondiales had already attempted to appease its critics on these matters by covering bare bottoms with leafy wraps (fig. 2) or even removing or erasing breasts altogether in an effort to desexualize the iconography of the female anatomy (fig. 3). Similar measures can be seen in *Guy l'éclair* as well, where editors concealed female curves beneath long gowns (fig. 4) and even extricated a female love interest from the hero's arms altogether (fig. 5). Editors across the industry were adapting comics by altering female forms as a means of salvaging their right to publish in France.

Tarzan's propensity for violence and muscular brute force to resolve problems and overcome difficulties in the treacherous jungle was an example of “superanimality” as exemplified by the “inarticulate cry of victory” he let loose after each triumph.<sup>73</sup> Tarzan was “brutal force exalted” and “a panegyric for excessive muscular strength” as opposed to an archetype for clever thinking.<sup>74</sup> Even the size of his head was criticized as being drawn too small for his bulky frame, indicating an intentional emphasis on an underdeveloped intelligence and overdeveloped physique. His body was made not of flesh that “suffers, bruises, and submits,” but of a “new metal” that defied damage; his “nudity” served as his “armor.”<sup>75</sup> This invincibility was considered to encourage reck-

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, the scathing sarcasm of Vigilax, “Le mythe de Tarzan,” 395–99.

<sup>70</sup> Bauchard, *La presse, le film et la radio pour enfants*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Pihan and Soumille, *La presse enfantine*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> “Savez-vous ce qu'il y a dans les journaux enfants?” 451.

<sup>73</sup> *Compte rendu . . . 1950*, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Pihan and Soumille, *La presse enfantine*, 35; and “Savez-vous ce qu'il y a dans les journaux d'enfants?” 451.

<sup>75</sup> Soumille, “Tarzan, l'homme-singe,” 300.



**Figure 3** French editors even removed breasts to desexualize the iconography of the female anatomy. TARZAN © UFS. Reprinted by permission



less behavior on the part of young readers—notably those boys falling out of treetops. Likewise, Tarzan's recurrent combat encouraged violent behavior in children, as evidenced by the deadly tragedies among youngsters at play.

More difficult to alter, however, was the very premise of *Tarzan*, which troubled the commission and other critics. He lacked "sophisticated ambition" and "rarely engaged modern society."<sup>76</sup> Tarzan had no professional or familial milieu, no education or cadre of peers; in short, he did not participate as a member of society and did not offer the young a valuable archetype in this measure. His detractors lamented that Tarzan preferred to roam the isolated jungle rather than commune with others in a modern social framework. Tarzan thrived outside social networks and civil institutions. Likewise, he was not committed to democracy: "If children voted," two members of the commission maintained, "Tarzan would be president of the world" and, worse still, "he would become a dictator."<sup>77</sup> Apparently, what many critics in France found so troubling about Tarzan was that he was inherently and by definition a reactionary as he responded to contingent crises in the jungle. Tarzan's continual struggle was again and again to restore order and reestablish the carefully balanced equilibrium or "law of the jungle." Thus he did not advocate or promote social progress, a point counter to the interventionist social engineering of the postwar welfare state.<sup>78</sup>

Tarzan's animal instinct rejected reason and rationality and thrived in a primitive representation of the world that lacked the cultured mores of civil society. "Let Tarzan solve a problem of differential calculus," one editor sniffed, "or ask him to analyze a page of Valéry!"<sup>79</sup> It made no difference if Tarzan was noble; he was still a savage. Tarzan appeared "as the incarnation of precivilized man whose animality remains intact." He was "the symbol of a humanity that refuses and defies thought." Simply put, Tarzan was unthinking and uncivilized. He represented a "formidable revolt against the rational precedence of our civilization."<sup>80</sup> His rejection of reason and reliance on violent impulse challenged the basis of the civilized world. Through Tarzan, "the animal is opposed to the man and the jungle to the civilization, implying that one of these two terms symbolizes artificiality, falsity, and the unreal; it is, roughly, civilization that is presented as artificial."<sup>81</sup> True enough.

<sup>76</sup> Bauchard, *La presse, le film et la radio pour enfants*, 34.

