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Living Inside and Outside the Trenches in *Le Cœur des Batailles*:
A Textual and Graphic Analysis of *La Marne* and *Verdun* by Jean-
David Morvan, Igor Kordey, and Walter

Abstract

Major French *bédéiste* Jean-David Morvan, illustrator Igor Kordey and colorist Walter, dedicate their collaborative efforts to World War I. By re-contextualizing historical facts and images in personalized and graphic narratives, the two volumes of *Le Cœur des Batailles* are excellent examples of how the *bandes dessinées* ('drawn strips') contribute to the recollection of historical artifacts. The two volumes entitled *La Marne* (2007) and *Verdun* (2008) abound in the reconstruction of WWI artifacts drawn from archival research, giving a more humanized approach to historical abstractions. These two examples visually narrate and represent aspects and events of WWI by using innovative narrative and graphic techniques, especially with the inclusion of trench journals both within the narrative and in a separate insert. Their didactic applications are commensurate with the state-mandated history curriculum of present-day France and other EU countries which promote the use of comics as one of the sources of historical truth.

1. Introduction

May comics be historical, and may history take the form of comics? In France, graphic novels or *bandes dessinées* (also referred to as *bédés* or *BD*), are invaluable because they target various generations of readers and a broad spectrum of themes. Fairly recent scholarship has pointed to the value of the historical *bande dessinée* as one relevant source for the historian (Rosemberg 2004, 1). With the proliferation of the medium, more scholarship has emerged since the 1990s attesting to the significance of this graphic genre vis-à-vis cultural studies and historiography. The *bande dessinée*, that was given the designation “*le*

Neuvième Art” in 1983 by the Classification des Arts¹, has evolved to high levels of complex graphic and narrative interpretation of historical periods. The growth of thematically and formally diverse *bandes dessinées* provides a unique opportunity to explore the foundations of the French nation, what American critic Joel E. Vessels (2010, 14) justly identifies as “the eternal construction of *Frenchness* itself – a moment and method of investigating the nation as it transitioned from civil monarchy to civic republic and finally to a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual nation; from choppily literate, to a Republic of Letters, and now a multi-imaged state.” Vessels accounts for what makes the evolution of the *bande dessinée* medium in France distinct from that of any other country, when he explores the shifting political and cultural place of *BD* imagery amid a combination of social discourse, governmental policy, and popular culture.

The birth of the *bande dessinée* is generically linked to French *illustrés*, as in the case of *Le journal illustré*, which emerged in 1914. With the advent of both world wars, and the proliferation of children’s literature, such a journal full of drawn illustrations and linotyped images became a vehicle for propagandistic messages. The most popular examples of *illustrés* targeting such an audience of readers during WWI were *Les Trois Couleurs*, *La Croix d’Honneur*, *La Jeune France* or *Les Belles Images*, to name the most respectable ones. From 1914, as comic artists took part in the cultural history of their time, comic strip production changed, developing from a medium meant for children to one that appealed to both adolescents and adults. With the changing status of the medium evolving towards a visual art form targeting a wider readership, and its present state-mandated form, the evolution of historical *bandes dessinées* throughout the 20th and 21st centuries displays crucial shifts, which are highly important in the development of the medium.

In France, the government has often sought control over publications. The government oversight committee *Commission de surveillance et de contrôle des publications destinées à l’enfance et à l’adolescence*, rigorously enforced a set of regulations – particularly in the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s – which turned out to be a stifling influence on the post-war development of the French *bande dessinée* until the advent of *Pilote* magazine and the country’s

1 Comics were officially called the ninth art in France when, under President François Mitterrand, the city of Angoulême was named City of Image and the capital of *bande dessinée*.

May 1968 social upheaval. French society's perception of the medium also changed radically in the 1970s–1980s, in stark contrast to the one it held in the 1940s–1950s. When French cultural authorities recognized that the medium advanced France's cultural status worldwide, they began to aid the expansion of the *bande dessinée* as a legitimate art form. This was especially true under the patronage of Minister of Culture Jack Lang, who formulated his long-term *Quinze mesures nouvelles en faveur de la Bande dessinée* ministry policy plan in 1982, which was updated and reaffirmed by a latter-day successor of Lang in 1997. Consequently, in the 1980s–1990s, the medium achieved its formal status in France's "*Classification des Arts* as "*le Neuvième Art*," becoming accepted as a mature part of French culture. In this context, and especially since the 1990s, a central issue is how some French *bédéistes* have engaged with history to validate their art form.²

Looking at the representations of WWI in this example of historical *BD* and the discourses underlying the *bédéistes'* intentions to speak truthfully about the war, we are confronted by one key question: the degree of narrative and graphic reliability in the face of historical truth. My preference for this medium over other image/text formats stems from my reading of these works as a self-reflexive one; one in which the reader is constantly aware of the image as representation rather than truth. Here, I examine questions such as: what makes the historical *BD* a sequential art form relevant to historiography? Also, how do *bédéistes* such as Jean-David Morvan, illustrator Igor Kordey, and colorist Walter fuse history and historical artifacts into their graphic style?

Many *bandes dessinées* use history either as the major focus of the plot or simply as a background to a story.³ *Bande dessinée* scholar Hillary Chute justly contends "the compounding of word and image has led to new possibilities for writing history that combine formal experimentation with an appeal to mass readerships" (2016, 459). Given its evolution from marginal to central in literary and academic circles, the historical *bande dessinée* has become a site of inquiry in which just about anything happens.

When assessing the production of the now familiar medium, we may always consider, on the one hand, the context in which the *bande dessinée* was originally conceptualized, and on the one hand, its targeted audience.

2 I use the word *bédéiste* throughout my essay in reference to French comic writers.

3 See Rosemberg, 2004 ; Denéchère & Révillon, 2008 ; Révillon, 2009 ; Mack 2006.

Theoretical knowledge of the comic medium helps us to better understand how *bédéistes* navigate representation and interpretation of the past. Historians of the image and theorists of “le Neuvième Art” provide useful concepts to explore writing, or history via the comic strip. The theme of WWI in the *bande dessinée* becomes the focus of many serious analyses on the genre and its didactical applications.

Fabienne Castagna and Anne Silvert assert that historical *BDs* are significant for the teaching of this period because “le Neuvième Art est particulièrement adapté à l’examen de l’évolution des mentalités” (1990-91, 57). Thus, I will look at how Morvan, Kordey and Walter envision WWI, and how they construct it in the two volumes *La Marne* (2007) and *Verdun* (2008), which make up *Le Cœur des Batailles*. I argue their work shares an ambition to narrate innovatively historical facts and images related to WWI. Using generic and formal analysis of both graphic novels, I encourage scholars, educators, and students across disciplines likewise to open new fields of inquiry: the relationship between history, popular culture, and word/image studies.

