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Status Quaestions è uno spazio di scambio interdisciplinare e interculturale. Rivista semestrale, che prevede un numero di letteratura uno di linguistica – entrambi monografici con una sezione miscellanea –, SQ è specialmente interessata agli studi comparativi e interculturali, a questioni metodologiche e agli studi di linguistica e traduzione.

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SEZIONE MONOGRAFICA

DRAWING (HI)STORIES: RETHINKING HISTORICAL GRAPHIC NARRATIVES

edited by Umberto Rossi and Tracy Lassiter

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Introduction

When we first pondered the theme of this issue of *Status Quaestionis*, we already knew the focus would be comics and graphic narratives; after all, our paths had crossed at conferences and through scholarly networks dedicated to these texts. But what *kind* of graphic narratives? Given our personal interest in the subject and given that it is frequently the topic of some of our favorite graphic novels, we quickly settled on the theme of history.

Besides our selfish interest in historical graphic narratives like Jason Lutes's *Berlin: City of Stones*, Hugo Pratt's Corto Maltese stories, or Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde*, we liked the questions that analyses of historical graphic narratives allowed; we saw them as an opportunity to generate thought-provoking and challenging prompts to our contributors. In our call for proposals, we raised some of these considerations: Historical reconstruction (or – to some extent – construction) has a complex relation with the times in which it is produced. Historical comics writers and artists must reconstruct the past in order to tell their stories, or to relay others'; how do these creators become researchers? Furthermore, these creators are judged on their ability to conjure long-gone worlds, to resurrect the dead, to unearth forgotten stories, places, and cultures; whose story will be told? From whose perspective? How much and what do we remember of the past? Why do we remember it at all? What present concerns, fears, and hopes make us look back into time and space? What is depicted and what remains hidden? How do artists remain true to historical facts, and how do they decide which ones to remain true to?

The issue that follows represents answers to these questions. We are pleased with the scope of the contributions, and in them readers will find answers to those questions coming from not only the contributors, but by the comic and graphic novel writers and artists themselves.

Even though one might object to the use of the overworked phrase “graphic novel” (which here one might instinctively like to see replaced by “comics,” “graphic narratives,” or “sequential art”), there is something to be appreciated: that the depiction or reconstruction of a past time is not accomplished by novels only. There is such a thing as historical comics. It took some years, but at last historians have come to accept this format as a legitimate mode of scholarship. In his essay “History and Comics,” Paul Buhle (who would later work with Howard Zinn and Mike Konopacki in creating the graphic version of Zinn’s *A People’s History of America’s Empire*) states, “For at least a generation, students have increasingly thought about history (and other disciplines) ‘in pictures’” (2007, 315). He recognizes the validity of this art form, which he predicted “could become a vehicle for non-fictional versions of the big stories as well as the personal tale.” Recognizing this narrative form, Buhle adds, marks a significant cultural turning point (320). Elsewhere, Frederick Luis Adalma notes that these books, particularly those from a multiethnic perspective, “powerfully persuade us to consider how graphic novels...can open our eyes wide to deliberately erased chapters from our past” (2018, ix-x). Finally, Adalma adds, these books provide “new ways of looking back to the past...in order for us to act progressively for humanity today and tomorrow” (x).

When we think of any historical novel, we expect to be told a story set in a distant past. But how far back is “far”? Not even the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, clearly establishes when the past is sufficiently far enough “past” to be a proper setting for a historical novel:

Historical novel, a novel that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact.

That realistic detail includes elements such as accuracy with costumes, building design, and means of transportation. In adventure stories, their inclusion might serve as simple backdrop or for amusement. At other times, however, these depictions are the result of thorough research and are rendered in painstaking

detail. We wish to recognize this accuracy, demonstrated in, among others, works by Gian Luigi Bonelli in *Tex Willer* and Pratt's *Corto Maltese*. Their attention to detail brings history to life, a history that occurred many decades prior. Therefore, rather than focus on a demarcation that fixes a particular number of years as the boundary of what constitutes "the past,"¹ we prefer the *Encyclopedie Britannica* definition as it focuses on the *zeitgeist* of a given era, valuing the pieces that can transport us to an earlier age, even if that age occurred a few decades ago.

Something else should be said about historical fictions, including historical comics. Describing the historical novel as a genre, the *Encyclopedie Italiana* clearly states that: "Caratteristica di questo genere di romanzo è la mescolanza tra realtà dei grandi fatti storici narrati e finzione degli eventi che accadono ai personaggi" (The mix of the reality of the great historical events that are told and the fictional events occurring to characters is typical of this kind of novel).

The *Britannica* agrees, and quotes examples:

The work may deal with actual historical personages, as does Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934), or it may contain a mixture of fictional and historical characters. It may focus on a single historic event, as does Franz Werfel's *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1934), which dramatizes the defense of an Armenian stronghold.

¹ The attempt to define a clear demarcation between which narratives are historical and which are "contemporary" is problematic, and ultimately self-defeating. If we said that a novel or a comic is historical when the author sets his or her story in a past that he has not lived, a sort of "grey area" would immediately be created: a young comics artist, born, say, in 1990, might write and draw a story set in the 1970 that would be historical for him or her, but would not be for someone born in 1960. Of course, when we talk of the Great War, or the French Revolution, or the Boston Tea Party, or the life of Queen Elizabeth I, we feel we are on a safer ground: those are events that no living man or woman (as far as we know) can *remember*. So, the idea of a historical narrative seems to have a lot to do with the duration of human life. But such a feeling may be beguiling: the Vietnam War, or the Shoah are still the past, even if many people are still alive to talk about those events. What would we make of *Maus*, then? Art Spiegelman's father could remember his experiences in Auschwitz; but were not those experiences at the same time deeply personal *and* historical for his son? Moreover, does not *Maus* count as a historical comic because it can be read as a memoir? Last but not least: what is contemporary now (e.g., a comic about Hurricane Katrina like Don Brown's *Drowned City*) will ultimately be read as a historical narrative in a more or less far future.

This should also apply to historical comics: they must be made up by a combination of historical reconstruction (which compels comics artists to research their narratives) and fictional invention, with a variable proportion of the two ingredients. This also implies that a historical comics artist must be endowed with at least three skills: to those of the visual artist and the writer, s/he must add the talent of the researcher.

By trying to frame a satisfactory definition of historical comics, we have also touched – not always explicitly – on all the theoretical issues discussed by the articles in this special issue of *Status Quaestionis*. Ascertaining what is factual and what is fictional in a historical graphic narrative is only part of the question: our contributors have also striven to understand *why* the author resorted to inserting fictional tesserae in their verbal-visual mosaic. This is what can be found especially in Tena L. Helton’s “Genre and Truth-Telling in David Wong’s *Escape to Gold Mountain*,” in Umberto Rossi’s “Drawing (and Researching) the Great War”, as well as in Marco Petrelli’s “Landscape of Fear,” wherein he argues Alan Moore’s *From Hell* is a commentary on the perils of modern times.

Fundamental questions surrounding the discussion of historical comics begins with addressing the “Why?” – that is, why does an artist select a particular era to write about? The artist’s choice to depict a certain historical era, whether 50 BCE or 1914 AD, is never arbitrary – actually, it is a tremendously meaningful decision. Other essays in this collection explore why comics artists chose particular historical moments to write about,² and what insights readers like us today can glean from them. Essays like Adam W. Darlage’s “A Fixed *Astérix*” address these questions, as does Petrelli’s again. A transnational dimension of both artists and scholars enables them not to subscribe to a single historical narrative, the so-called history written by winners (or hegemonic cultures, or privileged groups, and so on). It is then interesting that Julie Higashi, in her essay on Kouno Fumiyo’s *In This Corner of the World*, focuses on the private dimension, we might say the individuals’ history, of greater historical events

² Of course, also the choice of a place is important and adds to the effects of sense that the comic generates; but asking why that artist chose to set his graphic narrative in Naples or Bangkok is not something that is only done when analyzing historical comics. It is a highly relevant question when dealing with any graphic narrative, be it set in Coconino County or in Paris, France.

(the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima); similarly, Rossi shows how Tardi has highlighted the plight of little men fighting in the trenches of the Great War, but never forgetting History with capital H. Historical graphic narratives also support a national history, which Nilakshi Goswami explains in her essay, “Ideological History, Contested Culture, and the Politics of Representation in *Amar Chitra Katha*.” The “why” questions are crucial to Tracy Lassiter’s groundbreaking essay about what we might style pandemics comics, “Of Pencils and Pandemics”, where the relation between historical comics dealing with the Spanish Flu and our present beleaguered by the Coronavirus is paramount.

Other contributors address the “How?” – that is, how do writers and artists construct their narratives? Claudia Cerulo’s “Ink on Silence” explores how the intertextual use of documents, photographs and other artifacts can be assembled to form a narrative from the gaps or silences of what is unspoken. Anne Cirella-Urrutia’s essay takes a similar tack, exploring Jean-David Morvan, Igor Kordey, and Walter’s books on World War I which use artifacts like trench newspapers to help convey their narrative. Like Goswami, Cirella-Urrutia explains that these elements contribute to these books’ inclusion in a country’s national narrative. Last but not least, Francesco-Alessio Ursini’s “Roman Emperors Across Comics Traditions” argues through rigorous theoretical framing that the answer to “how” various Roman emperors are depicted depends on culture, audience, and genre.

To conclude, we would like to underscore the truly transnational dimension of these essays. We collected essays written by American, French, Italian, Japanese, and Indian authors, who often work on comics that were not created and published in their own countries (cf. Darlage’s essay, dealing with a classic of French *bande dessinée*, or Cerulo’s discussion of two graphic memoirs by German female artists reconstructing family histories). Comics studies are rightly considered part of comparative literature studies, in as much as they work on a hybrid medium conjugating pictures with words (in very sophisticated ways); but we should always remember that comics are created by artists and writers working for a globalized publishing industry, and that they tend to have an international circulation³. This may be the reason why such

³ The reason for this easier “exportability” of comics is that their translation is much cheaper than that of a novel. Pictures do not of course need to be translated.

Historical comics seem to be able to deal with histories, not just with history: to give voice (and visibility) to minorities and to all those whose stories might otherwise be forgotten. We honor those stories, hoping one day our own will be treated as well by scholars of the future who examine our present as history.

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A Fixed *Astérix*: A Comic Reading of Romanization in Gaul

Abstract

René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's *Astérix* has become one of the most popular comics around the world; it has sold over 380 million copies and has been translated into over 100 languages. *Astérix* follows the adventures of Asterix, his best friend Obelix, and other Gauls who live in the only village that has not surrendered to the Romans after Julius Caesar's defeat of Vercingetorix at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE. The comic imagines a place where the Gauls successfully resist Roman domination and thus speaks to issues of colonization and conquest. At the same time, *Astérix* uses several comic strategies to highlight the processes of acculturation and adaptation that have long been at work among modern European national cultures. Through its counterfactual comic rewriting of the aftermath of the Gallic Wars, *Astérix* presents a cosmopolitan Gallo-Roman world populated by different historical cultures. Through *Astérix*, Goscinny and Uderzo present and promote a vision of the French past to be celebrated in defiance of the Romans today, those who would modernize France at the expense of her rich cultural heritage.

I. *Astérix* and Romanization

René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo published the first *Astérix* comic in the October 1959 edition of the French comic magazine *Pilote*. This *bande dessinée* (Franco-Belgian comic) has enjoyed sustained popularity around the world. It has sold over 380 million copies and has been translated into over 100 languages (McElduff 2016; Gustines 2019). *Astérix* became a national hit almost overnight; in 1965, just six years after the publication of *Astérix le Gaulois*, the French launched their first satellite into space bearing the name *Astérix*, aka A-1 (Nye, 1980). Despite the deaths of Goscinny in 1977 and Uderzo in 2020, many others have kept *Astérix* alive in comic form as well as film, with several

animated or live action movies based on the comic.¹ The French theme park, Parc Astérix, demonstrates the enduring popularity of *Astérix*. Also known as the “L’irréductible Parc” (after “les irréductibles Gaulois”), it opened in Plailly in 1989 and is the second largest theme park in France. There are also numerous websites devoted to the comic. The official website has five language options to keep fans informed of all things *Astérix*.²

Astérix follows the adventures of the “little star” of the series (*astérisque*), Asterix, his best friend Obelix, and the other Gauls who live in the only village that has not surrendered to the Romans after Julius Caesar’s defeat of Vercingetorix at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE. The comic is set in 50 BCE, and the villagers keep the Romans at bay through a potion brewed by the village druid Panoramix that temporarily grants great strength to those who drink it. Moving from panel to panel with illustrations to match, the first issue, *Astérix le Gaulois*, begins as follows:

En 50 avant J.-C., Nos ancêtres les Gaulois avaient été vaincus par les Romains, après une longue lutte...

Des chefs telles que Vercingétorix doivent déposer leurs armes aux pieds de César...

La paix s'est installée, troublée par quelques attaques de Germains, vite repoussées...

Toute la Gaule est occupée... [...]

Toute ?... Non ! Car une région résiste victorieusement à L'envahisseur. Une petite région entourée de camps retranchés Romains...

Tous les efforts pour vaincre ces fiers Gaulois ont été inutiles et César s'interroge...

“Quid ?”

C'est ici que nous faisons connaissance avec notre héros, le guerrier Astérix, qui va s'adonner à son sport favori : la chasse. (Goscinny and Uderzo 1961, 5)

Uderzo draws Caesar with a dark, angry look on his face, perplexed by his legions’ inability to conquer this one last village. He does not know (yet) that Asterix relies on the potion from the druid Panoramix to fuel his physical prowess, and all he can ask is “Quid?” Notably, in the panel devoted to Vercingetorix laying his arms at Caesar’s feet, the proud Arvernian warlord drops them on

¹ In 2012 Albert Uderzo selected author Jean-Yves Ferri and illustrator Didier Conrad to take over the *Astérix* series. Both *Astérix & Obélix contre César* (1995) and *Astérix et Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre* (2002) are among the highest grossing films in French history. To date, there have been ten animated *Astérix* films since and five live action movies since 1967.

² The official website is: <https://www.asterix.com>.

Caesar's feet, with the great general yelling "Ouap!" The comic resistance to the Romans begins here, with a proud Vercingetorix depicted standing before a seated Caesar in pain.

Even before the Gallic War, Roman advances into Gaul could be painful. Strategies of adaptation as well as both open defiance and quiet resistance have long characterized the colonialization and conquest of one culture by the other. Although the creeping Roman conquest of Gaul had begun even earlier, it accelerated in 125 BCE when the Romans agreed to protect a trading partner, the Greek colony of Massilia (Marseilles), from the raids of a Gallic tribe (Sulluvii) and their allies. The Romans soon established their first province north of the Alps in 121 BCE (Gallia Transalpina; later renamed Gallia Narbonensis; aka Provincia Nostra). They began building the roads that would eventually assist Julius Caesar and later Romans maintain the supply lines critical to feeding the Roman legions.

Historians have long studied the increasing political, cultural, economic, and linguistic influence of the Roman Republic and Empire on the Gauls and other tribal peoples of Europe through this process of trade, conquest, and colonization. The German historian Theodore Mommsen used the term "Romanisation" in 1885 to describe this process in the fifth volume of *Römische Geschichte*, and he regarded Roman culture as superior to the "barbarian" culture of the native peoples (Mommsen 1976, 1996; cf. Haverfield 1912 and Julian 1908-1926). Contemporary archaeologists and historians have articulated more scholarly palatable views of this Romanization process, and some even dispute the term as a descriptor of these cultural exchanges (Woolf 1998). Many have focused on native efforts to emulate and adapt to Roman cultural norms, and today Gallo-Roman culture represents one of the earliest and best understood examples of Romanization (Cf. Cunliffe 1999, Millet 1990).

A number of ancient sources provide evidence for Romanization, including Posidonius of Rhodes, Diodorus Siculus, the geographer Strabo, Appian, Cassius Dio, Tacitus, and Pliny the Elder. The Romans themselves had different names for the Gallic tribal regions based on their cultural proximity to Rome. For example, "Hairy Gaul" (Gallia Comata, for the long-haired Gauls), was farther north and therefore farthest from Roman influence, while "Toga-wearing Gaul" (Gallia Togata), otherwise known as Cisalpine Gaul, included the Gallic tribes in northern Italy most influenced by Roman cultural values

(Hammond 1996, xxvii). Asterix's village lies on the northwest coast of France in the region of Armorica (Britanny) and is a part of "Hairy Gaul." For the Romans, more physical distance from Rome equated to more barbarism among the natives because their standard was Rome, the Eternal City (*Urbs Aeterna*). In their first volume, *Astérix le Gaulois*, Goscinny and Uderzo have fun with this history. When the Roman centurion Caius Bonus captures the druid Panoramix and forces him to make the magic potion in their camp at Compendium, Panoramix instead makes a potion that causes the Romans' hair to grow to comic proportions. By the end of the story, the Roman legionaries look very much like hairy Gauls (1961, 44-48; cf. Almagor 2016, 124-125).

Astérix's historical reconstruction of this fixed moment in time merits analysis because the comic speaks to issues of colonization and conquest. Goscinny and Uderzo have created a comic universe where a minority native culture maintains its way of life by denying victory to a majority, militant, technologically advanced culture. Asterix, Obelix, and their allies invariably find themselves outside their village walls and in a world where the Romans have brought their own culture to bear. In book after book, Asterix and Obelix continue to prove their quality as Gallic heroes. They free slaves and assist gladiators, they resist Roman subterfuge, disrupt construction projects, win bets against Roman prefects, help fellow tribal peoples, and foil other threats to their simple way of life. Through it all, they transform the Roman stereotype of the barbaric, impetuous Gaul into the heroic, victorious one. Conversely, the Romans are not the historical Late Republican picture of ruthless efficiency and organization after the Marian reforms in 107 BCE. Instead, the legions are often the hapless, and generally helpless, recipients of comic pratfall violence from Asterix and Obelix, much to the chagrin of Julius Caesar.

At the same time, however, *Astérix* imbeds relevant historical, cultural, and linguistic details within the comic itself that highlight the processes of acculturation and adaptation that have long been at work among modern European national cultures. Through its counterfactual comic rewriting of the aftermath of the Gallic Wars, *Astérix* presents a cosmopolitan Gallo-Roman world populated by different historical cultures. *Astérix* routinely parodies people, events, and cultural movements in the modern world after World War II, but it does so within a comic universe peopled by Gauls, Romans, and many other world historical cultures. Goscinny and Uderzo want to make people laugh through this interplay of peoples and cultures. As Peter Kessler

notes, “the authors did not intend to cause offence with these national and international jokes. They do not after all make fun of a nation, but of the way that nation is seen by others” (1995, 87).

To this end, Goscinny and Uderzo deploy endless national stereotypes, puns, parodies, caricatures, symbolic references, double entendres, mythological references (“Par Toutatis!”), and historical allusions (“Alea iacta est!”) to both induce laughter and edify their readers through comedic satire.³ Most of the odd-numbered volumes focus on the Gauls and the Romans around their village in the region of Armorica. Cultural distinctions between Gaul (France) and Rome (Italy) are a constant reminder of the comic cultural battle. Food is a major theme, and Roman food is denigrated in favor of French cuisine. The different regions of France also receive comic treatment; Parisians stereotype the French in the provinces and vice versa. In *Le serpe d’or*, the pollution and traffic in the Gallic cities pokes fun at the perceived failures of modern urban engineering (Goscinny and Uderzo 1962, 11). *Astérix* presents a vision of the French past to be celebrated in defiance of today’s Romans, those who would modernize France at the expense of her rich cultural heritage.

Moreover, historical appearance and costumes in *Astérix* signify nationality and general cultural values. The Gauls have mustaches and the Romans do not; the Romans of the late Republic believed mustaches were signs of barbarism, as do the Romans in *Astérix* (Allen 1875, 196-8; Almagor 2016, 119). The comic makes puns out of names: “Panoramix” is the wise village druid, “Abraracourcix” is the chief of Asterix’s village, and “Assurancetourix” is the village bard who sings terribly and is just as bad on the lyre. Their English equivalents provide similar laughs: Panoramix becomes “Getafix,” as he is the one who provides the magic potion; Abraracourcix becomes “Vitalstatistix”; and Assurancetourix becomes the aptly named “Cacofonix.” These naming strategies follow traditional national and linguistic identities for the various cultural groups. The names of Gallic men end in “-ix” in homage to Vercingetorix, while Roman male names end in “-us” according to Latin noun

³ Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge translated most of the *Astérix* stories into English, beginning in 1969. Adrianna Hunter has served as the English translator since 2017 in *Asterix and the Chariot Race* (*Astérix et la Transalpine*, 2017). Because puns are so language specific, the translators often privilege the comic thrust of their work over literal translations. Cf. Kessler 1995 and Armistead 2013.

conventions. These funny Roman and Gallic names usually relate to the plot of the comic. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, the Roman architect is “Anglaicus,” while the Gallic traitor in the English translation of *Le Tour de Gaule d’Astérix* is “Unpatriotix.” Of course, this villain reforms himself in the spirit of Gallic unity after an encounter with Asterix and Obelix.

Goscinny and Uderzo mine these cultural stereotypes for laughs when Asterix and Obelix leave Gaul for adventures in the wider world, usually in the even-numbered volumes. Over-the-top costumes are deployed to identify national character, and all historical periods are fair game. For example, the stereotypically warlike Germanic Gothic tribesmen are portrayed with the nineteenth-century Prussian spiked helmet known as the Pickelhaube. When the Goths speak, their speech bubbles are always in a fraktur (Gothic) font. The Egyptians, of course, speak and write in hieroglyphics. A fan favorite, Cleopatra, makes her *Astérix* debut in *Astérix et Cléopâtre* and resembles Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra from the 1963 film. The comics make her nose rather long, as Goscinny and Uderzo play on Blaise Pascal’s comment in the *Pensées* that the length of her nose changed history (Goscinny and Uderzo 1965). The Helvetians (the Swiss) have red hair and beards and wear lederhosen, the Normans are stereotypical Vikings, and the tough Belgians live on beer and meat and compete with the Gauls for who are the bravest of Rome’s enemies.⁴

No area of European life is exempt from the fun. The Helvetians (the Swiss) make great cheese, accurate timepieces, are excellent bankers, and prefer neutrality in times of war. Both the Britons and the Iberians, like the Gauls, have their own pockets of resistance under their respective chiefs, Zebibos and Soupalognon y Crouton (the English translation uses the name Huevos y Bacon for the Iberian chief). Within the *Astérix* universe, Britain fell to Rome because the Britons always stopped fighting at 5:00 PM for hot water and milk on weekdays (a precursor to tea, which Asterix introduces to them) and never fought on the weekends (Goscinny and Uderzo 1966, 10, 45, 48). Of course, Caesar promptly chooses those times to fight them and therefore conquers them rather easily (Ibid. 6). While in Spain, Asterix and Obelix run into Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and they also introduce bullfighting to the Iberians (Goscinny and Uderzo 1969, 32; 45-46). As Christopher Pinet points out, Goscinny and Uderzo rely

⁴ *Astérix* is a rich resource for scholars interested in teaching cultural humor. For a deep analysis of Belgian culture in *Astérix chez les Belges*, cf. Vines 2008.

heavily on stereotypes drawn from national cultures: “Surely it is no accident that nearly one third of the books treat different national groupings. The titles are as follows: *Astérix et les Goths*, *Astérix en Hispanie*, *Astérix chez les Helvètes*, *La Grande Traversée* (American Indians), *Astérix en Corse*. In addition, Asterix meets many foreigners in *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* and *Astérix Legionnaire*” (1977, 157). The travels of Asterix and Obelix have continued to this day. The duo travel to Scotland in *Astérix chez les Pictes*, the first volume of *Astérix* written by Jean-Yves Ferri and illustrated by Didier Conrad.

Finally, there are other characters in *Astérix* that Goscinny and Uderzo do not depict primarily through their national identities vis-à-vis the Romans, but instead play to other mid-twentieth century stereotypes. Barbe Rouge and the pirates, for example, appear throughout the series. They fly the Jolly Roger, and with a few wardrobe changes and some pistols, they could quite possibly sail on Blackbeard’s Queen Anne’s Revenge. A running gag is that Asterix and Obelix routinely beat them up and sink their ship, so much so that the pirates have taken to sinking their own ship just to avoid the conflict. Perhaps their most famous moment is in *Astérix Légionnaire* when Uderzo draws the wreckage of their ship in a parody of Théodore Géricault’s *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (1818-1819). Sitting with his battered pirates on the floating wreckage, Barbe Rouge mournfully laments, “Je suis médusé!” (Goscinny and Uderzo 1967, 35). English translators Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge give Barbe Rouge the line, “We’ve been framed, by Jericho!” and thus preserve the comedy by punning on the painter’s name (2011, Omnibus 4, 43).

Some of these characters, including gladiators and slaves, represent conquered and oppressed peoples within Roman culture.⁵ Asterix and the other Gauls nearly always support these characters against the Romans. For example, in *Astérix Gladiateur*, Asterix and Obelix manage to free the gladiators from their “cruel métier” after several misadventures, including teaching the gladiators a child’s

⁵ There are well-documented problems with Uderzo’s visual depictions of the African (in *Astérix*, Numidian) slaves. Criticisms of Uderzo’s art (black skin, exaggerated red lips, exotic clothing) generally fall somewhere between two positions. Some argue that Uderzo’s artistic depiction of the Numidians, while distasteful and insensitive to readers today, is a symptom of Uderzo’s historical context, while others argue that his drawings are clearly racist and white supremacist. Uderzo’s art has generated press in the United States over the edited versions that children’s graphic novel publisher Papercutz began publishing in the summer of 2020. Cf. Alverson and Reid 2019, and Livingstone 2020.

guessing game that infuriates Julius Caesar from his perch in the arena (Goscinny and Uderzo, 1964, 46). On the other hand, these characters often have their own interests and do not necessarily support the Gauls against the Romans. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, slaves from a number of national backgrounds (Belgian, Gothic, Iberian, Lusitanian, and Numidian) are clearing the forest for the Romans so that Caesar can build luxury apartments all around the village of the Gauls. To help free the slaves, Asterix offers Panoramix's magic potion to Duplicatha, their Numidian leader. The slaves, however, have another idea in mind. They drink the potion, but instead beating up the Romans and leaving, they beat up the Romans to leverage better working conditions, including better pay than the legionaries. Duplicatha brings their demands to the Roman architect Anglaicus:

Nous désirons quelques petits changements dans nos conditions de travail : nous voulons être payés et affranchis dès que le premier immeuble sera bâti...
Bien entendu, nous voulons aussi des congés payés, des heures supplémentaires, la suppression progressive des coups de fouet, l'interdiction de la chaîne, et la construction de logements décents. (Goscinny and Uderzo 1971, 22)

Anglaicus agrees to free the slaves after they have finished clearing the forest. However, the druid Panoramix has given Asterix and Obelix acorns dipped in a magic potion that cause them to grow instantly into trees. Previously, the two Gauls had been planting these acorns to disrupt the Romans, but now the newly grown trees are preventing the slaves from receiving their freedom.

Apparently at an impasse with the Gauls, Duplicatha goes to Asterix's village looking for a way to finish clearing the forest, and Panoramix finds a way to solve both of their problems: "ne vous inquiétez pas; nous allons nous amuser un peu avec les Romains. Nous leur donnerons une nouvelle leçon, tout en aidant ces pauvres esclaves" (25). His clever plan involves allowing the Romans to finish their building program, and soon enough, the slaves receive their freedom. Many of them decide to take their earnings and become pirates; Barbe Rouge is seen leading a group of former slaves to the coast while tossing a bag of money into the air (31).

2. Virtuous Gauls and Decadent Romans

Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* connects Rome's decline to the twin evils of barbarism and religion and the concomitant loss

of traditional Roman civic virtues (Gibbon, 1776-1789). In *Astérix*, however, the Eternal City eternally rots from within, with corrupt Roman governors and greedy prefects lording power over bumpkin legionaries or local despots. Although Julius Caesar retains his *dignitas* throughout the series by always honoring Asterix's requests, he constantly falls victim to his Romans' ineptitude.⁶

On the other hand, it is barbarism as Goscinny and Uderzo define it that marks the path to virtue. Their distinction between two kinds of Gauls in *Le Combat des Chefs* illustrates the comic tension between those who live in the civilized, cosmopolitan, and decadent world of the Romans, and those who live in that one last village that will not submit to their rule. Drawing from the history of Romanization, Goscinny writes:

Au temps de l'occupation Romaine, il y avait en Gaule deux sortes de Gaulois...
Tout d'abord, ceux qui acceptaient la Paix Romaine et qui essayaient de s'adapter à la puissante civilisation des envahisseurs...
Et puis, il y avait les autres Gaulois, irréductibles, courageux, teigneux, têtus, ripailleurs, bagarreurs et rigolards, dont les plus beaux spécimens se trouvaient dans une petite peuplade que nous connaissons bien... (Goscinny and Uderzo 1966, 5)

This introduction sets up “le combat des chefs” between Abraracourcix and Aplusbégalix, the chief of Sérum, a town friendly to the Romans. The scheming Romans are behind this tribal feud, having manipulated Aplusbégalix into challenging Abraracourcix for rule of his village. While Asterix and his fellow villagers have mustaches, dress like Gauls, usually drink beer, and live humbly in Gallic houses, Aplusbégalix is clean shaven, wears a toga, drinks wine, and lives in a shoddy Gallic attempt at a Roman villa.⁷

⁶ Goscinny and Uderzo are excellent students of Roman history. Their positive treatment of Caesar may have to do with his well-known reputation for *clementia* (mercy) toward his enemies. Both Caesar's contemporaries (e.g., Cicero) and later historians have argued about the sincerity of that clemency. Cf. Konstan 2005. For more on Julius Caesar in *Astérix*, cf. Barnett 2016 (138-9).

⁷ Goscinny and the myriad translators of *Astérix* commonly draw inspiration from the world of pop culture and politics for the names of *Astérix* characters in their own languages. For example, here “Aplusbégalix” becomes “Cassius Ceramix” in the Bell and Hockridge translation of *Le Combat des Chefs* (*Asterix and the Big Fight*; trans. 1971). This is a play on the name Cassius Clay, who changed his name to Muhammad Ali in 1964. As one might expect, Aplusbégalix/Cassius Ceramix trains for the big fight in a boxing ring.

After many misadventures, Abraracourcix and the Gauls triumph over both Aplusbégalix and the Romans. In a show of Gallic unity, Abraracourcix deals mercifully with his fellow Gaul: “Je te laisse partir libre avec ton people! Je te demande simplement de ne pas oublier que tu es Gaulois et de ne plus servir la cause des Romains. Va!” (Ibid. 47). The book then ends with a reimagined, romantic account of the Gallo-Romans:

La vie a changé dans le village Gallo-Romain de Sérum. Ses habitants ont retrouvé la civilisation traditionnelle ; ils sont devenus rigolards, ripailleurs, braillards...
Et ils ne dédaignent pas, à l'occasion, de faire un bout de conduit aux patrouilles Romaines...
Quant à Aplusbégalix, il est devenu le chef plus poli de toute la Gaule. Il est sans doute à l'origine de la réputation d'amabilité qui a été la nôtre dans le monde.... il fut un temps. (Ibid. 47)

Here, Abraracourcix *qua* Vercingetorix speaks for Goscinny and Uderzo, who want a unified Gaul/France to resist the Romans and their civilizing process.

As an ahistorical resistance imbedded within a specific historical moment, *Astérix* induces its readers to identify with the weak (the Gauls) who resist the hegemony of the strong (the Romans). The simple plot device of a few Gallic warriors versus Roman legions tracks very much like similar hero journeys, and consumers of the comic may be drawn to *Astérix* as a classic underdog story. Stuart Barnett posits that the popularity of the comic may have to do with the fact that this is a mythical native population that maintains its culture in the face of “overwhelming might” (Barnett 2016, 132). He argues as follows:

One of the key reasons for the great appeal of *Astérix* is the notion of a small group being able to resist domination by an extremely powerful foreign people. As such, *Astérix* engages with what I call the origin of the pure native. By this I mean a point in the past when a people was characterized by a purity uncontaminated by influence from any other group of people—in other words, the point of origin of an autochthonous people. (Ibid.)

Stuart recognizes, of course, that “as it is so difficult to deny the hybrid nature of any people in a contemporary context, the notion of the pure native usually is pushed into the distant past” (Ibid.) *Astérix* provides this reimagined Celtic past for the French by identifying them with the Gauls. In the pages of *Asterix*, it is eternally the year 50 BCE and the French resist the historical process of Romanization.

This autochthonous, underdog storyline certainly supports a large and loyal fanbase, particularly in France. For example, when Albert Uderzo sold his share of *Astérix* to the publishing company Hachette in 2008, his own daughter Sylvie criticized him in *Le Monde* by claiming that her father had betrayed the comic to the Romans, i.e., the rich technocrats of the modern world. In stark disagreement with her aging father and the people she believed were taking advantage of him, she noted that “Son entourage, recruté sûrement par César du côté de chez Dark Vador, répète en boucle: ‘Il a quand même le droit de faire ce qu’il veut, c’est son œuvre !’” (Uderzo 2009). As for Goscinny, Christopher Pinet remarks on his position: “Goscinny also sees technocracy as a threat, and he adopts the posture of the underdog or so-called ‘average man’ who feels incompetent and impotent before the faceless bureaucracy of the institutions that dominate his life and responds by resigning himself to the situation with a shrug of the shoulders and the comment ‘Faut pas chercher à comprendre’” (1977, 153).

These sentiments are certainly in line with the political commentary that Goscinny and Uderzo imbed within the comic. *Astérix* does not shy from lampooning current events and political figures. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, published in the aftermath of the riots of May 1968, *Astérix* criticizes modern industrialization, exemplified by Caesar’s effort to destroy the forest next to the Gauls in order to build a patrician colony. In *Le serpe d’or*, while on his way to Lutetia (Paris) with Obelix, Asterix looks at an aqueduct being built and says, “avec leurs constructions modernes, les Romaines gâchent le paysage” (Goscinny and Uderzo 1962, 10). When the Romans decide to defeat the Gauls by introducing capitalism into their village in *Obélix et Compagnie*, the plan of the Roman economist Caius Saugrenus ultimately fails, ending in ruin for the Roman economy and a return to the simple life for the Gauls. Saugrenus is a parody of the French politician Jacques Chirac, the Prime Minister of France at the time who would later become President of France from 1995 to 2007.⁸

Here, *Le Domaine des Dieux*, *Le serpe d’or*, and *Obélix et Compagnie* all attack the so-called improvements of modern industrial society. The first is a building program that would destroy the forest around Asterix’s village and transform their lifestyle from bucolic simplicity to Roman complexity. The second provides a commentary on urban sprawl. The final example portrays a nefarious capitalist economic scheme that ultimately rebounds on the

⁸ For other famous *Astérix* parodies, see esp. Girardin 2015.

Romans. These storylines demonstrate that *Astérix* is more than a comic, but a metaphor for an idyllic and proud French past that must be celebrated and defended, not forgotten in the name of progress.⁹ As Russel B. Nye remarks, “Romans (who are not Italian) represent all that Goscinny and Uderzo dislike in contemporary life—bureaucracy, regimentation, the military mind. They cut down forests, pollute streams, cover Gaul with billboards, pave over the fields, build huge apartments and create instant slums” (1980, 191).

Paul Smith from the University of Nottingham remarks on the enduring popularity of *Astérix* vis-à-vis French history:

The country may owe its name to the Franks, but when French republicans in the late 19th century were looking to establish the “origins” of their people, the Celtic Gauls fell easily to hand as the “first nation”. It helped, of course, that the Gauls, as far as anyone knew, elected their chiefs and that druids met once a year in a kind of “national assembly”. In telling the “*roman de la nation*” – the national story – the first lesson was: “Our ancestors the Gauls”, and every schoolchild in France, including Goscinny and Uderzo, knew it. (Smith 2020)

By finding a specific, if fictional, vehicle of resistance to the opposition of Roman civilization versus Gallic barbarity, Goscinny and Uderzo have in effect fixed Asterix as a living example of barbarian indomitability. The magic potion that grants Asterix his strength allows Goscinny and Uderzo to repeatedly rewrite the story of the Gauls in 50 BCE. *Astérix* demonstrates that the Gauls never really went away, and that they are alive and well in the hearts and minds of Celtic peoples not only in France, but also around the world.¹⁰

⁹ Pinet points to René Goscinny’s background as a potential explanation for his nostalgic vision of a France less committed to post-war industrialization. Goscinny was born in France, raised in Argentina until age 19, and lived for a time in New York City: “In all, he spent seven years in the United States, a period that left a bitter taste, since he was not able to adjust to either the difficulty of finding work or what he saw as the standardization, impersonality, material-mindedness and loneliness of life in America” (150).

¹⁰ On the connection between Celtic identity and nationalism in Europe during the 19th century especially, see Cunliffe 1999. He writes of the “Celtomania of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century,” and adds that “Beneath the romantic Celtism of the eighteenth century lay an undercurrent of nationalism which intensified and became even more explicit in the nineteenth century. The classical sources provide a galaxy of national heroes—Boudica in Britain, Vercingetorix in France, Ambiorix in Belgium, Viriathus in Iberia—all of whom could be used as symbols of national identity and freedom when required” (12-3).

3. *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* and the Construction of the Gauls

The inspiration for the characters and tropes in *Astérix* comes from one primary source in particular: Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (*Commentaries on the Gallic War*; henceforth *The Gallic War*), written between 58 and 49 BCE as a first-hand account of his conquests in Gaul (cf. Alamagor 2019, 114). Julius Caesar is both the initial textual source for *Astérix* as well as the principal antagonist in the comic. References to the work are legion, and the comic addresses other famous moments in Caesar's career to promote the *Astérix* mythos. For example, *Astérix en Hispanie* begins in 45 BCE (unlike the rest of the Asterix volumes), right after Caesar's final victory over the Optimates in the Civil War at the Battle of Munda against Pompey's son Gnaeus Pompeius and his former lieutenant in the Gallic War, Titus Labienus. Goscinny and Uderzo's account of Caesar's victory *Astérix en Hispanie* begins as follows: "Un an après sa victoire de Thapsus sur les Pompéiens, César vient de battre les derniers survivants à Munda, soumettant toute L'Hispanie à L'Empire de Rome... Avant de retourner à Rome où L'attend un triomphe, Jules César passe en revue sa vieille garde : la glorieuse xème Légion" (1969, 5). In addition to the references to the Civil War, Goscinny's reference to the 10th legion is on target. Caesar specifically points to this legion as his most trusted in *The Gallic War* (1917, I, 64-69).

Goscinny and Uderzo know *The Gallic War* very well, and subtle details do not escape them. For example, in *Le Domaine des Dieux*, Julius Caesar lays out his plan to defeat the Gauls through a Roman building program:

Je vais vous faire quelques petits commentaires : en Gaule, après que Vercingétorix eut été vaincu, il déposa ses armes aux pieds du Glorieux chef...

...qui occupa toute la Gaule. Toute ? Non ! Un petit village peuplé d'irréductibles barbares osa, et ose encore lui résister ! [...]

...Ces Gaulois, aidés par une potion magique qui leur donne une force surhumaine, protégés par une forêt qui les nourrit, refusent la civilisation Romaine...

J'ai décidé de les forcer à accepter cette civilisation ! La forêt sera détruite pour faire place à un parc naturel !

Enfin, des immeubles habites par des Romains, entoureront le village, qui ne sera plus qu'une Amphoreville condamnée à s'adapter ou à disparaître ! (Goscinny and Uderzo 1971, 5).

These "petits commentaires" (an obvious reference to *Commentarii*) are accompanied by two panels of comic relief that poke fun at Julius Caesar's

famous references to himself in the third person in *The Gallic War*. One Roman asks another, “De qui parle-t-il ?” and another responds, “De lui. Il parle toujours de lui à la troisième personne.” In the next panel, the first Roman says, “Il est formidable !” and Caesar asks, “Qui ça ?” The Roman responds “Ben... vous!” and Caesar says, “Ah!... Lui!” (Ibid. 5). This comic exchange invites the reader to laugh at the arrogant and condescending Caesar.

Goscinny also conforms Caesar’s speech above to Julius Caesar’s Latin. The ablative absolute with present or perfect participles is one of the more common ways to create a subordinate clause in Latin, and it is a favorite construction of Caesar’s. The two phrases above from *Le Domaine des Dieux*, “aidés par une potion magique qui leur donne une force surhumaine, protégés par une forêt qui les nourrit,” translated by Anthea Bell and Derek Hockridge in the English version (*The Mansions of the Gods*) as “with the help of a magic potion which gives them superhuman strength, and protected by a forest which provides them with food,” imitate English translations of Caesar’s Latin (Goscinny and Uderzo; translated by Bell and Hockridge 2012, Omnibus 6, 61). Attentive readers, especially those who grew up learning Latin through *The Gallic War* (a common teaching text since soon after Caesar’s death; cf. Williams 2012), can spot the comic linguistic parody.

Goscinny and Uderzo clearly attend to the whole of Caesar’s work. As such, *The Gallic War* merits attention as the literary context within which they portray their imagined aftermath of Caesar’s conquest. For many scholars, including ancient critics like Cassius Dio, *The Gallic War* is Caesar’s attempt to portray his ambitious and aggressive takeover in Gaul as a justified military incursion.¹¹ Caesar wanted to increase his popularity among the people back in Rome. This would help solidify his political position vis-à-vis the remaining member of the First Triumvirate, Gnaeus Pompey (“Pompey the Great”) after the death of Marcus Licinius Crassus in 53 BCE. Caesar’s clear and simple Latin prose, his general position that, despite their barbarity, the Gauls were a courageous people, and his abundant praise of the valor and bravery of his legions, all combine to portray him as a magnanimous and skilled leader. These

¹¹ Notably, in his *Πωμαϊκὴ Ιστορία (Historia Romana)*, Cassius Dio reads Caesar’s entrance into Gaul and subsequent conquest as a selfish act of personal ambition, not a peace-keeping mission to protect the Gauls from the Germanic tribes across the Rhine. See esp. Johnston 2019, 53-77.

rhetorical strategies were wildly successful with the people in Rome. Caesar made his name through the Gallic War and would celebrate the first of his four Roman Triumphs in 46 BCE in honor of his victories in Gaul.

It bears repeating that Caesar's ethnographic construction of the Gauls in *The Gallic War* as brave opponents supports his interests as a Roman statesman. After all, if he depicted the Gauls as weak and cowardly, his final victory at the Battle of Alesia in 52 BCE would hardly register with the people back in Rome. For Caesar, the Gauls are stereotypically "barbarian," with character traits that have colored historical reconstructions of them ever since. While other sources tell us that they are tall, blond, and strong with long hair and mustaches, Caesar focuses more on their emotional register and martial virtues: they are courageous, yet impetuous and reactive; they disdain subterfuge and trickery in favor of direct action.¹² They love their freedom (*libertas*) and do not want to be reduced to slavery (*servitutem*) by the Romans.¹³

Although Caesar praises the Gauls for these qualities, he does so in the midst of demonstrating how these traits routinely lead to problems when confronted with Caesar's superior patience, calculation, and organization of his legions. When reading *The Gallic War*, it is clear that Caesar never fails in the command of his legions, even if his sub-commanders do. He even takes advantage of his own legions' fears to demonstrate his exceptional leadership. The best example comes from Book I, when Caesar expands his rhetorical ethnographic construction of the brave and scary Gauls to the even more brave and more scary Germans across the Rhine. There, Caesar recounts how some Gallic townspeople and merchants at Vesontio (Besançon) told his legions of the physical size and fierceness of the Suebi under their chief Ariovistus. This news terrified many Romans, especially the young inexperienced officers (military tribunes; *tribuni militum*), who then looked for any excuse to go back to Rome (1917, I, 58-63). Caesar used the growing panic as an opportunity to give a speech that both shamed his men for their cowardice and roused their fighting spirit (Ibid. 63-65).

¹² Caesar's view of the Gauls appears to have changed over time. For example, in Book VII he comments on the "summae genus" ("remarkable ingenuity") of the Gauls' during the Siege of Avaricum (52 BCE) VII, 22, pp. 410-413. For a detailed description of Caesar's ethnographic construction of the Gauls and the Germans, cf. Riggsby 2006, 47-71.

¹³ The most striking speech in defense of a proud, free Gaul comes from the Arvernian noble Critognatus (Caesar 1917, VII, 490-493).

Except for Asterix himself, Goscinny and Uderzo's depictions of the Gauls embrace the stereotypical characteristics of the northern and western European tribal peoples. They are hardy and strong, mustached, and invariably argumentative. Asterix has the classic mustache and the blond hair as well as a winged helmet, but he is described as a "petit guerrier à l'esprit malin, à l'intelligence vive."¹⁴ His short stature and savvy ability to solve problems without resorting to violence subverts the readers' expectations for a Gallic hero, perhaps endearing him even more to his readership (cf. Almagor 2016, 124). As for the winged helmet, this feature may be inspired by references in Diodorus Siculus, who also mentions horned helmets like those worn by Asterix's best friend Obelix.¹⁵ The role of the gigantic and temperamental Gaul who terrifies the legionaries is played by Obelix himself. He is "Livreur de menhirs de son état, grand amateur de sangliers et de belles bagarres." Obelix loves going on adventures and fighting Romans, but has a soft spot for his little dog, Idéfix.¹⁶ Unlike Asterix, Obelix does not need the magic potion that everyone else in the village does because he was dropped into a cauldron of the magic potion as a child. This happy accident granted him superhuman strength as a permanent feature. His constant complaint that Asterix and others in the village get to drink it while he does not is a running gag within the *Astérix* universe.

Other characters fit the common stereotypes of the Gallic past as inspired by *The Gallic War* and other sources. The druid Panoramix conforms to romantic artistic renderings of druids in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He is an old, wise wizard with a long white beard (cf. Cunliffe 1999, 12). The village

¹⁴ The front matter of each volume usually includes brief descriptions of Asterix, Obelix, the druid Panoramix, the bard Assurancetourix, and Chief Abraracourcix. This front matter also includes a map of Gaul that highlights Asterix's village and the Roman camps around it.

¹⁵ Like the horned helmet, the winged helmet is an overcharged symbol within European culture. It could be a reference to the Roman god Mercury, which Caesar claims as the high god among the Gauls: "Deum maxime Mercurium colunt" ("Among the gods, they most worship Mercury") VI, 340-341. Both horned and winged helmets also represent 19th century artistic efforts to romanticize the Gauls, Goths, Vikings, and other premodern northern European cultures.

¹⁶ In this case, the French pun "idée fixe," or "fixed idea" refers to Idéfix's obsession with trees. Fans of *Astérix* admire Anthea Bell's English translation of Idéfix into "Dogmatix," as it stays true to the French spirit of the pun.

chief, Abraracourcix is described as “majestueux, courageux, ombrageux, le vieux guerrier est respecté par ses hommes, craint par ses ennemis.” The only thing that he fears is the sky falling on his head. This trope of the “hot-tempered” Gaul appears again and again in *Astérix* with great comedic effect, yet it never ends in defeat for Asterix or the other Gauls. Instead, Roman prefects looking to curry favor with Julius Caesar fail in their conniving schemes to control the village. These greedy and gluttonous Roman patricians and their underlings are the perfect foils to the simple and honorable Gauls.¹⁷

Religion and other elements of Gallic culture come up in *The Gallic War* as well, but usually for the purpose of building up the Gauls as a brave yet alien people. For example, within Book VI of *The Gallic War*, Julius Caesar digresses from his usual commentary and spends some time recounting elements of Gallic culture (1917, VI, 332-355). This section is noteworthy because here scholars rely on Caesar for a basic outline of Gallic tribal culture in their own historical reconstructions. Caesar famously writes about what has become known as the “Wicker Man,” a feature of Gallic human sacrifice. This was allegedly the practice of putting criminals (and sometimes innocents) inside a hollow wooden figure made of twigs and branches and then burning them alive (Ibid. 340-341). Despite this sensational imagery, Caesar mentions it in passing, almost as a fascinating curiosity, and perhaps only to remind his readers back in Rome of how terrifying and alien the Gauls could be. Overall, descriptions of these kinds of religious and cultural practices are not a dominant feature of *The Gallic War*. Caesar does not expand on the Wicker Man or any other macabre element of Celtic/Gallic culture, including the well-documented practice of headhunting. Not surprisingly, after this brief interlude in Book VI, Caesar returns to his usual commentary on the events of his conquest.

Ancient cultural and religious practices are rather muted in *Astérix* as well. There is a mention of the alleged Gallic practice of cannibalism, and that comes from the new team of Jean-Yves Ferri and Didier Conrad,

¹⁷ Gracchus Garovirus, the Roman governor of Condatum, is an excellent example. He appears in *Astérix chez les Helvètes* (1970) as the picture of gluttony. Morbidly obese and always filthy from his Roman orgies, he does not send proper tribute to Rome, keeping most of the revenue from the province to support his lavish lifestyle. He poisons the Roman Quaestor Claudio Malosinus to avoid detection by Caesar.

who make a passing reference in *Le Papyrus de César*. Upon hearing the cacophonous horn (“Beuglophon”) of the village bard Assurancetourix, a legionary covers his ears and remarks, “On m’avait dit Qu’ils faisaient des sacrifices humains!” (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 40). This rumor comes from the speech of the Arvernian warlord Critognatus in *The Gallic War*. In this, the longest speech in the commentaries, Critognatus pleads with his fellow Gauls to do whatever it takes to defend the freedom of Gaul at Alesia, even if it means cannibalizing their own people to survive (Caesar 1917, VI, 490-493). This is hardly an admission of a widespread cultural practice. Further, the stone menhirs delivered by Obelix and the sickles of the druids in *Astérix* possibly connect to ancient Celtic religious practices, but they are only deployed generically in the comic.¹⁸ In *Obélix et Compagnie*, even the druid Panoramix does not know the purpose of the menhirs (Goscinny and Uderzo 1976, 30). When *Astérix* does address religious practices more overtly, the comic pokes fun at the Gallic and Roman obsession with divination and augury. For example, in *Le Devin*, Asterix and Panoramix see through the confidence man *qua* soothsayer (*le devin*) who visits the village and makes all sorts of outlandish predictions for the more gullible villagers, including Obelix. As usual, the plot turns on the antagonists in the end, and Asterix saves the day for his tribe against the Romans, who are victims of their own superstitious folly.

Like Caesar, Goscinny and Uderzo devote a great deal of attention to the bravery of the Gauls. In fact, they devote an entire volume, *Astérix chez les Belges*, to a competition between Asterix’s Armoricans and the Belgians to demonstrate which group is the bravest of Rome’s enemies. The provenance of this plot is Caesar’s claim at the beginning of *The Gallic War* that the Belgae are the most courageous of the three main groups of Gauls: the Belgae, the Aquitani, and the Celtae (Caesar, 1917 I, 2-3). Despite Panoramix’s wise advice

¹⁸ In *Le serpe d’or*, the druid Panoramix has broken his golden sickle. This could endanger the village, because the mistletoe he uses for the invincibility potion must be cut with a golden sickle. Asterix and Obelix set out for Lutetia to buy a new one from Obelix’s cousin, the sicklesmith Amérix. The use of a golden sickle to cut mistletoe references a passage in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (XVI, 95) in which Pliny recounts a Celtic ritual of oak and mistletoe: druids, dressed in white, climb oak trees and cut the mistletoe that grow on the trees with a golden sickle. Two white bulls are sacrificed to please the gods, and the mistletoe is used in an elixir to grant fertility and protect its drinkers from poisons.

that the village should just mind their own business, Chief Abraracourcix is determined to prove that his Armoricans are the bravest people that Julius Caesar has ever faced. After meeting the Belgians, both groups decide to show off their respective abilities. They destroy Roman camps and beat up the legionaries in their stereotypically straight-forward Gallic smash-and-bash style. Later, at a Belgian feast with copious amounts of beer and meat, the two tribes eventually settle on a competition. After more Roman camps are destroyed by the two tribes, Asterix and Obelix go to Caesar and ask him to settle the tribal dispute once and for all so that everyone can just go home. Enraged at their request, Caesar screams, “J'y serai à ce rendez-vous, avec mes légions, et je vous écraserai tous ! Je vous anéantirai ! Je vous étriperaï ! Je vous massacreraï !!! Et vous saurez que le plus brave de tous, c'est César, et rien que César !!!” (Goscinny and Uderzo 1979, 37). The Armoricans and the Belgians eventually unite to fight off the Romans, and the episode ends in defeat for the poor Roman legions. After the battle, their respective chiefs, Abraracourcix and Gueuselambix, stop Caesar on the road and ask him to finally settle the competition. The exasperated Roman leader shouts, “les plus braves, je ne sais pas ! Ce que je peux vous dire, c'est que vous êtes aussi fous les uns que les autres !!!” (Ibid. 46).

The druids receive positive press in *The Gallic War*, but mostly as an educated social class of teachers and tribal leaders. In fact, Caesar's most important ally among the powerful Aedui tribe is the druid Diviciacus, who serves as his spokesperson. In Book I Caesar reckons him as one of the leaders of the Aedui along with one Liscus, the “Vergobret” (chief judge) at the time (1917, I, 25). Although Caesar does not mention that he is a druid, we know that Diviciacus visited Rome in 63 BCE to ask for help against the Sequani and Arverni as well as the Suebi from across the Rhine. As Cicero's guest, Diviciacus apparently impressed the Roman orator with his knowledge of augury and divination (Cicero 1923, I, 321-323). Caesar writes of the esteem with which the druids are held by their fellow Gauls:

In omni Gallia eorum hominum, qui aliquo sunt numero atque honore, genera sunt duo...Sed de his duobus generibus alterum est druidum, alterum equitum. Illi rebus divinis intersunt, sacrificia publica ac privata procurant, religiones interpretantur: ad hos magnus adulescentium numerus disciplinae causa concurrit, magnoque hi sunt apud eos honore. Nam fere de omnibus controversiis publicis privatisque constituunt, et, si quod est admissum facinus, si caedes facta, si de hereditate, de finibus controversia est, idem

decernunt, praemia poenasque constituunt; si qui aut privatus aut populus eorum decreto non stetit, sacrificiis interdicunt. Haec poena apud eos est gravissima. (1917, VI, 335-336)¹⁹

For Caesar, the druids are an educated priestly class who serve as leaders, teachers, and spiritual guides. They rule the Gauls together with the knights.

Like Diviciacus, Panoramix is a respected figure among the Gauls. Within the universe of *Astérix*, he is portrayed as a village mentor, and he often goes off to cut the mistletoe with his golden sickle and brew the magic potion that grants temporary invincibility to the Gauls. Whenever Asterix is about to go on an adventure, Panoramix makes sure that Asterix is supplied with this potion. He also uses his knowledge for healing. For example, in *Astérix chez les Helvètes*, the governor of Condatum, Gracchus Garovirus, poisons the Roman quaestor Claudius Malosinus to avoid being exposed for failing to send tax revenue to Rome. Aware of the druid's reputation as a skilled healer, Malosinus sends for him, and Panoramix remarks, "Je dois toujours aider les maladies ; les Romains comme les autres," to which Obelix replies, "Moi je n'aime pas quand les Romains sont malades ; ils sont plus mous, que d'habitude" (Goscinny and Uderzo 1970, 14). Panoramix tends to the sick, Roman or not, while Obelix remains the anti-Roman barbarian brawler.

Panoramix even reverses the practice of hostagesship among the Gauls and the Romans to help Claudius Malosinus. Hostagesship, a common practice among premodern peoples, ensured good behavior among the losers of military conquests (cf. Walker 2005). Tenuous allies sometimes exchanged hostages to ensure good faith in alliances, but more often victors in wars demanded hostages of the losers. These hostages were often members of the ruler's immediate or extended family, to be left alive so long as the losers obeyed their new overlords. This is particularly relevant in the case of Julius Caesar, for

19 "Throughout Gaul there are two classes of persons of definite account and dignity... Of the two classes above mentioned one consists of Druids, the other of knights. The former are concerned with divine worship, the due performance of sacrifices, public and private, and the interpretation of ritual questions: a great number of young men gather about them for the sake of instruction and hold them in great honour. In fact, it is they who decide in almost all disputes, public and private; and if any crime has been committed, or murder done, or there is any disputes about succession or boundaries, they also decide it, determining rewards and penalties: if any person or people does not abide by their decision, they ban such from sacrifice, which is their heaviest penalty."

whom hostages often play an important political role. As M. James Moscovich notes, “Of the more 100 Gallic, German and British tribes mentioned by name in the b.G., 37 are specifically recorded as having rendered hostages to Caesar or his lieutenants” (Moscovich 1979, 122).

In his exchange with Gracchus Garovirus over his pledge to heal the quaestor Claudius Malosinus, Panoramix lays down the following condition for the trip to Switzerland that Asterix and Obelix must make to find the ingredient that he needs to heal the poisoned Roman.²⁰ Turning to Claudius Malosinus, he says, “Je mets une condition: tu viendres chez nous en otage, jusqu’au retour de mes amis.” Gracchus Garovirus interjects with, “Ah ça non! Jamais!” while the sick quaestor replies, “D’accord, druide.” Panoramix turns to Gracchus Garovirus: “Et je te préviens! Si mes amis ne reviennent pas, l’otage sera exécuté!” A confused Asterix whispers to Panoramix, “Ce n’est pas notre genre de prendre des otages...” to which Panoramix replies softly, “Cet homme, Malosinus, a été empoisonné. S’il reste ici, il a peu de chances de survivre; dans notre village il sera à l’abri des meurtriers” (Goscinny and Uderzo 1970, 16-17). Thus, under the pretext of taking a hostage, Panoramix looks out for the well-being of the Roman quaestor. Here Goscinny and Uderzo reverse the concept of hostagesship in *The Gallic War* by transforming it into a stratagem used by Panoramix to save the Roman questor from the dissolute and murderous Gracchus Garovirus.

Astérix is particularly indebted to *The Gallic War* in *Le Papyrus de César* (2015). This is the 36th volume of the series, and the second written by Jean-Yves Ferri and illustrated by Didier Conrad. The premise is that Caesar has written his *Commentaries on the Gallic War* and has included a personally embarrassing chapter on his failed attempts at conquering Asterix’s village: “Revers svbis face avx irredvctibles Gavlois d’Armoriqve” (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 5). Caesar’s publisher Bonus Promoplus convinces him that he should leave out the chapter, because the Gauls are illiterate and therefore will not dispute the omission of their story from Roman history. When Bonus Promoplus orders all the scroll copies of that chapter destroyed, one Numidian scribe, Bigdatha, escapes with a scroll of the chapter, because “il se dit solidaire du peuple Gaulois et refuse qu’on censure un chapitre clé de son histoire” (Ibid. 10). He hands it off to

²⁰ The ingredient, of course, is the Silver Star, or Edelweiss. Many regard Edelweiss as the national flower of Switzerland.

“l’activiste Gaulois” named Doublepolémix (most certainly a parody of Julian Assange), who delivers the scroll to the Gauls of Asterix’s village in Armorica.

At first, Chief Abraracourcix chooses to ignore the news that Caesar has censored his own war commentaries, but after a tongue lashing from his wife Bonemine over the village’s place in history, he decides to take the threat to Gallic history seriously. The wise Panoramix chooses a course of action:

Dans ce cas, je ne vois qu’une solution : Le druide Archéoptérix qui vit dans la forêt des Carnutes !

Archéoptérix est le gardien secret de nos connaissances. Il graverà ce papyrus dans sa mémoire, afin qu’il soit transmis, comme le veut notre tradition, par la bouche-à-oreille ! (Ibid. 18)

Compare what Panoramix says to what Caesar writes in Book VI of *The Gallic War* about the oral traditions of the druids:

Magnum ibi numerum versuum ediscere dicuntur. Itaque annos nonnulli vicos in disciplina permanent. Neque fas esse existimant ea litteris mandare, cum in reliquis fere rebus, publicis privatisque rationibus Graecis litteris utantur. Id mihi duabus de causis instituisse videntur, quod neque in vulgum disciplinam efferri velint neque eos, qui discunt, litteris confisos minus memoriae studere: quod fere plerisque accidit, ut praesidio litterarum diligentiam in perdiscendo ac memoriam remittant. (1917, VI, 338-339)²¹

According to Caesar, the druids use their memories to preserve their traditions instead of writing things down. The point of *Le Papyrus de César*, of course, is that the Romans lost the scroll precisely because it was in writing. Had they been more like the Gauls, they could have prevented the entire episode. This clever reversal privileges older, oral traditions over newer technologies like writing. In fact, the entire volume parodies the alleged advances of modern communication technologies with Roman analogues. For example, instead of

²¹ “Report says that in the schools of the Druids they learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some persons remain twenty years under training. And they do not think it proper to commit these utterances to writing, although in almost all other matters, and in their public and private accounts, they make use of Greek letters. I believe that they have adopted the practice for two reasons—that they do not wish the rule to become common property, nor those who learn the rule to rely on writing and so neglect the cultivation of the memory; and, in fact, it does usually happen that the assistance of writing tends to relax the diligence of the student and the action of the memory.”

the painfully slow Roman postal service (the *cursus publicus*), the Romans use carrier pigeons to comic effect (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 15-16).

Within the narrative, Panoramix, Asterix, and Obelix find Archéoptérix in the magical Forest of the Carnutes, a place in central France that Caesar mentions as the meeting place for the druids in Book VI: “Hi certo anni tempore in finibus Carnutum, quae regio totius Galliae media habetur, considunt in loco consecrato” (1917, VI, 336-337).²² In another reference to Caesar’s ethnographic reflections in *The Gallic War*, Asterix, Obelix, and Panoramix see unicorns within the forest, and one even chases off the Roman spies who are following them (Ferri and Conrad 2015, 27).²³ When the Gauls finally arrive at the oak of the venerable Archéoptérix, the old druid eventually commits the scroll to memory.

Meanwhile, the Romans have decided to march on the village of the Gauls, seemingly vulnerable without Asterix, Obelix, and Panoramix. The bard Assurancetourix manages to get a message to Asterix and his friends through his musical instrument, the “Beuglophon,” and the heroes hurry back to defend their village. After much comic violence (especially when Obelix arrives) the scroll is torn in half in the fight between Bonus Promoplus and Doublepolémix. As Bonus Promoplus yells, “Tu ne l’auras pas ! Ce papyrus appartient à César !” Julius Caesar arrives right on cue with the biblical line from the Gospel of Matthew (22:21): “il faut rendre à César ce qui lui appartient!” (Ibid. 45). Caesar promptly makes a deal with Asterix to recover the other half of the missing scroll: he will not persecute Gallic “colporteurs” (the press), and he will release all the scribes imprisoned by Promoplus. Asterix replies, “Nous n’avons que faire de tes écrits. Pour nous, seule la parole compte !” (Ibid. 46).

²² “These Druids, at a certain time of the year, meet within the borders of the Carnutes, whose territory is reckoned as the centre of all Gaul, and sit in conclave in a consecrated spot.”

²³ In a passage that has sparked the imagination to this day, Caesar writes about the creatures that dwell in the Hercynian forests in Germany: “Est bos cervi figura, cuius a media fronte inter aures unum cornu exsistit excelsius magisque directum his, quae nobis nota sunt, cornibus: ab eius summo sicut palmae ramique late diffunduntur. Eadem est feminae marisque natura, eadem forma magnitudoque cornuum”; “There is an ox shaped like a stag, from the middle of whose forehead between the ears stands forth a single horn, taller and straighter than the horns we know. From its top branches spread out just like open hands. The main features of female and of male are the same, the same the shape and the size of the horns,” VI, 350-353. Because both males and females have horns, the consensus among scholars is that the animal in question is the reindeer.

Ferri and Conrad end *Le Papyrus de César* with a post-script in a series of panels that celebrates the oral traditions of the Gauls while also paying homage to René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo:

Le souvenir de ce chapitre racontant les revers de César en Armorique s'est-il perdu au fil des âges ?... Pas sûr !

On dit que son contenu se serait transmis comme prévu, de druide en druide...

...et qu'en dépit de quelques approximations...

