



Western Hegemony and Its Galactic Critic:
Depicting Alternative Narration of International Relations in the
Adventures of *Valérian and Laureline*

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This paper represents to me a true jump to unknown but at same time I hope it also explores not just untracked paths to me but to international relations scholarship in general. Does IR have monopoly to interpret rules and logic of international order or would there be available alternative forms of narration that could offer an alternative reading of international relations. My interests in this paper are in popular cultural representations of IR and in particular in comics as alternative narration to describe, categorize and theoretize in other terms abstract and fragmented international order. In

what terms popular cultural forms of description manage to introduce new elements in comparison to academic discipline and in what ways these two are interrelated, intertwined and dialectical.

My particular case in this paper is a French science fiction comics series called *Valérian and Laureline* (French: *Valérian et Laureline*)¹. Series is created by writer Pierre Christin and artist Jean-Claude Mézières. First published in the magazine *Pilote* in 1967, but since early 1970s all of the *Valérian* stories have been collected in graphic novel album format, comprising some twenty-one volumes. The final installment was published in 2010. As such these are familiar for me as I have been reading these comics since my childhood but during the recent years their complexity in story and visual inventiveness has admired me more and more. The reader can recognize from *Valérian and Laureline* comics issues like colonialism, intercultural communication, peace mediation, global (or galactic) governance, globalization, market forces etc. However, the visual context is not the world we are living but galactic space opera. Instead of states we have planets and galaxies and the Others really look odd. Nonetheless because time travelling in some cases story is in surprising way intertwined with our own world and time. *Valérian and Laureline* combine fantasy and realism by analyzing socio-political phenomena in imagined visual context. This visual expression is what calls for explanation but what seemingly is in the end the most difficult also to answer.

Popular Culture and IR

So far easy but when I have been trying to answer to the core questions like does *Valérian and Laureline* comics introduce some unique and original reading of IR or is there something we IR scholars can learn or how is the argument in comics related with IR debate I have ended more to open questions than to definite answers. These questions are obviously intertwined with more general question of relationship with popular culture and international relations and how in popular culture international relations are introduced. There has been increasing interests towards these questions but beside a few interesting articles published in *Millennium* (3/2001) and whole book dealing Harry

¹ Only eight of them have translated and published in English.

Potter (Nexon & Neumann 2006) or science-fiction (Weldes 2003) and international relations there are still much to explore. Besides increasing interests towards popular culture among IR scholars scrutinizing above mentioned questions have remained still rather tentative. It seems also so that from variety of popular cultural genres only certain have received attention and that a few highly popular franchises like Star Trek or Harry Potter have received wide scholarly interests while predominantly the field has remained unexplored. Movies and TV-series have been in particular target of studies while music has remained mostly untouched. In similar manner study of political cartoons have been popular and rather obvious source in constructivist orientated studies but so far comics have been ignored even if in recent years international related topics are more widely touched in comics. Again interest has been more on superheroes than in realistic stories.

Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann (2006) have approached question of how international relations scholars can enter into popular culture from practical perspective. To them popular cultural forms of presenting international relations are categorized as second-order representation, thus forms in which popular culture represents representations. As they pointed out division is not so clear because so-called first-order representation may be heavily influenced by second-order-representation. While speech of politician is ranked to first category it may be constituted through popular cultural iconography. Nexon and Neumann list four ways: popular culture as politics, as mirror, as date and as constitutive. First is dealing popular cultural artifacts as causes and effects of political process. Danish cartoon crisis can easily be studied form this perspective as they provoked and were used for provoking world wide protests and demonstrations (see Hansen 2007). Second case is referring to pedagogical and analogical usage of popular culture. Thirdly popular culture can be treated “as evidence about dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs in a particular state, society, or region”. Fourth category, popular culture as constitutive, concentrates “how popular culture actively shapes first-order representations and thus plays a far more important role in the actual conduct of world politics”. Popular cultural representations could exercise a determining effect on policy making, but it could also without determining effect inform world politics. Popular representation can also enable political action or naturalize certain order.

These four categories introduced by Nexon and Neumann are not well fitting to the case of Valerian and Laureline. It based on rather categorical division between productions, content and reception of popular cultural artifacts and it seemingly emphasize reception over content. Thus how popular cultural representation causes political effects or how politicians are consciously or unconsciously using them. Scrutinizing Valerian and Laureline from this perspective is obviously possible and plausible option as it has been highly popular comic series in French-speaking Europe since 1970s. Its rich and innovative visual representations have influenced also for example Star War movies. Still I am not regarding this kind of approach as the most interesting one in this case. My interests is more on content; in what way comics and Valerian and Laureline comic albums in particular offers an alternative way of representing international relations.

If emphasizing contest over reception it is necessary to reevaluate strict division between first- and second-order-representation. In traditional realistic interpretation of world politics which seeks “to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible, aiming to capture world politics as-it-really-is” popular culture appears irrelevant because in its best it is just second-order representation of world politics (Bleiker 2001, 510). Further, world politics is seen to be dealing too serious issues connected with war and peace that “only well-proven social scientific inquiries can give us the certitude we need to navigate through the metaphorical – and real – minefields of world politics” (Bleiker 2009, 1). Roland Bleiker (2001, 509-10) writes about the *aesthetic turn* in IR that has in contrary to traditional mimetic form of representation assumed “that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than ignoring or seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approached do, aesthetic insight recognizes that the inevitable difference between the presented and its representations in the very location of politics”. It based on simple assumption that political reality, or international order, does not exist in a priori way but it comes into being only through the process of representation and “there is no way of representing the world in a neutral terms” (Bleiker 2009, 4). Through the representation people are aiming to know about world and when it is knowability at the stake all forms of representations are relevant and equal. Thus, there

is no ontological gap between efforts of social scientist and comic artists to represent particular aspect of international relations (Kangas 2009). Their relevance or knowability depends on its susceptibility to representations (Bleiker 2001). But there is obvious difference in forms of representation but also in criteria of convincing reader. In this paper it is examined how comics constituted its own unique form of representation and how it can be intertwined in certain case with social sciences. This may require readiness to step beyond strict rules and boundaries of IR scholarship and seek for a truly alternative way of representing international relations.

