Geographical Classification in Comics

Martin de la Iglesia

In this article, the concept of geographical classification -- in itself not a particularly widespread method in cultural geography -- is applied to the field of comics. Although geographical classification is already used in comics sometimes, it is rarely reflected upon. This article aims at closing this gap by addressing some issues concerning geographical classification and its appliance to works of art in general and comics in particular.

Before moving on to comics, I'd like to start with some examples from the field of "classical" art to demonstrate the ubiquity of classifications in the world of art and art history. These examples will introduce some concepts and problems connected with art and geographical classification. Some of these are well-known, whereas others have been relatively neglected so far. These concepts will be applied to comics later in the article.

As a first example, consider a typical floor plan of an art museum, say, the National Gallery in London. In the floor plan of the National Gallery, the exhibition rooms are arranged in groups which are marked by one out of four different colors, each of which stands for a different period of time: blue for 1250–1500, purple for 1500–1600, orange for 1600–1700, and green for 1700 to 1900. These periods are, of course, the periods in which the paintings on display in the respective rooms were made. Thus, through this plan a classification takes place: the paintings of a room are assigned to a chronological class (or "classed").

A leaflet of the National Gallery (transcribed in **Fig. 1**) informs the museum visitor, that each exhibition room is not only assigned a period and an individual number, but also some sort of topic or title. Apart from some personal names, like "Carlo Crivelli" or "Piero della Francesca", most of these titles are geographical terms, frequently combined with a further period specification ("Ferrara and Milan 1450-1500," "Italy 1250-1350," and so on). Thus, a mainly geographical classification occurs here: the paintings of an exhibition room are assigned to a geographical space.

Geographical classification can be considered as a subfield or method within *Kunstgeographie*, the geography of art. Since this discipline was developed primarily in Germany (cf. DaCosta Kaufmann, 2004), the German term *Kunstgeographie* is still used in some Anglophone texts (e.g. Murawska-Muthesius, 2000). As Paul Pieper, an early scholar in the field of *Kunstgeographie*, points out, this geography is to be distinguished from *Kunsttopographie*, the mere assignment of a place (rather than a space, or

region) to a work of art (Pieper, 1936:14). In order to achieve a geographical classification, this topographical process has to precede. This assignment of a place can be difficult, since with most works of art there are several places to choose from.

Paintings 1250 to 1500	
51	Ferrara and Milan 1450-1500
52	Italy 1250-1350
53	Italy 1350-1400
54	Tuscany 1400-1450
55	Italy 1400-1460
56	The Netherlands 1400-1450
57	Florence 1450-1500
58	Paintings for Florentine Palaces
59	Carlo Crivelli
60	Siena and Perugia 1450-1500
61	Mantua and Venice about 1500
62	Venice and the Veneto 1450-1500
63	The Netherlands in Europe 1450-1500
64	Cologne and Westphalia 1400-1500
65	Southern Germany and Austria
66	Piero della Francesca
Paintings 1500 to 1600	
2	Leonardo and North Italy
4	Germany
...	...

Fig. 1. Extract from a leaflet of the National Gallery London.

Consider, for instance, the impressionist painting “The Grand Canal, Venice,” by Claude Monet. Monet was born in Paris, and lived for most of his life in different places in France, except for his two years' military service in Algeria and several journeys throughout Europe. One of these journeys led him to Venice in 1908, where he painted his “Grand Canal”. Today, the work (which in fact is one piece out of a series) is located in the aforementioned National Gallery in London.

Now, the question is: should the place assigned to Monet's “Grand Canal” be his hometown in France, or Venice, where he painted it, or London, its current location? Or, to put it more pointedly: is it a French painting, an Italian, or even a British one? Surely Monet's national identity was most likely French, so that he is thus commonly referred to as a “French painter,” “French impressionist,” etc. This French identity is likely to have unconsciously influenced the production process of the painting. On the other hand, one cannot deny that the motif and the local conditions in Venice, like the local

climate and the available materials, could have had an effect on the look of the picture. These two places, the artist's place of origin, and the place of creation of the artwork, are the two most important ones in terms of production. It has to be decided as the case arises which of the two is the decisive for its topographical assignment.

But also the place where the work is located today can be of interest, regarding its reception. Only in its location -- in this case, London -- can Monet's picture be perceived as an original and have an effect on the public. The place determines the conditions of reception of the work (like lighting, height of installment on the wall, etc.), and restrains the circle of potential recipients; a person who, for example, doesn't live in London and has no money to travel there might possibly never see Monet's “Grand Canal” as an original. Depending on what statement the geographical classification is aimed at, the place of reception could be the decisive one.