...il serait parvenu aux oreilles de deux scribes modernes et passionnés qui en auraient note tous les détails...

Et en auraient tiré une série d'histoires amusantes.... Mais bien sûr, ce ne sont que des "on dit" ! (Ibid. 48)

In the panels the reader sees a druid dressed in stereotypical Parisian clothes sitting down in a café and speaking with René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. Goscinny says, "Tu entends ça, Bébert ?" and Uderzo exclaims, "Fabuleux, René !" (Ibid. 48). And so, within the *Astérix* universe, Julius Caesar's missing scroll from *The Gallic War* has become an ancient oral tradition that tells the true story of the indomitable Gauls, no matter what is written in the history books.

4. The Everlasting Feast of a Fixed Astérix

Astérix is a light-hearted comic that asks "What if?" about the French and Roman past, and it does not take itself too seriously.²⁴ As the anonymous author of an editorial in *The Guardian* puts it: "Part of Asterix's appeal lies in the gentle prodding of European national stereotypes: the fondue- and cuckoo-clock-obsessed Swiss, the milky-tea-drinking British and the beer-swilling Belgians. But while the parodies are occasionally mischievous, they are also humane" ("In Praise of... Asterix" 2009). The plethora of national stereotypes, puns, and caricatures of *Astérix* induce laughter across the globe in multiple languages. The continued popularity of the comic speaks to the experiences of a readership who see the funny side of themselves and their history in the

²⁴ *Astérix* has even inspired archaeologists to get in on the fun of speculative history. Cf. Keys 1993.

cosmopolitan world of *Astérix*. The comic rewards reading and rereading, because, as Peter Kessler explains, “readers can go back to his adventures time after time and find new jokes to savour” (1995, 70). Mark Tweedale adds that *Astérix* “really rewards the slower read. There’s so much detail to explore, little stories going on in the background and visual puns and recurring gags, especially in the feasts and fight scenes” (2020).

For their part, Goscinny and Uderzo were all about the laughs, and worked hard to deliver; the author and illustrator team usually produced one or two volumes per year until the death of Goscinny in 1977. However, they rejected scholarly analyses of their comic, especially as it became more popular and *Astérix* went global through translations. As Russel B. Nye points out, “Goscinny always denied the ‘Asterix’ had deeper symbolic, ideological, or social meanings. ‘I am essentially an entertainer,’ he said. ‘I am not a moralist. I don’t give lessons, I am not to be taken seriously, and I like to make people laugh.’” Nye goes on to list multiple interpretive stances that incensed the author, including readings of the Gauls as French socialists and the Romans as the capitalist state (1980, 188-190).

Nonetheless, scholars have studied and will continue to study *Astérix* as a cultural artifact. Like Frankenstein’s monster, *Astérix* has taken on a life of its own beyond the intentions of its creators. In his commentary on the banquet at the end of *Le Fils d’Astérix*, his third solo volume after the death of Goscinny, Uderzo discusses the cultural inertia of the comic:

Actually, every time I finish an album I feel that it is the last Asterix adventure. But this is a big ending: the Gauls are friends with Caesar and the banquet takes place on a ship instead of in the Village. I came in for a lot of criticism over that. The readers insist on the traditions being maintained. It’s very difficult, because when I start a new adventure, I have to create something fresh as well as keeping all the leit-motifs. If I leave out the pirates, or the fish fights, or any other traditional ingredient, people complain. It’s not easy. But it’s a job. (Kessler, 1995, 53)

As I demonstrate below, the banquet is perhaps the most important tradition in *Astérix*, but also the final element of a recurring narrative pattern that is far more significant and influential than the humorous leitmotifs noted by Uderzo. This plot pattern runs throughout the *Astérix* series, makes a deeper claim upon its readers, and might explain their insistence on its continued narrative presence: Asterix, Obelix, and the Gauls routinely defeat the Romans

and spare their Armorian village the supposed benefits of Roman civilization. And so, traditions are maintained and critical analysis abounds.

Uderzo's focus on the tradition of the village banquet is telling, as this feast is perhaps the most sacred moment of every *Astérix* adventure. Like so many other elements in the *Astérix* mythos, it has roots in the classical literature, and Goscinny and Uderzo have transformed it into the symbol of an everlasting happy ending (cf. Almagor 2016, 119). With a few exceptions (including *Le Fils d'Astérix*), nearly all of the thirty-eight *Astérix* volumes conclude with panels of the Gauls feasting in their village.²⁵ Below, I cite four examples:

Et, durant toute la nuit, sous le ciel étoile et la luna brillante, les Gaulois fêtèrent leurs héros, vainqueurs de leurs ennemis, grâce à la ruse, la magie et la protection des dieux... (*Astérix le Gaulois* 1961, 48)

Et, non loin des ruines Romaines, dans une vraie clairière de la forêt, fréquentée par les sangliers et les corneilles, nos Gaulois réunis pour un de leurs traditionnels banquets, célèbrent une nouvelle victoire, une victoire sur les Romains, une victoire sur le temps qui passe, inexorablement... (*Le Domaine des Dieux* 1971, 47)

Le soir venu, ces humains ont tout oublié. Et, sous le ciel étoilé qui les recouvre, sans avoir, toutefois, l'intention de leur tomber sur la tête, nos Gaulois se sont réunis pour un de leurs traditionnels banquets, qui célèbre, entre autres, la fin de la zizanie. (*La Zizanie* 1970, 48)

Mais tous ces soucis compliqués fondent sous les étoiles comme neige au soleil et c'est l'esprit tranquille, que les Gaulois fêtent leur amitié retrouvée... (*Obélix et Compagnie* 1976, 48)

Uderzo's art depicts Gauls looking cozy and content as they happily feast around a bonfire, usually under the light of a full moon.

The very act of feasting merits a closer examination here, and we can speculate as to why readers might look forward to this recurring happy ending

²⁵ The exceptions are *Astérix et la rentrée gauloise* (2003) and *Le Livre d'or l'anniversaire d'Astérix et Obélix* (2009). *Astérix et la rentrée gauloise* (2003) is a series of fourteen short stories; thirteen of these previously appeared in *Pilote* or other venues, and only two (*En 35 avant J.C.* and *En 50 avant J.C.*) end with the usual feast. *Le Livre d'or l'anniversaire d'Astérix et Obélix* is a series of short stories that celebrates the 50th anniversary of *Astérix*. As noted above, *Le Fils d'Astérix* (1983) ends in a feast, but on Cleopatra's galley off the coast of Armorica.

in *Astérix*. One explanation might be found by looking through the lens of plot fulfillment. Joseph Campbell's work on mythology around the world is helpful, as his concept of the monomyth (the "Hero's Journey") may account for the satisfaction that readers take in the comedy's resolution. For Campbell, the final step of the hero journey is the sharing of the elixir that restores the world: "at the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world" (Campbell 2004, 228). Goscinny and Uderzo's final panels of each volume of *Astérix* represent this return to the restored ordinary world. There are no more Romans to fight, no more journeys to make, and therefore no need for Asterix to drink the magic potion. All is well in the village again and again at the end of each volume.

Another potential explanation for the allure of *Astérix* among its readers may lie in the cultural significance of human feasting as a symbol of shared human values, or at least their most ideal forms. Charles Stanish, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at UCLA, reflects on the role of feasting in the development of civilization:

Both bread and wine are products of settled society. They represent the power to control nature and create civilization, converting the wild into the tamed, the raw into the cooked—and their transformation cannot be easily done alone. The very act of transforming the wild into the civilized is a social one, requiring many people to work together... Archaeologists have discovered that the consumption of food and drink in ritually prescribed times and places – known technically as feasting – is one of the cornerstones of heightened sociality and cooperation throughout human history. (Stanish 2018)

Though Stanish's own work focuses on the premodern peoples of the Andes, his point may be relevant here. Goscinny and Uderzo have certainly ritualized the feasts of Asterix and his fellow Gauls at the end of each volume.

As noted above, feasting peacefully around the bonfire conjures up a host of positive feelings for readers, as eating and sharing a meal together is one of the most fundamental elements of the collective human experience. Michael Dietler discusses the role of the feast in representing the positive elements of community life. He argues, "as public ritual events, in contrast to daily activity, feasts provide an arena for the highly condensed symbolic representation of social relations. Like all rituals, they express idealized concepts, that is the way people believe relations exist or should exist rather than how they are necessarily

manifested in daily activity” (Dietler 1998, 89). In other words, feasts affirm the most noble values of the community. We see this in Asterix’s village at the end of each volume. Despite their differences, the Gauls, from Chief Abraracourcix to the village fishmonger Ordralfabétix and his blacksmith friend Cetautomatix, all feast in celebration of their heroes and their beloved community.²⁶ Even Asterix and Obelix are known to quarrel during their adventures, but they always make up in the end.

Moreover, because they are frozen in time in 50 BCE within the Late Republic, the Gauls represent a certain point of civilization vis-à-vis the Roman culture around them. On the one hand, they are not early humans, and they are not nomadic hunters and gatherers. Their village demonstrates economic, social, and political distinctions, with an elite class (Chief Abraracourcix and the druid Panoramix) as well as a class of tradespeople and artisans. When not helping Asterix, Obelix works as a menhir delivery man.²⁷ On the other hand, they lack the complex political structure, technological sophistication, and bureaucratic efficiency typical of the Romans. But, in their relative simplicity, they also avoid Roman problems.

Goscinny and Uderzo celebrate this small-town simplicity in every volume. For them, the Gauls may even represent something akin to the Enlightenment vision of the “noble savage,” for whom the political, economic, and cultural trappings of “advanced” civilizations represent at best a foreign, life-draining alternative way of life. At worst, of course, these civilizations attack and annihilate the cultural expressions of indigenous peoples through their colonial aggression. Within the study of Roman and French history, Romanization represents a historical process probably somewhere in between these extremes, a process that led to the creation of Gallo-Roman culture over several centuries. *Astérix* reverses the historical polarities of the Romanization process described

²⁶ As noted above by Uderzo, a notable gag that runs through the entire *Astérix* series are the “fish fights.” Within the *Astérix* universe, there is a rivalry between the village blacksmith Cetautomatix and his friend, the fishmonger Ordralfabétix. They are friends most of the time, but when Cetautomatix criticizes the freshness of Ordralfabétix’s fish, comic hilarity ensues, usually with fish being thrown around.

²⁷ Although Goscinny and Uderzo certainly do not portray Abraracourcix and Panoramix as somehow better than the rest of the villagers in *Astérix*, their roles certainly echo Caesar’s distinction between the two noble classes (the druids and the knights) and the rest of the Gauls, whom he presents as little more than slaves to the ruling class (1917, VI, 334-341).

by Theodore Mommsen. It is a universe peopled by noble barbarians in their village and dissolute Romans in their fortified camps and cities. Barbarian is good and Roman civilization is bad.

The Gauls in *Astérix* look and act like stereotypical barbarian warriors often enough; they squabble and fight among themselves almost as often as they fight the Romans. But unlike the usually distant and conniving Roman magistrates (Caesar and Cleopatra are notable exceptions), the Gauls are a close-knit community, a family even. For example, in *La Zizanie*, the Romans imbed a noted troublemaker into Asterix's village, and he promptly starts sowing division and strife among the villagers. After much comic mayhem and even accusations that Asterix is a traitor, the Gauls (led by Asterix and Panoramix) figure out the ploy and defeat the Romans. Their feast ends in the usual fashion, with the Gauls coming together to celebrate "la fin de la zizanie" (1970, 48).

Finally, as good students of their druid Panoramix, the Gauls respect the natural world around them and resist the "modern" trappings of Roman life. Goscinny and Uderzo quickly erase the Roman apartment complex at the end of *Le Domaine des Dieux*; Panoramix uses his magic acorns to regrow the forest around their village within one panel: "À la tombée de la nuit, la forêt a repris ses droits; seules quelques ruines témoignent que le domaine des dieux a failli exister..." (Goscinny and Uderzo 1971, 47). Based on their mockery of urban life throughout the series, one may imagine that Goscinny and Uderzo lamented the housing boom in France in the decades following World War II. Their vision of a georgic France certainly conflicts with that of the controversial Swiss-French architect and urban planner Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), aka Le Corbusier. The comic strategy certainly delighted and still delights readers nostalgic for the France that existed before the Second World War.

Astérix rewrites the history of the Gauls by fixing them in time. Although expressed a bit differently at the end of each volume, the everlasting feast is the portrayal of the Gauls that Goscinny and Uderzo want their readers to remember. Drawing largely upon the stereotypes attributed to them by Julius Caesar in *The Gallic War*, *Astérix* presents the Gauls as good honest folk, brave in battle and ready to help their allies. The cartoon violence never ends in death, only humiliated legionaries or Roman allies bemoaning their encounters with Asterix and Obelix. There are no references to the Wicker Man, head-hunting, or other unseemly Celtic religious practices that might obfuscate this romantic vision of the Gauls.

Goscinny and Uderzo long for a French past that perhaps once existed, but now can only be imagined. In the name of this past, they imbed biting social commentary within the comic that lampoons the alleged failures of the modern world and its political figures. *Astérix* criticizes unbridled capitalism, urban sprawl, and other advances within contemporary French society. Goscinny and Uderzo position their readers in plots that code the Gauls as heroes and the Romans as villains or hapless bureaucrats (and therefore also villains). And these Romans are not just the Late Republicans within the comic. They are also the modernizing Romans that Sylvie Uderzo fought in the courts when her father sold 60% of his shares in *Astérix* to the publishing group Hachette. The Gauls are those who defend an older model of French society that is natural, local, sustainable, and certainly less corporate and less bureaucratic.

Readers of *Astérix*, like premodern seafarers who found their way by looking to the Pole Star, navigate the plots of these stories by means of this fixed *Astérix*. They identify with this “little star” and his friends because of their bravery, loyalty, and genuine concern for each other as a community. Readers heartily support the indomitable Gauls in their proud defiance of Julius Caesar and his Roman legions. They know that there will always be a feast to celebrate the latest victory of Asterix and Obelix.

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Roman Emperors across Comics Traditions

Abstract

The goal of this paper is to investigate the representation of Roman Emperors across different comic traditions: Anglophonic Comics, Francophone *bandes dessinées*, Japanese *manga* and Italian *fumetti*. These representations are analysed through the lens of reception studies on Classical Greek and Roman cultures, and their intersection with comics studies and narratology. While reception studies often assume that Classical cultures are liberally re-interpreted, historical accuracy is a distinguishing feature of comics operating within the “historical fiction” and biographic genres. This claim is supported via the analysis of how Roman emperors are portrayed across different works and traditions. It is thus proposed that genre norms, and their interaction thereof, play a key role in how historical sources are received and elaborated in comics.

I. Introduction: Reception Studies in a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Scholarly interest in the reception of classical Greek-Roman cultural heritage has recently witnessed a renaissance. *Reception studies*, defined as the discipline studying the adaptation and re-elaboration of this heritage, have expanded their focus beyond their traditional literary domain (Hardwick 2003). Comics thus represent such a novel domain of inquiry (Kovacs & Marshall 2010; 2016). Reception studies in comics analyse which sources and modes of transmission are attested across different comics traditions¹ (Hammar 2017). An initial conclusion is that Classical Greece and Rome represent a source of inspiration

¹ We use the term *comics* as a general label for the medium, when no confusion arises. For instance, “comics traditions” refers to all the traditions discussed in this paper.

for creators of Anglophonic comics, Francophone *bandes dessinées* or *bedées*, and Japanese *manga*, among others. However, authors reinvent historical sources in often subtle manners, possibly including inspiration from non-classical sources (Shanower 2010).

Another, more controversial conclusion is that certain themes have played a preponderant role, but authors have often liberally re-interpreted these themes. For instance, Greek and Roman mythology has been vastly reinterpreted in Marvel and DC comics (Kovacs & Marshall 2010, chap. 1). The popular *Asterix* stories provide a very loose representation of Rome's republican period (Barnett 2016). Imperial Rome has also been cited as a powerful source of inspiration for several francophone artists; however, these stories tend to remain close to the actual historical facts (Dinter 2010). Thus, both history and myth have offered inspiration for artists who wish to work with classical themes in modern comics. However, such inspiration seems to sometimes lead to faithful adaptations, and sometimes to open re-interpretations.

From a theoretical perspective, these instances of reception in comics raise questions regarding *how* faithful these adaptions may be, and *why* authors may adapt these sources (Hardwick 2003, 5). Ultimately, authors working with classical themes challenge themselves with the task of presenting novel interpretations of "old stories" to audiences that may not be acquainted with Classical culture(s). For *manga*, the second question has been explicitly formulated as "why should the Japanese be concerned with ancient Greece and Rome in the first place?" (Kovacs & Marshall 2016, xxv). Initial answers to these questions in the literature are perhaps obvious. The dramatic nature of classical stories offers a rich narrative potential. However, authors do not completely respect all the source material (Tomasso 2010; Johnson 2016; Nisbet 2016).

The goal of this article is to show that a more nuanced answer to both questions emerges once we examine a broader domain of "Classical comics". We achieve this goal by analysing the representation of Roman emperors across different comics traditions, and across the genres of biographic, historical, horror, fantasy, and science fiction comics. Our answer is that authors concerning themselves with Classical themes offer re-interpretations that aim to meet genre-driven narrative goals. Thus, authors working within the genre of historical fiction maintain a strong degree of faithfulness to their sources (Martin 2019, 210; and references therein). Authors working within

other genres but importing classic themes, instead, often take historical liberties consistent with the genre norms they work with (e.g., fantasy). These claims act as our answer to the *how*-question. We then argue that authors may select classical themes for their narrative potential, but also because they have a genuine interest in re-telling “history as stories”, so to speak. These claims, instead, form our answer to the *why*-question.

To reach this goal, we follow this theoretical and empirical roadmap. We introduce and motivate theoretical tools that combine insights from reception and comics studies, narratology, and possible worlds literary theory, and that we use for our analysis (Section 2). We introduce a method that we implemented to create a corpus of comics focusing on imperial Rome and Roman emperors as a case study (Section 3). We prove that faithfulness to historical sources is a cross-cultural theme *qua* a norm of historical fiction also respected in comics. Lesser degrees of faithfulness aim to coherently integrate historical sources with themes specific to horror, fantasy, science fiction and other genres in which a comic operates (Section 4). We conclude by offering some observations on the nature of reception of the Classical tradition in comics (Section 5).

2. Theoretical Background: Key concepts

In his study of reception modes, Hardwick (2003, 8–9) outlines 24 possible modes that form a continuum ranging from “faithfulness” to “invention”. For instance, the *adaptation* mode is considered the maximally faithful mode of reception. It involves the presentation of a Classical work in its original form (e.g., the *Iliad* in the original Greek language). Conversely, the *transplant* mode, described below, may involve ample liberties taken on the original concepts. For our goals, four modes play a key role: *acculturation*, *translation*, *hybridization*, and *transplant*. Acculturation is defined as the adaptation of themes from classical sources to modern texts (e.g., the use of the Roman Empire’s history in comics). Translation involves translating a work into a different language (e.g., French), and adapting it to a language’s cultural demands. Hybridization is defined as the combination of themes from different media (e.g., visual and textual) into target works. Transplant is defined as the importing of images, ideas and themes from an original text into a novel text, and the development of these elements into novel concepts.

In studying how authors can use these and other modes in their works, reception studies set themselves at least these three goals. The first is to study how classical themes are received in modern cultures, broadly defined. The second is to study how faithful the reception of these themes can be, and the nature of eventual divergences. The third is to study the “cultural horizon”, i.e., the context, media, norms, and genres that can affect the reception of a work. Thus, reception studies analyse how different reception modes can determine the degree of faithfulness or re-interpretation that a work displays. They also study the context and possible cultural constraints that may explain why authors may diverge from the original texts but may render a work more accessible to contemporary readers.

These concepts must be tailored to the medium-specific properties of comics, and how they may influence modes and goals. For this purpose, we take Groensteen’s theory of comics as a semiotic (i.e., sign-based), multimodal and intertextual system (Groensteen 2007, 90-100; Groensteen, 2013, 130-140). This theory suggests that comics operate as systems through which authors can combine themes from different sources into multi-modal narratives. Other theories on the nature of comics certainly exist, two examples being McCloud (1993) and Cohn (2014)’s proposals. The first theory suggests that comics are sequential, multi-modal narratives; the second, that they are “languages” with its own structural and interpretive rules. McCloud’s approach permits researchers to analyse the formal properties of comic works but leaves open questions regarding their modes of production (cf. also Cook 2011, 288-289; for discussion). Cohn’s proposal offers powerful accounts of how comics can be read and understood but leaves aside matters of comics production. Thus, both theories focus on different aspects of analysis than the ones we seek to explore in our paper.

Though Groensteen’s theory allows us to address these matters directly, a refinement of the concepts of multimodality and intertextuality can sharpen its empirical import. We pursue such refinements via John Bateman’s “GeM” (Genre and Multimodality) model, and its application to comics (Bateman 2008; Bateman & Wildfeuer 2014; Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017). The GeM model introduces *documents* as units used to convey information amongst individuals (or “agents”). *Multi-modality* holds when documents involve at least two distinct modalities to present information, e.g., comics and their combination of text and images. The model uses the *page* as a

unit carrying information within a document. A multi-modal document can include a single page (e.g., a flyer), several pages (e.g., comic issues) and collections of pages including potentially connected information (e.g., books and trade paperbacks). Crucially, comics distinguish themselves in including *panels* as the minimal semiotic units forming pages of documents (Bateman 2008, 100-138). Thus, combinations of panels can form pages that in turn can potentially combine into issues, volumes, series, and other more complex types of documents.

Documents can convey coherent information when their constituting elements establish thematically related semiotic structures, or *narratives*. *Intertextuality* is therefore defined as a semiotic relation between two or more documents and the narratives they may present, whether this relation involves panels, pages, chapters, issues, and volumes (Bateman 2008, 200-210; Allen 2011, 130-155). When an intertextual relation holds, one or more documents act as the “source” documents (or “sources”), providing content that can be partially or fully utilised in “target” documents (or “target”). Intertextuality therefore acts as a relation potentially holding between parts of documents, but also between documents as “wholes” (e.g., Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Homer’s *Odyssey*: Allen 2011, 130-155). Authors may be conceived as “compilers” and “assemblers” of inherently intertextual documents, usually re-elaborating sources (classical or other) in novel ways (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017, chap. 1).

Via these concepts, we can answer our *how-* and *why-*questions in an elegant manner. However, to maintain our analysis compact, we choose to narrow our focus on Roman emperors and their renditions across different comics traditions and genres. Our choice is based on the fact that most reception studies in comics focus on concepts (e.g., the portrayal of Troy: Shanower 2010) and events (e.g., the battle of the Thermopylae: Tomasso 2010). However, the reception of classical historical figures has been mostly left aside. Luckily, Hammar (2017) presents a pilot study that analyses the reception of Emperor Caligula’s figure in the British science fiction comic *Judge Dredd*. Hammar’s work shows that a futuristic version of Caligula, based on both historical and fictional sources (e.g., Robert Graves’ *I, Claudius*), acts as an antagonist to Judge Dredd. The work suggests that Caligula is transplanted into this series’ fictional world and re-interpreted for its narrative potential as a villain. We therefore conceive our work as a continuation of this study offering a broader, cross-cultural empirical basis.

Before we present the analysis, we must address the question of how to interpret intertextual faithfulness through the lens of genre norms. To answer this question, we adopt some notions from possible worlds literary theory (Ryan 1991; Ryan 2001; Bell 2010; Bell & Ryan 2019). Central to our concerns is that this theory offers a simple but systematic view of (some) genres and their relations. In so doing, it permits us to highlight a connection between faithfulness in reception, and the demands of genres and narrative goals as elements of divergence. We show why this seems to be the case by introducing the theory's key concepts.

Within possible worlds literary theory, texts are taken to present alternative renditions or “possible worlds” of what we know as the “actual world” (e.g., Eco 1984; Doležel 1998). Five key ontological assumptions permit researchers to analyse the relations between these alternative renditions and the actual world. First, the actual world is defined as the centre of our literary analysis, i.e., the reality that the reader experiences. Second, possible worlds represent alternative models to the actual world, and may be considered as speculations about possible events, concepts and individuals. Third, textual actual and possible worlds are renditions of the actual world and possible worlds, respectively. If the world we experience is the actual world, then documents representing this world create fictional worlds, which may or may not be faithful representations (e.g., historical vs. science fiction). Fourth, a document can present actual and possible/fictional worlds as co-existing within a narrative structure. Fifth, these worlds form the “textual universe”, the set of worlds that a text/document describes.

For our concerns, a crucial tool of analysis comes from the formulation of fiction genres that this theory offers. If documents present possible renditions of the actual world, then they can also offer possible renditions of future and past events (Alber 2019; Martin 2019). Therefore, the fictional nature of a narrative does not only lie in the use of (im)possible themes, but also in the creation of alternate, fictional worlds nevertheless related to the actual world. “Historical fiction” may thus be conceived describing past historical events with possibly high, though not necessarily perfectly accurate, levels of faithfulness. Other fiction genres may instead take ample liberties with historical sources, by inserting their genre-specific themes in target narratives (cf. also Schuknet 2019). As also suggested in Hammar (2017), genre norms may strongly influence which modes of reception authors use for their narrative purposes.

Let us take stock. We envision reception studies in comics as the study of how Classical Greek-Roman sources have been received (i.e., used and interpreted) in modern comic texts. We assume that comics are multi-modal and intertextual semiotic texts. They may involve multi-modal, intertextual relations that may operate at any level of organization, from the panel to the series. Fictional texts involving such historical sources can furthermore combine themes from different genres (e.g., historical, science, fantasy fiction). Therefore, they can create complex textual universes that can display differing degrees of faithfulness to their historical sources. There is ample evidence that many authors liberally re-interpret classical sources. However, evidence showing that authors can also be faithful to sources, given the role of genre norms, is outstanding.

3. Methodology

Our methodology was as follows. We compiled a corpus of documents featuring Roman emperors as characters, across different comic traditions. For this purpose, we queried the database of American comics (<https://www.comicsdatabase.org>), the “bakaupdate” database of *manga* (<https://www.bakaupdate.com>), and the online collection of *bedées* (<https://www.BD.org>) via the key words “Rome”, “roman”, “republic”, “emperor”, “empire” and “history”. For Italian *fumetti*, we used the ComiXtime Italian app, which is an ongoing project of cataloguing *fumetti* and other works from different traditions (<https://www.ComiXtime.com>). A second round of selection identified texts that featured Roman emperors as characters in at least one issue. The results amounted to three documents out of seven candidates for comics, three documents out of eight candidates for *bedées*, five documents out of 21 candidates for *manga*, and two documents out of eight candidates for *fumetti*. Candidate documents were discarded when they did not feature any Roman emperors (e.g., *Ad Astra: Hannibal to Scipio*, a manga that focuses on the second Punic war: Kagano 2011–2018).

Once a corpus of relevant works was obtained, the subsequent analysis of the documents followed these principles. For each emperor, we analysed the portrayal in terms of “characterization”, i.e., narrative rendition of his psychological traits (Iannidis 2013) and appearance. We also analysed how the

imperial Rome period associated to the emperor was portrayed, if attested (i.e., each emperor's "reign"). We thus verified if an emperor's portrayal was consistent with the overall setting of each story and series, the two factors jointly contributing to outlining the genre at stake. We verified which historical sources the authors used for their research when possible (e.g., translations of Suetonius' *De Vitae Caesarorum* was often cited in the authors' commentary to volumes). We then analysed such renditions with information from historiographical sources (e.g., the *Britannica* encyclopaedia). For visual representations, we verified if emperors' appearances and illustrations of imperial Rome could be considered close to their bust portrayals, mosaics, or other classical sources obtained via Google Images.

Next, we analysed which reception modes were used in each work by focusing on the hybridization and transplant modes. By definition, all the documents in this corpus feature the acculturation and translation modes. They adapt classical history and figures (acculturation mode) for an audience speaking a language other than Latin (translation mode). However, only some documents resort to non-classical sources for their visual representations (hybridization mode), usually to fill in missing information. Most documents, instead, insert fictional themes that "connect" historical facts with their specific fictional universe, and that usually follow the norms of the genres they operate within (transplant mode). After identifying these modes and their narrative function, we conclude each analysis by proposing the possible cultural horizon in which a document can be analysed. Since each document is produced within a given comic tradition but potentially aims at a global audience, we focus on the genre(s) to which a document seems to belong. We then propose how and why the target document may be considered faithful to its classical sources or the genre norms it may follow. With this point in mind, we turn to the results.

4. Results

4.1 Comics

The first document we discuss is *Caligula*, a horror (fiction) series set during the rule of Emperor Caligula (Lapham (w) & Nobile (i) 2012). The series features the titular emperor as a demon-possessed immortal antagonist to meek

Junius, a rich farmer whose family is brutally slaughtered and dismembered by Caligula's soldiers. Junius travels to the capital and infiltrates the court to assassinate Caligula during an orgy, but he discovers to his chagrin that the emperor is immortal. A knife transfixing his head has the only effect of slowing down the rape of his sister Drusilla (Fig. 1):



Fig. 1. Caligula (left panel) and Junius (right panel).

As the story unfolds, Junius decides to avenge his family by following a rather diverse approach: he becomes Caligula's favourite slave lover. In so doing, he discovers that a demon drives Caligula's perversions and his many massacres of innocent citizens in gladiatorial games and orgies. The demon's ultimate goal is to enjoy as much carnage as possible, while also bringing Roman civilization to ruin. Though Junius ultimately obtains his revenge, this comes at the cost of the demon escaping Caligula's body and possessing Junius' to use for his purposes.

Caligula is a series that finds its genre roots in the sexually explicit, gore-driven approach to horror of modern authors (e.g., *Cabal*, Barker 1988). Though imperial Rome is sometimes portrayed in an accurate manner, the series features

several forms of transplant that establish its clear status as a horror fiction comic. The first case is swapping Caligula's alleged folly, probably due to epilepsy ("Editors" 2020b), with satanic possession. The second case is vastly exaggerating the more truculent aspects of Roman life. Though certainly violent, chariot games were not known to feature anthropophagic undead horses. Caligula's alleged orgies seemed not to include cannibalistic practices, at least according to historical sources. The third case includes the exploration of how (abusive) male homosexual relations might have taken their course in a society having a very ambivalent relation with sexuality. This is also a well-trodden theme of modern horror, as themes involving the dark aspects of gender and race are often explored in detail (Bloom 2012), and perhaps consistently with Caligula's bisexuality.

One might argue that *Caligula*'s cultural horizon falls entirely within the horror fiction genre, while "borrowing" the decidedly wicked figure and rule of Caligula for this purpose. Thus, historical faithfulness is mostly left aside, as the goal of using Caligula in the story is to have a blood-thirsty tyrant abusing, socially and sexually, the protagonist and Roman citizens. Readers acquainted with horror fiction can acknowledge that the wealth of gruesome acts that the demonic Caligula performs are perfectly consistent with the genre's norms. If one leaves aside such supernatural themes, it seems also obvious that the series seems to take inspiration from the Tinto Brass' 1979 movie *Caligula*, via hybridization. The movie notoriously depicted the emperor as organizing orgies and mass murders in his court (Brass (d) 1979). Thus, this work's lack of historical accuracy should come as no surprise, for the series seems to operate within the cultural horizon of horror, not historical fiction.

The second document we discuss is the series *The Sandman* and its story "August" (Gaiman (w) & VV. AA. (a) 1992, chap. 2). The protagonist is Emperor Augustus, and the story is based on an apparently apocryphal episode described in Suetonius' *De Vitae Caesorum* (Gaiman and VV. AA. 1992, appendix). Old Augustus visits the market at the imperial forum camouflaged as a beggar, in the company of the actor Lycius, so that he can observe the daily lives of Romans. During this day of anonymity, he reminisces about a dark episode of abuse from his uncle Julius Caesar. He also describes the oneiric meeting with Dream/Morpheus (i.e., the titular "Sandman") concerning the fate(s) of the Roman Empire. The story concludes by showing Augustus retiring in *Domus Augusta* and reflecting on whether his life and choices have been the best for the future of imperial Rome or not.

As our compact summary suggests, *The Sandman* may be considered a series loosely classifiable as modern fantasy (Strong 2010). The narrative arc to which the story belongs (i.e., *Fables and Reflections*, Gaiman (w) et al. (i) 1992) sometimes explores the lives of various historical figures. However, it firmly (and intertextually) embeds them in *The Sandman*'s fantasy world via their interactions with Morpheus. Augustus' portrayal thus offers an interesting case of analysis. Augustus tends to be perceived as an ambivalent figure: cruel, power-hungry, and ruthless in his republican days; benevolent and respectful of republican institutions in his imperial days (Grant 2020). Gaiman's characterization seems based on the republican period: old Augustus is portrayed as a bitter, cold, ruthless master to Lycius. At the same time, he lapses into mellower narrations of the past when discussing with the actor. On the other hand, illustrator Brian Talbot portrays a historically accurate Rome. It also presents an Augustus as a vigorous and intellectually sharp individual in his old age (Fig. 2):

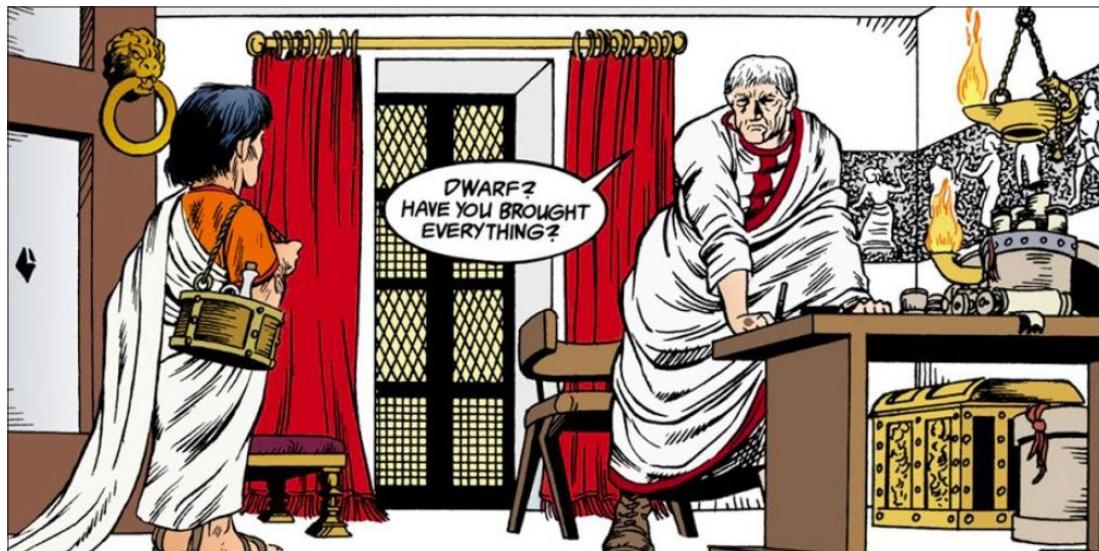


Fig. 2. Lycius (left) entering Augustus' (right) private office.

As also observed in Strong (2010), this target (document) offers at least two forms of transplant mode. One is the abusive relation between Caesar and Augustus and how it motivates Augustus' choices, and Morpheus' appearance in Augustus' dreams. Morpheus meets human individuals

mostly in their dreams, and in this narrative arc asks them to make important choices about the future of their domains of influence. Thus, Augustus' transplant in the narrative system underpinning *The Sandman* establishes that this traumatized version of the emperor exists in a fictional, fantasy world in which the so-called "Endless", like Morpheus, interact with mortals. This world exists in a cultural horizon in which comics readers may not be fully acquainted with Augustus' life. Readers may certainly appreciate him as a controversial if not tragic figure, like the other historical figures in this narrative arc. However, readers would expect Augustus and Morpheus' meeting to follow the fantasy genre narrative norms of *The Sandman*, whence the oneiric discussion.

The third document we discuss is *Britannia*, which consists of three five-issue series published by American Valiant Comics (Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2016–2018). *Britannia* follows Antonius Axia, a former Roman centurion living during Nero's rule. Antonius becomes the first "detectioner" (i.e., detective) in history, after being trained in deductive reasoning and basic psychological skills by Drusa, high priestess of the Vestals' order. Antonius's adventures involve an apparent mix of horror and supernatural elements which, upon further inspection, are revealed to be elaborate subterfuges that Antonius' antagonists create to carry out their plans. Antonius appears to also have developed psychic powers, though it is left open whether these "powers" are his newfound analytical skills, understood via Antonius' own superstition. Thus, Antonius becomes a special agent responding only to the orders of the emperor or the Vestals' high priestess.

Britannia presents an accurate rendition of imperial Rome, both in visual style and narrative themes, combined with various themes from detective fiction. The authors draw information and themes from the essays of classical scholars, thus collecting back matter to the stories (e.g., the overview of Nero's late rule in Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2016 vol. 1, chap. 1). Such faithfulness is reflected in Nero's rendition as an unstable, cruel despot, given that the series is set in 64 (i.e. in Nero's twilight years: "Editors" 2020d). Nero does not want the Vestals' power to expand as a result of Antonius' actions, and even attempts to have him executed in a bout of madness (Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2017, vol. 2, issue 3). However, in each mini-series he acts as the ruling figure ordering Antonius to solve the cases threatening Rome, begrudgingly admitting the usefulness of his work

(Milligan (w) & Jose Ryp 2018 vol. 3, issue 4). Faithful to most historical portraits, Nero is illustrated as a usually angry and bearded man, often carrying an evil smirk (Fig. 2.):



Fig. 3. An adult Nero in *Britannia*.

Overall, *Britannia* includes a form of transplant that allows the authors to combine historical and detective fiction: the introduction of Antonius Axia as the first investigator. Nevertheless, the series maintains a fairly high degree of faithfulness to the sources that inspired and fascinated its creators (*Britannia* vol. 1 issue 4). *Britannia*'s publisher, Valiant Comics, is known for its super-hero series, and thus caters to an audience perhaps more used to historical liberties. If we consider this culture as the chief cultural horizon in which the authors may operate, then it is perhaps surprising that *Britannia* does *not* feature more significant forms of transplant. Aside a general ambiguity regarding Antonius' "powers", however, the series operates within the norms of historical fiction, while also combining them with action and detective fiction. Like *The Sandman* but unlike *Caligula*, it displays faithfulness to its sources, while also adhering to the norms of the historical and detective genres.

4.2 Bédées

The first document we discuss is *Les Aigles de Rome* ('The Eagles of Rome', Marini 2007-2011). This is a 5-volume historical fiction series chronicling the lives of Arminius and Marcus, respectively a Germanic boy and the son of a centurion. The two initially meet and mistrust one another but grow to become friends and members of the Roman Empire during the rule of Emperor Augustus. The series offers a subtle study of how Arminius, first enslaved and brought to Rome, meets Marcus. The two develop a complex form of friendship over the years, even if they belong to opposing cultures. Arminius ultimately returns to "Germania" to lead the Germanic tribes in the Teutoburg forest's battle; Marcus participates amongst the Roman troops. Aside from offering often very accurate renditions of historical events (e.g., the aforementioned battle; Marini 2011, vol. 5), the series is also widely praised for its lavish illustrations and sober portrayal of the opposing cultures, via its representatives Arminius and Marcus (Dinter 2010).

Given this premise, it should come as no surprise that Augustus' rendition in the series is also historically accurate. In his old age, the emperor is portrayed as an overall benevolent though certainly stern autocrat, still fit and of sober manners (Fig. 4):

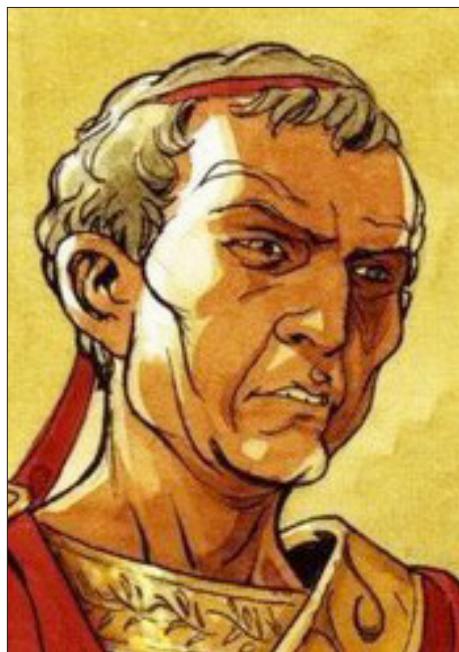


Fig. 4. An old Augustus addressing the protagonist (not in the picture).

Unlike his counterpart in *The Sandman*, however, Emperor Augustus plays a lesser role in this series since the main focus is on Marcus and Arminius' *bildungsroman*. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that a painstakingly detailed work of research went into the development and characterization of each historical figure (Marini 2007, vol. 4). Thus, the transplant of two (partially) fictional protagonists in an historical context determines the status of *Les Aigles de Rome* as an historical fiction comic. Crucially, *bédées* are well-known for their attention to detail, and for including a relatively small but very lively sub-genre of historical fiction, usually with adult connotations (Dinter 2010). Hence, this target (document) belongs to a genre and tradition acting as a cultural horizon that prizes historical accuracy, and in which audiences demand potentially high faithfulness to historical sources.

It is against this specific cultural horizon that *Murena* (Dufaux (w) & Delaby (i) 1997–2013; Dufaux (w) & Caneschi (i) 2015–current) should also be analysed. *Murena* chronicles the relationship of the centurion Lucius Murena with Emperor Nero, the imperial court and its machinations. Lucius is the son of Lollia Paulina, a noblewoman that Emperor Claudius wanted to marry in his late age and thus represented an obstacle to Agrippina's ambitions. Nero's mother has Lollia assassinated, thus setting in motion a complex spiral of events in which Murena, Nero and several other historical figures enter into conflict. As a result, Nero and Lucius grow from childhood friends to adult enemies.

As this synthesis suggests, *Murena* includes a form of transplant on which the narrative structure hinges to create an intense historical drama. Though a *gens Murena* is attested in Roman history ("Editors" 2020e), Lucius' story is likely to be fictional. In all other aspects, however, the series is known for its high historical accuracy and lavish attention to detail. Emperor Claudius is featured in the first volume as an old and brutal tyrant in the thralls of Agrippina's schemes. It is Nero's representation throughout the series, however, that offers our main source of analysis. Nero is initially portrayed as a young, fit and sensitive boy who slowly develops into the famous tyrant. Ultimately a tragic figure, Nero is portrayed as a man descending into madness due to the pressures he faces in court. Such characterization is visually captured through Nero's changing physical appearance throughout the years, from slim and cheerful boy to overweight, cruel adult (Fig. 5):

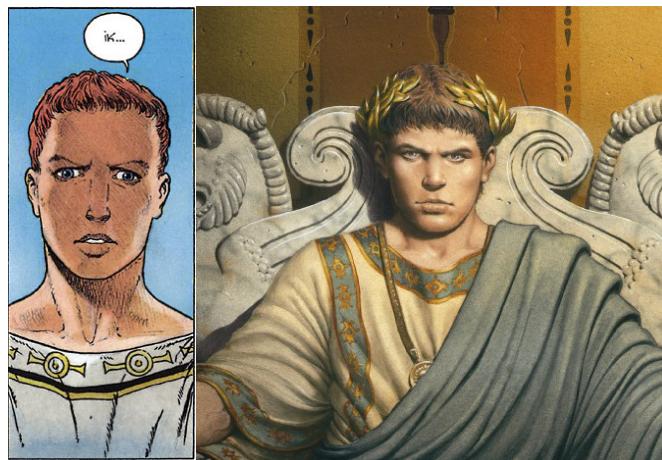


Fig. 5. Young Nero (left) and older Nero (right) in *Murena*.

Thus, *Murena* presents a perhaps more complex rendition of Nero than the one offered in *Britannia*. However, the series aims to cover a longer historical period, and takes an overall brooding, tragic perspective on Nero and his life. Once Lucius Murena is transplanted as the protagonist against antagonist Nero, the emperor's figure and actions become powerful narrative themes to create a brooding tragedy rife with adult tones.

We conclude this section by discussing *Alix: Senator*, our third *bédé* document (Mangin (w) & Démarez (i) 2012–current). The series *Alix* was created in 1948 and features a Gallic boy who is first enslaved, but then freed by his Roman owner and subsequently becomes a Roman citizen (Martin 1948–2010). His adventures often involve diplomatic missions commissioned by Julius Caesar himself, and having the goal of ensuring Rome's safety while interacting with antagonist cultures. *Alix* has always been known for its often-nuanced representation of historical cultures, more adult tones and generally strong historical accuracy (Barnett 2016). Thus, while *Asterix* is perhaps notorious for its historical liberties, *Alix* has always represented its historically accurate, if less popular, counterpart.

Publisher Casterman decided to continue *Alix*'s adventures as a Roman senator in his 50s, in the modern *Alix: Senator* sequel series. *Alix* has become a respected senator who is often sent to diplomatic missions by an aged Augustus during the years 11–14. Old Augustus, as in the case of *Les Aigles de Rome*, is presented as a benevolent but firm autocrat, as befits the “first senator” of the Roman senate (Fig 6):



Fig. 6. Old Augustus addresses the senators on matters of governance. The speech is in French because the panel has been taken from the original version of the comic. The panel recites: “Come on, senator, let us know what is it that you want!” (my translation).

As in the previous cases discussed in this section, *Alix: Senator* includes one instance of transplant, in the form of the protagonist Alix. Augustus in particular, but imperial Rome in general, tends to be represented with high accuracy, thus being faithful not only to historical sources, but to Martin’s original vision. Though Alix’s adventures do take some liberties when historical details are scarce (e.g., Cleopatra’s death in Mangin (w) & Démarez (i) 2017, vol. 8), they can generally be considered as fairly accurate examples of historical fiction in comics. Overall, this and the other documents discussed in this section show that the historical sub-genre in adult *bédées* acts as a cultural horizon in which faithfulness is a powerful norm. As also mentioned in Dinter (2010), authors and readers engage in this norm, though they also appreciate the introduction of fictional elements in these stories.

4.3 Manga

The five *manga* series discussed in this section offer some interesting renditions of several Roman emperors. Before we discuss the documents, however, we must offer a compact overview of *manga* genres and demographics that act as the documents' cultural horizon.

From the '80s onwards, the *manga* market has been divided into age/gender demographic and genre sub-types (Schodt 1996; Berndt, Nagaike and Ogi 2019, chap. 1). Modern *seinen* ('young men') *manga*, like their *josei* ('young women') counterparts, are an age-based genre that includes *rekishi* ('historical') *manga*; adult themes (e.g., politics, sex, thorough characterization, gender, and ethnic relations) are central in *seinen* *manga*. Historical *manga* thus match their francophone counterparts by also being fairly faithful to their sources (Bryce and Davis 2010, 47). Such norms do not generally apply to *shōnen* ('boys') *manga*, which represent the mainstream segment of this comic tradition. Since action, imaginative settings and simple plots are central to this segment/genre, historical accuracy is often a marginal aspect (Bryce and Davis 2010, 43–44). Widely popular cases such as *Saint Seiya* (known as 'knights of the Zodiac') offer examples of this libertine approach to historical sources (Theisen 2010). Different release pressures also play a role: *shōnen* are weekly, *seinen* are mostly monthly/fortnightly publications. In general, *shōnen* authors have little time for accurate background research (pace Theisen 2010).

One document we found in our corpus that highlights *shōnen*'s liberal attitude is *Hishintan - Vita arcana* (Itoh 2010). This is a discontinued series featuring Ishintan, an alluring but deadly Cappadocian female killer during the rules of Emperors Caracalla and Macrinus. The first Emperor only appears in the first panel of the series. His assassination by the praetorian guards and soon-to-be-emperor Macrinus in year 217 opens the narration and defines the historical *mise en scène*. Emperor Macrinus is represented as a North African man. Caracalla's visual representation is, however, vague, and may or may not be consistent with historical portrayals (Fig. 7). Aside this brief cameo, neither emperor appears again:



Fig. 7. Caracalla appears in the top panel, Macrinus in the bottom panel. Note that the comment regarding “usurpation” refers to Macrinus’ assassination of Caracalla.

Though brief, this characterization of facts seems consistent with historical sources (Kolb 2020). More in general, the series presents latter-day imperial Rome as a violent, decadent society, but does not dwell on historical matters. Once a form of transplant is used (i.e., Ishintan as the protagonist), the narrative focuses on her assassination missions. The historical side of the genre equation is thus less relevant than the action side, a fact fully consistent with the manga’s appeal to a *shōnen* demographic/genre.

A different picture, however, emerges in *Kendo Ankokuuden Cestvs* (‘Dark fight history Cestvs’ Wazarai 1997–2009) and its sequel *Kento Shitouden Cestvs* (‘Death fight history Cestvs’ Wazarai 2010–current). This *seinen manga* focuses on the adventures of the eponymous Cestvs, a slave boy fighting in the “cestomachia” (a form of “Roman boxing”), during the years 54–56 of Emperor Nero’s rule. In this document, Nero acts as a sponsor of the various gladiatorial tournaments. Though not a central figure, adolescent Nero is generally (but not always) portrayed as a more psychologically stable, wise and less ruthless emperor, with a gentler aspect reminiscent of his young counterpart in *Murena* (Fig. 8):



Fig. 8. The youthful Nero in *Cestus* has flaxen hair, which is only indirectly shown via the lighter shade use in the black and white *manga*.

A more complex rendition of Nero that can also be directly compared to the *Murena* rendition is the one found in *Waga Wa Na Nero* ('I am Nero!', Yasuhiko 1998).² This document offers a biographic novelization of Nero's rule from his ascension to the throne to his alleged death. Its author, Yasuhiko Yoshikazu, is one of the celebrated creators of the science fiction *Gundam* multi-media franchise, but also an author well-versed in *seinen* biographic *manga*. Examples include documents covering Jesus Christ and Alexander the Great's lives (respectively Yasuhiko 1997, 2003). *Waga Wa Na Nero* symmetrically differs from *Murena* in having a slave turned gladiator, Germanicus, as a fictional character through which part of the story is narrated. However, Nero is the veritable and tragic protagonist, from his beginnings as an emperor to his violent death. Like in *Murena*, Nero's trajectory is also represented via his growth into an overweight, bearded man of ruthless behaviour (Fig. 9):

² Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius are also mentioned in single-panel summaries at the beginning of the work (Yasuhiko 1998, vol.1). No other mention of these and other emperors are however offered.



Fig. 9. Cithara-playing Nero from the cover of vol. 2, in colour. The almost David Bowie-esque androgynous portrait and flaxen hair hint at the hybridization elements of the series.

Both authors have acknowledged researching classical and contemporary sources. Both authors have also acknowledged attempting to carefully reconstruct an historical period they are fascinated with (Yasuhiko 1998, vol. 1; Wazarai 1998, vol. 1). Case in point, both authors have included events from Nero's life in the series that might help in portraying him in a more sympathetic light. Thus, young Nero in *Cestus* attempts to save his stepbrother Britannicus from a fatal seizure to no avail (Wazarai 1998, vol. 2). Adult Nero in *Waga Na Nero* leads the fire-fighting efforts during Rome's fire in 67. However, adult Nero is also shown to place the blame on Christians, therefore authorizing exceedingly cruel public slaughtering of innocent individuals (Yasuhiko 1998, vol. 2). Thus, while *Cestus* includes a form of transplant by focusing on Cestus' life as a boxer, *Nero* minimally includes an alternate point of view on Germanicus' relationship with Nero. However, Nero's perspective generally dominates this story, and sets the overall tragic tone of this biographic *manga*. Nevertheless, both series seem fairly faithful to their historical sources.

Interestingly, both series include minor forms of hybridization. Nero is imagined flaxen-haired in *Cestus* (again Fig. 8) and the series also includes

information on Roman, Greek and other fighting styles (e.g., pankration), not easily traceable to Roman sources. A flaxen-haired Nero plays the Cithara on the cover of vol. 2 of *Waga Wa Na Nero* (Fig. 9). His passion for Greek culture is often a pre-text for the author to use historically accurate renditions of this culture (e.g., statues and ships). Such choices however confirm that both series maintain the high standards of faithfulness expected of historical manga: they do so by also using Greek historiographic sources, given their richness of themes.

We conclude this section by analysing the documents *Plinius* and *Thermae Romae*, both by Yamazaki Mari. *Plinius* (Yamazaki 2012–current) is a series that chronicles the life of Pliny the elder from the latter rule of Nero to the Vesuvius' eruption (i.e., years 66 to 79 CE). *Plinius* distinguishes itself for its sober and serious tone, as befits biographies. Consequently, Nero is portrayed as a despotic, overweight, and deranged tyrant in his twilight years. His successor Vespasianus, on the other hand, is portrayed as a pragmatic and direct ruler with a stout body and a severe expression, in his rare appearances (Fig. 10):



Fig. 10. A Nero intensely focusing on his Cithara performance (left), and Vespasianus as a personal aide to Nero (right).

Since this series focuses on Pliny the elder and his voyages, both emperors are secondary but accurately depicted characters. Both emperors are at times illustrated as giving orders to Pliny, himself a Roman general, with Nero being arrogant

and Vespasianus being stern but respectful of Pliny. Such rigour permeates the whole series. As the author acknowledged, such an attention to detail could only become possible through the support of Miki Tori, a manga author (*mangaka*) famous for his ability to draw intricately detailed backgrounds. More in general, *Plinius* can be considered another biographic work that faithfully chronicles the life and time of Roman emperors, though its focus is on Pliny the elder.

The perhaps more popular *Thermae Romae* offers an idiosyncratic rendition of imperial Rome, on the other hand. The series chronicles the misadventures of Lucius, an out-of-luck Roman thermal engineer/designer who can travel in time. Such a science-fictional event occurs when Lucius takes a bath and fully submerges himself to escape from the hardships of life. His travels invariably bring him to modern-day Japan, perhaps the only modern culture that considers public baths as central to public life as ancient Rome. Lucius, via his accident-ridden but overall safe travels, can save his career by bringing back and popularising Japanese cultural artefacts (e.g., bath caps, after-bath smoothies) to Roman audiences.

Though the series mixes this fantastic premise with comedy (and romance, in its later part), it also offers accurate renditions of Roman Imperial life of the 2nd century. The relevance of comedic overtones becomes clear when Lucius visits the imperial palace. Emperor Antoninus Pius, the heir to Hadrianus, briefly appears as a young womaniser and a generally frivolous individual attracting Lucius' scorn. Emperor Hadrianus is however portrayed as a stern, authoritative figure when asking Lucius to re-model his own imperial baths (Fig. II):



Fig. II. Hadrianus is portrayed with his trademark Greek-style full beard.

Interestingly, Hadrianus' homosexuality and artistic sensibility are explicitly mentioned in the series, but treated with sobriety (Yamazaki 2008, vol. 1–2, 2010, vol. 4; cf. Bowersock 2020; for discussion). Nevertheless, Hadrianus aptly incarnates the “stern ruler” figure when ordering Lucius to innovate his baths design style, lest he incur in the emperor’s wrath. Antoninus also seems to playfully antagonise Lucius, when not chasing skirts and generally wasting time. Many comedic episodes follow from these general premises. Crucial for our goal, however, is the fact that the series includes two distinct instances of transplant. The first is the use of the science-fictional theme of time travel. The second is the consequent presence of strong cultural barriers creating comedic episodes (e.g., Lucius yelling to Japanese individuals in a futile attempt to be understood). Though leading to comedic scenes, Antoninus’ frivolity and Hadrianus’ sternness seem historically accurate. Hence, *Thermae Romae* is a faithful, passionate rendition of Imperial Rome, its emperors and its bath-loving citizens.

From this analysis of these works, one may wonder in what kind of specific cultural horizon these works find their inception. Yamazaki Mari’s personal background becomes crucial in understanding such a matter. At age 18, the author moved to Florence to study the Italian language, art and history during the early ‘80s (Yamazaki 2010, vol. 4), and also became well-versed in Roman history. During a period she spent back in Japan, she worked as a part-time *mangaka* and a lecturer of Italian culture and language in various universities (Yamazaki 2009, vol. 2). As a *mangaka*, she has worked extensively on biographies (including her own), given her passion for history and European (in particular, Italian) culture. In a sense, historical accuracy is a norm that Yamazaki Mari is used to follow, given her commitment to the historical and biographic genres.

Given this premise, *Plinius* represents a pure biographic work. *Thermae Romae*, instead, represents an attempt to create a series connecting her two beloved, quintessential “bath-loving” cultures: Rome and Japan. At the same time, the series aimed to offer a vivid rendition of Roman daily life and culture (Yamazaki 2009, Vol. 1). Like the other historical manga discussed in this section, it provides an example of a document that shows an author’s genre-driven commitment to faithfulness to historical facts. At the same time, this series respects the norms of fiction and comedy, though always in a perspective respectful of its historical commitment.

4.4 Fumetti

We conclude our discussion of relevant works with the two *fumetti* documents that feature roman Emperors *RanXeroX* and *Storia D'Italia a Fumetti*.

RanXeroX presents the adventures of the eponymous character, a cyborg built off scrapes of a Ranx Xerox copy machine, in a dystopic version of the late 20th century (Tamburini & Liberatore 1992). Mixing harsh social commentary, sex, drugs and (very) black humour, *RanXeroX* was a pioneer in the cyberpunk genre and a comic with strong postmodern undertones. In the second volume (Tamburini (w) & Liberatore (i) 1992b), *RanXeroX* ends up living in New York, and is involved in the machinations of “Enogabalus”, a shady new media tycoon who builds his image after the notorious roman emperor Elagabalus/Eliogabalus. *RanXeroX* becomes part of a video clip shooting that aims to reconstruct the imperial chariot races, though mediated via their *Ben Hur* version, with cars and modern weapons. Enogabalus plans to use the video to promote his latest protégé band, and via the shock value of real-life deaths. *RanXeroX*, however, thwarts Enogabalus’ plans and ends the shooting in a gigantic crash, killing most of the participants.

It should be clear from the brief description that Elagabalus’ reception represents a radical case of transplant. The fictional Elagabalus, Enogabalus, is a character only partially inspired by the corresponding Roman emperor, who followed Caracalla and Macrinus’ rule and distinguished himself as a very decadent emperor (“Editors”, 2020c). The *RanXeroX* character, though based on this figure, is nevertheless a distinct character. Case in point, Enogabalus’s appearance mixes a roman tunica with hair-style and make-up that seems to be based on 1980’s fashion (Fig. 12). Thus, hybridization also features as a clear mode of reception for this emperor:



Fig. 12. Enogabalus.

The idea of reconstructing the chariot races in “cyberpunk” form also acts as a nod to dystopian works such as the book *Crash* (Ballard 1973) or the cult movie *Death Race 2000* (Bartel (d) 1975), aside from *Ben Hur*. After all, the cultural horizon in which the authors worked is Italy of the early ‘80s, and the tradition of alternative/underground comics. Thus, one might argue that the authors’ chief concern is to combine several historical and fictional sources to create a work of (then) contemporary social commentary, mixed with the nascent cyberpunk genre. Historical faithfulness seems certainly not a concern of the two authors, as this type of re-interpretation is generally found in cyberpunk works (e.g., *Judge Dredd*, Hammar 2017; Ursini 2016, 2017).³

The other *fumetti* work we discuss to conclude our analysis offers a very different picture, however. *Storia D’Italia a fumetti* ‘History of Italy in Comics’ (Biagi (w) & VV.AA., 1978–1986) represents a multi-volume collaboration between Enzo Biagi and some of most illustrious *fumetti* illustrators (e.g., Milo Manara, Guido Crepax and several others). Enzo Biagi was one of the most important, influential and intellectually rigorous journalists of post-war Italy (Zippel 1991). At the end of the ‘70s, Enzo Biagi launched this complex project with the goal of introducing young and not-so-young readers to Italy’s history. For this purpose, Enzo Biagi chose a medium considered to be better pedagogically oriented to younger generations, within Italian culture (Barbieri 2009). At the same time, Enzo Biagi also chose to offer an expansive if not excessively detailed historiographic approach to the subject matter. Thus, the document traces the history of the Italian peninsula from his earliest attested settlers to the modern age.

For our discussion, suffice it to say that vols. 4–5 cover the history of imperial Rome, offering concise overviews of the rules of the emperors discussed so far. Since the work covers several emperors and their rules, we do not offer an exhaustive list. However, we can confirm that Augustus, Nero and the other emperors discussed so far are also represented in the work, if only briefly. Such representations are overall accurate and offer what one could call “highlights”

³ Post-modern undertones are also present in the first volume, in which RanXeroX is forced to dance in a Broadway musical combining all Fred Astaire’s movies (Tamburini and Liberatore 1992a). One can thus argue that the series generally answers to post-modern norms of hybridization, than to historical norms of faithfulness, as the explicit reference to a not so faithful source such as *Ben Hur* also clearly indicates.

of each emperor's rule. This is part of the work's goal to offer an illustrated history of Italy as a land.

Storia D'Italia a Fumetti perhaps represents the clearest case of non-fictional, historiographic document in our corpus. By offering an overall faithful rendition of history from the actual world, the series offers a consequent faithful rendition of Roman emperors and countless other historical figures. In so doing, it offers clear proof that comics as a medium can certainly involve faithful modes of reception, if authors create works within a historiographical, non-fictional genre. In such a case, the cultural horizon that authors and readers come to share seems to amount to a common language (Italian, in this case) and perhaps an interest in the history of Italy, conceived of as land with ancient roots.⁴ With this point in mind, we turn to the discussion and the conclusions.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

We believe that four key results emerge from our analysis.

First, Nero and Augustus emerge as the most famous emperors in these comic traditions, probably due to their historical popularity (or notoriety). Other emperors are also attested, and with the exceptions of Elagabalus in *RanXeroX*, Caligula in the eponymous series and perhaps the Caracalla/Macrinus duo in *Ishintan*, they are represented in a faithful manner. This fact should not appear surprising if one considers the genre norms at stake. *Shōnen* 'boys' manga tend to gloss over historical details (cf. *Ishintan*). Horror, fantasy and science fiction comics must include genre-specific themes (cf. *Caligula*, *The Sandman*, *RanXeroX*). Other works are instead faithful to their sources apart from minimal fictional elements. *Britannia*, *Les Aigles de Rome*, *Alix: Senator*, *Cestus* and *Thermae Romae* introduce fictional characters interacting with "realistic" emperors, though the latter does include a concession to fiction in the time-travelling Lucius. Finally, some works represent clear examples of historiographic/biographic non-fiction. *La Storia D'Italia a Fumetti* and

⁴ It is worth noting that Enzo Biagi authored several other editorial projects involving *fumetti*, and chronicling history at various levels (e.g., *Storia della Seconda Guerra Mondiale a Fumetti* 'history of WWII in comics': Biagi (w) & VV. AA. (i) 1991). We leave a discussion of such interesting works for future endeavours.

Plinius can be considered to offer accurate representations of roman Emperors and their rules. We therefore conclude that genre norms and historical sources are a key factor influencing the reception of “Classics” in comics.

Second, transplant seems a key mode of reception in comics, since it determines the degree of faithfulness of a document in often subtle manners, and may operate via incremental, discrete steps. The introduction of fictional protagonists is a first step in the creation of a fictional world that may nevertheless lead to an historical fiction narrative (e.g., *Murena*, *Britannia*). The introduction of the aforementioned “fantastic” themes can decrease the degree of faithfulness to historical sources, but it can also increase that of adherence to fantasy, science fiction or other genres. Hybridization may also affect this degree, but one might argue that this happens in a more limited set of cases. Our analysis has shown that visual portrayals of emperors tend to be close to historical sources, but certain visual concessions may appear across works (e.g., a Cithara-playing Nero). Both modes signal narrative themes that authors use to create their fictional worlds, while also establishing intertextual relations with real-world sources.