Instead of division between production, content and reception I would borrow from the theories of art a division between artists and spectator, or between performer and audience. Performance, painting, movie or comics received its mode just in active relationship between these two: artists have “denoted message” concerning his performance (that does exclude existing other aims concerning production like making profit) and its aesthetic quality is a result of “artistic and inevitably subjective decisions”. On the other side, the audience is interpreting its contents. Thus, beside “denoted message” there is also “connoted message” which includes how particular artifact or performance is “read and interpreted, how it fits into existing practices of knowledge and communication”. Following Bleiker (2009), “the very same principles engulf our attempts to analyze and understand the realities of world politics”. Therefore representations are always preceded choices, brushstrokes, angles and framing.

If looking at (popular) cultural products that have relevance for study of IR the most obvious turn is to pick up those artifacts and performances of which “denoted message” include political commitment. While talking about the politics of art Bleiker (2009, 8) however reminds that the art that is openly avowing its political commitment is not aesthetically interesting and it is conceptually shallow. Instead, “the aesthetic politics, by contrast, has to do with the ability of artistic engagement to challenge, in a more fundamental way, how we think about and represent the political” (2009, 8) Following Jacques Rancière (2009) the politics of art begins “when it interferes with, even disrupts, this commonsensical delineation of what can be seen, said and thought”.

Bleiker and Rancière are arguing for the significance of art for politics but they are not interested in popular (or mass) culture as such. Its main function has been seen to be just offering entertainment to masses without “serious” denoted message. It is just for fun. However, as Jutta Weldes (2003) pinpoints popular culture also could “help us transcend our mundane environment” and it “provides alternatives that challenge the status quo: we can examine it for modes of thinking that resist dominant constructions of world politics, that provide alternative visions of world politics, and that offer possibilities for transformation”. This kind of definition approaches Rancière’s (2009, 103) idea of ‘a new landscape of the possible’ according “help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought”. But that holds well with popular cultural artifacts too to which the images of art but also according to opinion of popular culture too and therefore, it is hard to see any fundamental difference between classic art and popular cultural forms of art.

Comics constitute their particular form of narration combining image and text. Everyone has read comics and quite many reads them regularly but for many only familiar comics are those in newspaper. Nonetheless, there are diversity of genres and styles among comics. There are also stubborn beliefs of comics. Comics are regarded by many as something simple and childish; something that could not have less to do with seriously taken and mature international relation studies. Answer would not certainly change if pick up science-fiction stories or would I say space opera as our target of observation. Beside all doubts I am arguing in this paper that comics should be taken seriously by IR scholars because in its best it can offer an alternative way of describing rather abstract realm of international relations. This argument does not obviously hold with every possible comic book but only with particular like that of Valerian and Laureline.

In more general terms it is good to keep in mind that even if scholars disagree on the definition of comics they could be describe as the pictorial representation of a narrative that is not just illustration of written story but in which the combination of both word and image are crucial for story telling. Will Eisner described in his 1985 *Comics and*

Sequential Art the technique and structure of comics as *sequential art*, "...the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea." Further, "comics communicate in a 'language' that relies on a visual experience common to both creator and audience. Modern readers can be expected to have as easy understanding of image-word mix and the traditional deciphering of text. Comics can be called 'reading' in a wider sense than that term is commonly applied." Reader need to have both visual and verbal interpretive skills.

At this point it is important to make distinction between American and French comics. Distinction is not sharp and exclusive but in French tradition comics has been taken since 1970s more seriously and regarded beside literature and movies as seriously taken form of an art when in America or in Anglo-American world it is regarded often just belonging to popular culture. Nevertheless, the comics as the form of an art are American invention and variety of styles in America is diverse. Still, comics are published in Anglo-American world mainly as newspaper strips or magazines when graphic novels or comic albums often published in hard covers have been popular in French-speaking world. Interestingly the notion of graphic novel has been introduced first to categorize works of American comics writer Will Eisner but this perhaps more pinpoint that in American context a specific term was needed to describe "a narrative work in which the story is conveyed to the reader using sequential art in either an experimental design or in a traditional comics format". To French audience this kind of long narratives have been practice for a long time. There are two important implications of this distinction. First, in French speaking world potential audience is larger and combines peoples of all ages, sex and social positions. Second, comics are expected to touch important political and social question at the same time when they are humorous and adventurous.

Valerian and Laureline are however linked to other recently studied cases of being categorized as science-fiction story. Sci-fi can be counted as one of most popular genres of popular culture. Sci-fi is however difficult to define and its seemingly contested nature escapes all definite and exhaustive definitions. Thus some authors like Damon Knight argues that "science fiction is what we point to when we say it" and various products not

necessary categorized as science fiction can be treated as termed science fiction. According to science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein, "a handy short definition of almost all science fiction might read: realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method."² Emphasis of scientific method, however, drew a sharp line between sci-fi and fantasy that is not in practice simple to make. Nonetheless, as Weldes (2003) reminds, from point of a view of world politics it is relevant as sci-fi stories are rather often dealing war and peace, diplomacy and intercultural communication even if attaching spaceships, robots, aliens, time-machine and other creatures and innovations in storyline.

Sci-Fi can be divided to several sub-categories. For example *Valerian and Laureline* obviously can be treated space opera by its imaginative visual representation of galactic world with its burlesque and carnevalistic visualization. In many albums time travel that is treated as separate category holds a key role and in similar manner introducing alternative histories for the Earth is core element of storyline.

Still if *Valerian and Laureline* are necessary to classify to one box it is *social science fiction*³ that described a subgenre of science fiction concerning "less with technology and space opera and more with sociological speculation about human society. In other words, it "absorbs and discusses anthropology", and speculates about human behavior and interactions. The description "soft" science fiction may describe works based on social sciences such as psychology, economics, political science, sociology, and anthropology." Ursula K. Le Guin and Philip K. Dick are usually mentioned as prime examples of social science fiction.

Stories of *Valerian and Laureline* can obviously read and experienced primary as classical adventures even if main character is kind of anti-hero but political analysis, critical statement and emancipating tendencies are written into story and images. Several readers are recognizing the comics debating about several societal and political topics in

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_science_fiction

galactic contexts. Particular themes that are recognized by readers are for example how natural simplicity is superior to technological complexity; rejection of machismo, violence and war in favor of femininity and nature; distrust of power and the suppression of individuality and women can manipulate males sexually without being manipulated themselves.⁴ Several other themes are easy pick up.

