



# Actuel and the acclimation of US comix in France in the 1970s

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**“Actuel and the acclimation of US comix in France in the 1970s”<sup>1</sup>**

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**01** In the historiography of French *bande dessinée*, the period following the May 1968 student and labour protest movement is generally addressed from the angle of the “adult” comic magazines that appeared in those years. The most famous of them were the post-spring 1968 *Pilote*, *Charlie Mensuel* (debut issue in February 1969), *L’Écho des savanes* (May 1972), *Métal Hurlant* (January 1975), and *Fluide glacial* (May 1975).

**02** There appeared simultaneously a handful of more or less short-lived titles—including *Zinc* (1971-1974), *Le Canard sauvage* (1973-1974), *Mormoil* (1974-1975)—whose quick or not-so-quick demises stemmed from insufficiently attractive contents and/or faulty distribution. Regardless of their long-term popularity, all those titles laid the groundwork of comics magazines for adults (*revues de bande dessinée pour adultes*), a format that did not exist in France so far. However, they were not the only periodicals offering comics not specifically designed for “young readers:” **03** as far back as 1960, Georges Bernier and François Cavanna’s satirical monthly *Hara-Kiri* already featured both comics and text pieces.

By 1972, the poet André Laude argued in a column for the daily *Le Monde* that comics had become a *pièce de résistance* in France’s post-May 68 “free press.” In mainstream comic magazines and in the rising domain of *bédéphilie* (i.e. comics appreciation and criticism), the medium was distinguished for its aesthetic and/or cultural value. Conversely, in so-called “alternative” magazines, comics met the

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<sup>1</sup> This oral presentation is based on the research I developed in a previous article in French titled “Actuel, 1970-1975 : passeur transatlantique de l’underground américain et de la bande dessinée pour adultes,” in Marc Atallah & Alain Boillat (eds.), *BD-US : Les comics vus par l’Europe* (Lausanne : Infolio, 2016), 79-98.

expectations of those adolescent and young adult readers who placed less value in radical political commitment than in irreverence and derision toward the sacred cows of the Establishment. This dichotomy unsurprisingly mirrored the dividing line between politicos and hippies in the youth protest movements that emerged in the USA as of the mid-1960s. But in France (and more broadly in the rest of the western world) the post-1968 protest movements featured two mostly mutually exclusive types, either anti-American, Marxist-inspired activists, or followers of the US-type counterculture. The latter were variegated believers in and practitioners of communal living, soft drug use, environmentalism, free love, and across-the-board rejection of their parents' post-World War II consumerist lifestyles. **04** It was for such readers that Jean-François Bizot published and edited the monthly magazine *Actuel* from 1970 through 1975.

Bizot was an archetypal French baby-boomer. **05** Born in Lyon in 1944 into a wealthy upper-class family, he dropped out of engineering school in 1967 at the age of 23 to become a journalist and, ultimately, one of France's leading cultural agitators until his death in 2007. In 1970 he had the opportunity to buy up a flailing periodical devoted to free jazz and pop music titled *Actuel* ("current" in French). **06** He then proceeded to turn it into France's first "free press" magazine, patterned after such precursors as *The East Village Other* or *The Berkeley Barb* in the USA, or *International Times* and *Oz* in the UK. Bizot's magazine ran contents produced in France as well as translations of material obtained via UPS, the notorious *Underground Press Syndicate* founded in 1966 to enable free press magazines to reprint one another's contents at no charge. During its five-year run, *Actuel* was a sounding-board for Bizot's own fascination with the US counterculture, which he propagated among teenagers and young adults in post-De Gaulle France.

**07** One of the key elements in *Actuel's* editorial specificity was its consistent interest in the countercultural comics that had emerged since 1968 in the San Francisco

Bay area around a reluctant leading light named Robert Crumb. By using R. Crumb artwork to shape the visual identity of the magazine and running his comix as well as those of other underground cartoonists, *Actuel* became France's first promoter of the American adult comics spawned by the cultural effervescence of the Sixties.