2. *La mémoire ressaisie* in the *bande dessinée*: Blaise Boforlant’s (Autobio)Graphic Memory

By re-contextualizing historical facts and images as personalized narratives, *Le Cœur des Batailles* provides two innovative examples of how the *bande dessinée* contributes to the recollection of historical artifacts and adopts a more humanized approach to historical abstractions. French historian Pierre Nora’s core concept of “la mémoire ressaisie” is central to understanding Morvan and Kordey’s graphic and narrative construction. Nora provides a very succinct definition of history and memory. According to him (1984, xix), “[L]a mémoire est un phénomène toujours actuel, un lien vécu au présent éternel ; l’histoire, une représentation du passé... [D]ès qu’il y a trace, distance, médiation, on n’est plus dans la mémoire vraie, mais dans l’histoire.” Morvan’s creation of a protagonist in the person of disabled war veteran Blaise Boforlant provides a highly subjective narration that successfully brings back to life men and times that no longer exist. Morvan, Kordey and Walter’s *Le Cœur des batailles* may be considered an unfinished work as only the first two volumes – *La Marne* and *Verdun* – were brought out by French publisher Delcourt in 2007 and

2008. Originally presented as a trilogy, its third part, entitled *Le Chemin des dames*, was never published.⁴ If incomplete, the series seems to pose a provocative question regarding a major character: Zamaï. Namely, why does the French army want to execute him in the first three pages of Volume I? We do not know if Boforlant's attempt to save him succeeds or fails. As a result of this narrative gap, the reader may justly question whether the two volumes are anti-war or whether they are fascinated by the war. Soldier Zamaï is repeatedly extolled by trench journal editor Boforlant as the supreme fighter, a sort of *Übermensch* quite far from the deprived *poilus* infantrymen in, for example, the celebrated comics by French *bédéiste* Jacques Tardi. Since the series may be unfinished and might have contained an epilogue to the story, the celebration of Zamaï remains uncertain. Do the authors approve of the war? Conversely, do they wish to criticize it? Might there be a deliberate ambiguity embodied in Boforlant's veneration of the Perfect Soldier?

Morvan's war narrative is told by Boforlant himself via a daily face-to-face interview conducted by young American journalist Marvin Selcap at the end of June 1940 in the Alsatian city of Strasbourg, France. As Boforlant retells his war, we can sense the struggle Boforlant and his soldiers underwent against the common enemy, and how racial and hierarchical differences left some of them outside, forgotten and ultimately sacrificed. The reader is plunged into the story with Boforlant's memory of a traumatic event, the preparations to execute a black soldier named Amaréo Zamaï in November 1917 in Reims, France. Then, the principal focus of Boforlant's story, his '*moi graphique*,' is recapped by Selcap from p. 9 onward. As Boforlant speaks truthfully about the war, three temporal/spatial frames intertwine and overlap. These three frames might be called the historical, the testimonial and the arti(factual). The first one, the historical, goes back to the "Secteur de Reims November 1917" (Morvan 2007, 3) and an incident in Volume I *La Marne* where French Congolese soldier Amaréo Zamaï is about to be executed on p. 3. The second temporal/spatial frame, the testimonial, is

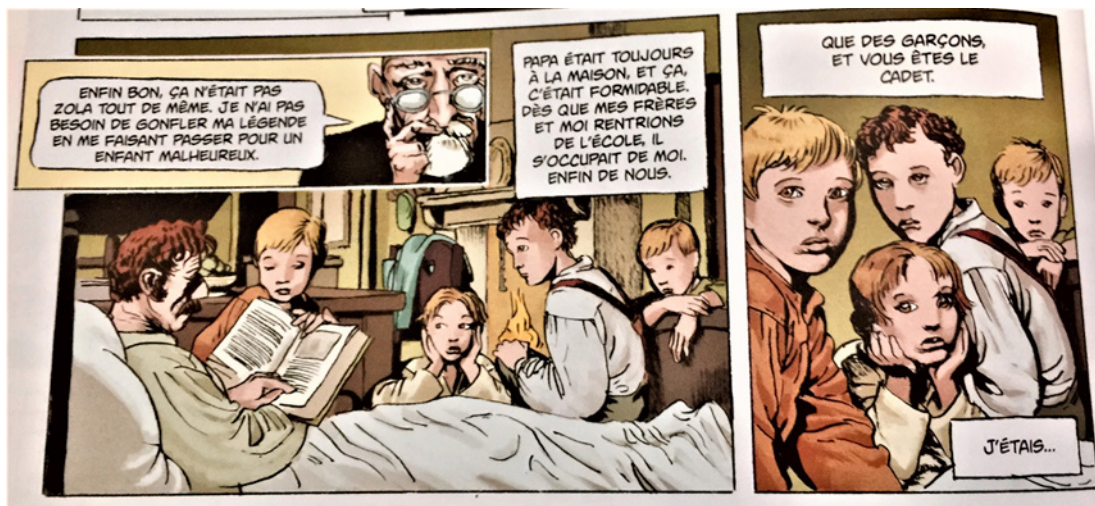
4 Morvan, Kordey and Walter's project seems to have been more ambitious: *Le Coeur des batailles* should have been a series. The last page of its fake issue inserted in the first volume stated: "*Le Coeur des Batailles* is a series which explores the wars of the 20th century from a novel and esoteric point-of-view. A man, unique in his own kind, will be the fil rouge of all these narratives. All begins during the First World War..." [trans. mine]. Thus, the WWI trilogy made up by *La Marne*, *Verdun*, and *Le Chemin des dames* should have been just the beginning of a long-term publication [Ed.].

the present time of Boforlant's live account of his tribulations during WWI to American journalist Marvin Selcap in June 1940. The third temporal/spatial frame, the arti(factual) one consists of Morvan's creation of three issues of Boforlant's own trench newspaper, entitled *Le Cœur des Batailles*. Three issues of that newspaper are subsequently acquired by Selcap and reproduced as inserts of the comics volumes; they are, respectively, Number 5, June 1915 (2007, 23-26), Number 35, 9 September 1915 (appended and printed in a separate insert to volumes 1 and 2), and Number 1, April 1916 (2008, 23-26). Marvin Selcap is so intrigued by his discovery of the trench newspaper that he decides to cross the Atlantic Ocean to meet the man who created and illustrated them. Moreover, Selcap is determined to write Boforlant's fascinating biography,⁵ hence he must interview Boforlant to make sure that his biographical account is flawless. It is from this premise that History unfolds, and it is envisioned throughout both Selcap's biographic sketch notes and Boforlant's (autobio)graphic recollection of the far-ranging events discussed.

