

# “To compose, typeset, print and publish marvelous books”

## An interview with Marc Tomsin<sup>1</sup>

### How did your editorial adventures begin? When did you get the idea to publish books?

My first attempt goes back to the 1970s. At the time I was living in Barcelona, where two former members of the MIL<sup>2</sup> had set up a print shop in the working class neighborhood of Gracia with one of my friends, who'd had training in letterpress printing. Encouraged by these friendships, I first published a small book in 1978. It was a short hard-to-find text by Raoul Vaneigem called *Isidore Ducasse et le comte de Lautréamont dans les Poésies*.<sup>3</sup> Since there were less than a thousand copies printed, I was easily able to distribute it myself, thanks to the name of the author and the theme of the essay. Seven years later, I started again, this time in Paris, where I'd become a proofreader at a print shop. Taking advantage of a period of unemployment, I filed the forms to incorporate a publishing house with a friend, Angèle Soyaux. It was called Ludd, a reference to the hero of the English machine-breakers (the Luddites). That was in 1985, and it lasted until 1998. In total, we published around 30 books, a good number of them by German-speaking authors, such as Karl Kraus, Oskar Panizza, Franz Jung, Frank Wedekind and Christian Dietrich Grabbe. Pierre Gallissaires, who worked with éditions Nautilus in Hamburg, did a lot of the translating. All of those books, like the first one, had the particularities of being made in letterpress, composed in linotype and printed in lead, most of them in a Parisian suburb, at the SAIG, which still exists at L'Haÿ-les-Roses. For the two of us, this was craftsmanship: small print runs (a thousand copies on average), few titles (exactly 28 in 12 years), and we did this in addition to our normal salaried work. It was a parallel activity.

In 1993, I dropped out of this project and, five years later, Angèle had to stop: there were successive bankruptcies among the distributors, all kinds of difficulties, the task was becoming too onerous. And so éditions Ludd shut down. I stopped publishing books for about 10 years. In 2007, I found myself at the age for early retirement, and I started up a new nonprofit project under the name Rue des Cascades, this time working by myself when it came to the editorial choices but Angèle created all the book covers. I chose a small-book format and the works are now printed by offset lithography at Lussaud in Vendée, but they always have stitched-and-glued bindings and inside covers.

Rue des Cascades began in a very different way than did the Ludd adventure (which remained limited to the literary domain) because the first published texts were tied to the

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<sup>1</sup> Guillaume Goutte, “Composer, mettre en page, imprimer et éditer de merveilleux livres,” *Le Monde libertaire*, hors-série #43 22 December 2011-22 February 2012:

<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/guillaume-goutte/blog/080621/m-tomsin-composer-mettre-en-page-imprimer-et-editer-de-merveilleux-livres>. Translated by NOT BORED! 18 June 2021. All footnotes and [comments within brackets] by the translator.

<sup>2</sup> The *Movimiento Ibérico de Liberación* (Iberian Liberation Movement), an anarchist anticapitalist group active between 1971 and 1973, based in Barcelona, Spain, and Toulouse, France.

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in *Synthèses*, #151, Brussels, December 1958. Translated into English: <http://www.notbored.org/ducasse.pdf>.

struggles and histories of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. At that time, I was involved in an international solidarity network that formed back in 1994 and was centered around the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas.<sup>4</sup> And so the first books we published dealt with that particular subject: an analysis of the rebellion (*L'Autonomie, axe de la résistance zapatiste*) written by a Mexican friend, Raúl Ornelas Bernal, and a book by Sub-commandant Marcos (*Mexique, calendrier de la résistance*), which is a kind of inventory and description of the social movements that traversed Mexico between 2001 and 2003. That was the beginning of a series I called *Les livres de la jungle*,<sup>5</sup> which refers to Chiapas and the jungle – *selva* in Spanish – Lacandon. There was also *La Commune d'Oaxaca*, a book that focused on the uprising of the people of the Oaxaca region in 2006. It was the testimony of an author and friend, Georges Lapierre, who'd been a close observer of the development of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca. His book was both a chronicle and an analysis of what took place in 2006 and the perspectives opened up in 2007 by the creation of the *Voix d'Oaxaca construisant l'autonomie et la liberté* (Vocal), a network animated by young libertarians.

