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Drawing (and Researching) the Great War: Tardi Is Not Getting Out Of His Trench

Abstract

Tardi is one of the most important active French sequential artists, considered a contemporary classic thanks to his vast oeuvre and his comics adaptations of important French literary works. Most of his graphic narratives are set in the early 20th century, and quite a few of them deal with the First World War. These are a precious case study for the analysis of the interplay between individual memory, post-memory, and historiography. They may also cast light on the political dimension of Tardi's oeuvre.

Je ne suis pas historien, le nombre d'obus
au mètre carré ne m'intéresse pas.
Tardi

1. Tardi's Fixation With W.W.I

Tardi is one of those bewilderingly versatile comics artists that challenge critics' ability to define and pigeonhole them – on a par with, say, Alan Moore or Will Eisner. Born Jacques Tardi in 1946, but signing his works using only his surname, he became famous for the series *Les Aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blanc-Sec* (1976-2007), featuring an unconventional female supernatural detective and adventurer, set in the period between 1911 and 1922; the episodes of this series have been translated into English and are currently being adapted for a major film production. But Tardi is also the sequential artist who dared turn into comics three novels by the highly controversial French writer Louis-

Ferdinand Céline (*Voyage au bout de la nuit*, *Casse-pipe* and *Mort à credit*).[1] Moreover, he adapted several novels by Leo Malet, one of the paramount French crime writers, who believed that Tardi was the only person to have visually understood his books; he also turned into sequential narratives books by Jean-Patrick Manchette, another important crime writer, who also wrote scenarios for Tardi. He wrote and drew a three-volume graphic memoir, *I, Rene Tardi, Prisoner of War in Stalag IIB*, telling the story of his father, a POW in World War II. Finally, we have the monumental comics adaptation of Jean Vautrin's novel *Le cri du peuple*, set in the weeks of the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1871. Even such a cursory overview of Tardi's artistic career shows a recurring interest in past historical events, mostly focusing on French history of the late 19th and 20th Century.

However, the French comic artist seems to be mostly interested in a single event—albeit, as we shall see, gigantic in size and extremely complex—which constitutes a watershed not only in French history, but for most European countries: the Great War, aka World War I. This is allegedly due to a familial link to that historical event; his grandfather was one of the *poilus*, the French infantrymen who manned the trenches in one of the greatest mass slaughters in history: French casualties amounted to about 1,400,000, including 40,000 civilians. W.W.I seems to have become a sort of personal obsession for Tardi, who has drawn and written two large-size works, *C'était la guerre des tranchées*, published in 1993 and translated as *It Was the War of the Trenches*, and *Putain de guerre!* published in 2008-2009, whose English edition is called *Goddamn this War*. To these one must add a more recent narrative-cum-audio-CD, *Le dernier assaut* (The Last Assault), which was published in 2016, during the centenary of the First World War.

To the major works, that may be read as a sort of trilogy, we should add a handful of shorter graphic narratives published between 1974 and 1999. It is not without a certain amount of self-irony that Tardi wrote, in the verbal interlude following the first episode of *C'était...*: "People ask me, 'More soldier tales, Tardi? When're you coming out from your trench?'" (Tardi 2010, 22). The imagination of this master of graphic narratives seems to be trapped in a trench on the Western Front, and this metaphor is quite appropriate because the war

1 Though Tardi's adaptation of Céline is not considered to wholly belong to "pure" comics by Armelle Blin-Rolland, if such a thing as a pure comic ever existed.

appears (even depicted in a few frames) in other works of his vast oeuvre: in the ending of *La veritable histoire du soldat inconnu* (1974, The veritable story of the unknown soldier), in flashbacks throughout *Le Der des ders* (1997, The last of the last),[2] then in the short graphic story "La Fleur au fusil" (1979, The flower in the rifle) as well as in one of the stories of Adèle Blanc-Sec, *Le secret de la salamandre* (1891, The Secret of the Salamander).

Such a pervasive presence of W.W.I has already been noticed by other critics, like Jean Arrouye, even though the only collection of essays specifically focusing on comics depicting the Great War, the 2015 special issue of *European Comic Art* edited by Maaheen Ahmed, Martin Lund, and Kees Ribbens, passingly mentions Tardi in the introduction (Ahmed 3) but does not feature an article devoted to this huge textual corpus. However, Tardi's fixation on the muddy and deadly trenches of 1914-1918 seems to have begun together with his career as a comics artist – something rather remarkable for a practitioner of the sequential art of an overt and clearly stated anarchist and pacifist persuasion. It is therefore necessary to discuss Tardi's Great War narratives, as they constitute a conspicuous part of the oeuvre of a master of the sequential art, including some of his most impressive works. Moreover, they are a precious case study for the analysis of the interplay between individual memory (or post-memory) and historiography (considered as a collective, institutionalized, formalized form of memory). Last but not least, they may help us to better understand the political dimension of Tardi's oeuvre.

2. Glimpses of the Wasteland

It is Tardi himself to inform us that he was already attracted by W.W.I at the very beginning of his career. Viviane Alary maintains that the short story *Un épisode banal de la guerre des tranchées* "est la première manifestation de ce thème" (Alary 78), parenthetically inserting the year 1970 near its title.

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2 *Le Der des ders* means la « dernière des dernières (guerres) », that is, the last of the last wars, and it refers to the Great War, because it was (erroneously) seen as "the war to end all wars". The phrase, however, also applies to the *poilus*, the French W.W.I soldiers, hinting at their miserable and gruesome plight. This is a comics adaptation of a crime novel by Didier Daeninckx, translated into English as *A Very Profitable War*.