In both volumes of *Le Cœur des Batailles*, time is the raw material of the plot. *La mémoire ressaisie* is recaptured in the form of a listener/teller relationship framed with a cinematographic style to retell the events of Boforlant's life in and out of the trenches. This testimonial temporal/spatial frame begins in Volume 1, page 9, is set in Strasbourg, Alsace, France, coincides with WWII, and spans the days between Selcap's arrival June 7th, 1940 in Strasbourg and his stay up to June 18th, 1940, as referred to in a caption on pages 6 of *Verdun*, the second volume. Inside this frame, one of Morvan's strategies is his frequent use of straight-edged rectangular frames, also called "caption narratives," inserted within Selcap's speech. These caption narratives signal Boforlant's revisions and additions to his biographical account. Will Eisner observes, regarding the multiple uses of frames, that "the intent of the frame [can be] not so much to provide a stage as to heighten the reader's involvement with the narrative. [. . .] Whereas the conventional container-frame keeps the reader at bay – or out of the picture, so to speak – the frame can also invite the reader into the action" (2008, 46). Indeed, a close-up of Boforlant's commentary, contained in a speech balloon, indicates his active participation in the construction and revision of Selcap's biography. Morvan's graphic strategy consists of a frame-within-a-frame where Boforlant's side comments (outside of the biographical narration) intervene. This visual effect

⁵ See Alary, Corrado, and Mitaine 2015.

presents Boforlant both as a child (past) and as an old, disabled veteran (present), while the sequences of strips manipulate captions to reveal how Boforlant's is both seizing the memory of his life's events and revising Selcap's account of that life. Morvan reconstructs the grammar of the comic itself and Boforlant's act of remembering past events of his life while revisiting Selcap's biography. We are thus caught between memory and history, using Nora's definitions; we are caught between an autobiographical space (narrated by Boforlant himself) and a biographical one, amended by Selcap, as he exclaims "[...], rares sont ceux dont la biographie est aussi passionnante. Je vous lis celle que j'ai préparée et vous m'arrêtez si je dis une bêtise ?" (Morvan 2007, 8).



© Delcourt – *La Marne*, 2007, p. 10

An example is in Volume 1, page 10; the left panel reflects narration while the right one indicates Selcap's utterances, as when he states, "que des garçons et vous êtes le cadet" to which Boforlant quickly retorts "J'étais." Morvan's innovative use of both balloons and captions underscores two distinct types of asynchronous narrations within the same panel.

In the testimonial temporal/spatial frame we have been examining, Boforlant's 'act of memory' is further overlaid with conflicts he remembers as far back as 1870, before the years of WWI. There is another example of this asynchronous narration within the same panel. On page 10, in a frame, Boforlant reconstructs a happy event of his past in the company of his now-deceased family: his father, his elder brother (who died of tuberculosis in 1909) and his twin brothers (both

killed in Argonne during WWI, in December 1914 and January 1915, respectively). In the same panel a speech balloon stands outside of the narration, as Boforlant comments on his own celebrity and status as a legendary national figure: “Enfin bon, ça n’était pas Zola tout de même. Je n’ai pas besoin de gonfler ma légende en me faisant passer pour un enfant malheureux” (ibid. :10). For Eisner, these “container frames,” prove that as *bande dessinée* readers, we should read the shape of the frame as much as any other part of the image (2008, 76).

During WWI, Boforlant was a fervent supporter of the war, wishing Alsace to become again a French region, as it was part of the German Reich from 1870 to 1918: “J’ai voulu être le premier à remettre le pied en Alsace, permettre à mes parents de retrouver leur maison” (Morvan 2007, 12). The 71-year-old Boforlant tells the story, describing his feelings during WWI: “Plus JAMAIS je ne quitterai ma ville à cause de la superpuissance habituelle de leur armée...” (Morvan 2008, 48). His memory is at times selective, and even more subjective as these events are recollected twenty years after WWI - in 1940 Strasbourg. As Boforlant remembers it, his primary objective is to re-acquire what has been taken away from his family. Born in Alsace on November 28, 1869 (Morvan 2007, 9), where his family endured the first Franco-Prussian war of 1870, Boforlant was an eyewitness to the loss of the Alsatian territory, after which his family found refuge in Paris. Since his father had been wounded by a German cavalryman and was never again able to work, the family lived in precarious conditions; thus, Boforlant was firmly opposed to Germany. By 1914, Boforlant volunteers for WWI at the age of 45 and will be politically antimilitarist and internationalist at the end of the conflict (Ibid.: 12).

Morvan controls the pace of his *BD* by skillfully exploiting the panel layout and the many correspondences between his two volumes. He typically observes the classic nine-panel format with its many configurations in order to corroborate Boforlant’s act of remembering. Yet, at times, Morvan uses large horizontal banner-style panels to emphasize an event that traumatized Boforlant, events that become linchpins in the construction of his memories years later. Such an event occurs at the very beginning of Volume 1, in Reims, in 1917: “je vous en supplie, Général. Annulez cette exécution” (Morvan 2007, 3). The traumatic moment of Zamaï’s execution will alter Boforlant’s life and change his political stance forever.

Just like young Marvin Selcap, who graduated from Harvard, infantryman Boforlant was a journalist and founder of the trench journal he designed to entertain the soldiers trapped in the trenches. Morvan carefully builds

a prestigious biography for his protagonist. Throughout the two decades that follow WWI, Selcap's accounts reveal Boforlant's participation in several conflicts: Russia 1917-1918-1921, Morocco 1921, Ireland 1922; Bolivia and Paraguay 1922, Ethiopia 1935; Spain 1936, China 1937. Boforlant was a private first class in WWI before becoming a renowned intellectual and a living representative of the Third Republic. According to Selcap, he is also the embodiment of a national hero: professor, socialist, antimilitarist and internationalist, pacifist, patriot, a Strasbourg native, a French-Alsatian, intellectual, homosexual, and survivor (Ibid.: 12). Yet, of all this illustrious life, his experience in WWI will be the focus of Boforlant's recollections, as he pronounces the name of Amaréo Zamaï to the young American journalist. Selcap confesses to him: "J'ai été fasciné par l'histoire d'Amaréo Zamaï qui se déclinait au fil des numéros" (Ibid. : 28). He acknowledges that curiosity about Zamaï is what made him cross an ocean to interview Boforlant.