**How did work on Marcos' book go? Why did you choose that particular text? Did Marcos know about it?**

Marcos had received a letter that I'd written him and that was delivered to him personally to tell him that his text was going to appear in French. Obviously there was no response from him, but we knew that he is a partisan of piracy and that he didn't seek to obtain copyrights for his works. This letter made it clear that the profits from the sales of the book would be sent to the autonomous Zapatista villages. Concerning the choice of texts, I think that, in *Calendrier de la résistance*, Marcos – who at the time was writing many communiqués with ease – was attempting to create an authentic book. I also chose that text in particular for its third part, which explains the constitution of the *caracoles* (“snails” in Spanish, which evoke the symbolism of the spiral) and the Councils of Good Government, that is to say, the coordination and articulation of autonomous villages amongst themselves, forming five regions in the Zapatista zone of influence in Chiapas. That took place in August 2003; it was the response of the indigenous Zapatista peoples and villages to the accords of February 1996 concerning indigenous autonomy and culture. After months of dialogue between indigenous movements from all over of Mexico and civil society, these accords were signed by delegates from the EZLN and representatives from the Mexican federal government, but the latter has never implemented them, unlike the EZLN, which put them into practice through the creation of the *caracoles* and Councils of Good Government. I think that the explanations provided in this book are truly the clearest and that they allow the reader to understand the means and goals of the Zapatista movement – much better, in any case, than the spectacular aspects presented by the media and often favored by Marcos himself. This practice of autonomy through direct democracy inspires all the indigenous movements, which is highlighted in Joani Hocquenghem's book<sup>6</sup> about the meeting of indigenous delegations from all over America that took place in Vicam, located in Northern Mexico, in October 2007.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Comité de solidarité avec les peuples du Chiapas en lutte* (CSPCL).

<sup>5</sup> “Books from the Jungle” or perhaps “Jungle Books.”

<sup>6</sup> *Le Rendez-Vous de Vicam* (Les livres de la jungle/Rue des Cascades, 2008).

### **You have also published books on other subjects.**

Yes, of course, because I have not lost sight of texts directly concerning anarchism. At the end of 2007, I reprinted a passionate book about Jules Bonnot, *En Exil chez les hommes*, by the British writer Malcolm Menzies. Based on years of research, it very intelligently describes and retraces the individualist anarchist milieu at the beginning of the 20th century, before the First World War. After that, the libertarian theme returns with the writings of a Spanish comrade, Tomas Ibáñez: *Fragments épars pour un anarchisme sans dogmes*. I have also translated and published (under the title *Têtes d'orage*) the *Essais sur l'ingouvernable* by a must-read Argentinean anarchist, Christian Ferrer. Alongside these two editorial axis, there are books that I particularly hold dear, like *Les Jeux de l'amour et du langage*, by Jérôme Peignot, the *Écrits* of the Surrealist Adrien Dax and, more recently, *La Geste des irréguliers*, by Métie Navajo, which relates the march of a hundred undocumented immigrants through France in May 2010. Without forgetting a short text by Raoul Vaneigem, *L'État n'est plus rien, soyons tout*, written in September 2010 for the international meeting at Thessalonica, in Greece.

### **Where does the name of your publishing house come from?**

I live on the rue des Cascades, in Ménilmontant, which is also where I lived as a child. On this street, nearby each other, there's both Lucio Urtubia's Espace Louise-Michel, which evokes the Paris Commune as well as the libertarian revolution in Spain, and the Mexican artist Raoul Velasco's Atelier pour l'estampe et l'art populaire, which every year, at the beginning of November, on the occasion of the Mexican Day of the Dead, displays laughing skeletons – *calaveras* [in Spanish] – on its walls. Belleville and Ménilmontant were the headquarters of the “apaches”<sup>7</sup> a century ago and the rue des Cascades served as the location for the outdoor scenes in the film *Casque d'or*. Zoubir's tiny little bar, in the middle of the street, still welcomes a nocturnal, bohemian and proletarian clientele. More recently, Caroline and Wael took over the Les Cascades bar and it has become a meeting place for the more likeable figures of the neighborhood. Caroline runs writing workshops there and books have their place. I didn't like the idea of naming the publishing house after its editor in chief. I preferred a somewhat enigmatic name, one that inspired efforts to learn the history or histories that hid behind it.

### **From the economic or, rather, the counter-economic point of view, how does it work when it comes to paying the potential authors and translators, creating the books, their printing and distribution?**

It is extremely precarious, but for the moment, for the last five years, I've managed to put out two or three books a year. The authors published by Rue des Cascades, in solidarity and even complicity with this fragile editorial experiment, haven't asserted their copyrights. The translators are paid according to the currently used criteria. *Idem*<sup>8</sup> for the printers. I don't have any office spaces, so the principle costs are the costs of manufacturing and translation, when applicable. There have only been two books – those by Raoul Vaneigem and Georges Lapierre –

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<sup>7</sup> Criminal gangs. Cf. Luc Sante, *The Other Paris* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Latin for “the same.”

that have surpassed one thousand copies distributed and allow us to continue. The sales of the others don't always cover the production costs.

### **Who takes care of the distribution?**

Court-Circuit, which is a small company that started six or seven years ago and distributes the works of approximately 30 publishers, most of them libertarian in inspiration. On occasion, I have also proposed to various bookstores that they host an appearance by an author or a discussion of one of his or her books. The life of books essentially depends on contacts with bookstores, but I won't go to them personally to present novelties and generate orders. I did that for several years when Ludd was in operation, but it has been the existence of Court-Circuit that has allowed me to get back into publishing without having to occupy myself with distribution.