Third, all these choices must be interpreted within the cultural horizon in which each author operates: in our case, comics traditions. It is a fact that adult *bedées* and *seinen manga* belong to comic traditions in which historical fiction has strong currency within a well-defined market. Such authors are thus compelled to be faithful to sources, for their audiences expect this norm to be respected. If these works can offer themes allowing “cultural bridges”, then one can also expect readers to better appreciate these works. Case in point, *Thermae Romae* is a critically and commercially successful series that has generated a small multi-media franchise (e.g., a TV series, two live-action movies, several translations, and an *anime*). Note, furthermore, that with the likely exception of *fumetti*, these comics traditions have long had international audiences willing to buy original or translated documents. Thus, the cultural horizon in which 21st century authors of “classic comics” operate tends to be a veritable multi-cultural, ever-changing horizon.

Fourth, comics authors may certainly find classical (Greek and Roman) history fascinating and stimulating enough to use it in their creations. At least in the case of Yamazaki Mari, a fascination with her adoptive culture becomes the reason for creating such documents. Yoshikazu Yasuhiko (*Waga wa na Nero*) and Pat Milligan (*Britannia*) also cite such a fascination with Roman

history, though they (likely?) lack Roman roots. Nevertheless, these authors seem to be acquainted well enough with Classical culture to consider certain events and figures (emperors, in our case) as having a strong narrative potential. In the 21st century, the reception of imperial Rome seems to be part of the cultural horizon of any author and reader of comics that can love these rich (hi)stories from this period.⁵

We can conclude by offering the answers to our initial questions. First, our answer to the *how*-question (i.e., how faithfulness is achieved) is that authors usually compile information from historical sources to create potentially accurate renditions of roman emperors in their targets (e.g., comics series). Divergences from this norm may be motivated by the need of authors to introduce fictional themes specific to the genre they wish to operate in. Second, our answer to the *why*-question (i.e., why these themes are used) is that imperial Rome seems to be an extremely fascinating and rich source of interesting figures, events, and themes. Audiences from very diverse cultural backgrounds may intensely appreciate them, whether they involve tragic villains such as Nero or ambivalent autocrats such as Augustus. Reception studies may thus become able to study these forms of reception in precise manners, provided that Classical heritages are interpreted as potentially interesting to comics fans across different cultures.

⁵ Perhaps tellingly, Yamazaki Mari has received the title of *Commendatrice dell'Ordine della Stella D'Italia* ‘Commander of the Order of the Italian Star’, in 2017. This is an honorary title offered to non-Italian individuals who offer invaluable global contributions to Italian culture. *Pace Kovacs and Marshall* (2016: xxv), Japanese (and other) artists have excellent reasons to concern themselves with cultures other than their “ancestral” ones.

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Genre and Truth-Telling in David Wong's *Escape to Gold Mountain*

Abstract

This essay explores how historiography and the formal characteristics of the graphic narrative genre reveal the potential of historical “truth” as separate from historical “fact.” In *Escape to Gold Mountain*, David H.T. Wong leverages the formal characteristics of the genre to create stronger empathy with the perspective character, allowing readers to bridge the truth-telling functions of both history and fiction. Four primary features illustrate Wong’s method: historical apparatus, a controlling symbol, focalization, and central sequence. Through these techniques, the graphic narrative addresses legacies of systemic racism against Chinese immigrants in the United States and Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although it also problematically reproduces the stereotype of the model minority in the process.

Most of us recognize that the dividing lines between “history” and “literature” are not as distinct as they may appear to be to the general public browsing the shelves of the local bookstore. In “Interpretation in History,” historian Hayden White established nearly 50 years ago that there is no such thing as “objective” or “scientific” history despite an explanatory impulse in historiography. Historical narrative, akin to literary storytelling, is a definitional, interpretive, meaning-making feature of writing history. Historical philosopher Frank Ankersmit elaborates upon the truth-telling function of historical narrative, arguing that the relationship is “chiastic” in that both are “entwined” so that “the components of the historical narrative are true, but at the same time historiography also contains an element of ‘fiction’ that is so difficult to deal with.... History makes truth trivial; the novel makes it mysterious. And in both cases the situation is unsatisfactory precisely where the essence of the two genres is concerned. It is as if each of them needs the heart of the other

in order to perfect itself" (1999, 9). Ankersmit's argument derives from an ongoing discussion of narrative and how historians construct, reconstruct, and interpret history. He uses European historical novels to illustrate the extent to which various literary artists have engaged with historical truths. These novels use historical detail while historians use techniques of fictional storytelling to interpenetrate genres in order to tell truths.

Historians are not alone in their concern about how narrative technique and history intertwine. E.M. Forster, in a 1927 collection of lectures delivered at Cambridge, entitled *Aspects of the Novel*, notes the interconnectedness of history and literature. His perspective as a novelist sheds more light on how the techniques of fiction reveal and penetrate the interior life. He says:

The historian deals with actions, and with the characters of men only so far as he can deduce them from their actions... The hidden life is, by definition, hidden. The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus to produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history. (1927, 45)

Importantly, he argues that the fiction writer reveals "more [...] than could be known" by simply describing the "external signs." A fiction-writer, according to Forster, provides deeper knowledge than historical explanation or interpretation can foster. Obviously, neither Forster nor Ankersmit apply their ideas to the genre of graphic narrative, yet both historiography and fiction-writing are relevant to the problems of representation and interpretation and to the genre, which self-consciously explodes the possibility of rigidly drawn genre boundaries.

Graphic narratives, so self-conscious of form, often cut across genre lines more obviously than a traditional novel might, inviting more admixtures of history, literary and visual art, and thereby interrogating these forms themselves. Hillary Chute argues in "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" that non-fiction graphic narratives encounter and render history self-consciously. Regarding *Maus*' strategy, for instance, she says: "We see that as historical enunciation weaves jaggedly through paradoxical spaces and shifting temporalities, comics – as a form that relies on space to represent time – becomes structurally equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing" (2008, 456). *Maus* illustrates the opportunity

of self-reflexive graphic narrative storytelling that both comments upon and participates in the construction of historical truths.

David H.T. Wong's 2012 *Escape to Gold Mountain* occupies this generically hybrid space between fiction/non-fiction and history/literature. The subtitle, "A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America" indicates its non-fiction status, yet Wong himself in the Preface says that it is a "fictional story...based on facts, on [his] own family's experiences" (2012, ii). Thus, the book's generic definition remains murky. Is it history? Fiction? Autobiography? As he describes his process of writing in the Foreword, he reveals that the genre necessarily shifted from his original conception: "Initially, this book was going to explore the history of the Chinese in Canada, but it soon became apparent that sharing only part of the story gave an incomplete picture of the Chinese experience in Gam Saan (Gold Mountain)" (Ibid.: ii). Determining the genre of the text matters insofar as it affects the truth-telling function of the narrative and, thereby, how readers process important truths about racism and Chinese history in North America. Not knowing the genre that the text inhabits blurs the factual and the fictional. If an event or fact is verifiably inaccurate and the reader can perceive this disjunction as a function of genre, then the truth-telling function of the narrative, as a whole, may be undermined. *Self-consciously* remixing the genres, however, may mitigate the perception of not telling the truth.

While the apparatus of history and historiography structures *Escape to Gold Mountain*, Wong's controlling symbol and focalization techniques animate the narrative. The historical apparatus of the text and the central sequence in the chapters devoted to California history encapsulate Wong's approach to telling a fictionalized history (or a historicized fiction) in a quest for truth. Although Wong's truth reveals his purpose, an attempt to heal a legacy of racism against Chinese in the United States and Canada, the book also reiterates the model minority myth, a specter that continues to haunt representations of Chinese in Asian-American literature.

I. Historical Apparatus

Wong's awareness of the truth-telling function of history is clear because he uses the apparatus of historiography explicitly in the text. To establish his historical ethos, besides the Foreword, he creates an "Introductions" section

of the book, along with a dialect key, a timeline, a travel map, a prologue, in-text citations, an afterword, a “Notes & References” section, an explanatory section about an important machine, “The Iron Chink,” a listing of multiple historical societies and historians in his acknowledgments section, and inclusion of dates at the beginning and within most chapters. His treatment of the subject matter within the graphic narrative itself also helps to establish historical authority, of course, but the apparatus demonstrates a desire to comply with historiographical genre expectations.

Those genre expectations are different, however, in part because of the visual art used to express them. For example, the timeline section is interesting because it makes parallel North American and Chinese historical events, along with a generational timeline of the author’s family. The visual connection illustrates the deeper connection between the people affected by the events and policies of history on both sides of the Pacific beginning from about 1790 to 2000. His representation of personal and political histories in parallel space implies causal connections. The Taiping Rebellion, for instance, is connected to the Central Pacific Railroad and Chinese Expulsion, which directly affects the two characters/family members with which those historical events are aligned. Without reading more extensively, the reader will not know precisely how, of course. Nevertheless, Wong illustrates a connection between the personal and the historical. Obviously, this narrative will not take an objectivist stance in favor of Forster’s novelistic impulse to expose the “hidden” truth.

Wong’s incorporation of “Introductions” of important authorities of Chinese history and activism also demonstrates attention to historical apparatus and ethos, as well as personal connection. (Wong himself is a community activist in Vancouver, Canada, in addition to his primary occupation as an architect and urban ecologist. *Escape to Gold Mountain* is his only novel, although it is the culmination of a childhood dream to become a cartoonist.) Such testimonies have been typical of both histories and novels, particularly in the early nineteenth century when genre boundaries were not strictly established and were more permeable. Writers of historical fiction often used authenticity markers so that readers would regard their books as authoritative, legitimizing the truth-telling function of fictional texts, particularly if they were trying to make a political, social, or moral (aka “activist”) point. The function of Wong’s “Introductions” is similar in that it provides historical authority for a fictional, activist text.

Yet his first “authority” does much more than legitimize the historical references Wong uses in the narrative itself. After an opening that invokes the stereotypical comic book genre elements – “BAM! POWW!! ZAP! KA-BOOM!!! KLUGNК!” – and after paragraphs that describe the over 150-year history of the Chinese in North America, Dr. Imogene Lim’s commentary authorizes the genre itself: “The graphic novel is a way to make such history accessible to people who might find the subject ‘dry,’ or who don’t like reading or find it difficult” (*Ibid.*: 14). Perhaps the artists of the genre would find this reasoning reductionist; nevertheless, it is a method for legitimizing the genre. Her primary authorization, however, is as a historian and activist who provides explanation for what is fictionalized in the coming narrative, concluding: “As a history and as a graphic novel, this book is unique in providing parallel stories of the Chinese in [Canada and the United States]” (*Ibid.*: 13). The historian sees this book as belonging to two genres, and she authorizes both at the same time. In a thick black frame, Wong portrays Dr. Lim and his other two experts, by means of stately realistic portraiture, akin to an academic employee photo, and textual credentials. Wong has inserted their static portraits alongside their commentary; thus, these two elements work together, mutually reinforcing the authority Dr. Lim grants the narrative.

Wong’s purpose is not simply to inform, but to educate and activate readers to work against the legacies of racism. He proposes in his afterword an idealistic goal: “I did not want to aggravate readers over historic injustices and ignite fresh diatribes based on a person’s skin color. That is why the ‘penultimate chapter... is so important to me: it shows that old grudges need not be continued by future generations and that people from different cultures share a common desire—joy for successive generations” (*Ibid.*: 225). With an explicit activist ideal, the narrative needs both historical authorization and generic legitimacy to achieve its truth-telling function. Chute argues that this ethical impulse is embedded in the form of comics themselves, stating that “graphic narrative offers compelling, diverse examples that engage with different styles, methods, and modes to consider the problem of historical representation. An awareness of the limits of representation...is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form; yet it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement” (2008, 457). The historical apparatus Wong uses to frame his narrative is a self-conscious attempt to authorize the form and the generic hybridity of the narrative.

2. Controlling Symbol

After extensive prefatory material establishing historical features of the text, the graphic narrative itself begins with a sequence inside the Museum of Migration in Vancouver, Canada. The first chapter introduces the “Iron Chink,” a machine that replaced and displaced Chinese workers who initially immigrated to the west coast to work primarily on railroad construction in the United States and Canada, but then had to find alternate work, in this case, the fish canneries in the Pacific northwest. This machine is, according to Iyko Day, “a personification of the simultaneous efficiency and disposability of the Chinese laborer [that] articulates the contradictions of settler colonial capitalism that expose the inhumanity of commodity-determined labor” (2016, 195). Chinese labor is the primary mover of this narrative, and this machine embodies economic and racial histories. Even within the imaginative narrative, material history matters; Wong’s symbolic use of the machine creates a bridge between traditional historiography and imaginative narrative.

The first two-page spread establishes the importance of the historical artifact and its effects. On the left-hand page are three frames, one that takes two-thirds of the page and two others that split the last horizontal third of the page. Two thirds of the first frame feature the mechanism of the Iron Chink, which is labeled prominently; the other third of the frame in the bottom right features three characters, two Asian (one male and one female) and facing the reader and another white boy whose back is to the reader and whose shadow is within the frame, while his feet are outside the frame. The two young male teens face one another, the blond with his arm outstretched and fist balled up, the bespectacled one with a similarly aggressive stance. The female holds her hand over her mouth as if in dismay at the museum display, but also at the exclamation of “CHINK!” within the frame.

Wong thus establishes the connection between offensive language, economic history, and race, with a slightly ominous shadow cast on the floor reminiscent of the Nazi salute (fig. 1).

CHAPTER 1 The Iron Chink



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Fig. 1 The first image of the first chapter depicts the primary symbol of the text. David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 26. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

(This image reverberates within one of the final chapters focused on reconciliation between two fathers-in-law who had fought in Normandy on opposite sides). The white boy's feet outside the frame shows his essential separation from the Asian-American history that this narrative depicts, but simultaneously demonstrates his potential racist power. This white boy could be a threat. Two other frames on the page slightly overlap. The first shows a low-angle shot from the female's perspective where the primary gear of the massive machine dominates, and its racist label is a primary focus. The second shows a high angle shot of the back of the machine with her in front of it, hands on her hips, when she hears laughter from someone outside the frame. Removed from the historical context, this woman is overwhelmed and angry. Both her reaction and the boys' reactions illustrate the importance of this machine, its presence in a museum, and the graphic narrative Wong has written.

This machine stands for the psychological, physical, and economic pain that immigrant Chinese had to endure in the past, as well as its legacy on future generations. On the opposite page of the initial two-page spread, a frame depicts two front views of the white boy, who uses his fingers to slant his eyes. In a similar white outlined font to the racial slur depicted on the opposite page, are two sets of "HA HA HA." This boy's "fun" (*Ibid.*: 29) emphasizes why material history is important to teach culture. In "Material Culture and Cultural History," Richard Grassby argues for the importance of objects in writing history: "Whether it communicates through words or visual representation, the cultural system relies on metaphor and symbolism. When literal language fails, people express ideas through metaphorical analogies. Historians often conceptualize in metaphors to relate concrete facts to abstractions" (2005, 591). Although Grassby focuses his analysis on early modern English artifacts, his remarks about material history are salient, and they demonstrate why Wong depicts this machine and discussion about it in the opening sequence. The Iron Chink represents and provides an autobiographical bridge to the Chinese past in North America. Grandma Wong responds to the children's questions about the machine by explicitly articulating its symbolism: "I used to wish that I had not been born Chinese. We had to endure so much prejudice. The Iron Chink ... it represents a people's pain and sadness" (2012, 30). Alternating images of tears and fist waving, Wong shows the grandmother's feelings as representative of the immigrant community. The mechanism of the machine is juxtaposed with the grandmother's depth of sadness and anger: thus material

history takes on greater personal significance and resonance with those children whom both Grandmother Wong and the book itself seek to inform and influence. Her memory extends only so far because she was a baby when the machine was introduced to the canneries, annihilating jobs that supported Chinese households. Nevertheless, Wong visualizes events outside of her direct observation while using her character as a way to flashback to 1905, when the Iron Chink machine is introduced, and then again to 1835, when we begin to follow the historical perspective character of Wong Ah Gin, whom the author introduces as a dock worker and then a stowaway escaping the horrifying conditions in China during the time after the first Opium War (1839-1842).

This machine is also important as a controlling symbol for the narrative because it establishes labor and racism as central to the story of the Wongs and by extension, the story of the Chinese immigrant experience in the United States and Canada. Malissa Phung, in “The Reinscription of Life, Labour, and Property in David H.T. Wong’s *Escape to Gold Mountain*,” recognizes Wong’s “anti-racist critique,” but also acknowledges that it “perpetuates labour tropes of efficiency, productivity, and sacrifice that remain central to the Gold Mountain and model minority myth” (2018, 155). The model minority myth is an idealized portrait that seems harmless, but which nevertheless sets up impossible expectations for Asians and other immigrants from any locale. In fact, many national immigration policies have been constructed to allow only the most productive “desirables” to enter the country. Wong’s focus on labor through this controlling symbol, but also through the consistent reference to the ingenuity and sacrifice of Chinese immigrants in the infrastructure building of Canada and the United States, does not provide alternative avenues for construing Chinese immigrant identity.

3. Focalization

Of course, the narrative itself is not strictly history or, even, typically historiographical. Most obviously, the narrative is sequential art, not a typical medium for traditional history-writing. Beyond that, however, the narrative as a whole does not consistently strike a disinterested pose, or an objective viewpoint, and some “facts” are imagined rather than verifiable. Wong Ah Gin, for instance, the primary perspective character of the California

chapters, is portrayed as the person who first found gold at Sutter's Mill, thus starting the California Gold Rush, and as the first person to come up with the germ for the idea of the transcontinental railroad. These "facts" are imagined methods for influencing the decision-makers. How else can the descendants of the disenfranchised be influencers of history? The narrative seeks to fill gaps that histories themselves cannot address because no personal narratives from the perspective of the oppressed are extant. This is a perpetual concern of social historians, who often must interpret the absence in records because the oppressed do not have access to power or to literacy itself. Their perspectives and their stories are simply not available. Nevertheless, choosing to include unverified facts runs the risk of undermining the truth-telling function of the *historical* narrative. Perhaps it does not matter for a book that proclaims its hybridity in form and function. Forster argues that "fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence, and even if the novelist has not got it correctly—well, he has tried" (1927, 63-4). Where Wong's narrative is not strictly history, the techniques of fiction allow important license to fill in gaps in the historical record.

Here cross-genre truth telling utilizes the form of graphic narrative and specifically exploits the multiple focalization options the form offers. Kai Mikkonen in "Graphic Narratives as Challenge to Transmedia Narratology: The Question of Focalization" argues that Rick Altman's concept of "following" is important in graphic narrative. He says that

the person or figure who is followed tends to import perceptual information and subjective vision into the image. There is a potential focalizer in every focalized person: Images reveal looks, fields of vision, and so on. This potential is similar to that of literary narratives, but images also literally reveal acts of perception from the outside, that is, from an external viewpoint (2011, 643).

Importantly, the shifts in perspective or focalization can occur in less than a page or even in a single panel.

Graphic perspective, or focalization, is a significant vector of control and creativity for a fiction writer; normally, anything other than disinterested perspective is conscientiously avoided by the traditional historiographer. Wong's focalization in the fourth chapter invites the reader to empathize with Ah Gin's perspective on history (fig. 2).

CHAPTER 4 Crocker's Iron Road



Fig. 2. Visuals and text merge to establish the power differential between Ah Gin and railroad magnate, Crocker.

David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 63. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

In the first panel of the chapter, the reader peers into the well-appointed office of Charles Crocker, one of the “big four” investors of the Central Pacific Railroad. Crocker leans an elbow against books on his desk, his body turned towards Ah Gin, whose back is turned to the reader and his face visible only in profile. All of Crocker’s face is visible, although his eyes are focused on Ah Gin. The postures and the setting of the panel demonstrate the power dynamic between the characters (as representatives of each race), one borne out by the historical record. Crocker’s testimony to the 1876 U.S. Congress Joint Special Committee investigating Chinese immigration indicates the racist fear of the time and Crocker himself as conflicted. Despite a generally positive disposition towards Chinese labor, he testified to the committee that he “did not prefer the Chinamen at all; I was convinced that I had to employ them in order to complete the work; I preferred white labor” (Sargent 1877, 672).

Wong depicts the complicated relationship Crocker has with the Chinese, giving him credit for seeing the worth of Chinese labor, but firmly establishing the power relationship: Ah Gin is the servant, Crocker the employer. This relationship is also clear within the speech bubbles, where Crocker makes a point of establishing Ah Gin as a feminized worker by making an off-color joke about how Ah Gin would “make someone a good wife” (Wong, 2012, 63) because he cooks, cleans, and gardens. Although readers’ reactions are never completely predictable, modern sensibility makes Crocker’s joke off-putting, creating more reader empathy with Ah Gin. Crocker does all the talking at first, asking Ah Gin to tell him about China. In the previous chapter, the reader has “followed” Ah Gin, but in this half-page panel (each 1/3 of the remaining horizontal half of the page), readers are led to Crocker, focusing on him and his personality. In the final three panels on the page, we focus on Crocker alone and more at the mid-range level, where he and his words fill the frame. In the first two panels, Crocker’s eyeline directs to the right. In the final panel, he looks directly at the reader. Readers inhabit Ah Gin’s perspective by the final panel, which re-establishes a cooperative power between the perspective/focus we “follow” (Ah Gin) and the reader. Traditional historiography has no similar mechanism for such perspective shifts and cooperative meaning-making.

While Wong uses the techniques of a fiction writer, his devotion to traditional historiography sometimes intrudes, which may distance the

reader; but also helps to establish Ah Gin as an authoritative interlocutor between the reader and history. In this way, the reader is more likely to accept as truth unverified facts and recognize history as an incomplete telling by the “victors.” For example, in the next sequence of panels, the shift in story-telling power continues, where Ah Gin faces the reader (although his eyeline remains with Crocker), and Crocker’s back is to the audience. In the fourth and fifth panels on the page, however, we see a different technique more akin to the explicative impulse of historiography. After Crocker muses that “China built the great wall,” Ah Gin confirms the construction. Wong depicts the wall in the background with Ah Gin in the right corner foreground, as if narrating a grade-school history film, and glancing back towards history (the wall) rather than at Crocker or at the reader. In the next panel, Ah Gin’s ambiguous gaze dominates a panel that includes a crowd of sketchily drawn Chinese in the background of the image over which Ah Gin provides explanatory detail. In the final and smallest panel, we return to Crocker’s office where Ah Gin provides a comparative opinion of the “Ching” dynasty. The narrative focal point remains Ah Gin (as narrator) in this panel, but the reader is pulled out of the narrative almost completely with an instructional detail about how to pronounce “Ching.” The educational purpose of this page dominates, but the sequencing underscores the hybridity of the genres across which Wong develops the narrative.

The shift back to Crocker’s perspective occurs over the next three panels, where Wong transitions from Ah Gin’s explanations about the canal system to Crocker’s musings about a “transportation line ... over long distances” (2012, 65). In the first horizontal panel, Ah Gin faces the audience, his eyeline focused on Crocker, who turns his back on the readers. Crocker does not speak. In the second horizontal panel, he asks “How?” when Ah Gin explains the canal system. In the final panel, Ah Gin does not appear, but an image of the Grand Canal is interrupted by a vignette of Crocker in his office, looking directly at the reader, who is inhabiting the narrative perspective of Ah Gin again. The next series of panels proceed from a two-shot similar to the first panel of the chapter to a single mid-level shot of Crocker facing the reader to four panels of a close up of Crocker’s face as he talks to Ah-Gin. In the final panel, Crocker thinks of how he will use Ah Gin’s insight, deciding to contact the initial

proposer of a transcontinental railroad, Theodore Judah. This sequence portrays Ah Gin as the inspiration for Crocker's investment decision and a significant influencer of history. Strictly speaking, this is an unverified detail, not a historical fact. But can we say definitively that it did not happen this way? Wong exploits a historical absence to sustain a significant truth about the importance of Chinese immigrants for the construction of the Central Pacific. While plenty of facts are available that indicate the significant sacrifice and contribution of the Chinese to that enterprise, no one has argued that a single Chinese immigrant was the source of Crocker's inspiration to invest in the endeavor. This is the power of fiction to provide additional meat for the historical bone, to insist upon a more emphatic presentation of a truth.

Wong's book leverages focalization to enhance historiography, thereby calling attention to the problem of writing history. According to Chute, "Graphic narrative accomplishes this work with its manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation" (2008, 458). Through the shifting perspective, readers come closer to character empathy or closer to traditional history from one panel to the next. How Wong manages focalization distance graphically illustrates the power of the form to bridge the truth-telling functions of both history and fiction.

4. Central Sequence

The empathy Wong engenders for Ah Gin is essential to reframing reader comprehension of systemic racism based on historical events. Much of the history is painful to look at; some of it is excruciating. It is one thing to read about mass lynching of 17 Chinese people in Los Angeles; it is quite another to see a graphic representation of lynching. How and why did this October 24, 1871, massacre occur? Once the Central Pacific was completed, the demand for Chinese labor plummeted, while more people from the eastern United States began to settle in California. Many Americans resented the Chinese, arguing a familiar refrain about the Chinese "stealing all our jobs!" (Wong 2012, 87). Combined with anti-Chinese rhetoric by American

politicians at the national and international levels, the struggle for resources and work in California heated and boiled into multiple violent incidents at the local level.

Within a two-chapter sequence, Wong depicts two of the most horrifying events, the first in Los Angeles in 1871, the second in San Francisco in 1877. These two chapters animate the arguments and figures prominent in debates about Chinese immigrants prior to the Exclusion Act of 1882, the first in a series of federal laws intended to curb Chinese immigration and later other “undesirable” groups perceived to be taking jobs away from American citizens. In these visual-essay sections, Ah Gin appears in a single panel just prior to the two violent sequences, but his presence anchors the history within the narrative. They also provide the motivation of Ah Gin as the primary perspective character and so serve a narrative purpose as well: Wong and his adopted son, Sam, emigrate farther north to British Columbia to escape the hatred and violence in California.

These chapters also further indict the racism embodied within the “Iron Chink” by using other nineteenth-century racist depictions of Chinese people. Opportunistic politicians, according to Wong, consciously exploited the volatile domestic conditions in China to make immigrants “scapegoats” (*Ibid.*: 88). They did this by configuring Chinese immigrants as “the yellow terror” or “the yellow peril,” a sustained visual stereotype that dominated anti-Chinese political tracts during the late nineteenth century. Monica Chiu and Jeanette Roan have argued that “[a] history of racist representations, specifically those of Asians in the United States and Canada, haunts many Asian American graphic narratives” (para 5). Wong rewrites these “haunting” images in *Escape to Gold Mountain*, using the formal characteristics of the genre to contextualize them.

Specifically, Wong’s approach to these static images (fig. 3) is to depict them within additional frames, thus graphically encapsulating them as objects to be studied, not simply used uncritically as propaganda or as part of an escapist narrative.



Fig. 3. A sequenced context embeds single-panel anti-Chinese images.

David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 88. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

This approach attempts to avoid a contemporary complaint about rendering race stereotypically, a conundrum for comics because the medium tends to distill representations to their most basic features and exaggerate them. Jared Gardner acknowledges this use of “stereotype and caricature” in “Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim.” He argues that both the collaborative nature of the medium and its demands of readers to imagine the time and space between panels allow sequential comics to exploit the “tension between the two primary systems of communication in graphic narrative: image and text” (2010, 138). The “gap” between these two features “is precisely what makes the sequential comic so resistant to racialist work” (*Ibid.*: 138) because while “racism may share with comics some fundamental grammatical elements: caricature, stereotypes, condensation... racism requires precisely that which sequential comics makes impossible: unequivocal meanings, and a stable definition of us and them” (*Ibid.*: 142). Thus, while Wong’s narrative may rely on the model minority myth overall, the formal features of graphic narrative and Wong’s illustrations, at least, resist propagandistic racist depictions inherent in static images, especially in conjunction with an “unruly reader” who reads recursively.

In contrast to single-panel static images, Wong provides a sequence where a trio of white men, portrayed as greedy gamblers with short tempers, finally decide to attack Chinese (fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Repeated and mirrored images reflect the inward hatred that turns outward.
David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 90. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

In one page, he illustrates repeated postures in two panels separated by other individual white men angrily gathering a mob. The repetition of images suggests a transition from talk to action. The trio is first in an interior space having a heated interaction among themselves, a chair toppled and postures aggressive. In the second, parallel panel, the three men are in the repeated postures, although one is facing outward in a mirrored image, revealing the essential shift from internal to external violence. All are now holding weapons. The background is white, inferring an exterior shot, but also a more static, poster-like stereotype of “violent white men.” In the sequence that follows, those men do indeed verbally abuse and physically attack and kill the Chinese. The images are gory: a full-body angle of one body that had been shot and then lynched; a two-shot of a Chinese man shot and with the top of his skull removed; a panel that depicts all the victims, most in shadow and lynched, but three bloody and mutilated; and two separate panels with close-ups of one man’s queue and another with an amputated ring finger. This incident is dramatic and demands representation. To avoid sensationalism, however, Wong includes an informational panel that cites a scholarly source, the historiographical impulse intruding again upon the fictional narrative.

The reader is informed, but shocked, and forced to face a shameful reality that racism affects both white people and their victims. In the final pictorial panel of the sequence, a backdrop of fiery destruction in the background, a white child points at the “dead Chinese” beyond the frame and announces that they “sure look[s] stupid” (Wong 2012, 92). Rather than reprimand the child, the white mother says, “Child, all Chinamen look stupid” (*Ibid.*: 92). For Gardner’s “unruly reader,” this response echoes the beginning of the book when the white child slants his eyes, laughs, and says he is just joking around. What may have seemed somewhat innocent at the beginning of the narrative is much less innocent here, and the parallel behavior of these children shows little had changed from 1871 to 2006. Thus, Wong returns to the purpose of his book: to demonstrate the legacy of racism and racist acts on younger generations, ever mindful of the audience (both white and Chinese) that graphic narrative often implies.

The next chapter depicts how Ah Gin and Sam are forced to flee San Francisco in 1877. The focus remains on the economic and labor pressures that led to individuals to stir up anti-Chinese sentiment. One third of the chapter is focused on Denis Kearney, a California labor leader and powerful

orator known for long, hate-filled rallies that ended with “The Chinese Must Go” at the end of each. In one panel, Wong depicts a gang of boys throwing rocks at Chinese as they flee into the distance. A policeman encourages them with “Good hit boys!” (Ibid.: 94). On the next page, two horizontal panels dominate: the first depicts a rally with angry figures drawn abstractly and in shadow; the second shows a cityscape with even less distinct figures, a mass of rioters, drawn holding flags. Within the gutter of these two images readers imagine the causal connections, the additional meetings, the anger, hatred, and marches. These men fomented rioting for days in the city, causing four deaths and over \$100,000 damage to property primarily owned by the Chinese (approximately \$2.5 million in today’s dollars). Wong breaks the frame of the second panel to show a close up of a gored Chinese man pierced in the chest with a stick. This stark image humanizes the hate and leads the reader back to the narrative of Ah Gin and his son. In the face of growing hatred, violence, and racist laws, they both go to Vancouver and the promise of a better life.

Unfortunately, that life is not easy, and after the California sections, the narrative continues a pattern of fictionalized history when Ah Gin encounters Sun Yat-sen in Hawaii or when Canadian artist Emily Carr encounters Wong’s children outside the family’s restaurant in Vancouver. While such fictional interventions could potentially undermine the truth-telling function of the narrative, Wong’s admission of using “artistic license” (Ibid.: 225) in his rendering of his family’s immigrant history in North America instead leverages the graphic narrative form to supply voice to the historically suppressed and the disenfranchised.

Ultimately, the trajectory of the narrative ends with a racial reconciliation fantasy that seems a little too tidy, perhaps reflecting the author’s activist goals and, as Phung has argued, “a commemorative impulse [...] to memorialize” (2018, 139). The final chapters present an integrative portrait, a sort of personal truth and reconciliation commission in which two potential fathers-in-law who fought on opposite sides of World War II cry together in mutual understanding and in a shared goal “to see our children live the lives that were stolen from our youth” (Wong, 2012, 219) and put the past behind them. This sequence is followed by a return to the Iron Chink at the museum and a televised apology from the Canadian prime minister in 2006 and, in the afterword, “regret” from the U.S. Congress in 2011 and 2012. Monica Chiu notes in “Visual Realities of Race” that “a successful ethnic American story requires public sanction: the

suffering refugee who finds succor and success in America, the model minority encouraged by US opportunity, an adherence to what the majority accepts as typically ethnic American, sometimes more fiction than fact" (2014, 3). *Escape to Gold Mountain* includes suffering refugees and does indeed "re-inscribe" the model minority myth. However, it also uses the formal characteristics of the genre to provide context for those portrayals so that readers can understand and abhor Wong's truth, that is, *the* truth: the personal legacy and devastation of systemic racism and racist violence.

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A Landscape of Fear: *From Hell* and the Twentieth Century

Abstract

This essay reads Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* as an unorthodox *tractatus* on space-time and a paranoiac, political retelling of history. In the graphic novel, the Whitechapel murders are presented as a symbolical generator for the violence of the twentieth century through a meaningful association with the Holocaust. Through a four-dimensional outlook, Moore presents a metaphorical, non-causal way of thinking about history that represents the latter as a Lovecraftian "landscape of fear." The essay examines *From Hell*'s geo-historical dimension and its use of a wide variety of sources to demonstrate how its oblique account of late nineteenth-century London can be interpreted as a militant comment on our "fraught modern world."

1. Of space, time, and closure

In approaching the historical poetics of a labyrinthine work like Eddie Campbell and Alan Moore's *From Hell*, one is reminded of the introductory paragraph to Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". Opening this classic study which is both somewhat outdated and still unsurpassed when it comes to historical-spatial literary analysis, the Russian critic writes: "The process of assimilating real historical space and time in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space" (Bakhtin 1981, 84). "Complicated" and "erratic" are adjectives that fit perfectly Moore's ambitious narrative structure, although the latter should be ascribed to the unreliable realm of first impression rather than to an actual structural weakness—*From Hell*'s apparently unstable ontological and chronological framework is more the product of a clockwork plan than of aimless wandering.

This is not the only reason why Bakhtin's aesthetic theory is useful in introducing the graphic novel's space-time dimension, of course. The most interesting connection between the critic's speculations and Moore's story lies in that the latter ideally stands as an additional case-study, an appendix of sorts, to Bakhtin's philological mapping of the ways in which history and place have been absorbed by literature. The chronotopic analysis of texts emanates from Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and *From Hell* seems in a way to elaborate on the theoretical foundations laid by Bakhtin. Its conception of reality as a four-dimensional totality is openly exhibited, and expanded as to include a vast range of scientific, pseudo-scientific, and philosophical assumptions. In producing a work so aesthetically reliant on its underlying conception of time (and space), Moore and Campbell have given a uniquely strong interpretation to the "spatial and temporal indicators ... fused together in one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" that constitute a text's aesthetic spatial-historical dimension (Bakhtin 1981, 84).

The "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships" (Ibid.) that according to Bakhtin characterizes literary works is in a way already evident in graphic narratives. It is inherent in the way they function, deeply embedded in their form. Scott McCloud posits that closure, the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (McCloud 1993, 63), is a vital element of the sequential art. "In a very real sense, comic is closure," (Ibid., 67) he writes (actually, he draws). He identifies its most powerful agent in the white space between panels, the gutter, concluding that "closure is comics' primary means of simulating time" (Ibid., 69). With the help of the reader's perception, space in comics can work as a semiotic indicator of temporality. And the opposite is true, too: graphic narratives can also be described as a way in which chronological data are collapsed into spatial elements. As Art Spiegelman elegantly explains: "comics are time turned into space" (Brunetti 2020). The space-time entanglement common to Einstein's Relativity, Bakhtin's chronotope, and graphic narratives had already been recognized, again, by McCloud, whose essay recapitulates this digression by affirming "in the world of comics time and space are one and the same," because they "merge so completely, the distinction often vanishes" (McCloud 1993, 100, 102).

This short and by all means incomplete discussion of how space-time is in a way part of the very fabric of comics is meant as a first methodological

introduction to what follows.¹ Given the substantial continuity of space and time both in the theoretical approach proposed and in the nature of the medium itself, from now on I will use space to probe the way in which the novel absorbs and re-elaborates history and vice versa. *From Hell*'s extremely conscious engagement with history and the perception of time requires an investigation that is equally able to understand how space and time form a coherent, complex dimension. An analysis that didn't accept these premises would fail to acknowledge the novel's deep commitment with historical facts, and the way in which these facts can be narrated in order to put them under a new light. Because of the way in which the novel thinks and writes about history, the events contained in it acquire a meaning that goes beyond the limits of spatial-temporal contingency.

While focused on Jack the Ripper's infamous murders, the work is actually grander in its scope, taking one step forward in simply representing history on the page. Moore and Campbell's story takes graphic narratives' intrinsic involvement with time and brings it front and center in the creation of an ambitious philosophical (and often straightforwardly mystical) inquiry into the machinery of history and our perception of it as human beings. In this paper, I will analyze how *From Hell* not only stands as an impressive philological work of historical and meta-historical research on Victorian London and the Ripper Murders in particular, but also how it reads like an eccentric lecture on space-time, and, on a larger scale, as a counterintuitive *tractatus* that offers an unconventional perspective on the genesis of the twentieth century, its underlying cultural motives and their significance. To do so, I will navigate the graphic novel's manifold connections with a number of doctrines, practices and beliefs that includes relativity and quantum physics, history, architecture, psychogeography, magic, and conspiracy theories in order to delineate the bigger picture drawn by the interrelation of all these discourses. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how *From Hell*'s

¹ I have limited myself to some basic ideas because I believe that the vast implications of how space-time works in comics go beyond the focus of this essay. For a detailed analysis of this and related concepts, I suggest McCloud's seminal essay *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*; or, for a more contemporary study, Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening*. Scholars specifically interested in the relation between cognition and comics (one of the newest and fastest-growing branches of comics studies) should refer, among others, to Neil Cohn's *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*.

kaleidoscopic reworking of its sources can ultimately be interpreted as a paranoiac retelling of history aimed at illustrating its underlying oppressive power relations.

2. Architectures of history

Since history is the main preoccupation of this analysis, the first thing to do is to position *From Hell* in its space-time. Although the story spans over roughly a century (1827-1923) its focus is on summer and fall 1888, the months in which the so-called “canonical five” Ripper murders took place.² As Moore himself writes in the Appendix II to the novel, he had initially ruled out writing about Jack the Ripper, because the story was “too played out, too obvious” (Moore and Campbell 1999, 16).³ Brought to Stephen Knight’s conspiracist work of investigative journalism, *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution* by the publicity around the crimes’ centennial in 1988, he declares its plot “a swiss-watch work of art,” and says that some “ideas coalesce[d]” around that particular interpretation (ibid., 15, 16). What is interesting to notice is that throughout Appendix II, in which Moore tells the story behind the novel, he clearly doesn’t buy into Knight’s version of the facts, or any other, declaring them to be nothing but “dodgy pseudo-history” (ibid., 16). “The idea of a solution, any solution, is inane,” he writes, “murder, a human event located in both space and time, has an imaginary field completely unrestrained by either. It holds meaning, and shape, but no solution” (Ibid.). These statements are an apparent contradiction to what I stated before, namely, that *From Hell* is a painstakingly accurate depiction of the historical era it seeks to represent. To solve this non sequitur, it is necessary to keep in mind the distinction between facts and

² As reported by Stewart P. Evans and Keith Skinner’s *The Ultimate Jack the Ripper’s Sourcebook* (3), the police files on the Whitechapel murders included eleven victims spanning from April 1888 to February 1891. Of these, only the murders of Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly are considered the most likely to be connected.

³ *From Hell* has a peculiar page numbering. Every chapter starts from page one, with an introductory page dedicated to epigraphs which is not numbered. At the expenses of a fluid reading, I have decided to always specify which chapter I am referring to in order to avoid confusion. The same goes with *Lost Girls*, upon which I will touch briefly later on.

narration, and between the ontology of historical events and their poetics. I will return to this later on in the essay. For now, suffice it to say that the novel's understanding of the fourth dimension can help clarify this discrimination.

The opening towards other dimensions is clear right from Chapter Two, whose epigraph is taken from mathematician and sci-fi writer Charles Howard Hinton's pamphlet titled *What is the Fourth Dimension?* The epigraph reads: "we should have to imagine some stupendous whole, wherein all that has ever come into being or will come coexists." The question about the actual meaning of a four-dimensional space is repeated throughout the chapter. The mathematician's ideas are mainly oriented towards the theorization of another spatial dimension, but they proved to be influential for the conception of time as a fourth dimension later to be developed by Einstein's relativity. Moreover, as explained by Anne De Witt, Hinton's fourth dimension is also a speculation on a higher moral dimension in which a more sympathetic relationship between human beings is possible (De Witt 2013, 173). As we will see, Moore completely reverses this idea. Later in the chapter, Hinton's theories are directly expounded by his father James while on an early morning stroll with William Gull. The two were close friends in real life, but Moore's meta-fictional historical account puts them in the baroque Christ Church located in the London district of Spitalfields. The church borders the district of Whitechapel, the story's main setting, and, more than the various places of worship described in the novel, is a recurring symbol in *From Hell*. In the text, various characters highlight its historical connections with violent events and with the "perpetual multitudes of beggars, criminals, and whores" (Moore and Campbell 1999, 32), as Gull himself affirms in Chapter Four. It is almost as Nicholas Hawksmoor, its architect, "gouged more deeply an existing channel of suffering, violence and authority," says Hinton during the stroll (ibid. 15). Hawksmoor's church is an everlasting monument to the chain of interconnected brutal events that have taken place nearby in the course of centuries. He further elaborates on that: "Fourth dimensional patterns within Eternity's monolith would ... seem merely random events to third-dimensional percipients... events rising towards inevitable convergence like and archway's line" (Moore and Campbell 1999, 15). History, as *From Hell* depicts it, is structured like some kind of colossal, invisible architecture. Gull calls this notion "most glorious and most terrible" (Ibid.), and he is right. Four-dimensionality as defined by Hinton and presented by Moore implies that human beings are devoid of agency and that

they are, maybe unknowingly but unavoidably, part of a bigger scheme at the same time. Hinton's theory also implies that apparently unrelated events may actually belong together like parts of the same architectural element sustaining some invisible truth. This way of looking at history allows Moore to juxtapose different, distant moments in a timeline to suggest some hidden relation between them. These metaphorical connections are of course of no strict historiographic value as far as the phenomenal world is concerned: their aim is to create meaningful symbolical and rhetorical relationships that can reframe events in order to elucidate an overarching discourse capable of improving our understanding of the past.

To elucidate how *From Hell* performs a metaphorical interpretation of history while also closely sticking to data, let's use as an example one of the novel's symbolic connection between otherwise unrelated events. In chapter Five, titled "The Nemesis of Neglect", William Gull, Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria and the real identity of Jack the Ripper according to Knight's book, is about to start his chain of killings. This section opens with a quite puzzling sequence in which we literally peep through a snowy window as an Austrian couple is having sex. Even more puzzling is the fact that, as the two reach their climax, the woman (whose name is Klara, we later discover) has a horrific vision in which Christ Church in Spitalfields, appearing once again, vomits a torrent of blood on some orthodox Jews passing by (Moore and Campbell 1999, 1-3). To help anyone looking for this sequence's meaning in the story, Moore explains in Appendix I that we have just witnessed the conception of Adolf Hitler. "Alle ist in Ordnung," says the man, Alois, caressing his wife's womb in sinister anticipation of what will happen in fifty years' time. Why this brief and gruesome scene? Of course, from a purely historical point of view, Hitler's conception took place more or less during the onset of the Ripper's homicides. But, as Moore writes in the appendix, the sequence depicts a "somewhat resonant chronological coincidence," (Moore and Campbell 1999, 18), a meaningful threading of events aimed at delineating a specific historical vision.

The sequence is pivotal in *From Hell*'s historical poetics, and also revelatory of Moore's idiosyncratic way of looking at modern and contemporary history. As elucidated by William Gull/Jack the Ripper himself after the last Whitechapel murder is committed, the graphic novel considers the five prostitutes' homicides as the generating point of the twentieth century: the act that gives birth to it, and that also sets the tone for the kind of violence

and terror that would come to characterize the following hundred years. “It is beginning, Netley,” Gull tells his clueless coachman in Chapter Ten, “only just beginning. For better or worse, the twentieth century. I have delivered it” (Moore and Campbell, 1999, 33). It is clear that we are outside of the field of mere historiography, and into a creative, metaphorical reconstruction of events. Moore gives a reason for this expressive choice in a conversation with John Higgs, author of *Stranger than We Can Imagine*, an essay that, like Moore and Campbell’s novel, takes an oblique look at the twentieth century in order to explain its uniqueness:

[Considering the Ripper’s murders as the symbolical event that gave birth to the twentieth century] was my conceit that resolved a lot of the material that emerged during my research for *From Hell*. When I was just looking into the 1880s I noticed all these things that had happened. I think in 1882 Michelson and Morley actually performed the experiment ... that ended up completely disproving that aether existed ... you got France going into Indochina, you got the beginning of the modern art movement ... you got some of the first kind of modern realist writings ... all of these things which had gone up to really color and shape the twentieth century. And then, in 1888, these senseless, violent murders. It just seemed to me that symbolically I could kind of position the Jack the Ripper murders as the birth throes of the Twentieth century, with Jack the Ripper as a kind of really ghastly midwife.⁴ (Higgs 2015b)

Moore’s metaphorical approach to the symbolic undercurrents of the twentieth century is close to Higgs’s unconventional work of historiography. His essay, like *From Hell*, is not an act of sabotage directed towards official historiography, but rather a footnote or an integration that relies more on rhetorical affinities and intuition. As Higgs writes in the introduction of *Stranger than We Can Imagine*, although the twentieth century is the century “we know most about,” the story that is told in all the many detailed accounts of the period “somewhat fails to lead us into the world we’re in now” (Higgs 2015a, 5). History is a “landscape” that “includes dark patches of thick, deep woods ... These are areas such as relativity, cubism, the Somme, quantum

⁴ The Michelson-Morley experiment (which actually took place in 1887) was aimed at detecting the movement of matter through the luminiferous aether, at the time considered to be the medium of propagation of light. The importance of the experiment in the context of this essay is that the line of research initiated by it ultimately led to Einstein’s special theory of relativity.

mechanics, the id, existentialism, Stalin, psychedelics, chaos mathematics and climate change" (Ibid., 7). It is interesting to notice that Higgs's list is largely coherent with Moore and Campbell's work in *From Hell*, where art, science, mysticism, and politics come together in an ever-evolving constellation of knowledge that orbits around the Ripper's murders and that resonates with its symbolic, irrational dimension. It is the same path taken by Higgs, according to whom, if we "strike through the dark woods" of the century, we will be able to map the "emerging pattern" made of new ideas that "point in a broadly coherent direction" (Ibid., 7,8).

Instead of presenting history in a traditional chronological order, the essay organizes it along thematic clusters (Modernism, Id, Space, Sex), all of them dialectically connected by the will to illuminate the "alien landscapes, incomprehensible structures and troubled dreams" (Higgs 2015a, 3) that have been left out of the records. As Higgs frames it, it is a way to look for the beach under the paving stones laid by the official chronicles—a method consistently used by Moore in his later work. In graphic novels like *Providence* and *Lost Girls*, the author often resolves to "strike through the dark woods" of history in order to highlight a subterranean theme or an idea that can be used to shed a new light on specific historical events. *Lost Girls*, in particular, contains an interesting parallel drawn by the symmetrical endings of the graphic novel's first two books. In Chapter Ten, Book One, a striking sequence depicts the notorious 1913 Parisian premiere of Igor Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*. Violence and sexual energy are unleashed in the theater; someone starts to yell at the orchestra while someone else engages in an orgy. The ballet is described as an event existing beyond the audience's here-and-now, "a time-dissolving cloud of echoed notes and duplicated gestures," its rhythm "stabbing space, stabbing time" (Moore and Gebbie 2006, 4, 5). After a riot breaks out outside the theater, one of the protagonists makes an apparently farfetched consideration by saying "I had not known that Europe's heartstrings were at such a pitch" (Ibid., 8). It is only at the end of Book Two that this extravagant comment is thoroughly justified and explained. In Chapter Twenty another dreamlike, ecstatic sequence juxtaposes uncontrolled erotic desire and the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand (Ibid., 1-8). Europe's descent into the devastation of the Great War is finally depicted at the end of Book Three, whose Chapter Thirty closes on the disturbing image of an evirated, disemboweled soldier

whose horrific wound resembles female genitalia (*ibid.*, 8). The descending path that goes from creativity to destruction is complete.

In this particular case, the action of human history's "dark woods" is embodied by the parallel action of violence and sexuality. Like a string in a maze, the sudden outbursts of these impulses connect Stravinsky's ballet to the shooting in Sarajevo, and culminates in a bombarded battlefield. "The wild and irrational could not be ignored for ever and, having been repressed for so long, its return would be explosive," Higgs comments (2015a, 94). *The Rite of Spring* and the Great War are hence put on the same rhetorical plane, a connection that doesn't seek to criticize the former or to ennable the latter on the basis of a supposed bestiality or an inner poetic value. Rather, by virtue of the horizontal gaze inherent in a four-dimensional text whose concept of time lacks chronological hierarchies, these kinds of metaphorical links work in a similar way to Bakhtin's Rabelaisian chronotope: they destruct all ordinary ties of things and ideas, to create "unexpected matrices, unexpected connections, including the most surprising logical links" (Bakhtin 1981, 169).

It is the same modus operandi that Moore applies to *From Hell*'s Victorian London, in which a literal architecture of history always looming in the background of the main plot is created through meaningful subterranean and irrational connections. "I have a more fractal way of working," he declares, "when your mind wanders, if you ever pay attention to the paths it takes, you generally find it's these paths of association that can link all over the place" (Berlatsky 2011, 63). Sex is again a major force behind the events, but this time the story lacks the ultimately redeeming quality that characterizes *Lost Girls'* depiction of sexuality (in spite of all its ambiguity and precariousness). The novel is almost a total inversion of the latter work's involvement with that sphere: it is precisely Prince Albert Victor's illicit desire that starts the chain of events leading to the killing of three innocent women, and sex is almost always presented in a disturbing, grisly context. The novel juxtaposes Victorian high society's notoriously closeted and hypocritical (and maybe stereotypical) relationship with sexuality with London's East End's accurately-reproduced prostitution underworld. Whitechapel's sinister *genius loci*, inherited from the gruesome history of the place as laid out by James Hinton, "casts shadow pictures on the minds of those whose lives are spent within its sight," as Gull affirms in Chapter Four (Moore and Campbell 1999, 32), turning the neighborhood into a space-time anomaly where violent transgression is the

norm, and “only the darkest forms of freedom, the most horrific possibilities” take place. “No one is given the opportunity to explore spiritually affirming ‘borders’ of existence” here (Giles 2009, 109). In the dark alleys of *From Hell*’s London sex is but another commodity, and its unrestrained action leads to death more often than it results in liberation.

3. The haunted origins of the fraught modern world

Death is pretty much anywhere in Moore and Campbell’s grim but realistic description of the city. The tour of London by Gull and Netley that occupies most of Chapter Four—inspired by Moore’s own walks with writer and psychogeographer Iain Sinclair (Berlatsky 2011, 73)—is a reconstruction of the city’s pre-modern and esoteric history by way of some key monuments. Through the man’s verbose erudition, the metropolis becomes a transparent, living being, revealing multiple layers of symbols arranged according to C. Howard Hinton’s architecture of time—It is “symbol, history and myth” at the same time (Moore and Campbell 6). But Gull’s understanding of the fourth dimension doesn’t reveal any “stupendous whole,” ominously veering toward the morbid instead. Digging through the centuries and linking pagan beliefs and places of worship to modern-day monuments and churches is for him only a way to demonstrate to the terrified Netley how their personal stories are already written, being part of the bigger, darker history of London, which is “inked in blood long dry, engraved in stone” (*ibid.*, 37-38). The edifice of time as envisioned by Gull is a monument to death and its all-encompassing power. He himself defines it as being made out of “bricks of viscera, with knife as trowel” in Chapter Twelve (*Ibid.*, 22). Although the man fanatically asserts to be the harbinger of “an older truth made finally explicit” (*ibid.*), the revelation he brings is made of nothing else than blood and fear. This is further demonstrated by his “ascending” in the last chapter of the novel, in which Gull’s ghost (or his soul) randomly appears in different times and different places, generally causing unsettling accidents while also influencing some of England’s most famous serial killers.

Moore chooses to substitute the fourth dimension as postulated by Hinton with a chthonian world lying just beyond our everyday perception of space and time but nonetheless able to shape the events of our reality. A

rhetorical strategy that can again be explained through the interview with John Higgs, in which Moore talks about the rhetorical-historical relevance of H.P. Lovecraft's worldview, further illuminating the relation between *From Hell*'s ghastly conception of history and the symbolical and ideological undertow of the twentieth century. Discussing the author from Providence, he says: "In some ways his stories represented the kind of landscape of fear, the territory of fear for the twentieth century as a whole" (Higgs 2015b). It is easy to see where William Gull's ecstatic but dreadful vision of the rising architecture of the coming century overlaps with Lovecraft's allusive descriptions of a dimension of cosmic horror lurking behind our limited perception of reality. There is nothing like a terrifying Cthulhu sleeping in the depths of time in *From Hell*, and that makes the landscape of fear upon which the twentieth century has been built only more frightening: its limits and its potential are to be found entirely within the human soul. In the introduction to Leslie Klinger's *The New Annotated H.P. Lovecraft* he penned, Moore touches upon this suggestion again by writing: "In H.P. Lovecraft's tales we are afforded an oblique and yet unsettlingly perceptive view into the haunted origins of the fraught modern world and its attendant mind-set that we presently inhabit" (Klinger 2014, introduction).

In a similar way to Lovecraft, "an unbearably sensitive barometer of ... fear," (ibid.), William Gull/Jack the Ripper is used by Moore as a symbolic prolepsis to the fearful territory of the twentieth century and its horrors, like the Holocaust as hallucinated by Adolf Hitler's mother-to-be in Chapter Five. The Holocaust seems to be a recurring symbol in Moore's later work, coming back again as a synecdoche for contemporary horror as a whole in *Providence*. In the third issue of the series, whose telling title is "A Lurking Fear", the protagonist, both a closeted homosexual and a closeted Jew, has a dream in which the kind of unspeakable terrors that usually haunt Lovecraft's characters' unconscious take the form of repressed, protean sexual desires that slowly lead him through a concentration camp's gate and in swastika-covered gas chambers. "I can't tell you about it. It's too awful. It's unnameable," he says before waking up (Moore and Burrows 2015, 22). A classic example of Lovecraftian unspeakable meets Adorno to affirm that the only possible transcendence in the "fraught modern world" is the one towards an incomprehensible, endless horror whose birth we owe to the Whitechapel murders and whose apex coincides with Nazi Germany's *Endlösung*. Moore's expressionistic symbolical-historical

reconstruction is, again, a rather dark suggestion that the last century possessed a rotten ideological core.

There is one last consideration that needs to be made in order to better frame and understand *From Hell*'s use of a fourth dimension of fear to explain the logic of the twentieth century. Although the character of William Gull is clearly delusional—and he becomes more and more deranged as the story progresses, being the victim of hallucinations that feature ancestral masonic gods and buildings from contemporary London—his unshakable conviction of being the “ghastly midwife” of the twentieth century, as Moore defines him, is more than a madman’s delirium. He is an apt symbol for a fearful era, as the writer has declared, but, more pragmatically, Gull was also an excellent member of the British high society. Through him, Moore is holding the British Empire accountable for the kind of unspeakable evil *From Hell* points towards. In the nineteenth century, London was the world’s biggest city, it had the world’s largest port, and, thanks to the almost-ubiquitous presence of the Empire all over the known world, it literally was the center of Western civilization through its economic and financial power (Darwin 2013, 185). It would not be controversial to say that the modern world as we know it has been, at least partly, fabricated by the British Empire’s immense network of power relations. Of course, the creation of the largest empire in human history wasn’t a bloodless enterprise, and the modern world still bears the scars of its ruthlessness. “The world we know today is in large measure the product of Britain’s age of empire,” writes historian Niall Ferguson. “The question is whether there could have been a less bloody path to modernity” (Ferguson 2004, xxvi), he adds, not leaving much room for speculation. The responsibility for giving birth to the fearful twentieth century doesn’t weigh on a single man’s shoulders of course, but it is to be taken by the power structure responsible for Gull’s actions.

When London, intended here as a synecdoche for the Empire as a whole, is presented through Gull’s dark description in Chapter Four, its monuments are described as physical manifestations of a “pattern of control drawn with a finger dripped in ... blood” (Moore and Campbell 1999, 29). The chapter’s dense description of the city’s history, re-interpreted through masonic symbols such as the sun and the moon, is more than an example of magniloquent storytelling dedicated to London’s alleged esoteric underside. The never-ending fight between the forces of rationality and irrationality Gull is fanatically devoted to in the end is nothing but a disguise for a far more concrete reality: London, and

the Empire, are manifestations of repressive power relentlessly working to serve the ruling class by maintaining a convenient status quo. *From Hell*'s impressive verisimilitude, both in terms of historical research and graphic rendition of the period, may sometimes be obscured by the magical-speculative elements of the plot, but its roots are firmly planted into social realism. In Chapter Five, a sequence that depicts William Gull's awakening for his first day of killing, shows alternate panels in which the doctor's opulent, comfortable lifestyle is contrasted with Polly Nichols's unbearably squalid routine. Different drawing styles are also adopted to accentuate the upper classes' polished existence and the lower classes' stark living conditions: Gull's panels are almost ethereal, painted in smooth, bright watercolor; while Nichols's show Campbell's usual dark, etching-like austerity (Moore and Campbell 1999, 4-9).

Gull's words during his esoteric-historical drive through London could be the ravings of an unhinged (and misogynistic) mason, but there is little doubt that they also express the dominant classes' desire to crush any attempt at social or political reform:

Sometimes an act of social magic's necessary; man's triumph over woman's insecure, the dust of history not yet settled. Changing times erase the pattern that constrains society's irrational, female side. Our workers, lately given votes, now talk of socialism, talk of rights, riot in Trafalgar square and won't quit 'til they are shot, whereon their fury doubles! King mob's clamour drowns our Apollonian debates ... Our suffragettes demand that women vote, and have equality! They'd drag us back to that primordial nursery, the rule of instinct and the tyranny of mother's milk! We can't have that. (*Ibid.*, 30)

The story of the Ripper as a whole can be interpreted as an act of retaliation of the upper class against the lower class, guilty of an act of open defiance directed against the former's hegemony. And, if we avoid to get lost in Gull's wordiness, the killer himself declares his actions to be "a ritual act, to shape society" (*ibid.*, 29). Agent of an exemplary, gruesome act of social control, Jack the Ripper is defined by Moore in Appendix II as a "super-position," a term derived from quantum mechanics and Schrödinger's equation. Simply put, it refers to the fact that "quantum uncertainty, unable to determine both a particle's location and its nature, necessitates that we map every possible state of the particle" (*ibid.*, 16). Turning physics into a figure of speech, it is possible to affirm that *From Hell* uses William Gull as a ubiquitous symbol (and also an allegory) for the dominant classes' violent subjugation of the wretched of the Earth.

The Ripper is not ‘the’ Ripper; he is an incidental disguise that hides modern Western society’s systemic oppression towards the *hoi polloi*—especially considered as a patriarchal entity’s intersectional targeting of destitute women. Moore’s treatment of the subject matter is openly militant: his killer story is also the centuries-old history of male violence against women. Chapter Twelve’s epigraph, taken from Herbert Marcuse’s “Repressive Tolerance”, is there to reinforce the novel’s strong and ultimately pessimistic political stance: “Law and order are always and everywhere the law and order which protect the established hierarchy.”

4. Paranoia and the specters of power

This brings me to some concluding considerations on *From Hell*’s representation of power and violence. I have briefly mentioned the fact that the graphic novel’s main source, Stephen Knight’s controversial bestseller, was selected by Moore as the backbone of his colossal historical research mainly because of its value as a good story and its meta-narrative potential. “I’d be writing about the story as much as I’d be writing about Jack the Ripper. It’s the way that the myth has grown that is important,” he declared (Berlatsky 2011, 107). And indeed, as I have shown, the story is not at all limited to another investigation of the Whitechapel murders, but rather a painstakingly detailed historical account of a specific milieu whose aim goes well beyond its main subject. There is some kind of dissonance between the graphic novel’s rigorous research and reenactment of the period—to which Eddie Campbell’s thoroughly accurate drawings greatly contribute—and the plot it is attached to: apart from its qualities as a political thriller, the latter is a state-of-the-art paranoiac retelling of history. The labyrinthine story of William Gull and the five prostitutes is a masterpiece of conspiracism in which the British Crown, Scotland Yard, the Freemasonry and pretty much everyone involved in various ways in the triangle of relationship created by these three poles participate, willingly or not, in an impressive undercover operation. The over-plotted intrigue is, at its core, the classic kind of conspiratorial delusion involving deep-state cabals that collude to defend a wicked status quo.

Considering the amount of work that went into the novel’s reconstruction of Victorian London, and all its erudite digressions into various cultural fields,

the coveted final solution to the case could come as a disappointment once its shock-value has made an impact on the reader. But Moore is not a conspiracist. In a 1998 interview with British writer Matthew De Abaitua, he declared that these kind of mass paranoias are but “a security blanket” (Berlatsky 2011, 71), and that their only use is to find a paradoxical comfort in knowing that at least someone is in charge of the world. In Appendix II, he also elaborates on the futility of finding an actual solution to the Ripper murders, going as far as declaring that the only real element of the story is its aura. “The complex phantom we project. That alone, we know is real,” he writes, “the actual killer’s gone, unglimmed, might as well not have been there at all. There never was a Jack the Ripper” (Moore and Campbell 1999, 23). This idea of a phantom whose hauntings are more real than reality itself is in a way connected with the fourth dimension of fear that the author identifies as the symbolic order of the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, Jack the Ripper is not the only ghost of this story: in spite of his self-aggrandized role, in the end he is nothing but an instrument in the hands of the queen. And the way in which Victoria is depicted throughout the graphic novel points at her being nothing but an interchangeable symbol of blindly repressive power. When she is introduced in Chapter Four (*Ibid.*, 2-3), she looks remarkably sketched when compared with Eddie Campbell’s overall drawing style, whose expressionistic, gothic trait is nonetheless always at the service of historical realism. Portrayed like a phantom emerging from the surrounding shadows, her character is also clearly shaped upon the profile pose that is so common in the Queen’s official photographs of the time. Almost every time she appears on the page, she is seated in the dark in a stiff posture, more of a presence or an effigy than an actual human being.

The extensive scholarly research that Moore performed before writing *From Hell*—he declared to have read “nearly every book that [has] ever been written on Jack the Ripper” (Berlatsky 2011, 107)—is apparently at odds with the choice of using it to support a rather flimsy story—and a story that had already been debunked at the time. Historical information and disinformation coexist. But I believe that the novel performs a quite balanced synthesis between these poles, and that the juxtaposition of facts and pseudo-historiography doesn’t mar its critique of power, but actually reinforces it. The writer’s words in Appendix II may help clarify this statement: “Truth is, this has never been about the murders, nor the killer, nor his victims. It’s about us, about our minds and how they dance” (Moore and Campbell, 1999, 22). In the interview with De

Abaitua mentioned above, and also in a number of other conversations, Moore discusses his unorthodox worldview mentioning his belief in an “Idea Space.” Drawing from notion as diverse (and controversial) as Rupert Sheldrake’s Morphic Resonance and Carl Gustav Jung’s Synchronicity, together with Karl Popper’s World Three, he discusses his own notion of an Idea Space, a theoretical space “where concept exist” (Berlatsky 2011, 119).⁵ This abstraction is in a complex but direct relationship with objective reality, because according to Moore “the objective world and the nonobjective world are the same thing to some degree. Idea Space and this space are the same space, just different ends of the scale” (Ibid., 85). Without necessarily accepting Moore mystic way of talking about ideas and culture *in toto*, it is possible to simply consider his theory as a way of thinking about the relationship between the individual and human knowledge, both in its totality as the history of culture and in its historicized relationship with a specific *Zeitgeist*.