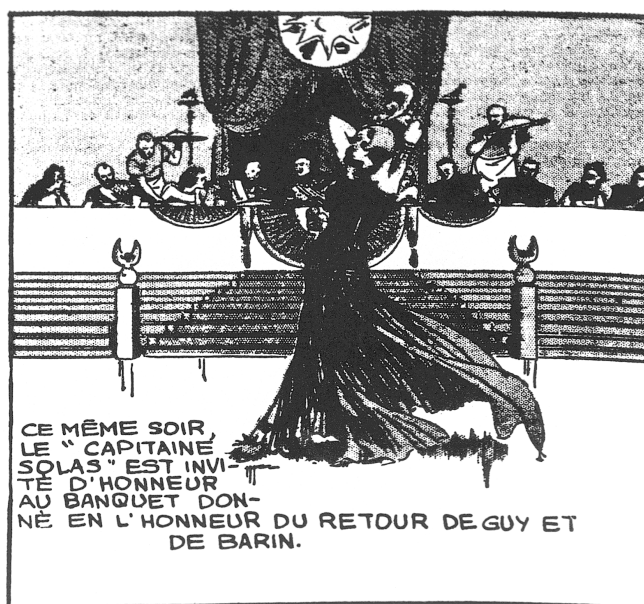
<sup>77</sup> Pihan and Soumille, *La presse enfantine*, 3.

<sup>78</sup> For more on this, see Pierre Fouilhe, *Journaux d'enfants, journaux pour rire?* (Paris, 1955), 54–56.

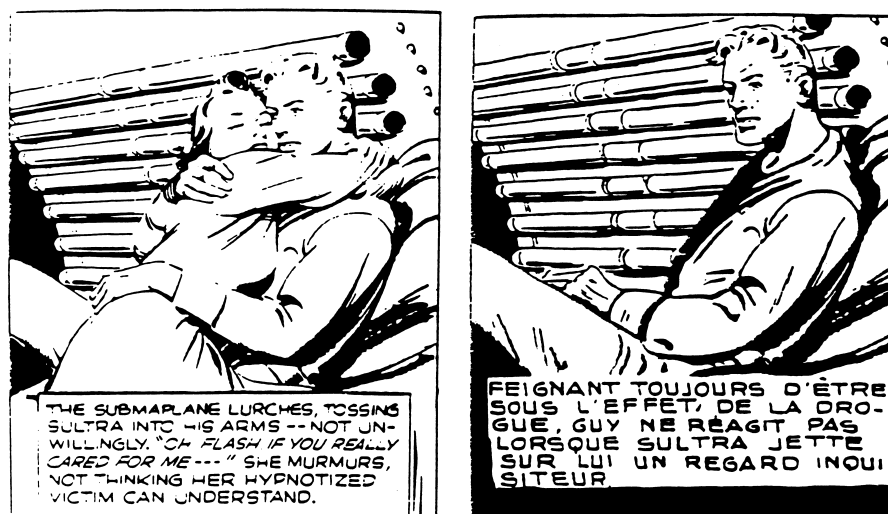
<sup>79</sup> Vigilax, "Le mythe de Tarzan," 397.

<sup>80</sup> Armand Lanoux, "Si nous capturons Tarzan," *L'éducation nationale*, 27 Apr. 1950, 3–4.

<sup>81</sup> Soumille, "Tarzan, l'homme-singe," 301.



**Figure 4** In *Guy l'éclair* (Flash Gordon), French editors covered the seminude female form in long flowing gowns. © King Features Syndicated. Reprinted with special permission



**Figure 5** Guy l'éclair's love interest was even removed entirely from his embrace. © King Features Syndicate. Reprinted with special permission

When Edgar Rice Burroughs created the character in 1912, Tarzan was indeed offered as a criticism and intended to show the civilized world gone soft.

Ironically, in the original novel, Tarzan was "civilized" by a Frenchman, Lieutenant D'Arnot. D'Arnot taught Tarzan the codes and etiquette of civilized behavior until the mighty ape-man emerged as a refined, charming gentleman. Monsieur Tarzan resided in Paris, socialized in the best circles, and spoke English with a French accent! In the comics, however, Tarzan remained in the jungle and in 1950, in the midst of France's rejuvenation, comic book Tarzan represented a threat to the very precepts of civility, morality, and community that France had been championing since the troubles of World War II.<sup>82</sup> In fact, France had long considered itself the guardian of the Western tradition of *civilisation* more generally.<sup>83</sup> Thus, not only was the comic book Tarzan not clothed enough, he was, more problematically, not even French enough.

The inherent racism in *Tarzan* remained largely neglected and unexplored by critics, with few exceptions. The Committee of Defense for North Africans, however, did send a letter to the management of

<sup>82</sup> See Lanoux, "Si nous capturons Tarzan," 3–4; and Vigilax, "Le mythe de Tarzan," 395–99.

<sup>83</sup> For an historical overview of this attitude, see Herman Lebovics, "Once and Future Trustees of Western Civilization," in *Mona Lisa's Escort: André Malraux and the Reinvention of French Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), 27–49.