The *bande dessinée* can transport memory across time and geographical space. It is the medium that crosses over decades and triggers the encounter between Boforlant and Selcap. Selcap found several trench journals created by Boforlant in a flea market in New York, saying, "Je suis tombé dessus par hasard sur un marché aux puces à Manhattan" (Ibid.: 27). He immediately spots their power to rekindle subjective experiences of long dead men. Boforlant's feelings for and enthrallment with Zamaï immediately turned into burning memories and propelled his accomplishments as the editor of journals which are intimate and vivid documentation of lives once lived. Thus, the *BD* (and the trench journal that shares its title) is itself a memory, in graphic form. *Le Coeur des batailles* refers to the thick of battle and to the beating hearts of the men who endured it; to their fears and fascinations, to the images they saw – for some men, before death closed their eyes forever; for other men, before the rest of their lives – when those images were not memories at all, but the life they were living.

3. Metatextual Techniques in the Bande Dessinée: Morvan's Creation of Trench Journals as one Historical Comic Source.

Metatextuality is drawn from French narratologist Gérard Genette's concept of transtextuality, in which a text changes or expands on the content of another text. Metatextuality, more commonly referred to as "comment," unites a text

with another text, without necessarily quoting or naming it. It is an allusive and silent reference, a critical relationship par excellence between texts (Genette 1997, 13). In *Lire la bande dessinée*, BD specialist Benoit Peeters insists that metatextuality is one of the panel's fundamental traits (Peeters 2010, 27). Metatextuality can reveal the hidden structure underlying a narrative; it can also pull apart a narrative, exposing its artifice, its constructed nature.

In *Le Cœur des batailles*, the other texts brought to bear as comment include public sources as newsclippings, press photographs and documentary images. Their inclusion implies that readers may be (un)familiar with official representations of historical events. Morvan's inclusion of public source material authenticates and contextualizes fictional narratives within the framework of national history. By re-appropriating and re-contextualizing problematic media representations, Morvan encourages his readers to question hegemonic discourses on the war.

French historians Chante and Marie (2009, 17) describe this strategy of inclusion as *témoignage* [testimony]. They refer expressly to the work of noted French *bédéiste* Jacques Tardi's fascination with WWI and his use of a narrative strategy as historical testimony. This vital testimony may be equally applied to Morvan's artistic intentions:

L'utilisation des sources historiques traduit quant à elle la volonté d'inscrire les récits dans un contexte viable et signifiant. Le recours à une importante documentation – lettres, carnets de guerre, témoignages de soldats au front, objets de tranchées, uniformes, armement – permet de pénétrer dans les détails de l'intimité des soldats, mais aussi de nourrir la « coloration » historique du récit.

A particularly relevant use of historical sources is Morvan's inclusion of a newspaper clip entitled "Français!" within the comic narration and as part of both Boforlant and Selcap's shared experience of WWII (Morvan 2008, 9). This was an actual speech intended to announce the end the war,⁶ delivered by Maréchal Pétain on

6 On May 27th, 1940, Allied troops were trapped with their backs to the sea on a French beach at Dunkirk. Hitler had invaded Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, and France, forcing a gap in the Allied front. On 22 June, the Second Armistice at Compiègne was signed by France and Germany. The Vichy government led by Marshal Philippe Pétain superseded the Third Republic and Germany occupied the North Sea and Atlantic coasts of France and their hinterlands.

June 17th, 1940.⁷ This date is within the present time of the narration, when Selcap and Boforlant meet for the first time. As one reads, one sees that the text has not been condensed from its original source: Morvan includes it in full and places it prominently in the center of the triptych. With a zooming in effect, the frame stands in the center with Selcap commenting over Boforlant's shoulder. In this perspective, the reader stands above them, reading the speech simultaneously with the two characters. In this clever fashion, Morvan pulls the reader into the story itself. This speech adds a note of ambiguity to Morvan's message. Is his intent to rouse the reader? Or to call for an end of the war (of all wars)?



© Delcourt – Verdun 2008, p. 9

Morvan provides readers with a vision of the war in a highly documented, realistic, and unique style, throughout one war veteran's unique gaze and editorial work.

⁷ One may listen to the entire speech at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=due4avh8ih4>

As for Boforlant the editor, he is not merely the character sharing his first-person point of view; he is the alter ego of the author, Morvan. Boforlant intentionally created a fictional character that embodies his own subjective vision of the war, reinforcing his narrative choice with historical data and vocabulary proper to the times. Probably the key strategy of metatextuality, one which Morvan uses with brilliant effect, is his creation of a pastiche trench journal. Trench journals were magazines created by soldiers for soldiers. Produced in vast numbers, they could be found everywhere: at the front, in hospitals, behind the front lines, in troopships and in prison camps. Issues were printed in a small number of copies, or in their thousands. They are extant from September 1914, and they tell the soldiers' experience of the war in an immediate and vivid fashion. A trench journal is a written memory of an historical event. These four-page trench journals resembled a school magazine of the time: full of in-jokes, poetry of dubious quality, limericks, pastiches, well and badly drawn cartoons, awful puns, diary-sketches that give self-censored references to the frontline experience.⁸ Morvan gives the same title, *Le Cœur des Batailles* to his *BD* work and to the trench journal Boforlant produced during WWI, emphasizing the many correspondences between them.

As mentioned, Morvan uses the fictional Boforlant to serve as his narrative proxy. For instance, Morvan provides readers with a separate print of the trench journal dated September 9, 1915. This separate insert (in a much larger format) corroborates the two included issues of his trench journals judiciously positioned on page 23 of each volume, roughly in the middle. In his essay "Young Blood: Parisian Schoolgirl's Transformation of France's Great War Poster Aesthetic" Mark Levitch, who specializes in the art and visual culture of World War I, notes the prominent use of bold colors in books and magazines. Their scope was purely to entertain and was an inherently French artistic feature and also an element of a discourse of resistance.⁹ According to Levitch (2009, 157-58):

Color, especially bold color, was in desperately short supply. [...] The only images aimed at adults that regularly featured striking colors were found in humor magazines and in prints called *images d'Épinal*. These naïve and martially themed folkloric prints had been especially popular during the Napoleonic era and were revived upon the outbreak of war in

8 On the language used by infantrymen, see Roynette 2010.

9 Levitch formally established the World War I Memorial Inventory Project as a non-profit organization in 2012. The Project became a partner of the US World War I Centennial Commission in 2013.

1914. They found an audience immediately receptive to their nostalgic, heroic, and utterly unreal construction of the all-too-real war at hand.