While it is not easy to make a topographical assignment to a painting, it is far more complex with a comic because even more places have to be considered. It is, for instance, not unusual for a comic book to be written in Scotland, penciled in Canada, readily produced (inked, colored, lettered, edited, possibly also printed, and so forth) in the USA and distributed to hundreds of thousands of places throughout the world. Therefore, we deal with at least two, if not three or more, places of production, and hundreds of thousands of places at which the reception takes place, i.e. where the copies of the comic book are read. This makes a geographical approach to comics more difficult, but it also allows new questions to be addressed, e.g. how international collaboration between comic creators works, or which comics and how many are read in different parts of the world.

Let's return briefly to our initial example. The geographical classification of the National Gallery consisted of classes of geographical spaces assigned to individual exhibition rooms. A further division of these classes, or a comprehensive superordinate order didn't exist. Thus, all classes were coordinative.

Usually, however, classifications consist of several hierarchical levels. In the classification of the National Gallery, an additional superordinate level could be added, e.g. with classes corresponding to present-day nation states, like Italy, the Netherlands, or Germany, to which the other classes could be subordinated. The statement that could be deduced from such a classification could be that the classes like “Florence 1450-1500” and “Mantua and Venice about 1500” are more similar than “Florence 1450-1500” and “Cologne and Westphalia 1400-1500,” since “Florence” and “Mantua and Venice” would share the same superordinate class “Italy,” whereas “Cologne and Westphalia” would belong to the class “Germany”. Put into practice, such a classification could be used to arrange the rooms within a museum according to their highest hierarchical classes, so that similar paintings would be in adjacent rooms.

Just as well the lower level of the classification -- the initial classes given in the National Gallery's leaflet -- could be further divided, leading to another subordinate level consisting of classes corresponding to even smaller geographical regions, or single cities (e.g. the class “Cologne and Westphalia 1400-1500” could be divided into the individual classes “Cologne 1400-1500” and “Westphalia 1400-1500”). Such subdivisions only make sense as long as the art of the lowest classes still has a character so distinguishable, that a local style or tradition or school can be spoken of.

Let's assume we should want to develop a complete geographical classification of the collection of the National Gallery, consisting of these three hierarchical levels, the national, the regional and the local. In this case, it is advisable to follow two rules that apply to most classifications in general: first, the classes should be disjoint; i.e. an object -- in this case, a work of art -- should only be assigned to a single class (within a hierarchical level), not to several at once. In a museum context, this rule is obvious, since a painting cannot be exhibited in two different rooms at the same time.

Second, the classes within a hierarchical level should be about the same size; i.e. the number of objects assigned to them should be about equal. Otherwise, empty classes may result, or classes so large that the assignment of an object to it is of little significance for this object. Again, in the sphere of museums, this rule becomes clear: no museum visitor likes to see exhibition rooms crammed full of paintings arranged in multiple rows reaching from floor to ceiling, whereas empty, unused rooms would be considered a waste of space.

Using these two rules, a complete geographical classification for the National Gallery in London could be devised, with which its entire collection could be classified. However, it is plain that such a classification could only be used for this specific museum. To classify a collection of e.g. contemporary art, additional classes for American, Asian, Eastern European art, etc. would have to be added, while the extensive subdivision of regions like Italy would probably lead to empty classes. Therefore, for each museum collection, and also for each field in art history, each scholarly objective, each period and for each genre a separate classification would need to be created.

We are now going to try to develop a geographical classification for an entire genre: comics. A geographical approach to comics is anything but far-fetched, since comics have nearly always been closely associated with geographical terms. For a long time, in some countries comics were almost exclusively imported from the U.S. -- and many scholars believe that the United States is the country of origin of comics -- which led to comics being seen by the public as purely an American phenomenon. In some non-Anglophone countries even the word for the genre, like the Spanish “cómic” or the German “Comic,” stems directly from the English language spoken in the U.S.

Since the 1960s, the reception of comics from France and Belgium rapidly

increased in some countries, and since then comics from this tradition are called “Franco-Belgian.” From around 1990, finally, Japanese comics began their conquest around the world, and their specific name, “manga,” soon became widespread. Even more evident is the connection to geography in terms like “manhwa” or “manhua,” which denote comics exclusively from Korea and China respectively, rather than “manga” which can be used to refer to a style that European and other non-Japanese comic creators can emulate.

