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Comic Art as a Field of Study

Profile Interview:

John Lent

Editor, International Journal of Comic Art

Professor John A. Lent of Temple University, USA, is a well-known scholar to students, researchers and teachers of media and communication studies. He is one of the pioneers of communication education in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in Malaysia, Philippines and China. He was the first coordinator of the mass communications programme at the Science University of Malaysia in early 1970s and has been involved in the teaching, writing and study of communications for more than 42 years. Among the honours he has received is as Fulbright Scholar in the Philippines and first Chair of the Rogers Distinguished Professorship at the University of Western Ontario, Canada.

Lent has authored more than 60 books and published more than 200 articles. Among his well-known publications are *The Asian Newspapers' Reluctant Revolution*, *Newspapers in Asia*, *Broadcasting in Asia*, *Asian Cinema* and *Animation in Asia and the Pacific*. He serves as editor and editorial board member of more than a dozen periodicals and chairs the Asian Popular Culture Group of the Popular Culture Association. In addition to founding and editing the *International Journal of Comic Art*, he has been chair of the Asian Cinema Studies Society and edited the *Asian Cinema* since 1994.

In September 2004, Lent participated in three meetings coordinated by *Mediaplus Consultants*, in Singapore and Malaysia. He was the principal resource person for the inaugural Asian comic art meetings in Singapore (September 11) and in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia (September 13 & 14). **Sankaran Ramanathan**, chief operating officer of Mediaplus Consultants (www.mediaplusconsultants.com) spoke with Lent in Petaling Jaya.

My association with Lent goes back to 1974, when we met at various fora for communication educators in Malaysia. In 1987, Lent informed me of his new field of interest, i.e. comic art and sought my assistance for a meeting with *Lat*, a renowned Malaysian cartoonist. The interview with Lat subsequently appeared in *Witty World*, a magazine founded by Lent. The magazine ceased publication after some 12 years.

What impressed me then about Lent was his dedication to the development of what was then a new field of studies, as he continued to publish his magazines and works on comic art and cinema largely through putting in his own resources and time.

Even now, the *International Journal of Comic Art* and *Asian Cinema*, journals that he founded and edits, are heavily subsidized by his resources and that of his wife. Published twice yearly, IJOCA (www.ijoca.com) has completed its sixth year of publication and seems well on its way to becoming the leading international journal on comic art. He continues to be involved in developing these fields despite his lecturing duties at Temple University and obligations as visiting professor at Shanghai University.

Ramanathan: When did you first become involved in comic art?

Lent: I first became involved in comic art scholarship as an extension of a field study I carried out at Syracuse University in 1963 on possible effects of comic book violence on children. My application of the topic to Asia occurred in 1964 while on a Fulbright Scholarship researching mass communication of the Philippines. At various times during the next 20 years, I dipped into comic art scholarship but made my most serious commitment to these studies beginning in mid-1980s, with the founding and publication of the magazine *Witty World*. From then on, most of my research effort and basic interest has been in comic art.

Ramanathan: What do you think are some unique aspects of Asian comic art?

Lent: Aspects of Asian comic art are or have been unique, even before the advent of modern printing. Among these are Japanese *manga*, known for their huge size (hundreds of pages), gigantic circulations (individual titles with millions sold weekly), cinematic approaches, and different genres, all characteristics not previously known in comic art elsewhere; Chinese brush painting cartoons based on Chinese folk tales and literature, and some of the most exquisite animation in the world; Philippine *komiks* that employed fine art techniques in the rendering of often weird characters; Korean online comics drawn by amateurs but sporting extremely well-done stories. There are many more aspects that make Asian comic art different, including distribution (traditionally through rental shops), types of editorial cartoons (such as summary in Sri Lanka).

Ramanathan: What is special about comic art as a field of study?

Lent: Comic art itself is unique as a field of study for three main reasons. First, it demands that students, researchers and scholars look at both the visual and verbal content and at the form as used in various media. Among these are: comic books, animated film, funnies and political cartoons and comic strips in newspapers.