*Editions mondiales* condemning the “racist propaganda” against Africans found in *Tarzan*. “We are astonished,” they wrote, “to see a children’s publication distill racist poison so insidiously.”<sup>84</sup> In fact, it was not until November 1954 that Article 2 of the 1949 law was amended to include “ethnic prejudices” in its extended list of unfavorable characteristics deemed demoralizing for youth.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, in 1952 *Tarzan*’s most egregious faults, and the grievances repeatedly waged against the Lord of the Jungle, were not simply that *Tarzan* was an American product, but that it ran counter to the complicated strategies of cultural reconstruction in postwar France. Essentially, the mighty ape-man undermined the effort in France to remake and reform its young people along national, moral, and rational lines.

### In Defense of Comics

It is remarkable that there were so few defenders of *Tarzan* or comics generally in the public debates regarding their appropriateness as reading material for young people. Even the obvious issue of freedom of the press was easily set aside, despite objections.<sup>86</sup> The primary consumers of comic books—the young—were, of course, largely unable to participate in the ongoing polemics, having no access to either the legislature or the media. Meanwhile, the producers of comic books were in a precarious position. If opposed to the law and the commission, they were viewed as obviously biased by their desire for a wide circulation and high profits, to the detriment of France’s youth. Conversely, others from the industry supported the law and commission as a way to provide job security for local draftsmen as well as a means to reduce the market share of competitors. However, one member of the commission, Jean Chapelle, himself an editor from Lyon, seems to have been reasonable in his assessment of comic books. While acknowledging that there were some extreme examples of poor judgment on the part of editors, he defended the industry and comics to the commission by pointing out that while “it is possible that juvenile delinquents read comic books,” there are, “in effect, millions of other children who read comic books and these millions of other boys and girls do not steal, hurt others, or kill their grandmothers.” Moreover, “the causes of bad behavior in young people,” he said, “are thus much deeper than the simple reading

<sup>84</sup> Raoul Dubois, “La loi du 16 juillet 1949,” *Enfance* 5 (1953): 444–45.

<sup>85</sup> La loi du 29 novembre 1954, *Journal officiel*.

<sup>86</sup> For such a criticism, see Jacques Perret, “On peut museler la presse enfantine,” *La bataille*, 21 Jan. 1948, 1 and 7. See the response of André Marie, the Keeper of the Seals, to this question during Assembly debates on 21 Jan. 1949, 4096. See also the speech by René Mayer, the next Keeper of the Seals, to the commission on 2 Mar. 1950, CAC 900208/arts. 2, 4.



#### L'ÉPURATION DE LA PRESSE ENFANTINE

(De gauche à droite : MM. Marie, Delbos, Mlle Bécassine, MM. Buffalo Bill, les Pieds Nickelés, Donald et Tarzan.)  
(Dessin de Jean Effel.)

**Figure 6** Jean Effel's political cartoon from *Le Figaro littéraire* offered some popular criticism on the 1949 assembly debates. Courtesy of *Le Figaro*

of comics.”<sup>87</sup> Chapelle also warned that the recreational press was for just that, recreation, and need not be made into instruments of pedagogy. With so many titles disappearing from circulation, the commission threatened the industry's footing while giving an open hand to the already powerful political (Communist) and religious (Catholic) press, a policy that Chapelle resented.<sup>88</sup>

A 1949 political cartoon from *Le Figaro littéraire* does offer some popular criticism on the Assembly debates (fig. 6). The title, “The Purge of the Children's Press,” is an obvious reference to the recent purge of Vichy collaborators. The elderly and grimacing Keeper of the Seals and Minister of Justice, André Marie, enters the courtroom followed by the equally old and haughty Minister of National Education, Yvon Delbos. They advance toward a rostrum so antiquated that it is covered in cobwebs. Standing in the dock to be confronted by the people's justice are the bewildered Breton housemaid Bécassine, the rather frank,

<sup>87</sup> Jean Chapelle, “Rapport sur le projet de représentations et recommandations aux éditeurs de journaux pour enfants,” 13 Oct. 1950, 4, CAC 900208/art. 1.