Having defined the twentieth century as a territory of fear, and Idea Space as “an overlaying mental space in which we all exists” (ibid. 89), it is only natural that, in writing about the birth throes of an era of chronical anguish, Moore would also document a possible general reaction to the psychological and emotive climate that characterizes that same era. After all, *From Hell*’s meta-narrative aspect implies that its story elicits from the kind of conscious or unconscious bias that pretty much every work of investigative journalism on the murders possesses because of its being a product of the “fascination and hysteria” that mysteries inevitably engender. “Five murdered paupers, one anonymous assailant. This reality is dwarfed by the vast theme-park we’ve built around it,” Moore writes in Appendix II (Moore and Campbell 1999, 22). By putting together historical research and conspiracism, the author is trying to produce the most accurate depiction of the event: that which also tells us something about the kind of mindset that surrounds it—the same mindset that will come to characterize the twentieth century. Read in this light, his

⁵ Rupert Sheldrake’s Morphic Resonance assumes that memory is something inherent in nature itself, and it is passed down through species. “Most of the so-called laws of nature are more like habits,” he writes (Sheldrake, n.d.). The theory shows some similarities with Jung’s collective unconscious, and that is why Moore also mentions the psychiatrist’s concept of synchronicity (a meaningful, acausal coincidence) in explaining his views. Idea space derives also from Karl Popper’s World 3, that, in his lecture “Three Worlds”, he defines as “the world of the products of the human mind” (1978, 167).

paranoiac reconstruction is as valuable as his minute historical reenactment, clearly stating why and how Jack the Ripper really delivered the following one-hundred years.

Subject to the capricious and implacable action of power structures that, in spite of their spectral origins, often act in a concrete and gruesome way, the modern mass is an easy prey of paranoia. Disempowered and disenfranchised, it looks everywhere for an explanation of its deep-seated lack of agency, sometimes resulting to explanations that turn stories into plots in order to make up for its perceived inability to affect historical change. In the end, *From Hell*'s most important symbolic act is probably to be found in its exposure of the deteriorating psychological effects of authoritarian power upon the masses. By presenting the readers with both history and conspiracy, it allows us to witness how oppression and deceit often go hand in hand. Impotence brings common people to refigure a concrete, historical event into a frightening ghost story, and a nebulous historical figure into a specter of power that is always looming at the back of their consciousness. Whether a Freemason or a member of the Royals, in the end "Jack mirrors our hysterias. Faceless, he is the receptacle for each new social panic" (*Ibid.*). In this sense, Moore and Campbell really deliver the case's final solution, documenting Jack the Ripper's ascension from a real man living in a real here-and-now to a pervasive, sinister social symbol of the fearful twentieth century.

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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 multitongued 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 Rosemburg, 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 Coeur 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 Coeur 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 Coeur 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

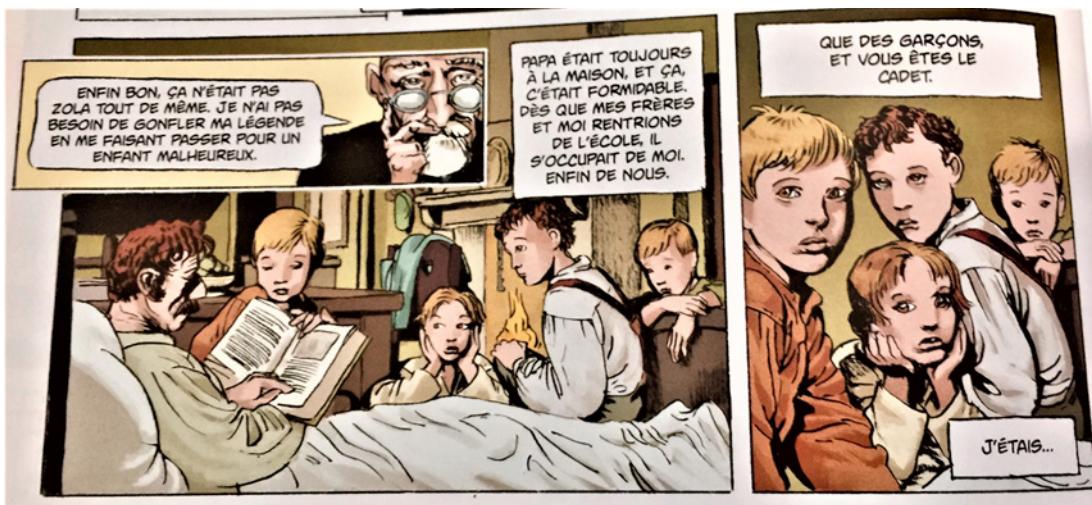
⁴ Morvan, Kordey and Walter's project seems to have been more ambitious: *Le Coeur des batailles* should have been a series. The last page of its fake issue inserted in the first volume stated: "*Le Coeur des Batailles* is a series which explores the wars of the 20th century from a novel and esoteric 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 artifactual one consists of Morvan's creation of three issues of Boforlant's own trench newspaper, entitled *Le Coeur des Batailles*. Three issues of that newspaper are subsequently acquired by Selcap and reproduced as inserts of the comic 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 Coeur 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 Zamai’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 enthralment 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 news clippings, 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=due4avh81h4>

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 Coeur 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'Epinal*. 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 Zamaï who takes center stage, for reasons we will examine more closely in the next part of this essay. Zamaï 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.

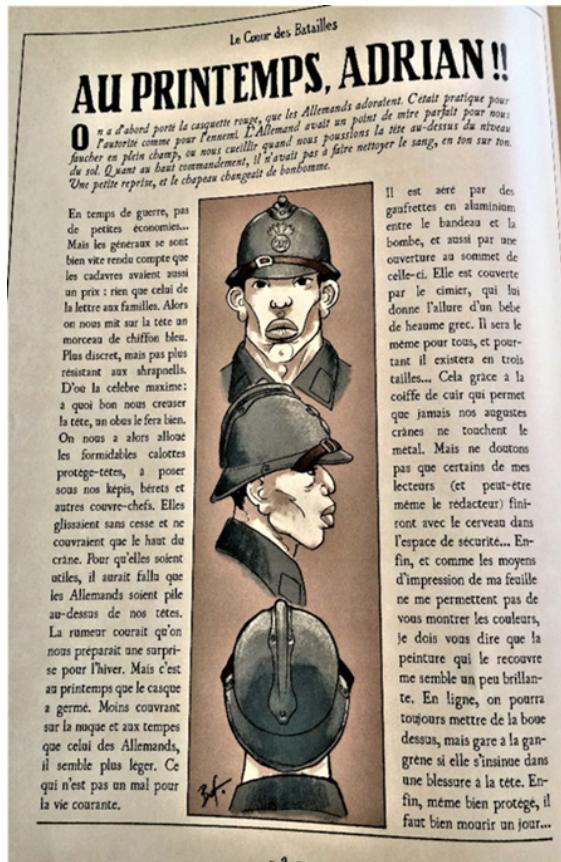
On page 18 of Volume 1, readers are presented with a sight of Zamaï in his brand-new uniform in a triptych of panels given dramatic emphasis because they are much larger than the majority of the panels in other sections; moreover, they are free of speech bubbles. The use of oversized panels is a cinematic 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 enthrallement by Zamaï. 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 tétonisé... 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 *épinal* 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; Rosemburg 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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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

I. 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 crédit*).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, René 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 véritable 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.

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 trottais déjà 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 véritable 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 épisode...* 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 véritable 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 véritable 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 épisode...*, 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-Mathieu 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 véritable 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 *Entstehungsgeschichte*, 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;

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.

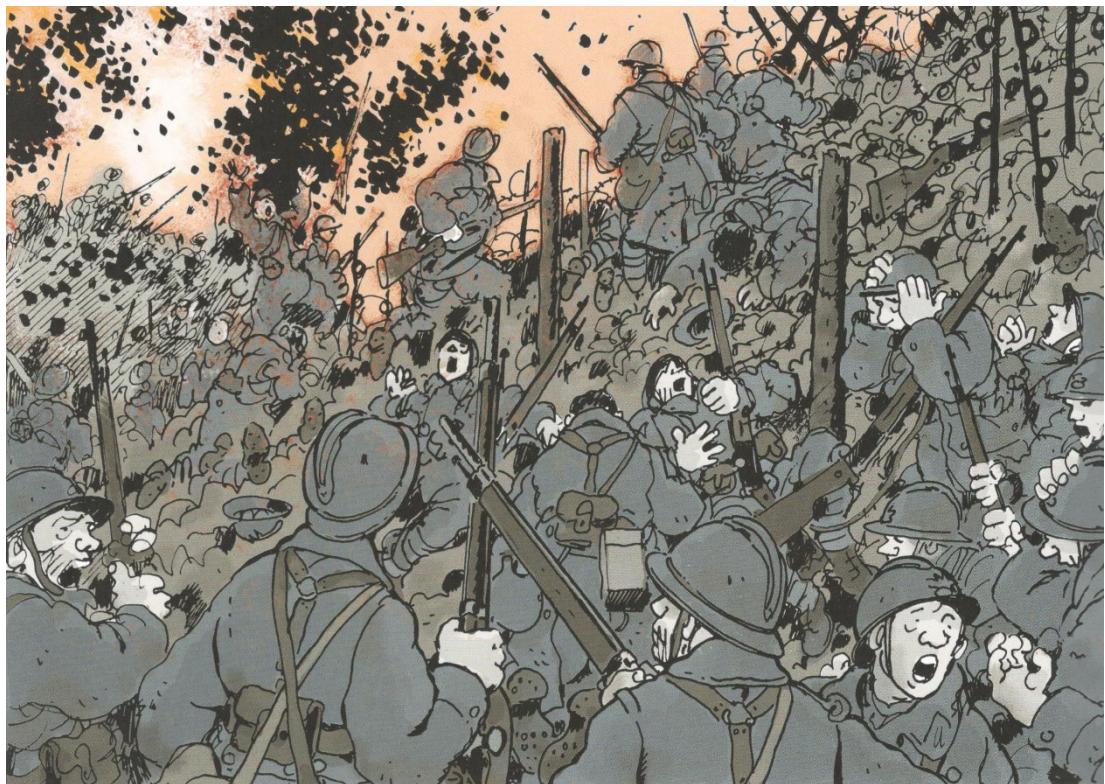
Tardi impressively managed to contrast the two components of comics, images and words, by having caption narrative providing continuity to the kaleidoscope of war episodes conjured up by the pictures. And such a contrast between a highly personal voice-over, speaking in colloquial streetwise French, 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 dégueulasse 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'intéresse 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 général Pétain*, by Vincent Moulia, *Le temps des américains, 1917-1918*, by André Kaspi, *La femme au temps de la guerre de 14*, by Françoise

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 théâtralité 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 assaut*, 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 Première 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 épisode...*, 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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In This Corner of the World:
Animated Landscapes of Hiroshima and Kure in the Present Tense

Abstract

This paper examines the seemingly harmless, taken-for-granted everyday gestures that make up the fabric of the animated film *In This Corner of the World* (2016). Based on Kouno Fumiyo's¹ manga series (2007–2009), the film takes pains to depict the actual artifacts, practices, buildings, historical events – most importantly, those landscapes that exist today in Hiroshima and Kure, the two localities of wartime memories portrayed in it. The made-up world of Kouno's fictional world is brought to life by screenplay writer and director Katabuchi Sunao, whose attention to details helps us understand that the memories of war are firmly traceable in the here and now.

1. Introduction

With the older generation fading away and fewer witnesses remaining to talk about the traumatic era of the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945), what role can animation and manga play in molding a view of the past that is ethically meaningful? Individual memories may turn into fictionalized and historical narratives, in which case the viewers or readers become consumers of a memory culture. Alison Landsberg (2004) has argued that through “mass-mediated experience” gained from, for example, cinemas, tv mini-series, and memorial museums, one can experience and be connected to the past, and even identify with the characters that survive a traumatic event (19). “Prosthetic memory,”

¹ Following the tradition, Japanese names are written with surnames first, followed by given names. The English translation of the manga is provided by the author unless otherwise noted.

as Landsberg calls it, like a prosthetic arm or leg that is inevitably less than the real thing, can be worn to effectively become part of one's body, or in this case, one's memory. By the same token, I would assert that an animation or manga created by artists who do not have first-hand experience of a war can transmit the essence of the traumatic event to audiences far and wide. A case in point would be Kouno Fumiyo's manga series, *In This Corner of the World* (2007-2009), especially in its animated form. The animation film played a crucial role in communicating to a wide range of audiences coming from different generations and economic, social, and political backgrounds the need to deal with and remember a difficult past.

This paper briefly outlines the history of the war manga genre, situating Kouno's work within this historical framework. I will then proceed to demonstrate that the animation film's screenplay writer and director Katabuchi Sunao's understanding and sensitive handling of Kouno's intent in her seemingly apolitical manga, on which the animation film is based, play an important role in successfully communicating Kouno's quiet message to the so-called *senmu-sedai*, or the generation without experience of a war. Katabuchi pushed to the fore, albeit in a subdued manner, Kouno's insightful understanding that war is always lurking right around the corner, here, now, and in the everyday. Kouno's manga and Katabuchi's contribution in its animated version provides Landsberg's "prosthetic memory" of the Hiroshima-Kure everyday life at the end of World War II.

2. Comic Magazines, Comic Books, and War Narratives

According to a survey in 2000 that NHK (Japan Broadcasting Cooperation) conducted among members of the younger generation with neither firsthand nor secondhand knowledge of the Asia-Pacific War, animated films and comic books, not classroom instruction, shaped their views on war memories (Makita 2000, 5). Nakazawa Keiji's *Barefoot Gen*, which first appeared in 1973 in the weekly comic magazine *Shōnen Jump* [Young Boy's Jump], and the 1988 critically acclaimed Takahata Isao's animation film of Studio Ghibli, *The Grave of Fireflies*, immediately come to mind. When, in 2020, the *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper asked teenagers and those in their twenties to name a creative work on the Asia-Pacific War that left an indelible impression on them, these

two works—*Barefoot Gen* and *The Grave of Fireflies*—continued to come in first and second (August 30, 2020). Relatively direct in their portrayal of the tumultuous wartime era, they are often used in ‘peace education’ instruction and hold a firm place in the national narrative even today.

Among those manga artists who openly acknowledged that their personal war experience had an undeniable impact on their creative work were manga artists Tezuka Osamu (1928–1989), Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015), and Nakazawa Keiji (1939–2012). Tezuka, Mizuki, and Nakazawa lived through the Asia-Pacific War era, and in publishing their narratives throughout the postwar years, they established the war manga genre.

Tezuka was nine years old when China and Japan entered war for the second time. He was thirteen when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941 and entered the Pacific War (1941–1945) with the United States. In the 1980s, he depicted the World War II era in *Message to Adolf*. He also conveyed wartime messages in different eras in other popular manga series, ranging from the story of a robot (*Astor Boy*) in the 1950s and 60s to that of a doctor (*Black Jack*) in the 1970s. The 2007 special exhibit on “The Origin of Tezuka Osamu Manga: Drawing on War Experience,” held at the National Showakan Memorial Museum in Tokyo, showcased his achievements (Showakan and Tezuka Production 2007).²

Another manga artist, Mizuki, known for his famous *Ge Ge Ge no Kitaro*, or *Kitaro of the Graveyard*, depicted his own experience of barely surviving the war after being drafted to serve the Imperial Japanese Army in his *So-in Gyokusaiseyo* (Onwards Towards Our Noble Death). This was published in 1973 in comic book form and includes a description of how his left arm was blown off during the air raids in 1943 while he was at Rabaul, now part of Papua New Guinea island. As Mizuki wrote in the afterword, “90 percent of the story is based on facts” (2018 [1973], 470). Today, his ‘horror manga’ drawings are used in sign plates and on the walls of the Peace Memorial Museum for Soldiers, Detainees in Siberia, and Postwar Repatriates, which is an exhibition hall in Shinjuku, Tokyo, subcontracted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication.

Nakazawa, a native of Hiroshima, is perhaps best known for his ‘anti-war’ or ‘anti-nuclear weapon’ manga, telling the story of *hibakusha* (atomic

² Special exhibit, “Tezuka Osamu no manga no genten: Senso taiken to egakareta senso,” March 14–May 6, 2007.

bomb survivor) in *Barefoot Gen*. Wrote Nakazawa, “Gen is me, myself” (2008, 16). *Barefoot Gen* was turned into an animation film in 1983 and the manga magazine series was published in comic book form, totaling ten volumes in all, and completed in 1985. Some considered aspects of *Barefoot Gen*, such as the graphic drawings of the Japanese Imperial Army’s brutal actions against the people of China, the raw images of ghostly bodies after the atomic bombing, and his blatant criticism of the late emperor, ‘inappropriate’ for today’s children. In 2013, when the board of education of Matsue city in Tottori prefecture decided that *Barefoot Gen* should be pulled off the shelves of school libraries, it caused such a controversy that the board later retracted their decision. There is no stopping of the spread of *Barefoot Gen* outside of Japan, either. It has been translated into more than twenty languages, including Esperanto, Chinese, and recently Arabic, allowing its universal message to be shared with the larger international community.

However, with survivors of the atomic bomb aging, the war generation quickly disappearing, and manga artists like Tezuka, Mizuki, and Nakazawa, whose readers were mostly school children at the time, gone, it was becoming increasingly clear that the war manga genre could only benefit from adopting innovative approaches. As if in response to such a need, a new group of manga artists emerged. In contrast to the hard-core, straightforward depictions of the Asia-Pacific War as represented by the works of Tezuka, Mizuki, and Nakazawa are Kouno Fumiyo’s manga drawings, featuring young female protagonists depicted in her soft and almost old-fashioned ‘girly touch.’ They portray the effects of war more indirectly. Her earlier works, *Town of Evening Calm* and *Country of Cherry Blossoms* (2003–2004), were translated into English and published as an anthology for the international audience in 2007, and other translations in Korean, French, Mandarin, and Portuguese followed (Kouno [2003] 2009). Much has been written about this anthology, which portrayed Hiroshima ten years after the atomic bombing, including its aftereffects (Ichitani 2010; Takeuchi 2016). The artist carefully maintains focus on capturing the everyday details of the survivors’ lives, including their trauma and social stigma that are passed onto the family members of the next generation.

Kouno’s anthology received the 2004 Grand Prize for the Manga Division in the Japan Media Festival, organized by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs, and the 2005 Tezuka Osamu Cultural Prize Creative Award. Kouno’s work became even more popular when her manga series *In This Corner of the World*

was published as a three-volume comic book, which received the 2009 Excellence Award in the Japan Media Festival before it was turned into an animation film. Not since Miyazaki Hayao's *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) has an animation film received so much attention and enjoyed such a long run in Japanese theatres as *In This Corner of the World* (2016).³ Although Kouno had no firsthand experience or memory of war, she produced stories for adult readers by taking up the theme of war memories in her own imaginative and creative way, which multiple other resourceful female manga artists also did.⁴ Together, they succeed in bringing the wartime era back to life in ways not attempted by their predecessors.

Kouno is a member of the so-called *senmu-sedai*, or generation without experience of a war, and she took a different approach to preserve the memories of war that were rapidly showing signs of fading. Kouno was born in Hiroshima in 1968 and raised there. She often visited her grandmother in the nearby city of Kure, where her maternal relatives lived. As Kouno wrote in the 'afterword' of *Town of Evening Calm, Country of Cherry Blossoms*, being neither a hibakusha nor a second-generation hibakusha, and having no close relatives who could talk to her about their experiences, she avoided taking up the theme of Hiroshima and the atomic bombing until a comic magazine editor suggested it. After moving to Tokyo, however, Kouno realized that people outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not know much about the devastation caused by the atomic bomb, not because they were avoiding the topic, but because "they never had the opportunity to learn about it even if they wanted to" (2009 [2003], 103). Kouno felt she could provide such an opportunity.

As an artist who had no experience of a war herself, Kouno was aware that her depictions of the destruction wrought by the war would not be perceived

³ A sequel to the 2016 film with a 40-minute added footage, *In This Corner (and Other Corners) of the World*, was screened in 2018. It was based on the same series by Kouno Fumiyo and directed by Katabuchi Sunao.

⁴ The winners of the 2015 Grand Prize of Cartoon division from the Japan Cartoonist Association were both female manga artists, Ozawa Yuki and Kyo Machiko. Ozawa's *Atokata no machi* (City of Traces, 2014-2015) is a manga on the air raids in Nagoya city, and Kyo Machiko's *Cocoon* (2008-2010) features the Battle of Okinawa in the Asia-Pacific War, while her *Ano-ne* (2012) is based on an encounter between Anne Frank and Adolf Hitler. Other notable manga include Ishikawa Maki's 1945, *A Teenager's War: The Atomic Bomb and Yokohama Air Raid* (2004) and Miyauchi Saya's *Shirohata no shojō* (The girl holding the white flag), a story of the Battle of Okinawa that took place in June 1945.

as being as real as those portrayed by her predecessors. However, Kouno more than offsets this ‘lack’ by conducting meticulous and detailed research of the era with an eye to bringing the everydayness of the wartime back to life. She succeeds in portraying important aspects of the war that are curiously absent in the works of her predecessors: that daily life did not end with the beginning or the end of a war, and that not everyone was behaving according to the imperial government’s expectations, including its plan of world order.

Although Kouno wanted to tell her story in a historically and culturally informed way, she knew she had to be resourceful in order to cater to an audience who had little knowledge of what happened during the war. Recreating the scenes that the war generation witnessed was no longer an effective means of helping readers of the *senmu* generation develop an empathic understanding of the war. In a conversation featured in a magazine with the manga artist Nishijima Daisuke, author of the immensely popular *Diên Bien Phu* (2007–2016), Kouno stressed, as follows: “If we only emphasized the catastrophic nature of war, we could only reach those who like to hear about it” (2016c, 33).

This concern is also in line with that of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in undertaking its third renewal art project, completed in the spring of 2019. It was no longer a question of intensity—some thought the mannequin dolls, whose skin was melting like tattered clothing, was too intense and grotesque, while others did not—as it was of effectiveness and validity. As Nabeshima Yui (2018) has documented in detail, the museum decided to remove the mannequin dolls after a heated debate that involved the citizens of Hiroshima, the *hibakusha* community, and even the city mayor. The emphasis was shifted towards bringing the war experience closer to the audience as something they could immediately relate to and feel empathy towards. As Amy Sodaro (2018) has also demonstrated in her book *Exhibiting Atrocity*, the emerging new form of memorial museums calls for generating Landsberg’s ‘prosthetic memory’ mediated by exhibits that can bring intellectual, emotional, and moral impact in the here and now. This coincides with Kouno’s approach.

Kouno has resisted being labeled an ‘anti-war manga’ artist on numerous occasions (2012, 231). Nor does she want to be perceived as a ‘memory keeper’ of Hiroshima’s history. She believes that “war memories cannot be owned” by a certain group of people, that is, by those who have firsthand experience, but rather, need to be continuously narrated and expressed by a diverse group of artists through different media (Kouno and Ozawa 2015, 190). At the 20th

anniversary event of the Hiroshima Manga Library, the only public manga library in the country, Kouno voiced her position yet again: “None of us [speakers at this symposium] have experienced a war, so we all have an equal right, even an obligation, to produce a narrative about the war, don’t we?” (April 22, 2017). However, regardless of Kouno’s intentions, by depicting the ‘everydayness’ of the wartime era that fails to coincide with the ideology propagated by the Japanese Imperial Government, her graphic narrative in effect becomes an ‘off the record’ historical documentation of a wartime world that did not always succumb to the state’s deceptive accounts of it.

The success of Kouno’s manga and its animated version *In This Corner of the World* came about through a series of fortunate circumstances. Originally, *In This Corner of the World* was released as a manga series in a bi-weekly comic magazine *Manga Action* between January 2007 and January 2009. The magazine’s target audience were men in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Because the magazine cover of *Manga Action* regularly featured pin-up girls in bathing suits, one might easily imagine female comic fans feeling reluctant to purchase the magazine. This does not mean that the story was written predominantly for men, but that it initially found its readership among males. Predictably, from the outset, Kouno’s manga did not quite blend in with the rest of the magazine. Her drawings and stories were reminiscent of girls’ comic books that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s and almost too gentle for the magazine. Consequently, after the first issue of the series, *In This Corner of the World* was almost always featured at the very end of the magazine as if to invite its readers to read it before closing the magazine.

In fact, because Kouno’s *In This Corner of the World* manga series was perceived to be too temperate and lacking in drama, the animation production company MAPPA initially faced difficulty in raising the funds necessary to remake Kouno’s manga series into an animation feature film, according to the company’s Planning Department Head, Maruyama Masao (NHK March 3, 2017). Fortunately, this time lag also gave the production team more time to prepare for the film, allowing them to visit the places where the events in the narrative took place, create sketches for the background scenes, and conduct interviews with those who lived at specific locations (Maruyama and Maki 2016, 68-69). According to the Production Committee records, the Committee soon thereafter raised part of the financing through crowdfunding, which reached its goal of collecting two million Japanese yen, or approximately two hundred thousand U.S. dollars, in just eight days. Although this amount hardly covered

the production costs, it was enough to show the prospective sponsors that there was a real demand for the film, that is, that there were “ten thousand people who would pay two thousand Japanese yen” to see the manga series turned into an animation film (*In This Corner of the World* Production Committee 2016, 7). The visibility of the fans and their voluntary actions in spreading the word to those who were not necessarily animation fans was critical, and so, from the start, the animation’s marketing strategy had as its target the adult group.

Had Kouno’s *In This Corner of the World* not been made into an animation film, the larger populace might not have been as exposed to her narrative. As Oguma Eiji, a historical sociologist, asserts, manga narratives no longer construct “a shared awareness” and mass identification of a larger middle-class group; weekly or bi-weekly manga magazines today are highly segmented by age, taste, and perhaps even class (2017, 13).

Add to this the decline of the publishing industry at large and the dwindling of the sheer number of weekly or bi-weekly manga magazines, and the difficulty for any one manga narrative to reach the general public becomes evident. However, manga can be “indicators of social values and norms,” particularly in Japan, as Tsurumi observed (2000, 171). In this regard, the animation film *In This Corner of the World* has been transformed from a piece of entertainment for a small group of manga readers into a commodity for a much wider audience from different backgrounds. This allows them to feel that they are part of a larger history, sharing social values and norms, thanks to the propagation of the manga narrative via its animation film version.

The war manga genre as we know it today is more expansive and inclusive than it used to be. While legendary manga artists, such as Mizuki and Nakazawa, created the genre by depicting the wartime years they lived, the more recent manga artists can take on numerous war-related themes, only one of which is to depict the war itself. *In This Corner of the World*, for instance, is not about Hiroshima and the dropping of the atomic bomb per se. Kouno purposely draws her narratives from the off-center, the center being the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. In fact, the atomic bombing is not even treated as a major incident, because people in other cities, including the neighboring city of Kure, were not informed of what happened in Hiroshima during the Pacific War. Instead, the story centers on the massive air bombing that Kure experienced, including the incendiary and time-delayed bombings, and on how people led their lives before, during, and months after the war ended.

3. Animated Landscapes and Places Matter

Both the manga *In This Corner of the World* and its animated version, provide a localized picture of the wartime experience, thereby successfully reflecting the differences in experience that the citizens of Hiroshima and Kure underwent. Both cities are in Hiroshima prefecture. This approach demonstrates a more dynamic view of wartime memories, providing a historical graphic narrative that takes place on the home front, where women were responsible for taking care of a series of culture-specific household tasks. The animated film highlights the slightly off-center artistic expressions, such as the characters speaking in their local dialects of Kure or Hiroshima, which are somewhat different from one another, the lesser-known facts of everyday life that are documented in detail, and a depiction of landscape that is more than just a backdrop against which the narrative events take place.

Katabuchi Sunao, the screenplay writer and director of the two-hour animated film *In This Corner of the World*, was pivotal to the success of the film. It is fair to say that Katabuchi's success in interpreting Kouno's 'intent' in drawing her manga of wartime everyday life was directly responsible for the success of the animated film itself. He received numerous awards for transforming Kouno's manga into animation, one of them being the 2016 Blue Ribbon Award. This was the first time movie critics and writers decided to give a best director award to an animation director.

For example, Katabuchi saw that in Kouno's work landscapes mattered almost as much as the characters. He confessed that when he first read Kouno's manga, he felt that both his popular TV manga series *The Famous Lassie* (1996) and her *In This Corner of the World* shared a defining similarity: they stuck to the details of the time and place (Katabuchi 2016, 92). By adding landscapes in color that were about 80 percent hand-drawn and 20 percent digitally reproduced, Katabuchi preserved Kouno's original soft touches from her hand-drawn manga, the manga frames, and the color-page ending of the black-and-white original (Hayashi 2016, 83). This meant that unlike the mostly black-and-white original manga, the animated landscapes in color played a much more prominent role than in the original manga, all to foreground the historical, social, and political context of the narrative.

To give the film a multi-layered historical context, the focus is on Kure, which is neither too far from, nor too close to, Hiroshima. The audience will

be watching the scenes that take place in Kure without being able to completely escape imagining what happened in nearby Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. The dates of the escalation of air raids in Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and other cities, of the sinking of the ‘invincible’ battleship *Yamato*, and of the Allied Powers’s landing in Okinawa are in the back of our minds while we watch the animated scenes of the characters’ everyday lives in Kure. Like a countdown to the dropping of the atomic bomb and the end of the Asia-Pacific War, the dates and their significance appear on the screen as they do on the pages of the original manga presentation. Life goes on in this corner of the world, and women needed to be creative in preparing dinner even when no food was available at the market.

3.1 The Naval Port Kure

Kure is a naval city with a military port, located in the Inner Sea of Seto in Hiroshima prefecture. The animation is narrated through the main character, Suzy, who is an 18-year-old woman. Suzy marries Shusaku, who works as a secretary for the Navy Court Martial at Kure’s Naval Base while her siblings and family live in Hiroshima city. Although these two locations are only approximately 25 kilometers, or 15 miles, apart, marriage meant leaving familiar faces and places, with transportation being far more inconvenient then than it is today. As becomes a naval city, men in military uniforms are not uncommon. Shusaku wears a stand-up collar uniform, not as a military man but as a civilian, while his father wears a *kokuminfuku* (national uniform), also as a civilian aviation engineer. Marrying into an ordinary family, Suzy lives in a house on the corner of a hillside in Kure, and from the nearby terrace fields she can see the harbor and the warships stationed there.

Historically, the building of battleships supported Kure’s prosperity. Kure had been building large battleships since the Russo–Japanese War (1904–1905) and well into the Asia-Pacific War, while the United States was preparing for airstrikes by building large-sized B-29 Superfortresses. What symbolizes the location and the animation scenes depicting it is the appearance of the battleship *Yamato* in the harbor, along with *Musashi*, *Yamato*’s sistership, *Aoba*, *Atago*, and *Yukikaze*, to name a few. As the story develops in the film, the audience cannot become completely oblivious to the final destiny that awaits

the ‘invincible’ battleship *Yamato* and the heavy cruiser *Aoba*. Historically, *Yamato* failed to complete its reckless mission to Okinawa. *Aoba*, on which Suzu’s childhood friend boards as a naval seaman, was also destroyed by American airstrikes. However, like most Japanese at that time, the characters watch the technologically advanced battleships in the harbor with pride and in the firm belief that these battleships would change the course of the war and bring the country to victory.

A date appears on the screen—“April 1944”—and Suzu and Shusaku are both sitting at the top a hill on the terrace fields, viewing the harbor together. Shusaku points his finger toward the harbor, naming the ships, the aircraft carriers, the submarine tender, and the U-boat from Germany. Suzu has just returned from visiting her family in Hiroshima, thus feeling a bit homesick and melancholic, when suddenly a large ship enters the harbor, and the following exchange ensues:

Suzu: “Shusaku-san, what is that? Is that a ship?”⁵

Shusaku: “That’s *Yamato*. The world’s greatest warship, born from the orient’s number one shipyard.”

Suzu: “There’s people on it, too?”

Then, the animation zooms in to get closer to *Yamato*. We see and hear navy men talking, some raising their voices to reach other seamen on board. A small fishing boat passes by, accentuating the scale of the large battleship.

Shusaku: “Yes. About 2,700 people.”

Suzu: “Two thousand ... seven hundred people?”

Shusaku: “That’s right, 2,700 people. Tell them, let’s welcome them [back] to Kure.”

Suzu: “They cook for 2,700 people every day and do the laundry?”

Katabuchi’s film consistently shows Kouno’s claim that wartime reality was an extension of the everyday. Kouno’s original manga, in two facing pages, shows the battleship *Yamato* from a distance, as viewed from the terrace field with Suzu and Shusaku in the frame (Kouno 2017 [2008], 110–11). There is no mention of the number of men on board, let alone any scene with Suzu worrying about who is going to take care of the seamen’s food and laundry. Here, Katabuchi even

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, the English translations are from the animation film’s subtitles.

adds a short close-up scene of the men on board and makes sure that the seamen on *Yamato* are visible everywhere—on the deck and on different floors, one of whom sends a flag signal that can be decoded by those who are familiar with the signals. According to historical records, *Yamato* returned to Kure once a month, and this—in the animation film—was one of those days, April 17, 1944 (*Chugoku Shimbun* Sep. 29, 2016). We are reminded, thanks to Katabuchi's contribution, that almost three thousand men, who had to eat and do their laundry, as Suзу rightly imagines, were on board when *Yamato* left for its final mission the following year. Like the kamikaze pilots, the men on *Yamato* would embark on an impossible mission against the Allied Powers in Okinawa, never to return. This short, inserted scene reminds the viewers that people's lives would be lost, not just the battleship that everyone took so much pride in.

Remaining faithful to Kouno's insistence on historical accuracy, Katabuchi adds another short landscape scene suggesting that *Yamato* leaves the Seto Inland Sea for good the following year. After a series of air raids in March and April of 1945, Suзу spends an anxious night in the community shelter, and morning arrives. Suзу is outside, hanging the laundry to dry. Butterflies are flying and birds are singing, when suddenly, she sees a contrail in the sky. Suзу flips her body backwards, trying to follow the contrail with her eyes: "Never seen that before," says Suзу in the film. The view of Suзу bending her body backwards is drawn in such a way as to suggest that this is how she looks from the ground, and it gives the readers and viewers a sense of precariousness, with the wide sky in view. According to Sumida Chiho, a curator at Kure Art Museum, Kouno drew the contrail after reading a 'memory note' left by a Kure local on April 6, 1945 (Sumida 2016). In the manga, a vertical frame from the top of the page to the bottom of it focuses on what Suзу saw in the sky, and then, we turn to the next page and see Suзу bending backwards in a large frame. In two smaller frames below, her father-in-law is explaining in scientific terms how a contrail is made, leaving the readers to wonder whether something serious is happening.

Katabuchi emphasizes in his film version the historical detail that Kouno's manga presentation merely suggests. In the animation film version, the audience hears the sound of an aircraft engine after Suзу follows the contrail with her body bent backwards. Presented from the point of view of the pilot, a scene involving a large battleship surrounded by numerous smaller battleships emerges, and it is closely followed by an image of a camera lens shutter, a

‘click’ sound, and then another ‘click.’ With these click sounds, the audience is encouraged to suspect that the pilot must have taken several photographs of the battleship *Yamato* in the harbor. The contrail Suзу sees in the animation film was ‘in reality’ produced by a B-29 reconnaissance plane. According to an *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper article of July 4, 2006, Katabuchi generated the scene in the animation film by reproducing a real photograph taken 5 hours before *Yamato* left the Inner Sea of Seto for its last mission in Okinawa. Found in the United States National Archives, the photograph was later exhibited at the Yamato Museum in Kure in 2006.⁶ With the unobtrusively added scene based on archival research, the battleship *Yamato* that Suзу and Shusaku are portrayed as seeing from a distance on “April 6, 1945” in the animation film would no longer represent pride, but instead, foreshadows the terrible final days of the Asia-Pacific War.

As Lee (2016) has demonstrated, Kure’s identity is inseparable from the battleship *Yamato*, and myths and memories of the war’s tragedy live on in the minds of Kure’s citizens and beyond. The myth of *Yamato* as a cultural symbol of spiritual strength and rebirth of post-war Japan remains strong to this day. However, it is important to note that Kouno’s narrative maintains a certain distance from any kind of ideologically driven position. In fact, not having a fixed dichotomy of aggressor and victim leaves little scope for ready criticism. The reader cannot dismissively treat the war era as something of the distant past with no connection to the present. By making the Hiroshima-born protagonist Suзу marry into a family who live in the navy military city of Kure, her affiliation is to both Hiroshima, whose citizens suffer horrendously because of the war, and Kure, which ultimately prospered because of it and took pride in taking part in the war effort. Hence, the narrative blurs the line between those who benefitted, and those who suffered from the war, making it difficult to take sides in a simplistic way. Through Suзу, the main character, we are led to imagine the men on the battleship *Yamato* led no less an everyday life than did the citizens of Hiroshima – or anywhere else in the world. The seamen had to eat and do laundry, just as we must, today.

⁶ According to *Asahi Shimbun* (2006), the photo was obtained upon a request made by Kudo Yozo, a high school history teacher and representative of *kūshū sensai o kirokusurukai, zenkoku renraku kaigi* [national network of preserving records of air raids and war disasters].

3.2. Air Raids in Kure

Historically, in addition to battleships, Kure produced military aircraft and other weapons during the Asia-Pacific War. Kouno's manga depicts Kure as a strategically organized military city with a chart showing how the structure of the Kure Navy Base evolved throughout history: the Hiro Naval Arsenal, Kure Naval Arsenal, Hiro Aircraft Factory Departments directly attached to the Navy Base, and all the other divisions and factories that produce the weapons (Kouno 2016a [2009], 11-14). The drawings of the various aircrafts produced in Kure are accompanied by lyrics of a 1934 military song that factory workers at the time sang: "With stars shining above at dawn . . . we strive to improve our skills, a unified determination and goal . . . we carry our glorious duties" (Kouno 2016a [2009], 13-14). In the film, Suzu's father-in-law, who builds aircraft engines as a civil engineer, sings the same military song when he is with Suzu and her niece while they are trying to take cover from the heavy air raids. In short, Kure and the military are inseparable.

A 'third voice' that exists in Kouno's manga but not in the animation animated film complicates this picture. In the manga pages where the pictures of various aircrafts and the quotations of the military song appear, the viewers see an ordinary middle-class nuclear family, looking up at the sky with a smile, the mother holding a parasol in her hand and her daughter pointing her finger at the sky. Perhaps she sees an aircraft. A third-party voice without a hint of local dialect says, "What is a dream to some is . . ." and the sentence is completed in the following left-hand page, in which an aerial view of the Hiro Naval Aircraft and Arsenal Factory area fills the entire page—"a nightmare to others" (Kouno 2016a [2009], 14-15). The two-page spread suggests that these aircrafts have bombed other parties, just as the citizens of Kure are being bombed by the Allied Powers. In other words, this 'third voice' expresses the understanding that the labels of 'aggressors' and 'victims' are not fixed or easily identifiable.

In both Kouno's manga and its film version, the air raids are portrayed as an everyday occurrence. According to John Dower, more than 65 percent of Tokyo residences were destroyed and sixty-six major cities throughout Japan were heavily bombed in the air raids during the Pacific War (1999, 45-47). Kure, too, was heavily bombed—14 times, to be exact, from March 19 to August 14 in 1945; about two thousand citizens were killed during the July 1-2 air raids

alone (Yamato Museum 2015, 76-77). Each time an air raid alarm went off, people went through a routine, as depicted in both the manga and animation versions of Kouno's narrative: "04: 50, March 29, 1945 ... Ready air raid gear! Put out all fires! Remove slide doors! Grab survival kits and head to bomb shelters!" The same routine is repeated, but not with equal urgency: "22: 10, April 1, 1945. I can't see anything ... oops! sorry! (meow) whose cat is that?"; "23: 45, April 5, 1945 ... [a child in the bomb shelter] I'm getting tired of air raids." Kouno and Katabuchi recognize the human propensity to normalize extreme circumstances and begin to let their guard down when air alarms occur frequently, particularly when they turn out to be false alarms.

Everyday psychology also governs those activities that should support the war effort on the home front. In another scene of the film, on "March 31, 1945," women are putting on their sashes that read, 'Greater Japanese Women's Association for the Protection of the Country.' They are getting ready to support the war effort by cheering and sending off drafted men. In a low voice, a woman says, "Poor Mrs. Kariya. She lost her husband. Now her 17-year-old is being drafted." The women line up and wave the national flag unenthusiastically and, in a depressed tone, congratulate the drafted soldiers and family members before rushing off to the bomb shelters as the air raid alarm goes off. In the manga version of the same scene, a woman on her way to send some young men off to war, murmurs, "This is so depressing" (Kouno 2016b [2009], 6). Although women supported the home front war efforts by joining the 'Greater Japanese Women's Association for Protection of the Country,' not everyone was equally enthusiastic about their 'duties' devised by the imperial government. In Kouno's narrative, we see that human psychology would not always conform to the expectations of a state. People sometimes do not even take seriously the orders of the *kenpei*, or military police, and are depicted as being their ordinary selves, regardless of the imperial government's ideology.

While human psychology can unwittingly defy the dictates of any single ideology, essayist Okabe Itsuko's (1923–2008) well-known essay, "The Woman Aggressor" (2008), also reminds us of the ordinary citizen's vulnerability. Okabe, having received military education since primary school, recalls how she could not understand her fiancé when he told her, upon receiving his draft notice, that "he did not want to die for the emperor" (2008, 94). The following day, she sent him off at Osaka station, waving the national flag with

enthusiasm. Okabe's fiancé was killed during the Battle of Okinawa, and she describes how only years later she realized what she had done. Okabe reminds us that on any given day, ordinary people leading honest lives can be involved in a war, even supporting it. The ordinary citizen is highly capable of becoming an 'aggressor,' to use Okabe's title for the essay. Whether reluctantly, dutifully, or unthinkingly, when people follow the state's orders, they become an Okabe or a character in *In This Corner of the World*.

4. Documenting Hiroshima

Suzu was brought up in the seaside of Eba, a part of Hiroshima city that has a view on the Inner Sea of Seto. Her family is involved in selling nori, or dried seaweed sheets. The first scene of both the manga and the animated film opens with a view of nori being dried under the sun and the ocean breeze blowing in from the Inner Sea of Seto. Suzu, still a child, is on her way to sell the nori to a restaurant in Nakajima Honmachi. Nakajima Honmachi was once the liveliest commercial district in Hiroshima city until the area was completely demolished by the atomic bomb. Katabuchi carefully recreates the streets of the area in his animation by conducting interviews, examining photographs, and engaging in archival research. He worked especially closely with Nagakawa Mikio, a member of a citizen group, the Hiroshima Fieldwork, whose objective was to interview the former inhabitants of the Nakajima district and publish booklets on the area (Katabuchi 2019, 105).

The outcome of Katabuchi's efforts is noteworthy. In the animation film, viewers see the Morinaga chocolate and caramel candy sold in the stores, the Hamai family's barber shop, and the Aioi bridge, the target landmark that the bombardier of the aircraft "Enola Gay" aimed at when he dropped the atomic bomb. Suzu walks through the commercial district, and when she leans on the handrail of the rather large 'Taishoya' kimono store building to rest, the feature film's theme song sung by the musician Kotoringo in her distinctive floating, whispering voice sets the tone of the animation. From the outset, we are reminded that there was once a lively city.

The actual Nakajima Hondori is located within 100 to 700 meters from the hypocenter of the blast and occupies the northern part of today's Hiroshima Peace Park. When we walk through the park, we can find a memorial plaque,

also known as the Map Restoration Monument, that shows the name of the households, movie theaters, small shops, and a department store, where people spent their everyday lives. Accordingly, an attentive viewer of the animated film would slowly recognize that Suzu is walking through today's Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. When Suzu revisits the area after she has married, we see her walking through the Kamiyacho intersection in Hiroshima city, which is lined with modern buildings and street cars. Suzu is drawing a picture of the Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, and this time the drawing of the hall from the manga is presented close-up and in color. Then, when the time comes for Suzu to return to Kure, Suzu says, "Sayonara [goodbye] . . . sayonara, Hiroshima," which makes the readers and viewers sense another kind of farewell with Hiroshima that is destined to happen with the dropping of the atomic bomb (Kouno 2017 [2008], 104). In these scenes of Hiroshima, the manga readers and the animation viewers alike realize that the Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall that Suzu draws a sketch of will later become a world heritage site, the Atomic Bomb Dome. And the large kimono store 'Taishoya,' where Suzu rests, is the only other building that survives the atomic bomb.

In this way, because the names of the geographical locations in Kouno's *In This Corner of the World*—for example Kure, Eba, Kusatsu, Mt. Haigamine, and Hiroshima—exist to this very day, the manga and its animated version bring the past into the present. Precisely because the graphic narrative focuses on Kure's everyday life, Kouno's narrative as animated under Katabuchi's direction becomes not of a wartime past, but one that happened at a time and place that is within the manga readers' and animation viewers' comprehension and reach. The scenes, dialogues, and even the pauses set against a backdrop of familiar views and locations invite us to imagine how war is always a stone's throw away in a subdued, profoundly ominous way.

4.1. The dropping of the atomic bomb

The portrayal of the dropping of the atomic bomb in Kouno's story highlights the difference in the experiences between those who lived in Kure and those who lived in Hiroshima city. It is August 1945, the month the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In contrast to the air raids in Kure, the depiction of the atomic bomb being dropped on Hiroshima is far less

dramatic. In fact, the critical moment is almost unnoticeable in the manga, consisting of just a small, white, blank frame located at the bottom of the page, sandwiched by two other frames. The frame on the right of the blank one is a drawing of Suzu's left hand on a basket, her traveling bag. The frame on the left shows Keiko, her sister-in-law, being distracted by a flash, and in a speech bubble, a question mark (Kouno 2016b [2009], 75). On the next page, a matter-of-fact conversation between Suzu and Keiko continues.

A neighbor: "Keiko-chan,⁷ did you see a flash just now?"

Sister-in-law, Keiko: "I did. Was it lightning maybe? It's such a nice day out though."

Suzu: "... Could, could I ask you to wash this *monpe*, after all?" (Kouno 2016b [2009], 76)

When the atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima, Suzu in Kure is, on the surface of things, mundanely asking her sister-in-law if she would wash a *monpe*, a pair of pants for women, which she plans to take with her to give to her elder sister. Kure has undergone heavy air bombings and Suzu is not sure whether she wants to stay there with the Hojo family. Preparing to leave for Hiroshima city that day, Suzu, at the last moment, decides to postpone her visit. Suzu still needs to ask Keiko to wash the *monpe* because by the time this scene unfolds, Suzu's right hand has been blown off by a time bomb. But Suzu also hesitates to make this request, because the time bomb that blew off Suzu's right hand also killed Keiko's daughter, who was holding that very right hand. Predictably, Keiko and Suzu's relationship is temporarily strained, but they both come to terms with their very real, very profound, losses.

Suzu: "and Can I stay here?" Suzu physically gets closer and holds Keiko's arms.

Keiko: "Ok, ok, I understand, but don't come so close, it's embarrassing."

(Kouno 2016b [2009], 76)

Just then, a loud rumbling sound in the ground is heard. The entire family in the house rush outside to see what has happened. When the readers turn the page, they see what looks like 'an anvil cloud' in the sky, which takes up an entire page (Kouno 2016b [2009], 78). When we think of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima city, most of us probably imagine it to be a mushroom cloud, but in reality, the people in Kure only saw an anvil shaped cloud (Kouno

⁷ The suffix 'chan' is added mostly to girls' names to express feelings of endearment.

2012, 234)⁸. The manga and the animation film not only portray this reality accurately but also show that all sorts of tragedies, conflicts, and reconciliations were taking place in the wartime everyday lives of Kure's citizens.

5. Conclusion: Being Ordinary in an Extraordinary, or Abnormal, World

When *In This Corner of the World* received the Excellence Award in 2009 in the manga division of Japan Media Arts Festival, the judges provided the following reason for conferring the award:

Although the story is based on real life during wartime, it is amazing that this work is *not ideological* but profoundly universal, and it has become a Shōjo manga, that is, one that primarily targets girls, which ignites every reader's heartbeat. (emphasis added, Japan Media Arts Festival Archive)

We might agree with the judges at the Agency of Cultural Affairs, who view her work as being unideological. However, judging from a scene describing an exchange between Suzu and Tetsu, Suzu's childhood friend, as he is about to return to his battleship, *Aoba*, after a short holiday with Suzu's family, Kouno is clear about what she does *not* want, regarding wartime memory:

For you, Suzu, to take care of this household here and for me to protect this nation in the battleship *Aoba*, are no different; they are just activities we engage in because we have to. Think of it all that way and keep at being ordinary and decent in this world, won't you? If I die, don't lump me with all the other 'fallen heroes' and praise me for dying for the country. Laugh and remember me. Remember me and smile. If you can't do that, please forget. (Kouno 2016a [2009], 87-88)

Kouno rejects glorification, idolization, and hero worship. After the war ends, towards the end of the story, the same message is repeated with the portrayal of a completely wrecked battleship *Aoba*, half sunk, appearing in the harbor. Suzu passes by *Aoba* without acknowledging Tetsu. Tetsu, standing in front of

⁸ Kouno referred to the photo exhibited at the Yamato Museum. The photo was taken in Yoshiuracho (today's Wakabacho) in Kure city soon after the atomic bomb was dropped. For photo, see Yamato Museum, ed. (2015), 78.

Aoba, is talking to Suzu with his eyes directed towards the sky. “You must have been so shocked when you lost Harumi [the daughter of Suzu’s sister-in-law, Keiko] . . . but please remain sane and ordinary in this world.” When Suzu replies “Yes,” he goes on to repeat, “If you can’t do that, please forget about me” (Kouno 2016b [2009], 125). Whether battleships sink and people die in war, Suzu is depicted as carrying on the memories and telling the stories of the people she encounters in her life.

Notably the Frankfurt School, and more recently, scholars such as Marianne Hirsch, have argued that in thinking about ‘postmemories’ of a catastrophic and traumatic experience such as the holocaust, the “break, between then and now, between the one who lived it and the one who did not remains monumental and insurmountable” (2012, 86). All memories are mediated. As Hirsch has pointed out, ‘postmemories’ of the holocaust were mostly shaped by men of the first generation, such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel, and the second generation, including comic artist Art Spiegelman (1992; 2012, 98). If animated films such as *In This Corner of the World* are capable of prompting the audience to imaginatively experience an extraordinary event through the eyes of an ordinary young woman who thinks her everyday thoughts in the midst of extraordinary circumstances, they would realize that even at wartime, food had to be cooked and the laundry had to be done. When Suzu lines up to receive the rations in the film, we hear her say, “Even in war, cicadas cry, and butterflies fly.”⁹ This is also to say that cicadas crying and butterflies flying is no guarantee that the ‘then’ is so distant from the ‘now.’ We realize that ‘then’ and ‘now’ are extensions of one another.

Moreover, because the shape of clouds that people saw in the sky, the view of the battleships in the harbor on a given day, the kinds of candy sold in stores, and the military songs sung in the animation are based on historical facts and meticulous research, the fictitious is not quite as fictitious, either. Kouno’s message on the back of first volume’s cover is telling: “To the me, in all the other corners of the world.” Kouno and Katabuchi inform me that Suzu is me, myself, in the here and now.

⁹ The original manga only shows Suzu getting into line to pick up the food rations and sees a signpost that announces that there will be no sugar rationed after August 1944 (Kouno 2016 [2008], 11).

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Ideological History, Contested Culture, and the Politics of Representation in *Amar Chitra Katha*

Abstract

The evolution of culture and societies through the course of history is not *a priori* but is discursively constructed by a constellation of beliefs and myths and is shaped by different ideological institutions. This paper addresses the historical narratives of *Amar Chitra Katha* (from now on *ACK*), the first indigenous children's comics in India, which began publishing in 1967. Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children's media culture continues to be underrepresented in the field of history and popular culture. When we engage with the world of comics and graphic novels, we realize how it shapes, and is shaped by, not just the minds of individuals but also the collective consciousness of communities and their (un)sung histories. *ACK* has been an important cultural institution that has played a significant role in defining, for several generations of Indian readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian. In the process, the comics tradition seems to portray a delimited world view of India, often erasing non-Hindu subjects and lower caste strata of the society from India's history.

While the research will focus on reformist and revisionist impulses that *ACK* carries, it will also engage in the way these historical parables of India are narrated, the stories that are chosen to be told, the faces and the voices that are prioritized (or obliterated) for the purpose, and the collaboration of literary and visual image on which they rely to accomplish their re-presentation of history. Thus, the paper seeks to address the politics of representation and the symbolic significance of the visual representation of different historical figures and events throughout the history of India. The historical representations of this comic book tradition render *ACK* a crucial resource to understand paradigm shift in the ways the nation imagines itself.

I. Introduction

The evolution of culture and societies through history is not *a priori* or given but is discursively produced within a constellation of discourses—cultural beliefs and national myths, in particular—and is shaped by different ideological institutions. The narration of “history” is, thereby, consequent upon the expression of different ideologies. It is quite interesting to note how the changing modes of representation of the past—ranging from cave paintings to digital storytelling—have refracted history through their own prism of ideologies, more so since the twentieth century world’s transition into modernity. Thus, visual communication remains an indispensable medium of expression that has remained discreetly efficient even while the technical means of its circulation and reproduction have radically altered. While considering the above concerns, this paper addresses the comic book tradition of *Amar Chitra Katha* — the first indigenous children’s comics to be published in 1967 postcolonial India, and the manner in which it has brought Indian history to life. *ACK*’s idiosyncrasies lie in its ability to narrate stories through indigenous or mythographic prisms.

Translated from Hindi as “Immortal Picture Stories,” *Amar Chitra Katha*, a brainchild of Anant Pai, has been known for the representation of Indian history, historical figures, and regional folktales in the form of graphic narratives. In its inception, *ACK* portrayed a delimited world view of India in terms of Hindu religious nationalism, often erasing non-Hindu subjects and lower caste strata of the society from India’s historic and religious fabric. *ACK* is an important cultural institution that has played a significant role in defining, for several generations of readers, what it means to be Hindu and Indian. Drawn from Hindu mythology, the first heroes of *ACK* were Hindu gods and goddesses like Krishna, Durga and Rama. However, later in the 1970s, historical Indian figures were added to into the mix, including several warrior kings and freedom fighters, ranging from Akbar and Shivaji to Bhagat Singh and Mahatma Gandhi. Thus, *ACK*’s efforts towards inclusive Indian nationalism seem to be a recent phenomenon, which cannot go unnoticed. By delving into the politics of representation, this paper examines visionary icons and leaders who have marked important turnings in India’s history and how they are couched in the larger social, cultural, and ideological national imagery. While considering some of the national figures as case study, this research delves

into the literary historical epochs of *ACK*, locating its graphic tradition within the broader paradigm of historical narratives in popular culture.

Over the last few decades, the series of *ACK* have been considered not merely as entertainment product, but as foundational texts for the religious and national education of young readers. The profound significance of these comics in the everyday lives of the readers remains the pivot of this research. In this context, an entire raft of questions seems evocative: as a cultural comment on history, what are the politics of *ACK*? How was it accepted in evolving postcolonial Indian society? How does popular imagination of historical events and personages, even through comic books, contribute to shaping contemporary India? Although sharing a rich narrative corpus can arguably evoke a sense of (supposed) indigenous myths, collective tradition, and national history linking many generations of India, does the mechanical reproduction (cf. Walter Benjamin) of these historical as well as oral narrative traditions eliminate actual correspondence among the target readers owing to a different mode of production?

This research attempts to document and explore these questions by analyzing different historical personages, viz. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Rani Padmini of Chittor, Queen of Jhansi, and B.R. Ambedkar. The historical representations in *ACK* render it a crucial resource to understand paradigm shifts in the way the nation imagines itself, and the way it has educated whole generations of Indian children, both native and expatriate, on mythology, folklore, history, and other aspects of Indian culture. However, this paper highlights how the representations of religion and gender in these comics are neither inclusive nor egalitarian. Further, it emphasizes how *ACK*'s reliance on hegemonic "original" versions of epic tales underscores the patriarchal, racist, and casteist ideologies of contemporary Hindu nationalism in India (McLain).

Despite a growing body of research on the media landscape in postcolonial India, Indian children's media culture continues to be underrepresented in the field of history and popular memory. And yet, when we engage with the world of comics and graphic novels, we realize how it shapes, and is shaped by, not just the minds of individuals but also collective consciousness of communities and their (un)sung histories. While this research focuses on reformist and revisionist impulses that *ACK* carries, it also draws attention to the way these historical parables of India are narrated, the stories that are chosen to be told, the faces

and the voices that are prioritized (or obliterated) for the political purpose of peddling a dominant rightwing ideology, and the collaboration of literary and visual image on which they rely to accomplish their re-presentation of history. Thus, this paper seeks to address the politics of representation and the symbolic significance of the visual representation of different historical figures and events across different times and places in India's history. A sustained concern in this account is with the historical representations of *ACK*—how the narrative highlights certain aspects while negating others. For a major part in the early series of *ACK*, it could be felt that the founder editor Anant Pai revolutionized children's entertainment by interweaving it with India's historical narratives. However, he also altered religious education for children, predominantly in the shades and hues of Hindu religious education, largely omitting religious minorities in India like Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. Thus, examining *ACK* remains crucial, on one hand, when looking into the historical parables shared in the visual-textual format; on the other hand, it remains vital to understand the paradigm shifts in the ways a nation is imagined.

2. Background: The Phenomenon of *Amar Chitra Katha*

Amar Chitra Katha, a leading historical comics-book series in India, enjoys a ubiquitous presence among the urban middle-class in India and the South Asian diaspora. Founded in 1967 by Editor-in-Chief Anant Pai, *ACK* has sold over 100 million issues consisting of nearly 500 different titles, translated into 20 Indian languages, including Assamese, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Tamil, among others, and several international languages like Mandarin, French, Portuguese, and Taiwanese. Pai worked as an editor at Indrajal Comics in the early 1960s—the company that popularized Western comics in India since its inception in 1964. Thus, *ACK* was founded as a reaction to what was perceived by Pai as an excess of foreign influences trickling into the consumption of popular culture by Indian youth. Pai realized how characters like Superman, Phantom, Mandrake, and the like, operated in a mostly Western milieu, while drawing upon colonial issues and playing out their adventures in colonial locales like Western Africa, India, and China, to name a few, howsoever excruciatingly represented.

The popularity of The Phantom and Mandrake clearly indicated the mass-market appeal of comic books to the Indian popular culture sensibilities.

However, instead of creating more Western heroes, Pai, by invading the colonial heart of darkness, reversed the entire structural paradigm of comic books in India. Thus, *ACK* was founded on the principle of educating the young readers of India about Indian myths and mythology, religion and history, and nation and national figures. As a matter of fact, Pai envisaged *ACK* as a means of teaching Indian themes to the Western educated Indian children who were more attentive to Western history, supposedly at the expense of Indian history and mythology. Accordingly, these comics now could be loosely grouped into two categories: mythological and historical. The mythological ones, including narratives from classical Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and various Puranic stories, were retold in a child-friendly way. On the other hand, the historical ones added several years later, feature regional personalities to promote national integration, according to Pai, by teaching people in one region about the culture and history of another.

Initially, the series of *ACK* books were merely restricted to mythological characters, recreating the stories of deities from classical narratives like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Subsequently the series expanded its focus to include historical figures, ranging from notable kings and queens like such as Shivaji, Padmini, Lakshmibai, to more modern leaders and luminaries like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B.R. Ambedkar. As Pai stated, *ACK* brings to life personages and events from the forgotten pages of Indian history. Despite this paradigmatic shift to favour the depiction of real-life historical figures, *ACK* clearly appropriated the comics medium popularized by American writers and artists that Indrajal had been selling to the Indian audiences for years.

Amar Chitra Katha presents complex historical facts and intricate mythology in a format that appeals to children. The stories not only entertain, but also provide a fitting introduction to India's cultural heritage. In a country so vast and varied, the series also serves as a medium of national integration by introducing young readers to the rich cultural diversity of the country and highlighting the achievements of local heroes (Pai 1899, inside cover).

In one of his early interviews with Karline McLain, Pai mentions that his chief concern is weaning young Indian readers away from Western culture, American comics and other popular culture, back into what, according to him, was a much healthier moral, social and cultural environment: "This is the trouble with our educational system. Children are getting alienated from their

own culture" (McLain 2005, 47). Thus, although *ACK* as a visual narrative form is different from its Western counterpart, it does apply some of the formal conventions of Western comics in its visuals. An in-depth exploration of *ACK*'s intertextuality reflects how it merges different pre-novelistic conventions of India along with some visual and formal conventions of Western comics to create an effect that is common to the existing comic books tradition, yet unique due to its focus on the immediate historical context of India. In this vein, *ACK* as a historical narrative form significantly contributes to the production and consumption of essentially traditional elements—signified by the word *katha* which translates to "storytelling," yet, at once contemporary—reflected by the contemporaneity of the content it represents.

3. *Amar Chitra Katha*: A Dialogue between Tradition and Contemporaneity

Although Indian mythology—a rich source of delightful children's stories—is what *ACK* initially focused on, over time its role gradually broadened to cover aspects of contemporary Indian history. In so doing, *ACK* has duly appropriated the pedagogic implementations and possibilities of Western comic books while instigating a dialogue between tradition (religion, myth, and mythology) and contemporaneity (national figures and modern-day heroes). By virtue of being comic books, a dominant form of popular culture, *ACK* already had what Dorfman and Mattelart state as "a biologically captive, pre-determined audience" (1975, 30). Hero worship remains an inevitable part of the relationship between an adolescent and the character of his/her comic book—an established norm duly appropriated by *ACK* for mass propagation of its ideology. Placed within this context, hero worship is used for manoeuvring the child's natural affinity towards the historical and national figures that Pai wanted Indian children to be familiar with. Examining the local and the national in *ACK*, Nandini Chandra observes how the series' "ideological charge draws upon two sources: the innocence that it projects onto its child audience and the reliance of its narrative on the naturalizing effect of the photographic realism of its drawings" (Chandra 2008, 6).

Having built upon this model of the "Indian hero," while taking benefit of the sales potential brought about by the latent indignation of the colonized Hindu, the crucial question is, what actually constitutes "Indianness." While

ACK has constructed a legendary past of India for impressionable generations of Indian middle-class children, it has also indelibly projected an Indian identity wedded with prejudiced norms. Since its debut in 1967, *ACK* on one hand has been reinforcing many of the problematic tenets of Indian society by tying together masculinity, fair skin, dominance of the high caste, and Hinduism. On the other hand, by often erasing non-Hindu subjects from India's history and religious fabric, *ACK* reinforced many problematic aspects of Hindu nationalism, tenets that partially drive the platform of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, currently criticized both domestically and internationally for policies targeting religious minorities and lower castes.

A steady attempt to construct a hegemonic Indian identity could be evidently noticed in the decades following independence from the British in 1947. Despite being the world's largest secular democracy, this hegemonic concept of "Indianness" marginalized the non-Hindus as a religious and cultural outsider while privileging the Hindu upper castes, and relegated Indian women to the limited traditional roles delineated by the patriarchal Indian society. In the process, the cultural and moral high ground of what can be considered "Indian" has been strongly projected as Hinduised. Considering that Pai's intention was to reinvigorate the young readership's interest in their cultural identity, *ACK*, in many of its issues, played an active role in perpetuating that identity. Moreover, *ACK*'s stories about gods, goddesses, kings, and historical legends have often associated light-skinned masculine figures with strength, virtues, compassion, and upper caste status, whereas dark skin, in the comic book illustrations, has primarily been coded through the semiotics of violence, brutality, and low caste status.