We might think this is the year of the first publication of this story, but in a collection of short narratives (including *Un épisode...*) the author explains that in 1970 he proposed the story ("un scénario sur 14-18" [Tardi 1979, 2] – those numbers indicating, of course, W.W.I) to the comics magazine *Pilote*, but it was rejected by Goscinny "pour des raisons obscures" (Tardi 1979, 59). Thus, Tardi had to fall back on another war story, set in the Napoleonic wars, *Un cheval en hiver*, which would become his first published comic in 1970. *Un épisode...* was published on the newspaper Liberation only "quatre ou cinq ans plus tard [...] très mal imprimé", then reprinted on issue 78 of *Charlie Hebdo*, albeit "trop réduite". The fact that Tardi did not abandon his original idea of a story set in the trenches of W.W.I is proof of what he jokingly declares in his graphic commentary to the stories collected in his 1979 anthology: "14-18 me trottait déja dans la tête" (Tardi 1979, 10). Besides, the importance of this first, very brief, embryonic text is witnessed by the fact that two versions of it were reprinted in the 1979 anthology: the first (pages 60-5), drawn and written for *Underground*, a comics magazine whose publication never started; the second (pages 66-9), published on *Liberation* and then on *Charlie Hebdo*. *Un épisode...* tells the bitter story of two French soldiers sent to relieve their comrades manning an advanced observation post; this is actually a suicide mission with a tragic ending in both versions. In the first, the two surviving soldiers (one French, one German) simultaneously kill each other; in the second, the French protagonist is accidentally killed by other French infantrymen because he's wearing a German gas mask.[3] As it often happens in Tardi's war stories, one might comment by quoting Jim Morrison: no one here gets out alive.

If, as Tardi stated in 1979, *Un épisode...* was first published four or five years after it had been rejected by *Pilote*, it came out in the same year of *La veritable histoire...*, that is, 1974; or there was an inversion of the chronological order, as his first Great War narrative (in order of conception) was published after the second, in 1975.[4] Tardi's comment on the latter states that "...il y a

3 One must agree with Tardi as for the format of the second version: though graphically more refined than the first (and much closer to Tardi's mature drawing style), it is definitely too small compared to the first, or to the large-sized frames of the subsequent major works on W.W.I.

4 Unfortunately, Tardi does not mention the date of publication of *Un episode...* on *Liberation*, leaving this matter to be defined by further bibliographic research.

là, à peu pres tous les sujets que je reprendrai par la suite chez la 'Blanc-Sec' et ailleurs: savant fous, délires è la Jules Verne, dinosaures, et 14-18"[5] (Tardi 2005, 2), and this is exactly what we find in *La veritable histoire...*: the hard and horrific vision of W.W.I only appears at the end of a surrealistic, oneiric narrative conjured up by Tardi's unbridled visionary creativity. *La veritable histoire...* starts as a long phantasmagoria of weird, vaguely threatening visions which abruptly stops, leaving us in the cold mud of a trench: the last page reveals that it has all been the terminal delirium of a dying man, a French infantryman (and former writer) shot in the head. The ending is bitterly ironic, since the narrating "I" and protagonist will be buried under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris on 11 November 1920, second anniversary of the end of the war on the Western Front: we thus find out that the pitoyable (pitiful) writer is none other than the French Unknown Soldier. Here Tardi seems to be intimidated by the wasteland of modern warfare, limiting himself to draw only three frames which show the corpse of the protagonist and narrator, three of his comrades in arms uttering derogatory comments about him, then a skeleton. We have no landscapes of No Man's Land as in *Un episode...*, and in Tardi's later, larger works on the Great War. The final circular frame ironically shows the Arc de triomphe, built by Napoleon to celebrate another, much less bloody, French victory, the battle of Austerlitz (1805). That celebrated event contrasts with the battles of W.W.I, as there were only 8,200 casualties – killed and wounded – in Bonaparte's army: a small number if compared to the 11,000 French soldiers killed in the Battle of Charleroi in 1914, which was not even one of the greatest clashes in the Great War (and was depicted by Tardi at the beginning of *Putain...*).

In 1974 Tardi becomes relatively bolder: a whole short story is set in November 1914 on the Western Front. *La Fleur au fusil* is only ten pages long, but it features Lucien Brindavoine, a recurring character in Tardi's oeuvre (first appeared in 1972, in *Adieu Brindavoine*), and it shows Tardi's accuracy in depicting uniforms and equipment; though a 4-page sequence depicts Brindavoine's dream after he has been shot and has fainted, the rest of the pages present us with a rather faithful depiction of W.W.I landscape as we can see it in photographs of the Western Front.

5 "...there are more or less all the themes that I would later take up again in 'Blanc-sec' and elsewhere: mad scientists, delirium à la Jules Verne, dinosaurs, and 1914-18."

Shortly after that (probably in 1976) Tardi wrote and drew *Knock-out* (another story included in the 1979 collection) which is set in W.W.I but not in the trenches: Stacy, a fighter pilot and former prizefighter, flies above the ravaged fields of Flanders and Picardy, like the air aces in those EC Comics discussed by Jean-Matthieu Méon in his essay "A War Like Any Other... or Nobler?". When Stacy is attacked by a German pilot with his deadly Fokker Dr.I triplane, he comes to believe that the enemy aircraft is piloted by another former boxer, Hermann, that he had fought and then befriended right before the war. Though the story is heavily indebted to Joe Kubert's war comics, Tardi warns us that "sa vision de la première guerre mondiale est bidon" (Tardi 1979, 26). This means that he was already knowledgeable with the grim reality of trench warfare and the mass carnages of the Western Front.