<sup>88</sup> Jean Chapelle, “A la Commission de Surveillance et de Contrôle,” 29 Mar. 1955, CAC 900208/art. 1.

no-nonsense Buffalo Bill (a popular comic of French origin though set in the American West), the Pieds Nickelés, a slobbering Donald Duck, and an impassive Tarzan. Clearly, the cartoonist Jean Effel intends to mock the government's attack on comics. Importantly, however, he has included among the accused popular French comics as well as American ones, indicating what he sees as the potential danger of the new legislation to exaggerate the menace of juvenile literature.<sup>89</sup>

The most sophisticated critic of the commission and the general brouhaha surrounding comic books was Pierre Foulhe, a social science researcher from the prestigious CNRS institute. Foulhe published a number of articles and even an entire book on the subject of juvenile periodicals. In *Journaux d'enfants, journaux pour rire?* (1955), Foulhe recounted the history of the comic book and the superhero, noting that both emerged in the 1930s, at a time of crisis, when the escapist nature of literature allowed the hero to come to the rescue of those in troubled difficulty. This imaginative escapism was precisely what young people needed, he claimed. Foulhe argued that comic books were, in practice, instruments that furthered a child's development through imaginative play: "By reading comics, children find a way to live out, in the imaginary, dramatic situations and to assume the role of the hero." The real and the imagined are not confused or blurred for a young person, Foulhe argued, because this imaginary play-acting was a crucial element of child development, one that occurs with or without comic books. Moreover, he said, comics may actually be an ideal mechanism for child development because images process more easily than text and it is through images that children begin to comprehend and enter social reality. Thus young people are quite capable and quite accustomed to distinguishing between reality and representation, between fact and fantasy, and are able to negotiate the real and the imaginary.<sup>90</sup> Far from being endangered by comic books, said Foulhe, young people were actually enriched by them.

There was no hard evidence of any connection between comic books and juvenile delinquency. For several years, Foulhe had been calling for an extensive empirical study to investigate this supposed link.<sup>91</sup> He castigated juvenile judge Jean Chazal for declaring there to be a causal relationship without "citing any concrete case," but instead relying on conventional wisdom and personal anecdote. Furthermore, he noted, "wine leads a number of drinkers to commit crimes each

<sup>89</sup> Jean Effel, *Le Figaro littéraire*, 29 Jan. 1949, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Foulhe, *Journaux d'enfants, journaux pour rire?*, 108–29.

<sup>91</sup> Pierre Foulhe, "Le héros et les ombres," in *Enfance* 5 (1953): 395–401.

year. Should we outlaw wine? And yet it is relatively easy to determine the influence of alcohol on the execution of crime.” Finally, he emphasized the legal weaknesses of the Commission for Oversight and Control, which had no real power of enforcement. He pointed out that the commission relied on consultation because it was incapable of demonstrating legally the demoralization of youth by an offending publication.<sup>92</sup> Though Fouilhe’s criticisms were valid, they were not heeded. He was greatly outnumbered by the educators, judges, politicians, and family groups who found the harmfulness of comic books to be a self-evidentiary and obvious truth.<sup>93</sup>

### The Prosecution of Pierre Mouchot

As Pierre Fouilhe so rightly surmised, demonstrating the direct link between comic book reading and delinquent behavior was difficult to prove if not impossible. Legally verifying the supposed “demoralizing” effects of comics on youth was, in practice, burdensome, as evidenced by the repeated prosecution of publisher Pierre Mouchot. From 1954 until 1961 in a series of eight court decisions, Pierre Mouchot was prosecuted for being in violation of Article 2 of the 1949 law stipulating that a publication “should not contain any illustration, any narrative, any chronicle, any heading, or any insertion that favorably presents banditry, falsehoods, thievery, idleness, cowardice, hatred, debauchery, or any criminal acts or misdemeanors of a nature demoralizing to children or youth.”<sup>94</sup> Although Cino Del Duca and others had been threatened with prosecution on the basis of Article 2, those publishers had either made changes amenable to the commission or, as Del Duca did with *Tarzan*, had opted to cease publication altogether. Mouchot, however, refused to acquiesce and remains to this day the only publisher prosecuted under Article 2 for publishing material intended for juveniles that was “demoralizing to youth.”

Pierre Mouchot was a Lyon author, draftsman, and publisher known as “Chott” who in 1946 launched *Fantax*, an influential and successful comic of French origin that combined noir storytelling with exotic adventure and featured a masked superhero who tended toward excessive violence and cruelty. Recognizing what was to come from the new legislation, Mouchot pulled his comic from publication in late 1949

<sup>92</sup> Fouilhe, *Journaux d'enfants, journaux pour rire?*, 136–50.

<sup>93</sup> See the question and answer session recounted in Pierre Fouilhe, “La presse enfantine, discussion et intervention de M. Menard,” *L'école des parents* 5 (1956): 13–23.