This paper, then, highlights the way *ACK* deploys religion, mythology, and history, on one hand, and nation and national identity on the other, in conjunction with words and images of the comic book medium to create and recreate the dominant ideology. Many of the subsequent issues of *ACK* exclude the intersectionality of marginalized non-Hindu religious subjects and Hindu lower castes as cultural "outsiders" in its politics of representation. While the graphic narrative has educated an entire generation of Indian children on mythology, folklore, history, and other such aspects of Indian culture, this paper delves into how these graphic representations of history, religion, and women in *ACK* are neither inclusive nor egalitarian. Furthermore, it could be observed that *ACK*'s reliance on hegemonic "original" versions of historical narratives underscores the patriarchal, racist, and casteist ideologies of contemporary

Hindu nationalism in India. As noted by McLain, “hegemonic forms are always in flux: dominant ideologies do not just exist passively but are created and recreated amidst ongoing debate” (2005, 22). In a similar vein, *ACK*, a ubiquitous form of public culture familiar to an enormous section of the educated Indian population, practically creates shared shorthand for its conceptualization of Indian history and mythology while simultaneously functioning as a platform for debates surrounding that very conceptualization. Thus, the research here delves into the multifarious roles played by *ACK* and the functions it plays in shaping the public culture. Addressing the concerns of contested history and gender, *chitrakathas* (or picture stories), viz. *Dayananda: His Strength Was His Virtue* (1976), *Padmini: A Tale of Love and Honour* (1973), *Rani of Jhansi: The Flame of Freedom* (1974) and *Babasaheb Ambedkar: He Dared to Fight* (1979), would be analysed within the ambit of this proposed research.

4. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, “His Strength Was His Virtue”

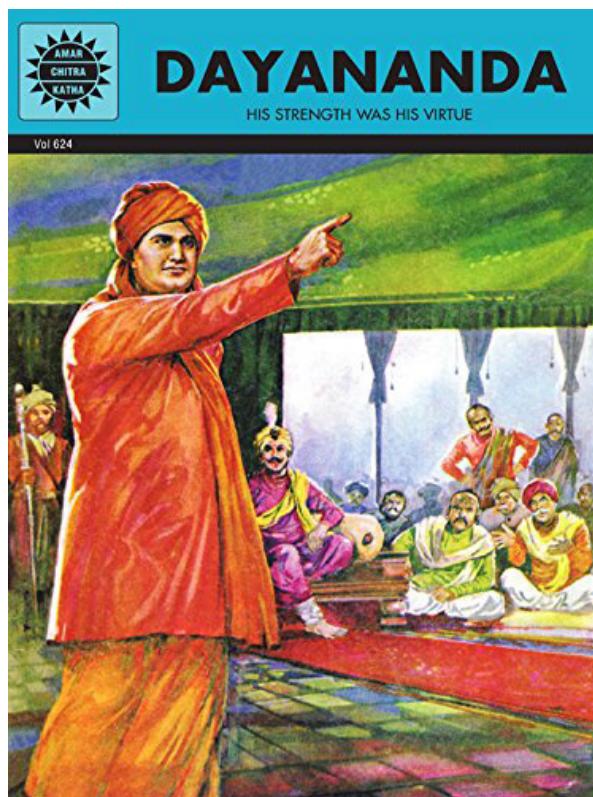


Fig. 4.1. Cover Illustration, *Dayananda*, Anant Pai, 1967

Hindu nationalism owes its genesis to Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883). The Arya Samaj—a monotheistic Hindu reform institution—founded by Dayananda in 1875 pervaded the entire social, intellectual, and cultural scenario of the late nineteenth century northern India. Established on the motto of “*कृण्वन्तो वशिवमार्यम्*”, translated to “make the world noble,” the primary goal of Arya Samaj was to foster one’s self-identity while promoting physical, spiritual, and social wellbeing of all. This ethical framework, although it helped to spread education and bring about social reforms, seemed to be based on exclusionary policies meant only for the upper caste, Hindu privileged society. While the issue of *ACK* on Dayananda emphasized his reform works for the revival of the lost ideals of India—symbolized by his slogan “Back to the Vedas”—the comic book turned a blind eye to his censure of various non-Hindu religions and beliefs. Historians argue the ideologies perpetuated by Arya Samaji played a crucial role in the later development of increasingly militaristic, right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS),¹ among others (Krishnamurti 2004, 116). Given this background, it is curious to note why *ACK* chose to eulogize Dayananda in its comic book. Explicitly stating Swami Dayananda Saraswati’s reformist stance, *ACK* in the “Introduction” states:

Swami Dayananda was born at a time when our country was under foreign domination. Most of the people were steeped in ignorance and poverty. Hypocrisy and corruption flourished in the name of religion . . . Prejudices of creed, caste and community had corroded the social cohesion and the wily and the wicked were ruling the roost. (Pai 1967, inside front cover)

It could be noted that Dayananda Saraswati’s message struck a deep chord through its ambiguous stance. On one hand, he stood for sharp criticism of child marriage and taboos on widow remarriage. On the other hand, he propagated existing Hindu practices such as idolatry and polytheism and supported Brahmin predominance and the varna system (multiplicity of castes based on birth, viz. Brahmins, Kshatrias, Vaishyas, Sudras), along with an equally strong assertion of the superiority of a purified Vedic Hinduism

¹ Founded in 1925, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, often abbreviated as RSS, is an Indian rightwing Hindu nationalist volunteer organization. RSS has been often accused of plotting assassinations, stoking riots against religious minorities, and indulging in acts of terrorism. For further details, cf. Kelkar.

over all the other faiths including Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism. In fact, many of the successor organizations to the Arya Samaj did not shy away from explicitly blaming the Muslims and other religious minorities for India's ensuing political problems. It cannot be denied that Dayananda Saraswati played a crucial role in the upliftment of women, primarily widows and those belonging to lowly castes, laying the initial groundwork for Mahatma Gandhi's later projects (Pai 1967, inside front cover); and yet, the innocuously depoliticized way in which these reforms are depicted in *ACK* are partial in its representation. Uma Chakravarti, Radha Kumar, and others have opined that reformers of this period who spoke for women were not necessarily progressive in their political beliefs (Chakravati 1990, 245). In this vein, the incident portrayed in *ACK* where Dayananda gave *janeu* or sacred thread to women and Dalit²—as a means of denting the caste system—remains crucial. While the comic book highlighted the efficacy of Dayananda's ideology, the homogenizing tendencies of his ideals are not duly depicted in the text. Elucidating this further, Uma Chakravarty states:

According to Dayananda, during Vedic times, society recognized only varnas based on the skills and accomplishments of an individual and not a system of hereditary endogamous castes. He, however, recommended that people marry within their varna to maintain social order, and was primarily interested in the religious education of young women in order to prepare them to do their "duty" as "mothers of the nation." (Chakravarti 1990, 256-257)

Contrary to the details mentioned by Chakravarti, *ACK* states, "For women to acquire that place of honour, they must get proper education. Give up Purdah! Give up superstitions" (Pai 1967, 21). While this statement contributes to the commemoration of Dayananda Saraswati as an advocate of women's rights, it is equally important to consider how he also recognized Purdah and "superstitions" as essentially Islamic imports that debased the "purity" of Hindu culture. While it appealed to the Hindus to reject the outward aspects of European culture and emulate their basic values such as hard work and discipline, he was, however, also a staunch believer in the traditional varna system. Arya Samaj was deliberately founded on a

² Dalit is a name for people belonging to the lowest caste in India, characterised as "untouchable".

Brahminical worldview and held that every Hindu mind needs to be saturated with the consciousness of being not just an Indian, but also a Hindu. Similarly, the establishment of the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic (DAV) educational institutions, although including a study of both English and Western culture, had as its sole intention to take forwards the aims and objectives of the Arya Samaj. In the process, DAV, akin to Arya Samaj, stood to induce a sense of common language and religion.

In this 32-page *ACK* comic book, it is not until page 26 that Dayanand Swami establishes the Arya Samaj. “Arya Samaj” for Dayananda “means the society of virtuous men. We must all unite without distinction of caste or creed. Our objectives are to impart true knowledge, to bring about social justice and to achieve freedom from alien rule” (Pai 1967, 26). For Dayananda Saraswati, Aryans were the “original” Indians and were the only practitioners of the Vedic religion of his “Golden Age,” conjecturally linking both Indian cultural and religious traditions. Quite interestingly, the foundation of the Arya Samaj anticipated the establishment of the Benares Hindu University (BHU) in 1915, which was meant to be a “modern institution with a religio-cultural agenda” (Kumar 2005, 10). It is noteworthy that the BHU was not a government institution, but a community project generated over the years through the collective effort of a vast network of upper-caste, landed, and feudal interests which were spread all over the United Provinces, the Central Provinces, and Bihar (Kumar 2005, 10).

In this sense, Hindu revivalism was based on rejection of both the secular and the modern. Dayananda’s version of India was based on a blind aping of the West and nationalist spirit – reformed, rational, and above all, founded on the Vedic values. Thus, it could be reasonably argued that Dayananda advocated this new “creed” of Indian nationalism based on largely Hindu consciousness. In this regard, the liaison of the Arya Samaj to the Mahasabha, and later, the RSS movements, cannot be overlooked either. *ACK*, however, appears to consciously position Dayananda Saraswati in line with other nationalist heroes of India as chiefly in opposition to British rule, couching his Hindu reformist agenda as a response to colonization. This makes it possible for the readers to miss the Hindu-centric effects of the Arya Samaj and its anti-Muslim sentiments.

5. Padmini of Chittor, “A Tale of Love and Honour”



Fig. 5.1. Cover Illustration, *Padmini*, Anant Pai, 1973

The legend of Padmini of Chittor remains a foundational myth of the Hindu nation. ACK's *Padmini*, published in 1973, integrally intertwines the purity of the nation and its women, and in turn, proposes her as a symbol of feminine heroism and spirituality. Padmini, who was also known as Padmavati, legendary Queen of Chittor (Mewar) and wife of King Ratan Sen, forms a foundational myth of the Hindu nation and Indian womanhood.

In the nationalist discourses of post-Independence India, the 1947 partition is marked as a national failure wherein Indian Muslims have been permanently marked as the saboteurs of the country and its ideals, and in extension, suspected of extra-territorial loyalties. The legend of Padmini, in this vein, is instrumental in reawakening the subject-citizen to the potential danger to one's family and nation:

... the bardic legend of Padmini and Alauddin [Al-ud-din Khilji] ... has acquired the status of historically authentic event not only in what is called popular perception but also among the articulate middle class intelligentsia. The transformation of a legend into a historical event

gives a fair indication of the historical perspective which is imposed upon scattered pieces of experiences. Alauddin [Al-ud-din], apart from being an archetype of the ruthless aggressors, also becomes an epitome of a furiously libidinous Muslim. (Agarwal 2018, 35-36)

The formation of Pakistan through partitioning of “Bharat Mata,” translating to “Mother India,” has been a recurring metaphor to reflect on the body of the pure Hindu woman, a site of negotiation where gender, politics, and nation merge into one another. The multiple gang rapes and abductions of Hindu women during the 1947 partition have been regarded as a stigma upon the national honour, thereby demanding a greater vigilance on the part of the state to avoid such “rupture of the nation” again (Bhutalia 2017, 67). In this vein, Urvashi Butalia writes: “The Indian state was regularly assailed for its failure to protect its women and to respond to Pakistan, the aggressor state, in the language that it deserved” (2017, 67).

In this context, reference to the cover page of the RSS mouthpiece *Organiser* (August 14, 1947) seems crucial. The illustration consisted of the Indian map superimposed with the figure of a woman—representing “Mother India”—with her severed limbs, and Jawaharlal Nehru is portrayed holding the bloody knife—symbolically making him responsible for this gory affair. RSS’ call in the aftermath of the 1947 partition was first to alert the country against the enemy within, and supposedly, the one that did not share India’s cultural and spiritual inheritance, and second, had their loyalties to Pakistan—a subtle hint towards the Muslim population of India.

The significance of *ACK*’s Padmini could be read in the mentioned context of the partition of India:

In the history of India Padmini of Chittor holds a very prominent position. She was a perfect model of ideal Indian womanhood. The values cherished by her were threatened by Ala-ud-din Khilji, the mighty Afghan King of Delhi. A lesser woman would not have been able to face Al-ud-din. But Padmini was not an ordinary woman. She faced her problems with exceptional courage, a living example of victorious womanhood. (Pai 1973, “Introduction”)

Al-ud-din Khilji, as expounded in the narrative, is the “outsider” threatening the values cherished by Padmini, and by extension, the nation. The narrative, thereby, depicts the clash between two value systems: first, honour and purity of women, and second, the values of the nation. Represented as a tale of lust and war, *Padmini* centers on the lascivious Al-ud-din’s lust for the Rani Padmini, the

beautiful queen of King Ratan Singh, and the latter's defeat in the war, which leads to a great betrayal that continues to haunt the post-partition national imaginary (Sreenivas 2010, 187). Evidently, the narration in *ACK* is double-edged: on one hand, it glorifies the Hindu ruler's pacifism; on the other hand, it is depicted in stark contrast with the Muslim ruler's deceit and debauchery. It could be noticed that *ACK*'s effort through Padmini's legend is to evoke the "dishonour" wrought upon Hindu women through abduction and rape by the Muslim "traitors" within the larger nationalistic partition narrative of India. In this context, Bhatalia states, "It is also the tolerance—hitherto important—which has rendered the Hindu male incapable of protecting women" (Qtd. in Sreenivas 2010, 188). Quoting from *Organize*, she further elucidates:

. . . while other people take pride in savage campaigns launched by their ancestors for enslavement, exploitation and forcible proselytisation of their brother human beings, India, pregnant with the wisdom of her illustrious seers and true to her hoary culture, remembers only the key days of her glory when the impact of her glorious civilisation was felt far and wide. (Qtd. in Sreenivas 2010, 188)

Evident in the cover illustration of the comic book *Padmini*, one can verily witness Rani Padmini's self-sacrifice after Ratan Sen's death and defeat to avoid being enslaved by Al-u-din—a powerful image evoking women's bodies as a nationalist trope. Notably, the author of *Padmini*, Yagya Sharma, states how the values embodied by Padmini should be reviewed with regard to history, as using contemporary a value system as a yardstick to judge historical events would be inappropriate. The author seems to further believe the values of *sati* (an erstwhile practice in India whereby a widow was supposed to self-immolate on to her husband's funeral pyre) and *jauhar* (an act of mass self-immolation by women when facing defeat during a war) do not lie in the mere action of the women, but in the fact that they were prepared to take such an extreme step of self-annihilation in defense of their principles and morals—an idea which perpetuates a reductionist portrayal of women couched in culture and tradition.

Women's self-immolation, both in the form of *jauhar* and the more commonly practiced *sati*, has a painful history. The battle to give women rights to live even after the death of their husband was a hard fought one. Even though *sati* was banned by the colonial government in 1861, it was much later, in 1988, with The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987 that the law against this practice was made more stringent. Thus, the disturbing glorification of *jauhar*

in this comic book series, indefinitely, perpetuates a wrong sense of honour, which cannot go unremarked upon.

Furthermore, “othering” the Muslim identity in this comic series remains another seminal issue. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the critique of “appeasement policies” towards the minority Muslim population was renewed in the Nehruvian state. This, in turn, is seen as giving impetus to anti-nationalist parties like the Muslim league, Jamaat-i-Islami and Itehad-ul-Musalmeen that were accused of fostering “communal chauvinism” and loyalties towards Pakistan. Analyzed against this backdrop, the rhetoric of Al-ud-din’s conceit towards Ratan Sen in the comic series serves as a major indicator of the misplaced faith that leaves one’s women and one’s nation vulnerable to the enemy: “Keep your nobility to yourself. Now I shall have Padmini with your cooperation” (Pai 1973, 22).

Despite his high ideals, King Ratan Sen emerges as a weak character in the comic book. When Ratan Sen’s defeat is certain, Rani Padmini’s decision to commit *jauhar* to escape dishonour by annihilating herself in the fire with the other Rajput women makes her a much-venerated figure of among Hindu women. As she says: “No sacrifice is too big to save one’s honour!” (Pai 1973, 22). This act of Padmini which is more often read as her efforts at self-preservation is, in turn, transmuted to the great sacrifice in the nationalist imagination. Her sacrifice is meant to incite the upper caste Hindu male into action to protect the “threatened” nation—a metaphor where nation and women’s bodies become one and all. Kumkum Sangari, analyzing such incitement of male honour through the voice (or, in this case, the memory) of a woman, notes:

... there is an obsessive re-enactment and reclaiming of male honour [through such incitement], which first plays on male fears of dispossession as well as on women’s anxieties, by displaying all Hindu woman as past and future victims of sexual violation, and then equates male sexual honour with the projected Hindu Rasht ra itself. ‘Masculinity’ acquires a single axis of social determination. The ability of Hindu men to protect their women, in a single universalisation of the claim to martial valour, becomes the basis of their right to self-government and their claim to monopolise a nation (Sangari 1989, 877).

Padmini’s sacrifice, in fact, becomes a part of the national collective memory, wherein citizenship for an Indian who is a Muslim becomes an impossible institution. Befuddled Al-ud-din’s reaction to Padmini’s *jauhar* remains a crucial part of the final panel in this issue, where he asks Raghav Chetan, a traitor from Ratan Sen’s court: “But why did they kill themselves?” (Pai 1973, 32). Raghav Chetan’s reply

proves revealing: “Your Majesty! You will never understand” (Pai 1973, 32)—an indication that Al-ud-din is unable to comprehend the logic of Padmini’s self-sacrifice since he has never witnessed a similar code of honour among the women of his own community. Through this narratorial move, Rani Padmini displaces not merely Al-ud-din but also Muslim women, and, by extension, lower caste women outside the ambit of the nation. The virtue of a woman, so unquestionably supreme within the value system of a Rajput like Ratan Sen, is an unfamiliar concept to Al-ud-din. Images of the voluptuous women in different poses of debauchery and servility surrounding Al-ud-din in *ACK* bear testimony to this. As the virtue of the upper-caste Hindu women is developed as the norm of the nation, other non-Hindu and other lower caste women are placed outside the purview of what constitutes ideal Indian womanhood, which would justify their rights over their bodies and foreground their alternative identities.

6. Rani of Jhansi, “The Flame of Freedom”

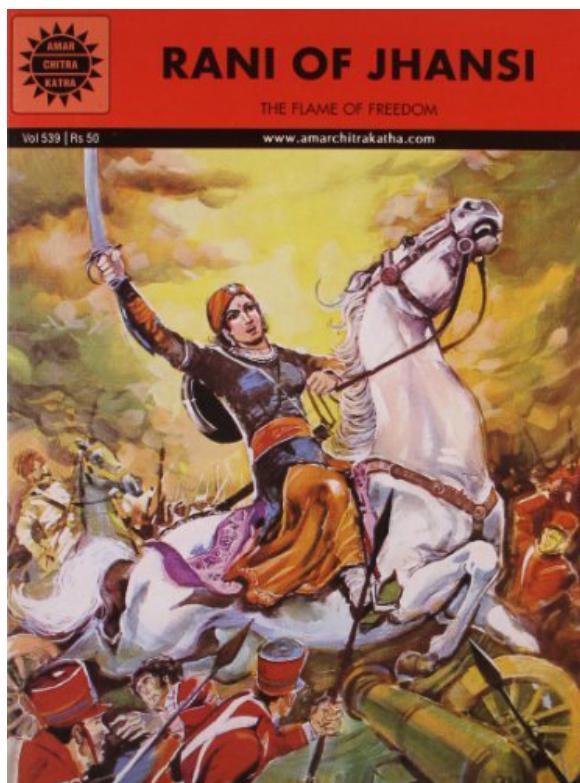


Fig. 6.1. Cover Illustration, *Rani of Jhansi: The Flame of Freedom*, Pai, 1974

Indian mythology is saturated with numerous goddesses as figures of much reverence and worship, yet the widespread understanding of women's role is limited to their domestic confinement. The stereotypical portrayals of women across different genres have rendered them in dichotomic representations: either in a hypersexualized manner while neatly labelling them in pejorative terms or as silent, passive, and meek figures and embodiments of virtues and ideals. It is noteworthy that when Queen Victoria reigned over England during the 1857 rebellion, Indian queens still were rarely entitled to occupy a parallel position of authority—in both British policies and Indian nationalism. Thus, *ACK*'s publication of its issue on Rani of Jhansi in 1974 remains crucial in shaping the mass culture of the young readers, considering how it is couched in the context of emerging new historical realities.

One of the first forays introducing Lakshmibai into the annals of history and popular culture, *ACK*'s depiction of this female warrior is crucial in disrupting the nation's overwhelmingly masculine narrative. Lakshmibai, the Queen of the Maratha princely state of Jhansi (1828-58), was a leading figure of the Indian Rebellion of 1857. A symbol of resistance to the British Raj for the Indian nationalists, she has been celebrated as an epitome of female courage in the country. The *ACK* issue on Rani of Jhansi, evident from the subtitle of the comic book, "The Flame of Freedom" and the accompanied illustration (Fig. 6.1), is reflective of her passion and courage. The figure of Rani of Jhansi, charging her steed through enemy lines, with her sword raised for the next thrust, evidently justifies her name as the Warrior Queen of India.

A harbinger of India's struggle against colonialism, Rani of Jhansi, although she ruled over the small kingdom of Jhansi, aspired to freedom for the whole country from the British Raj. With her wits and force unmatched by the British generals, Lakshmibai, duly portrayed in *ACK*, was a central figure in the great revolt of 1857. A testimony to history, she is one of the few who has been venerated even by her adversaries for her resistance to the British rule. As noted by Partha Chatterjee, Lakshmibai is "doubly articulated as history and metaphor," appreciated by both rebels and oppressors alike (2002, 6). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that her legendary contributions to the Indian Mutiny made her immensely popular in folk tales, poetry, and oral traditions in India as well. The gallantry of Rani of Jhansi is the subject of many folktales and folksongs in Bundelkhand. For instance, Rahi Masoon Raza, in one such story, states:

Nagaha chup huye sab, a gayi bahar Rani
Fauj thi ek sadaf, us mein gauhar Rani
Matla-e-jihad pe hai gairat-e-Akhtar, Rani
Azm-e-paikar mein mardo'n ke barabar Rani

[Suddenly there was silence, here comes the Rani
The army was the oyster, the pearl was the Rani
In the battlefield, you could shame the stars, Rani
In bravery and courage, equal to men is the Rani] (Safvi 2018)

Born as Manikarnika to a Brahmin priest's house in Varanasi, Rani of Jhansi was renamed as Lakshmibai in 1842 after her marriage to Maharaja Gangadhar Rao Newalkar, the 5th King of Jhansi, located in northern India, in the Maratha Empire. After Maharaja Gangadhar Rao died in 1853, Jhansi was annexed by the British under Lord Dalhousie's infamous "Doctrine of Lapse," as the British denied Lakshmibai's adopted son Damodar Rao the right to rule. However, making a virtue out of her necessity, after Lakshmibai was forced out of the Jhansi fort, she relentlessly fought against the undue annexation of her territory by the British: "main apni Jhansi nahin doongi" (translating to "I will not give up my Jhansi"). Rani's story indicates the British discomfort with women who rule, and by extension, with their own Queen Victoria. This historical parable of the warrior Queen of India, on one hand, highlights both the Indian and British discomfort with women's political leadership; on the other hand, it reorders gender structures and disrupts patriarchy's sanctioned categories. The *ACK* issue on Lakshmibai appropriately portrays how this widowed queen, dressed in male attire, opposed the British forces. Even though the British forces gained the upper hand, and Lakshmibai was shot at and fell from her horse, the narrative displays her unwavering strength and her daunting courage, portraying her as an individual with an active agency. Rani of Jhansi was a rebel woman, a female warrior, and a monarch at the same time, hence a disruptive figure whose depiction could nonetheless be located within the confinements of domesticity.

In this issue of *ACK*, Rani is romanticized in terms of the utopian ideal of a female, symbolizing freedom, strength, and unmatched strength, yet still placed amidst the centre of the home—the building block of the society. This romantic reconfiguration of Rani relegates her to irrelevance: Rani is metamorphosed into a goddess but not given her deserved position in the

historical and political reality. Even as a female warrior, she is a daughter, a wife, and a mother, before she is a queen and a warrior: the Rani has to hold her home and nation above everything else. It could be thereby mentioned that she is barely uncharacteristic of Indian women whose feet are still grounded within the confinements of her domesticity even as a “heroine of unending fascination, her remaking in new forms transforms the marginalized into a bounded, integrated, and meaningful entity” (Singh 2019).

The female Indian rebel, monarch, and warrior is a disruptive figure, and the representation of this warrior queen is replete with paradox and ambiguity. Often depicted as an idealized character of literature, symbolizing freedom, strength, and the poetic worth of outmatched fights, these romantic figurations relegate the Rani to irrelevance; the Rani is worshipped as a goddess or mother figure, but not given the crucial regard she deserves in historical research and political reality. As daughter, wife, mother, and then queen, the Rani holds the home and nation above all else. Thus, she is hardly anomalous in Indian texts where even as a “heroine of unending fascination, her remaking in new forms transforms the marginalized into a bounded, integrated, and meaningful entity” (Singh 2019).

It is the precise mobilizing of female icons, such as the Rani of Jhansi, in terms of their “power” that has been undertaken in this project. Thus, gesturing towards the mythically heroic Rani may at first be heard as an inspirational call to the nation’s women. Closer reading, however, reveals the extent to which even the historical Rani may be recast as the fictional, poetic, or cinematic configuration of a traditional Indian womanhood that is instead a vehicle for the patriarchal destinies of the nation. Thus, at both colonial and postcolonial junctures, while traditional gender roles are most under scrutiny, the figure of Rani Lakshmi Bai, in equal parts, daughter, wife, mother, and queen, functions as a haven of representation—in which female strength may emerge and yet subside on male identified and male-dominated whims. (Singh 2014, 167)

For the eleven years that Lakshmibai was married to Raja Gangadhar Rao, she remained a mere queen. It was only in the tragic aftermath of her husband’s death that the unwarranted denial of her adopted son’s claim to the throne hurled her into the beginning of her own odyssey as a diplomat, a leader, and a modernist visionary. Thus, Lakshmibai’s depiction, despite her bold stance as a rebel against the British rule, continues to be symbolized as a politically conservative figure: valiant, bold, and fearless, yet reclaimed within the socially sanctioned spheres of domesticity.

7. Babasaheb Ambedkar, “He Dared to Fight”



Fig. 7.1. Cover Illustration, *Babasaheb Ambedkar*, Anant Pai, 1979.

Indian politician Babasaheb Ambedkar can be located at the cutting edge of the cultural politics that marked the 1980s. The issue of *ACK* entitled *Babasaheb Ambedkar*³ attempts to frame his place in Dalit politics to the measures of the nationalist project of modernity and progress. It is crucial to note that this series was republished in 1996 after the anti-Mandal agitation⁴ of the early

³ *Babasaheb* is the popular name of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar; he was affectionately called “Bhim” by his sisters. *Babasaheb* is a Marathi word meaning “respected father”. Considering Ambedkar’s immense struggle for the upliftment of the society at large, particularly for the Dalits, he was called *Babasaheb*.

⁴ Mandal commission protests of the early 1990s were against reservation of government jobs in India based on the caste, rather than the competence and skills of the candidate.

1990s and the subsequent resurgence of interest in Ambedkar among Dalits and the backward classes. Analysis of Ambedkar's politics brings forth the notes of discordance, both in nationalistic politics and in the constitution of independent India, which challenged the "Hindu" ideal of citizenship and the order of the civil society. Within this context, *ACK* endeavors to shift Ambedkar and his politics onto the terrain of nationalism, modernity, and enlightenment. In fact, by positioning Ambedkar as a pedagogic authority, *ACK* it seeks to homogenize the claims of the upper caste bourgeoisie that reservation⁵ (based on caste) would degrade idealism, hamper the spirit of independence, and make the individual "soft." Examining Ambedkar as an allegory of the present times, this series reiterates the nation as a homogenous entity and negates the historical differences of caste that might justify the demand for a separate electorate (as happened in 1932).

ACK's issue on Babasaheb Ambedkar may be viewed as a celebration of the triumph of the human spirit in the most adverse circumstances. A daunting narrative, tracing the progress of one person's journey to enlightenment, the comic book underscores Babasaheb Ambedkar's long-term battle against the markers of oppression, including caste, community, and gender. Depicting Ambedkar's fight against oppression and violence against the lower caste and gender, the narrative identifies those who perpetuate caste oppression, marking them as pre-modern and reactionary. In fact, B.R. Ambedkar's modernist project and his exposure to (Hindu) patriarchy starts quite early in his life. As a child, Ambedkar had to passively accept injustice meted out to him and his community. He had to sit separately in the class and could not drink water from the pot in the school unless someone poured out some for him. He was asked to get down from a bullock cart when the driver found out he was an untouchable. He was stoned by the Brahmins for drawing water from the village well, and so on. In one of the instances, Ambedkar asks his sister, "[b]ut why? What makes us different?" (Pai, *Babasaheb* 7). To this, she replies, "I don't know. That's the way it has been always." Bhim was not satisfied with

⁵ Based on the provisions in the Constitution of India, Reservation is a system that ensures equal representation of historically marginalized groups, often termed as "socially and economically backward citizens," in education, employment, and politics. It is intended to uplift these communities who have been the target of systematic oppression by the higher castes in Indian society.

his sister's answers" (Pai 1979, 7). However, now one could notice every act of injustice would accelerate Ambedkar's determination and the growth of his basic humanity. Addressing a group of individuals from socially backward classes, Ambedkar says: "It is time we root out of our minds the ideas of high and low. We can attain self-elevation only if we learn self-help and regain our self-respect. Liberty is never gifted away, it is fought for" (Pai 1979, 20).

Ambedkar's long hours of studies until two in the morning in a crowded one-room apartment in which he cohabited with his family, his endless toils at the British Museum Library in London, and many similar struggles remains important to his character development. However, as alleged by Upendra Baxi in "Emancipation as Justice," *ACK* has failed to highlight enough of these personal accounts of Ambedkar's life, the struggles of the student-scholar in particular (1995, 140). Instead, this issue focuses on the social inequalities that in some manner are presented as false consciousness. It suggests the onus is more often placed on the lower caste, left to fight their own battles.

Every outward struggle against the caste system is mostly presented in terms of an extension of the lower castes' inner battle rather than as a socially subversive act because the caste system is something wherein the lower castes are made to believe in their inherent inferiority. Certainly, *ACK* portrays the external factors and antagonists including the priestly classes, caste prejudices, and superstitions. In a striking incident, the comic book shows how Ambedkar leading a crowd of the "depressed classes" to Mahad's municipality tank, which has been legally open for four years but has never been used by the people of the lower castes. The narrative portrays how the crowd followed Ambedkar hesitantly: "Draw water from the tank? Do we dare to do it?" (Pai 1979, 21). The incident duly portrays how by one act of courage, drinking water from the tank with his cupped hands, Ambedkar makes a "miracle" happen: "This gesture had a remarkable effect. Ambedkar had exorcised fear from the mind of his people. Thousands drank water from the public tanks and made history" (Pai 1979, 21).

The incident underscores not merely the remarkable victory of the individual self but also poses an interesting opposition between civil societal equality (the public tank being open to all) and vestiges of the primitive that taint the society. Incensed at being stoned by upper-caste Hindus for drinking water from the public tanks, Ambedkar's followers say to him: "Give us word, Sir, and we shall finish them" (Pai 1979, 22). To this, Ambedkar replies, "No

violence will help. We'll do nothing unlawful. I have given my word that we will agitate peacefully" (Pai 1979, 22). The narrative further informs us that Ambedkar had promised the police that he would keep his people under control and thus "he prevented a bloodbath" (Pai 1979, 22).

However, *ACK* does not highlight Ambedkar's antagonistic attitude towards Mahatma Gandhi and his Harijan Sevak Sangh, which according to Ambedkar "kill[s] the spirit of independence among the untouchables" (Pai 1979, 267). Moreover, Ambedkar's stance at the Round Table Conferences, where he repeatedly presses the point that the depressed classes do not demand the immediate transfer of political power from Britain to the Indian people. In *Babasaheb Ambedkar* the narrative presents the voices of the lower castes as separate grievances while portraying them as a mere suffix to the nationalist demand for freedom:

The Depressed classes of India also join in the demand for replacement of the British government by a government of the people for the people. . . our wrongs have remained as open sores and they have not been rightened although 150 years of British rule have rolled away. What good is such a government to anybody. (Pai 1979, 24)

Also significant is Gandhi's stamp of approval:

From the reports that have reached me of your speeches at the First Round Table Conferences, I know you are a patriot of sterling worth. (Pai 1979, 24)

In a way, the establishment of Ambedkar's patriotic credentials in the narrative prepares us for his demand for a separate electorate. When the reader finally encounters this demand, its oppositional force is subordinate to Ambedkar's unquestionable patriotism. The *ACK* issue about Ambedkar, however, remains silent on his extremely critical stands on Gandhi, his methods of spiritual coercion, and how Gandhi fasted to make Ambedkar withdraw his demands.

In *ACK*, Ambedkar emerges as the nationalist leader, the individualist par excellence. As his unique and unyielding selfhood is magnified, there is simultaneous reinforcement of the category of citizenship to the exclusion of all other categories (caste, community, or gender). The struggles of Ambedkar's life are also represented as the battle for the modern nation which can only be "corrupted" by caste—whether it is articulated as discrimination or as demand. The words of Ambedkar as he presented the draft of the constitution to the

constituent assembly, chosen to be quoted in *ACK*, efface that other domain of politics which made the idea of the nation much less final and more fraught for him: “. . . and I appeal to all Indians to be a nation by discarding castes which have brought about separation in social life and created jealousy and hatred” (Pai 1979, 30).

8. Conclusion

The *Amar Chitra Katha* series of comic books have, since 1967, dominated the market for domestic comic books in India. In this paper, I have examined how these comics function as a site of public culture, creating a platform through which identities (religious, class, gender, regional, national) are negotiated and re-negotiated. The narrative traditions of *ACK*, even though targeted to young readers, were nonetheless meant to ideologically co-opt them into the appropriation of their middle-class Hindu nationalist readings of Indian mythology and history, or into their depiction of the stringent gender roles delineated by the societal structures. While including figures of mythological, historical, and contemporary relevance seems laudable, the flexible medium of a popular culture form aided the transformation of hegemonic and universal conceptualization of “Indianness” into the imagination of the intended readership.

Women have been more often depicted in *ACK* as devoted to their country and their husbands, while displaying a buttoned-up femininity that kept them within the confines of domesticity. *ACK* depicts how, for instance, Rani of Jhansi involves herself in *poojas*,⁶ Subbu Lakhsmi takes care of her children, Rani Padmini lives and dies solely for her responsibility as King Ratan Sen’s wife, and Marie Curie⁷ is involved in domestic chores; all these depictions of

⁶ The word “pūjā” or *pooja*, is Sanskrit, and means “reverence, honour, homage, worship”. It is a ritual performed by Hindus to offer their prayers to the deities.

⁷ Although *ACK* primarily delves into Indian culture and history, stories of some famous historical characters like Albert Einstein and Marie and Pierre Curie; the first edition on Marie Curie was published on February 1, 2011. An issue of *ACK* was published in 2010, *Travellers to India* (Megasthenes, Fa Hien, Hiuen tsang), that centers on some of the first foreign travelers to India. Megasthenes (302 B.C.-298 B.C) was the ambassador of Seleucus (Greece), and visited India during the supremacy of Chandragupta Maurya. Fa Hien (405

women are in line with the overriding principles of neatly categorized gender roles. As *ACK* rarely gives them space for the expression of freedom of love or marriage, women are presented in a multiply jeopardized position—both by men, society, and nation. Thus, the portrayal of fearless women as victimized by society or as a coy character is problematic, since it carries the threat of unconsciously pressurizing the young readers to follow the ideals of golden-era Indian womanhood. Similarly, I have also argued how *ACK* as a historical narrative is also problematic, considering how it heavily draws from the Hindu nationalist schools of thought. On one hand, *ACK* often seems to be delineating non-Hindus as religious and cultural “outsiders” privileging Hindu upper and middle class; on the other hand, these visual narratives are observed to be representing, and rather coercing, females into traditional roles of domesticity.

ACK is a ubiquitous form of public culture, widely popular to an enormous section of the educated Indian population, nearly creating a shared shorthand-manual for their understanding of Indian culture, history, and mythology, while simultaneously functioning as a platform for debates surrounding that very understanding. Although *ACK* voices the erstwhile inaudible legends, it seems to co-opt them into the dominant cultural and national imaginary, thereby continuing and broadening the horizon of the cultural consciousness of the citizens of the country. The narratives examined in this paper underline *ACK*’s role in shaping Indian public culture while highlighting how *ACK*’s comic books still sell the overriding, hegemonic ideals of the society.

A.D.-411 A.D.) was a Chinese Buddhist monk who visited India during the reign of Vikramaditya (Chandragupta II) and described his voyage in his travelogue *Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*. Hiuen Tsang (630 A.D.-645 A.D.) was a Chinese traveler, scholar and translator who visited India during the reign of Harsha Vardhana and is known for his work *Si-yu-ki* or *The Records of the Western World*.

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Ink on Silence

Dealing with the past through images, objects and music
in *Love looks away* and *Belonging: a German Reckons
with History and Home*

Abstract

Writing about the Holocaust means negotiating with silence and investigating the repercussions of a trauma that never stopped affecting our present. The process of historical recognition from the perspective of a third-generation artist implies the reconstruction of the past through objects, photographs and documents, written and visual evidence. Through the analysis of two contemporary German graphic novels – *Love looks away* (2008) by Line Hoven and *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018) by Nora Krug – this essay will identify the multiple compositional techniques and aesthetic strategies in order to understand how drawing, text and photography converge in a single effort to untangle History, either micro or macro, in order to understand what came before and after significant historical events – and perhaps even explain why those events occurred.

1. The weight of inherited memory

If, as Lukács states, “Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence” (1988, 26) that the artist attempts to exorcise through the creative act, writing about the Holocaust is a challenge. The artist must present what is often unrepresentable, and to do so, must resort to every narrative form capable of investigating the “longest shadow” (Hartmann, 1996) of a trauma that is still affecting our present. My analysis starts in the conflicting combination of memory, subjectivity and autobiography as represented in two third-

generation German graphic narratives¹ related to the traumatic experience of becoming aware of the Nazi past: Line Hoven's *Liebe schaut Weg* (2008), translated in English as *Love looks away* (2009), and Nora Krug's *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home* (2018). Both narratives are hybrid and transmedial; two investigations into the family past conducted through an unofficial historiography and constantly crossed by the question of the possibility of knowing and finding a balance – even an unstable one – between understanding and guilt, judgement and acceptance, emotions and clarity. The two authors step into the narrative of the family past by choice; they purposefully want to reconstruct the history of their grandparents and uncles, perished long before the authors' conscious awareness, whose lingering presence exists only as photographs and family accounts. My argument is that through some specific formal and narrative strategies, the two graphic narratives share an ethically oriented purpose, i.e., to question the gaps of the official history by weaving documentary research and graphic setting. Historical reconstruction is a highly controversial field of research because the portion that relies on memory includes by its very nature elisions and omissions. Hence, memory studies require a transdisciplinary perspective and a method of analysis that help us to understand how we deal with the past through the interpretive lens of our contemporary framework. While those born right in the aftermath of the Second World War grew up dealing with the 'silence of fathers' (see Viart, 2009) and experiencing a "mirrored" trauma, the inherited trauma that they received from their parents via postmemory, third-generation artists and writers will carry on a tenacious quest to get around the silence that enshrines the past. They will adopt an 'archaeological perspective' (see Bertoni, 2004), turning themselves into researchers to fill the gaps and put together the scraps of the past. In other words, the posthumous reconstruction of the past often starts

¹ In this essay, I will use the definition 'graphic narratives' instead of 'graphic novels', sharing Hillary Chute's point of view as expressed in *Graphic Women. Life narrative and Contemporary Comics*. Chute states: "Graphic narrative designates a book-length work composed in the medium of comics. [...] the most riveting comics texts coming out right now are not novels at all. Instead, even as they deliberately place stress on official histories and traditional modes of transmitting history, they are deeply invested in their own accuracy and historicity. They are texts that claim nonfiction status or choose, as Lynda Barry's invented term 'autobifictionalography' well indicates, to reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storyline" (2010, 3).

with the discovery of a material and symbolic patchwork of traces: objects, photographs, written and visual evidence used to create a unified narrative out of fragments “seized haphazardly” (Aarons 2016, 5).

These are the stories of artists who belong to the so-called “generation of postmemory” (Hirsch 2012) and feel the need to investigate the lives and responsibilities of characters whom they had known only as grandparents, great-grandparents, or uncles. These relatives are absent protagonists, ghosts with whom the authors entertain a lonesome dialogue. Authors can only draw information from the relics of these personalities submerged by history: objects, photographs, and letters. To those relics the author can only add hypotheses and considerations about what could and could not have happened. So, the story of a life becomes a plurality of divergent stories and personal experiences. The effort to reconstruct an identity through a few objects often results in a melancholic *modus narrandi*, which engages both the empathy of the artist and the reader. The author’s empathy detects connections and omens in objects and places and reads the world as an endless source of signs that accumulate until they become unbearably heavy.

Considering the approximation of a story that can be only imaginatively reconstructed, the third generation is caught “in the abyss between [the] imperious need to speak and the prohibition on speaking” (Raczymow 1994, 102-3) and faces an ethical problem, that is: “by what right could I speak” (Ibid.).

Raczymow points out the anxiety coming from a sort of ‘appropriation’ of memories. Nevertheless, the diachronic distance does not necessarily mean a lack of value in the quality of memory, but only a difference from survivor memory. As Hirsch states:

The term “postmemory” is meant to convey a sense of both temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, [and] its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. (2001, 9)

The tension between the need to bear witness and the fear to speak is what Vita Fortunati recognizes as the fundamental ‘task’ to bridge past and present (see Fortunati et. al. 2008, 18). By using the term ‘task’ she highlights the importance of listening and telling, two tools necessary to move back and

forth between micro-history and macro-history. Listening and telling have an extremely important cognitive function, because they constitute a form of self-analysis, and therefore a “painful therapy” (*Ibid.*). This therapeutic research in the past often brings to light censored, intimate and unofficial memories. This sorrowful process took place in Germany not only for the children and grandchildren of Holocaust victims, but also for those who had families involved in the crimes of the Nazi regime. German novels of second and third generation are often an effort to understand and unbury episodes removed from both official and personal history. As one scholar has stated,

Although contemporary German novels have become increasingly transnational and globalized in terms of theme and content, German history continues to be a favoured subject. Graphic novels are particularly suited to represent both transcultural and historical themes by way of their inherent mutual dialogue of text and image, which can in turn complement or contradict one another (Raedler 2016, 171)

The controversial history that Germany lived until the end of the twentieth century shaped the ways individuals and institutions negotiate with the legacy of the past. Through multimodal storytelling, *Love looks away* and *Belonging* engage with the national past in order to portray its complex events. Published in 2007, *Liebe schaut Weg* (*Love looks away*) is the first book by the German illustrator Line Hoven. The book’s five episodes depict the history of the German-American family of the author from the 1930s to the 1970s, with a particular emphasis on the 1940s and the love story of her grandparents, inevitably related to the historical events of the Second World War and the Nazi regime. Although the Third Reich appears only in the background, the artist shows how the war left indelible marks both on those who experienced it and on the following generations. The artist explores the concept of ‘identity’ and how it is often defined by cultural stereotypes by embedding her own family’s biography into the historical context. The title of the graphic memoir is already meaningful and polysemic: the word ‘love’ that usually implies care and attention is followed immediately by ‘looks away’. This construction may relate to the desire to look away from a painful familiar past. According to Lloyd, the German verb *wegschauen* “can also have the sense of ‘to turn a blind eye to’, suggesting that the familial bonds that bind us will enable us to look away from the crimes of the past and forgive” (Lloyd 2021, 58).

Like Line Hoven, Nora Krug was born thirty years after the end of the Third Reich. She grew up in the shadow of the conflict, carrying the weight of the untold family secrets. *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*² is the result of meticulous and at times distressing research. Published in 2018, the book is the result of several years of documentary and archival investigation that swings between remembrance and historical contradictions. In an attempt to reconstruct family history from both the paternal and maternal branches, the writer comes across a series of forgotten characters, submerged by history. She researches her heritage by unearthing personal documents that reflect the life of a whole generation. In one of the opening pages of the book, she writes:

Though my parents weren't religious, they occasionally took my brother and me to church on Sundays when we were children, so that we would grow up believing in something. [...] Even though I didn't understand why JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS, the concept of INHERITED SIN – as the Germans call ORIGINAL SIN – and of having to bear the consequences of another generation's actions seemed familiar, and I swore to Jesus that I would accept it. (Krug 2018, 17)

Krug's impressions as a child come from a series of concepts spread in Germany during the denazification period (1945-1951), such as *Erbsünde* (inherited guilt) and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the struggle to overcome the past). By describing her school years, the author conceptualises the idea of cultural trauma, which Jeffrey Alexander defines as it follows:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 2004, 1)

² It is interesting that the title of the US version is different from the translated versions. Whereas the German title is *Heimat: Ein deutsches Familienalbum* and the British one is its translation *Heimat: a German Family Album*. In French, the subtitle has been changed in '*Loin de mon Pays*' and Italy the book has been translated only with *Heimat*. In this article, we will use the title of the US version considering that it has been the first one published and thinking that the subtitle 'German Reckons with History and Home' is more suitable to express the point of view of our research.

In order to show how such a cultural trauma affected her generation, Krug includes in the text some pages of an exercise book from her 11th grade (Fig. 1) describing how her teachers tried to cope with teaching the national past:

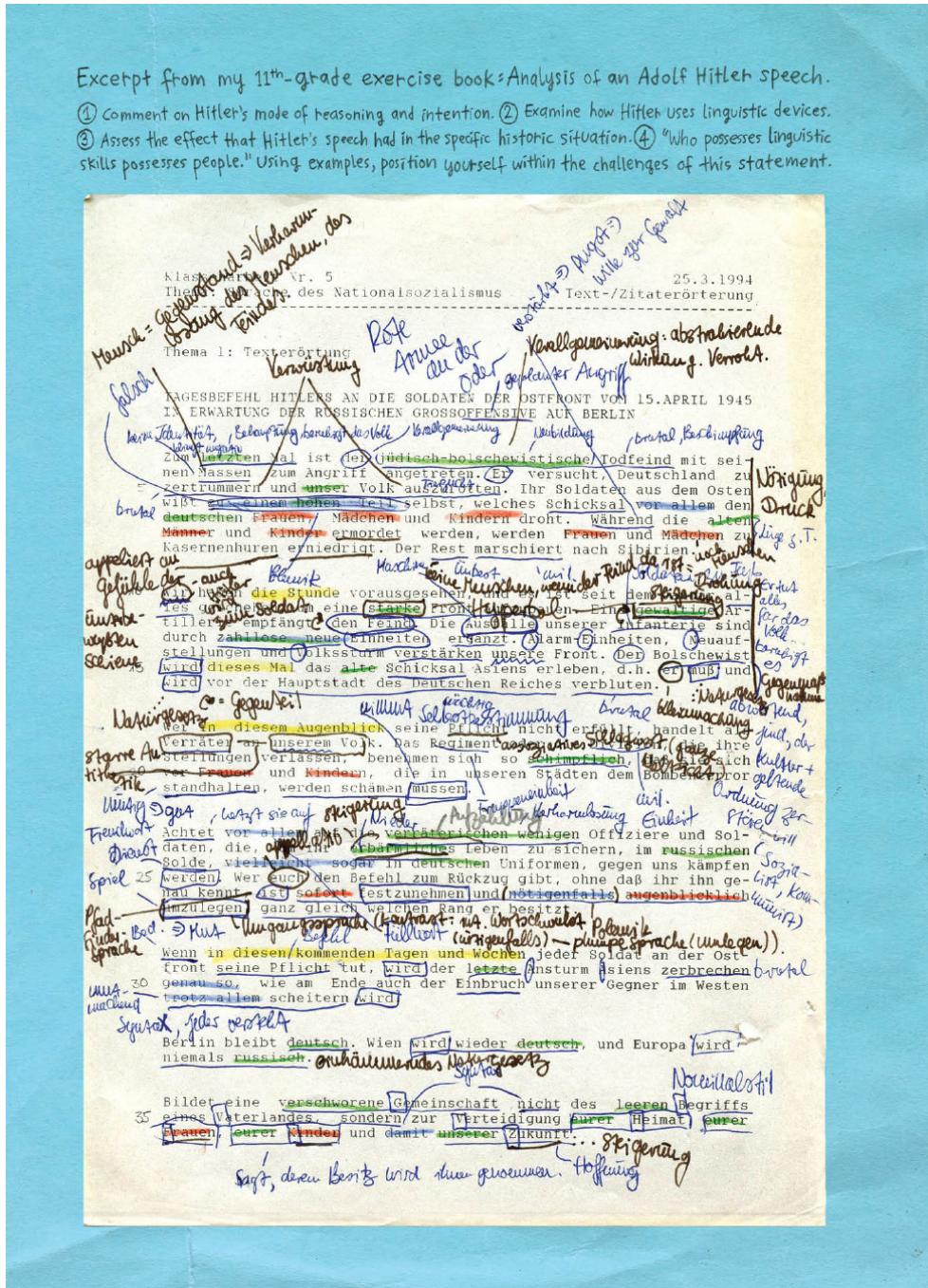


Fig. I

We analysed Hitler's speeches alliteration by alliteration, tautology by tautology, neologism by neologism. [...] We learned that our language was once poetic, but now potentially dangerous. We read Schiller but didn't learn to love him as we loved Shakespeare. We struck the German words for HERO, VICTORY, BATTLE, and PRIDE from our vocabularies. We avoided superlatives, and we used the word ZUSAMMENGEHÖRIGKEITSGEFÜHL, the sense of identifying with a group and believing in an idea larger than oneself, when defining American cultural identity, but not our own. [...] We learned that VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG means "coming to terms with one's political past", but felt that it really defined "the process of struggling to come to terms" with it (Krug 2018, 24-25)

Since her childhood, dealing with guilt becomes part of both her sense of belonging to her nation and being part of her generation: "we felt that history in our blood and shame in our genes" (2018, 25). However, this insurmountable shame is an abstract notion, a taboo subject both in family discussions as well as in everyday life and school. Nora Krug complains about the lack of information and the cultural gap in the education of her generation, writing about a silence that is not merely personal or familial, but is broader: social, historical. The illustrator moves to the United States soon, but even from this 'safe distance' (2018, 36), she cannot get rid of the weight of a past that does not go away. She understands that – as a German living abroad – she is not only representative of her own family, but also of her country and her country's political past. However, the physical distance also arouses a different feeling in her: homesickness. Being a German among non-Germans leads to the urge to explore what really happened from a new perspective. Moving away from that same country whose burden is too heavy, the writer sums up her disorientation in the sentence: "How do you know who you are, if you don't understand where you come from?" (Krug 2018, 28). The opening words of Line Hoven's book have a similar function. The author quotes Woody Allen in the very first page of the book: "I wondered if a memory is something you have or something you've lost..." (2009, 4-5). *Belonging*, as well as *Love looks away* are the tangible answer to these questions; as Krug states at the end of the second chapter, the only way to find her lost *Heimat* is not by 'looking away', but looking back:

Move beyond the abstract shame and ask those questions that are really difficult to ask – about my own hometown, about my father's and my mother's families. [...] To return to my childhood, go back to the beginning, follow the bread-crumbs, and hope they'll lead the way home (Krug 2018, 46)

2. Scratching the Surface

In the last few decades, in the wake of the incredible success of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1980), a new aesthetic of self-representation has emerged. This 'graphic turn' is a symptomatic key to grasping the reconfiguration of contemporary subjectivity. Comics, traditionally confined to a marginal sphere of the humanities, started to be considered an important source for historiographical research. From the second half of the twentieth century, the comic strip extended its creative field to new themes, showing "an increasing confidence in the expressive possibilities of the medium" (Groensteen, 2006, 15) and shifting – from an aesthetic and narrative point of view – from 'serial' to 'authorial'. According to Brancato, the contemporary cultural sensibility and the relationship between individual and society find a narrative representation in comics:

[...] or rather in a conception of the comic strip in which the author is the centre of the story, in a very literary sense, and tells stories animated by an autobiographical tension which, however, often overflows into the field of historical exploration (Brancato 2017, 121).

Graphic narratives seem particularly suited to manage the overlapping of different temporal levels and, because of the synesthetic contamination of different narrative languages, they have become one of the most flourishing cores of today's writing. Contemporary authors are now more than ever able to write non-narrative histories using the cross-discursive form of comics. In her book *Graphic Women* (2010), Hillary Chute investigates this growing field of comics' self-representation, stressing that often the starting point of contemporary narratives are traumatic experiences. This does not mean that the identities of the authors are exclusively defined by trauma. She underlines the force and value of graphic narratives, a medium that "draws to tell" (Chute 2006, 200) probing "how and why the stories these authors both tell and show could not be communicated any other way" (Chute 2010, 2). In other words, the multimodal storytelling that graphic narratives enable opens up new ways to explore and portray historical events. The ethical importance of images in the trauma-transmission has been pointed out by Didi-Huberman in her *Images in Spite of All* (2008):

The "truth" of Auschwitz, if this expression has any meaning, is neither more nor less *unimaginable* than it is unsayable. If the horror of the camps defies imagination, then *each image* snatched from such an experience becomes all the more necessary. If the terror of the

camps functions as an enterprise of generalized obliteration, then *each apparition* – however fragmentary, however difficult to look at and to interpret – in which a single cog of this enterprise is visually suggested to us becomes all the more necessary. (Didi-Huberman 2008, 26)

In the last few years, we witnessed a real ‘graphic syndrome’ (see Gamzou, 2019): many second or third generation memories have emerged in the field of graphic memoirs and have contributed to reshaping war narratives from the perspective of authors placed at the point of transition between lived experience and cultural memory. Limiting the field exclusively to Germany, Lloyd recognizes that only in recent years have, several German-language graphic narratives have been published that explore fascism and Second World War from a ‘German’ perspective:

In the last twenty years specifically, there has been a turn from a focus on collective responsibility for the atrocities committed under Nazism to a more pluralistic view, which encompasses a broader range of memory and experience. First and foremost, space has been made for accounts of German victimhood and suffering during Second World War (Lloyd 2020, 49).

In the case of two “historio-metographics” (see Polak, 2017) such as *Love looks away* and *Belonging*, the narrative is not simple and linear: silence, ellipses, pauses play a crucial role. The discourse is discontinuous and non-sequential and the unsaid is sometimes more important than what is displayed on the page. In *Belonging*, the narration is often intertwined with the author’s process of writing the book, including the artistic and ethical dilemmas she faced. This approach shows clearly the ethical and testimonial value of the research she faced, adding her contemporary knowledge to the fragments of the past. In both Hoven’s and Krug’s books, each narrative feature carries essential information: the graphic form contributes to and conveys the meaning of the text. *Love looks away* is entirely in black and white, the lines are highly stylised, and the strong contrasts give the page an oppressive feel. The definition of “coffins of memory” (Chute 2006, 202), as Spiegelman defined the structure of his pages, fits perfectly Hoven’s style.

According to Gamzou, the choice of black and white is meaningful because “Instead of emphasizing the production and artifice involved in the representation, this unrealistic lack of colour has come to signify the gravitas of testimony, the truth associated with memory and experience” (2019, 228).

The story is both realistic and metaphorical: environments, objects and clothes are simple, clear, but extremely detailed. The characters’ faces rarely

show emotions. These visual tricks ensure that the reader does not fall into easy emotion or commotion. (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2

Line Hoven uses a special technique called ‘Scraperboard’ or ‘Scratchboard’. It is a technique similar to woodcutting: the artist does not add ink to the page; on the contrary, she starts to scratch on a completely black surface until she obtains the drawing. The scraperboard becomes an epistemological instrument in the hands of Line Hoven stressing the physical effort to dig into the past and, at the same time, underlines the impossibility of distinguishing between reality and fiction. The graphical structure of the work implies a “sensual” practice

and in this way “expresses history” (Chute, 2016, 4). This technique incarnates what Raedler defined as ‘tension art’:

Liebe schaut weg displays the salient structural feature of a system of multi-polar tensions, which encompass the black-and-white presentation of the scraperboard medium, German versus American language and culture, utopia versus reality, closeness versus distance, and autobiographical versus historical content. The larger scheme to which these tensions contribute creates a reflective meta-level on which the author presents these factors in opposition (Raedler 2016, 172).

An example of the tension created by the apparently simple design of Hoven’s book is the end of the first part: a double page represents a photo album (2008, 21-22). We see a photo of Erich Hoven (the author’s grandfather) and his wife, Irmgard, on their first wedding anniversary, a photo of their children and a flower pressed between the pages of the album (Fig. 3).

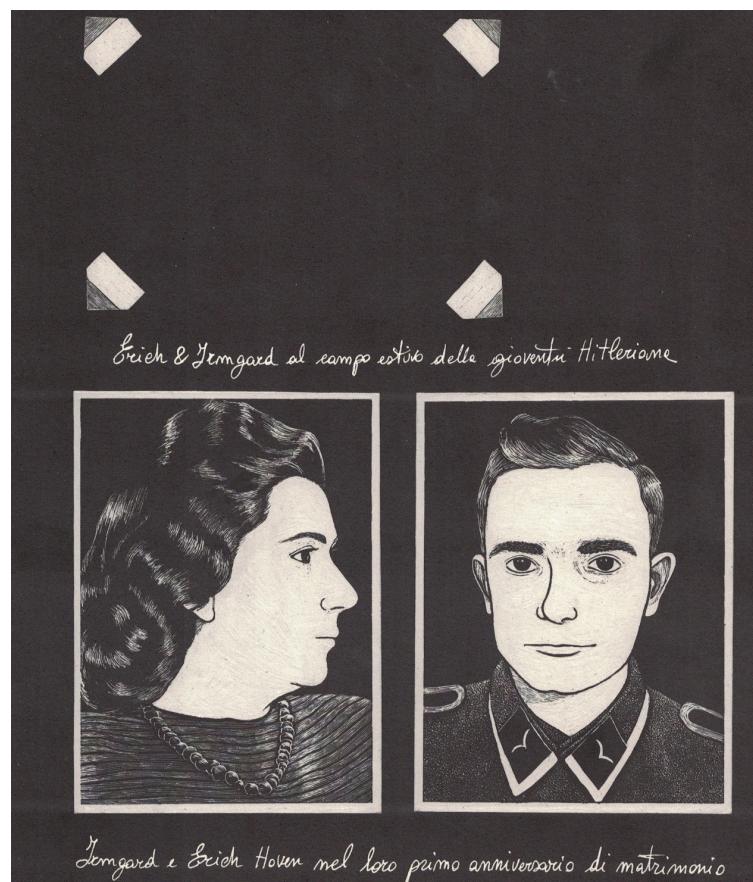


Fig. 3

We notice that a photograph has been detached from the album because of four empty mounting squares. Significantly, the caption states: “Erich and Irmgard at the Hitler Youth Summer Camp” (20).

As pointed out by Nancy Pedri, photographs inserted in a graphic narrative “function in a similar fashion to reinforce the narrative’s claims to truth, highlighting and making forcible the objective, realistic and accurate portrayal of self in a way that words and cartoons alone would be hard-pressed to do” (Pedri, 2014: 251). In this particular page, the absence of the photograph becomes a symbol. On the one hand, it represents the struggle to deal with the past; on the other hand, it shows the insufficiency of the documents to give a complete picture of what happened. The missing photograph is part of a chapter of the family past buried and deliberately forgotten. As Hoven’s father Reinhard later explains, referring to his parents’ failure to share the experiences of the war, he is not able to say exactly where did his parents meet: “Oh, I don’t really know the whole story... I think it was in the Hitler Youth, in a summer camp or something... They don’t talk about it, really. It was a long time ago...” (75). Hoven tries to show this self-censorship mechanism hiding the historical background in the empty spaces and recalling the violence of the Third Reich only through small symbols and details like the missing picture.

Comparing Line Hoven’s narrative style to Nora Krug’s, we can state that the first uses a narrative ‘by subtraction’ whereas the latter uses a narrative mechanism ‘by addition’. If one looks at Nora Krug’s previous works, one will notice a certain thematic and stylistic coherence: her previous short stories are nearly always war biographies. In her 2012 short graphic story “Kamikaze” Krug switches from photographs to drawings still maintaining a classic comic-strip structure (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4

Conversely, most of *Belonging* does not stick to the traditional panel format; the drawing often dissolves into a fragmented and distorted form that displays the free associations of memory (Fig. 5).

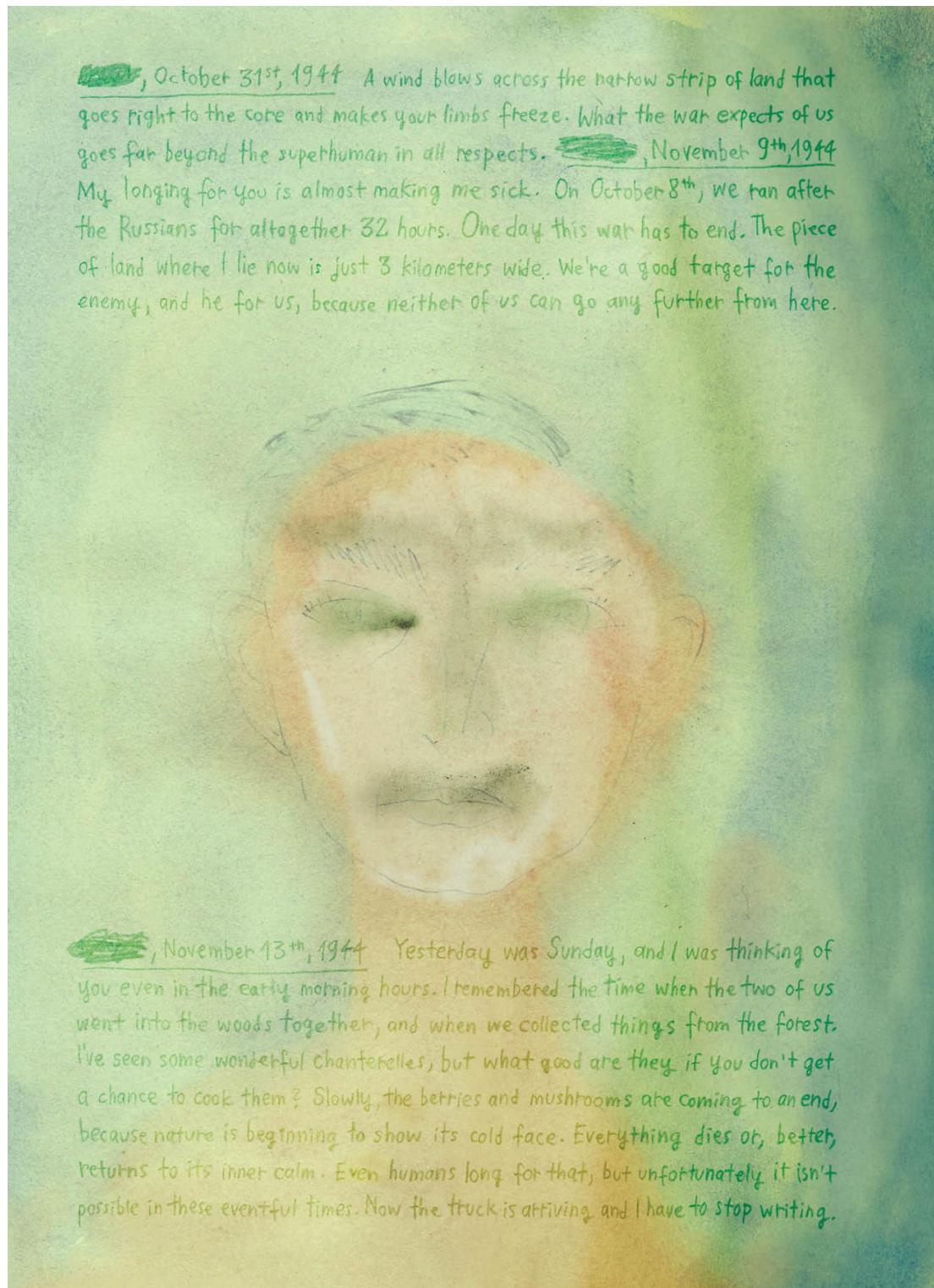


Fig. 5

Through an artisanal and typographic process, Krug perfectly combines the density of the iconic dimension, alternating it with writing. The fragmentation and the heterogeneous nature of materials render the author's effort to reconstruct the history. Furthermore, the editing process becomes crucial for the work to unfold gradually; it reveals the author's thinking and research even before she finishes the work. The use of this 'scrapbook technique', i.e., the use of paper cutouts, leaves the author the freedom to jump from past to present, real and poetic, documentary and imaginary. As in *Love looks away*, the narrative space is organised in 'boxes of memory'. Krug's work is a graphic anatomy of memory examined through its own mechanisms. The author allows the reader to collect clues and build hypotheses on the traces of the past through a graphic that breaks down the construction of history into tiny images, into shreds of the past that have unexpected resonances and that maintain a dialogue with the invisible present. The result is a storyline that overturns the traditional criteria of anteriority and posteriority on which a narrative is typically constructed. Nora Krug writes a metanarrative work in which the problem of representability of the past through language and images is explicitly communicated to the reader; she often underlines the importance of the visual dimension of memory, especially when it is connected to history and historical transmission. If the research of meaning is the pivot of the work, the montage become its visual embodiment. The constant semiotic exchange between text and image has not only an aesthetic value, it shows a possible order among a multitude of possibilities. The woman's silhouette on the cover of the book is a recurring theme throughout the book; what seems to be no more than a tribute to Caspar David Friedrich's 1818 painting, *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* is rather an example of a long visual tradition that seems to run through German culture across the centuries. Krug shows the reader this cultural *topos* by disseminating through the text a long genealogy of postcards and private photos she found during her travels in Germany (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6

Looking at the group of pictures it seems that this visual composition is one in which Germans have always identified. The stunning difference in proportion between the wanderer and the immensity in front of him is a contemporary *Sehnsucht*, a metaphor for the writer's challenge.