Generally speaking, comics are a global phenomenon. The dynamics, though, of their production and reception, has developed differently in different countries. These distinctions are to be precisely expressed through a geographical classification. Again, the two aforementioned rules should be followed: no overlap between classes, and classes of roughly equal size. Although this classification is not (yet) tied to a museum like the previous National Gallery example of classification, these rules will still be helpful in terms of making the classification more robust and manageable.

We start at the top hierarchical level, which is the most problematic: the entire global comic culture is to be divided into a few large geographical classes. As mentioned above, the world of comics is primarily dominated by three regions: the U.S., France and Belgium, and Japan. As these regions are located in different continents, one is tempted to organize the top classes in correspondence to the physical continents. The result could be a top level consisting of an American (or North American) class, a European class, and an Asian (or East Asian) class. The comics from the rest of the world could either be assigned to one or several further classes, or assigned to one of the three other classes.

The issue of such a rough geographical classification is, of course, not limited to the field of comics. It is, in a sense, the concept of *Kulturkreise* (culture areas, again a concept originated from German scholarship) that stems from cultural geography, which has been discussed for over a hundred years (Ehlers, 2006:338-344). A relatively recent and much debated proposal to divide the world into culture areas is the concept of civilizations according to Samuel P. Huntington (1996:26-27). It might be interesting to examine if this concept can be of use for our comics classification problem.

When we look at Huntington's world map (**Fig. 2**), two things catch our eye. Firstly, East Asia is seen by Huntington not as a unit, and is instead divided into a Japanese and a Chinese (also called “Sinic” or “Confucian”, cf. Ehlers, 2006:340) civilization, to the latter of which also the Korean peninsula belongs. Considering that Korean and Japanese comics are so similar that they are barely distinguishable, this division appears problematic. The other striking thing about Huntington's classification is that Europe and North America are not separated into two different cultures, but united in a single “Western” civilization. Whether this perception holds true for comics is still to be discussed. While some scholars stress the differences between the