<sup>94</sup> At the time of Mouchot’s initial prosecution, Article 2 did not yet include “ethnic prejudices” as amended on 29 Nov. 1954.

after its thirty-ninth issue.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps Mouchot hoped that this evident act of good faith would gain him clemency from the commission for future publications. It did not. In 1954, Mouchot was prosecuted in the Lyon tribunal for the 1950 to 1954 publication of *Big Bill le Casseur* and *P'tit Gars*.<sup>96</sup> The first comic had as a hero a masked and muscled cowboy adventurer in the American West who meted out “eye for an eye” justice with savage vengeance. The second comic, *P'tit Gars*, featured a young adventurer who explored the exotic jungles of Africa with frequent violent encounters. Importantly, neither was of foreign origin; both were fully French, though heavily influenced in style and content by American and Italian comics—so much so, in fact, that Mouchot was frequently accused of plagiarism.

The commission recommended indictment of Mouchot to the French Attorney General in 1953, after repeated refusals by Mouchot to adhere to the commission's mandates and warnings. Joining the state prosecution was a civil suit on behalf of the Union Départementale des Associations Familiales du Rhône, whose national organization held a seat on the commission and had produced the Ballandras Report a few years earlier. The prosecution maintained that Mouchot's violation of the 1949 law was of a material, subjective, and intentional nature. First, his publications presented noxious content of a nature demoralizing to youth; second, his publications presented this material in a favorable light; and third, Mouchot, as publisher and author, committed these digressions in full knowledge of the law.<sup>97</sup> Mouchot's defense rested primarily on each comic book issue's moralizing conclusion, or *le happy-end*. That is, in the conclusion of each comic, evil was vanquished and justice triumphed, thus showing good as a more powerful and noble force than evil. Unable to determine what effect, exactly, these comics had on French youth, the Lyon tribunal acquitted Mouchot on 4 March 1955. The prosecution persevered, however, and appealed the ruling.

The Lyon Court of Appeal upheld Mouchot's acquittal in February 1956 while castigating him for his bad taste and “assuredly regrettable” publications of a nature that probably “troubled the sleep of its young readers, if not also their elders.”<sup>98</sup> Yet, in January 1957, the Supreme Court of Appeal annulled both acquittals and sent the case

<sup>95</sup> *Fantax* was mentioned frequently in the Assembly debates and remains a sought-after collectible today.

<sup>96</sup> *Big Bill le Casseur* began publication in 1947 and *P'tit Gars* began in 1952.

<sup>97</sup> See “Annexe 1: Décisions judiciaires relatives aux poursuites intentées contre un éditeur de publications destinées à la jeunesse, pour infraction aux dispositions de l'article 2 de la loi du 16 juillet 1949,” in *Compte-rendu des travaux de la Commission de contrôle* 1958, 39–54, CAC 900208/art. 2.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



to Grenoble for a new trial. However, in December 1957, this court also acquitted Mouchot. In March 1959, the Supreme Court of Appeal annulled this ruling as well and then sent the case to Dijon for yet another trial. Again, Mouchot was acquitted. And again, this ruling was annulled and the case sent to Angers. There, on 12 January 1961, Mouchot was at last convicted of demoralizing the young and sentenced to a suspended one-month imprisonment with a 500 (new) franc fine. The Union Départementale des Associations Familiales du Rhône won 50 (new) francs in damages.<sup>99</sup> Although the financial penalty was a nominal affair, the years of court battles and legal fees had sapped Mouchot's finances and left him near bankruptcy. In fact, although he continued to publish throughout the ordeal, Mouchot had actually sold Les Editions Pierre Mouchot in August 1960, just a few months before his conviction.<sup>100</sup> Despite Mouchot's recurring courtroom victories, the Supreme Court of Appeal was clearly sympathetic to the commission's *raison d'être* and ensured Mouchot's eventual conviction by its repeated annulments of his acquittals.

The juridical issue in this case was how to define the qualifier "favorably" because the legislature had provided "no easy criteria" with which to establish such a vague principle. The Supreme Court of Appeal believed that the results of such an oversight were "most regrettable" by "giving license to editors without scruples to profit off the demoralization of youth by taking the simple precaution of providing a moralizing conclusion."<sup>101</sup> Each of Mouchot's acquittals came from the prosecution's inability to show conclusively that he had demoralized the young through the depiction of criminal or immoral acts shown in a favorable light. Upon its annulments, the Supreme Court of Appeal demanded that subsequent courts conduct a detailed investigation both analyzing the comics and determining their effect on the "imagination of young readers." The Supreme Court of Appeal instructed the Angers judge that his mission was to determine whether Mouchot's publications were a healthy diversion for young readers appealing to their taste for adventure or "if, on the contrary, there developed in their nature a path

<sup>99</sup> For an overview of these court proceedings, see the collection of *Compte-rendu des travaux de la Commission de contrôle* at CAC 900208; see also Jean Fourie, "Les effets de la loi de 1949," *Le collectionneur de bandes-dessinées* 57/58 (1988): 16–18; Chavdia, "La loi du 16 juillet 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse," 117–20. For a juridical analysis, see Jurisprudence, "Le climat d'un récit, quelque soit le dénouement de ce dernier, peut suffire à déterminer une condamnation," *La presse française*, Dec. (1961): 32–38.