Secondly, though not a unique attribute, comic art can be studied from many approaches and from both a liberal/fine arts perspective as well as from a

communications/media studies perspective. By this I mean that we can adopt historical, philosophical, effects, and societal approaches to study the evolution and development of comic art. Such study can be undertaken within the ambit of either the liberal/fine arts perspective (where the focus can be more on the content and meanings) or from a communications/media studies perspective (where the focus can be more on form and medium).

Thirdly, similar to other media of communication and expression, comic art lends itself as a field of scholarly research. Here, we can use various perspectives (rhetorical, semiotic, experimental, content analysis), whereby such serious research can enhance our understanding of this medium of communication and expression. Furthermore, we can also focus our research upon the impact and effects of this form of communication upon various segments of society, particularly children. Research aimed at understanding the effects upon children is particularly important in view of the growing popularity of comic art in all societies throughout the world.

Ramanathan: Can you highlight some of the main contributions that you have made to this field?

Lent: Among contributions I feel I have made to the field are:

- a. Development of bibliographical research, having published 10 huge volumes on references of every continent and most countries;
- b. Establishing *International Journal of Comic Art* as the only academic periodical in the field globally and sustaining it already through six volumes;
- c. Starting groups or divisions encouraging comic art scholarship, such as the working group of International Association for Media & Communication Research (1984) and the Asian Popular Culture Group of Popular Culture Association;
- d. Bringing an awareness of the importance of the field of study, and especially of non-U.S. comic art, to the academic and other communities through editing or writing numerous books, articles, and special issues of four or five journals, and through many symposia, panels and paper presentations at various conferences;
- e. Encouraging graduate students to write dissertations on comic art (at my university, I have supervised 12 dissertations on comic art of Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America); and
- f. Providing other service, such as co-starting and editing *WittyWorld* for about 12 years, teaching a course in comic art for many years.

Ramanathan: What in your opinion are the key aspects of media development that will impinge upon the study of comic art?

Lent: I can think of five key aspects of media development that have made it more urgent to study comic art. First, there may be the growth in numbers of television stations globally that demand more programming and thus, use animation, even in primetime. Here, we can point to the lead taken by the Japanese, particularly through programmes such as *Doraemon*.

Secondly, there is the development of video games using animated characters. In this respect, games developed in Korea come to mind.

Thirdly, there is the accelerated use of computers and the Internet world-wide, whereby professional and amateur cartoonists are placing their works to reach larger

audiences. Further, as many newspapers and magazines go online, cartoonists will also benefit through the greater exposure.

Fourthly, we see a growing interest in the graphic novel as a literary form. In countries such as China and India, well-known historical stories and traditions are being reproduced as historical novels targeted at the younger generation.

Finally, in some countries such as Malaysia, there has been a substantial increase in the publishing of humor/cartoon magazines, with many of them catering to younger segments of the population.

All these developments mean that there will be growing interest in comic art as a field of study.

Ramanathan: What would be the major aspects of a course on comic art that can be taught at diploma/degree level?

Lent: Major aspects of a comic art course might include: history of the art form going back to ancient times; comic art's relationship to other disciplines; theory of comic art; functions and uses of comic art; a thorough definition of comic art; individual sections on comic books and strips, animation, political cartoons and caricature; controls placed on comic art through censorship, political correctness, etc. Such a course should emphasize global and international dimensions and include much visual presentation.

This course can be part of diploma/degree programmes offered at colleges of liberal arts or at colleges of communication/media studies. As such, the approach and emphasis can be tailored to dovetail into the broad approaches that the respective colleges emphasize.

Ramanathan: What is the current status of comic art as an area for study and research in the Asia-Pacific region?

Lent: Not many colleges/universities in the Asia-Pacific region have introduced comic art as an area for study and research. There are isolated courses here and there. However, in South Korea, about 150 universities and colleges teach comics and animation, although much of the instruction is on the practical, not historical or theoretical, levels. There is therefore a need for more colleges and universities in this region to introduce courses on comic art.

At graduate level, there is a dearth of studies on comic art. In fact, I can think of only a handful of Asians who have studied and researched this field.

Ramanathan: What is your prediction for the future development of comic art as a discipline?

Lent: Already, interest in comic art as a field of study is growing rapidly and a number of conferences have been initiated. Also books, and magazines on this subject have started up. Since comic art is an accepted part of the culture in many Asian countries, I am confident that it will develop very quickly as a distinct field of study in its own right.