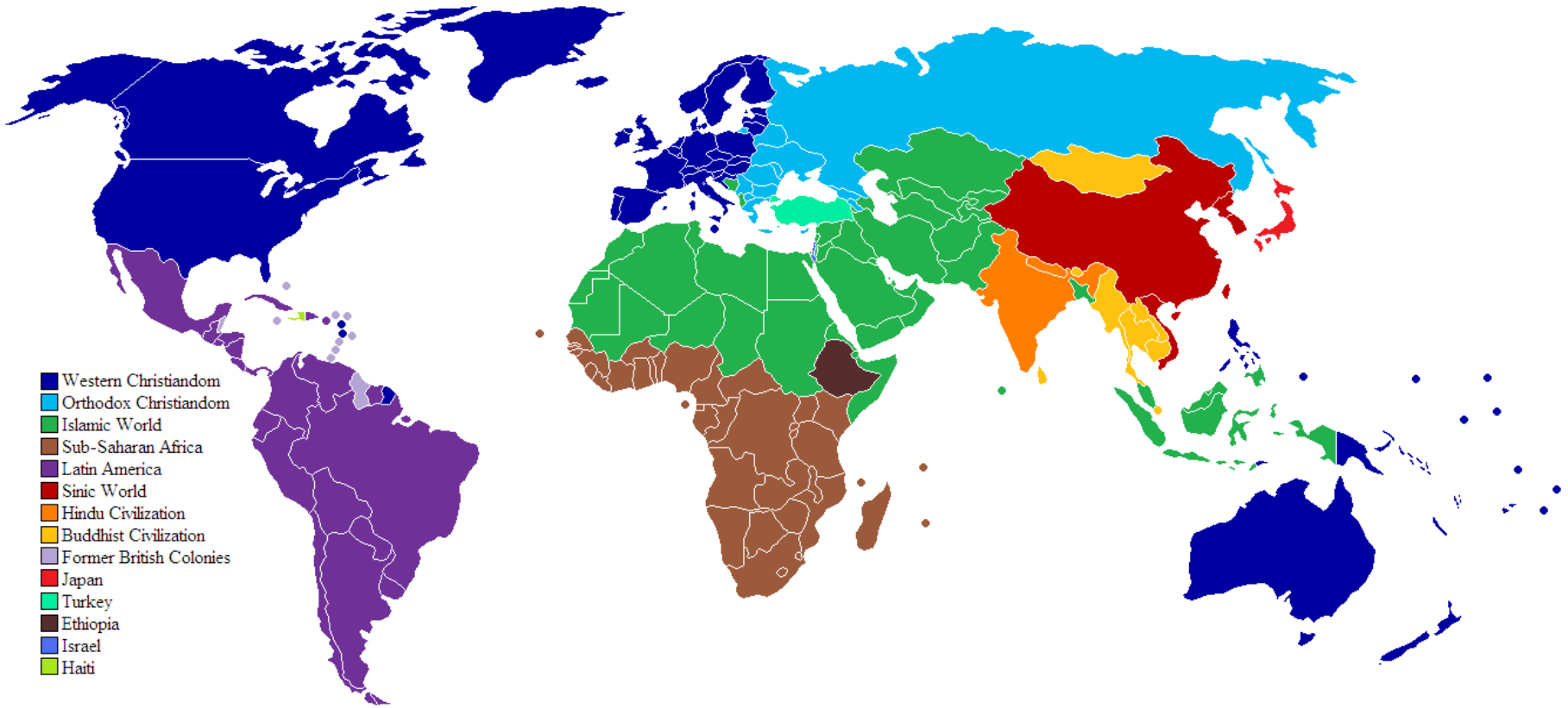

Fig. 2. A world map based on Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*, published in Wikipedia under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License.

European and the North American comic cultures, primarily concerning disparities in format and the market (e.g., most recently, Beaty, 2007), it can be observed that in the last few years, at least stylistically, the two comic worlds are becoming more and more similar. An example for the disparity in terms of format and market is that the most important format in each market -- the “comic book” pamphlet in the United States and the album (traditionally larger in its height and width than the average graphic novel, but with less pages) in Europe -- is almost completely insignificant for the respective other market. The stylistic approximation, on the other hand, might be seen in the increasing number of European artists (e.g. from Spain, France or Croatia) working for publishers based in the USA.

In any case, a direct adoption of Huntington's world map (and most others in cultural geography) for our comics classification seems inapt. One has to bear in mind that the geography of art is a specialized subfield of cultural geography, and as such does not necessarily produce the same results in the creation of classifications. Instead, different borders can be devised in art and its individual genres than in culture as a whole.

In the field of comics there is, for example, a case which apparently contradicts a division into continents: the comic culture of the United Kingdom. (This example has been pointed out before by Roger Sabin, 2002.) Like some other countries, Britain is a country with a long tradition of comics production, but whose comics are largely unknown abroad. In the 1980s, the phenomenon called “British Invasion” started: Many British comic creators began to work for U.S. publishers, to benefit from their better working conditions. It's safe to say that these British creators did export their talent, but not a specifically British comics style. Quite the contrary, they blended so well into the American comics tradition that it's not possible to tell whether a comic book published by an American company is written by an American or a British author.

On the side of reception, the same is true in Britain: although a few home-grown series are still consumed, the market is dominated by imported or reprinted American material, and the popularity of US comics in the UK even exceeds the popularity of manga (and of Franco-Belgian titles anyway). The consequence for our classification problem is that the British comic culture has to be regarded as a sort of satellite culture to the American. Despite the physical proximity of the British Isles to the European mainland, the decisive element in this case seems to be the common language that leads to a more or less uniform Anglophone comics culture. It would be of interest to analyze if other languages spoken on several continents, like Spanish, are capable of establishing such consistent comic cultures. On the other hand, the question is whether the relationship between Korean (or Chinese) and Japanese comics is also a one-sided dependency (cf. Lent, 1995), despite the different languages they are written in.

Let's nevertheless assume we would already have succeeded in compiling

the top level of our geographical classification out of a few continent-sized classes. The next step would be to find a suitable further geographical division for the next hierarchical level. In this article, already, comics have been repeatedly associated with nation states, like Japan, France, the United Kingdom, etc. Indeed, regions of this size seem to be feasible classes for this second hierarchical level. There are several reasons for the emergence of national comic cultures. The most important one is that political borders between nation states are often -- though not always, as we have seen in the case of the UK and the U.S. -- at the same time language borders, which reduce the reception of comics from neighboring countries and hinder international exchange between creators. Thus, in spite of their stylistic similarity, Korean and Japanese comics can be assigned to their own separate national comic cultures.