Brindavoine reappears in one of the episodes of the comics series which made Tardi famous, *Les Aventures extraordinaires d'Adèle Blanc-Sec*: we meet him in *Le secret de la salamandre*, published in 1981, sitting at the bottom of a trench filled with water, quite dejected, exclaiming "Putain de guerre!" (Tardi 1981, 5). It is remarkable that the derogatory comment on the war turned, more than thirty years later, into the title of the second large-sized work devoted to the Great War by the French comics artist. In this episode of Adèle Blanc-Sec's series, the war appears through a series of flashbacks: we begin with an eight-page sequence in which Brindavoine first infects his arm with gangrene, in order to leave the battlefield and save his life (self-mutilation being an all-too-common practice in W.W.I trenches), then looks for shelter under a heavy shelling, eventually taking refuge in a crypt where he finds a supernatural talking idol (Tardi 1981, 4-11). Then there is the series of frames depicting the moment when Brindavoine awakes in a military hospital to find out that his arm has been amputated, immediately followed by his return home, an embittered and demoralized survivor: the loss of the right arm has brought to an end his career as a photographer and turned him into an alcoholic (Tardi 1981, 14-8). These are no more than glimpses of trench warfare in a fantasy story with psi powers, conspiracies and counter-conspiracies, cryogenic suspension of life, mafia killers, and the quest for immortality; but they are quite vivid and realistic, presenting its readers with a believable illustration of the dismal landscape of the Western Front, and a detailed reproduction of a French infantryman's uniform and equipment, even in terms of color.

3. A Matter of Post-memory

All in all, throughout the Seventies and the Eighties the French artist seems to be slowly—maybe hesitantly—getting nearer and nearer the Line, as one of the most famous German writers and witnesses of the Great War, Ernst Jünger, called the ravaged strip of land enclosed by the trenches which stretched from Switzerland to the North Sea, pockmarked by shell holes, scattered with corpses and debris. That dismal and lugubrious landscape seems to be haunting the imagination of Jacques Tardi, who draws it in a series of glimpses, that is, the short stories we have discussed so far.

Tardi's link to that place and time is a matter of post-memory, to put it in Marianne Hirsch's terms, as the artist himself explains in the verbal interlude (Tardi 1993, 27-30) separating the first story of *C'était...* from the rest of the volume. His grandfather was an infantryman in W.W.I, and his grandmother told him again and again the story of the frightening night spent by her husband at Verdun, in one of the most lethal areas of the whole Western Front: Tardi's grandfather was stranded between the French lines, among corpses, unable to reach his fellow soldiers with the food he was carrying, under enemy fire and then shelling (Tardi 2000, 17). This story was partially transmogrified in an episode in *C'était...*, dated January 1916 (Tardi 1993, 86-99). We are graphically shown the soldier who, like Tardi's grandfather, throws himself on the ground under fire, accidentally plunging his hands in the entrails of a German soldier's eviscerated corpse (Tardi 1993, 87-88), being subsequently scared by the danger of gangrene.

Thus, well before *Un épisode banal...* and *La veritable histoire...*, Tardi's involvement in the memory—or better post-memory—of the Great War seems to be one of those acts of transmission brought to attention by Hirsch (31), who describes post-memory as

> the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors, among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch 5)

It is quite remarkable that Hirsch started her discussion of post-memory by reading another graphic narrative, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*; and she had the

first page of the first version of *Maus*—the 1972 short story from which the graphic memoir sprouted from 1980 to 1991—inserted right at the beginning of the first chapter of her monograph (Hirsch 28). There we see the original act of memory transmission, Vladek Spiegelman telling his son Art the story of his ordeal in the Shoah; a scene which is quite like the one described by the purely verbal narrative inserted by Tardi between the first story of *C'était...* and the others. One must notice the different choice of the French artist: while Spiegelman showed us the act of transfer, drawing himself in bed, listening to his narrating father, with the horrors of the Sosnowiec Ghetto replacing ordinary fairy tales, Tardi temporarily renounced images and depicted the act of transfer with words only. In both cases, however, the representation of the scene of memory transmission is a way to highlight the intimate, personal connection of the authors with the narrated past; in Tardi's case, the connection between himself, a man born in 1946, and W.W.I, that had ended twenty-eight years before his birth; and that is a connection made possible by post-memory.

4. The Making of *C'était la guerre des tranchées*

The story that comes before the verbal "post-memorial" interlude in the volume edition of *C'était...* tells the dire fate of infantryman Binet, killed while searching for his brother-in-arms Faucheux in no man's land. What is now the opening episode of *C'était...* was once a standalone comic book, *Trou d'obus* [Howitzer shellhole], first published in 1984 by Imagerie Pellerin. As we have seen, this story is the last of a series of short pieces scattered throughout the 1970s and 1980s that tackle the First World War,[6] witnessing Tardi's longstanding interest in that conflict and, above all, in the nightmarish landscape of the trenches: since it was included in the larger work, it should be read as a sort of gateway to Tardi's major graphic narratives on W.W.I, to what would in time become a monumental trilogy with *Putain de guerre!* and *Le dernier assaut*.

6 To those we should probably add *La torpedo rouge-sang*, which is set in the years of the Great War (starting on the day of the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian archduke whose death triggered the conflict), even though its text was not written by Tardi but by Serge De Beketch, and it is not set in the trenches.

But how should we interpret Tardi's purely verbal retelling of his grandfather's horrific accident in Verdun, which separates the story of Binet, from all the other narratives? Was that just a way to differentiate his "primal scene" of post-memory from Spiegelman's? Though I suspect that *Maus* was an important influence on Tardi after 1990, especially for his W.W.II trilogy *I, Rene Tardi, Prisoner of War in Stalag IIB*, I do not think that the Bloomian anxiety of influence may explain this odd textual discontinuity.