A strand of recent historical criticism has valorized precisely this type of leisure literature as key socio-historical documents and the role of this literature in the formation of a discourse of resistance.¹⁰ Morvan and Kordey's cover of Boforlant's trench newspaper deliberately recaptures the style of "images d'Épinal" found in children's magazines and books as propaganda literature.¹¹ Bold in colors, they typically present an emphatically traditionalist and naïve portrayal of someone or something, showing only its good aspects. Boforlant's use of the *Épinal* imagery that depicts the men gathered around Zamaï is a happy one. The picture displays his arrival emphasizing only its good aspects (Zamaï's face is white and his features are African) and is a way to entertain and trigger his readers' curiosity, just like children were intrigued by such images (also called "*devinettes*"). The covers of each trench journal aptly describe Levitch's remarks about their patriotic appeal to the readers. The covers seem to be meant to warm French infantrymen to the recruitment of African colonial troops. Boforlant himself apparently participates in this process since, as editor of the journal, he includes this *Épinal* imagery with Zamaï.

Comic scholar Charles Forsdick defends his thesis that the choice of new heroes, here a representative of the French infantry of African descent, is not arbitrary (Forsdick 2005, 28). Although Zamaï was born in Marseille from a French mother and a Congolese slave,¹² his arrival in the camp is presented as heroic: "*Au début, je n'ai vu qu'une émeute avec un casque qui dépassait. [...] Et puis il a fendu la foule.*" (Morvan 2007, 17-18). In the contents of these journals, puns and in-jokes become another metatextual technique in the hands of author Morvan – and editor Boforlant. At the pivotal moment when Zamaï first arrives among the troops, the title is a jocular "le Soldat Nouveau est arrivé!!" (Ibid.: 23). The title plays on a catchy tagline known to all French people: "Le

¹⁰ See Cirella-Urrutia, 2014.

¹¹ *Épinal* prints owe their name to Jean-Charles Pellerin who founded his printing house in *Épinal* in 1796.

¹² This is overtly said in the second page of the fake issue of Boforlant's trench journal inserted in the first volume of the series, *La Marne*: "Il est le fils de Mélodie, héritière d'une riche famille de colons du Congo et d'un esclave au service de cette même famille. Rendu fou de colère par cette mésalliance, le père de Mélodie s'empresse de faire exécuter son esclave".

Beaujolais nouveau est arrivé!” It refers to a prime wine, usually available in mid-November, which is eagerly waited for and has been announced with the same phrase from the years of WWI to the present day.

Editor Borfolant – and author Morvan – devote much space to presenting two artifacts of primary importance to the soldier of WWI: a (new) helmet and a (new) uniform. Every soldier wished to have the newer equipment. Both the neck-covering helmet and the sky-blue uniform will become emblems of the French soldier, an image of WWI solidified in the national memory thereby subsuming into a mere symbolic individual any man who wore them. In these presentations, it is Marseille-born soldier Amaréo Zamai who takes center stage, for reasons we will examine more closely in the next part of this essay. Zamai himself will become a virtual ‘artifact’ that is also presented to the soldiers, as a magnificent model of soldierly bravery.



© Delcourt – *La Marne* 2007, p. 23

The included issue, number 5 of June 5th, 1915, set by Morvan within Volume 1, p. 23, displays an oversized Zamaï, who stands in full contrast to his French fellows. His M1914 uniform—now easily recognized for its sky blue colour—would see service for the remainder of the war. Combined with the M15 Adrian helmet, this silhouette would become the defining symbol of the French army. In a setting of countryside framed by tricolor outfits, readers can see a friendly dog scrutinizing the newcomer. Boforlant's newspaper confirms Levitch's contentions that wartime imagery in France was mostly monochromatic (except for the domination of red and blue) and that pencil *croquis* (rough sketches) were the quintessential example of art from the front. And indeed, colorist Walter's rendition of such a stylish *croquis* is impressive throughout each trench journal Morvan has deliberately included within the scenario of each plot.

As with many metafictional graphic novels, Morvan underlines his refusal to take for granted how stories should be told and thus implicitly comments on the nature of fiction itself, playing with, and exploring, how stories are told. Boforlant's trench journals represent his experience of the war. As such they are uncoloured by subsequent thoughts, and to a large extent give us an immediate idea of the experience of the war by its soldiers. One example is the way Morvan introduces the new Adrian helmet to readers throughout the comic narrative. A metatextual technique consisting of fitting an issue of Boforlant's trench journal within the comic narrative is unique and leads us to carefully consider the panel layout itself and compare both pages 18 and 24 of Volume 1.

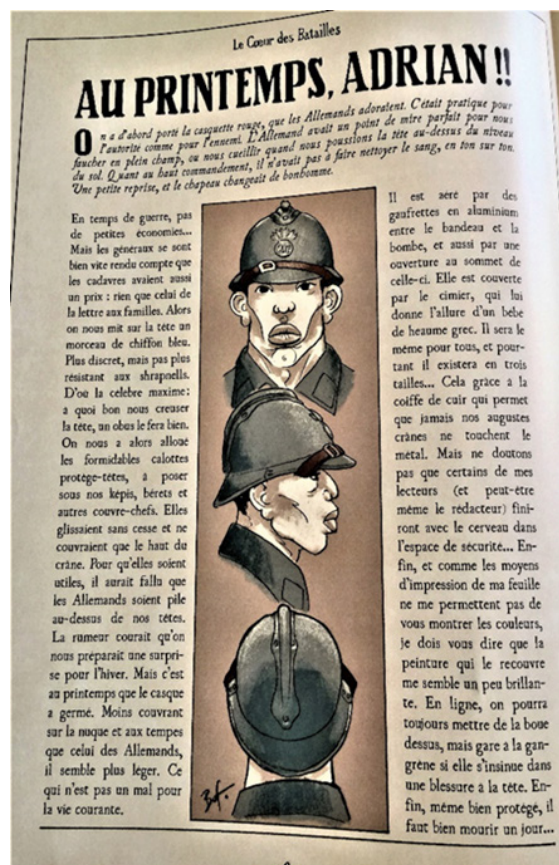
On page 18 of Volume 1, readers are presented with a sight of Zamaï in his brand-new uniform in a triptych of panels given dramatic emphasis because they are much larger than the majority of the panels in other sections; moreover, they are free of speech bubbles. The use of oversized panels is a cinematic device highlighting the second most important hero of the story, Boforlant himself, since the figure shots of the tall, confident Zamaï is obviously seen through his eyes (in the middle of the image is his back and his blond hair). That Boforlant is amazed, shaken, awed is cleverly brought out by Morvan and Kordey's use of three lower, rectangular frames that bring out the details of Boforlant's gradually shaking fingers. As a reader can see, his magnified hands express amazement from left to right, as he rolls his cigarette, spilling and wasting the precious tobacco.