Looking background of artists confirms existence of intended aims to contribute to critical debate on society and politics. In particular writer Pierre Christin has academic background and after graduating from the Sorbonne, Christin pursued graduate studies in political science and became a professor of French literature at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City. Nonetheless, that does not mean that he would necessary combine elements of social sciences to his writings and as he has co-worked with several artists this is not always a case but his background let us to understand why it is so easy to recognize several themes related to critical school, post-colonial studies, feminism and other similar themes are so obvious in Valerian but still represented simultaneously in simplistic and complex terms hidden into adventure. In comparison to Harry Potter or Start Trek I would argue that there is obvious difference in intention (denoted message) and also in experience of readers (connoted message). Valerian and Laureline are intended to be read and they are widely read as galactic adventure challenging and critically scrutinizing various political issues familiar to our own time. Interestingly TV-series recently produced on the basis of comics lacks this intention and they are only checked by Mezieres and Christin but cannot be treated as their personal aesthetic contribution.

I am arguing that the ability to present a new landscape of the possible is what art or popular culture can do in its best and if it deals international relations this kind of products could offer interesting alternative narration of IR. In comparison to scholarly literature popular cultural form of representations like comics have different tools to present (combined usage of image and text) their case but they also followed different logic of narration and thus they are convincing their readers not appealing only to their

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Val%C3%A9rian_and_Laureline

rationality but also to motions. In the end, I would give attentions to comic as plot. Even if the notion comics are derived from the term comic the plot used in comics is not necessary comic. In case of Valerian and Laureline this however case and this opens up clear difference between rationalistic form of text like traditional scholarly studies and usage of comic. As Louiza Odysseos (2001) argues “the predominant adherence to rational narratives in IR and political science discredits the comic as an equally pre-eminent perspective for political life.” Thus comic narratives are not seen valid to describe social life in comparison to rational based complex narrations. Still it is obvious that sticking in rational narratives merely exclude possible explanations and opposite. Following Odysseos comic – expressed as humorous or as an absurd – can in its best “enable the search for a place from which to seek the limits of rational narrative, especially regarding fundamental concepts of politics”. “The mockery of reason, the success of the irrational, the achievement of the seemingly impossible” as she continues “suggest that the comic is a perspective which is valid for human understanding, for the practice of critique and reconstitution of the possibilities of the everyday”. Comic also pinpoint the role of “the little man” and how everyone can have ability to act and influence.

Riikka Kuusisto (2009) crystallizes the significance and potentiality of comic in politics as she compared it to two dominating plot – epic and tragedy – western political narrations:

“ When it comes to avoiding violence, the comic plot seems to be only alternative among the age-old Western ways to understand discordant human encounters. Comedies are less black-and-white, less absolute, less deterministic, less aggressive than epics and tragedies. They examine disagreements, problems and conflicts – after all, without conflict, stagnation might result – but they allow for mistakes, surprises and learning. Comedies represent the pragmatic choice, the piecemeal reform and the versatile character. Comedies check the epic and tragic tendency to oversimplify. Where epics and tragedies lead to extremes, comedies calm down, relativize and swing round. Where the personae in epics and tragedies are stable and predictable, comedies are lenient with inconsistencies and momentary lapses. Where epic and tragic problems and solutions are ‘larger than life’, paths through comic conflicts are ‘life-size’, mundane and winding.”

The West in IR

I have been recently studying the notion of the West (Lehti 2010, Browning & Lehti 2010) and at least according my reading themes like Western democracy or contacts and clashes between the West and rest are the core questions in several Valérian and Laureline stories. Thus what I am going to do is to examine how is the West described into galactic context? How is the West presented in visual terms? But then it is not just a question about the West but its relationship with others and in that way critic towards western hegemony, colonialism or modernity. Thus the core focus is how clashes and contacts of the West with others is described and does Valérian and Laureline manage to introduce surprising elements into debate.

Before closer analysis a brief overview to this one of core organizing notions of the current international order is required. Focus on civilisational concepts like the West as a unit of analysis in the discipline of International Relations (IR) is a relatively new and perhaps surprising phenomenon. In the 1990s, however, Samuel Huntington (1993; 1996) sought to rectify this absence on the IR academic agenda with his theory of the ‘clash of civilizations’. Huntington’s intervention was provocative and drew considerable criticism. Other scholars have therefore sought to rethink this view of civilisations as portraying a fixed essence. Instead of seeing civilisations as bounded, coherent and consensual, like nations they should rather be seen as contested and in a state of flux. According Hall and Jackson (2007: 6–8) ‘civilizations are better understood as ongoing *processes*, and in particular, as ongoing processes through which boundaries are continually produced and reproduced’.

Edward Said (1978) argued that civilizations are fuzzy and socially constructed entities. From Said’s perspective, therefore, civilizational labels are reflective of an imperial legacy by which a dominant (Western) culture has ‘eliminated the impurities and hybrids that make up all cultures’. In contrast to Huntington’s view of civilisations as largely independent entities, Said emphasized that all cultures are hybrid, mixed, impure and interdependent by nature (Chowdhry 2007: 109).

Obviously, though, this emphasis on the contingency of civilisational identities does not exclude the possibility that civilisational narrations can as such declare their universalism, superiority and pureness. This is especially evident in how the West has been narrated into being during the past century and how its relations with other civilisations have been defined. In this respect, the notion of the West has constituted a core legitimating narrative for colonialism and a European-inscribed world order. Such narratives survived colonialism and remained central to claims about the superiority of the Western world through to the end of the Cold War. Declarations of universalism – which implicitly proclaim the West’s ownership or guardianship of concepts such as democracy, liberty and market economy – have constituted the fundamental basis for relations between the West and the Rest. However, although this universalist narration of the superior West may be hegemonic it is not the only narrative available. Other counter-narrations challenging the West can also be identified, not least in the form of Westernizing narratives among non-westerners, but also in critical voices within the margins of the so-called West..

Four core claims can express to describe the various and contingent essence of the West (Browning & Lehti 2010). The first is that the West needs to be understood as an essentially contested concept. Even if the West is often presented as an ancient and stable coordinate, its history is actually surprisingly short. But even more important is that the West escapes all definite definitions of who belong to it what are the core criteria of belonging to the West. In short the West is a slippery concept.

The second is that the West is a narrative concept. The West is comprised of narrations that create and emphasise continuity over dissonance (hence the historical selectivity evident in all narrations of the West). Such narrations point to a true essence of society, map out spatial borders of us and them and, above all, have historically assured Westerners of their superiority. Historically the concept of the West has been framed around three sets of narratives, respectively focused around ideas of civilizations, modernity and ideology.⁵ *Civilization West* is a narrative that views the West as a unique

⁵ For a slightly different scheme see Ifversen (2008: 238–42).

civilisational community that has possessed unity and common identity across time. The civilisational discourse implies that the West has been only minimally influenced by its outside. In contrast, *modern West* is a narrative that instead locates the essence of the West as lying in the legacy of the enlightenment, industrialization, capitalism and colonialism. This narrative draws on these elements to assert the West's superiority over other cultures and also links in with renderings of the West that tie the concept to processes of globalization and westernization. Finally, there is the *political West*, which is usually taken to refer to the Cold War transatlantic community and in particular its institutional grounding in the NATO security community.