I do not mean to imply that US underground comics were perfectly unknown in the country before *Actuel*, but they were definitely very confidential for a while. **08a** By 1968 the Latin Quarter's early alternative bookstores (such as Actualités, or Le Minotaure) would occasionally carry copies of the American pamphlets **08b** but also the Dutch samplers published in *Real Free Press Illustratie*. Until proven otherwise, the very first R. Crumb comics published in France appeared in June 1969 in the last two issues of *Action*, a Communist student magazine launched during the May 1968 movement. The very first article about Crumb (written by the Dutch Provo cartoonist Willem) appeared in *Charlie Mensuel* #13 in February 1970, more than six months before *Actuel*'s debut issue. **09** It was only with *Actuel* that Crumb, and to a lesser degree the US underground comix scene, started developing some visibility in France, with a few predictably extreme reactions. In a 2007 interview, Michel-Antoine Burnier, one of Bizot's long-time sidekicks, reminisced about the early responses of « regular » people to *Actuel*:

***[O]ur parents found it disgusting. Quality press people looked down on us as smut peddlers. We were ostracized. They barely acknowledged us in the street anymore. We would publish full pages of R. Crumb art. They told us it was filth. The classic press loathed such comics [...].***

As the 1970s began, there was indeed a long way to go to acclimate US underground comix in the land of Astérix (even though the latter's co-creator René Goscinny was among the few early supporters of Bizot and his unconventional magazine).

**10** The *Actuel* run includes 53 monthly issues dated October 1970 through October 1975 and an 8-page tabloid extra released for the presidential election of May 1974 (which saw the victory of the moderate conservative Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, much to the dismay of Bizot and his very left-wing staff). As far as our topic is concerned the innovativeness of the magazine unfolded on two levels. The first one was the highlighting of comic art as a countercultural practice. *Actuel's* agenda was to impart to French readers the diversity of the post-May 1968 « new culture » in all shapes and forms. **11** In this respect it was the first non-comic magazine that illustrated its news stories, special reports, music and literature columns, etc. with comic panels and strips interspersed along its pages. Although most of the material was American, *Actuel* also published a few French creators (but this would be the matter for another paper). **12** The magazine frequently used comics as cover art and advertised their presence in some issues. By 1973, following the successful reception in France of Ralph Bakshi's X-rated cartoon adaptation of R. Crumb's *Fritz the Cat*, *Actuel* even ran a few « comics issues » that contained oversized comic sections. The magazine also released five trade paperback collections of US underground comix for newsstand distribution; three were devoted to Crumb (more about that later), the two others to Gilbert Shelton, Greg Irons, and Fred Schrier.

As the latter enumeration suggests, *Actuel's* second major innovation had to do with its appreciation of US underground comics, which was not justified only because they cost nothing thanks to the magazine's Underground Press Syndicate membership. In retrospect, the American material that appeared in *Actuel* does not accurately reflect the diversity of the 1968-1973 underground comix scene. However, it did reflect the tastes of Bizot, who had the final say to select the comics that would make it into the magazine.

**13** A half-century down the road, it is interesting to observe to what extent his choices anticipated the long-term accession to canonization, or oblivion, of certain cartoonists. Here is a table showing the frequency of appearances of US comix creators in *Actuel* issues and TPBs in the 1970-1975 period. In the first place it is necessary to circumvent the « tree hiding the forest » syndrome which is inevitable in relation to R. Crumb, Gilbert Shelton, and—to a lesser degree—Richard Corben. It is more revealing to focus on names that have grown less overwhelmingly canonical into the 21st century.

**14** Once we put aside Crumb and Shelton, the first name that stands out is Ron Cobb, who started producing satirical cartoons (rather than comics per se) in 1966, with frequent references to environmental issues. Cobb appeared in 19 *Actuel* issues, including the 1974 presidential election extra released in support of René Dumont, the very first environmentalist presidential candidate in the country's history. The next two names, Greg Irons and Richard Corben, typify the creative spectrum that made underground comics appealing to a broad readership at the time. **15** The slick design of Corben's tongue-in-cheek fantasy and science-fiction stories teeming with bosomy women played around the parodic, hardly political end of the underground comix' creative range. **16** Simultaneously Irons' horror and eroticism material, drawn in rougher linework than Corben's, would often convey a biting anti-Establishment critique—the best example of which is Irons' 1971 *The Legion of Charlies*. This visual rumination that paralleled the massacre by GIs of the Vietnamese village of My Lay in 1968 and the Manson Family's Tate murders in LA in 1969, was translated in *Actuel* #46 in 1974.

