

POPULAR ROOTS OF EUROPEAN CULTURE THROUGH FILM, COMICS AND SERIALIZED LITERATURE (EPOP PROJECT)

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Popular Roots of European Culture through Film, Comics and Serialized Literature (EPOP) is a research and popularization project funded by the European Commission in the frame of the Culture Programme 2007. It started on November 24, 2008 and will be completed on May 24, 2010.

The EPOP Project deals with an object that has received a growing attention in the last few decades, both inside and outside academic studies: the fictional texts (both written and visual) serially produced by European culture industries between mid-19th century and early 20th century. Throughout all Europe research in the history of popular literature and its intermedial relationships with visual narrative forms (such as film and comics) has dramatically increased in many national contexts, producing a proliferation of publications, university courses, websites, public events, networking among collectors, etc. However, while the urgency of a transnational approach to this phenomenon has been acknowledged everywhere, communication among cultural institutions variously concerned with research and archival preservation in this domain in the different European countries still remains flawed. This is why the EPOP project aims to surpass the cultural and linguistic boundaries that have prevented until now a true appraisal of the continental dimension of the industrial popular culture produced between 19th and 20th century by establishing a transnational network of researchers and institutions working to promote a better knowledge of this particular cultural heritage among EU citizens.

Eight countries are already involved. The cooperation among a wide range of cultural institutions in different countries aims to produce a connection of research, didactics and popularization activities. Several actions have been planned: creation of a searchable database with detailed information; creation of a multilingual on line Virtual Museum of archival materials; publication of a collection of essays (in English and French); education/information seminars addressed to students and teachers; publication of a multilingual CD-Rom with teaching resources; an exhibition of reproductions of archival materials; production of a periodical newsletter.

Project Topic

Industrial popular culture emerged in mid-19th century as a literary phenomenon through a range of different serial formats (such as the *roman-feuilleton* in France, the *penny dreadfuls* in the United Kingdom, the *Kolportageliteratur* in Germany, etc.). Circulated throughout all Europe by means of an extensive process of translation, imitation and plagiarism, and subsequently largely reused as a primary source in films and comics fictions, popular literature constitutes an important native phenomenon for European cultural identity, a shared depository of themes, narrative

topoi and figures – as well as, because of the crucial function of illustrations, iconography – that can instinctively be recognized by the audiences as their own collective memory.

The socio-cultural relevance of this production appears clearly in a continental perspective: reprising and reworking Gramsci's oft-cited contention, we might say that popular fictions are not only national-popular, but fundamentally "international-popular". The works of famous authors such as Eugène Sue, Albert Dumas, Ponson du Terrail, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, Karl May, Emilio Salgari and so on, and "immortal" characters such as Rocambole, Sherlock Holmes, Raffles, Arsène Lupin, Fantômas, Lord Lister, Morgan the Pirate, Maciste, Belphégor, etc. have been the privileged object of an uninterrupted process of cultural exchange throughout all European countries. The remarkably visual character of such fictions – made explicit both in the illustrations and the iconography associated to these products and in later film and comics adaptations – has enormously facilitated their international dissemination, and may still today represent a powerful means to promote intercultural dialogue among the population of the different countries that constitute the European Union.

The research teams involved in the project (guided by Prof. Monica Dall'Asta in Bologna, Prof. Jacques Migozzi in Limoges, Prof. Jean-Louis Tilleuil in Louvain-la Neuve and Prof. Adriaan van der Weel in Leiden) will provide different approaches (such as Film History, History of Popular Literature, Comics History, Book History) as needed by the transmedial nature of the subject.

Description of the Activities

Research will be focused on the realization of several activities:

1. Creation of a searchable database concerning the origins of European popular culture from mid-19th century to the third decade of 20th century. This will be a useful tool for any researcher interested in exploring these subjects from a European perspective.

2. Selection of materials, production of texts and management of the technical realization of a multilingual Virtual Museum (in English, Italian, French and Dutch) of archival materials (both written and visual), comprising examples of serialized fictions ranging from French *romans-feuilleton* and *image d'Epinal* to the popular series marketed throughout the whole Continent by German publisher Alwin Eichler and his followers, from British detective novels of late 19th century to their Italian and German imitations, etc. The intermedial dimension of this survey will be provided by the inclusion of filmographical and bibliographical data documenting the extensive process of adaptation of literary sources on film and comics beyond national boundaries;

3. Publication of a collection of essays (in English and French) by authors of different nationalities, focusing on the processes of cultural exchange at work in the European popular fictions produced in the period comprised between mid-19th century and the third decade of 20th century.

4. Organization of seminars for students and teachers and production of specific teaching tools aimed to make the results of scientific research immediately available to the educational system.

5. Preparation of an exhibition devoted to the influence of popular literature – its authors, characters and themes – on the iconography of European illustration, comics and cinema. The scope

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of the exhibition will be to give the general public the possibility to see reproductions of rare examples of publications and press materials related to cinematographic productions of the silent cinema period, thus broadening the target of the project and drawing interest on intermedial and transnational reports on cinema, press image, and popular literature.

6. Creation of operative connections among a number of institutions working in the field concerned: universities, museums, libraries, public bodies, cultural associations, festivals, journals and private collectors. The networking activity will continue throughout the whole duration of the project and constitutes in fact one of its main objectives. A specific tool has been devised to stimulate the creation of the network and its maintenance after the end of the project: a periodical newsletter circulating information on research, initiatives and events concerning the history of European popular culture.

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