Thirdly, the West is also a clustered concept. Saying 'West' does not tell us what it means in and of itself. Instead, the concept only makes sense to listeners because when it is spoken it also tends to invoke a series of related concepts. These, for example, may include things like: civilization, Europe, America, modernity, democracy, liberalism, capitalism, free world. But it may also include things like: Christendom, race/white, colonialism, slavery, war, consumerism, coalition of the willing etc.

Finally, the fourth is that the other, the outside, has been fundamental to the constitution of the West, both historically and today. By returning to the three narratives of the West noted above of civilization West, modern West and political West, it can be examined the traditional passive role of the Other in western discourse. and consider how in each case the role of the other (in this case the Orient/East) has been plotted in order to provide the West with content and a role. First, then, narratives of *civilization West* depict the West as culturally and historically organic. Understood as unique the vision of the West on offer is highly exclusive. In other words, there can be no thought of reconciliation with the West's outside, the Orient/East. Although the Orient need not as such be imagined as an enemy, its difference is inscribed in the narrative through a series of binary oppositions (e.g., individualism-collectivism, rational-mystical, Christian-pagan), which in turn, of course, become constitutive of the West's own essence. As such, the Orient exists as a mirror enabling the West to experience its own uniqueness in contrast to radically different cultures beyond. The narrative of *modern West* is based on a similar type of

opposition between the developed and the undeveloped world. On the one hand, this opposition therefore legitimizes Western superiority. However, it also introduces a potentially more dynamic relationship with the outside by opening up the possibility for mutual rapprochement insofar as the other transforms to become like 'us'. The East therefore becomes a potential target of *modernizing* or *westernizing* efforts and thus the ultimate goal is to transform the East into West. In stark contrast to the narrative of civilization West, in this narrative the defining characteristics of the West are not seen as inherent but learned. By adopting certain forms of governance and economics all societies can develop and become Western. Finally, like civilization West, the narrative of *political West* also depicts a largely exclusive relationship to the East. In this instance, though, it is as a direct result of efforts to securitize the East as an enemy, thereby leaving very little room for reconciliation. At the same time, though, it is the radicalized otherness of the East (e.g. communist) that enables the West to assert a sense of its own identity (e.g. capitalist).

However, the non-West's ability to contribute to constructions of the West is not limited to the passive role indicated above. In contrast to traditional genealogies of the West, which overwhelmingly depict the West as an inside-out concept, the non-West can play much more active roles to the extent that the West is produced to a significant degree in its outside. Even Western narrations of a boundary between 'us' and 'them' require the recognition of the Other if the West is to remain a plausible concept. It should be noted that pointing to the constitutive role of the outside in defining the identity of the core has become a widely accepted analytical point in much critical scholarship. For example, poststructuralist scholars like Lene Hansen (2006; 2007) have clearly demonstrated how the construction of identity is always drawn through a dialogue of demarcating the self from its outside. As Hansen (2007) puts it: 'The Other is on the one hand constituted through discourses (of the Self), but it is also one whose agency is established as important'.

In looking for an answer for the role of the Other it is necessary to analyse the legitimising power of the West. The term 'legitimacy' has been used in IR literature in

various ways, but in this context it refers to the whole international order. Indeed, as Shane Mulligan writes (2006: 364–5) ‘legitimacy is virtually indistinguishable from order; yet its use connotes a degree of justice (law, right) in that order’. Thus, legitimacy seemingly implies acceptance and it emerges on a communitarian basis as an agreement or consensus among those it concerns. In this respect, the major function of the West has been its power to legitimise the existing Western global order and the superior position of those claimed to be Western (see Bessis 2003). There are similarities here with what David Rapkin and Dan Braaten (2009: 114, 117, 120) define as hegemonic legitimacy, which for them is a subtype of international legitimacy. For them ‘Hegemony is a contested political process’ that requires that actors (like states) continuously seek legitimation or claim legitimacy for certain ideas, norms and policies upon which order is based. Fundamentally, though, calls for legitimacy also need an audience that accepts this claim to legitimacy. The question therefore concerns which audience Western order requires – only those regarded as Western or also non-Westerners?

As a legitimising narrative, however, the West is fuzzy and vague. There is no authority to speak in the name of the West and the West eludes all fixed definitions of using it. In the Cold War years a broad consensus existed (though not without frictions) regarding how to legitimate the existing order, because the West had a clearly recognisable opponent. This consensus has disappeared along with the Communist East. Today there is no consensus about what now constitutes the opponent and how to relate to it. There is no consensus on who can speak in the name of the West, let alone what kind of order it legitimates – if any. What is on the table is more or less a question of who owns the West and possesses the power to narrate it into being and finally what kind of international order it is going to legitimate.

In conclusion it is worth asking the question of whether it is possible to step beyond the limits of the West, or if instead civilisational narratives of the West have become hegemonic to the extent that alternative social imaginaries appear practicably impossible as political projects of transformation and renewal. In other words, is it possible to narrate Europe or America without reference to the notion of the West? Indeed, is it possible to

deconstruct the whole Western discourse and discard major arguments of history and civilization based on the idea of a civilized West entirely? In this respect two processes can be identified which are seemingly attempting to wage just such a campaign against the hegemony of narratives of the West in framing our conceptions of world order and identity.

From “Terrain Galactic Empire” to the Post-Earth Fragmentation

In the last part of this paper I concentrate to analyze selected albums and how in these international relations are narrated. As argued above I am counting these albums as unique and original contributions that can be compared to single scholarly studies and thus core argument of each need to interpreted. I have picked two albums from 1970s (*Welcome to Alflolol*, 1972, & *Ambassador of the Shadows*, 1975) and from past decade concluding trilogy (*At the Edge of the Great Void*, 2004, *The Orders of the Stones*, 2007, & *The Open Time*, 2010) for closer scrutiny.