**17** The ten creators at the bottom of the list were « non-canonical » at the time. They were either minor players, such as: Jim Franklin, whose notoriety was very limited outside of his native Texas; or Dan O'Neill and Gary Hallgren, members of the Air Pirates

collective whose productivity was cut short when the Walt Disney Company sued them in 1971 for publishing satirical and pornographic « plagiaries » of their most famous characters. Or they were admittedly obscure creators (Jorgy, Dave Manning, Jim Evans) who had appeared in second- and third-tier underground publications. The fact that they were featured, if ever so rarely, in *Actuel* testified to the eclecticism of an editor whose choices were not necessarily motivated by the creators' degree of popularity in their home country.

The middle segment of the table (numbers 6 thru 11) also raises interesting questions. Among the creators featured in only 4 to 10 issues are four heavyweights, the acolytes of Crumb and Shelton in the *Zap Comix* collective (S. Clay Wilson, Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso, Spain). Near the top of this section is Jay Lynch, a Chicago-based artist that specialized in humour and edited *Bijou Funnies*, arguably the most important underground comic book series created in the wake of *Zap Comics*; predictably most of the Lynch comics in *Actuel* featured his signature characters, the comedy duo Nard'n'Pat.

**18** All the names appearing in this section are still seen today as first-raters of the high underground era, but one: Fred Schrier (whose last name was systematically misspelled ~~Schrier~~ in *Actuel*). He appeared in six issues and was featured along with Greg Irons in the upside-down special *Boum dans ma tête*. While Bizot evidently held him in high regard, Schrier has been largely forgotten today, possibly because of his trademark convoluted psychedelic narratives whose grainy, dark linework never succeeded in matching the visual appeal of Crumb, Shelton, or Irons.

The range of creators that appeared in *Actuel* is more reflective of Bizot's tastes than of the diversity of US underground comic-making in the early 1970s. One is legitimately surprised with the absence of Vaughn Bodé, who never appeared once in *Actuel* even though his visibility among comix artists then equalled Crumb's and

Shelton's. The same question can be asked in relation to Robert Williams or Rory Hayes. Did Bizot find their respective artworks off-putting? We shall never know.

**19** What of R. Crumb? He occupied a unique position in *Actuel*. His artwork appeared in every single issue, on 11 front covers and 13 back covers—some of which (**20** like this one in favor of legalized abortion) featured in-the-face contents which would raise eyebrows on both ends of the political spectrum nowadays whereas their satirical intent was then unequivocal.

The clearest sign of Crumb's exceptional status was that no less than three TPBs were devoted to his comics. **21** The first one, *Head Comix*, came out in September 1971: 100 pages of material drawn between 1967 and 1970 for 9.50 French francs (same price as *Astérix* albums). The collection was available from newsstands until late December and subsequently by mail order for years. On October 2, Bizot plugged the book on national television on *Pop 2*, a Saturday afternoon pop music show that was very popular with teenage and young adult viewers. A month later he contributed a glowing review for the liberal middlebrow newsmagazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. By doing so he targetted the readerships that made up the vital center of the nascent adult comics market—young people and the intelligentsia. Just as had happened in the United States and the UK, Crumb's cartoons subsequently became staples of the free press nationwide, the most effective ploy to lure readers into buying (and—why not?—reading) the most cheaply mimeographed newsletters or fanzines.

**22** *Actuel*'s next two Crumb books came out in specific contexts. *Fritz le chat* was published in November 1972 to coincide with the release of Ralph Bakshi's animated cartoon, which was received quite positively in France after having made a big impression at the Cannes film festival six months earlier. **23** The third book, *Les Horribles obsessions de Robert Crumb* [~~need I translate the title?~~], hit newsstands in



October 1974. For the first time *Actuel* dared to publish the cartoonist's most racy material. Even though Bizot was perfectly familiar with those strips, he had always refrained from running them in the magazine to avoid attracting the wrath of the Interior Ministry, which had banned *Hara-Kiri* on obscenity grounds repeatedly in the last decade by means of France's notorious 1949 act on children's publications. He finally decided to make this bold move to take advantage of the wind of modernization and liberalization that followed the presidential election after Valéry Giscard d'Estaing decided to shut down state censorship, thereby unwittingly opening flood gates to porn on newsstands and on movie theaters across the country.