The caesura created by the verbal interlude may be read instead—in a more productive way—as a trace of Tardi's comic's discontinuous *Enstehungsgeschichte*, or history of the text, which has been accurately reconstructed by Thierry Groensteen (5-6). The stories that make up *C'était...* were separately published in instalments from 1982 to 1993 (with a very long pause between November 1982 and February 1993) by Casterman on the magazine *(A Suivre)*; as we have seen, *Trou...* had been published separately by another press. Groensteen notices that the seven episodes of *C'était...* "ne soient plus indiqués comme tels ni séparés d'aucune manière" (6), hence they seem to have been somewhat merged into a single narrative, and yet some episodes are characterized by unity of subject and closure effect (6). Groensteen correctly concludes thus:

> La *Guerre des tranchées* n'est pas un récit linéaire mais une collection de scènes plus ou moins indépendantes les unes des autres ; plus qu'un album déroulant une intrigue classique, cet ouvrage est donc, dans sa conception même, structuré par un chapitrage implicite.[7] (7)

One should then read the implicit division in chapters of *C'était...* as a result of their publication history, something that may be more accidental than intentional, as Groensteen suggests that we cannot always know whether the interruption of an episode mirrors a voluntary scansion of the narrative or an editorial imperative (e.g. a limited number of pages). The critic then quotes Tardi, who states: "Je crois que la BD accédera vraiment à l'âge adulte quand on pourra, comme en littérature, sortir une histoire directement en album" (8). So, the matter of narrative continuity or discontinuity is quite important;

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7 *It Was the War of the Trenches* is not a linear narrative but a collection of scenes more or less independent from each other; more than a comic book unrolling a classical plot, this work is therefore, in its very conception, structured by an implicit division in chapters. [tr. mine]

after all, the title of Groensteen's essay is "Jacques Tardi ou le parti pris de la continuité". Hence Tardi's narratives' movement from *recueil* [collection] to *roman* [novel], with an increasing level of continuity, should be considered as the coming of age of the sequential art. It is when it becomes "un récit complètement intégré, homogène, au déroulement continu" (Groensteen 9) that we can consider it a mature work of art; unsurprisingly, Groensteen ends his essay by quoting Tardi's adaptation of *Le Cri du peuple*, published between 2001 and 2004, as an example of such a completely integrated, homogeneous narrative with a continuous progression.

5. The Prequel: *Varlot Soldat*

After the publication of *C'était...* and before the other parts of the trilogy, we have another short graphic story, which can be considered as a prequel to one of Tardi's comics adaptations. It all begins with the publication of *Le Der des ders*, a noir novel written by Didier Daeninckx and published in 1984; Tardi turned it into a graphic novel which was published in 1997. The story begins in 1920, hence less than two years after the end of the Great War, when a private detective, Varlot, is hired by a retired general and war hero to find out who is trying to blackmail him. The investigation compels Varlot, a war veteran, to unearth a series of episodes of W.W.I, so that Tardi inserts three flashbacks allowing him to draw the trenches and combat scenes (evidently taking advantage of all the research work done to write and draw *C'était...*) and write dialogues in which the characters recollect episodes of the war.

After *Le Der...* Daeninckx wrote a prequel, *Varlot Soldat*, drawn by Tardi, in which we are told a story in which the future detective wears the uniform of the French army and crosses the German lines to reach the wife of Griffon, a comrade who committed suicide, in order to deliver his last letter to her; since the woman lives in Mons, a Belgian city close to the French border occupied by the German army in 1914, Varlot risks his life to go there, because if he were captured he would be executed as a spy. This war story was published in 1997, and witnesses Tardi's relentless interest in the Great War; it can be also read as a halfway station between *C'était...* and *Putain...* witnessing the evolution of his style, and his ability to manage a longer war narrative than the episodes of *C'était...*

It is interesting to see how Daeninckx and Tardi managed to develop a scene which is already shown in *Le Der...*; it is an apparently senseless act by Varlot, who smashes with his rifle stock the head of Griffon right after he has shot himself to get it over with. One of the soldiers asks Varlot "T'est dingue or quoi?" (Daeninckx & Tardi 2010, 24), that is "Are you insane or what?", but the reason of his gesture is only given in *Varlot soldat*, when the protagonist explains that he destroyed Griffon's head so that nobody could prove he had shot himself (Daeninckx & Tardi 2017, 32); this will allow his widow to get a war pension as her husband died in combat. Varlot also lies to Griffon's widow, telling her that her husband sacrificed himself to save his squad (Daeninckx & Tardi 2017, 30). As usual in these war stories, one can only expect the occasional acts of kindness and solidarity from soldiers; and such acts, in a deranged world like that of trench warfare, often seem absurd or demented when seen from the outside.

Moreover, *Varlot soldat* paves the way, as we shall see, for *Putain...* inasmuch as it is characterized by an almost continuous use of caption narrative – a technique that will turn into a powerful unifying device for a graphic narrative which might have been as fragmentary as *C'était...* without it.

5. From *Putain de guerre !* To *Le dernier assaut*

Interestingly, Groensteen does not mention the second and third part of Tardi's Great War trilogy, that is *Putain de guerre!* and *Le dernier assaut*, both published after *Le Cri du peuple* and yet well before his article. Maybe the reason is that, according to his evolutionary and diachronic perspective (9), the second and third part of the triptych should be seen as a regression. It is in fact quite difficult to read them as "graphic novels," even though they have evidently been conceived as unitary works, notwithstanding the original publication of *Putain...* in two volumes, and Jean Arrouye's idea that *Putain...* is made up "de récits successifs et indépendants les uns des autres". Yet these independent stories (most of them very short) are somewhat unified by the caption narrative which relentlessly comments on the images. It begins as the voice of an anonymous infantryman (we are only told he is "un ouvrier toruneur en métaux de la rue des Panoyaux" [8]) telling his own story, but then expands its scope, talking about episodes of the Great War that he has not personally experienced, such

as in the frame depicting the retreat of the Belgian army (18) or the remarkable final sequence in the "1919" part, in which each frame depicts a different time and place of the war, often showing little known aspects of that enormous conflict (81-95), ultimately dealing with events after the armistice of November 11, 1918. The very last frame shows the anonymous narrator of *Putain...*, sitting in a bar, drinking and smoking with his remaining hand (the other having been lost in Argonne), a sad and embittered survivor in a world ravaged by death and destruction, with more death and destruction to come in twenty years' time.