When pictures are part of the narrative, they not only have an aesthetic or thematic value. Scott McCloud thinks that through the alternation of images and text, the reader becomes "co-creator of the narrative" (McCloud 1993, 68) because his or her imagination is involved in a complex cognitive experience in which imagination should fill the empty spaces between one page and another. The presence of photographs also creates a tension between moment and duration. Photographs, those "nomadic things that [have] only a small chance to survive" (Sebald 2006, 24), are fascinating objects that are fragile on the one hand and epiphanical and unquestionable on the other. When placed in the middle of a tale, they ask for a pause during the reading process. In an interview in 1996, W. G. Sebald compares the cognitive function of figurative art, literature and music; he states that figurative art has the enormous advantage of being able to escape time, of being able to build a barrier against what is

ceaselessly being lost. “Figurative art is static; literature and music, on the other hand, are dynamic, dragging towards the end. Inserting images into a text is also an attempt to somehow, at least for a moment, resist the inevitability of the end” (see Sebald 2011, 140). Both authors play with the ‘truth’ told by the documents and the photographs. In *Belonging* and *Love looks away*, photos are not simulacra, but instead they take on a documentary meaning only when inserted into the narrative mechanism. By redrawing the documents (Hoven) or transforming them (Krug), photographs and documents work as a trace of the past. Hoven inserts highly realistic scraped paper documents throughout the comic (Fig. 7).

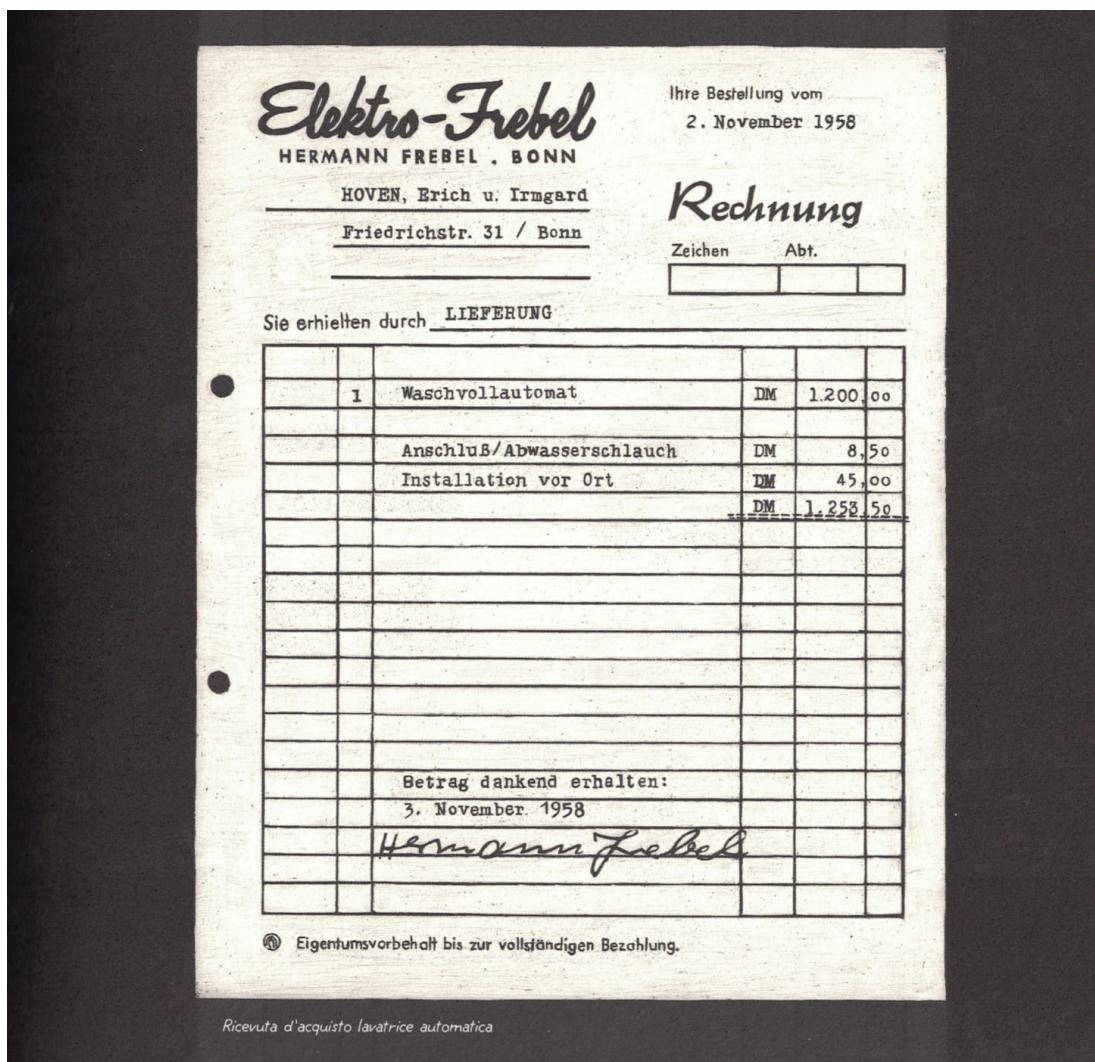


Fig. 7

According to Raedler's interpretation, the "deliberate ambiguity in the production process speaks to the complexity and intricacies of the graphic novel's content despite its outwardly and simple aesthetic appearance" (2016, 175).

On the other hand, Krug uses real documents and pictures; the peculiarity is that the author does not leave the photos inviolate, but breaks them down, colours them, interferes with them, exposing her memorialist and witnessing dimension. While researching information about her grandfather, the way Krug represents him changes according to what she discovers (Fig. 8).

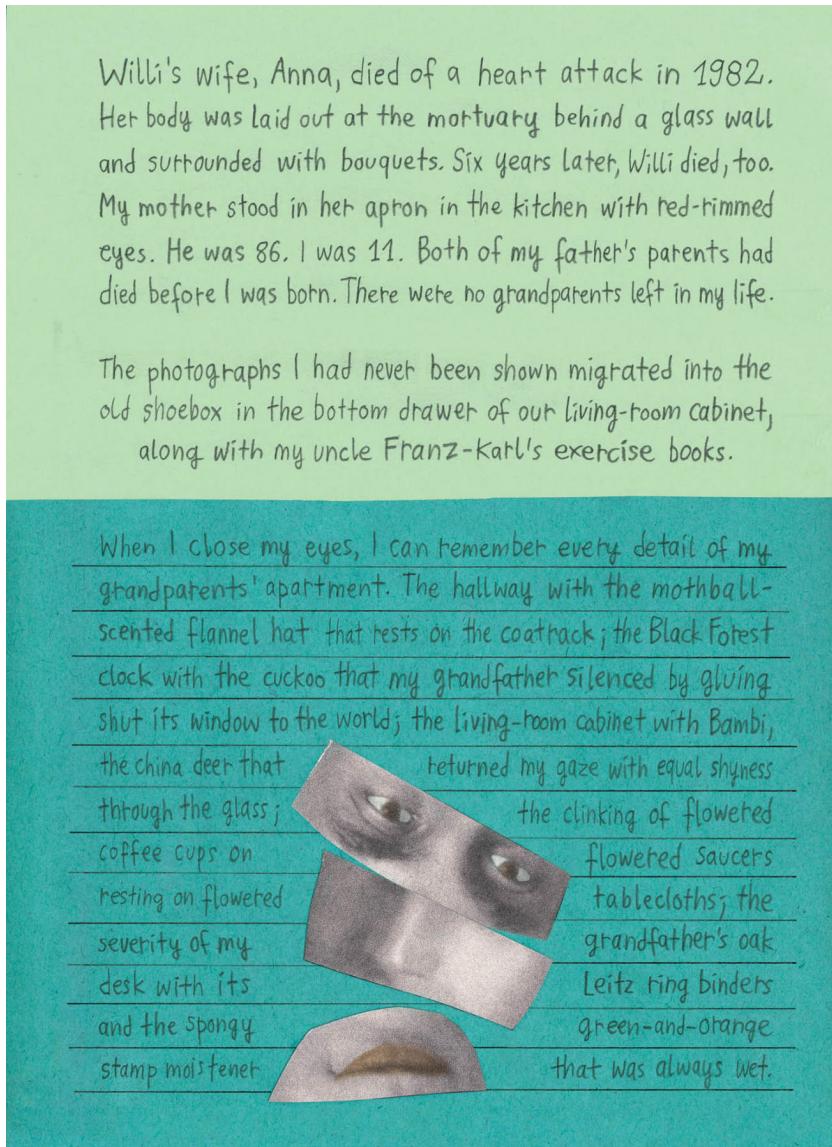


Fig. 8

Her grandfather's pictures do not merely serve as information for the reader, but also as "affective and thus connective sites of identification" (Cvetkovich 2008, 120). By destroying and recollecting the pieces of her grandfather's picture, Krug shows the reader the *punctum* (see Barthes, 1982) of the photograph, e.g., the emotional aspect hidden in a photograph by which the spectator is irrationally affected.

3. Paper Sounds

As we mentioned in the beginning, both Krug and Hoven reanimate the ghostly memories about war perpetrators by digging up relics from a chronologically distant past but describing them through a sense of complicity and accountability. According to Grujić and Schaum (2019), this process helps creating a feeling of 'post-home'. While photographs and documents can recall a memory of the past but require the effort of memory to be affective, music is characterised by its technical reproducibility, which is why the acoustic memory works in a different way. Starting with Proust's *Vinteuil Sonata*, musical-sound perception and the theme of listening have become frequent topics in literary works. In twentieth-century literature, sound phenomena open up a new dimension of access to the unconscious. In the course of time, illustrators have developed many tricks to overcome the apparent absence of sound in comics, starting with onomatopoeia. Both in *Belonging* and in *Love looks away*, music plays a very special role. In Hoven's book, the first chapter is dedicated to the childhood of the author's grandfather Erich. The pre-adolescent boy is portrayed as walking with his friends through the streets of Bonn accompanied by the sound of drums. Erich seems satisfied in his Hitler Youth uniform, but his thoughts – graphically represented in the balloon – refer to something else. The next page reveals the subject of Erich's thoughts while he stares at himself in the mirror: the child is in the process of building a radio. Suddenly, a wave of musical notes explodes from the radio and surrounds Erich, who assumes an ecstatic expression. In a much smaller rectangle, on the next page, the voice on the radio announces, "That was Overture No. 7 by the Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy" (2008, 17). As soon as the music stops, Erich finds himself shocked to discover that his radio works, and that he has not only just listened to an English-language station (totally illegal in Nazi Germany), but he has also listened a piece by a Jewish composer (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9

On the following page, the image in which Erich looks at himself in the mirror in his uniform is repeated, but this time his smile turns into a macabre grin. The reflection in the mirror repeated twice points to the moment when Erich seems to doubt his belonging to Hitler's youth. This doubt is not accompanied by any linguistic signal, but it is only interpreted by the reader through the child's reaction to the forbidden music. Hoven's technique, i.e., drawing of the stave, is only one of the ways of representing music in comics. In this case, a reader that cannot read a stave will not be able to imagine the real music

the character is listening to. The notes on the pentagram lose their musical value (in terms of solfeggio) and take on a value that derives exclusively from the context, namely ‘music’. The contextual and narrative importance of the music is only given through the voice of the BBC speaker and later by the reaction of the character. Overwhelmed by his own feelings, Erich prefers to tell his friends that the radio he has been working on is broken. The sequence takes place as Erich’s comrades walk down the street and the words “Jew” are written on the shopwindows. Erich is portrayed again a few instants later, but this time he is marching in the opposite direction to his comrades. The musical experience tells the reader a story: that of his inner distance from the values of Hitler’s youth and the recognition of two discordant parts of himself. This is another aspect of Hoven’s ‘tension art’, according to Raedler’s interpretation: “essential information hides in those gaps: the violence of the Third Reich and the Holocaust are only very indirectly hinted at by way of the Yellow Star (...), which may go unnoticed by many a reader, and through Mendelssohn’s music (...) which could only be listened to illegally” (Raedler 2016, 185).

In *Belonging*, Nora Krug uses another of the narrative possibilities of a graphic representation of music: a kind of musical *ekphrasis*, i.e., the description of music through words. The second chapter entitled ‘Forgotten Songs’ describes two experiences (again, in this case, two similar drawings show two different moments) that inspired the author to investigate her family’s past. The first chapter opens with a double-page drawing of a skyline. The author, who has just moved to New York to study, meets an old woman during a party on a roof:

It was one of my very first encounters in New York City. [...] I didn’t know anyone. No one knew me. Everything was possible. An elderly woman sitting in a lounge chair had overheard our conversation. ‘Where are you from?’ she asked me. ‘I’m from Germany’. ‘That’s what I thought’. ‘Have you ever been to Germany?’ I asked. ‘Yes. A long, long time ago’. She avoided eye contact. And then I understood. She went on to tell me about how she had survived the concentration camp because one of the female guards had rescued her from the gas chamber sixteen times at the last moment. [...] A familiar heat began to form in the pit of my stomach. How do you react, as a German, standing across from a human being who reveals this memory to you? I remained silent. ‘That was a long time ago’ she finally said. ‘I’m sure things have changed. You seem like someone who was raised by loving parents’. I nodded (Krug 2018, 6-9).

Inherited guilt continues to plague Krug whenever someone brings up her German origins. Over the years the relationship with her heritage changes,

her identity becomes only a fading memory, but continues to be important in her daily life. The physical and chronological distance changes her “being German” into “feeling German”.

After 12 years of living in America [...] I feel more German than ever before. The longer I’ve lived in my Caribbean neighbourhood in Brooklyn, the more I find myself scavenging American thrift stores for the green-stemmed Riesling glasses, the vine-branch corkscrews, and the cuckoo clocks I would never have thought to buy in Germany. [...] From this safe distance, I allow myself to see the loss it once endured. And yet, the longer I’ve lived away from Germany, the more elusive my idea of my identity becomes. My HEIMAT is an echo, a forgotten word once called into the mountains. An unrecognizable reverberation. (2018, 36)

Twelve years later, the artist is again on a rooftop in New York; she is now a well-known author and has not returned to Germany for a long time. This time she is not listening to the story of a Holocaust survivor, but to a man singing Schubert’s WINTERREISE. “And this time, with its longing for love and nature and death, with its melancholy and its unembellished beauty, my native language evokes longing, rather than shame” (Krug 2018, 31). The music³ brings Krug back to the beauty of her mother tongue and to a metaphorical ‘before’ evoked by Schubert’s notes, a feeling out of time, or rather a ‘time regained’. We mentioned at the beginning of our analysis that the lack of transmission of testimonies from one generation to the next results in a void in memory, but it is perhaps more accurate to say that it also causes a gap in identity. For Nora Krug, German cultural self-censorship is a real violence against the generations of innocent people who came after the generation of perpetrators. Mastering the past does not mean forgetting the cultural life and identity of a country that consists in music, symbols, art and all the cultural machinery that the Nazis manipulated and for this reason today continues to be negatively impacted.

³ Both authors were invited to participate to a conference called *Ferocious Ink: A Conversation between Line Hoven and Nora Krug* and had a long chat during which they discussed the education they grew up with during the Eighties. The interview took place shortly before the publication of *Belonging* and Nora Krug talks about her desire to produce an audio book containing – in addition to the graphic format – a musical soundtrack of German *Volkslieder* in order to appeal synesthetically to all senses of the reader. The audio book was published in America shortly after the incredible success of the book.

4. Postmodern Madeleines

In both books, the stories of the maternal and paternal family alternate in each chapter. In *Love looks away*, the bilingualism of the family is represented using two different fonts, including grammatical errors from both sides of family when they try to communicate. In *Belonging*, on the other hand, the two narrative lines are distinguished using two different colour palettes. The maternal branch is recognisable in the family tree at the beginning of the book by the nuances of green. The paternal branch instead (whose family tree is placed at the end of the book) is painted in shades of orange. Another stylistic aspect shared by both books is that at the end of each chapter there is a page displaying an object. Hoven divides her book in five sections. Every chapter begins with a blank page except for the drawing of an item that belongs to the family's archive, i.e., a Hitler Youth identity card (7), an ice-skating ticket (23), or an invoice for a washing machine (45). These objects reveal to the reader a near past that seems very distant; they are containers of a familiar and cultural identity and pieces of collective history. Hoven finds these objects and transforms them into "affective history" (Polak 2017, 14) by drawing them on the page. These apparently useless documents help the reader to understand the historical-generational context in which the narrative takes place. Hoven's scratchboarded objects are highly detailed and can easily be confused with real objects. Through this method, "they succeed in fostering a critical engagement with the 'truth' of the text and its depiction of history" (Raedler 2016: 175). In *Belonging* we witness a similar process: Krug's investigation is constantly interrupted by two inserts, the first is *Things German – From the notebook of a homesick émigré*, and the second is *Flea Market finds: From the scrapbook of a memory archivist*. It is a sort of 'Museum of Innocence', a collection that Remo Ceserani defined as: "an omnipresent, omnivorous and almost libidinal historicism, which tries to reduce the past to a museum of photographs and a collection of press clippings and simulacra" (Ceserani, 1997: 142). The objects listed by Krug and Hoven are postmodern madeleines, shards of consumerist culture and fragments of a generational imaginary that are invested with nostalgic lyricism and act as catalysts for the reader's empathy. For Krug, some particular objects compensate for the lack of information about the past; certain 'things' are the only evidence left of the forgotten German culture. The comforting and domestic objects listed by Krug seem to be an antidote to the seriousness of the story: these simple drawings refer to some of the clichés

associated with the German people and reflect the way in which the conflicting aspects of an identity reveal themselves in the finest detail. An interesting example is the first listed object, the *Hansaplast* band-aids (Fig. 10).

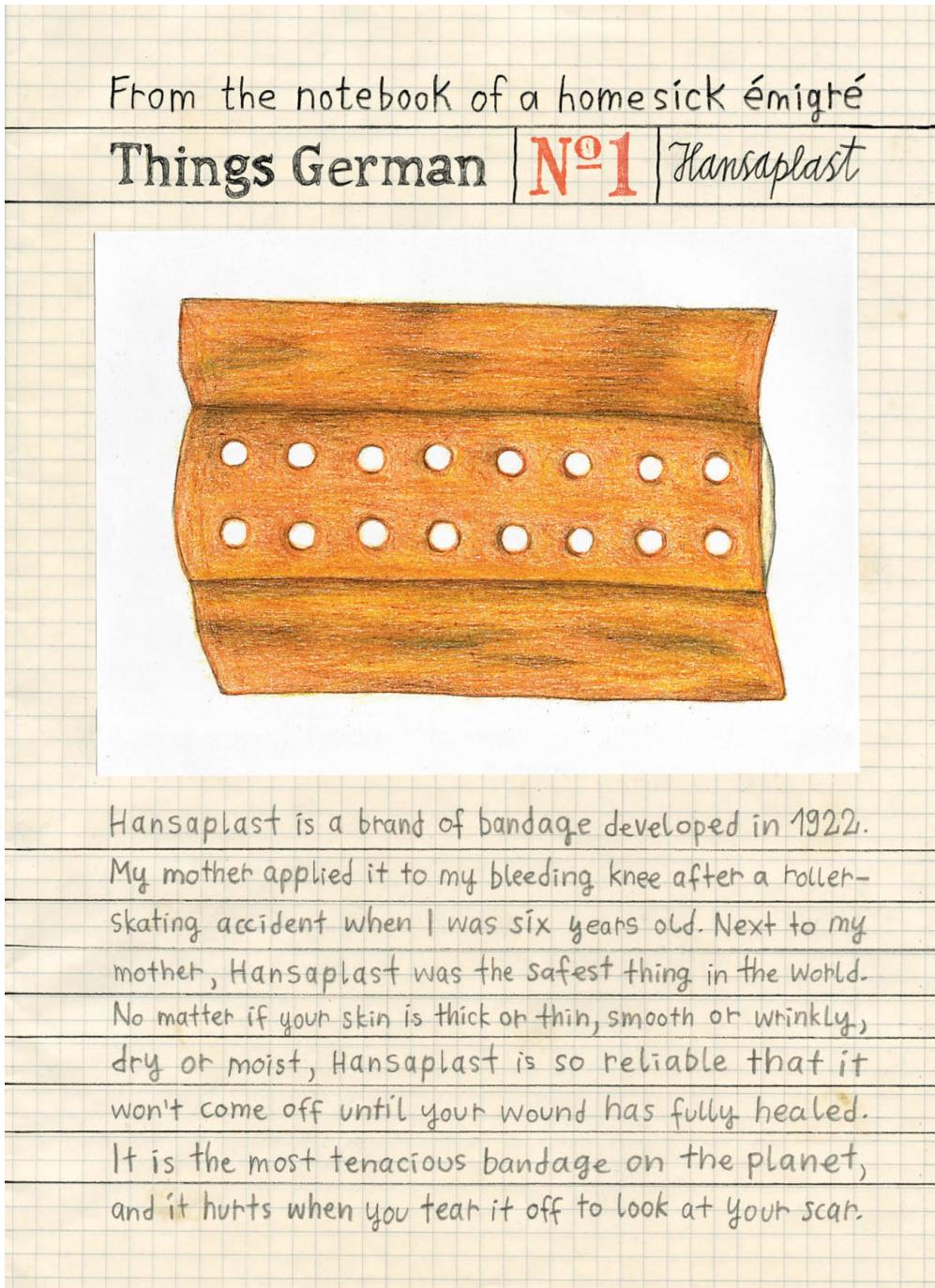


Fig. 10

As pointed out by Grujić and Schaum:

Already on the first page, we read that the homeland invokes safety by means of the mother tongue and of the mother herself. It is lived through every-day objects and the cosiness they provide, such as the bandage or the hot-water bottle as staple of German household. Connected to these objects, a feminine trope (motherly care) plays a central role. ‘Next to my mother, Hansaplast was the safest thing in the world’ (2019, 202).

The scent of dried flowers and yellowed leaves that one breathes among the most touching pages of the book is on the one hand a nostalgic ‘poetics of things’, but on the other hand a suffocating catalogue that evokes stories from the past but cannot change them. It is no coincidence that the last page of *Belonging* is the drawing of one last highly metaphorical object, the Uhu glue: “Even though Uhu is the strongest glue available, it cannot cover up the crack” (Krug 2018, 262).

5. Conclusion

The two texts we examined are part of what Lynn Kutch defined as the “delayed process of German cultural acknowledgement” (2016, 1). Although they address the past, both books are about the present. The apparently messy structure helps the reader to understand that history is not a sequence of facts, but instead is a sequence of decisions made by individuals. There is an inseparable link between events and responsibilities. In both works, there is no catharsis for the living or the dead, the *Heimat* is not a physical place, but instead an abstract concept that exists only in memories. Are the books two autobiographies? The authors do not really appear as characters but can only draw the lines that lead to their research. According to Arfuchs:

The biographical value – which, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, presupposes the ordering of the narrator’s life and, correlatively, that of the addressee, but also the necessary ethical aim of life in general – is not the only one to count. To this must be added what we might call the memorial value leading to the present of the narrative, whatever the medium, the recollection of a past with its symbolic and often traumatic charge in the individual and/or collective experience. (Arfuchs, 2011: 165).

In both books, the autobiographical aspect does not count. What matters are the narrators' efforts to reflect on the past through the lens of our present, a process that attempts to make a coherent sense of a confused historical recollection. The concept of narrative identity provides a different entry into storytelling, not only considering them in relation to their semiotic, linguistic, or visual potential, but also in their ethical dimension. In this sense, the works of Nora Krug and Line Hoven move away from the constraints of historiography; the possibility of understanding the history of the present through memory is not only linked to trauma, but above all to the power of empathy, which is an attempt to recover – even partially – the affective and wounded dimension of the experience. The traumatic events of the twentieth century made us all aware of the importance of understanding the past in a critical way; we cannot look at the past only considering the official memory of different nations, but also by that of individuals and their particular histories. Helmut Peitsch (1998) described this concept through a battlefield metaphor: nothing is neutral and everything must be re-examined. Therefore, many memories – those of winners and losers, both public and private – must be considered. As pointed out by Aarons:

Undeterred by silence and sanctions against such a pursuit, third-generation narratives reveal attempts to comprehend, give voice to, and demystify the ‘unimaginable’, unrepresentable fracture of the Holocaust, remarking a place for the Shoah’s necessary imprint in the twenty-first century. [...] Ironically, given their place in history, a contemporary generation is prepared ‘now to know’, to begin again the uncontained incomplete, and ongoing process of discovery and narration. A third wave of Holocaust transmission is poised to fill in the gaps of narration and representation, affective gaps as well as gaps in knowledge. (Aarons 2016, XIII-XIV).

Despite the complexities and difficulties of both discovery and transmission, third-generation Holocaust representation clears the path from memory to history through its therapeutic dimension and ethical value.

The power of the comic medium in this field is that comics are a slow, visual medium, both in their laborious production and in readers' perception. According to Raedler, “readers observe static life situations that enable them to reflect upon these situations. The addressing of the reader is reflection oriented. He is not prompted to come up with a solution to the puzzle but rather to try to understand the present conflict” (Raedler 2016, 187). We saw that comics

could show a historiographical potential proving that each narrative form carries an ethical value with it and the hybrid forms – even in a fluctuating way – always weave the individual with the collective because, as Kundera so aptly put it “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting” (Kundera 1981, II).

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Of Pencils and Pandemics: Artist Responses to Outbreaks

Abstract

As of this writing, many nations, cities, and industries remain shut down during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Globally, we have pivoted to social distancing, isolation, and mask-wearing. Despite our Zoom fatigue and work-from-home responsibilities, we might find extra time for reading and binge-watching streamed television shows. As Stephen Greenblatt theorizes in New Historicism, cultural productions emerge from, and simultaneously take their place in, a given historical moment. Assuming *arguendo* that Greenblatt is correct, then we have an array of relevant pandemic-related cultural productions to examine today.

This article focuses primarily on comic strips and graphic narratives created about or during times of outbreaks. These inform us of what life was like for different people, in a different time, under similar circumstances. Those texts reassure us that, despite horrific losses, we can survive the political, social, and economic disruption the current outbreak has wrought; humanity has been through this before. For example, when we examine graphic narratives related to the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, we see the same political and social polarities occurring today, such as disagreements over mask-wearing. Dan Brown's *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918* (2019) and Katherine Krohn's *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* (2008) are based on archival news accounts and photos that recorded these polarities a century ago. Graphic narratives about pandemics like these, as well as comics archives, also serve to educate their readers, whether they inform youngsters trying to understand what a pandemic is, or whether they instruct medical students about what it's like to live with particular conditions. Graphic novels even allow readers to understand racism, for example from the

perspective of a Chinese person originally from Wuhan Province, the assumed origin of the current virus. A repeated aphorism states that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. As we confront our fears about this devastating pandemic, we can rely on the humanities as record of that history. We turn to cultural productions – including comics and graphic narratives – for clues about how to proceed from here.

1. Introduction: Framing the Current Pandemic and Its Discourse

On December 31, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issued reports of a cluster of cases seeming to be a “pneumonia of unknown cause”; the illness was later identified and named COVID-19, a novel form of the SARS coronavirus (Peters 2020). As the World Health Organization and other experts started to raise the alarm over the virus, in the U.S., former president Donald Trump downplayed their concerns. “We have it totally under control,” he said on January 22, 2020. He said it was still “very much under control” in Twitter remarks he made on February 24. On March 9, he publicly and falsely compared the coronavirus to the flu, and in October proclaimed the virus was going to “disappear” (Peters; Wright 2020). As cases climbed around the world and the U.S. racked up some of the highest infection rates globally, the virus not only didn’t “disappear,” it worsened and turned into a deadly, end-of-the-year, holiday-related surge.

In *Fever Year*, graphic narrative author and illustrator Don Brown offers a timeline of significant events related to the 1918 influenza epidemic. He bases his narrative in historical fact, and, pertinently, we can connect the thinking that occurred during the outbreak one hundred years ago to the thinking of today. As Brown relates on one page, “Military bases filled with sick soldiers and sailors ringed Boston; there was little chance the city could avoid the disease. Still, Massachusetts Health official Dr. Dan Hitchcock tried to allay fears. ‘The malady appears to be in the nature of the old fashion grippe [flu]... Daily cases appear to be diminishing.’ He was wrong...Soon, Boston hospitals overflowed with hundreds of flu patients...” (28). As U.S. hospitals late in 2020 went over capacity and treated patients in converted gift shops and makeshift ICUs in parking lot tents, we could relate in some measure to what Brown described the Boston area experiencing during the flu pandemic. Brown also

cites A.A. Cairns, the former Director of the Municipal Department of Health in Philadelphia, who stated of the 1918 pandemic that “There is nothing to be alarmed about. I expect the disease will burn itself out in two weeks,” wishful thinking of the time that eerily resembles Trump’s own (Brown 35; Glasser 2020). If we wanted to, we could take the time to cull historical archives to locate information about life under an earlier pandemic, yet a text like Brown’s that summarizes and illustrates those events for us makes the situation more accessible and immediate. Sadly, some leaders today never learned from those earlier accounts – gleaned from archives, graphic narratives, or otherwise – that downplaying and not responding appropriately to a crisis only worsens it.

As humanists, we look to art, music, novels, poems, and other texts for insight into a society’s culture, priorities, and paradigm during a given historical moment. It’s natural that we turn to other texts to learn, to help us cope with our fears, to remind us of what has gone before, to provide us with hope and guidance for what can come after. Indeed, as the coronavirus pandemic first caused massive shutdowns in mid-March 2020, lists of pandemic-related films, books, and games, such as one from *Esquire* magazine, started to appear in news feeds and internet searches (Ovenden, Clark and Nicholson). Fang Fang’s book *Wuhan Diary* compiles her daily postings written during the coronavirus’s early days. Emma Donoghue’s recent novel, *The Pull of the Stars*, takes place in a Dublin maternity ward during the 1918 flu pandemic and explores how pandemics disproportionately burden women (Dockterman). Amazon launched its series *Utopia*, written by *Gone Girl* author Gillian Flynn. Interestingly, it is about a comic book that predicts a nationwide pandemic; the satirical series is only available to Amazon Prime customers, but viewers can watch the trailer on YouTube. We are even starting to see books that address the post-pandemic era, such as Bob Gordon’s *Life After COVID-19* and Scott Galloway’s *Post Corona: From Crisis to Opportunity*. This is a short list of cultural productions, not counting movies such as 1995’s *Outbreak*, that deal with health disasters. Thus, while we live a pandemic history, we search for means like these for coping with it. Humanity’s cultural productions across time, including those giving us glimpses of pandemics and survival, allow us to connect at a level of profundity those texts might not have had at another historical moment. When we are forced into isolation, lockdowns, and social distancing, we need that connection, empathy, and understanding more urgently than ever.

In this case, our focus is on comic and graphic novel artists and two pandemics, one hundred years apart. First, I briefly mention the graphic narrative form's impact on readers, particularly younger readers, to see how they might learn through its combination of word and image. I use recent news accounts to examine scenes from two graphic narratives to highlight the similarity in people's reactions to the 1918 pandemic and those of today. Comic strip and graphic novel repositories, such as *Drawing Blood: Comics and Medicine* or *Graphic Medicine* usefully provide locations to view pandemic and medical comics and graphic novels, whether for entertainment or informative purposes. The *Graphic Medicine* website "explores the interaction between the medium of comics and the discourse of healthcare" (Home); it houses resources like podcasts, articles, and literature reviews, such as one that explores how comics can be used to train medical students. *Drawing Blood* features comic strips from the flu epidemic of 1918. I compare examples from this university's archive to recent comic artists' drawings that reflect our "new cultural normal" concerning the coronavirus. Finally, I examine two artists' graphic narratives that respond to the racism that occurred as a result of the coronavirus's reported origins in Wuhan, China. Underlying each of these examinations is the commendable human spirit, the one that continues to write, create, document, photograph, and draw amid some of our darkest days.

2. The Two Pandemics in Graphic Novels and Comic Strips

In 2019, author and illustrator Don Brown released *Fever Year: The Killer Flu of 1918*. This episode of world history fits into the larger corpus of Brown's graphic narratives (also referred to as "storyographies") about global events written for school children; some of his other titles include *The Great American Dust Bowl*, *Drowned City: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans*, and the Sibert- and YALSA Award-winning *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* ("Home").¹ Even so, it almost seems that with *Fever Year*, Brown

¹ His current book is entitled *Shot in the Arm* as part of the *Big Ideas That Changed the World* series. This book is fictionally narrated by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and describes the importance of vaccines. See <https://www.booksbybrown.com/2021/03/08/booklist-starred-review-for-shot-in-the-arm/>.

was prescient. Within months of its release, the world was struck by another pandemic: the COVID-19 coronavirus. Although medically comparing the 1918 influenza to the coronavirus outbreak is a false equivocation, the historical similarities to the unfolding events across the two eras is remarkable. Thanks to Brown's research and journalistic approach, these parallels are quite easy to see. He doesn't fictionalize the tragedy to be told through a protagonist, for example; instead, he synthesizes information into a narrative based on an array of authoritative sources, including eyewitness accounts penned at the time the Spanish flu raged (Brown 91).

Brown was not the first children's author to create a graphic narrative about the 1918 pandemic; about ten years earlier, Katherine Krohn wrote *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* as part of Capstone Press's *Graphic Library* series. The book cover brags that "[t]rue-life tragedies jump off the page in the Graphic Library set Disasters in History" (Krohn 2008, back cover). Although readers may wonder briefly why a publishing company for children would focus specifically on tragedies, at least upon reading *The 1918 Flu Pandemic* readers are provided another researched summary of the flu's terrible arc. Krohn's intended audience is obviously much younger than Brown's, as its smaller size and easier vocabulary indicate. Even so, Krohn also draws upon solid research for the facts she relates and that illustrators Bob Hall, Keith Williams and Charles Barnett III vibrantly depict (Krohn 2008, 31).

Brown has been called "comics' premier chronicler of historical catastrophe" because he "has a knack for dramatizing details with striking visual angles that produce maximum emotional impact while still conveying solid, accurate information" (Karp 2019, 47; Hunt 2019, 106). Krohn's book was noted specifically for the series' intentional choice to relay this information in graphic narrative form, which "[pulls] in the reader's attention right from the start" (Foucart 2008). Another reviewer commended Krohn's three illustrators, claiming that thanks to their work "readers will be effortlessly transported through the years—and across the globe—in this fast-paced tale" (Gutierrez 2008). Solid research undergirds the books, but these historical events presented as graphic narratives warrant further exploration. First, the graphic narrative form supports younger readers' reading and comprehension skills. Second, the genre allows readers of all ages to have a compressed and somewhat dramatized sense of that pandemic, compiling the years into one summarized textual and visual story.

3. Graphic Narratives as Instructional

One reason both Brown and Kohn depict historical events in graphic narrative form is because the genre helps younger learners improve their reading skills. First, the books help students understand critical thinking, sequencing, and vocabulary words in context (English). Furthermore, reviewers, educators, and graphic narrative scholars are aware of the genre's storytelling power. As one of Krohn's reviewers iterated,

Some parents...might find the format strange and perhaps a little irreverent for such topics as disasters; however, the information is given in a way that makes it more than just facts on a page to young readers. Instead of trying to process the consequences of the pandemic from several words and a few blurry photographs, in this volume history comes alive in vivid drawings and dialogue between both historical figures and everyday people. This is an excellent way to reach the more reluctant readers" (Foucart).

Thus, as many educators and graphic narrative scholars know, research conducted about comic books now supports quantitatively what they knew instinctively: that the genre positively impacts readers' cognition. These studies reveal that these books are "excellent resources" for readers because of how the brain processes the combination of text and images (Morrison 2017). One article cites several studies and reports that found "when students learn to read graphic novels with an analytical eye, depth and complexity are added to the reading process" and the genre improves upon how readers interpret nuance and make inferences (Morrison). Moreover, as most kids will argue, history is "boring." As author Candace Fleming explains, "All breadth and no depth, the history they've encountered has been stripped of meaning" (2019, 22). Therefore, two graphic narratives about the 1918 Spanish flu inform readers young and old alike about the flu's devastation in a way a simple encyclopedia entry could not.

In *Fever Year*, for example, Brown dedicates a page to one doctor's description of how quickly the influenza ravaged soldiers in Camp Devens: "Two hours after admission they have mahogany spots over the cheekbones, and a few hours later you can begin to see [it] extending...over the face, until it is hard to distinguish the coloured [sic] men from the white . . . It is simply a struggle for air until they suffocate. It is horrible" (21). The page of six panels depicting a patient in stages of this decline helps readers understand visually

what medical providers in 1918 witnessed regularly. It conveys a sense of the helplessness they felt watching patients go through this predictable course. *Fever Year's* readers might have a sense then, of what one modern doctor meant when he said today's frontline coronavirus health care workers "have witnessed a form of psychological horror that rivals what soldiers experience in a war." He added, "This is serious. This is real. . . It's not worth getting sick to the point where you feel like you're drowning. That's how it feels when I talk to some of my patients. No one should feel that way" (Palazzolo and DeRosa 2020).

It's quite striking how many events and comments reported by Krohn and Brown are similar to those of the current pandemic. For example, in Krohn we see a panel with two nurses talking. The narrative above the two women states, "Hospital workers put themselves at great risk by treating flu patients." One nurse says to the other, "I'm worried about bringing the flu home to my family," as the other replies "I'm worried about myself. I feel terrible" while she coughs (14). On the opposite page, Krohn reports how hospitals during the 1918 pandemic became overwhelmed, mortuaries couldn't keep up with demand, and cities banned public funerals (15), experiences similarly reported by Brown (40-41). As the coronavirus surged in the U.S. during the 2020 holiday season, hospitals and even mortuaries became overwhelmed. In California, funeral homes turned customers away because they couldn't handle any additional business (Weber 2021).

Krohn and Brown also relate the quack remedies, such as gelsemium, onions, camphor balls, goose grease poultices, mustard plasters, and more, that people turned to when traditional medicine failed (Krohn 20-21; Brown 52-55). Those citizens could be forgiven for thinking these folk cures would work when so little of the new flu virus was understood and medicine didn't benefit from the scientific knowledge and technology we enjoy today. Despite this knowledge, in 2020, Trump suggested that disinfectants could potentially treat the coronavirus, triggering a spike in calls to places like New York City's Poison Control Center as desperate citizens tried this measure to save themselves from the disease (Slotkin 2020). The danger of quack remedies is how quickly they are considered to be a solution, as evidenced by one QAnon conspiracy theory site follower who posted of the purported remedy, "Do you realize how freaking cheap and easy it would be to mass produce chlorine dioxide for 100,000's of people?" (Jacobs 2020). Trump also promoted two antimalarial drugs which were never proven

to work against COVID-19 and which could prove to be toxic to a patient when combined with other medications such as azithromycin (Gabler and Keller 2020). Perhaps most tellingly, Trump promoted the theories of Stella Immanuel, a doctor who claimed hydroxychloroquine was an effective COVID-19 treatment and that face masks were unnecessary in preventing the virus's spread; Immanuel also professes that gynecological problems result from people having sex with demons and witches in their dreams, and that the U.S. government was partly run by "reptilians" and other aliens (Sommer 2020).

Dr. Alan Levinovitz of James Madison University explains the allure of unproven remedies such as those propounded by Trump, Immanuel and others. "For a lot of people, Trump represents an alternative to pointy-headed experts in white lab coats who speak a language we can't understand," he said. "When you feel existentially threatened by a deadly virus, and the president says you can take control of your health with a product in your kitchen cabinet, that's incredibly empowering" (Jacobs 2020). At the time of the 1918 flu pandemic, Surgeon General Rupert Blue warned there was "No specific cure for influenza...and that many of the alleged cures and remedies ... being recommended by neighbors, nostrum vendors, and others do more harm than good" (Brown 55). As Brown adds in the next panel, "A blunt New York druggist simply called users of outlandish and outrageous cures 'Imbeciles'" (55).

Currently, the world is hopeful about an end or at least some control over the coronavirus pandemic as countries begin administering vaccines like the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Oxford-AstraZeneca formulas. The testing has been fast-tracked, but it has been conducted. During the flu pandemic, Brown tells us about efforts by Tufts Medical School, Tulane University, and the University of Pittsburgh's medical school to create a vaccine against the flu; none seemed to be effective against the virus, leading one doctor at the time to proclaim, "Perhaps, if we learned anything, it is that we are not quite sure what we know about the disease" (73). It seems today's doctors know more about viruses and even coronavirus than the doctors one hundred years ago understood about the influenza. Even so, scientists in this age are not entirely sure what caused the 1918 influenza to finally fade out, nor are they sure what would happen if it were to re-emerge in the population again.

We have both history and our current experience with coronavirus to give us some clues. Brown and Krohn both depict how schools, stores, and entire cities closed as the flu rampaged. Figure 1 depicts the right-hand page of a two-

page spread in *Fever Year*. The two-page spread provides a dramatic depiction of what Philadelphia looked like as the 1918 flu shut it down; the speaker says “the life of the city stopped.” Figure 2 represents a detail of a photograph of New York City taken in March 2020.

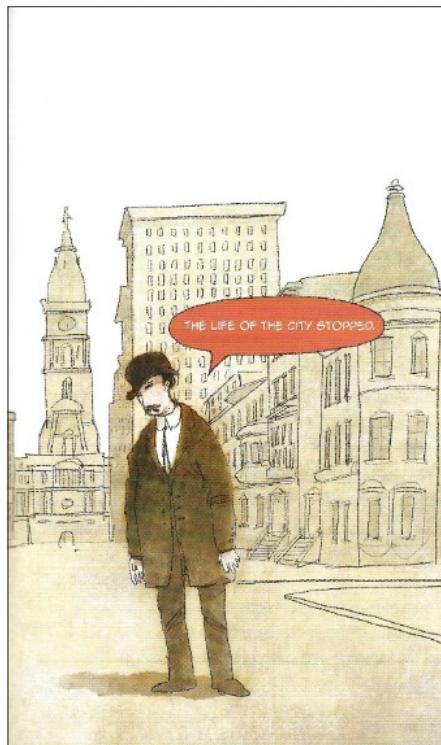


Fig. 1
From Brown's *Fever Year*



Fig. 2
Detail from the *New York Times'*
“The Great Empty”

Contemporary media such as the *New York Times'* interactive page “The Great Empty” offer photographs of empty cities around the world taken in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic. “The Great Empty” provides an array of photographic images that bring to vivid life what Brown illustrates with a limited palette of muted colors. Yet both provide a combination of word and text to remind us of the outbreaks’ power to still human activity. Just as most of the world came to an abrupt halt in March 2020, the same phenomenon occurred in 1918 during the flu pandemic. Brown relates how sickness forced people from their jobs, either due to illness or due to a loss of foot traffic. As he explains, “With neither customers nor employees, many businesses and shops shut down” (36). Brown

also reports that “dances and social gatherings were banned, except for church services” (56). U.S. cities and states have made their own decisions as to which businesses and institutions to close, and when, or at what customer capacity they can remain open; nonetheless, just as Brown relates about the 1918 pandemic, currently many small shops and restaurants have closed, having not enough customers to warrant keeping all their employees.

The two pandemic eras constantly reflect commonalities like these. In another instance, both Brown and Krohn describe how cities passed ordinances requiring mask-wearing, a safety measure that was as controversial then as it is today. This photograph of riders attempting to get on a trolley without a mask appeared in the article “Mask Resistance during a Pandemic Isn’t New – in 1918, Many Americans Were ‘Slackers’” written by J. Alexander Navarro, Assistant Director of the University of Michigan’s Center for the History of Medicine and published in *The Conversation* (Navarro 2020). The image itself is taken from the University of Michigan’s Center for the History of Medicine and Michigan Publishing’s Influenza Archives and is dated October 1918. It was taken in Seattle (“City of Seattle”). As demonstrated below, Krohn’s illustrators faithfully reproduced the image to support her narrative.



Fig. 3
From U. Michigan’s Influenza
Archives, dated October, 1918

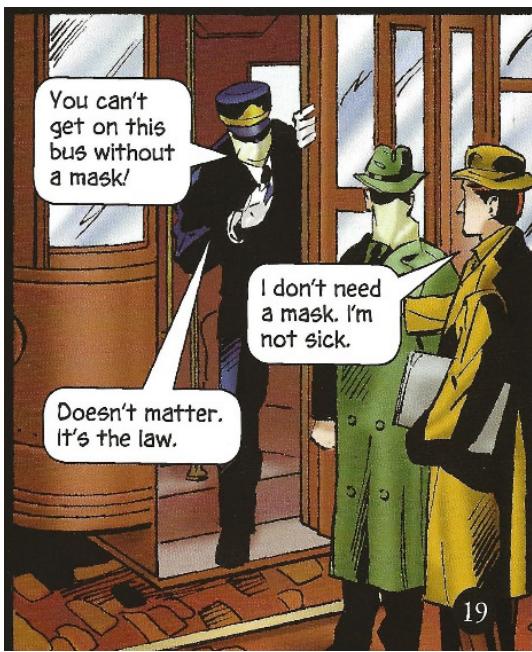


Fig. 4
From Krohn's *The 1918 Flu Pandemic*

Navarro writes, “It is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of masks used in 1918. Today we have a growing body of evidence that well-constructed cloth face coverings are an effective tool in slowing the spread of COVID-19. It remains to be seen, however, whether Americans will maintain the widespread use of face masks as our current pandemic continues to unfold.” Then, as now, reluctance to wear masks comes with peril. Navarro adds, “Deeply entrenched ideals of individual freedom, the lack of cohesive messaging and leadership on mask-wearing, and pervasive misinformation have proven to be major hindrances thus far, precisely when the crisis demands consensus and widespread compliance. This was certainly the case in many communities during the fall of 1918. That pandemic ultimately killed about 675,000 people in the U.S. Hopefully, history is not in the process of repeating itself today.)²

Masks aside, the 1918 flu was devastating. Brown reports that “By the end of September 1918, 757 soldiers [at Camp Devens] had died. The camp ran short of coffins. Without them, the dead were ‘all dressed up’ and laid out in long double rows in barracks made over into temporary morgues” (27). In the contemporary coronavirus pandemic, meanwhile, news accounts report refrigerated trucks, extra morgue tents and vehicles, and even ice rinks being used to store the victims (McNamara 2020; Goodman 2020). So far, despite Navarro’s stated wish, it does seem that this terrible history is repeating itself.

As mentioned earlier in this section, graphic narratives such as these written for school children inform them of major historical events. Given our contemporary moment’s battle against the coronavirus, these books can help younger readers understand what is occurring. Recognizing that graphic narratives can help learners comprehend complex issues through their combination of word and image, NPR (National Public Radio) consulted experts and its own editor, author and illustrator Malaka Gharib, to create a comic about the coronavirus (Gharib 2020). Figure 5 is an excerpt from that comic, entitled “Exploring the New Coronavirus: A Comic Just for Kids,” which also comes with directions for how to fold it into a zine and with links to read it in Chinese or Spanish.

² See also the *New York Times* article “The Mask Slackers of 1918” at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/us/mask-protests-1918.html>



Fig. 5
From Gharib's NPR comic

Moreover, through NPR, Gharib created another comic explaining to kids how they could create their own mini-comic, or zine, to be shared at #quaranzine.³ Today, as during the earlier epidemic, the impulse to create, to tell a story, to make sense of the drastic events unfolding, persists.

4. Comic Strips as Historical

The *Graphic Medicine* website is a repository of comics used for health education. Not surprisingly, it includes a tab entitled “COVID-19 Comics,” and it appears to have been created on March 12, 2020, one day after the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic. It has been updated since to remain current and the page has organized collections for visitors to click on according to subtopic, such as “COVID-19 Comics: Educational” or “COVID-19 Comics: By Patients.” Readers can glean a great deal of information from these creations; for example, the comic “Death by the Numbers” ranks the world’s top 10 deadliest epidemics

³ See: <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/28/863068957/how-to-make-a-mini-zine-about-life-during-the-pandemic>.

and conflicts over the ages. Co-authors Matthew Noe and Leonard Levin (2020) published a scoping-review study that is posted on the site; they state the study's purpose originally was to provide a comprehensive collection of the use of comics in health education. However, they conclude that, “[W]e've now reached the point where it is becoming increasingly clear the scope of graphic medicine has changed drastically since this scoping review began” (Noe and Levin).

One reason medical experts have greater interest in graphic medicine is because “[t]he value of pictures, illustrations, and pictograms...in patient communication has been well-established since the 1990's [sic]” (Noe and Levin). Since then comics have been used with students from kindergarten through medical school. Noe and Levin cite another article that determined “that course grades were higher for those students who reported engagement with the comics than for those who did not, and the students felt the comics were engaging and useful conversation starters.” For this reason, Noe and Levin see opportunities for future research in this area, arguing, “[W]e suggest the inclusion of practicing cartoonists whose expertise is invaluable. Publications detailing the process of creating educational comics, the pedagogy of teaching cartooning in the health sciences, and the explorations of clinical uses of comics are particularly rich areas for exploration.”

Meanwhile, repositories such as *Graphic Medicine* and Ohio State University's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum's exhibit *Drawing Blood: Comics and Medicine* provide us archival collections of comics that have an “obsession with medicine from the 18th century to today” (*Drawing Blood* “About”). As part of the exhibit, the Drawing Blood site hosts three web pages featuring comics from the Spanish flu epidemic. As curator Jared Gardner notes of the collection, “it is at first surprising how relatively few there were during the first months of the disease, beginning in March 1918” (“The Spanish Flu in Comics Strips, 1918”). However, he explains that World War I and its related casualties took the public's primary attention. Only after the war was winding down and people started to realize the flu's deadly toll did it start to appear more widely in the press. Even so, Gardner adds, it's noteworthy that comics of the time did start to reference the flu since “most daily ‘funnies’ avoided engagement with unpleasant topical affairs” (“The Spanish Flu in Comics Strips, 1918”). This reluctance to address negative issues might explain

why this final panel from a *Krazy Kat* strip shows him happy to have the flu as an excuse to get out of a previous engagement (Figure 6).⁴



Fig. 6. *Krazy Kat* panel from the site *Drawing Blood: Comics and Medicine's "The Spanish Flu in Comic Strips, 1918"*

The Drawing Blood site hosts a range of other comic strips from the era, including *Mutt and Jeff*, “Cap” *Stubbs*, *The Gumps* and *Outbursts of Everett True*. It also includes editorial cartoons addressing public lockdowns and mask-wearing. Gardner notes pertinently, “Just as the cartoons of a century ago remind us that we have survived pandemics before and will again, they also remind us, perhaps less optimistically, that resistance to public health measures—whether based in ignorance, arrogance, or fantasies of individual autonomy—has been with us as long as global pandemics” (“The Spanish Flu in Cartoons (Part 2)”).

Comic strip artists and cartoonists of today are not as reluctant to include current events, even negative ones, into their art work. The May 18, 2020 *Blondie* cartoon, for example, depicts Blondie and Dagwood discussing his at-home work schedule in front of his flat-screen computer. His list includes time for breakfast, computer games, a nap, and snacks. The October 5, 2020 *Bound and Gagged* stripped shows two dungeon prisoners chained to a wall and one

⁴ The full sequence is available online via a *Paris Review* article shared March 19, 2020 entitled “Krazy Kat Gets the Spanish Flu.” See <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/03/19/krazy-kat-gets-the-spanish-flu/>

declares to the other “The upside is we never got the coronavirus.” An October 22, 2020 *Baby Blues* comic portrays parents Wanda and Daryl discussing their daughter Zoe’s desire to have a sleepover. When Daryl asks how many girls are likely to attend, Wanda replies, “Not sure yet. We’re waiting for the lab results.”

Since the pandemic began, the daily strips regularly refer to working from home, social isolation, masks, and Zoom meetings. Notably, though, more than 70 artists came together to dedicate their Sunday multipanel strips in homage to frontline workers. On June 7, 2020, comic strip readers could hunt for each of the six symbols hidden in the comics. For example, in that day’s *Rhymes with Orange* strip, what appears to be a lamp base on an end table actually is a microscope. Indeed, the idea to hide images such as surgical masks, shopping carts, or steering wheels (to represent health care workers, grocery store employees and transportation drivers) came from *Baby Blues* co-cartoonist Rick Kirkman, who wanted to show gratitude for the workers. The idea spread quickly through the cartooning community. Jason Chatfield, president of the National Cartoonist Society, stated that although comic strip artists have come together in the past for certain causes, a creative effort of this size had not been accomplished before (Kennedy 2020, 6). This unified artistic homage made history, perhaps one that will take its place in repositories like Drawing Blood where future readers, researching social responses to this pandemic, can likewise enjoy the illustrated scavenger hunt.

5. “The Wuhan I Knew” and “I Am Not a Virus”—Comics Against Racism

Experts currently believe that the coronavirus emerged around December 12, 2019, from a seafood market in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a city whose population of 11 million people is larger than many other global urban areas. In the early days of the pandemic, it seemed the U.S. was working with Chinese authorities as evidenced by one Trump Tweet that stated “We are in very close communication with China concerning the virus. . .We have offered China and President Xi any help that is necessary” (Dilanian, et al. 2020). However, as the virus spread and became a recognized pandemic causing widespread illness and mass lockdowns, Trump’s tenor changed. He referred to the virus with inflammatory terminology, calling it at different points the “China flu” or, worse, the “kung flu” (Itkowitz 2020). At the time, Asian Americans

worried “the affiliation would stoke fears and result in prejudice against them” (Itkowitz).

They were right to be concerned, as by July, the Pew Research Center reported that 31% of Asian Americans said they had been subjected to slur or jokes about their race since the onset of the pandemic (Ruiz, Horowitz, and Tamir 2020). A story printed by the BBC and reported in May 2020 uncovered worse: that Asian Americans had been “spat on, punched, kicked – and in one case even stabbed” (Cheung, Feng and Deng 2020). The organization Stop AAPI (Asian American/Pacific Islander) Hate notes that in the five months between mid-March and early August 2020, it received more than 2,500 reports of anti-Asian incidents across the U.S. (Park 2021). These figures continue as incidents in San Francisco’s Chinatown and other areas note an uptick in other assaults and robberies. After many of these incidents, Asian Americans armed themselves, organized incident databases, formed patrols to prevent acts of vandalism and theft, and spoke out against these attacks.

People who perpetuate racist associations with the disease feel justified in doing so, claiming monikers for COVID-19 like “the Chinese flu” simply correlate it to the site of its emergence, not to any specific people. Frequently, they use the analogous argument that, “Well, it’s called the *Spanish* influenza, so why isn’t that racist?” The problem is, the 1918 influenza did not originate in Spain. Because Spain was one of the few countries to print news articles about it while other countries were focused on World War I, people came to believe the flu originated there. However, as scholar Salvador Herrera (2020) explains in his informative article “Already Quarantined: Yes, the ‘Spanish Flu’ Was Racist, Too,” studies of the 1918 pandemic indicate that it “probably started in British Army camps in mainland Europe” as early as two years prior to the first outbreak. Alternatively, other sources theorize that “U.S. Army training camps” of early 1918 could be the cause. Herrera notes that given the “volatile dynamics of virus transmission,” there’s no reason to call the disease the “Spanish” flu. Likewise, he adds, “the infinite permeability and interconnectedness of the world confounds the search for the origins of disease in the biological sciences, let alone the attribution of a non-human virus to racialized hosts.”

Even so, there’s a long global history of laying blame for contagions on *someone*. “[X]enophobia, scapegoating, and ‘othering’ have always been a pervasive consequence of pandemics throughout history,” states scholar Claire O’Neill (2020), a history we have yet to learn from. O’Neill adds,

“Societies facing novel pathogens have often engaged in that scapegoating of certain populations, especially when the disease source can be linked, even inaccurately, to a distant place.” This behavior, she continues, “as we have seen time and time again, [is] entirely unhelpful in terms of disease treatment and eradication.” Instead, what’s needed is “increased education and understanding of race and ethnicity, and the historical structures that govern it.” In this respect, the examples of the following two illustrated publications could help foster the empathy that seems to be needed at this historical moment.

Korean-Swedish graphic novel artist Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom shared one-panel images on her Instagram account that depicted acts of racism she and other Asians were experiencing as the pandemic worsened. As PBS explains, the title of her series “I Am Not a Virus” stemmed from the hashtag *#IAmNotAVirus* started by French Asians who were responding to racist encounters they experienced on public transportation (Garcia 2020). The movement the French Asian and other artists began sparked other artistic responses on social media, namely Instagram,⁵ Sjöblom’s being one of them. She intends her art to foster a sense of empathy in viewers who otherwise didn’t witness the racist encounters, but some of the comments she received were “absolutely horrific,” causing her to “clean up the commentary because there was so much racism in it” (Garcia). In the end, though, she prefers to continue to depict the episodes people tell her because “it means something to people that...I illustrate something that is important to them.” After all, what Sjöblom is doing is capturing these occurrences for history.

In the U.S., Laura Gao and her family arrived from Wuhan when she was three, moving to a small town in Texas. Most people she encountered knew of Beijing or Shanghai, but few knew of Wuhan—until the outbreak. She is disheartened to know that all most people in the U.S. and elsewhere know of Wuhan is its association with the pandemic. She wanted to depict the city she knew, not the city that has become associated with “disgust and pity” (Juhasz 2020).

⁵ See, e.g., <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13877013/artists-fight-coronavirus-related-racism-on-instagram>



Fig. 7. Detail from “The Wuhan I Knew” by Laura Gao
The full comic is available at <https://www.lauragao.com/wuhan>

The result is “The Wuhan I Knew,” Gao’s effort to highlight its “beautiful culture, rich history, and strong people” (Juhasz). Panels highlight street food, landmarks, and aspects of Wuhan history, such as its role in the Chinese Revolution in 1911. She released the strip in March 2020, and she was at first nervous at the reception it would receive. However, as NPR reports, the comic was shared widely on Twitter and Gao has heard that her comic has influenced readers and followers to visit Wuhan one day (Juhasz). When visitors do arrive there, though, they shouldn’t expect to see the fish market that supposedly was the epicenter of the outbreak; as one Wuhan shopkeeper currently in an office above the market predicts, the entire structure is likely to be torn down. “The name is ruined,” he told *New Yorker* reporter Peter Hessler (2020). Soon, it will survive only as a mention in pandemic history. Fortunately, artists like Gao will have captured other Wuhan features, memorialized in electronic comic book form for the ages.

6. The Value of History

Late in 2020, the editors of *Time* magazine reached out to various historians and asked them to choose a pivotal moment from the year that stood out to them. They wanted to find out “what future historians will – or at least should – write about when they study the momentous year...and whether it signals a new chapter or turning point for America and the world” (Waxman 2020). Nukhet Varlik, Associate Professor of History at the University of South Carolina and Rutgers University-Newark, selected March 11, the date the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic.

Varlik writes, “Ironically enough, I was then teaching a course on the history of pandemics...I prepared my students and myself for what was to come. . .” He added, “Premodern plague treatises, written about an unfamiliar and far deadlier disease, taught me that good food, good rest, and good thoughts were critical for recovery. I was lucky to have both historical and contemporary knowledge for guidance. That was more than eight months ago. Since then, I’ve been reading, writing, and teaching about this pandemic, constantly stressing the importance of historical knowledge for its modern management” (Waxman).

That historical knowledge can be gleaned from multiples sources and archives: Instagram accounts, Twitter threads, museum exhibit collections, magazine archives—and repositories of comic books and graphic novels attempting to record what society experienced as the world slowed down.

We can use those records even now, archives that include cultural productions such as films, books, televisions shows, and comics, to help us grapple with our “new normal.” As it turns out, what our doctors and journalists report today has been written about and depicted before, first in the eyewitness accounts recorded during the Spanish flu pandemic and second through texts like Brown’s and Kohn’s illustrated retellings. These narratives, comics, and other visual depictions allow us a vehicle by which to cope with today’s pandemic issues as we start to answer the question “What happens now?” David McCullough remarked that the past is interesting because “things didn’t have to turn out the way they did”; they might have gone another way (Heitman 2020, 36). It’s up to us to search the archives, listen to the artists, seek guidance for what went wrong, decide what we must do next to get it right.

One of the last panels in Brown's book is a rendering of writer Katherine Ann Porter, who nearly died from the 1918 flu – and whose fiancé did succumb. She says, “[The flu] simply divided my life, cut across it like that. So that everything before that was just getting ready, and after that I was in some strange way altered, really” (89). In this last year, our own lives have likewise been split, altered, from the “Before Times” to the “new normal.” We have had a year to slow down, perhaps to grieve, to learn new skills and adjust, to come to value social interaction, work, science, and medicine in ways we might not have earlier. Perhaps we took things for granted we henceforth will treasure. Humanity has been through viral scourges before, and even though we’re seeing similar events from one hundred years ago occurring today, if we are wise we will heed that history, learn from it, and be our better selves going forward.

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language text culture•

MISCELLANEA

Mimmo Cangiano
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Anti-modernismo di destra (Francia, Germania, Italia)

La classicità non è altro che la popolarità portata

alla sua più pura ed alta espressione nell'arte.

Ardengo Soffici

Ovunque si spandeva la terribile disciplina dell'Occidente.

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle

Abstract

Right-wing European culture has been constantly crossed, since the last years of the 19th century, by anti-modernist tendencies. From religious to anti-metropolitan and 'traditionalist' trends, from medievalish myths (guilds) to the harsh critique of United States and Soviet Union's industrial process, everything concurred to create, on an intellectual and literary level, the image of a possible ethnic-cultural resistance to an incumbent modernity. This article presents a vast recon of this phenomenon in France, Germany, and Italy, analyzing both the literary production and the essayistic one of right-wing culture of the first half of the 20th century.