Another motivation for Bizot was to stave off a new competitor. [24](#) The very same year, the Swiss-born publisher Rolf Kesselring had broken into the niche so far cornered by *Actuel* with *Les Comix de Mainmise*, two cheaply produced TPBs that collected Québécois translations of Crumb comix, including some of his most offensive material. While Bizot was primarily a magazine publisher who sometimes released comics collections, [25](#) Kesselring was the first publisher in France to specialize in countercultural comics, starting with Nicolas Devil's now-forgotten *Orejona*, an uncategorisable 250-page rambling visual manifesto about the decline of the counterculture that extensively cited/pillaged US underground comics. By the mid-seventies Kesselring thus inaugurated the appropriation of US underground comix by the French comics industry a half-decade after they first appeared in the countercultural press.

[26](#) When Bizot put an end to *Actuel* in October 1975, he had successfully fulfilled his mission as France's early discoverer of the US underground comix scene. Crumb had been published in *Pilote*, the historical birthplace of Asterix, in spring 1975. He and

Shelton were about to be published in *L'Écho des savanes* as of 1976. The Swiss publisher Kesselring was about to carry on the Francophone acclimation of US comix in 1977 with translations of Spain Rodriguez's *Trashman* and Shelton's *Freak Brothers*, three years after the trio was featured in a special *Actuel* issue dated January 1974. The French landscape of adult comics after Bizot was radically different to what it used to be like in 1970. [27](#) In the last five years the great precursor *Pilote* had entered a protracted decline when becoming a monthly in June 1974; *Charlie Mensuel* had consolidated its position as promoter of the best of the international comics output; and since 1972, three newcomers (*L'Écho des savanes*, *Métal Hurlant*, *Fluide glacial*) had jointly originated a purely French underground scene that had drawn inspiration from American models to break with the creative frameworks inherited from the postwar Franco-Belgian mainstream comics industry.

[28](#) Unlike the editors of the key adult comics magazines of the 1970s that have just been mentioned, Jean-François Bizot was never a comics creator. Till the end of his life he was a radical journalist committed to the various forms of the contemporary counterculture, including the comics medium which he held in high esteem. This is why *Actuel* is perceived nowadays as a peripheral actor in the evolution of French adult comic magazines by comparison with the major titles of the early 1970s. Yet by disseminating the material authored by Crumb, Shelton, Corben, and their likes, Bizot's title reached not only a readership broader than that of comics magazines but also individuals that lived outside of the greater Paris area and/or could not read English. In retrospect *Actuel* arguably engineered a re-Americanization of French comics, a quarter century after the dis-Americanization that occurred in the wake of the act to regulate publications for minors passed on July 16, 1949. Another way of interpreting the magazine's impact is that it enabled French adult comics to catch up with their American

counterparts following the great Western cultural upheaval of the Sixties. In either case, France's comics, but also Europe's, found themselves changed forever by the discovery of US underground comix.

From 1970 through 1975 the French journalist and editor Jean-François Bizot published *Actuel*, a monthly magazine dedicated to the post-May '68 era's alternative youth culture. During its five-year run *Actuel* was a sounding-board of Bizot's own fascination with the US counterculture, which he proceeded to propagate among French teenagers and young adults. One of the key elements in *Actuel*'s editorial identity was its consistent interest in US underground comics, in particular those of R. Crumb, featured in every issue and a couple of anthologies. *Actuel* also showcased a number of other significant comix creators (Gilbert Shelton, S. Clay Wilson, Greg Irons, Richard Corben, Dave Sheridan, Rick Griffin, Fred Schrier) and, by 1973, was the first French non-comic magazine to publish « all-comics issues » featuring American cartoonists as well as French beginners.

Bizot was a key discoverer and promoter of the US underground comix scene by making it accessible in French to a broad readership who had no physical access to the comic books and/or could not read English. More broadly *Actuel*'s consistent emphasis on comic art as an "adult" medium laid the groundwork for the rise of French-made underground comic magazines (*L'Écho des savanes*, *Métal Hurlant*, *Fluide glacial*) in the first half of the 1970s. A quarter-century after US comics became de facto largely banned by law in 1949, the magazine thereby arguably participated in the opening of a new chapter in the history of French comics—a "re-Americanization" that functioned a transition between the post-World War II Franco-Belgian era and the 1980s heyday of album-format "bande dessinées pour adultes."

#### Biographical note

Jean-Paul Gabilliet is a professor of North American Studies at the Dept. of English of Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France. He specializes in the cultural history of comics in North America and Europe, about which he has written over 70 articles. He has also authored *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (UP of Mississippi, 2010) and the biography of a famous underground cartoonist simply titled *R. Crumb* (PU Bordeaux, 2012).

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