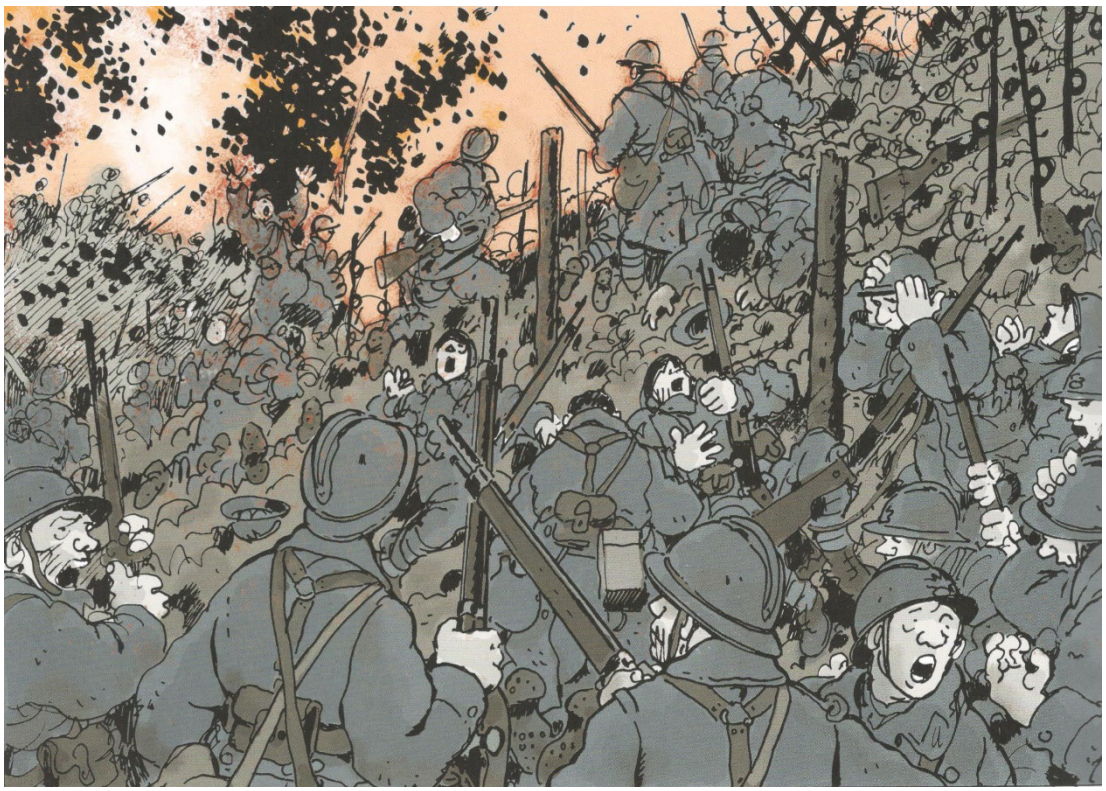
Tardi impressively managed to contrast the two components of comics, images and words, by having caption narrative providing continuity to the kaleidoscope of war episodes conjured up by the pictures. And such a contrast between a highly personal voice-over, speaking in colloquial streetwise French, and the sometimes horrifying objectivity of pictures (like the wholesale butchery of the third frame at page 22), even though conveyed through a "classical" *ligne clair* style (cf. Alary), is brusquely increased when the "1915" part begins. In fact, the first section of the book, "1914", depicts the individual experiences of the narrator, his first battle, then a flashback of his enlistment, the departure of French troops marching towards the front between cheering crowds, then once again the battlefield and a mostly linear narrative of combat, in which captions and images run parallel and the point of view is that of a single character. But as soon as "1915" begins, the narrative instantaneously moves along the Western Front and elsewhere, alternating individual tragedies (such as the suicide of Cloutier [28]) and the collective dimension (for example, when Tardi deals with colonial troops, the Indians fighting with the British Army and the Senegalese enlisted by the French [29]).

All in all, the narrative in *Putain...* is mostly set in a chronological order, paced by the succession of parts whose titles are the years of the Great War, thus declaring the intention of telling the whole war beginning to end, even though commented by the voice-over of a single soldier; there is surely a visible effort to unify the highly heterogeneous matter of W.W.I, something which is not found in *C'était...*, where we are told independent stories and the use of captions is not at all as continuous and pervasive as in *Putain...*. And yet plurality, complexity, fragmentation cannot be completely eliminated, and I am not at all sure that this was Tardi's purpose.

We find an even stronger unifying device in *Le dernier assaut*, which tells the story of a single soldier, a stretcher-bearer called Augustine,

who wanders along the trenches after surviving a shelling in which both his colleague Sauvageon and the wounded soldier they were carrying, Grumeau, have been killed. *Le dernier...* cannot, however, be simply read as the story of Augustine, because captions start commenting on it from page 16, and the voice-over they contain is not to be attributed to the stretcher-bearer but is closer to the omniscient commentary in *Putain...*. The voice-over in the captions is once again characterized by hindsight; it is the voice of a historian, notwithstanding its informal register, who has a much wider vision of the war than Augustine. A good example are the captions wondering about what Ernst, the Stormtrooper who is the protagonist of a quite long sequence (56-62), might have become after the war if he had not been killed by a Senegalese rifleman: here the voice-over talks about events that took place well after November 1918, including the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. Moreover, there are sequences – like the one on the British Bantam soldiers (32-5) – which do not feature Augustin as the protagonist. Once again, there is a tension between the story of an individual and the enormous events surrounding him. This tension is made visible and readable when a long comment on asphyxiating gases generously used during W.W.I, in which the caption defines chemical weapons as "produits toxiques aux fort jolis noms" (toxic products with very nice names) (67), is answered by Augustin thus: "Tout ce qui est déugueulasse porte un joli nom" (all that is horrible has a nice name). If the captions may be said to voice Tardi's knowledge and opinion about the war, here we have the character answering his own author, in a spontaneous and effective moment of metafiction.