<sup>100</sup> Les Editions Pierre Mouchot became La Société d'Éditions Rhôdaniennes (SER). Pierre Mouchot died in 1966 and subsequently became a mythic icon for the industry and comic book aficionados due to his defiance of censorship and heroic challenge to the commission's authority.

<sup>101</sup> Cour de Cassation, "L'application de la loi du 16 juillet sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse," *Pour la vie* 76 (1959): 8, CNBDI.

toward bad instincts and perverse passions." This determination was within the court's power, furthermore, because "the legislators' intention relied on the sagacity and good sense of judges."<sup>102</sup>

In essence, the Angers court was charged to bring this long battle to a conclusion by, at last, convicting Mouchot. And, in fact, the Angers court ruled that the happy endings of Mouchot's comics did not "balance" the "scenes of violence, acts of crime, and visions of horror" found within them. Rather, the court found in his comics "an uninterrupted succession of scenes of murder, pillage, and violence of all kinds." However, after seven years and eight court decisions, this conviction was more symbolic than punitive, as evidenced by the one-month suspended prison sentence and modest fine. One commentator concluded that the previous rulings in Mouchot's favor had been "judged on the facts," whereas the Angers ruling was "judged on the consequences." However, he also pointed out that all studies examining the effects of comics were predisposed in their conclusions because they were conducted on delinquent youth or those in psychiatric hospitals, and rarely, if ever, on average, well-adjusted children.<sup>103</sup> While Mouchot's conviction was, ostensibly, a victory for the commission and the 1949 law, the seven-year wrangle had revealed legal weaknesses and ensured no similar prosecutions in the near future.

### The Commission's Legacy

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties of the Mouchot case, by the end of the 1950s the commission was considered to be quite a success in its endeavor to protect French youth from the nefarious effects of suspect periodicals. Between 1951 and 1954, the commission received, on average, 2,000 issues annually for 23 weekly, 25 bimonthly, and 105 monthly periodicals. In that same time period, 1951 to 1954, the commission issued 135 simple recommendations, 45 warnings, and 41 sanctions.<sup>104</sup> The comic book industry had, for the most part, made alterations acceptable to the commission. Many of "the worst" publications, such as *Tarzan* and *Le fantôme du Bengale* (*The Phantom*), had ceased publication altogether while Mouchot was under prosecution in Lyon for

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>103</sup> Jean Chappelle, "L'influence de la presse pour enfants est-elle aussi grande qu'on veut bien le laisser croire?" *La presse française* Dec. (1961): 35–36, CNBDI. In fact, the commission had authorized a study at the University of Paris begun in 1956 to examine the effect of violence in comic books on 380 girls and 630 boys. The results, which did indicate some correlation between violent images and violent behavior, were, however, inconclusive and required further study. See annexe II in *Compte rendu* . . . , 1 June 1958, 55–58, CAC 900208/art. 2.

<sup>104</sup> *Compte rendu* . . . , 1 Jan. 1955, 8–9.

his defiance. However, in its 1955 report, the commission identified some new concerns it had for juvenile publications. Notable was the “at least implicit racism” in many comics that may be “perhaps generally unconscious” but “unacceptable” nonetheless.<sup>105</sup>

Because the “worst” publications had disappeared, the commission refrained from issuing warnings and sanctions after 1955 although it still had such measures at its disposal. Instead, the commission relied on the “good faith” of editors and issued recommendations for improvement, which it gave, on average, to 50 publications a year from 1955 through 1957 for the 173 periodicals it reviewed, on average, in each of those years.<sup>106</sup> The other primary responsibility of the commission—to prevent the sale of adult (pornographic) publications to minors under 18—was a great success and much more easily accomplished and enforced than the “moral” improvement of juvenile publications. From 1950 to 1958, the commission identified 651 publications that it forbade for sale to minors. In that same period, 36 vendors were convicted of selling this forbidden material to those under eighteen and an individual in Colmar was convicted for simply showing pornographic material to youths.<sup>107</sup>