© Delcourt – La Marne, p. 18

As noted on this page, Boforlant intentionally creates the myth of Zamaï, who embodies his own subjective vision of the war. During his interview, he backs up his account with historical data and provides Selcap with relevant, unknown details regarding the specifics of the piece of military equipment Amaréo wears. The M15 Adrian helmet, also called *Casque Adrian*, was a combat helmet issued to the French Army in April 1915 as head wounds from the falling shrapnel generated by the new technique of indirect fire became a frequent cause of battlefield casualties. This newly introduced helmet displayed in Boforlant's trench journal is to become the first standard helmet of the French

Army, designed when millions of French troops were engaged in trench warfare. Boforlant uses the new helmet to highlight the arrival of his *Übermensch* soldier and indeed the helmet becomes a primary focus of Amaréo's first encounter with his fellow soldiers. Later Boforlant represented/depicted this moment in an issue of his journal dated 1915. According to Boforlant, the new helmet is shinier than the picture in his own trench journal because he lacked sufficient print colors: "Enfin, et comme les moyens d'impression de ma feuille ne me permettent pas de vous montrer les couleurs, je dois vous dire que la peinture qui le recouvre me semble un peu brillante" (Morvan 2007, 24). The title, "Au printemps, Adrian!!" brings out curiosity as to who/what Adrian may be. It paraphrases the title of the cover of the trench journal "Le soldat nouveau est arrivé!!" and yet is misleading when Boforlant points out: "Mais c'est au printemps que le casque a germé." (Ibid.: 24). Boforlant intentionally misleads his readers, who may think that Adrian is actually the name of the black soldier who is wearing the helmet.



© Delcourt – La Marne, p. 24

As one may see on page 24 of *La Marne*, Boforlant deliberately chooses to display the new helmet with three vertical drawings of Zamaï's head, each one from a different point of view: a frontal, side and back view. The insignia displayed on the top image is a stamped plate displaying a flaming bomb onto which is engraved the letters RF; the French Second Republic. Each image displays the joining rim around the helmet that characterizes the M15 and the presence of a deflector crest along the helmet's axis. The middle image and the bottom image contribute well to Boforlant's intention to promote its shape and to compare its superiority to the ones German soldiers wear: "Moins couvrant sur la nuque et aux tempes que celui des Allemands, il semble plus léger" (Ibid.: 24). Although both graphic examples use different metatextual techniques, both offer readers a glimpse into a closed world, a world claustrophobic at times, and the reality of what soldiers were reading as one major source of entertainment. Yet, as readers may observe, the helmet Zamaï wears is introduced much earlier in the narrative and from Boforlant's own personal experience, before he decides to research the new helmet and publishes it in his trench journal.

Boforlant's fascination with Zamaï leads readers to reflect on how Morvan controls the pace of his comic by carefully considering the panel layout and the many correspondences between the two graphic *bandes dessinées*. Morvan typically observes throughout both volumes the classic nine-panel format with its many configurations in order to corroborate Boforlant's act of remembering and the pace of the narrative overall. Yet, at times Morvan uses large horizontal *bandeau* panels to emphasize an event that has impacted Boforlant. Such is the case at the very beginning of Volume 1 that begins in 1917 Reims, France, and the imminent execution of Zamaï for high treason to his country and which will change his political stance forever, especially at the beginning, when Boforlant exclaims: "Je vous en supplie, Général. Annulez cette execution." (2007, 3). Boforlant's creation of a single black hero throughout the issues of his trench journal provides a highly subjective narration that successfully brings back to life men who may no longer exist.

Like many trench journals, as in the last page of the April 1916 issue entitled "Du Soldat au Guerrier" (2008, 23-26), Boforlant devotes the last page of his newspaper to famous WWI writers who experienced the war, in the form of pastiches praising the new legend. These are Guillaume Apollinaire, Blaise

Cendrars, and Pierre Mac Orlan to name just a few.¹³ In addition, his inclusion of these familiar writers' faces suggests that the *bande dessinée* further explores how the war has entered individual memories as well as the national collective memory.

4. Boforlant's Superhuman Black Combatant as Entertainment and Hope for the Troops.

Morvan gives the same title *Le Coeur des batailles* to his sequence of volumes and to the issues of Boforlant's trench journal because the trench journal plays an important role in the spatial/temporal frame of the narrative: it ties together Boforlant's accomplishment as the editor of the journal and his enthrallment by Zamai. Its message travels through time and geography and triggers the encounter between Boforlant and Selcap, because the issues of Boforlant's trench magazine bought by the American journalist in a flea market in New York have led the latter to fly to "Strasbourg, début juin 1940" (Ibid.: 6). That is the present time of the narration, when Boforlant meets Selcap for the first time.

The Great War was felt by many as an apocalyptic conflict, overwhelming political, geographical, social, or even psychological borders. Trench life both involved extreme violence and extreme boredom; it combined dullness, anxiety, and hardship with an irrational sense of optimism. Soldiers as well as distraught civilians longed to be entertained during a period of deprivation and frustration: "Jamais les journaux ne mentionnent nos conditions insoutenables dans les tranchées. Jamais ils n'évoquent les agonies de certains de nos bonhommes..." (insert, 9 September 1915). For many soldiers, the experience of the war was oddly contradictory. Trench magazines were able to both expose the unbearable – and strictly censored – conditions of trench life, and the dark humor and silly jokes of the soldiers' fatalistic optimism. Boforlant's piece of entertainment thus appeared to be a safe strategy to mock the enemy and a cunning tool to lampoon the general nonsense of the war. Trench journals enabled artists like Boforlant to gloss over the naked, ugly reality and rewrite

¹³ Swiss-born poet and novelist Blaise Cendrars joined the French Foreign Legion and was at the front line in the Somme from December 1914 to February 1915. Apollinaire joined the French army in December 1914. See *Paroles de Poilus* 2006 & 2007.

the war to make it more palatable. Boforlant describes the act of writing and printing *Le Cœur des batailles* between 1915 and 1918 as “le plus grand moment de sa jeunesse [...] car je peux vous l’avouer, je n’aurais jamais été aussi brillant si je n’avais pas rencontré ... Amaréo Zamaï” (Morvan 2007, 15).