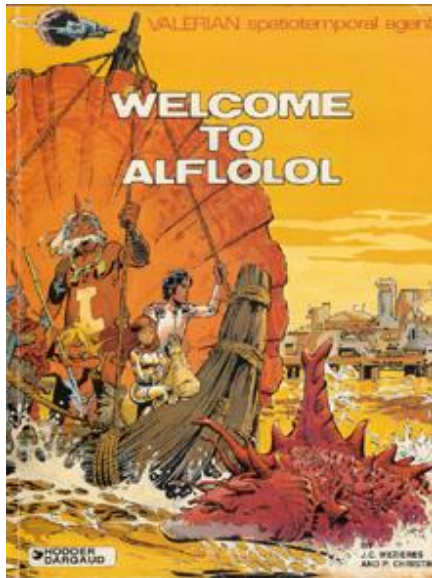
The Valérian and Laureline albums are telling the adventures of the dark-haired Valérian, a spatio-temporal agent, and his redheaded female companion, Laureline, as they travel the universe through space and time. The original setting for the series was the 28th century. Humanity has discovered the means of travelling instantaneously in time and space. The capital of Earth, *Galaxy*, is the centre of the vast *Terrain Galactic Empire*. Earth itself has become a virtual utopia with most of the population living a life of leisure in a virtual reality dream-state while ruled by the benign *Technocrats of the First Circle*. The *Spatio-Temporal Service* protects the planets of the Terrain Empire and guards against temporal paradoxes caused by rogue time-travelers. Valérian and Laureline are two such spatio-temporal agents. However, since the end of the story *The Rage of Hynsis* (*Les Foudres d'Hynsis*) in which *Galaxy* disappears from space-time as a result of a temporal paradox the pair have become freelance trouble-shooters travelling space and time offering their services to anyone willing to hire them while also searching for their lost home.

In the final page of the final album of Valérian and Laureline published in 2010 (Open Time) was introduced chronology that tries to map and locate all individual adventures in time line. However, time line is not straightforwardly linear but have cyclical element and includes duality of times. The grand narrative combines in its own terms all albums together but it has been developed during recent years and it was not an original plan followed from very beginning of series.

If analyzing how the West and its hegemony are presented in albums the division between stories from different periods is obvious. In earlier albums from the 1970s the setting was rather straightforward: Terrain Galactic Empire represents the West (or its future heir) in galactic sphere but in the latest version in which the Earth has disappeared simple dichotomy between the West and the rest has been replaced by post-modern chaos with blurring narrations, combination of surprising elements and in particular pointing the role of marginality - all what been declared by postmodernists and constructivists in their studies but rarely managed to show how it can be really done.

Albums from 1970s hold several typical features to leftist-liberal thinking of its own time. Still it is worthwhile to scrutinize these early interpretations because all in all stories have elements that are still relevant much because story itself is still catching. The challenge of reading these is that if we are looking at in what terms these stories broke self-evidences and introduced a new landscape of possible we need to contextualize that to general conceptualization of the West and its relationship with the rest in 1970s not our cotemporary world. It is noteworthy that the political West dominating Cold War imagination is absent in Valerian and Laureline adventures and problems deals relationship with technologically advanced society with more archaic societies. Thus, it is modernizing West that is dominating stories dealing with various moral and ethical problems appears from well-meaning western aims to control the whole world (or galaxy) in the name of development and progress. The first album "Welcome to Alflolol" is examining ethical problem how fulfill simultaneously the rights of aboriginal inhabitants and needs to cultivate soil and use of raw materials for supporting western industrial

society. The second album deals about problem of global governance that would be based on solely on western norms and values.



Closer look to each album requires introducing of brief synopsis of storyline. “Welcome to Alflolol” starts when:

“Valérian and Laureline are departing the Earth colony Technorog following a tour of inspection. Checking their tracking instruments, they find an alien spacecraft falling towards Technorog. It strikes the protective shield and bounces into the asteroid belt that rings the planet. Following, Valérian finds Laureline surrounded by a group of strange aliens. The lead alien introduces himself, using telepathy, as Argol, He-Who-Has-The-Gift-Of-Speaking-In-Minds. Argol introduces the rest of his family: family's maternal ancestor, Garol, She-Who-Has-The-Gift-Of-Taking-Over-Minds, Argol's wife, Orgal, She-Who-Has-The-Gift-Of-Making-Things-Move-Through-Space, his son Lagor and daughter Logar, who haven't yet discovered their gifts, and the Goumon, their pet. He explains that they come from the planet below them which is called Alflolol and that they have been away exploring other worlds. Valérian tells him that the planet below him is called Technorog and belongs to Earth. Argol laughs and says his people have just been away on a little trip. Valérian estimates their “little trip” has lasted 4,000 years. Argol explains that his people live for hundreds of thousands of years.

As the astroship flies over the surface of their planet, the Alflololians are dumbfounded by the activities of human settlers – the salt extraction plants on the ocean, the mines, the factories and the hydroponic plantations. They are even more dismayed when they discover that the humans have built their capital, Technorogville, on top of where they had their campsite. Landing, the guards that greet them demand that the Alflololians are put through sanitary control. Valérian goes to the Governor's office. He explains to the Governor that Technorog's original inhabitants have returned and that, under Galaxy's

laws, they have the right to return to the land that is theirs. The Governor wants to refer the matter to Technorog's council before making a decision.

The situation has gotten worse – a hundred Alflololian families have now arrived and are demanding to be allowed to return to their home. Now, they present a threat to industrial production. The Governor plans to put them on a reservation. With the Alflololians on the brink of starvation, Valérien convinces the council to give them food-aid. But there is a price – the Alflololians must work for their food. The Governor has a new plan: the Alflololians will be split up – some to the mines, some to the factories, some to the power plants. Valérien refuses to comply with his new orders. The Governor threatens to inform Galaxy about Laureline's rebellious behaviour – if Valérien doesn't co-operate, Laureline will be dismissed from the Spatio-Temporal Service and will finish her days in the mines. Reluctantly, Valérien complies.

Several days later, Valérien begins a tour of inspection to see how the Alflololians are getting on. Arriving at a factory, he discovers that the spaceships they have been making have all been transformed into colourful sculptures. The situation is similar in the other factories – the atomic weapons factory can only make pocket-knives while at the biology centre, everyone has hay-fever. Moving on to the mines, he discovers that the drilling rigs are paralysed. Flying over the power plants he finds a huge fire raging. Reaching Technorogville, he finds it plunged in darkness due to a system-wide power cut. Entering the Governor's office, the council are in a state of despair – production has ground to a complete halt. Finally they agree that the Alflololians should be allowed to roam free on their own world. Heading to the reservation to pass on the good news, Valérien is surprised to discover the Alflololians leaving in their spaceships.”