The commission even wanted to extend its reach and compound its good work to morally protect French youth. In the late 1950s, the commission began to lobby the government to have its duties extended to include the romance novels of the *presse du coeur* industry that targeted adolescent girls. These seemingly “inoffensive” stories, in fact, “duped” young women into desiring fabulous and luxurious lives that created “troubled feelings” and “tortuous envy” among them. These novels encouraged young women to desire a social status and lifestyle beyond their reach, leaving them “emotionally confused.”<sup>108</sup> Even worse, they also excited sexual desire and amorous longings at an age when there should be none. As early as 1954, the commission sought control over this genre that “reduced relations between young men and young women to the sole objective of amorous seduction.”<sup>109</sup> In 1958, the commission was granted jurisdiction over all publications for youth and not just periodicals. A subcommission for the *presse du coeur* was soon established, as was one for the *presse d'horreur*, or short novels of

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 10 and 31.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 10–11.

<sup>107</sup> He was sentenced to a three-month imprisonment (suspended) and a 50,000 (old) franc fine in 1956. For a complete list of these convictions and a complete title list of publications forbidden for sale to minors, see annexe 3 and annexe 4 in *Compte rendu . . .*, 1 June 1958, 59–113.

<sup>108</sup> Mathilde Leriche, “La presse du coeur pour les petites filles,” *Vers l'éducation nouvelle* 81 (1954): 3–7.

<sup>109</sup> *Compte rendu . . .*, 1 Jan. 1955, 23.

scary tales targeting adolescent boys, which “compromised the mental health of its readers.” As the 1960s began, the commission even sought jurisdiction over the “licentious records” of rock and roll and radio programs as well as the expanding medium of television.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, for several years the commission had been lobbying the government to regulate the film industry more strictly and to remove lewd advertisements from cinema houses and sidewalk kiosks.<sup>111</sup>

The commission still exists and continues to monitor all juvenile publications in France, yet it remains controversial for the industry. There are publishers who have difficulty with the commission from time to time, notably the series *Elvifrance*, which has a Web page dedicated to challenging the commission and the 1949 law.<sup>112</sup> In 1999, the Centre National de la Bande Dessinée et de l’Image (CNBDI) in Angoulême even held a conference — “50 Years of Censorship?” — that brought together academics, artists, and publishers to discuss the history, merits, and failings of the 1949 law.<sup>113</sup>

Still, the fact that CNBDI exists indicates that comic books in France underwent a renaissance and rehabilitation despite or maybe because of the 1949 legislation. In the 1960s, not only did René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo’s feisty little Gaul *Astérix* emerge, but so did Jean-Claude Forest’s space-age sex vixen *Barbarella*. The latter is indicative of a shift toward the growing market of adult comics. One side effect of the 1949 law was to differentiate the markets for juvenile and adult comics, emphasizing the distinction between youth and adult as social groups. Many elements of comics deemed inappropriate for the young — sex, violence, fantasy, visual rather than textual emphasis — became highly developed in, and characteristic of, adult comics. *Barbarella* and its imitators simply targeted a more narrow market and accepted their status as adult publications. The underground or adult comics emerged as a viable market for artists and editors as the spread of television caused a slump in the juvenile market. Moreover, in the wake of 1968’s general challenge to all things, the number of adult titles skyrocketed in France during the 1970s.

This resurgence was not simply about the reemergence of erotic or violent content in comic books, however. There was a greater appre-

<sup>110</sup> Ceccaldi, “Note: Disques relevant des articles 2 ou 14 de la loi du 16 juillet 1949,” 7 Oct. 1958, CAC 910258/art. 159.

<sup>111</sup> For more on similar impulses to regulate film in the Fourth Republic, see Jobs, “Riding the New Wave.”

<sup>112</sup> See [perso.club-internet.fr/poncetd/CENSURE/EF\\_CENSURE.htm](http://perso.club-internet.fr/poncetd/CENSURE/EF_CENSURE.htm). See also Bernard Joubert, “*Elvifrance* et le dépôt préalable,” in Gabilliet, “*On tue à chaque page!*,” 131–36.

<sup>113</sup> See Gabilliet, “*On tue à chaque page!*”

ciation in the 1960s for the draftsmanship and artistic quality of comics as well. Most influential, perhaps, was the work of Moebius (Jean Giraud), who began to publish his serials in the mid-1960s, emphasizing artistic design and vision over text and plot. Moreover, this coincided with a more general rehabilitation of comics as an artistic and literary medium. Over the course of the sixties, a series of critical studies championed comics for having artistic, sociological, historical, and literary merit. Clubs and salons emerged as critical forums to appreciate and promote comics while the work of Francis Lacassin, for example, proclaimed comics to be the “ninth art,” a term that has had lasting relevance. Jacques Marny placed comics within a long literary tradition, and Gérard Blanchard (among others) placed comics within the historical trajectory of Western civilization and French civilization in particular, from the Lascaux caves to the Bayeux tapestry and on. In 1967, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs even sponsored a special exhibit on comics. This rehabilitation solidified the domestic industry and helped to establish today’s widespread acknowledgment and appreciation of comics in France.<sup>114</sup>