Captions, as we have already said, are not as continuous as in *Putain...*: one of the most impressive moments of *Le dernier...* are the six pages (75-80) in which Tardi shows us the last attack only through a sequence of brutal and cataclysmic images, without captions or balloons. The apocalyptic unleashing of destructive forces in industrial warfare does not need words, not even those onomatopoeia which should render noises, especially violent ones, that comics readers are so familiar with; Tardi's pictures, however, manage to suggest the deafening roar of artillery shells and other firearms and explosives, conjuring up a sort of mental cacophony. The lack of captions in this shocking sequence tells us that the voice-over does not aim at playing the role of verbal connective tissue as it did in *Putain...*.



6. The Sincerity of Fragments

All in all, it seems that fragmentation cannot be edited out of narratives about W.W.I: such stories resist any attempt at unification, at continuity, at homogenization. Of course, it is a matter of size, because the First World War (just like the Second) is too big, too vast, too world-wide to admit or tolerate simplification, streamlining, synthesis. It is the story of millions, of whole nations caught in what a veteran of that war, Ernst Jünger, called *Die totale Mobilmachung*, the total mobilization. Surely Tardi strove to catch the enormity of the war, and – being a pacifist and an anarchist, immune to chauvinism – did not only focus on the plight of French fighters, but also portrayed their German enemies: the symmetric pages 8 and 9, of *Putain...* depicting the enthusiasm of civilians in the first days of the war in both France and Germany, are eloquent. Moreover, Tardi has drawn the allies of France as well. We are shown the soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force, we are presented with scenes whose protagonists are the Russian, American,

Italian, Australian, New Zealand soldiers, not to mention the peoples of the colonial empires (cf. the rant of the colonialist – and racist – captain about the African soldiers in *Le dernier...* [14-9]). Tardi is also aware of the long-lasting consequences of the war, as when the voice-over talks about the treatment of African soldiers in the French army in the Second World War, and the massacre of Thiarouye in 1944, in which former Senegalese POWs demanding to be paid their due were shot by French colonial troops in a military camp after being repatriated (17).

Moreover, there is a rift between the objective, panoramic, detached voice of historians, dealing with armies, countries, fronts, battles, abstract entities which, as military historian John Keegan has well explained in his *The Face of Battle*, have become so vast as to challenge the human ability to envision them, and the highly subjective, limited and dramatically involved narratives of combatants. Tardi seems bent on having both perspectives in his major W.W.I comics, and this can be explained by his statement in the verbal interlude of *C'était...*: "Je me suis souvent posé cette question: comment pouvait-on rester là, sous le feu ? Comment pouvait-on dormir ? Comment se réveillait-on ? Où fallait-il puiser un peu d'espoir pour avoir quelque énergie ? [...] Je ne m'interesse qu'à l'homme et à ses souffrances" (Tardi 2014, 5-6). The artist is interested in the subjective perspective of individuals, even though he is knowledgeable with the overall picture reconstructed by historians; he clearly says that he has avoided all the "historical" facts, but to steer clear of them he has studied his military history, and has asked for the support of a historian and collector, Jean-Pierre Verney, whom he thanks in the foreword to the volume edition of *C'était...* (moreover, Verney is the co-author of *Putain...*, as he wrote the bulky 37-large-size-page historical appendix to that work, richly furnished with pictures).

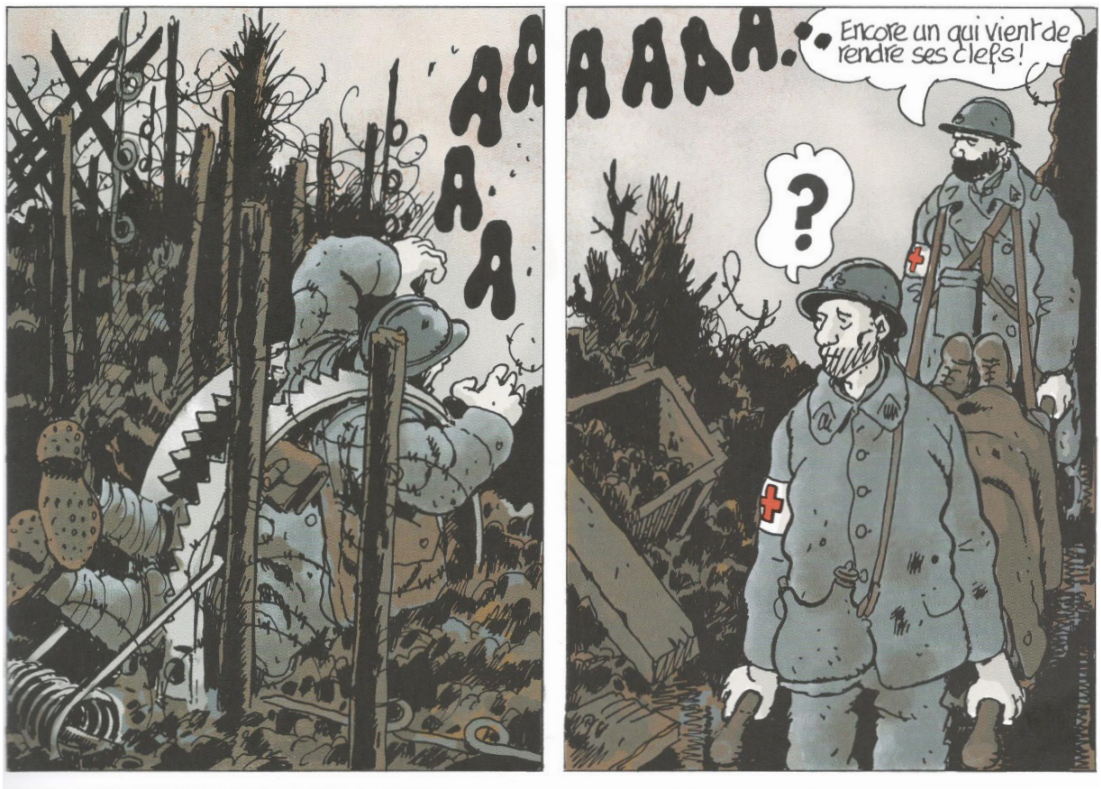
Besides, the English translation of *C'était...* presents readers with a Filmography and a Bibliography; it is the latter which deserves our attention, because it lists a series of classics of W.W.I literature, such as Henri Barbusse's *Under Fire*, Ernst Jünger's *Storms of Steel*, Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero*, Gabriel Chevallier's *Fear*, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The bibliography also includes works written by historians: *Les pelotons du general Pétain*, by Vincent Moulia, *Le temps des américains, 1917-1918*, by André Kaspi, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14*, by Francoise