### **And what about promotion? Do you get any feedback from the press, etc.?**

The media response is practically nonexistent, except for occasional notices in the libertarian press, especially in the bibliographical bulletin *À contretemps*, which has listed the majority of the books published by Rue des Cascades. When we started, I sent out several press releases. But faced with the virtual absence of results, I stopped doing that. There are exceptions, like when someone requests one or for newspapers such as *CQFD*.<sup>9</sup> What's important to me is the presence of small independent and libertarian publishers at the many events that concern books, such as the various anarchist book fairs. This allows for the establishment of direct contact with the readers. That's truly important for a small company. For example, at the end of 2011, there will be a temporary bookstore set up for three weeks in Paris, at the Halle Saint-Pierre, where the works of 50 small publishers will be exhibited.

### **Why publish?**

I am a book worker. I worked at a printing house at first. The first thing that prompted me to publish was the desire to establish a link between texts and the production of books. The first two books – the one from 1978 and the first one published by éditions Ludd in 1985 – didn't exist as books or even projected books. In both cases, I wanted to give form to those writings, through typography, composition, and layout, hand-made construction. I have always had in mind the works of Guy Levis Mano, the typographer, poet and translator who, for a half-century, composed, laid out, printed and published marvelous little books in his Parisian workshop. Of course, also playing a role was the desire to explore little-known domains, such as the German one, tying literature to the social movement and the emancipation of mores, of amorous life, which we tried to make better known with éditions Ludd. All this remains little known, even among the libertarians; it truly interests me to explore that domain, which two world wars have almost completely effaced. For that matter, it is this same perspective that prompted me to publish essays about the indigenous peoples of America: books that allow us to understand those movements today, their manner of organizing themselves, their vision of the world and what they seek to achieve are very rare, apart from Marcos' communiqués and university research. I have sought to publish texts from authors who are both witnesses to and actors who are truly involved

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<sup>9</sup> *Ce qu'il faut dire, détruire, développer*, monthly publication devoted to social critique, founded in 2003.

in those movements. You can find a book here and there, but there hasn't been an attempt to create an ensemble of works for an understanding of contemporary indigenous movements. That's what I am trying to do with the "Les livres de la jungle" collection.

### **What is your relationship with books and writing in general?**

Paradoxically, I feel close to oral transmission, I myself write very little, but I love the idea of taking the book out of its "official" locations, especially the university. I grew up surrounded by books, in my father's library. Also, anarchism was born in the print shops, among the typographical workers. Libertarian bookstores and publishing houses have always been the best tools for this movement. Today, libraries are emerging alongside many small editorial companies, some of them nomadic (bookmobiles), reviving "public discussions" [*causeries populaires*] in the manner of the libertarian athenaeums in Spain [in the 1930s]. Books can open wider horizons than those opened by activist or organizational activities. I seek texts that combine form and content, imagination, poetry and social critique.

### **Germany-Mexico, Mexico-Germany, social movements and literature – you must publish B. Traven!<sup>10</sup>**

Yes, Traven provides a junction between Germany and the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. It is true that Traven is a real bridge between these two universes. But I still have not managed to obtain the translation rights.

### **What links do you establish between libertarian political commitments and editorial activity?**

The libertarian milieu allows for a multiplicity and diversity of initiatives. It is resistant to uniformity. I am an anarchist who publishes books but I do not define Rue des Cascades as a libertarian publishing house. On the other hand, I address myself first of all to the readers who recognize themselves in that current of thought and in its history. During the two years I spent in Barcelona, I was encouraged to do this by my old friend Diego Camacho (Abel Paz), for whom the writing, publication and distribution of books is essential to the survival of the movement.

### **What projects are in the works? What's the future for Rue des Cascades?**

To reach and go beyond the five-year mark. The first book that will appear in 2012 will be *Femmes de maïs*, a collection of interviews with Zapatista women, as part of the "Livres de la jungle" series. But I also foresee publishing the first story by Georg Glaser, the German author of *Secret et violence* (Agone, 2005), who was close to the libertarians, a friend of André Prudhommeaux, and a copper craftsman who lived in Paris. His book is an account, written when he was very young, inspired by the vagabond life that he led in his adolescence. It appeared in Germany in 1930 – when Glaser was just 20 years old – and has never been translated into French. Finally, I also envision reprinting a brief and intense philosophical reflection on love by Georges Bataille, which will accompany an essay by Jérôme Peignot. And, in the name of a long friendship, of a conversation conducted in both Barcelona and Paris over the course of three

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<sup>10</sup> Pseudonym of Otto Feige (1882-1969), German libertarian writer.

decades, one that brought me so much, I would like to start the translation of the three volumes of Abel Paz's *Mémoires*, which are still not yet published in French. This will keep Rue des Cascades busy for several years.