I. Dinamismo

Secondo Hermann Rauschning (che fu membro del partito dal '32 al '34) il nazismo è un "movimento rivoluzionario" teso a distruggere ogni elemento pertinente all'identità nazionale tedesca, elementi che si esprimevano nel vecchio conservatorismo che ha ora tradito se stesso alleandosi con Hitler (facendo insomma, parole sue, "un patto col diavolo"). Il nazismo non è un prodotto della *reazione*, ma un'ideologia inerente al "dinamismo" (è la parola che usa con più frequenza per descrivere i nazional-socialisti) della modernità.

Rifacendosi esplicitamente alla *Tecnica del colpo di Stato* di Malaparte, Rauschning caratterizza il nazismo come fenomeno eminentemente modernista, fenomeno che “demolisce tutte le norme spirituali e tradizionali”, abbandonando i principi nazionalistici dell’*ordine* conservatore (“noi crediamo nei valori imperituri della nazione e in un ordine politico che riposi su di essi”) e scatenando le forze del *moderno*: la massa, la metropoli, la tecnica. Siamo qui nell’ottica di un pensiero anti-modernista e a matrice contro-rivoluzionaria, dove i valori più tipici delle ideologie di destra (non a caso Rauschning diventerà poi un modello per qui settori dell’*intelligenzia* anti-comunista del secondo dopoguerra tesi a sovrapporre nazismo e bolscevismo) vengono esaltati, in controluce al nazismo, a patto di essere mantenuti nell’alveo rassicurante del nazionalismo liberal-conservatore, cioè proprio di quella ideologia alla cui crisi il nazismo aveva dato una risposta. Fuori dai principi di “una morale borghese tradizionale” (Rauschning 1947, 46) l’azione della destra si rovescerebbe per Rauschning nel suo opposto.

Vale la pena notare che Rauschning non critica mai i capisaldi teorici del nazismo-ideologia. In *La rivoluzione del nichilismo* troviamo infatti la concezione elitaria, la missione spirituale dell’Occidente, l’esaltazione nazionalista, la necessità di mantenere sotto controllo le masse, l’esaltazione della guerra e della violenza (una violenza naturalmente mantenuta nei limiti appunto della “morale borghese”). Ciò che viene criticata è invece proprio la manipolazione, modernista, dell’armamentario ideologico della destra. Il nazismo non fa della guerra la “madre di tutte le cose” ma “la distruttrice di tutti gli ordini e di tutti i valori spirituali” (Ibid., 148); non difende la proprietà ma l’assegna allo Stato (“L’espropriazione sarà inevitabile e così la totale soppressione della economia privata”); non esalta l’*ethnos* nazionale ma lo annulla nell’obbedienza cieca; non tiene le masse sotto controllo ma converte la nazione in massa, riducendo alla fedeltà allo Stato gli antichi legami socio-culturali (“corona la proletarizzazione della nazione e la sua riduzione a massa”). Il nazismo, infine, è esso stesso un “macchinario”, vale a dire una macchina *organizzativa*, dunque a funzione anti-organicista (ed è inevitabile che su questa linea ideologica Rauschning veda proprio i modernisti Ernst Jünger e Ernst Niekisch come gli intellettuali più compromessi con Hitler), tesa a trasfigurare la corrente conformazione sociale – l’anima romantico-contadina della Germania – secondo un’ottica cittadina, industriale, anti-tradizionale:

Sotto il velo del romanticismo e appoggiandosi ai così detti valori tradizionali [...] si è imposto a questo ceto di contadini la forma di una collettività moderna, nella quale si inaridiscono i suoi veri legami naturali, gli autentici valori della sua tradizione radicata in un fondo di religiosità. [...] la cruda realtà di un apparato di costrizioni meccaniche, per cui anche il ceto contadino viene assimilato alla massa generale (Ibid., 154-55).

Se il Rauschning ex-nazista esprime, a livello emblematico, i turbamenti di certa destra conservatrice rispetto alle caratteristiche moderniste dei fascismi, si può in generale sostenere che la persistenza di temi anti-modernisti nel pensiero di destra (fascista e non) sia un tratto fondato quanto la persistenza di temi modernisti.

2. Metropolis

I motivi anti-modernisti si esprimono in una serie di tematiche connesse all'avanzare della società di massa (suffragio universale, trionfo della *tecnica*, standardizzazione, decadimento del *gusto* artistico, ecc.) e poi anzitutto nella direzione di un *ruralismo* a cui contrapporre l'immagine della metropoli industriale e dei suoi effetti sull'individuo e sulle relazioni sociali.

La *città* – luogo della produzione e della circolazione di merci e denaro – è inquadrata, fin dagli ultimi anni dell'800, quale luogo, al contempo, dell'innovazione continua e della negazione delle esperienze *significative*, dominata dall'infrangersi dei circoli comunitari che garantivano nuclei di *senso* mediante il loro riferirsi alle possibilità sintetiche ('tradizione') delle *forme* correlate alla *Kultur*: "La città fuor d'ogni apprezzamento morale e logico lo penetrò. [...] cominciò dentro di lui [...] la multivaria storia della città com'era. Legittima e non morale storia della città com'era. [...] un primigenio trionfo di torbide linfe, senza forma" (Boine 1983, 430-31). La metropoli condivide cioè quell'assenza di *forma* quale nucleo centrale dell'economia di mercato ("Ogni rivoluzione borghese ha come scena la grande città", scrive Spengler), vale a dire quel decadimento dei *valori* che si esprime materialmente come passaggio al dominio del valore-di-scambio, il quale annulla i presupposti *qualitativi* celebrando, dal valore *mobile* delle merci alla mobilità dei valori etico-culturali, il trionfo del *movimento* e della trasformazione (la metropoli come divenire senza meta che tende ad abolire, egemonizzando la *campagna*, fino la nostalgia dell'autenticità):

La metropoli [...] il freddo senso pratico in luogo del rispetto per ciò che è tradizionale e innato. [...] Il *danaro* come una grandezza astratta, inorganica, priva di ogni relazione col senso di una terra fertile [...]. La sua incomprensione per tutto ciò che è tradizionale [...] per la nobiltà, la Chiesa, i privilegi, le dinastie, le convenzioni nell'arte, [...] *panem et circenses* che oggi riappare travestito come lotta salariale e arena sportiva [...]. Il villaggio con i suoi tetti pacifici a forma di colline, col fumo che da essi s'innalza alla sera, con le sue fontane, [...] Prima la città si era abbandonata al paesaggio, ora essa vuol farlo simile a sé. [...] deserto demonico di pura pietra. [...] abitazioni create non dal sangue ma da un fine pratico, non dal sentimento ma da una iniziativa economica. [...] l'epoca in cui la fase di una crescenza organica è terminata e in cui comincia un ammucchiamento inorganico. (Spengler 2008, 813-14)

Benché ovviamente non manchino esperienze tese, in presupposti modernisti, a riattivare i principi valoriali della *Gemeinschaft* all'interno della metropoli stessa,¹ pure continuano ad esistere opzioni di carattere reazionario tese a qualificare lo spazio cittadino come semplice alveo del nichilismo: opzioni che interpretano la città nei termini dell'artificiale e/o del disorganico.

Sebbene tali reazioni anti-cittadine siano inquadrabili nell'onda lunga delle riflessioni baudelairiane, tale cultura di destra tende per lo più a rigettare il principio di un'invadenza dei valori cittadini (cioè della merce stessa) all'interno dei tradizionali istituti valoriali (a cominciare dall'arte), movimento che rischierebbe di condurli a vedere ormai come merce lo stesso valore d'uso (anche quello artistico), preferendo invece serrarsi in principi binomiali atti a salvare uno spazio *intatto* (solitamente di tipo rurale) dove il valore d'uso, e l'arte a questo collegato, si dà ancora come possibile. Inevitabilmente tale posizionamento li porta a sovrapporre alle stesse conflittualità presenti (inclusa quella città/campagna – tappa dello scontro *Kultur/Zivilisation* – che è alla base di tale modo di ragionare) un'immagine armonica e organica che annulla il conflitto stesso, perché intende come veramente *reale* solo uno dei poli del binomio, assegnando all'altro (la città) i tratti dell'*apparenza* e dell'infondatezza.

Tali tratti, in questo modo intesi, risultano poi concretizzabili in una lunga serie di motivi politico-culturali. La città, espressione del nichilismo della modernità, può così certo diventare il luogo dell'alienazione (“lo sfondo della solitudine dell'uomo moderno è senz'altro la grande metropoli”) (Hof-

¹ Cfr. Cacciari 1973, 41-42. Cfr. anche Esposito 1988, 73-124.

mannsthal 1983, 83) e della “terra straniera”,² ma anche il luogo dell’emersione di una massa proletaria tesa alla distruzione degli antichi nuclei valoriali. Può diventare il luogo dove una borghesia a traino mercantile celebra il suo trionfo e il luogo dove il denaro (tentando all’inurbamento e trasformando il contadino in operaio) distrugge l’antica *fedeltà* alla terra e ai suoi valori *eternizzati e assoluti*:

l’operaio sopporta il lavoro per passione al denaro. Perché il lavoro della terra ha questa grazia di dare risposta in valore permanenti e assoluto; mentre il denaro è risposta contingente e relativa. [...] E ti tenta verso l’effimero il denaro [...] il lavoro montanaro si permuta in cose di valore assoluto. (Jahier 2005, 101-102)

Gli anti-valori della città possono anche essere intesi come, è ad esempio il caso dei cattolici Papini e Giulotti (e del Bernanos del *Diario di un curato di campagna*), crollo dell’universo valoriale connesso alla fede, possono diventare i falsi valori alla base delle nazioni più industrialmente progredite (Stati Uniti, Inghilterra, ecc.), e addirittura essere addossati in blocco, è il caso di Barrès, all’azione del nemico militare: “Devant ces modestes magasins, aux enseignes encore françaises, et tandis qu’ils coudoyaient d’innombrables soldats et quelques indigènes, de types aisés à distinguer, ils crurent comprendre que Metz a perdu son élégance de bon ton, fameuse avant la guerre” (Barrès 1897, 322-23). In Barrès del resto, dove i tedeschi (anche dopo la prima guerra mondiale) rappresentano proprio il rischio dell’introduzione di quei metodi industrial-tayloristici che sono a fondamento del modo di vita nella grande città (“n’ayant pu y parvenir par les armes, va revenir au labeur industriel et commercial. [...] Grâce à sa natalité et au moyen d’une sorte de taylorisme national [...] il inontera tous les marchés de ses offres”), a questi va contrapposto uno spazio (regionale) che, resistendo al nemico, resiste di pari tempo all’industrializzazione e ai suoi effetti: “un loyer d’énergie intérieure: dans sa résistance à la germanisation, [...] les paysans des villages travaillent encore la terre avec des méthodes et dans des sentiments de discipline hérités des vieux groupes gaulois et des villas romaines” (Ibid., 324). Se poi inglesi e tedeschi sono addirittura equiparati ai parigini (“Le

² Cfr. Slataper 1953, 276-77: “Non so che anche a voi, andando per le strade della città, capiti talvolta di fermarvi a un tratto e di considerare straniti l’affrettato movimento degli uomini, come se foste in terra straniera”.

Parisien, c'est de l'artificiel, du composite”),³ è chiaro che a far da contraltare troviamo un ambiente rurale (“quando i facili piaceri di Parigi cosmopolita vi inebriavano, come avreste potuto conoscere ciò che riposava in seno ai nostri focolari domestici [...]?”) (Barrès 1917, 2-3) non solo intoccato dalla degenerazione della modernità e riposante su valori tradizionali, ma anche in grado di produrre un’arte che, essendo manifestazione diretta di quei valori, resti al riparo dal suo decadere a espressione del nichilismo cittadino, cioè ancora del valore di scambio che è attacco all’*eternalizzazione*:

Et s'il sait faire parler l'architecture, s'il possède une instruction suffisante pour dialoguer avec l'histoire, il évoquera les dignes exemples d'une organisation républicaine dans cette vieille municipalité ecclésiastique, tout en examinant la cathédrale des évêques de Toul, les remparts de Vauban, les formidables travaux des polytechniciens sur tous les monts. [...] Ce qui fait la constance de son caractère historique, c'est, plutôt que des moeurs et un esprit traditionnel, d'être un lieu où, de toute éternité, un même phénomène s'écoule. (Barrès 1897, 306)⁴

Se addirittura un Maurras o un Sorel (pur nella difesa del progresso industriale) tendono comunque sempre ad appoggiarsi performativamente su determinati valori identificati come di tipo rurale (per il primo la famiglia quale nucleo dello Stato e del concetto di ‘proprietà’, per il secondo il *paysan* quale portatore di valori morali di tipo *eroico* da rilanciare mediante il processo industriale), identificando nel contadino una *bourdieuana class-objet* da attivare in funzione mitopoietica, non può sorprendere che i ragionamenti barresiani trovino poi ampia fortuna (anche dopo il primo conflitto mondiale) tanto in intellettuali più legati a principi romantico-qualitativi (artigianato, valore d’uso, gusto anti-moderno, ecc.), come Henri Focillon (*Les Pierres de France*, 1919), quanto nella critica all’orizzonte cittadino che emergerà in certa cultura fascista (la Parigi “cimitero in preda al caos” di Céline, o la Parigi di Drieu La Rochelle, che può reggersi solo se *travata* dalla vita delle sue provincie).

³ Cfr. Bompaire-Evesque 1990, 68 : “Barrés a renouvelé le thème de la ville corruptrice en portant sur la vie parisienne un regard de sociologue plus que de moraliste. Il tente d’expliquer l’évolution des jeunes provinciaux “tombés sur le bitume parisien” en analysant le décalage entre leur milieu d’origine et celui où ils se trouvent transplantés”.

⁴ Cfr. Golan 1995, 23-25: “it was fidelity to their vernacular traditions that had allegedly ‘saved’ Alsace-Lorraine from the taint of almost half a century of German occupation (*germanisation*) [...] ; the Regionalist idea is, essentially, an agent of order”.

La reazione anti-cittadina, comunque, è naturalmente molto più aspra in Italia e in Germania, dove il processo industriale era stato molto più veloce e impetuoso. Sebbene infatti anche in Italia non manchino, a destra dello schieramento politico, esperienze intellettuali tese a esaltare l'inevitabilità del progresso industrial-tecnologico (è il caso di Morasso, di Corradini, dei futuristi milanesi, ma anche del Prezzolini ‘vociano’, interessato tanto a porre l’Italia al livello economico delle grandi potenze quanto a spezzare la maggioranza parlamentare a base agraria di Giolitti),⁵ il ruralismo – con il tramite mazziniano e anti-positivista di Oriani –⁶ è certo uno degli alvei principali di riflessione tanto dell’*intellighenzia* attiva prima della guerra quanto di quella emersa, dopo Caporetto, dall’opera del Servizio Propaganda.

È Papini ad aprire le danze (“nelle città [...] si soffoca, si affoga e si muore dal caldo, dall’afa, dal puzzo di rinchiuso e di stamperia [...]. Andiamo via; scappiamo in campagna”) (Papini 1959, 818) identificando nella campagna anzitutto il consueto spazio di una persistenza valoriale che si oppone alla frammentazione/disgregazione cittadina:

ho bisogno di appoggiarmi a qualcosa, di rimetter le radici in qualche posto. [...] Sono nato in un certo posto, appartengo a una certa razza, ho dietro di me una storia, una tradizione. Raccogliere e concentrare me stesso significa pure rimettermi in contatto colla mia terra nativa, col mio popolo, colla cultura da cui, voglio o no, son uscito. (Papini 1994, 190)

D’altro canto, però, come si evince dal passaggio citato, nella *campagna* Papini non ritrova solo un mazziniano serbatoio di valori, ma anche il contatto con un popolo che trasporta quei valori nella modernità (“quando la grande industria non aveva dappertutto tramutato le mani in macchine, l’uomo in congegno e l’anima in numero”), valori che sono d’altro canto già stati espressi da una precisa tradizione culturale italiana (“Dante, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Leonardo

⁵ Cfr. Prezzolini 1923, 41: “In campagna si vive ancora secondo l’ordine del passato e di Dio [...]. Ma in città è un’altra faccenda. L’uomo non obbedisce all’ordine di Dio ma all’ordine proprio”.

⁶ Cfr. Oriani 1933, 61-65: “gli spiriti migliori si sentono giù esuli dentro la volgarità della moltitudine [...]. Ogni forma predominante nella società si misura dal proprio ideale, ma l’industrialismo non poteva avere che quello della ricchezza. [...] i positivisti distrussero le idee nei fatti; la loro filosofia era la sola conveniente ad una fase industriale, che isolava gli individui livellandoli”.

[...] un tal senso plebeo di realismo robusto”) che è ora da riattivare (è la versione papiniana del legame intellettuale-popolo) per richiamare il popolo stesso alla sua attitudine, ancora mazzinianamente, rivoluzionaria. Preannunciando aspetti che saranno di *Strapaese*, Papini infatti, mentre vede nell’intellettuale – col solito sovraccarico di ideologia culturalistica – colui che ha il compito di testimoniare la persistenza di questi valori contro il Moloch cittadino-industriale, già raddoppia il bersaglio sovrapponendo l’orizzonte cittadino *italiano* a quello dominante, fuor dai confini nazionali, nelle grandi potenze industriali: “Milano è una città pressoché tedesca, tedesche sono in gran parte le fabbriche rappresentate e i loro rappresentanti, tedeschi i capi tecnici di molte officine, tedeschi i sostenitori di gran numero di imprese industriali” (Papini 1963, 192). In un racconto come *Quattro cani fecero giustizia* vediamo così quattro mastini maremmani (“con tutta la foga della loro razza robusta”) attaccare dei turisti americani in visita in Toscana, così come, nel *Lemmonio Boreo* di Soffici, vediamo i tre protagonisti randellare altri quattro turisti la cui nazionalità (un americano, un inglese, un tedesco e un francese) non può sorprendere. Inutile sottolineare che anche in questo caso l’impeto rivoluzionario e palingentico coincide col ritorno a un’*origine* (lo spirito del popolo italiano portatore di valori inossidabili) che è il sostrato *Kultur* della rivoluzione da compiere. Manca infatti del tutto, in questo modo di trattare il tema ‘città’, quella concezione dialettica (questo è Boine: “avrai accolta in te spontaneamente la vita dei tuoi antenati e del popolo tuo per secoli”) in grado, pur nelle prospettive con *agaton* presupposto, di riconoscere tanto la trasformazione che l’ambiente cittadino ha imposto a quello rurale, quanto l’emergere di nuove forme *comunitarie* (pur essenzialistiche) all’interno dell’orizzonte cittadino medesimo (si pensi a Jahier). Tali nuove forme richiederebbero infatti (come ad esempio accade in Jünger o nei vari teorici tedeschi dei ‘socialismi’ a base nazionale) una fase di mediazione politica che ridurrebbe sensibilmente la capacità palingentica della funzione-cultura. Questa è invece qui, inteso il popolo come depositario di valori che sta all’intellettuale far emergere, del tutto preservata, e fra l’altro secondo linee ideologiche finalizzate proprio a ridurre a zero la conflittualità contadina sul piano non di un mero *locus* culturale (spirito campagnolo *vs.* spirito cittadino) ma di classe: “la rassegnazione eroica, perché silenziosa e tranquilla, dei nostri lavoratori” (Soffici 1959, 257).

Il Soffici pre-fascista si muove lungo le stesse tematiche, a cominciare dall’identificazione della *campagna* con la possibilità della significazione valoriale

nel quadro della *Kultur*: “un senso della nostra terra pacata e miracolosa, una pienezza di adesione alle linee fondamentali della nostra natura e della nostra tradizione più indigena e profonda [...], un gusto e un sapore di verità ritrovate per sempre”. La popolazione italiana rurale (poi contrapposta a quella Parigi “spietata nel moto turbinoso della sua vita”) è portatrice di un tessuto culturale unificatore, e questo è a sua volta la sintesi di un carattere *etnico* che si riversa nell’arte (e viceversa), facendo della difesa di un selezionato elemento ideologico (l’arte-cultura) la difesa di un popolo tratteggiato in alcune delle sue, selezionatissime (e assolutizzate appunto perché selezionate fuori da ogni possibile polarizzazione sociale), caratteristiche:

Il popolo custodiva tale un tesoro di pensieri, di affetti, di passioni e di parole che Giovanni ne era come inebriato [...] un canto di Dante, un racconto del Boccaccio [...] gli eran parsi chiarissimi e affatto vivi perché inzuppati di quello stesso sapere. Sua madre contadina e figlia di contadini piangente sul corpo del vecchio padre morto [...] la vedeva sempre come scolpita nel macigno, per l’eternità. Ma ciò che più lo colpiva quando rinvangava i suoi ricordi era la concordanza che si stabiliva nella sua mente fra quegli esseri e la terra ch’essi abitavano e che li nutriva. (Soffici 1997, 72-73)⁷

Da qui sarà inevitabile che tutto ciò che si oppone alle selezionate caratteristiche del popolo contadino (conflittualità, urbanizzazione, ideali socialisti, ecc.)⁸ diventi tanto espressione della *metropoli* quanto allontanamento da quei principi artistici tesi ad esprimere (e rinforzare) quelle stesse caratteristiche (sarà ad esempio la sua battaglia contro l’architettura razionalista).

Si esprime qui una divaricazione importante fra la cultura che approderà al fascismo (Papini, Soffici, ecc.) e quella che riuscirà a impostare una resistenza ideologica al regime (ad esempio Jahier). Quest’ultima infatti, pur nella consueta presupposizione di un *agaton* anti-modernista connesso alla vita rurale (“la terra e i contadini sono la forza materiale e morale della nazione”), scende nel campo dell’analisi storico-dialettica perché analizza la polarizzazione che si è

7 Cfr. Del Puppo 2000, 22: “la Toscana era l’*intérieur* entro cui recuperare una vita rurale e mitica”.

8 Cfr. Soffici 1923, 59-60: “Quando i suoi compagni scioperavano egli non disertava il suo campo [...]. Non mi è mai accaduto di sentirli parlar di politica; e neanche lamentarsi. Nessuno di loro legge i giornali [...], sono i miei veri fratelli, i veri cittadini della mia meravigliosa Patria”.

instaurata fra spazio cittadino e spazio campestre (“i suoi ex-contadini scontenti a salario quindicinale, le sue donne-soldato macchiate di tinte indelebili sul grembiale”) (Jahier 2002, 42-43), rifiutando dunque ogni motivo di pacificazione in una *campagna* vista come sotto attacco, e riuscendo così a non perdere di vista tanto i fenomeni connessi al progresso materiale quanto quelli legati alla progressiva trasformazione del contado. La stessa produzione artistica di Jahier, ad esempio il *Gino Bianchi*, si potrà dunque concentrare sull’analisi materiale degli effetti connessi alla trasformazione, in senso impiegatizio-industriale-cittadino, della società. La prima opzione, invece, focalizzando sulla *campagna* quale luogo *intoccato* perché direttamente connesso all’etnicità nazionale,⁹ destoricizza il proprio punto di riferimento appunto perché mira a una visione statica (anti-dialettica) dell’insieme sociale. Sarà proprio su questa linea che il fascismo potrà creare un’immagine della campagna (un’immagine *industrialmente* prodotta) quale luogo al riparo dalla *corruzione* cittadina.¹⁰ E sulla stessa linea la produzione artistica degli uomini legati a *Il Selvaggio* e a *L’Italiano* (con alle spalle l’importante mediazione del nazionalismo culturale di *La Ronda*) giocherà sì la carta “campagna” per indicare al fascismo una anti-liberale direzione di marcia (“l’avvenire del Fascismo è inevitabilmente legato a un suo ritorno alle origini, le sue origini provinciali, rurali”) (Malaparte 1991, 410), ma sarà costretta in ogni momento di crisi (fino al ’43) ad evitare ogni troppa marcata polarizzazione col regime, appunto perché il suo tema “campagna”, etichettato come luogo principe dell’*ethnos* nazionale (quell’*ethnos* che sarà all’arte esprimere), è considerato, come tale, estraneo alle funzioni (‘cittadine’) della polarizzazione e del conflitto.

Più in generale si può comunque sostenere che il modo in cui il rapporto fra *città* e *campagna* viene impostato tenda a rivelare la posizione dell’autore rispetto a tutta una serie di tematiche inerenti, all’interno del pensiero di destra, alla polarizzazione fra modernismo e anti-modernismo (e anche al rapporto fra *Zivilisation* e *Kultur*, fra capitalismo e identità). Se i casi estremi di un

⁹ Cfr. Stanghellini 1924, 113: “Più che tutta la sua arte, più che tutto il suo genio, più che la sua bellezza, è patria la sana e fresca bontà delle umili case odorose di farine, di spigo, del caldo fermento del vino. Il contadino fermo alla sua terra è patria”.

¹⁰ Cfr. Forgacs e Gundel 2007, 338-39: “La campagna [...] fu vista come autenticamente fascista e pertanto autenticamente italiana, perché laboriosa, frugale e anticonsumista. [...] Non si trattava ovviamente di autentici prodotti della cultura popolare, bensì di mitiche rappresentazioni prodotte dalle industrie culturali metropolitane ad uso di un pubblico di consumatori prevalentemente urbano e settentrionale”.

nazionalismo a fondamento rural-spirituale (come Papini, Soffici, Barrès, Riehl, Hofmannsthal, Redondo, ecc.) tendono a inquadrare nell'oggetto-campagna (dove vive e resiste il sostrato culturale autoctono) la *vera* espressione della compagine nazionale e dei suoi valori, questi ultimi tenderanno a diventare i valori *reali* dell'insieme nazionale (i valori *cittadini* saranno infatti assegnati a una 'degenerazione' proveniente o dall'estero o dagli elementi interni 'cosmopoliticizzati'), e la *Kultur* si darà come essa stessa reale in giustapposizione binomica con la *Zivilisation*. Se invece il quadro valoriale agrario risulta essere affiancato, naturalmente nei propositi nazionalistici, al quadro cittadino-industriale-tecnologico, mediante, ad esempio, la spiritualizzazione in senso *etnico* dell'industria e della massa (il secondo Malaparte, Bottai, Maurras, La Rochelle, Brasillach, Spengler, van den Bruck, ecc.)¹¹ allora *città* e *campagna* (come *Zivilisation* e *Kultur*) verranno presentate – di solito grazie all'azione dei partiti o degli stati fascisti – come in equilibrio, nel quadro di un rapporto in cui la *Kultur* tiene sotto controllo la *Zivilisation* (così come, *mutatis mutandis*, il corporativismo dovrebbe tenere sotto controllo il capitalismo).¹² Una terza opzione è infine quella – rappresentata soprattutto da Jünger – tesa a trasferire all'oggetto-città i *valori* prima connessi all'oggetto-campagna, proprio nel quadro di quella dialettica (materiale) fra *città* e *campagna* che alcuni autori di destra tendono invece a rifiutare mediante l'ipostatizzazione dei valori rurali:

la lotta dei contadini è vana e senza speranza, poiché una libertà qual è quella che essi rivendicano non è più possibile oggi. Il podere che viene lavorato con le macchine e fertilizzato con l'azoto artificiale delle fabbriche non è più lo stesso podere di prima. Non è vero, perciò, che l'esistenza del contadino è atemporale e che i grandi mutamenti passano sopra la sua zolla come il vento e le nubi. La profondità della rivoluzione in cui siamo coinvolti è valutabile dal fatto che essa infrange anche le condizioni primitive e originarie di vita. La celebre distinzione tra *città* e *campagna* sussiste oggi soltanto nello spazio romantico; non ha più valore, così come è caduta la distinzione tra mondo organico e mondo meccanico. (Jünger 1984, 148-49)¹³

¹¹ Celia Applegate 1990 ha ben dimostrato come questa opzione sia ben viva in Germania già alla fine del XIX secolo.

¹² Cfr. Valois 1924, 97: "Au financier, au pétrolier, au éleveur de vermines qui se croient les maîtres du monde et qui veulent l'organiser selon la loi de l'argent [...] [le fascisme répond] en levant l'épée".

¹³ Cfr. Jünger 1995, 93: "la campagna di cui stiamo parlando rappresenta un'autentica faccenda metropolitana. (...) sotto il simbolo della nostra campagna viene condotta una batta-

In questo caso, rigettate le funzioni anti-moderniste come tentativi di mantenere in vita la “sicurezza” borghese (e si comprendono gli anatemi di Rauschning), gli elementi pertinenti alla *Zivilisation* assumeranno i tratti valoriali della *Kultur*: “Cercheremo di tralasciare le obiezioni di un malinteso romanticismo che vede la macchina in conflitto con la *Kultur*. Se il nostro tempo possiede una cultura è solo grazie alle macchine”. (Jünger 1995, 95)

Tale divaricazione tripartitica (con tutte le sue ramificazioni tematiche) significa anche, naturalmente, che il binomio città-campagna è semplicemente l’elemento culturalmente più vistoso della contrapposizione in atto all’interno della cultura di destra. L’anti-modernismo riesce infatti a declinarsi (in ogni Paese) in una lunga serie di motivi: critica del denaro e della speculazione (caratteristica assegnata solitamente agli ebrei),¹⁴ critica del materialismo, critica del lavoro ‘diviso’ e ‘specializzato’, ecc. Tali tematiche ruotano attorno al macro-tema della *metropolis* inquadrata come palcoscenico dell’emersione delle masse e del loro sistema di valori. Questo è ad esempio quell’Hofmannsthal che guarda allo ‘spirito europeo’ in contrapposizione a quello materialista: “un mutato rapporto dell’io rispetto all’esistenza, al denaro. [...] Qui può risorgere il logoro ed esausto concetto d’Europa. Nel singolo. Nelle masse esso è vissuto attaccato allo schema, è diventato un gettone” (Hofmannsthal 2003, 37). E questo è il Barrès che lega industria e tecnica quali elementi finalizzati a distruggere, a uno col nazionalismo, il mondo rurale e il suo pre-giudiziale (in senso positivo) sistema di valori; quello stesso sistema di valori che, è un punto che non va dimenticato, considera base della produzione artistica:

Dans les villes, les inventions du luxe, les modes de la capitale combattent les agencements de simple commodité; dans les groupes ruraux [...] toutes ces humbles maisons qui

glia che si rifa al sistema di valori di un’epoca passata. (...) esplicitamente statico”. Tali tesi si sovrappongono da vicino a quelle sostenute dallo Schmitt di *Romanticismo politico* (1919), dove la ricerca di valori assoluti fuori dalla sfera valoriale del presente non può che risolversi in un fuga romantica.

¹⁴ Spessissimo il tema della speculazione, vale a dire di un processo di profitto parassitario rispetto a quello della produzione è dato a carico degli ebrei. Cfr. Barrès 1897, 312: “Eh! le propriétaire des hauts – Fould? Et ce nom évocateur de la riche famille juive qui a peut-être le mieux symbolisé l’installation au pouvoir de l’aristocratie de Bourse succédant au patronat terrien”. Allo stesso modo il leader antisemita Jules Guérin può farsi promotore della difesa della piccola proprietà contro le grandi ditte industriali.

s'assurent ce que le lieu comporte de bien-être sont esthétiquement supérieures à certaines constructions urbaines, riches, mais dénuées de sens. [...] Ils vivront dans les mêmes maisons et dans les mêmes travaux, et les préjugés qu'ils y héritent demeureront longtemps encore les vérités de leur ordre. La civilisation industrielle ne descend pas au-dessous de Trèves (Barrès 1897, 386).

3. USA e URSS

La fondazione dello spirito nazionale in un quadro a fondamento *naturale* permetterà poi ai temi anti-modernisti di continuare a giocare un ruolo importante anche nel dopoguerra, tanto nel quadro delle teorizzazioni economico-politiche quanto in quello delle prospettive artistiche, solitamente incrociandosi col più generale *rappel à l'ordre*. In Germania l'ideologia del *Bauerntum* viene ad esempio rivitalizzata da un settore dell'intellighenzia nazionale che se ne serve per spiegare le ragioni della sconfitta militare: la sconfitta è cioè addossata all'adozione da parte dei tedeschi di uno spirito non conforme a quello della loro *terra*. Si verificano però tre novità sostanziali rispetto alla ideologia ruralista di fine '800 e dei primissimi anni del secolo. In primo luogo, si pensi a un romanzo come *Volk ohne Raum* di Hans Grimm, i tratti *völkisch* escono dall'alveo di un pacificato romanticismo diventando decisamente agonistici (nel romanzo in questione il villaggio è in preda all'industrializzazione: invasione del denaro, distruzione dell'artigianato, ecc.) e sempre più fondati su motivi biologici ("Ich glaube an Blut; ich glaube an die Kraft der Tradition") (Grimm 1926, 32) che si danno come resistenza alla modernità avanzante. In tale prospettiva, naturalmente, la stessa Repubblica di Weimar passa a essere vista come rappresentazione di una *modernità* mediante cui uno 'spirito' non-tedesco sta sottomettendo la Germania (la "matria", nelle parole del Bohem di *Ruf der Jungen*). In seconda battuta – ed è principalmente la prospettiva del Walter Darré di *La nuova nobiltà di sangue e suolo* (1930) – l'analisi ruralista esce dal campo culturale per farsi direttamente proposta politica tesa a difendere l'economia agricola quale luogo di sviluppo di una razza *sana*, legata all'ambiente naturale, lontana dal "mare di pietre" che è quella "piovra" cittadina che produce "individui in serie" e accelera il processo di sradicamento (Darré 1978, 169-74).¹⁵

15 Sulla figura di Darré cfr. Bramwell 1988.

Temi anti-modernisti attraversano altresì il lavoro di alcuni degli autori più canonici della “rivoluzione conservatrice”. Non solo il ‘tradizionalista’ Edgar Jung, nella sua attitudine medievalistica che tende a vedere l’industrializzazione come via maestra per l’emergere di valori massificati, esalta il ritorno agli “eterni valori” che caratterizzavano gli uomini prima della Rivoluzione francese¹⁶ (chiamando su questa linea al passaggio da una *égalité* materialista ad una di spirito),¹⁷ ma addirittura Zehrer vede, almeno per un certo periodo, come inevitabile il ritorno a un’economia a base agricola. Il senso di una comunità-rurale come base per la difesa di un *ordine* di valori pre-selezionati si intreccia poi inevitabilmente proprio alle riflessioni sul corporativismo, insistendo sulla rappresentanza di *ordini/ceti* sociali (Othmar Spann) come via alla ricostruzione di quel tessuto etico-sociale frantumato dal liberalismo e dallo spirito commerciale. Come ha scritto Charles S. Maier la “storia doveva fare lo sgambetto a ognuno di questi gruppi” (1979, 32): la versione corporativista della “rivoluzione conservatrice” verrà superata in una rappresentanza *de facto* di ordini economici tesi a esaltare proprio il criterio della produttività, mentre la *campagna* sarà sì celebrata dal nazismo quale luogo principe dell’anima tedesca (anti-economica, anti-materialista, gerarchica, ecc.), ma saranno le nuove autostrade a portare i cittadini del Terzo Reich a quella *natura* che li definisce.¹⁸

Anche il dopoguerra francese è altamente caratterizzato, a destra, da una ripresa delle tematiche anti-moderniste (una linea ideologica che si protrarrà fino a Vichy). Se addirittura Léger e Le Corbusier mischiano ai vecchi temi modernisti una rinnovata attenzione per le forme vernacolari, finendo addirittura per considerare il *moderno* (è ad esempio il Léger di *Si tu n'aimes pas les vacances*) nei termini de-umanizzanti dell’organizzazione tayloristica (quella

¹⁶ Cfr. Beck 2019, 5: “With instantaneity as the basis of discontinuous interpretations of temporality, these images especially negated – or transfigured – the perception of historical time as *progress*, [...] each of these authors disavowed linearity and continuity and postulated a caesura in time as the premise for a new conception of history”.

¹⁷ Cfr. Jung 1932, 380.

¹⁸ Vale la pena notare che un principio, al fondo di carattere brutalmente *materialista*, avrà la meglio anche sui raffinati distinguo sulla questione razza/cultura/spirito/anima elaborati dagli intellettuali della “rivoluzione conservatrice”. Rosenberg risolverà la questione, dimostrando tutta la connivenza del cosiddetto “razzismo spirituale” o “culturale”, semplicemente affermando che “l’anima è la razza vista dall’interno”.

stessa *organizzazione* a cui in precedenza avevano ascritto il miglioramento delle condizioni di vita della popolazione), non può sorprendere che operatori culturali e politici di tendenze assai più *tradizionaliste* come i cattolici Henri Daniel-Rops (*Le Monde sans âme*, 1932) e Henri Massis (ma addirittura Bucard comincia a parlare di “piccole patrie” e di Assemblee su base comunale, mentre Valois si scaglia *contre l'argent*)¹⁹ inquadri nella modernità-liberale il trionfo del macchinismo e della “vita materiale”. Mentre Déat critica il bolscevismo “coperto di ferro”, e Brasillach (*Les pompiers avec nous!*), su *Combat* di Maulnier, accusa l’Aragon passato al realismo socialista di essere la quinta colonna che favorisce l’introduzione in Francia dei metodi razional-capitalisti (“*Candides de la culture française*”), le nuove *ligues* portano avanti – nel consueto proposito secondo cui individualismo liberale e collettivismo socialista sono le due facce della medesima medaglia – i *sani* valori della ‘provincia’ contadina, cioè di una settore della compagine sociale rimasta al riparo dagli effetti nocivi e disgreganti della modernità.²⁰

Proprio *Combat* (in tematiche che riappariranno poi in *Je suis partout*) è in prima linea nel processo ai danni prodotti dalla civiltà industriale e dalla sua ideologia materialista. In tale direzione Maulnier (il più anti-materialista fra i protagonisti della destra francese) imbastisce, mentre scrive una favorevole recensione all’edizione francese di *Il terzo Reich* di Moeller van den Bruck (come del resto fa Brasillach), un continuo processo alla decadenza dei valori dello spirito così come espressa dall’economicismo liberale (“disordine individualistico”) e da quello marxista.²¹ Avallata, in un titolo dal sapore paretiano, la critica nazista al primato dell’economia (*Mythes socialistes*, 1936), il direttore di *Combat* invoca da copione la fusione della coscienza sociale con quella nazionale (*Au-delà du nationalisme*, 1938) al fine di superare il carattere borghese del nazionalismo, e quello rivoluzionario del socialismo, verso uno Stato corporativo in grado di difendere l’individuo dagli effetti

¹⁹ Cfr. Bucard 1930. Cfr. Valois 1928. Cfr. Simard 1988, 55-75.

²⁰ Cfr. Caredda 1976, 151: “hanno una visione della Francia come d’una grande nazione agraria, in cui sono i proprietari terrieri, gli abitanti delle campagne in genere, ad incarnare i sani valori della Patria, del Lavoro, della Famiglia; gli operai diventano ‘bolscevichi’ non appena rompono il quadro idilliaco del paternalismo padronale”.

²¹ Già nel 1934, nel volume *Demain la France* (scritto a sei mani con Jean-Pierre Maxence e Robert Francis), Maulnier sosteneva del resto che gli ideali democratici conducessero inevitabilmente al materialismo marxista.

perniciosa di quella che, in *La crise est dans l'homme*, definisce “civiltà macchinistica”. Se il nazionalismo borghese era stato appunto l'espressione della classe industriale trionfante nella coscienza di uno Stato diventato sua espressione, e se il marxismo aveva cercato di imporre alla nazione lo stile di vita del proletariato (spingendo ancor più il pedale della subordinazione di tutte le sfere di attività all'economia),²² il nuovo nazionalismo, fondato sulle categorie intermedie fra proletariato e grande borghesia, si rifà invece a quell'idea di nazione tramandata dalle società precedenti. Si tratta di un'idea di nazione in grado di immettere i processi economici all'interno di quelle entità storico-biologiche che sono appunto le strutture (ideologiche) nazionali,²³ così superando quegli esiti della società industriale che stanno trasformando gli Stati Uniti e l'Unione Sovietica in Paesi dominati dai nessi congiunti di massificazione materialistica, atomizzazione sociale, trionfo della tecnica: “La société productive et rationalisée de Ford et Staline, [...] l'esclavage sans retour aux forces les plus vulgaires de la matière” (Maulnier 1935, 194).

La descrizione di queste due nazioni è del resto forse il centro del campo anti-modernista di destra così come si esprime fra le due guerre. Se già a inizio anni '20 Spengler aveva lamentato l'assenza di un impianto *comunitario* in USA e in URSS (e Werner Sombart aveva aggiunto i bolscevichi al macro-settore antropologico dei “mercanti”),²⁴ verso la fine della decade cominciano a moltiplicarsi – soprattutto in Francia – volumi che descrivono in termini estremamente negativi le strutture socio-economiche dei due Paesi, così legandosi pienamente alla precedente teorizzazione della destra di ante-guerra sul volto bifronte (edonista e comunista) del materialismo.²⁵

Il 1927 è in tal senso l'anno decisivo. Nel giro di pochi mesi vengono pubblicati *Les États-Unis d'aujourd'hui* di André Siegfried, *Qui sera le maître, Europe or Amérique?* di Lucien Romier, la *Défense de l'Occident* di Henri Massis, *Le Voyage de Moscou* di Georges Duhamel, *Dévant l'obstacle* di André Tardieu e *La crisi del mondo moderno* di Guénon. Quest'ultimo, criticando il conservatorismo di Massis (e dunque dell'*Action*) come troppo compromesso

²² Cfr. Maulnier 1938, 182.

²³ Cfr. Sternhell 1997, 335.

²⁴ Cfr. Nolan 1994.

²⁵ Cfr. Milza 1987.

con la *modernità* che vuole combattere,²⁶ si esprime in questi termini sulla funzione del *lavoro* nei due Paesi:

Ben diversi dagli artigiani di un tempo, essi non son più che i servitori delle macchine e, per dir così, fanno tutt'uno con esse. Debbono ripetere ininterrottamente, in modo affatto meccanico, certi determinati movimenti, sempre gli stessi, ad evitare la minima perdita di tempo. Ciò è almeno quel che vien desiderato da certi metodi americani, considerati come l'ultima parola del “progresso”, e entusiasticamente adottati dalla Russia bolscevica. Si tratta infatti di produrre il più possibile. (Guénon 2015, 139)

Fuori dalle prospettive del “pensiero tradizionale”, la destra francese fa dello stile di vita dei due giganti industriali la cartina di tornasole di quel processo storico di ‘decadenza’ (e si pensi anche a *Il mondo nuovo* di Huxley che è del 1932) già denunciato, nell’alveo di uno scontro fra ‘spirituale’ e ‘materiale’, fra qualitativo e quantitativo, dalla generazione precedente. Se Tardieu opera ancora in un livello scopertamente *culturalista*, separando binomicamente i due mondi (Francia e America) sulla base di *miti* scopertamente ideologici (amore della terra francese *vs.* nomadismo americano, ecc.), Siegfried – pur restando nel solito schema mezzi *vs.* fini e quantità *vs.* qualità – già introduce alcune interessanti riflessioni sulla relazione fra i modi di produzione (standardizzazione produttivi) e gli effetti di questa sulla psiche. Se Massis (ritornando continuamente sul tema: *Proudhon and Amérique, Dialogue entre deux mondes*, ecc.)²⁷ inquadra nella de-spiritualizzazione americana (e nella sua fede protestante) il decadimento in “commercialismo” dei valori cattolico-universali dell’Occidente, un decadimento che, seguendo Banville,²⁸ condurrà alla fine della supremazia bianca-europea (la Francia è l’ultimo baluardo),²⁹

²⁶ Cfr. Guénon 2015, 157: “diremo che il Massis suppone dappertutto azioni antioccidentali solo perché la sua mente è turbata dall’angoscia in lui suscitata dal presentimento di un crollo più o meno prossimo della civiltà moderna”.

²⁷ Cfr. Toda 1987.

²⁸ Le idee di Banville sono del resto al centro del lavoro del gruppo maurrassiano, attivo proprio in questi anni, *Réaction pour l’ordre*, guidato da Jean de Fabreguas. Si tratta, in linea con le idee di Massis, di una delle fazioni più anti-moderniste e ultra-cattoliche della destra francese.

²⁹ Su tale linea ideologica, inevitabilmente, Massis guarderà al fascismo solo come movimento tradizionalista e anti-moderno, esaltando Franco sopra Hitler e schierandosi, dopo l’occupazione, con Pétain. Su ciò cfr. Massis 1939.

Romier (futuro ministro di Pétain) inquadra invece tale de-spiritualizzazione più direttamente nel quadro dello sviluppo capitalistico,³⁰ salvo poi operare una distinzione fra capitalismo americano e capitalismo francese, ravvisando nel secondo, da copione, la possibilità di un freno *etico* agli eccessi del primo: “capter le pouvoir de la machine sans lui sacrifier la personnalité de l’homme [...] Le maître du monde sera le ‘civilisé’ sachant se servir de la machine et non le ‘proléttaire’ cherchant dans la machine le secret de la civilisation” (1927, 239). Per Romier (ed è forse l’elemento più interessante della sua riflessione) le degenerazioni di taylorismo e fordismo (attive naturalmente anche in URSS) possono essere contrastate ostacolando la super-produzione e ponendo in tal modo un freno allo sviluppo della stessa cultura massificata. In tal senso, se pur l’alveo di riflessione resta di carattere elitario e spiritualista (l’*high-culture*, così come si esprime in Francia, come baluardo contro la degenerazione del reale), viene però manifestata la relazione dialettica fra materiale e culturale.

Fra il 1930 e il 1933 appaiono, sia in Francia che in Italia, molti altri testi sul tema (si pensi anche ad *America primo amore* di Soldati che è del 1935).³¹ In Italia, se già nel 1930 Malaparte aveva avvertito che gli “Stati Uniti d’America e la Russia dei Soviet sono i paesi dove più si rivelano i pregi e i difetti della civiltà moderna” (1930, 154), tre anni dopo l’ingegnere Gaetano Ciocca fornirà prove alla cultura fascista (*Giudizio sul bolscevismo*) sul sempre sospettato “macchinoteismo” sovietico che guarda in pari misura a Stalin e a Ford.³² Allo stesso modo il giornalista Ugo D’Andrea si preoccuperà, più divulgativamente, di rassicurare i compatrioti sulla ‘terza-via’ che li terrà al riparo dagli orrori della *modernità*: “dinanzi al nuovo mondo dell’uomo-folla, dell’uomo macchina, dell’individuo collettività, mondo asiatico o americano che sia, il mio mondo rimane europeo, rimane italiano, rimane fascista” (1932, 147). Inutile dire che anche Evola, nel consueto tentativo di orientare il fascismo, partecipa attivamente al dibattito in corso,³³ vedendo

³⁰ Cfr. Armus 2007, 26: “a land of inverted values where human beings were reduced to the function that they played for the state or business”.

³¹ Cfr. Ben-Ghiat 2000, 62: “Soldati dipinge l’America come un luogo violento e patologico, che rappresenta un monito contro una modernità senza regole. Il capitalismo ‘selvaggio’ aveva creato un nuovo tipo di sudditanza di massa, governata da un cieco impulso a consumare a qualunque costo”.

³² Cfr. Schanpp 2004. Cfr. più in generale Groh 1980.

³³ Cfr. Evola 1991.

USA e URSS come due vie all'allontanamento dalla ‘tradizione’ nel quadro dello sviluppo di razionalizzazione, massificazione, *comfort*, ecc.: “Qui Stalin e Ford si danno la mano [...], vi è chi ancora si trastulla con l’idea che la “democrazia” americana sia l’antidoto contro il comunismo sovietico”. Questa è l’Unione Sovietica:

L’elemento primario è la negazione di ogni valore d’ordine spirituale e trascendente: [...] la meccanizzazione, la disintellettualizzazione e la razionalizzazione di ogni attività [...], la macchina si fa centro di una nuova promessa messianica. [...] Il fine è appunto la realizzazione dell’uomo massa [...]. È l’ideale del Superstato, come inversione sinistra dell’ideale tradizionale organico. (Evola 1998, 388-90)

E questi sono gli Stati Uniti:

ha introdotto definitivamente la religione della pratica e del rendimento, ha posto l’interesse al guadagno, alla grande produzione industriale, [...] quantitativa, al di sopra di ogni altro interesse [...]: per bocca di William James ha dichiarato che l’utile è il criterio del vero. [...] nella grandezza smarrente delle metropoli americane ove il singolo [...] realizza la sua nullità dinanzi al regno immenso delle quantità, ai gruppi, ai *trust* e agli *standard* onnipotenti, alle selve tentacolari di grattacieli e fabbriche [...], sempre la stessa è la volontà di standardizzare [...]. Lo *standard* morale corrisponde a quello pratico dell’americano. Il *comfort* alla portata di tutti e la superproduzione nella civiltà dei consumi che caratterizzano l’America sono stati pagati col prezzo di milioni di uomini ridotti all’automatismo nel lavoro. (Ibid., 391-96)

Sempre nel 1930 esce poi in Francia il volume (*Scenes de la vie future* di Georges Duhamel) che, per successo e capacità divulgativa, è destinato a orientare il dibattito sul tema nel corso di almeno un lustro (se non una decade). Duhamel, descrivendo il suo viaggio in America del 1927, non si limita a ricapitolare i consueti temi anti-modernisti (anti-macchinismo, anti-massificazione, anti-standardizzazione, ecc.) applicando poi la solita prospettiva binomiale (Francia *vs.* Stati Uniti) finalizzata a preservare, in movenze agonistiche, il nocciolo vitale dell’anima francese, ma porta la *modernità* capitalistica (parla di “spirito dell’alveare”, di “cancellamento dell’individuo”, di “apprendista stregone”) nel cuore stesso di Francia. La civiltà americana, non ci sono più dubbi, sta conquistando il vecchio continente: la grande maggioranza dei francesi la invoca ormai a gran voce. È quello di Duhamel (che non sarà mai fascista) un grido disperato e estremamente consci dei suoi limiti e dei suoi risvolti psicologici (l’autore afferma la sua stessa prospettiva anti-modernista come

‘inutile’, ma afferma pure che, dopo aver visto l’America, non può più farne a meno). L’America non è qui l’*avversario* (ogni battaglia è vana): l’America è il *profeta* che parla di ciò che sta per accadere. Non solo i suoi sistemi di produzione e consumo (e il tipo di esistenza che questi determinano nel solco del culto materialistico del *comfort*)³⁴ saranno a breve parte dell’Europa, ma la stessa cultura di massa a quelli collegata (film, pubblicità, corse d’auto, ecc.) sarà a breve la cultura d’Europa.

Questo libro è un caso *limite* della cultura della destra conservatrice fra le due guerre; e basterebbe metterlo in correlazione con l’altro successo editoriale del pensiero conservatore del 1929-1930, *La ribellione delle masse* di Ortega y Gasset (1988, 104): “New York e Mosca non presentano nulla di nuovo rispetto alla civiltà europea. Sono, l’una e l’altra, due parcelli del comando europeo, che, nel dissociarsi dal resto, ne hanno smarrito il senso”. Con Duhamel abbiamo infatti un pensiero che riesce tanto a delineare la dialettica fra materiale e culturale quanto a comprendere gli sviluppi del capitalismo su un piano internazionale destinato a travolgere le *Kultur* nazional-identitarie. Ciò che invece, come comprende perfettamente Benjamin leggendo il volume, risulta assente (ed è uno dei tratti più tipici della cultura di destra nel suo confrontarsi con lo sviluppo congiunto di tecnica e massa) è la capacità di comprendere come il dominio del *quantitativo* si sia ribaltato in un nuovo aspetto *qualitativo*, procedimento che è naturalmente anche alla base della possibilità di fondazione di una nuova cultura e di una nuova arte (la “*politicizzazione* dell’arte” dei comunisti):

La massa è una matrice dalla quale attualmente esce rinato ogni comportamento abituale nei confronti delle opere d’arte. La quantità si è ribaltata in qualità: le masse [...] hanno determinato un modo diverso di partecipazione. L’osservatore non deve lasciarsi ingannare dal fatto che questa partecipazione si manifesta dapprima in forme screditate. Eppure non sono mancati quelli che si sono pervicacemente attenuti a questo aspetto superficiale della cosa. Tra costoro Duhamel. (Benjamin 1967, 38-39)

Comprendere la questione in tali termini permette infatti, fra le altre cose, di superare l’impostazione binomiale non solo sul piano dell’analisi storica (come Duhamel effettivamente riesce a fare), ma anche sul piano di quel giudizio morale che mantiene invece Duhamel ancora legato a quella ‘nostalgia’ che sa

³⁴ Cfr. Nacci 1996. Cfr. anche Fauré e Bishop 1992.

inutile, cioè a quella presupposizione di una superiorità di ciò che è *passato* (e si pensi in quest'ottica anche al Bernanos di *La grande paura dei benpensanti*, ma addirittura Heidegger, del resto, parlando in *Introduzione alla metafisica* dell'orripilante estensione del “numero” e del “quantitativo” in atto in USA e URSS, sarà costretto contrapporvi l'immagine di un popolo tedesco *naturalmente* “metafisico”).

Altro testo di riferimento sarà *Il cancro americano* (1931) di Robert Aron e Arnaud Dandieu (addirittura la tecnocratica *Plans* accoglierà nei suoi fascicoli un lungo estratto del volume, pur facendolo precedere da uno scritto di Philippe Lamour che difende la ‘via francese’ al taylorismo). *Il cancro americano* condivide col libro di Duhamel il presupposto di un'incontrollata diffusione in Francia dei sistemi di produzione, delle idee e dello stile di vita americani,³⁵ ma non ascrive il fenomeno al moto universalistico del capitalismo, bensì, ed è ovviamente una differenza immensa, all'azione della Terza Repubblica. Grazie al cavallo di Troia della politica radical-socialista, l'americanismo, che ha già *vinto* la Russia, sta ora trionfando sulla vecchia anima di Francia,³⁶ riducendo ogni valore a elemento monetario-economico. L'americanismo ha qui pervertito il capitalismo medesimo – è “la malattia della ragione ridotta a un ruolo tecnico” (Aron e Dandieu 2005, 16) –, è una *massificazione* del razionalismo illuministico, riformulando i termini del progresso (industriale e scientifico) nell'ottica di un'azione puramente *materiale* destinata a non lasciare alcuno spazio ai presupposti *organicistici*, né a quelli a trazione nostalgica né a quelli guardanti al futuro. Nel '33 Aron e Dandieu vedranno per un attimo, nel nazismo, la ricomposizione di quella ‘collettività organica’ negata dall'americanismo, ma assegneranno a questo poi il pervertimento (soprattutto in termini razziali) dello stesso nazional-socialismo.

Gli elementi razziali, sempre in funzione anti-modernista, connessi all'americanismo e al soviettismo emergeranno invece direttamente nella cultura fascista e para-fascista: dalla regia della “mammella ebraica” alle spalle dei “fratelli capitalismo e socialismo” del Malynski di *La guerra occulta*, alla sovrapposizione di giudaismo e bolscevismo portata avanti da “Je suis partout”

³⁵ Cfr. anche Morand 1930. Roxanne Panchasi (2009) ha portato a termine un'interessante cartografia su varie riviste francesi di inizio anni '30 che hanno ospitato articoli dedicati a visioni distopiche del futuro. La sua analisi mostra, fra le altre cose, come gli elementi distopici tendano a coincidere con gli effetti concernenti l'americanizzazione del Paese.

³⁶ Cfr. Aron e Dandieu 1931.

e dal Céline di *Bagatelle*. La stessa New York di *Viaggio al termine della notte*, la New York dei “cretini scientificolari materialistici”, era stata del resto il luogo dell’anomia e della comunità assente, la cui disgregazione e frammentazione (materiale e culturale) si riversa nell’animo di Bardamu, sostituendo alle precedenti concettualizzazioni valoriali un “tornado di sensazioni”, vale a dire la riduzione del concetto di *valore* nel quadro di un divenire continuo teso all’ipostatizzazione di stati d’animo transeunti.

4. Avventure strapaesane

Anche in Italia, dalla fine degli anni ’20, gli Stati Uniti si manifestano quale minaccia diretta, attraverso la cultura e il consumo di massa, a uno stile di vita.³⁷ Questo è ad esempio Maccari: “Oggi il nemico vero [...] entra in casa nostra coi giornali, colle fotografie, coi libri che ne diffondono la mentalità” (Maccari 30 marzo 1928, 5).³⁸ Se Berto Ricci contrappone *Roma non a Mosca*, ma a “Chicago capitale del maiale”,³⁹ e rivendica al fascismo *squadristico* e *sansepolcrista* una prospettiva anti-capitalista (o pre-capitalista) finalizzata a rivoluzionare fino i meccanismi di produzione (il riferimento politico è Gino Baroncini) per saldarsi all’*ontologia* che il frugale popolo italiano *naturalmente* esprime,⁴⁰ uomini come Elio Vittorini e Romano Bilenchi – mentre la FIAT (d’accordo Mussolini) sigla un contratto con Bedaux per l’introduzione di un sistema basato sulla razionalizzazione scientifica del lavoro – elaborano un’idea di cultura popolare finalizzata a esaltare proprio il tema del *lavoro* pre-capitalistico/rurale quale simbolo-spartiacque tanto fra l’Italia e l’Europa quanto fra l’Italia popolare e quella borghese: “Grazie a Dio e a Mussolini, l’Italia non è tutta borghese europeista e parigina”.⁴¹ La cultura fascista anti-modernista guarda come sempre più a Mazzini che a Marx, riempiendo la rilevata contrapposizione sociale (il contrasto fra un’Italia popolare e un’Italia borghese, specchio del contrasto fra l’Italia e le

37 Cfr. De Grazia 1981.

38 Cfr. anche Dottorelli 1933; Poggiani 1936, e naturalmente *America amara* di Emilio Cecchi (1939). Cfr. Gentile 1993, 7-20.

39 Cfr. Malaparte 1930, 4-5: “Non fa meraviglia che i liberali e i democratici [...] tornino disillusi, indignati e pentiti dai loro viaggi in Russia. [...] l’unità di una rivoluzione, unità di spiriti, di cause [...] non entra nell’orizzonte della logica liberale”.

40 Cfr. Buchignani 1994.

41 Su Bilenchi cfr. il primo capitolo di Brogi 2012.

democrazie capitalistiche) con tematiche a carattere mitico-ontologico, perché tese ad assegnare in blocco al macro-tema della *modernità* tutte le caratteristiche della cultura dialettico-materialistica: economicismo borghese e proletario. Il mito della “provincia” elaborato da *Strapaese* (rifugio culturale dello sconfitto “fascismo intransigente”)⁴² consiste nel legare il *popolo* rurale a un sistema di valori che è fascista perché italiano, ed è rivoluzionario in quanto opposto, in palingenesi, a quel *moderno* che si esprime (politicamente) in democrazia, socialismo, parlamentarismo, ecc., e, culturalmente, in un’arte *europeizzante* che rigetta (il bersaglio sarà anzitutto “900” di Bontempelli) proprio quell’ontologia che il popolo italiano esprime quando ritorna alla sue *origini*:

Strapaese è l’affermazione risoluta e serena del valore *attuale, essenziale, indispensabile* delle tradizioni e dei costumi caratteristicamente italiani, di cui il “paese” è insieme rivelatore, custode e rinnovatore; la selezione di quelle tradizioni e di quei costumi in vista di una unità nazionale che li riunisca in una sintesi potente e feconda senza che essi perdano la forza e la schiettezza originaria della terra e del clima ove maturano. (Maccari 24 novembre 1927, 4)

Su tale linea, come Malaparte afferma già dal 1926, non è nemmeno necessario che il Governo stabilisca delle linee direttive per la produzione artistica. È invece sufficiente che questa produzione si mantenga nel solco di quell’*italianità* (e si notino i toscanismi utilizzati da Malaparte in quest’articolo) che, essendo in diretta connessione alla spirito *popolare*, già la fa fascista:

Tu mi domandi, caro Bottai, la mia opinione sulla possibilità e la necessità di un’arte fascista [...]. O che scherziamo? [...] o che vuol dire *arte fascista*? [...] se per arte fascista s’intende un’arte profondamente ed essenzialmente italiana, che abbia radici nella nostra vera, classica, italianissima tradizione, [...] becera all’occorrenza [...] allora [...] io dico che è tutta un’altra faccenda [...]: Mussolini quando dice “questo è fascista” intende dire che è italiano. (Malaparte 1991, 867-69)

Le malapartiane *Italia barbara* e *Avventure di un capitano di sventura* (“vostro felicissimo paese, che da qualche secolo ha l’avvertenza di vivere e di

⁴² Cfr. Maccari 30 gennaio 1928, 4: “abbiamo rotto le teste di alcuni cogliomberi perché cantavano *Bandiera Rossa*, e ora si consente che gli agrari strozzino i braccianti con salari da fame”. Cfr. Mangoni 1974, 145: “Dalla parte del ‘Selvaggio’ rimanevano ben pochi: ‘L’Assalto’ di Bologna, ‘Roma fascista’ e Malaparte [...] l’obiettivo [...] se non quello di portare a termine la rivolta squadristica, almeno quello di moralizzare gli istituti politici e culturali italiani”.

prosperare per conto proprio, fuori delle necessità e degli obblighi della storia d’Europa” (1963, 29) andranno proprio a illustrare ai “selvaggi” le ragioni di un intervento culturale che, senza rinunciare ai consueti meccanismi elitari (“Il popolo artigiano, il popolo marinaro, il popolo agricoltore: sicura base dell’aristocrazia”), sia in grado di illustrare (e rafforzare) la resistenza *italiana* alla modernità avanzante e alle sue sovrastrutture. Come sostiene ancora Maccari: “Strapaese si è eletto a baluardo contro l’invasione delle mode, del pensiero straniero e delle civiltà modernista, in quanto tali mode, pensiero e civiltà minacciano di reprimere, avvelenare o distruggere le qualità caratteristiche degli Italiani” (Maccari 15 marzo 1927, 5).⁴³

Da questa roccaforte ideologica che equipara ontologicamente Italia e fascismo, si sviluppano poi tutte le consuete ramificazioni concettuali della prospettiva anti-modernista. Da questo *standpoint* lo stesso Malaparte può separare la *straniera* borghesia italiana dalla tradizione culturale del Belpaese: “La borghesia non potrà mai intendere strapaese e la sua letteratura, che tien fede alle tradizioni della lingua, dei modi, dei costumi e degli spiriti. È un fatto già osservato da molti che la società borghese contemporanea non è più capace di intendere la grande tradizione letteraria italiana”. Longanesi può addossare all’europeismo certe manifestazioni artistiche nostrane: “Se in molte manifestazioni della vita italiana si riscontra mancanza di stile, la colpa è dell’europeismo” (Longanesi 1976, 73). Allo stesso modo Gherardo Casini (allontanatosi da Bottai)⁴⁴ può direttamente indicare la marcia all’indietro come moto rivoluzionario:

43 Come ha brillantemente notato Andrea Righi tale ideologia deve molto al soggetto sociale scelto a modello di riferimento: il contadino della Val d’Elsa. Cfr. 2015, 80-81: “This microregion historically enjoyed a relative prosperity, thus allowing for a remarkable mobility in class alliances. From an economic point of view, a few (usually textile) manufacturing districts produced a small working class while the share-cropper system – in which the peasants owned small farms – prevented both the rise of large landowners and the need for seasonal laborers”.

44 Anche su *Critica fascista* vengono comunque pubblicati articoli che vanno in direzione anti-modernista. Cfr. ad esempio Piccoli 1932, 23: “La mentalità ‘standard’ è come un’enorme piovra che stende i suoi tentacoli su tutta la vita esteriore, imprigiona l’anima e la mente, e costringe le idee e gli atteggiamenti a uniformarsi a un tipo unico, allo stesso modo con cui i grandi stabilimenti meccanici producono i diversi pezzi di un’automobile secondo una sagoma unitaria”.