Thébaud, and what is considered the first essay on Great War literature, Jean Norton Cru's *Témoins*, published in 1929, and only recently rediscovered and republished. Hence, we have the double perspective, the two different points of view which generate the tension we may sense in Tardi's W.W.I narratives: on the one hand the testimony of the individual, whose experience is unavoidably partial and fragmentary, on the other hand the wider scope of the historian's gaze from above. When Tardi asks himself how the soldiers could remain there, under fire; how they could sleep in the dugouts; how they woke up in the morning, he raises questions that only the memoirs of combatants can answer. Besides, these memoirs are the very sources that military historians have tapped too when they, like John Keegan in *The Face of Battle*, tried to reconstruct what might be the individual experience of soldiers in the "killing ground".

7. The Interplay of Stories, Testimonies, and Histories

Tardi's post-memory was thus fed by the stories told by his grandmother about his grandfather's experiences in the trenches, but also by the voices of combatants which entrusted their memories to a printed text; yet all this is put in a dialectical relation to the wider narratives of historians, which encompass the smaller stories of individuals. The interplay between these three sources (familial stories, war narratives and historiography) makes Tardi's W.W.I works such a complex and fascinating cultural artifact, well beyond their indisputable aesthetic value. But the tension between the individual stories and the collective history is not just diegetic: it is existential.

Viviane Alary has noticed that "La A est aussi un élément-clé de la fantasmagorie tardienne. [...] Il est la première lettre du vocabulaire tardienne composant une esthétique de la mort" (Alary 81). In fact, when Tardi's characters die, both in his W.W.I narratives and in the remainder of his oeuvre, they always issue the same cry, a row of trembling As, as shown in this picture taken from *Le dernier assaut*:



This is a sort of stylized death cry, which "renforcera l'intensité dramatique ou au contraire la théatralité parodique tout en ponctuant la comptabilité macabre des morts" (Alary 81). The French critic is right when she points out that in these war stories there is a veritable accounting of death: everybody dies. Most stories end with the death of the protagonists, especially in *Putain...* and *Le dernier...* This is absolutely realistic: what most soldiers who joined the French army in 1914 could reasonably expect was to be dead before the end of the war. But this means that the narrator of *Putain...* is a statistical anomaly, the only character in Tardi's gallery who manages to survive the war, even though he started fighting in 1914; the only one who does not end his story by issuing the iconic death cry. Hence the stories in *C'était...* are short also because their protagonists die: death is the great interruptor, signalled by the ominous As. History can afford continuity because it is mostly told by those who did not fight in the trenches, or did not take part in it, those who can afford the benefit of hindsight.

On the other hand, most of the combatants in Tardi's stories did not escape to tell us, like Melville's Ishmael. Hence the tension between interruption and

continuity is also the highly tragic opposition between those who die and those who live, between the fallen and the survivors – and their descendants. By focusing on the dead, on Binet, on Akermann, on Desbois, on Huet, on Mazure, and the other victims of the war, Tardi, the grandson of a survivor, seems to be paying off a symbolic debt; and though he is well aware of the long-term perspective of the historians, which provides *Putain*... with a larger frame, he remains faithful to the interrupted, discontinuous stories of the men (and women) who die.

This is the final solution in *Le dernier assaut*, maybe the most original of Tardi's W.W.I narratives in terms of diegetic architecture: the episodes are connected by the wandering stretcher-bearer Augustin, a sort of Dante lost in the hell of the Western Front. He survives Grumeau, Sauvageon, the Senegalese tirailleurs and their captain, the German soldiers killed in cold blood after they have been taken prisoners, the bantam soldiers, the Russians, Ernst the Stormtrooper, all the soldiers slaughtered in the attack, Broutille, but then Augustin is eventually maimed by shrapnel, and turned into a vegetable. The story ends when Grumeau, who somehow managed to survive and has been hospitalized in the same long-term care facility, exasperated by Augustin's ceaseless delirious blabbering, strangles him to have rest. Augustin dies killed by the dead: there is a somber circularity in the ending of *Le dernier assault*, a grim moral for this horrific, but historically sound and accurately researched story.