It is argued that Mézières and Christin were among the first to approach what we now call ecological politics in *Welcome to Alflolol* album in which they putting questions like to what extent can one put a planet in danger in the name of industrial profitability and does obsessive production destroy civilization. Still, main concern in story is to describe inability of the West to meet other cultures in equal bases and thus omnipresent dominance of the notion of feeling being superior.

The West in the story is a technological empire behaving to owning a superior right to exploit all resources of empty land or abandoned planet. Ethical problem emerge when original inhabitants returned but beside legal commitments the returning of aboriginals was solved first by interning them and then forcing them to work for production because no-one should receive food without input to system. The result is chaos when nomadic ideals of aboriginals are clashing with western values – efficiency and rationality against beauty and enjoy. The visual representation manages successfully to challenge traditional

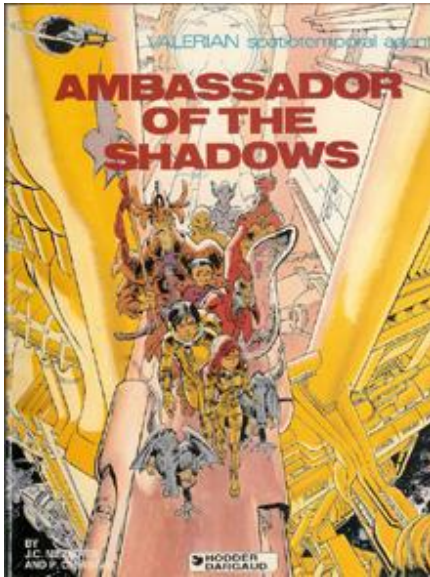
hierarchy between technologically advanced westerners and archaic primitive people. Both have their own spaceships but in contrast to western ships Alfololians's ships look like elementary part of nature (**picture 1**). They seemingly lack altogether modern technology but they still manage to travel great distances. By denuding superiority of western technology the legitimacy of superiority of the West is challenged.

Individual images contrast and juxtapose Alfololians and western technocrats. The first are presented as giant children entering into centre of technological control of the planet. Not understanding the real mean of technology but managing to stop everything just by mental force. But the core point is to juxtapose joy full, hilarious and exuberant attitude with rationality and discipline of western culture (**picture 2**). The West is not just attached/clustered to modernity and rationality but also to certain motions and temper. The West and modern is seen to be equivalent and what is challenged is not ownership to modernity but superiority of modernity. Following Zygmunt Baumann (1991) modern is a time that fears of the unfamiliar, a time that chases certainty and security, and as a time that organizes life into known and controllable categories. The story is pinpointing that this kind of modernity does not offer opportunity to intercultural dialogue and coexistence without hegemonic demand of modernization and that everything cannot be controlled.

The story is also successfully combining two different sides of presenting intercultural communication – so-called essentialist (solid) vs. nonessentialist (liquid) approaches. Solid/essentialist understanding reduces and solidifies “culture” to national and geographical boundaries, ethnicity, sex and professions that categorize people and ignore the complexity of them. It simplifies complexity of human culture but it makes culture easy to deal. Fluid/nonessentialist: see people as diverse individuals instead of concluding patterns due their origin. It focuses on the complexity of culture, that is, cultures are not fixed facts within certain boundaries but are instead unstable hybrids that are continuously being constructed by individuals. Thus all communication as cultural acts is flexible and changeable as “liquid”. Provide a method to see how people see each other as diverse diversity (Dervin 2009).

By using Valerian and Laureline as arbitrators it is pinpointed what are possible emotional solutions: Laureline's engagement to Alfololian society and Valerian's effort to mediate between the West (the colony of galaxy) and the rest (Alfololians) and ending to endless moral hangover. The point is however, that intercultural communication is not just between cultures but also with individuals and without combining both it cannot be truly mutual. Without abandoning its belief on superiority and willingness to communicate in personal level the West is incapable to live together with other cultures. The message is told by an iconoclastic good humour and by introducing species of cosmic tramps that brings chaos into the land of the technocrats. For making argument about the West it is however important that after challenging the western conceit the situation becomes insoluble.

By breaking normal rules of presenting the West and the rest in modernist narrative Welcome to Alfolol manages to unveil western arrogance and point shallowness of its superiority. The Rest does not necessary want to be modernized because their culture can solve same problems in other terms. Thus the story challenges legitimacy of western superiority without aggressive Occidentalism counter-narration (Buruma & Margalit 2004). In the story Alfololians just leave in peace their home planet without struggling against.



Another highly interesting album from same period is Ambassador of Shadows that concentrates more on question like global governance. Storyline is following:

Valérian and Laureline are travelling to Point Central with Earth's new Ambassador. Point Central is a vast space station that lies at a crossroads in space. The many alien races that have come here have each added a segment to the station built to simulate their home environment. Each segment meets at a single point – the huge *Hall of Screens* where the representatives of each race meet to discuss their differences. In most cases, each alien race never leaves its own segment and communicates with the others only via the screens. The passageways that connect the segments are populated by the Zools, mute beings whose planet exploded long ago and who have been taking care of maintenance on Point Central for thousands of years. Shortly before they arrive, the Ambassador calls them into his quarters for a meeting. He informs them that he intends to take advantage of the fact that it's Earth's turn to preside over the council at Point Central – he intends to bring order to the galaxy by proposing a federation with Earth as the keystone and police. There are ten thousand Earth warships waiting to surround Point Central at his order to enforce the proposed federation.

The astroship lands at Point Central and the three Terrans spacewalk to the Earth's segment. Entering, they are greeted by the assembled dignitaries that occupy the segment. The Ambassador begins his opening speech but, suddenly, the partition wall melts and a group of armed aliens burst in, opening fire with cocoon guns from Xoxos. The cocoons envelop everyone present rendering them unconscious except for Valérian and Laureline who react in time to put their spacesuit helmets back on. Laureline is trapped by one of the cocoons so Valérian is forced to pursue the aliens, who have taken the Ambassador, alone. Following them to their ship, he is captured and the ship blasts off into space. Freeing herself from her cocoon, Laureline is dismayed to discover Valérian has gone. Laureline leaves the Earth segment and heads for the different segments inhabited by various races.