Trench journals served as an escape from their relentless stress and trauma. Morvan exploits a trench journal’s status as mere entertainment in order to substitute for epics when it is impossible to create heroic tales. The front page of the insert captioned “Amaréo Zamaï, prophète des tranchées...” focuses on young Zamaï, an atypical soldier, both by his appearance and his aggressive heroic posture. The trench journals included in volume 1 and 2 are imaginary artifacts of an historical document that harks back to the real magazines and journals of the trenches.¹⁴ A sample of this journal portrays our black *tirailleur* on the cover as follows: “Du soldat au Guerrier” in volume 2 (2008, 23). His figure in side view, holding his weapon, presents us with a cutting-edge, larger-than-life combatant.¹⁵

Throughout Boforlant’s testimony, Zamaï’s biographical space is also traced in a *mise en abyme* process. Zamaï, the subject of the trench journal, is also at the core of Boforlant’s autobiography during his military years, interrogating many levels of history within the contained frames. Thanks to rectangular captions that are abundantly used in both volumes, the reader never forgets that what he sees is based on Boforlant’s recollection of the events that occurred during WWI, all centered on a less famous character that triggered Selcap’s curiosity: Amaréo Zamaï. Zamaï is at first a victim of laughter and racism: “Alors dis, c’était ta mère ou ton père qu’était un singe?” (Ibid.: 21). Yet, a figure of ridicule will become a model of resistance and bravery.¹⁶ Amaréo, Marseille-born soldier of the French colonies,¹⁷ fascinates Boforlant with his actions during the German assaults, accepting death as a certainty and not just as a contingency. He never speaks and it is his brooding silence that triggers the curiosity of Boforlant and eventually Selcap. Morvan includes a brief

14 See Du Pont, 2015, 107- 121.

15 Super soldiers evolve in the trenches in Dorison & Breccia, 2008; 2009; 2011; 2014. See also Adam. 2006-2008.

16 See Caumery & Pinchon 1915; McKinney 2008; McKinney 2011.

17 Over 160,000 black Africans fought and died for France in the trenches of Europe; the colonial *force noire* provided a vital reinforcement for the continental troops. See Riesz & Schultz 1989; Hale 2008.

biography within the inserted trench journal that supplements both volumes, dated September 1915:

Conçu en Afrique mais né en France, il va devenir un modèle. [...] C'est à Marseille que l'enfant voit le jour et qu'il grandit parmi les kakous du panier entre violence et galéjades. D'après ses proches, il n'est pas beau parleur. [...] rejoint le camp en même temps que le casque Adrian.

Zamaï looks like a legendary mythical figure. His arrival causes a cultural shock, so much so that he is rejected by his French comrades. He is laughed at and excluded because he is racially different.¹⁸ Yet, his physical strength and exceptional prowess at fighting will trigger Boforlant's decision to use him as the exemplary hero and a distraction for his fellow soldiers: "Un instant s'il vous plaît!! Je me demandais... Est-ce que vous me laisseriez vous dessiner ? Enfin, je veux dire votre casque hein... Je réalise un journal de tranchées, et ce nouveau casque va passionner les bonhommes" (Ibid. : 20). Thus, the fates of both Boforlant and Zamaï are linked.

Boforlant's use of a black protagonist is a potent blow against a virulent historical racism and, at the same time, explores its complexities. France was the first country willing to arm and deploy black Africans to fight against white enemies in Europe. The contemporary debate on the matter of this *force noire* was launched by colonel Mangin as early as 1909-1910.¹⁹ Black men from the colonies were described as super soldiers. According to French historian Le Naour:

Bon nombre de soldats allemands sont persuadés, pendant la guerre, que les Noirs sont des cannibales. Eux qui ne les ont rencontrés que dans les exhibitions foraines sont imprégnés des représentations coloniales et sont persuadés que les Noirs sont des sauvages qui tuent les prisonniers, achèvent les blessés et les mutilent. Ils couperaient en particulier le nez, les parties sexuelles et surtout les oreilles. (Le Naour 2006, 247)

Boforlant's encounter with Zamaï was of an entirely different kind; one that triggered admiration, and even sexual desire: "Là oui, peut-être, je dois l'avouer en le voyant aussi puissant et humide sous la lumière du jour naissant, j'ai eu une pulsion. Mais il m'a regardé, et son charisme a transcendé ce vulgaire appel au sexe"

18 See Van Galen Last 2015, 9-33.

19 See Mangin 1910.

(Morvan 2007, 34). Boforlant explains that Zamaï was not hailed as a hero at the beginning, but was viewed, as black people often were, as a “saucisson marron”; a common derogatory term targeting African soldiers and “un bon exemple de comique troupier” (Ibid.: 38). First, Boforlant draws Zamaï from a distance, and focuses on his singularity, especially when he executes his daily chores or even washes himself in the river. Gradually, Boforlant becomes his brother in arms, especially when Zamaï is severely injured: “J’avais le poids d’Amaréo sur les épaules. Je me sentais l’homme le plus fort du monde, à l’aider ainsi” (Ibid.: 10). The peak to his superhuman strength is when Zamaï stitches his own wound:

Personne ne me semblait capable de travailler ainsi sur ses propres déchirures. Je le regardais comme tétanisé...Je tremblais à sa place. Je souffrais... sa douleur. Une fois recousu, il prit le chemin du retour, vers la tranchée [...] En quinze jours, sa cicatrice était déjà presque refermée, c’était incroyable. (Morvan 2008, 14 ;19)

In the pages of the trench journal edited and printed by Boforlant, the name of Amaréo Zamaï and his achievements spread on both sides of the front line. In *Verdun*, under fire and in the putrid corridors of Fort de Vaux, Zamaï becomes a defender for veterans who discover, thanks to him, the difference between a soldier and a warrior: a code of honor, striving to maintain a shred of humanity in the midst of barbarity.

In the trench journal included in volume 2 (dated April 1916), entitled “Du Soldat au Guerrier,” Zamaï is no longer presented by Boforlant as a figure of derision but as one of bravery and super heroism. Boforlant devotes his trench journal to this black superhero and writes an article entitled: “Une large tranchée entre nous et lui!” The title refers to one of the major strategic innovations proper to WWI; however, the title’s reference to a wide trench, ‘une large tranchée’, is also a metaphor for the huge gap Boforlant wishes to stress between ordinary French infantrymen and his hero Zamaï. This difference, inherently racial, is doubled using the pronoun ‘lui’ (him). At first, when one reads this title, one may think it refers to the enemy, the *boche*, giving vent to an anti-German sentiment common in trench journals of the time. As one reads Boforlant’s narrative, one notices his recurring usage of the ‘nous/lui’ dichotomy. This dichotomy attests to Zamaï’s out-of-ordinary abilities.