But there is a greater irony, one which sounds even more ominous today. Here are the last words taken from the last, almost allegorical frame: "Mais depuis le printemps 'la grippe espagnole' s'en donnait a cœur joie... Elle allait faire elle seule, de par le monde, plus de victimes que la Premiere Guerre Mondiale" (Tardi 2016, 92). A pandemics may be even worse than the (then) worst war in human history.

Tardi's unstoppable irony, which often turns into withering sarcasm, is surely one of the great merits of his Great War trilogy: it allows the artist to present us a great historical event that has been told so many times in an almost always novel way. One should never forget, however, that the searing irony of these graphic narratives often stems from Tardi's ability to connect in unexpected way the greater picture—the historiographic, collective narrative—with individual tragedies, with the destiny of single characters that he conjured up in a such lively—and shocking—fashion.

8. The Anarchist's Point of View

One might now ask the overwhelming question: why is Tardi not getting out from the trenches of the Great War? Why is he getting back to that event, which is today a century old, so far from our present that even old people like him (and the author of this article) need to rely on the stories told by their great-parents or to history books to access it? Is it just a fascination with a time and a place, a collector's attitude maybe? One immediately notices how accurate is Tardi when it comes to uniforms, equipment, vehicles, and may conclude, with Jean-Matthieu Méon, that "The attention given to technical and military details (uniforms, weapons, strategies etc.) is a token of historical authenticity but it is also a typical attitude of amateurs of militaria" (Méon 72). Interest in war in general and combat in particular has always been monopolized by amateurs whose political leanings are often suspicious. But it is quite clear that Tardi does not belong to those who are interested in war because they are in love with it (a love which is mostly platonic).

We should never forget that Tardi is an anarchist, and that anarchism is particularly sensitive to the struggle of individuals against the vast bureaucratic, impersonal, and indifferent machinery of the state. The Great War is told by shifting from the collective level to that of the individuals and back, as Tardi does particularly in the second and third part of the trilogy, so as to display that contrast in a most dramatic and evident way. Paul Fussell highlighted the importance of "adversary proceedings" in his discussion of Great War literature and memory: he quoted as examples the us vs. them mentality which underpinned the representation of the enemy (Germans as seen by British combatants), as well as front fighters' often scathing representation of the civilians who stayed at home during the war (Fussell 75-90). Tardi wants instead to make visible the adversary rift between the poilus, the trench fighters, and the staff officers and politicians who sent them to die or be permanently maimed or mentally impaired. To Tardi the menacing "them" are not the Germans, the *boches* vituperated by the French press, but the generals and the colonels who manage the bloody show of W.W.I. The real enemy are not the German soldiers in front of you, they are the French elites behind you. The voices of these elites are already quoted in *Un episode...*, to provide a glaring contrast with the words of the soldiers in the balloons. Tardi quotes the bloodthirsty and rather hysterical rant of a journalist of *Illustration* (published on 12 August 1916): "Tuer du boche, battre le boche,

nettoyer la tranchée à la grenade, au couteau, au revolver [...]" (Tardi 1979, 68), and then shows the dire plight of French soldiers who do not clean the trenches at all, and a German soldier firing at the French outpost with a machine gun—much more effective than hand grenades, knives, or revolvers. This is done again in *Putain...*, where there are quotations of military commanders and politicians at the beginning of each chapter, with ironic effects, like when general Nivelle is quoted at the beginning of the 1917 chapter, saying "L'expérience a fait ses preuves, la victoire est certaine, je vous en donne l'assurance, l'ennemi l'apprendra à ses dépens" (Tardi & Verney, 51). General Robert Georges Nivelle did not win the war, but was the father of a colossal failure, the so-called "Nivelle offensive" of April 1917, whose results were so disappointing (and losses so staggering) to persuade Paul Painlevé, the war minister, to dismiss him.

Once again, irony is achieved by offsetting historical documents (the quotation of Nivelle's bragging) against historical reconstruction (embodied in Tardi's impressive graphic reconstruction of the carnage during the Nivelle offensive [Tardi & Verney 54-5]) and the voice-over of the fictional narrator commenting on both. Once again, the soldiers are victims of the abstract planning of generals, enforced by the machinery of the state. The Great War clearly shows the damages that can be caused by a democratically elected government, through that supreme destructive/repressive process that is modern warfare. It does not come as a surprise, then, that right after the horrors of the Nivelle offensive Tardi draws the individual story of François Paulet, sentenced to death by a court martial because he sang "La chanson de Craonne", a song that denounced the disaster of the Nivelle offensive, and refused to go back to the front-line trenches (Tardi & Verney 57-9). From the point of view of an anarchist like Tardi, this is a glaring example of how a state that presents itself as legitimized by the people may then send ordinary people (like Paulet and the other poilus) to die in badly planned and managed offensives or be shot by firing squads. And the Great War is probably, for Tardi, an even better case study—so to say—than the Shoah organized and carried out by the Third Reich, because the French Republic from 1914 to 1918 was not ruled by a madman surrounded by bloodthirsty henchmen, but by a democratically elected government made up by sane individuals. War is the moment when state-sanctioned violence, barbarism, and destruction manifest themselves most blatantly and obscenely; a moment of truth for one who, like Tardi, mistrusts states and governments.

Once again, it is a matter of how personal memory communicated through the vast literature of the Great War, historical reconstruction and personal post-memory interact, cooperate, clash, or create some precarious equilibrium endowed with a twisted and terrible beauty. This may ultimately explain the greatest merit of this trilogy from the point of view of comics studies: how it has exploited in an original way all the narrative resources available to a comics artist to present us with the technological apocalypse which took place between 1914 and 1918—the war of iron and gas, as it was called by a W.W.I survivor, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle—in such a way that only the sequential art could afford. This makes Tardi's graphic retelling of the Great War an inescapable milestone for any discussion on the relationship of history and comics to come, and an indispensable reading for all future comics scholars.

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