### Youth and Cultural Reconstruction

In the fifteen years following World War II, however, Tarzan, Mouchot, and the others fell victim to the complicated strategies of cultural reconstruction in France. Most obviously, as an American product, Tarzan was caught in the politics of the emerging Cold War at the peak of Communist political power in France. The attack on American comics was in part a protectionist response to stabilize France’s own industry as it floundered against foreign competition. It was also motivated in part by politicians seeking to demonstrate a renewed French hegemony over domestic policy in the context of Nazi and then American interference. Most obviously politicians and pedagogues did not want French children to grow up influenced by “American” dispositions of a crude, unsophisticated, and individualistic materialism. They feared that the consumption of American comic books would result in the Americanization of French youth.

Yet both the Tarzan Affair and the prosecution of Lyonnais publisher Pierre Mouchot show that the campaign against comics and the new law for the oversight and control of juvenile publications

<sup>114</sup> Francis Lacassin, *Pour un neuvième art: La bande dessinée* (Paris, 1971); Jacques Marny, *Le monde étonnant des bandes dessinées* (Paris, 1968); Gérard Blanchard, *Histoire de la bande dessinée: Une histoire des histoires en images de la préhistoire à nos jours* (Paris, 1969); the accompanying volume to the museum exhibit was Pierre Couperie et al., *A History of the Comic Strip*.

were not simply signs of rampant anti-Americanism, either. More important, Tarzan and Mouchot were attacked for the specific nature of their comic book content, which ran counter to the cultural reconstruction rhetoric of the postwar period. By controlling comic books, France hoped to produce, in some capacity, the development of a domestic moral character in its young. Reducing American influence in comics was merely one measure in the larger reassertion of a specifically “French” social construction of youth that sought to emphasize community, social and civic responsibility, morality, integrity, and France’s cultural *civilisation*—all issues responding relevantly to France’s troubled recent past.

The commission’s work on comic books sought to shape and mold French youth into a morally upright, idealized social body capable of accepting its future mantle of adult citizenship. The commission’s recommendations to editors repeatedly emphasized norms of gender, class, and rationality that formed the basis of the social order. They emphasized the collectivity of society as opposed to triumphant individualism and social harmony as opposed to social conflict. In short, the commission, like other programs and projects targeting youth, emphasized the future communal welfare of France.

At the same time, the public worries over youthful criminality and sexuality that seemed to threaten the welfare of France helped to direct the criticisms hurled at comic books. Reeducating juvenile delinquents meant accounting for and overcoming a failed socialization. Likewise, eliminating violence and crime from comic books meant eliminating the reminiscences of a violent past and displacing delinquent impulses. Desexualizing the images of comics preserved the fragile libidos of male adolescents, while providing chaste female role models for girls. In the conservative cultural climate of the 1950s, cleaning up comic books of immorality coincided with the moral elevation of France more generally as new ordinances restricted the adult activities of drinking, dancing, and carousing from the watchful eyes of youth and prevented the sale of pornographic publications to anyone under age eighteen.

The advantage to mobilizing around the social category of youth was its sheer convenience. Everyone, from all social groups, geographic regions, political ideologies or religious backgrounds, had youth in common. Everyone was once young, and most adults had a vested interest in young people—their own children, grandchildren, or others in the community who would eventually grow to responsible adulthood. Youth served as the lowest common denominator that crossed other social categories and invited speculation about the future, particularly in the wake of the war and the long-awaited baby boom. More-

over, the category of youth was capable of incorporating other issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, criminality, sexuality, or morality. With the destructive antagonism of recent class and nationalist struggles still so fresh, youth was an agreeable matrix through which adult France could deliberate on its past, present, and future.

In this context, the 16 July 1949 law was only one small measure in a larger national project of rejuvenation that revamped the juvenile justice system, retooled the national education system, and culturally prioritized the young at a time of national recovery. Thus, through these deliberations, of which the comic book was but a part, the social group of youth was being produced and reified by French society at large. As a cultural artifact, the comic book became a site of intervention by state and society to help manage the identity of its youth, the future citizens of France. Most significant, in the wake of the war and amid the eleven million births of the *bébé-boom*, the young became a key social body to be mobilized, managed, and directed for the cultural resurrection and reconstruction of France that, subsequently, had a profound impact on French society in the 1960s.





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