The Ambassador and Valerian are finally taken to mysterious place where they are greeted by what appear to be primitive humanoids. They explain that they built the first segment of Point Central but have since evolved and have lost interest in taking part in galactic politics. They have even forgotten their own name and the name of their planet and know themselves only as Shadows. They tell the Ambassador that they will not allow any one race to exert full control over Point Central and that they have the power to annihilate Earth's fleet if needed. The children of the island take Valérian and the Ambassador to the House of Wisdom. The Ambassador is a changed man from his experience with the Shadows and now proposes to deliver a message of peace to the council.

Heading back, there are now more and more Zools gathering in the passageways. Reaching the Hall of Screens, the Ambassador enters to make his speech. The Zools, fed up with corruption on Point Central, have decided to clean up matters, restore the moral code of the council and expel the profiteers. The Ambassador emerges from the council looking upset. They would not allow him to make his speech and the council has suspended Earth's membership for 100 years: their segment is to be blown up. Laureline takes charge and orders the war-fleet to assist in Earth's withdrawal.”

The linkage between galactic Central Point and the United Nations is obvious but the story steps beyond the organization itself. The key dynamism of the story is strive for western hegemony. The Ambassador of Galaxy presents the mission of the Earth as bringing order there where chaos, incoherence and disorder prevail. This would enable businesses and organizing expeditions. Instead of talking about the Earth (or the West) as galactic (global) police the Ambassador would prefer term cultural mission and as he said many are races than unconsciously are hoping that. Thus global governance is meaning in practice overrule of western values and it is just other name for colonialism. The true nature of the Earth is shown visually by introducing the secret allies of the Earth that are brutal and warlike races. **(Picture 3)**

The story is about the resistance of hegemonic strivings of the Earth (the West) from the margins. The Galaxy (the West) is again contrasted with other creators by introducing it as technology dominated while other cultures looks rather archaic and stereotypical. Meetings and contacts between different races are ceremonial and real communication is missing or it is going be found only in low-level bar gathering various races together. All races are just staying in their close segments only meeting in the hall of screens **(picture 4)**. The resistance appeared from two sides. First from side of the first race in the Central

Point that has already receded to shadows and enlightened themselves into wisdom of simplicity. Again natural and simplistic lifestyle is contrasted with technology. The ambassador is enlightened and he is reincarnated but his speech in the hall of screens was surprisingly interrupted by the Zools, the mute race administrating everyday function of Central Point. Surprise of the resistance from marginal is the core message of the story. It seems to argue that the West would not change even if it is enlightened and having more noble aims but in practice all its aims for global governance are expressions of discourse on superiority. In the end of the story the Earth (the West) is excluded from global community – the possibility that is not usually seen possible alternative.

The story in my reading is not shooting down a trust to United Nations and global governance as such but it merely put legitimacy of western created world order under a question. Also ability of the West really renew its motivation is highly doubted. However, there is no radical alternative offered and a need for global governance is recognized. Instead of value based order it is introduced kind of “neutral” catering/holding. Is that possible remains open question?

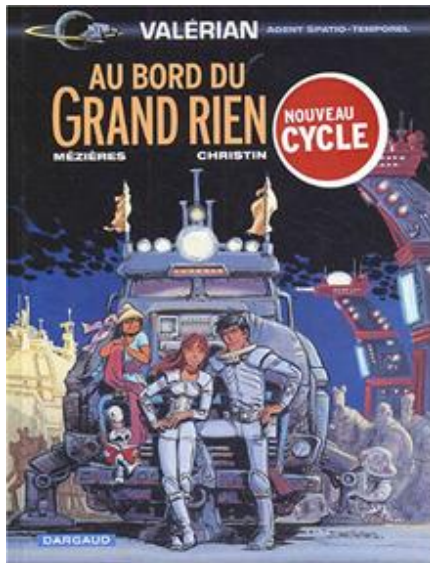
The one surprising theme in two albums from 1970s is absence of the Cold War bipolarity and the dominance of political West. In its own time it requires a lot to deal a question of western hegemony without referring to struggle between USA and Soviet Union. Mezieres and Christin managed to do that. They exclude political strivings and are concentrating the issues of intercultural communication and global governance. This is fruitful solution because of that stories have managed to preserve vitality of their argument and by bringing apart their representation of the West from day to day politics they are analysing not just particular case but generating more general argument.

Being intellectually close to postcolonial studies Mezieres and Christin cannot altogether avoid the pitfalls of Orientalism, that have also been evident in the critical scholarship on Western constructions of its outside, in particular in the fields of orientalism and post-colonial studies. Thus, whilst authors such as Edward Said (1978) have been keen to deconstruct Western homogenising constructions of the ‘East/Orient’ and to highlight the

legitimizing consequences of such constructions as justifications for Western imperialism and colonialism, in turn such analyses have tended to reify this Western subject. As Heller (2006: 21) notes, 'While accusing the West of essentializing the East, he [Said] equally essentializes the West'. More importantly, however, not only is the West essentialised but it is also presented as possessing the hegemonic power to define the Other. Thus, whilst the West is constructed as an unproblematic unified acting subject, the outside (the Orient) is presented as largely passive and reactive, as unable to in turn act back and assert constitutive power of its own. In earlier stories the West is still remaining unproblematic entity even if the Other is presented more in active terms. In later albums however the West is more ambiguous entity and Mezieres and Christin even managed to step beyond the West.

The albums published during the past two decades and in particular the most recently published are contributing to the debate about the West in the age of globalisation and how neoliberal market economy has become the prime epithet to define "western". Even if 9/11 terror attack, the occidentalist challenge of Islamist extremists and trans-Atlantic rift have been dominating discourse on the West these themes remain absent as was the Cold War bipolarity in the 1970s. Instead the series continues to explore on the one hand problems of intercultural communication and on the other hand critically observe decadence of the West and even if the disappearance or fragmentation of the West. The West is not anymore solely presented as technological power but instead for example by using eclectic architecture in surprising (galactic) context. In that terms civilization narrative is underlined but simultaneously certain arrogance towards other. Technologic progress has been replaced by neoliberal market economy expressed as desperate world without hope and moral. This kind of unveiling political features of the West is something that is not usually managed to do in public discussion dealing the current West. The notions of the West is so firmly anchored to the role of US or juxtaposition of Europe and America or challenge of Islamist that abstraction of the West is just possible in imagined landscape.