Je puis donc me permettre de témoigner de la différence de quotidien des soldats et du guerrier. La comparaison entre ce que je fus comme vous, et ce vers quoi Amaréo me pousse à tendre

[...] Nous gardons en permanence notre casque [...] Lui ne le porte jamais. [...] Lui se met en légère stase lors des moments d'inaction et passe en léger accéléré au cœur de l'action. Ne me demandez pas comment il réussit ça, je n'ai aucune explication. Déjà que mes mots manquent de précision pour vous expliquer le phénomène. [...] Et au moment même où nous ne pensons plus qu'à nous affaler, lui reste vigilant. C'est ce qui a sauvé nos vies lorsqu'il a repéré l'uniforme allemand sous une veste bien de chez nous (Morvan 2008, 24-25).

While most of the propaganda literature reinforced the view that black people were frightening, Boforlant reverses this stereotype. Boforlant's own vision of Zamaï as a super combatant is powerfully realized in the two-page image showing the scene in a trench at dusk (2008, 24/25; 2/3). The illustration is intentionally positioned at the center of the article Boforlant wrote. It displays a very attractive soldier standing ramrod straight. The panel displays a rather elaborate, developed kind of trench, with dugouts for sleeping and protection from artillery consisting of sacks of sand and concrete reinforcement. Although most trench floors were just mud and muck, this one is made of wooden planks called 'duckboards.' But then a question arises: why does Zamaï stand with his back turned away from the German enemy, disdaining all danger, as his fellow soldiers sleep? His posture defies all convention.



© Delcourt – Verdun 2008, p. 24-25

Pictorially, racial categories are being reversed and challenged. Zamaï is standing vigil over the battered figures of his white fellow soldiers; these are so battle worn that they literally melt into the mud while Zamaï stands tall, bareheaded, and calm, his uniform complete and clean. His back is entirely turned away from the battlefield. This posture catches the attention of two of his fellows who look at him puzzled. Unlike the rest of his brothers-in-arms, who are hunched over, Zamaï does not crouch in fear. He is a guardian figure, an archangel or an updated version of Delacroix's 'Liberty Leading the People.' This image both foregrounds the horrific proceedings the graphic novel chronicles, and at the same time, points to a new understanding that Boforlant is attempting to vividly portray. The growth of Zamaï's legend, that is to say, Boforlant's revisioning of a black man's abilities, is reflected pictorially.

Let us examine the differences between volume 1 (the June 1915 issue) and volume 2 (the April 1916 issue). In "Le soldat nouveau est arrivé", the image is a caricature with exaggerated proportions and simplistic features, like a picture in a children's book. On the cover of "Du soldat au Guerrier," the image is realistically detailed and shows Zamaï as a powerful hero. Colorist Walter's work is also an important contribution to this effort to build a legend. Walter supplants the bright coloring of *épinial* prints used on the cover of the trench journal in Volume 1, dated June 1915, with a sort of washed-out look reflected in Boforlant's increasing uses of more gray tones in the issue dated April 1916, as the war goes on.

The power of the *bande dessinée* to serve as virtual memory confirms Fabienne Castagna and Anne Silvert's contention that "[l]'enseignement de l'histoire peut faire appel à la bande dessinée non pas tant comme moyen de mettre l'Histoire en images mais comme témoin privilégié d'une époque, d'une mentalité, d'une idéologie" (Castagna & Silvert 1990, 53). The recycling of press and personal photography of WWI serves a dual purpose: to take part in the collective memory and, for *bédéistes* such as Jean-David Morvan, illustrator Kordey and colorist Walter to construct a post-memory of the war. In fact, since the war remains part of France's fairly recent past, most people – including several *bédéistes* – come from families directly affected by that war, because one or more of their members were involved as participants or victims. Historical *BDs* provide a bridge between historical data and fictional narrative. Their graphic works, with the inclusion of archival sources, should be read as instances of post-memory where they attempt to understand and articulate their own personal connection to France's history.

Diversity in source material (textual and iconographic, public and personal) demonstrates that the medium uniquely problematizes questions of history, memory, and postcolonial subjectivity.

5. Conclusion

By re-contextualizing historical facts and images in personalized narratives, *BD* offers a more humanized approach to historical abstractions. Graphic novels turn into self-referential contemplative metatexts to enable the readers to view the artistic world, and to realize the existence of multiple versions of historical events. *Le Coeur des Batailles* is one great comic example of how Nora's concept of "*la mémoire ressaisie*" works within the medium. Morvan, Kordey and Walter have created different spatial/narrative frameworks that stress issues of race and national identity and reflect the attitudes and policies directed toward the troops and black soldiers specifically. Their story addresses core issues such as how far French egalitarianism extended in welcoming and disciplining nonwhite infantrymen.

Using the experience of African-descent soldier Amaréo Zamaï as an icon of consecration and sacrifice, the two volumes delve into the tensions of racial prejudices. They also question strong traditions of republican universalism and the way egalitarianism may lead to often contradictory and paradoxical policies. The three authors' approach to the history of warfare connects military and political policies with the society and culture in which they developed. Combined with the inclusion of three examples of trench journal, Morvan, Kordey and Walter present a fresh picture of how the French came to deal with race relations, social differences, and French national identity itself.

I have intended to show how the *bande dessinée* uniquely problematizes questions of history, collective memory, post memory, and ultimately identity formation.²⁰ Educators may exploit the medium as both a historical document (whose purpose is to transmit knowledge of the past) and a document of History (which allows scholars to (re)trace the evolution of views on the shifting war. The medium's reliance on different forms of documentation makes it a valuable pedagogical tool for teaching their readers about the war. Reading war in the

20 See Roynette 2010; Rosemberg 2004, 1-37.

bande dessinée as an instance of post-memory allows readers to understand how the graphic medium transmits history and memory effectively. Alongside other literary and visual art forms, historical *bandes dessinées* shed an important light on the study of popular culture. Readers may identify with characters whose lives have been disrupted by war. Fictional and semi-fictional narratives visualize for readers the anonymous victims of political trauma. These works in which WWI is the major theme allow *bédéistes* to highlight authentic textual and iconographic source material and document the repercussions of WWI on underrepresented communities. The *bande dessinée* offers a non-academic point of entry into WWI history and encourages further inquiry through frequent allusions to more scholarly publications.

As I have demonstrated throughout my essay, the *bande dessinée* provides material for discussions about history, national identity, and the impact of political trauma. The visual component of the *BD* serves an important purpose in humanizing historical events, much like in cinema. In these two excellent graphic examples, the creative team of Morvan, Kordey and Walter have assembled ingredients usually associated with autobiography and have adapted them to the *BD*, thereby creating a hybrid genre.²¹ The result is a mosaic of narratives throughout the 21st Century that underscore the relationship between history and memory, between the individual and the collective, and between one generation and another. They are an invaluable source to enrich the state-mandated history curriculum as part of the secular public education in France.

²¹ See Alary, Corrado, Mitaine 2015.

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