Another reason for national comic scenes is due to the nature of the comics-trade. For instance, for some time imports of American comics were banned in some countries like Great Britain, Canada and Australia. This circumstance, of course, had a consolidating effect for these countries' respective comic industries (Gifford, 1990:126-128, 142). Furthermore, the trade is highly risk-averse: decision makers in the industry seem to assume that the consumers are generally conservative and skeptical of new or different kinds (in terms of style, content, format, distribution mode, etc.) of comics from abroad. This might be the reason why it took so long for manga to become popular in some countries, and why European comics in the album format are still largely ignored by some markets such as the British or the American.

However, the idea of classes corresponding to nation states contradicts in many cases the rule of the classes' size to be roughly equal. The comic culture of the U.S., for example, is many times larger in terms of produced and consumed titles than that of, say, Switzerland, although they are both nation states and therefore candidates for classes within the second level of our comics classification. One solution to this problem might be to unite several smaller comic cultures into a single class. Thus, the German-speaking part of the Swiss comic culture could be united with the German and the Austrian to form a class of German language comic culture, while the French-speaking part of the Swiss scene, closely connected to the Francophone industry, could be assigned to a Francophone class. Another approach to the problem of class size balance could be to subdivide large nation state classes into regional classes on this level already.

For a third, lowest, and final classification level, one could try to find distinct comic cultures within a nation state, on a smaller regional or even local scale. In Germany, for example, local comic scenes can be found in Hamburg as well as in Berlin and probably other conurbations. They are characterized by, among other things, frequent collaboration of local comic creators, local comics-related institutions (publishing companies, art colleges,

etc.), or the use of local idiom, topics, or settings in comics.

By using these three hierarchical levels -- the continental, the national and the local -- which would altogether consist of merely a few hundred classes, the entire world production of comics might be classed. To develop such a classification, one would have to be an expert on comics from all over the world, and possess knowledge of the comics landscape of every comic-producing country of the world. For a single person, such a feat seems impossible. Therefore, it might be forgiven that this article does not even rudimentarily present a complete geographical world classification of comics. One can only hope, though, that such a classification will one day exist.

Some issues were left unaddressed in this paper, including the strengths and weaknesses of classifications as presented here in comparison to other methods of indexing, the problem of representing time dynamics in classifications, the possibly decreasing role of comic creators' geographical ties in a globally operating industry, and the gradual homogenization of the world's comic cultures. These objections to the concept of geographical classification in comics have to be taken seriously. However, the precise conclusions to be obtained from this method suggest its further application and study. If we want to go on linking comics with spaces in the terms of our terminology, like “manhwa” and “manhua,” more explicitly geographical approaches are needed to justify the way we speak about comics. When we call a group of comics, for instance, “European,” which comics are included in this term, and which are excluded? Geographical classification and other geographically orientated methods could help to clarify this, or at least raise the awareness of such problems. Further studies in this direction could include the possible appliance of geographical thesauri to the field of comics, the development of classifications on a limited (e.g. national or continental) scale, or the tracing of the shifts in the relations of the major comic continents through history. The possibilities of geographical approaches are manifold, and their full potential in regard to comics is yet to be tapped.

Endnote

This article is based on a paper presented at the 72th Kunsthistorischer Studierendenkongress in Halle, Germany, May 18, 2007.

References

Beaty, Bart. 2007. *Unpopular Culture. Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

DaCosta Kaufmann, Thomas. 2005. *Toward a Geography of Art*. Chicago,

London: University of Chicago Press.

Ehlers, Eckart. 2006. “Kulturkreise -- Kulturerdteile -- Clash of Civilizations. Plädoyer für eine gegenwartsbezogene Kulturgeographie.” *Geographische Rundschau.* 48(6): 338-344.

Gifford, Denis. 1990. *The International Book of Comics*. London: Hamlyn.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1996. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lent, John A. 1995. “Comics in East Asia Countries: A Contemporary Survey.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 29(1): 185-198.

Murawska-Muthesius, Katarzyna, ed. 2000. *Borders in Art. Revisiting Kunstgeographie*. Warszawa: Institute of Art.

Pieper, Paul. 1936. *Kunstgeographie. Versuch einer Grundlegung.* Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt.

Sabin, Roger. 2002. “Comics. Eurocomics: '9th Art' or Misfit Lit?” In *The Media: An Introduction*, edited by Adam Briggs and Paul Cobley. Harlow: Longman.

Martin de la Iglesia studied art history and library and information science at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany. He spent the 2007 summer term London, where he worked on his thesis on the popularity of U.S. comics in the UK, with which he earned the *Magister Artium* degree in the same year.