In comparison to early volumes the fragmentation of the West is striking element of the later stories in which the Earth has disappeared from timeline. The West does not anymore exist as uniform power but instead the West exists everywhere as fragments. It can be represented certain forms of educational system, of industrial production, of hypo-capitalism, of entertainment industry etc. (picture 5) The West has changed to be fragmented and fluid concept that can be attached with certain issues but that lacks ownership. The impression of dissolution of the West is emphasized by locating these fragments to island of asteroids and replacing humans by aliens. The West is expanding everywhere and thus lost of being particular. This has been for example argument of Garton Ash (2005) by pointing what would be logical end of expansion of free world. Anyone could choose and cherry certain elements of the West but as an uniform cultural and political entity it has disappeared as is the Earth in series. In practice, the Valerian's and Laureline's seek for the lost Earth can be seen as an effort to find the old and lost West.



Complexity and ambiguous story of the final trilogy *At the Edge of the Great Void* (2004), *The Order of the Stones* (2007), *The Open-Time* (2010) is difficult to express in simplistic synopsis.

“Among the asteroids at the edge of the mysterious Great Void, where the universe is still in formation, Valérian and Laureline along with a Schniarfeur living weapon are working as travelling salesmen, hawking their wares from a battered old space truck, frequently harassed by the local police force who take their orders from the Triumvirate of Rubanis.

At one of their stops they befriend a young girl, Ky-Gaï, who has lost her job after the spacesuit factory in which she worked closed down. Laureline takes Ky-Gaï on as an assistant. When some of their merchandise is stolen by the Limboz, creatures from the Great Void who have lost their planet, Valérian and Laureline give chase. Catching the Limboz, Valérian agrees to let them go only if they'll give them information about the location of the Earth which Valérian and Laureline believe is located somewhere in the Great Void. Valérian and Laureline are looking for the Time Opener. They met and join for awhile for a crew of Singh'a Rough'a, a space captain who is mounting a voyage of exploration into the Great Void.

From the Great Void appears the giant sentient stones, the Wolochs, that have not personality and no moral. They destroy everything but also seeking allies in their effort to build a new order. Valerian and Laureline are gathering all their old friends from different corners of galaxy and different time to resist the Wolochs. In the end Wolochs are destroyed and the Earth is recreated but disappointed to unchanged technocratic Empire Valerian and Laureline are offered time travel and they are reincarnated as children in idyllic Paris house.”



The Wolochs are the most interesting element of stories. They are presented as a threat not just to the West but civilization or humanity (whatever that means in galactic sense) as whole. The Wolochs are drawn as Stonehedges without any features of being living or having personal character. Still they seemingly act purposefully and are systematically destroying old civilizations and bringing their own order. (picture 6) Because Wolochs cannot speak they need interpreter expressing they will. The destruction Wolochs are spreading is attracting different kind people from baddies and mythical warriors to businessmen and corrupted politicians and policemen.

The Wolochs are shown to destroy signs of old civilization and thus introducing the order that is not respecting the past heritage. To resist the Wolochs Valerian and Laureline are gathering together all possible friends representing different aliens and arriving from different corners of galaxy and different periods. Solidarity and dedication to common good are seen major tools in battle against un-human Wolochs without motions and moral. Struggle is easy to see to be representing threat of faceless market forces that is argued to have no motions, no moral and defining everything. Thus the story is underlining subjectivity of individuals and need alternatives.

Looking for the solutions from extreme margins or periphery has been dominating theme since very beginning. In many terms Mézières and Christin have managed to follow in visual terms what Said what is called as contrapuntal reading. In a contrapuntal reading the goal is to point out how even hegemonic narratives are part of a greater whole. This focus on revealing counter-narrations and voices in the margins would make possible to recuperate a 'non-coercive and non-dominating knowledge' (Chowdhry (2007: 105; also see Biswas 2007: 131). As Chowdhry (2007: 106) argues, a 'contrapuntal reading about IR narrates a different international relations into existence'. Contrapuntal reading therefore emphasises 'the idea of counterpoint, intertwining and integration and mutually embedded histories'.



In final trilogy Limboz are representing marginal creatures in all terms and still they hold time opener the key for recreation of the Earth. The series continues also more are more to play with time by deconstructing linear time and instead introducing parallel times and in final trilogy it is sought for “open time”. In the end the Earth is recreated but seemingly there is two options to be chosen: the one of galactic technologic empire and the one of idyllic backyard in current Paris. (**picture 7**) How to interpret that juxtaposition? Escape from futuristic future to current everyday? Recreation of the Earth and also return of Valerian and Laureline into childhood in the end are strong argument for pinpointing that the West (or is it Europe in this time) need reinvent itself and we should seek particularity from backyard and not from technologic or economic progress. Nonetheless, this seemingly means stepping beyond West. The West is fragmented and existed everywhere and thus it has lost its power to define particular.

In the end, I would like tentatively ask if we can treat Valerian and Laureline comics as kind of form of “theorization” of IR. Thus, accepting that they purposefully trying argue about international order and that they can be read in that manner. That is because instead

of presenting certain particular international order or particular case Valerian and Laureline are by generalizing and blotting out certain elements of IR managing to concentrate to chosen question. Or, presenting certain questions in imagined visual context but preserving critical look towards observed phenomena. There are also obvious links to theoretical debate in stories. Thus, instead of seeing comics only as mirror of IR we should treat them as particular and singular contribution to wider debate on society and politics equivalent to scholarly study or political pamphlet.

Then the most interesting question is what new this kind of theory can add in comparison to traditional ir scholarship and how it is related with it. In this case I would emphasize how they manage to surprise and introduce new landscape of possible. In my reading, Valerian and Laureline adventures success in that but it is always question of interpretation of spectator. Exaggeration of threat, showing recreation of the Earth and pointing disappearance of unified West are important points to make and points that are not presented in similar strength elsewhere. Detaching from current states and political debates it is possible to pinpoint larger trends. Visualization at least helps to exaggeration of certain features like s of Wolochs. How in other terms it would be possible to represent “market forces” as actor?

The West has already ceased to remain particular character separating us from them but instead element of usually associated with western have become features that are globally mimically copied. Thus it is important to recreate what has been West (or Europe) and looking not far or high but close and low. Closing the whole story with a cozy image of Parisian courtyard with playing children is catching.

Making argument convincing in comics and in scientific study differs. In both the reader is valuing how the argument is presented but when scientific study need to base of logical argumentation and documented sources comics is valued in other term. Its plausibility is measured by how captivating, rousing and emotionally touching story is. Valerian and Laureline used comic as plot for pinpointing and unveiling our self-evidences and beliefs. It is not trying to offer truth but painting landscapes of possible showing that thinks could be so and notice that also your activity and thoughts are important in shaping

international order. It thus deconstruct not just dichotomy between rationality and emotions but also between public and private sphere.

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