La sostanza genuina dell’italiano nuovo noi la dovremo cercare dove non è arrivata la corrompitrice civiltà moderna. E si badi che con questo non intendiamo di dire della civiltà meccanica, del telegrafo, del telefono, delle strade ferrate, dell’igiene e se si vuole radiofonia e del cinematografo, ma di quelle forme di vita e di mentalità forestiere che ci si sforza d’adottare fra noi deprimendo le nostre native qualità paesane. Così che oggi si cerca di americanizzare tutto dalle scarpe alle donne-uomini e agli uomini-donne, con tutti i conseguenti modi di pensare e d’agire come se l’Italia fosse una qualunque colonia di quaccheri e di mormoni da civilizzare coi lumi del progresso transatlantico [...] Perciò se vorremo scoprire quel che c’è rimasto di essenzialmente nostro in Italia dovremo andare a scovarlo fuori di queste nostre città che figliano palazzi di cemento armato, uomini e donne su misura, nelle campagne dove non è arrivato il rullo livellatore della civiltà internazionale. Ci ridurremo su per i colli di questa nostra divina Toscana inim-bastardibile dove la gente vive sana e parla pulito, o per le piane della Romagna sincera come il suo vino. (Casini 1926, 1)⁴⁵

Pur se non mancano del tutto in tale prospettiva prese di posizioni molto meno inclini al mero *culturalismo* (“È inutile insistere sul concetto di ‘spirito borghese’ che salva capra e cavoli [...] il borghese funziona ed esiste in funzione di un certo stato economico”) (Chilanti 1938, 573) è chiaro che, nella consueta capacità del mussolinismo di servirsi tanto dei temi modernisti quanto di quelli anti-modernisti, una tendenza culturale che si è sviluppata nel solco dell’equazione fascismo-Italia è continuamente a rischio caduta nel conformismo di Regime, appunto perché tende a considerare ogni azione del Governo come manifestazione della stessa *italianità* che nel fascismo si esprime (servirà la catastrofe della guerra a rompere questa equazione e a condurre molti fascisti di sinistra dall’altra parte della barricata). Malaparte, ad esempio, finirà naturalmente per allinearsi alle prospettive anti-albioniche che matureranno dopo la guerra d’Etiopia (e fin qua il posizionamento potrebbe ancora rientrare nei presupposti *popolareggianti* e classisti del discorso Strapaesano),⁴⁶ ma finirà

45 I riferimenti a Toscana e Romagna vanno a coincidere, storicamente, con i luoghi dove il fascismo intransigente era più forte.

46 Cfr. Malaparte 1992, 80: “candida Albione dei banchieri, dei mercanti [...] dei miserabili avanzi umani accatastati come mandrie scabbiose nei sordidi *slums* [...]. Addio, caro e simpatico Montagu Norman, Governatore della Bank of England [...] (ancora potentissima nei paesi europei dove sopravvivono la democrazia giudaica e il liberalismo dei plutocrati), che ha tante volte invaso il Continente portandovi la distruzione, la miseria [...] di lavoratori asserviti alla disoccupazione e alla fame”.

pure per avallare in termini anti-moderni e anti-capitalisti (oltreché razzisti) l'attacco a una Grecia, a suo dire, *inglesizzata*, cioè moderna:

una classe bastarda che di europeo non ha né il sangue, né la civiltà, né il nome. Tanto più ignobile è questa tirannia oggi dopo che, con l'avvento di Metaxàs al potere, l'autorità dello Stato è caduta in mano di quella deteriore razza di levantini [...], la classe plutocratica [...] che ha i suoi capitali in Inghilterra, i suoi interessi a Oxford e Cambridge. (Malaparte 1993, 376)

Dove però la sovrapposizione anti-modernista fra Italia e fascismo rivela tutt'intera la sua capacità conformistica è nella parabola di Soffici.

Nel 1923, scrivendo la prefazione a *L'Europa vivente* di Malaparte, Soffici avalla senza mezzi termini la teoria che vede nel fascismo la resistenza-rivoluzionaria a quella degenerazione introdotta in Europa dalla Riforma luterana: “la degenerazione italiana, dalla fine della Rinascenza in poi, ed il suo accelerarsi, in ispecie dopo il Risorgimento, non da altro deriva che dall'assorbimento progressivo, da parte delle nostre classi colte, della mentalità protestante” (1961, 647). Riprendendo in tal modo il dibattito fra latinità e germanesimo, Soffici recupera i suoi temi giovanili (temi lacerbiani che lo avevano accompagnato fino al ‘maggio radioso’) sul conflitto di civiltà, ma i termini di questo conflitto risultano ora del tutto rovesciati, perché del tutto rovesciata è la prospettiva storica che riflette sul moderno (e sul modernismo). Il Soffici che, alla fine del 1909, spiegava, nella *Lettera a un giovane pittore*, che gli antichi, costretti in un patrimonio comune di valori morali e religiosi, disprezzavano la natura perché sempre cercavano di rapportare le proprie inclinazioni a quegli ideali astratti; lo stesso Soffici che, nel 1911, in uno straordinario saggio su Courbet, delineava la Rivoluzione Francese come il “colpo di grazia assestato al mondo classico” (1959, 210), dove *classico* risultava qualunque artista (o filosofo) che obbligasse la natura nelle *forme* di “qualche verità trascendente”, inverte ora drasticamente i termini del contrasto, ipostatizzando proprio la positività, contro-riformistica, del concetto di *classico*, e già indicando nell’arte/cultura uno dei luoghi privilegiati del *politico*:

le nostre arti, le nostre lettere, la nostra filosofia [...] hanno progressivamente perduto il loro carattere nativo, sereno, misurato, realistico nel senso antico e classico; [...] questo spiega ogni nostra miseria, [...] ogni nostra caduta fino alla riscossa d’ottobre dell’anno scorso. [...] Definire dunque e predicare il Fascismo come un movimento di antiriforma equivale [...]

a spalancargli le porte verso la totale restaurazione dell'italianità, anzi della latinità, che è quanto dire dell'universalità. (1961, 647-48)

La Germania, sconfitta sul campo di battaglia, può ora presentarsi ancora minacciosa nell'orizzonte dello spirito, non più però perché concrezione di quell'anti-moderno (meccanico, razionalizzante, ordinativo, *crociano*) che il Soffici lacerbiano poneva a bersaglio dell'azione rivoluzionaria delle classi medie a trazione intellettuale, bensì espressione di quella tendenza disgregante che è propria dell'individualismo moderno che con la Riforma si inizia e col romanticismo, e poi con l'avanguardia, si attua in termini artistici:

Ideologie e utopie corrupsero l'animo popolare [...]. Il modernismo, il misticismo, l'occultismo, l'idealismo, il materialismo, il superomismo, il pragmatismo; il socialismo, il comunismo, il nikilismo, il romanticismo [...]. Miriamo all'ateismo confessato da intere classi sociali, posto come legge di Stato nella Russia rivoluzionaria; [...] per ciò che è delle arti, il futurismo, il cubismo, il surrealismo, il dadaismo. (1961, 443-45)

Democrazia e socialismo, avanguardia e modernismo sono ora accomunati (“Son sicuro che Lenin e Trotsky sono dei dadaisti entusiasti”) nel quadro del dissolvimento ideologico di un’unità spirituale che è l’unità di un popolo che ha nel *classico* il principio ricompositivo di un’organicità sociale che Soffici definisce *Stile*; il particolare, portato ad *espressione*, di una stirpe: “E che solo allorquando un pensiero politico profondo sarà espresso e bandito, il quale corrisponda al carattere vero essenziale della nostra razza, sarà possibile incamminarci verso una meta con fede di raggiungerla” (1923, 55-56). È per l'appunto tale *Stile* che l'artista avrà il compito di recuperare contro lo smarrimento della strada maestra:

la rivoluzione e il modernismo [...]. Non avevano pensato però quegli artisti stranieri [...] che le loro sensazioni e idee e immagini, per essere, appunto, particolari e caratteristiche del loro tempo, non potevano esserlo che per un certo tempo [...], mentre soltanto il fondo primordiale, nativo, semplice, essenziale delle cose permane in eterno [...]; e che solo in quel fondo sostanziale ed immutabile è [...] il proprio elemento vitale (1961, 380).

Si tratta di riportare l'elemento artistico a contatto con le *forme* prodotte dal suo popolo: “L'artista deve essere spiritualmente radicato nella sua terra; anzi essere di questa l'espressione sensibile”. Soffici sta cioè guardando, di contro

alle astrazioni moderniste, a un concetto *gestaltico* di Stile quale espressione del fondo, *naturalmente* classico ed eterno, di una comunità:

Il disordine gettato nel suo spirito l'ha condotto all'arbitrio individuale, alla creazione di forme emancipate dall'ordine naturale, di forme soggettive e perciò cerebrali, cioè astratte; [...] che cosa fu l'arte di Grecia e di Roma [...] se non un'affermazione precisa della realtà sensibile del mondo e della natura, una rivelazione armoniosa del loro ordine immutabile e necessario, [...] accettare le teorie oggi correnti [...] non significa altro se non ripudiare lo spirito animatore della civiltà romana e latina dell'Occidente europeo. (Ibid.)

Si tratta di una complessa serie di elementi che erano emersi in forme embrionali nel volume *Battaglia fra due vittorie* (significativamente pubblicato con una prefazione di Malaparte), volume che (fra la vittoria della Guerra e quella della marcia su Roma) aveva significato, nella battaglia per la conquista dell'egemonia, tutte le oscillazioni dell'avventura ideologica del primo fascismo. E volume che Soffici, emerso dalla guerra “un altro uomo”, e già affermando che “nel momento attuale [...] i fatti di ordine politico sono spesso così strettamente aderenti, o minacciano di divenirlo, a quelli spirituali ed estetici”, aveva sublimato come “sacrificio sull'altare dello Spirito e della Patria” (1923, xxxv-xxxvi). Qui le oscillazioni ideologiche di un “intellettuale tradizionale”, fra tentazioni frondiste e recupero di un ruolo subordinato ma reale (fra l'antico sogno di gestire in proprio la rivolta e il ruolo di *educazione* e contenimento per conto terzi appreso nella prospettiva populista sviluppata in trincea), fra consuete prospettive d'idealità anti-borghese e inalveamento di queste nella linea anti-moderna del populismo-contadinesco, già segnalano con chiarezza la progressiva subordinazione, per Soffici, della composita ideologia fascista ai presupposti reazionari di quella nazionalista. Qui, in legame indissolubile con un suolo patrio che (latino e cattolico) è però espressione di universalità, si innesta il *classico* anti-modernista di Soffici.

Ciò che Soffici passa a presentare come un'equiparazione fra etica ed estetica (politica e arte) è in realtà un progetto a matrice platonico-totalizzante che investe il fascismo del compito di modificare culturalmente tutti gli aspetti della vita, con il modello classico-gerarchico a far da guida (“Lo spirito che torna a dominare nelle arti [...] è uno spirito d'ordine tradizionale, di disciplina classica”) e con all'intellettuale riservato un compito da *estetizzatore* che però, nella connessione di tutti gli aspetti dello spirito, è un compito anche morale, cioè anche politico: “Gli uomini politici più avveduti hanno sempre

tenuti in gran conto gli avvisi che artisti veri potevano fornir loro. [...] agli artisti [...] basta presentire quali sono le tendenze dell'estetica verso l'avvenire, per capire nello stesso tempo quali saranno anche quelle delle altre facoltà spirituali” (1961, 319-20). La connessione di tutte le forme dello spirito (economiche, politiche, artistiche, ecc.) che l’orizzonte controriformistico enuncia contro la *frammentazione* moderna (e modernista), prospetta una ristrutturazione antropologica dove l’intellettuale riguadagna, in piena società di massa, un rispettabile compito pedagogico ponendo l’arte quale uno degli elementi connettivi della comunità e, al contempo legando, in un filo doppiamente determinato, la pratica artistica all’azione politica: “persuaso che l’Italia, forse meglio di qualsiasi altra nazione, potrebbe [...] arginare questa generale corsa al precipizio e ricondur tutti sul retto cammino – che è poi quello da lei in altri tempi tracciato [...] ho creduto mio dovere d’artista [...] elevare questo richiamo all’ordine: all’ordine italiano” (1963, 7). Il rapporto d’interdipendenza spirituale fra le arti, la politica, la morale, la religione, diventa per Soffici, al contempo, il motivo della nascita (essendo un movimento tipicamente italiano il fascismo dell’*italianità* condivide la struttura spiritualmente unitaria), la realtà e lo scopo del fascismo. Ma tale principio unificativo, però, è al contempo l’essenza stessa dell’oggetto-Italia che nel medesimo fascismo si esprime. L’approdo di tale processo, quello che il genio compie in campo artistico creando l’*espressione* di un popolo, sarà appunto ciò che Soffici definisce Stile: “Stile [...] è un fattore capitale di unità, di coesione tra i vari elementi di cui si compone un popolo e una civiltà, e perciò tra esso popolo ed il genio che ne interpreta lo spirito. [...] L’anima dell’artista aderisce, in questo caso, alla realtà, vi s’immerge tutta, se ne compenetra” (Ibid., 75-76). L’universalità che l’artista presenta si collega a quel valore socialmente espresso nel concetto di *classico* che è, al contempo, l’ordine formale dell’arte (e dunque della morale, politica, ecc.) e il ritrovamento di ciò che il *moderno* ha dissolto. Il classico sarà ciò che il popolo esprime e che – tramite l’intellettuale che lo idealizza universalizzandolo – gli permette di rivelarsi a se stesso in una realtà estranea alle concettualizzazioni che su di lei un’intelligenza moderna e degenerata (dunque una politica/morale degenerata) fa concrecere.

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Training Would-be Teachers: Premises and Results of a Content-based ESL Course

Abstract

This article focuses on the description and discussion of a corpus of 12 lesson plans created by Second Language Acquisition MA students at Sapienza University of Rome in AY 2020-2021. The best practices selected represent valid case studies for a much broader reflection about the implementation of content-based instructional approaches in the Italian education system. Resorting to internationally acknowledged critics as well as zoomed views about content-based English Second/Foreign Language courses in Italy, the current study aims at developing a coherent and cohesive method for an effective application of content-based language teaching. Such a model can be exploited by aspiring and experienced teachers within the scope of developing transdisciplinary key competences for lifelong learning and the internationalisation of education systems in Italy and worldwide.

I. Acknowledgments

This article and the teaching practice it describes would not have been possible without the precious contribution of Second Language Acquisition (hereafter SLA) students/trainees belonging to the MA degree courses at Sapienza University of Rome – namely, English and Anglo-American Studies (EAAS) and Scienze Linguistiche, Letterarie e della Traduzione (SLLT; i.e., Linguistic, Literary and Translation Studies). To all and each of them goes my gratitude. More than 50 aspiring teachers attended my SLA course in the first semester of AY 2020-2021 and 29 of them decided to submit a lesson plan/project concerning Content-based Language Teaching (hereafter CBLT)/Content-

based Instruction (hereafter CBI)¹ to be discussed during an oral exam. Of these 29, I have selected 12 best practices whose rationale and findings are investigated in this article. For practical reasons, I requested their written permission to mention their names and quote from their outputs; they all accepted very graciously and enthusiastically. They are, in alphabetical order by surname, Mariangela Amoroso, Marco Bucci, Giada Calce, Giorgia Carta, Noemi Cirone, Giulia D'Elia, Gaia Guglielmino, Aytakin Gurbanzade, Fabrizio Patrolecco, Lidia Maria Pes, Silvia Principali and Ginevra Tedeschi.² Ad maiora, guys!

2. Introduction: CBLT in the Italian education system

CBLT is an approach to the teaching of a foreign language, mainly English, which has been receiving growing attention for its dual focus on both disciplinary contents such as Maths, Sciences, History, Philosophy, etc., and the development of the students' linguistic competence and metalinguistic awareness. It has sometimes been variously defined as an umbrella term encompassing a cauldron of different (but at the same time similar) approaches and methodologies, such as bilingual and immersion programmes, EAL (English as Additional Language), EMI (English Medium Instruction), LAC (Language Across the Curriculum), LSP (Language for Special/Specific Purposes),³ etc. (see, i.a., Bula Villalobos 2013; Lightbrown 2014; Cammarata 2016; Lyster 2018). In other cases, CBI overlaps with CLIL (Content and

¹ In this article, I use these two acronyms interchangeably (cf. Stryker and Leaver 1997).

² I mention their names instead of their surnames in this text to distinguish them from SLA scholars. For the same reason – i.e., to distinguish their projects from published scientific articles, chapters and books – when quoting from the lesson plans, date of publication is not given (both because their projects have not been published and because it is 2020) and page numbers are preceded by the noun “page(s)”.

³ Actually, LSP is neither a methodology nor an approach *per se*, but a branch of applied linguistics. Nevertheless, since its teaching and implementation is a precise methodological choice in the Italian school system, here I consider LSP teaching a methodology. For this reason, from now on, when LSP is defined as a methodology, it must be considered LSP teaching, not LSP *per se*. Moreover, since the SLA course under scrutiny here is addressed to aspiring English teachers, the acronyms LSP and ESP (English for Special/Specific Purposes) are used interchangeably.

Language Integrated Learning), the latter being probably the best known and implemented approach/methodology that balances content and language teaching/learning (see, among others, Fernández 2009; Cenoz 2015). In this article, as in my SLA course, I adopt the first perspective, trying to distinguish among different CBLT programmes, since LSP, CLIL, EMI, etc. have separate statuses and regulations in the Italian educational system (see Cinganotto 2016; 2019; Graziano 2018; Langé 2021).

SLA is a brand-new course taught to postgraduate students belonging to the Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies (SEAI) at Sapienza University of Rome. According to the Italian Ministerial Decree n. 616/17 and subsequent amendments and additions,⁴ SLA is one of the courses that allow postgraduate students to obtain the 24 university credits necessary for participation in the public competition for high school English teaching positions. Since these prerequisite-like credits are divided into four main areas⁵ – i.e., 1) anthropology, 2) psychology, 3) pedagogy, and 4) teaching methods and technologies – SLA at Sapienza has been designed as a 6-credit course related to the field of teaching methods and technologies. The 24 credits can be obtained following both curricular and extracurricular exams, the only difference being that extracurricular exams are not covered by university fees and must be paid separately. For this reason, many postgraduate students belonging to both EAAS and SLLT curricula decide to attend the SLA course at Sapienza, even if they have not yet definitely decided to become teachers.⁶

Given the increasing interest in transversal, transdisciplinary competences for lifelong learning, on the one hand, and a growing tendency towards internationalisation of educational systems worldwide, on the other, I believe

⁴ I.e., so far, Note of 25 October 2017 n. 29999 and Note of 17 November 2017 n. 32688.

⁵ Future teachers are required to obtain at least 6 credits in at least three out of these four areas. In other words, they can even ignore one of the four areas and collect, say, 8 credits in each of the other ones, 12+6+6, 10+8+6, etc.

⁶ At the moment, the university degree course in Primary Education Studies (according to Law 169/2008) is the only one that qualifies graduate students to teach in primary schools in Italy. The Italian Ministry of Education is still working on a draft law concerning the so-called *lauree abilitanti all'insegnamento* (teaching qualifying degrees) to teach in Italian secondary schools. In the meantime, each university is free (and encouraged) to modify their curricula and adapt them to the necessities of aspiring teachers, thus inserting the necessary exams to obtain the necessary prerequisites within their educational syllabi.

that CBLT is a paramount field of studies to be investigated by would-be teachers taking an SLA course. The syllabus of this semester's course was divided into four modules:

- 1) Module A was dedicated to the main theories concerning SLA with emphasis on Error Analysis and the notion of interlanguage.⁷ The reference textbook for this module was Rod Ellis's *Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford University Press, 1997).⁸
- 2) Module B focused on the introduction, comparison and contrast of such methodologies/approaches as CBI, ESP, EMI and CLIL. The list of references for this module included David J. Fernández's 2009 article "CLIL at the university level: Relating language teaching with and through content teaching" (*Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning* 2, no. 2: 10-26), Roy Lyster's 2018 booklet *Content-based Language Teaching* (Routledge), and Daniel Madrid and Elena García Sánchez's 2001 article "Content-based second language teaching" (*Present and Future Trends in TEFL*: 101-134).
- 3) Module C focused on the roles of language use and learning in CLIL and its reference book was Christiane Dalton-Puffer, Tarja Nikula and Ute Smit's *Language Use and Language Learning in CLIL Classrooms* (John Benjamins, 2010).
- 4) Lastly, Module D introduced some good practices and case studies of content-based pathways/syllabi to be commented on, taken from Anna Romagnuolo's 2015 article "Teaching English professional writing in an e-learning environment: An Italian case study" (*International Journal of Language and Linguistics* 3, no. 6: 383-393), Alba Graziano's 2019 "Learning second language through restaurant menu dish names" (*Je-LKS* 15, no. 1: 67-82) and Fabio Ciambella's 2020 book chapter "ESP+CLIL: Theoretical insights, experimentation and future prospects at the School for Army Training Sub-Officers of Viterbo, Italy" (in Luminița Chiorean and Cristina

7 Despite not being the focus of this article, it is worth noticing that the concepts of "error" and "interlanguage" have been challenged over the last few decades, even due to the impact that globalisation is having on the spreading of English as a Global Language (see, i.a., Wid-dowson 2003; 2015; Jenkins 2007; Pennycook 2009; Seidlhofer 2011; 2015; Grazzi 2013; 2020).

8 Although Ellis's book is a good manual for future language teachers, it should be observed that its approach might be outdated as regards today's global dimension of English and its teaching as a world's lingua franca.

Nicolae's *Humanities in the Spotlight: The Role of Humanities in Pandemic Times*, 378-394. Lambert Academic Publishing).

Students chose between an oral exam focused on the discussion of a lesson plan or work project⁹ they could work on during the course, and a more traditional written exam covering the contents of the SLA syllabus. One week before the exam, the 29 students who had chosen to take the oral exam were asked to upload their lesson plans/work projects to the Moodle page of the course (<https://elearning.uniroma1.it/course/view.php?id=12568>).

Primarily, three different approaches/methodologies – i.e., LSP, EMI and CLIL – were distinguished and explored during the course, and then adopted by the students in their lesson plans. These are the most widespread content-based approaches/methodologies in the Italian educational system and were initially distinguished by adopting and adapting Roy Lyster's counterbalanced approach (2018) as representatives of the Canadian scholar's language-driven, content-driven and well-balanced programmes.

Lyster classifies CBLT programmes according to a continuum or spectrum whose ends are represented by language-driven and content-driven courses. At the language-driven extremity, Lyster positions what he calls theme-based language courses, “foreign-language classes that promote target-language development by incorporating a focus on themes or topics with which learners have some familiarity in their L1 [...] as a means of developing target-language vocabulary” (2). This is exactly what happens in Italy in the final three years of upper secondary school¹⁰ (third, fourth and fifth), when students are taught one or more foreign languages by language expert teachers using themes and

⁹ Postgraduate students were free to choose between a CBLT lesson plan that could be shaped like a CLIL, EMI or LSP short module and a work project about Error Analysis of some content-based outputs they made their friends and relatives write or record for them. Out of the 29 students who took the oral exam, 15 (52%) chose the lesson plan option, while the remaining 14 (48%) focused on Error Analysis.

¹⁰ To be as clear as possible, after nursery school (children's age: 3-6), primary school in Italy lasts for 5 years, when children are 6-11. Secondary/High school is divided into two branches: 3 years of lower secondary or middle school (11-14) and 5 years of upper secondary school (14-19), after which students can decide to attend university and obtain a degree. For further detailed information, see https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/italy_en.

topics tailored on their field of expertise and kind of school attended (e.g., professional English for computer programming, agro-industrial business, tourism, etc.). Literary studies have a particular status in the final three years of *licei* (i.e., non-technical and non-vocational high schools aimed at preparing students for tertiary education), since in the majority of cases English teachers abandon language teaching completely to focus on historical backgrounds and the life and works of English writers, as both students and scholars lament (see Stagi Scarpa 2005; Magnani 2009; Della Valle 2014). Two of the lesson plans by the SLA students – namely, Giorgia’s and Silvia’s – focused on how to teach English treating literary language as ESP neither more nor less than any other professional English course (see section 4.2). The language-driven end of Lyster’s continuum, I argue, corresponds to what Mohan (1986) called “language teaching *for* content teaching”, whose focus is on language, and only useful language (i.e., sectoral, professional language) is learnt/acquired.¹¹

On the content-driven end, Lyster positions the one-way immersion programmes typical of some areas in Canada and the southern US, where more than 50% of the total hours are taught through the medium of a foreign language. Unlike language-driven courses, metalinguistic awareness is not developed, and the students’ linguistic competence is somehow taken for granted. Content-driven programmes are typical of EMI university courses in Italy,¹² especially in internationalised degrees where some subjects (or all of them, as in the case of EAAS at Sapienza) are taught in English. Content experts are entrusted with teaching by adopting such an approach; for instance, such subjects as Philosophy and Theory of Language, Psychology and Fashion, Russian Studies, German Literature and Critical Thought, and even SLA are taught in English at EAAS, thus adopting an EMI approach which takes linguistic competence for granted, while metalinguistic awareness is developed through the English Language and Translation courses that form part of the

¹¹ For the purposes of this article, I treat both learning and acquisition as two interchangeable processes, yet acknowledging the importance of distinguishing them according to Krashen, Schmidt, and other SLA scholars.

¹² Lyster considers EMI “an extension of CLIL programs” (2018, 4), perhaps because in the majority of cases EMI in internationalised university courses represents the natural development of what CLIL is in high schools, which Graziano has also noticed, albeit lamenting the considerable confusion with labels in the Italian university (2018, 9).

EAAS curricular activities.¹³ In 1986, Mohan classified this kind of CBLT as “language teaching *by* content teaching”, a content-focused approach where L₂ is developed incidentally and without any direct focus on it.

Lastly, Lyster considers programmes in the middle of his spectrum (which I would call “(well-)balanced programmes/courses”) where “students study one or two subjects in the target language, usually in tandem with a foreign language or language arts class. This is the model adopted by many CLIL programs in Europe and elsewhere” (2). Lyster collocates CLIL in the middle of the continuum, although he had previously used CLIL as a synonym of CBI. Although the acronym CLIL had not even been coined when Mohan elaborated his taxonomy of CBLT in 1986,¹⁴ his definition of “language teaching *with* content teaching” closely resembles CLIL’s focus on both content and language. Nonetheless, only useful language is taught and learnt to acquire new content knowledge in Mohan’s description of LT *with* CT. Fernández revises Mohan’s LT *with* CT definition and adapts it to CLIL. The Argentinian scholar prefers adopting the label “language teaching *through* content teaching” (2009, 15) – a totally acceptable definition – whose focus is on both language and content, but L₂ teaching aims at developing communicative competence in subject-related topics and reinforcing previous general, non-sectoral linguistic competence. According to Italian school law,¹⁵ CLIL is compulsory in the final (fifth) year of *licei* and technical high schools, despite also being strongly recommended in vocational schools.¹⁶

¹³ For a general overview of EMI in Italian (and global) universities, see Bowles and Murphy 2020; Costa and Mariotti 2020.

¹⁴ The acronym CLIL was coined by David Marsh and Anne Maljers in 1994 at a conference at the Sorbonne University, Paris.

¹⁵ CLIL was first introduced into the Italian education system with the Moratti Reform, Law 52/2003, then made compulsory in the fifth year of *licei* and technical high schools with the presidential decrees DPRs 88/2010 and 89/2010.

¹⁶ See Graziano 2019 for a CLIL experimentation in an Italian vocational high school with “hotel management/food and wine curriculum” (68). Actually, according to Graziano (2018, 9), the introduction of CLIL in the Italian secondary school has generated an unexpected interest in it in lower secondary and primary schools as well. Among the lesson plans analysed in this article, it is worth noting that Lidia’s is the only one that considers lower secondary school in Italy. In line with Graziano’s “domino effect” of CLIL in primary and lower secondary school, Lidia’s lesson plan considers a possible collaboration between a Technology teacher and an English teacher to develop a module about the textile industry

Content experts are entrusted with CLIL teaching, provided that they possess a C1 level in the foreign language through which the non-linguistic content is delivered (see the CLIL teacher's profile in Cinganotto 2016, 385-6). From this perspective, CLIL is not so different from content-driven approaches/methodologies such as EMI (Marsh and Cinganotto 2021). Nevertheless, as Fernández's definition above demonstrates, unlike EMI, CLIL stresses the students' metalinguistic awareness, thus also making it close to LSP and language-driven CBI in general. Given its intrinsic dual focus on content and language, a plethora of scholars urge hand-in-hand collaboration between content and foreign language teachers in CLIL in Italy, as part of the so-called CLIL team or Teaching Team CLIL¹⁷ (see, i.a., Menegale 2008; Doiz and Lasagabaster 2017; de Maurissens 2018; Di Sabato, Cinganotto and Cuccurullo 2018). For this reason, according to Mohan's taxonomy (revised by Fernández) and Lyster's counterbalanced approach, CLIL represents the perfect balance and fusion between content- and language-driven CBI, between CBLT courses given by language and content teachers. One of the main peculiarities of CLIL is also its strong connection with new technologies (see Cinganotto and Cuccurullo 2018a; 2018b; Graziano *et al.* 2021), a characteristic which stresses the interdisciplinary nature of this approach/methodology and makes it adhere to the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning as established by the European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018.¹⁸ Indeed, one of the transversal competences (n. 6) is digital competence or e-skills. Throughout the SLA course, the importance of e-skills in CBLT in general was stressed and students' lesson plans were enriched with CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) tools.

and cloth production to second-year students aged 12. Resorting to affective humanistic techniques such as Moskowitz's "identity card" (Moskowitz 1987, 50-52; Graziano 2019, 69), crossword puzzles, and other communicative, inductive techniques, pupils are guided through the industry of synthetic and natural materials with the final aim (output) of describing what they wear in front of their classmates and talk about their clothes' environmental impact.

¹⁷ Actually, the notion of a CLIL team was introduced by the Italian Ministry of Education itself through the Note of 25 July 2014 n. 4969.

¹⁸ This document is a revision of the Council Recommendation of 18 December 2006, where digital competence was already listed as a transversal key competence for lifelong learning.

The table below (Table 1) shows the integration between Mohan's and Lyster's taxonomies and their actual implementation in the Italian education system through LSP, CLIL and EMI.

Approach/ methodology	LSP Language expert teacher	CLIL CLIL team: both language and content expert teachers	EMI content expert teacher
Mohan 1986. Revised in Fernández 2009	LT <i>for</i> CT	LT <i>through</i> CT	LT <i>by</i> CT
Lyster 2018. Adapted	Language-driven	(Well-)balanced	Content-driven

Table 1. Mohan's (revised) and Lyster's integrated counterbalanced approach

With this integrated taxonomy in mind, SLA students realised their lesson plans by freely choosing among the approaches/methodologies illustrated above. They had to justify their choices and model their projects on the canonical tripartition input-scaffolding-output, while also integrating it with Lyster's proactive approach,¹⁹ as illustrated in the next section.

3. Would-be teachers' outputs: rationale and data

After introducing the integrated model described above, SLA students were asked to start elaborating their own lesson plans,²⁰ choosing coherently between LSP, CLIL and EMI,²¹ but not before being introduced to and commenting

¹⁹ First theorised in 2016, it was perfected and adapted in 2018. It is this latter version that this article considers.

²⁰ Despite the few hours at my disposal, students were also asked to acquire practical skills by realising an output coherent with the rationale of the course.

²¹ 8 of the lesson plans selected focused on ESP (67%), while 4 of them adopted CLIL (33%). None of the lesson plans selected focused on EMI. A very interesting one to consider is Fabrizio's lesson plan about a CLIL project at university, conducted on MA students in evolutionary linguistics. Imagining a CLIL team comprising the Linguistics lecturer (content expert) and the English lecturer (language expert), Fabrizio's project focuses on Kirby's cumulative cultural evolution of language. His lesson plan guides students to the autonomous writing of an essay on evolutionary linguistics, but not before having introduced the content with listening and reading comprehension activities concerning a specific lexicon during the input phase (even resorting to an indirect use of corpus linguistic tools) and

on the different phases that characterise any lesson plan (input, scaffolding and output) and Lyster's proactive approach to CBLT. In CBI, the input phase is usually vocabulary-driven (Lyster 2018, 6) and, according to Krashen's well-known input hypothesis (*i+1*), comprehensible yet "just ahead of [the learners'] current level of ability" (6). Vocabulary is probably what content teachers are interested and more competent in, so this is also the phase they deal with, where a CLIL team is available, while language teachers prefer focusing (or should focus) on the morphosyntactic and textual scaffolding.²²

During the input phase, vocabulary is normally elicited through passive skills (reading and listening), although active skills (writing and speaking) are welcome but preferred during the output phase. An effective, well-structured scaffolding phase should lead L2 learners to metalinguistic awareness, focusing especially on morphosyntax and textuality. Lastly, the learners' output is an autonomous task they carry out by themselves (individually or as part of peer groups, thus also reverting to cooperative learning). Generally, outputs are creative – creativity being at the top of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational goals – and tangible, concrete products that demonstrate the learners' acquisition of specific competences (in this case, content and linguistic competences). It goes without saying that the output phase requires primarily the active skills of writing and speaking,²³ so a number of products are possible in CBLT, e.g., essays, articles, brochures, leaflets, ppt presentations, seminar-like oral presentations, debates, didactic songs, etc.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can be used throughout the whole lesson plan, as SLA students' outputs demonstrate.

having supported students with academic writing (through paraphrasing and re-ordering exercises) during the scaffolding stage. This, I believe, supports some Italian scholars' (and CLIL practitioners') unyielding conviction that implementing CLIL at university is possible and desirable in order to reach an effective internationalisation of university courses, which cannot occur by resorting to EMI alone (Bosisio 2015; Costa 2016; Graziano 2018).

²² By investigating various case studies about CLIL classroom interaction, Lorenzo and Moore (2010) concluded that content teachers prioritise lexis (thus demonstrating poor knowledge of language acquisition patterns) because they believe that students need the correct terminology to deal with a specific content. On the other hand, language teachers are still too focused on traditional grammar teaching and thus neglect sentential grammar items.

²³ Of the 12 lesson plans selected, 4 (33%) focused on a written task, 5 (42%) on a multimodal oral output, and 3 (25%) considered two different outputs by students (one written and one spoken) connected together.

10 out of the 12 selected best practices uploaded on Moodle (83%) present an effective use of learning platforms and apps such as *Storyboard That* (Giorgia), *Spider Gram Maker* (Silvia), *Wordwall* and *Kahoot* (Giada), blogs (Giorgia and Giulia), vlogs²⁴ to be uploaded on social media (Marco and Noemi), and audio-visual materials from YouTube (Fabrizio, Giada, Ginevra, Giorgia, Marco and Noemi) and TV series (Gaia and Mariangela). After all, the implementation of e-skills in CBLT is a very much studied field nowadays thanks to approaches/methodologies such as CALL, CALI (computer-aided language instruction), CMC (computer-mediated communication), MALL (mobile-assisted language learning), etc. (see, i.a., Durán and Cruz 2011; Abdelhak 2015; Matsubara and Yoshida 2018).

During Module B of the SLA course, the input-scaffolding-output model is integrated with Lyster's proactive approach, which identifies four phases (see Fig. 1) instead of the three considered thus far:

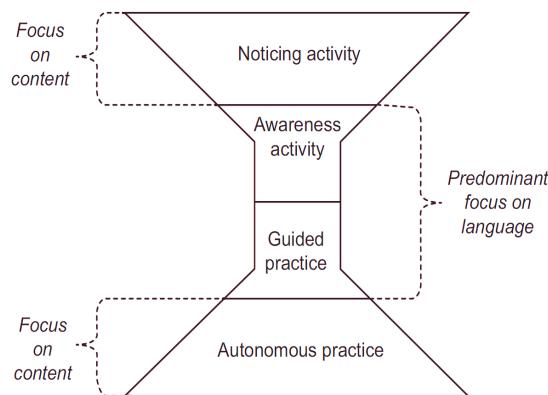


Figure 1. Phases of Lyster's proactive approach (2018, 16)

I use Lyster's own words to describe the instructional sequence he identifies:

The *noticing* phase establishes a meaningful context related to content, usually by means of a written or oral text in which target features have been contrived to appear more salient or more frequent. The *awareness* phase then encourages students to reflect on and manipulate the target forms in a way that helps them to become more

²⁴ "A personal website or social media account where a person regularly posts short videos" (OED, n.).

aware of patterns that were highlighted at the noticing phase. [...] The subject-matter or thematic content is in the foreground during the noticing phase but fades into the background during the awareness phase as students zoom in on language. [...] The *guided practice* phase provides opportunities for students to use the grammatical features in a meaningful yet controlled context and to receive corrective feedback in order to develop automaticity and accuracy. The sequence comes full circle at the *autonomous practice* phase by returning to the content area that served as the starting point. Autonomous practice requires the use of the target-language features but in a discipline-specific or thematic context. [...] [T]he instructional sequence begins with a primary focus on content during the noticing phase then zooms in on language during the awareness phase and guided practice phase. Finally, during the autonomous practice phase, the primary instructional focus is once again on the content that served as the starting point. (2018, 15-16. Emphases in the original)

Prima facie, although Lyster does not highlight it, the correspondence between the input, scaffolding and output stages and his four-phase model is evident: the input phase with its focus on content (mainly vocabulary) corresponds to Lyster's noticing activity, while linguistic scaffolding is divided into awareness activities and guided practice. Lastly, the students' output mirrors what Lyster calls autonomous practice.

Despite aspiring to become full-time, permanent English teachers, SLA students/trainees have encountered major difficulties in the scaffolding phase – quite paradoxically. As shown in the next section, the scaffolding is the central phase that should guarantee the coherence and cohesion of the whole lesson plan through the contextualised morphosyntactic re-elaboration of the input, thus paving the way to an autonomous, creative output. Thus it is clearly a demanding task for inexperienced trainees.²⁵ I next explore the difficulties surrounding the scaffolding phase that emerge from the students' lesson plans and even reflect on the weak points of my own teaching while trying to fill some methodological gaps.

²⁵ Not all of the students are inexperienced: some are private English tutors/teachers, others work in private language schools that adopt a specific global/experiential approach, and still others work as language consultants in public schools and attended my course as an extracurricular subject. Nevertheless, I consider them inexperienced in the field of SLA, since, as they admitted, most of them lack a systematic knowledge of learning/acquisition theories and how to create a successful lesson plan.

4. Discussion of the students' outputs

Before discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the students' lesson plans, we must examine some data regarding the approach/methodology selected (LSP, CLIL or EMI), the educational level of their intended target and the content/non-linguistic subject chosen. These data are shown in the charts below (Fig. 2):

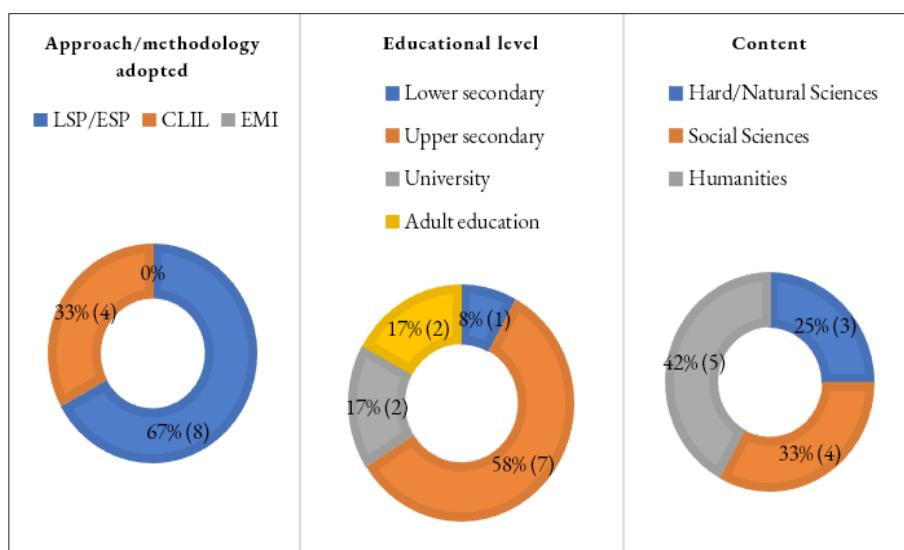


Figure 2. Statistics relating to trainees' methodological and target choices

The above data demonstrate that mainstream projects by SLA students concern ESP teaching as methodology adopted, a target of upper secondary school pupils (aged 14-19) and contents dealing with the Humanities and Social Sciences, ranging from Art History (2) to Law (2) via Literature (2), Linguistics (1), Philosophy (1), and Media Studies (1); the contents MFL MA students are definitely more familiar with if compared with the three students who dealt with Hard/Natural Sciences such as Medicine (1), Food Chemistry (1) and Textile Technology (1).

All the lesson plans selected were organized according to the canonical tripartition input-scaffolding-output, although three students – Giada, Giulia and Noemi – deliberately chose to “take[e] inspiration from Lyster's proactive approach, that divides the scaffolding part of a lesson plan in two different moments: awareness activity and guided practice” (Giada, page 3), while the

other two – Aytakin and Marco – provided an incredibly detailed subdivision of the various phases into a number of intermediate, gradual tasks.

Following Madrid and García Sánchez's summary of the dichotomic positions relating to L2 learning/teaching (2001),²⁶ all the trainees whose lesson plan was selected agreed that Hans H. Stern's combined model (1992) to surpass this dichotomy is the most convenient and feasible solution to adopt in the Italian education environment. In other words, although a cross-lingual, global/experiential, and implicit approach – proper to communicative and affective humanist methods – is preferable because it should lead students to natural, unconscious acquisition, intra-lingual, analytic and explicit techniques are sometimes necessary to allow and improve students' learning, as also stated by the European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 "on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of language" (2019/C 189/03).

Therefore, if the organization and methodological choices of the lesson plans selected represent the strong points in this SWOT analysis,²⁷ weak points must also be dealt with, aiming to improve the quality of the course – in case of future re-elaboration of the same syllabus – and of the lesson plans themselves. Undoubtedly, the main weakness of the students' lesson plans is the lack of coherence and cohesion between scaffolding and output. This probably stems from the fact that I have not stressed the importance of the scaffolding phase to help students realise what Lyster defines as a pushed output (2018, 6), that is, an output supported by a solid scaffolding, given that Krashen's notion of comprehensible input is insufficient to guide students to acquisition. As Aytakin's, Giada's, Giulia's, Marco's and Noemi's lesson plans demonstrate, Lyster's subdivision of the linguistic scaffolding into awareness activity and guided practice may help aspiring teachers to better understand the importance of a detailed and gradual scaffolding which allows students to create a successful output. In other words, the more the linguistic scaffolding phase is divided into intermediate subphases, the better the students' performance.

²⁶ Madrid and García Sánchez (2001) distinguish between SLA vs FLL (Foreign Language Learning), cross-lingual vs intra-lingual approaches, global vs analytic approaches, and explicit vs implicit teaching.

²⁷ SWOT analysis or matrix is a technique developed within business studies, aimed at improving the quality of a project by analysing its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. I believe that this kind of analysis is perfectly suited to the kind of research I describe in this article.

I believe that what has been stated above can be refined and integrated by resorting to Bloom's taxonomy and his distinction between LOTS and HOTS,²⁸ and to Jim Cummins's difference between BICS and CALP.²⁹ Both Bloom's original taxonomy, elaborated in the 1950s (see Bloom *et al.* 1956), and his revised version, elaborated by his former student Lorin W. Anderson in the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Anderson and Krathwohl 2001), represent a continuum of six cognitive processes which follow the learning process. The first three stages – i.e., remembering, understanding, applying, according to Anderson's revised taxonomy adopted here – correspond to LOTS (Lower-Order Thinking Skills), while domains 4 to 6 – i.e., analysing, evaluating, creating – correspond to HOTS (Higher-Order Thinking Skills). Adapting this taxonomy to Lyster's proactive approach, I would argue that both can be interpreted as a continuum and that correspondences are possible:

- Lyster's noticing activity, when content is elicited, can be understood in terms of remembering and understanding vocabulary in CBLT (so LOTS, where the passive skills of listening and reading are stressed).
- Awareness activity in Lyster's approach is reached through understanding and application, this first part of the scaffolding still corresponding to LOTS.
- Lyster's guided practice marks the turning point from LOTS to HOTS, thanks to the analysis and evaluation of the useful linguistic structures to be employed in the output.
- Lastly, resorting to the evaluation process, students arrive at creation (at the top of the continuum of Bloom's HOTS end) in what Lyster calls autonomous practice.

According to this combination of Bloom's revised taxonomy and Lyster's proactive approach, the scaffolding phase is the turning point at the core of any lesson plan where simple activities become complex practices (Lyster) and LOTS become HOTS (Bloom). Moreover, to stress the coherence of a CBLT lesson plan, I believe that the input and scaffolding phases share the process of understanding, while scaffolding and output share the evaluation domain.

First defined by Cummins in 1979, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills

²⁸ LOTS stands for Lower Order Thinking Skills, while HOTS for Higher Order Thinking Skills.

²⁹ BICS is the acronym for Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and CALP for Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency.

(BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) are at the very core of Cummins's cognitivist theory of learning/acquisition, a theory that significantly influenced CBI and its development. According to Cummins, "BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school" (2008, 71). He also affirms that differences between BICS and CALP are due to the context (BICS tend to be more context-embedded, while CALP more context-reduced, decontextualised) and the cognitive demand they encompass (BICS are generally cognitively undemanding, while CALP is cognitively demanding). Imagining the context continuum as a horizontal axis and the cognitive demand as a vertical one, Cummins elaborated his well-known four-quadrant model (Fig. 3) for the acquisition of an L2. The BICS/CALP dichotomy and quadrant framework were thought to concern language learning exclusively, and little space is devoted to the integration of content and language (Barbero 2006, 111). Nevertheless, academic language, which Cummins considers context-reduced, is also fertile ground for the development of CBI:³⁰ the more the context is reduced, the more specific/specialised it grows. An adaptation of Cummins's quadrant to be implemented in content-based classroom activities was attempted in Italy by Teresina Barbero (2006, Fig. 3).

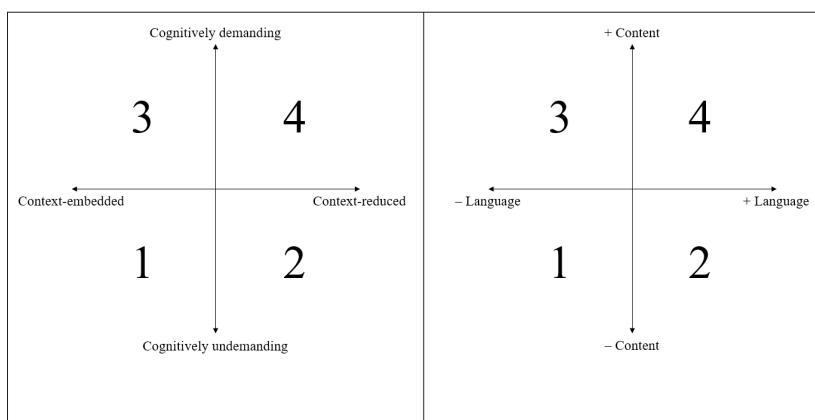


Figure 3. Barbero's revised model of Cummins's quadrant applied to CBI

³⁰ In this context, it is significant to notice that one of the titles of my SLA students' lesson plans, i.e., Fabrizio's, is "Academic English for Evolutionary Linguistics", which clearly connects CALP and CBI.

Instead of context and cognitive demand, Barbero develops a model whose x-axis is content and y-axis is language, thus identifying four major kinds of content-based activities (2006, 113) that I believe can be combined with Lyster's proactive approach:

- Low-demanding cognitive activities with limited language use. They correspond to Lyster's noticing activity, where the context is concrete, rich (Barbero 2006, 113) and meaningful (Lyster 2018, 15), and only "more salient and more frequent" (Ibid.) linguistic structures are elicited.
- Low-demanding cognitive activities focused on language. These activities, which Barbero, in line with Cummins's BICS, positions in an early scaffolding phase with mechanical drills, perfectly matches Lyster's awareness activity, where students "become more aware of the [language] patterns" (Ibid.) they need in a CBLT module.
- Highly demanding cognitive activities with limited language use. Since any scaffolding must be temporary to make students autonomous, Barbero states that in this third phase the linguistic demand must be "lightened" (2006, 114). Lyster's guided practice is perfectly suited here, because learners use the morphosyntactic structures they have practised during the awareness activities "in a meaningful yet controlled context" (2018, 16).
- Highly demanding cognitive activities focused on language. Barbero defines these activities as the real CALP tasks that ought to be carried out without any trainer's/teacher's support (2006, 114). This is exactly what Lyster calls autonomous practice; the focus is also on language because "[t]here are fewer constraints, allowing students to use the features in more open-ended ways to develop fluency, motivation, and confidence" (2018, 16).

The author's proposed integrated model is summarised in the table below (Table 2):

Lesson plan structure	Bloom 1956 (revised Anderson 2001)			Cummins 1976 (revised Barbero 2006)		Lyster 2018	
(Comprehensible) input	LOTS	Remember	BICS	– Content; – Language	Noticing	activity	practice
Scaffolding		Understand		– Content; + Language	Awareness		
(Pushed) output		Apply	CALP	+ Content; – Language	Guided		
	HOTS	Analyse	CALP	+ Content; + Language	Autonomous		
		Evaluate					
		Create					

Table 2. The integration of Bloom's, Cummins's and Lyster's models of learning/acquisition

As stated earlier, the lesson plans selected sometimes fail to connect all these stages correctly so that any component can be considered a step in an education continuum that successfully integrates language and content. The next section analyses one lesson plan that I consider the best case study for this kind of investigation.

4.1 LOTS/HOTS, BICS/CALP integration in a lesson plan: Marco's case study

I consider Marco's lesson plan the best case study for an analysis of the implementation of Bloom's revised taxonomy, Cummins's/Barbero's quadrant and Lyster's proactive approach to CBLT.³¹ His lesson plan presents a CLIL experiment on the topic of "digital detox", to be carried out by a CLIL team comprising a Human Sciences teacher (content expert) and an English teacher (language expert) in an Italian *liceo delle scienze umane* (human sciences high school, first year; students' age: 14-15; linguistic level: A2+, towards B1). The input phase focuses on vocabulary dealing with social media influencers and is made even more comprehensible by what Marco calls a "preparation task" (page 2), a matching exercise where students are asked to find the right definition for 8 content-related keywords they will encounter in the reading comprehension to be completed in tasks 1 (a multiple-choice quiz) and 2 (true/false exercise). LOTS – i.e., remember and understand – and low-demanding cognitive tasks with limited language use are required in this noticing activity, since students focus on receptive skills (reading), the content is meaningful, but only salient linguistic structures are elicited.

The awareness activity introduces the focus on language, as highlighted by Barbero in her second quadrant of low-demanding cognitive activities focused on language. Useful contextualised morphosyntactic structures are introduced here (the present tense in particular with its use and most recurring time expressions) with the aid of a YouTube video, visuals and drills. The communicative, implicit approach is deliberately adopted in this case. Drills, as also stated by Cummins (2000, 68), are typical of the first part

³¹ As an experienced private tutor and English teacher in private language schools, this trainee had the advantage of experimenting his lesson plan with his students and affirmed they were absolutely satisfied with the organization and results obtained, as was he.

of a scaffolding phase, where understanding and mere application are the LOTS employed.

A cooperative learning activity and a pre-output written task constitute the guided practice. Students are asked to discuss the pros and cons of social media, resorting to the vocabulary and morphosyntax introduced in the preceding stages, and to write a short bio-sketch for their Instagram profile “following the tips contained in the previous reading ‘Social Media Influencers’” (Marco, page 9). CALP and HOTS – i.e., analyse and evaluate – come into play here. Highly demanding cognitive skills are required, although focus on language is limited when compared with earlier activities.

Lastly, once students have become autonomous through temporary scaffolding, they are required to stop using their social media for a week and make two vlogs about becoming a digital-detox influencer to be uploaded onto their Instagram profile by the end of the week. Their output must be as creative as possible, thus considering HOTS – i.e., evaluate and create – and highly-demanding cognitive activities with a specific focus on language to describe both daily routines, feelings and thoughts, and the (dis)advantages of digital detox.

4.2 English Literature as ESP: An unusual but desirable binomial in the Italian high school

In the Italian *licei* and in the education scenario in general, understanding literary language as ESP has always been difficult (cf. Stagi Scarpa 2005; Magnani 2009; Della Valle 2014), which is why it is worth reporting the results of Giorgia’s and Silvia’s lesson plans as useful tools for both aspiring and experienced teachers. Giorgia’s project is addressed to the third year of an Italian *liceo coreutico* (dance high school) and is aimed at teaching Renaissance dances to be performed during the school final dancing event via Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Having been provided with the Shakespearean text (act 1, scene 3), a YouTube video and a simplified academic article about dances in *Twelfth Night* as input, students are asked to compile a terpsichorean glossary of early modern English choreographies. As the final output is the creation of a booklet containing a detailed description of the dances performed at the end-of-school-year ball, pupils are introduced to descriptive/expository texts, their main components

and features, during the scaffolding phase. Exercises involving paragraphing, reordering as well as bad examples to be corrected guarantee the students' understanding of the kind of textuality dealt with during the class. Lastly, just prior to the final task, students are divided into groups (cooperative learning is applied, which also elicits listening and speaking skills), each one responsible for planning the descriptive/expository text describing one dance in particular mentioned by Shakespeare in his play. As indicated above, the various texts are collected into a booklet that will be presented during the school's final dancing event about English Renaissance dances.

Dealing with a completely different period of English literature (i.e., the rise of the novel), Silvia addresses her lesson plan to fourth-year students in a *liceo linguistico* (linguistic high school). Warm-up brainstorming activities and visuals introduce the input phase regarding the literary jargon of novels (e.g., novel vs romance, genre and subgenre, Gothic, coming-of-age, etc.), while linguistic scaffolding concerns verbal forms to express the past in English (i.e., past tense, past continuous, past perfect, etc.) through drills and reordering exercises aiming to guide students through the acquisition of a proper syntactic structure of past narration in English. The autonomous practice is divided into two tasks (one written and one oral) where pupils are asked to introduce both verbally and in writing (as a kind of book review) a British novel they will have read during the school year.

Although completely different from one another, Giorgia's and Silvia's lesson plans show how the linguistic potentials offered by literary texts can be exploited in a CBLT class, given that the "relationship between language and literature is symbiotic" (Ihejirika 2014, 85) and literary texts represent an excellent selection of realia and authentic material that is more than welcome in the communicative approach on which CBI is based (Daskalovska and Dimova 2012).

5. Conclusion

The educational practice described and discussed here has highlighted the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the SLA course taught at Sapienza University of Rome in AY 2020-2021. On the one hand, CBLT has proved to be an effective approach that can be implemented at all education

levels in Italy, as it is tailored to the learners' needs. On the other hand, each phase of a content-based instructional model must be carefully pre-planned and well-balanced, to avoid the risk of compromising the teaching effectiveness. For this reason, the integrated models presented in the second and fourth sections aim at providing aspiring (but also in-service) FL teachers with valuable tools to improve the coherence and cohesion of CBLT lesson plans. These can be intended as operative education continua that guide students to develop their disciplinary and linguistic competence. Although good progress has been made in terms of student-centred methodologies, broader quantitative analyses are needed to confirm the results provided in this article.

Moreover, given the course hours at my disposal (42), I deliberately chose not to focus on the assessment and evaluation of students' output, given that not all trainees had the opportunity to use their lesson plans for actual teaching practice. With more time at my disposal, I could have dealt with holistic and analytic evaluation rubrics and grids, showing how to build them and how to implement them in the teaching practice. The only occasion I had to hint at assessment and evaluation was offered by Romagnuolo's article about professional writing in e-learning environments (2015). Her case study lists pivotal parameters to be considered when evaluating written academic tasks: "Grades have been assigned by [...] assessing *task achievement, textual coherence and cohesion, lexical richness and grammatical accuracy*. Importance has also been given [...] to students' choice of the right *textual format, appropriate register*, and mastery of other text-linguistic standards such as *informativity, intentionality and acceptability*" (390. Emphasis mine). Following Romagnuolo's criteria, some SLA students tried to establish useful assessment standards: while Giulia and Giada take into account (rather timidly) both content and linguistic objectives, and basic skills to be assessed, Lidia and Ginevra elaborate more complex rubrics that consider "coherence and cohesion, grammatical structures, lexical richness and pronunciation" (Lidia, page 4).

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Riccardino di Camilleri e *Niebla* di Unamuno: l'autorialità come im/possibile forma di potere nei confronti dei personaggi

Abstract

This essay aims to analyse authorship as a possible form of power and control over characters within modern and contemporary literature. To this end, two works will be compared and examined in which this dynamic seems to be particularly evident: *Riccardino* by Camilleri and *Niebla* by Unamuno. These novels present, in fact, a breaking down of the barrier between author and character, because the character tries to free himself from the power of his author-creator: a typologically complex narrative, in which innovative narrative structures are present.

I. Introduzione

Al fine di contribuire all'ancora vivo dibattito sull'autorialità nelle sue molteplici forme contemporanee¹, questo contributo intende focalizzare l'attenzione su due opere particolarmente rappresentative della 'lotta' tra autore-creatore e personaggio-creatura, quale manifestazione della dinamica di abbattimento della barriera tra autore e personaggio, che caratterizza la modernità e contemporaneità letteraria² quale nuova forma di posizionamento autoriale: *Riccardino* di Andrea Camilleri e *Niebla* di Miguel de Unamuno. La scelta

¹ A tal proposito basti ricordare, tra gli altri, Iovinelli 2004, Pitt 2009; Vittorini 2017; Zang 2018.

² Ciò che viene preso in considerazione è certamente un nodo teorico particolarmente interessante, di cui esistono numerosi esempi, non solo nella modernità, ma anche in tempi antichi; a tal proposito basti pensare a Daret Frigio e alla *Storia della distruzione di Troia*. Per una trattazione completa dell'argomento si veda Medaglia 2020, 107-III.

come *set* di opere da analizzare è caduta su questi due romanzi in quanto, maggiormente rispetto ad altri, sembrano porre in evidenza un rapporto conflittuale tra l'autore e il suo personaggio, in un momento di crisi che coinvolge i vari ruoli attanziali. Attraverso tale analisi, verrà posto in evidenza come l'abbattimento della barriera tra autore e personaggio possa condurre a strutture narrative innovative e a un differente posizionamento autoriale, in cui le dinamiche di potere tra autore e personaggi risultano di particolare interesse.

2. Camilleri vs. Montalbano

La ricerca del potere nel duello che si pone in atto tra i diversi ruoli attanziali diventa uno degli elementi ricorrenti di alcune opere di Camilleri, soprattutto con l'avvicinarsi della vecchiaia. A tal proposito, *Riccardino* (2020) di Andrea Camilleri è l'ultimo capitolo delle vicende che hanno per protagonista il Commissario Montalbano e fu scritto dall'autore alcuni anni prima della sua morte, avvenuta il 17 luglio 2019. In questo senso, il legame tra Camilleri e il suo personaggio è così profondo che l'autore, già molto tempo prima di morire, aveva provveduto a scrivere l'ultimo capitolo di Montalbano e lo aveva affidato a Elvira Sellerio, della casa editrice con cui collaborava ormai da anni, affinché lo pubblicasse solo dopo la sua morte.

Dopo la recente scomparsa di Camilleri, pochissime sono state le indiscrezioni su questo ultimo romanzo circolate prima della sua pubblicazione, avvenuta a distanza di un anno: ciò che fu chiaro fin dall'inizio, però, è che Montalbano sarebbe sparito senza morire e che, chiamato sul luogo di un omicidio, avrebbe visto persone fare riferimento non a lui, ma all'attore Zingaretti che lo interpreta nella *fiction* televisiva. Ciò lo avrebbe condotto da un lato a domandarsi se lui stesso non agisca in una certa maniera solo perché copia il suo doppio televisivo Montalbano, dall'altro ad iniziare un serrato confronto, fatto di riflessioni e domande, con se stesso come personaggio e, soprattutto, con il suo autore.

Tra l'attesa febbricitante del grande pubblico e degli appassionati e fedeli lettori di Camilleri e di Montalbano, alla fine il romanzo è stato pubblicato in una doppia versione: il volume contiene, infatti, sia la prima stesura del 2005, sia l'ultima del 2016. L'opera, ideata nel 2004 e terminata nel 2005, è stata rivista a distanza di circa dieci anni solo per quel che riguarda la lingua, ma non per la trama o i

contenuti; a tal proposito Camilleri afferma: “Ho sempre distrutto tutte le tracce che portavano ai romanzi compiuti, invece mi pare che possa giovare far vedere materialmente al lettore l’evoluzione della mia scrittura” (Camilleri 2020, VIII).

Al centro del romanzo, dunque, vi è una questione di capitale importanza per quel che concerne gli studi di teoria letteraria, ovvero quella della relazione tra l’autore e i suoi personaggi; specificamente, in questo romanzo, a parere dello stesso autore, “Il lettore vedrà quanto combattuto, dialettico, e pieno di ironia fosse il rapporto tra l’Autore e il suo Personaggio, relazione che in questo romanzo viene sviscerata in tutte le sue manifestazioni: tra personaggio letterario e televisivo e persino tra personaggio e attore” (Ibid.: IX).

Dal punto di vista teorico, all’interno del romanzo, l’autorialità sembra realizzarsi nell’abbattimento stesso della barriera tra autore e personaggio, al punto che è come se il personaggio Montalbano avesse, in qualche modo, raggiunto una vita del tutto autonoma e, al tempo stesso, l’autore Camilleri fosse divenuto un personaggio al pari di quelli da lui creati: vi è, dunque, una profonda interferenza tra i ruoli attanziali.

In effetti, in ambito letterario, i cambiamenti derivati dall’avvento della modernità hanno portato alla creazione di nuovi *pattern* narrativi, che hanno ulteriormente amplificato gli spostamenti dell’autorialità già in corso da tempo – da quando l’autore è stato in qualche modo posto al centro dell’attenzione da Barthes e Foucault con i loro saggi.³ Tutte le affermazioni in merito alla morte e alla sparizione dell’autore, che sul finire degli anni Sessanta del Novecento hanno raggiunto il loro apice, hanno compiuto una sorta di prodigo, sostiene Benedetti, in quanto “se tutto è morto, tutto è di nuovo possibile” (Benedetti 1999, 194): l’autore non solo è tornato, ma ha la possibilità di rendersi più complesso utilizzando strategie innovative, di cui la modernità si rende complice e che risultano particolarmente visibili nel sovvertimento della barriera tra autore e personaggio.

Riccardino, certamente, è esempio di ciò, in quanto per l’appunto autore e personaggio dialogano tra loro incessantemente: più volte Montalbano, dubioso o irritato per qualche motivo, coinvolge Camilleri nel testo, così

³ Si fa ovviamente riferimento alla questione relativa alla morte dell’autore, che è emersa verso la fine degli anni Sessanta, quando apparvero a breve distanza l’uno dall’altro *Mort de l’auteur* (1968) di Barthes e *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* (1969) di Foucault, entrambi testi che rappresentano l’acme di una lunga riflessione fondata sul contributo in parte della linguistica, ma anche dello strutturalismo e del post-strutturalismo.

come l'autore, a sua volta, interviene sul suo personaggio, ricordandogli, in qualche modo, chi è il suo creatore. In questo senso, le interferenze tra autore e personaggio sovvertono la realtà e il mondo fittizio della narrazione, abbattendo le barriere che li separano e consentendo ad autore e personaggi di confrontarsi su un piano almeno apparentemente paritetico.

La trama del romanzo, se pur nel suo essere intrigante e nel suo complesso dipanarsi, è piuttosto semplice per quel che concerne gli elementi di base: al centro vi è l'omicidio di Riccardo Lopresti – detto, per l'appunto Riccardino – che vede coinvolti i suoi più cari amici (almeno in apparenza!), le loro mogli e l'azienda per cui questi lavorano. Ciò che, invece, risulta davvero interessante è che fin dal principio del racconto, ovvero quando il Commissario arriva sulla scena del crimine, si iniziano ad intrecciare i diversi livelli della realtà; in particolare, il Montalbano dei romanzi viene posto in relazione con il Montalbano televisivo:

‘Montalbano è!’. ‘Cu? Montalbanu? Chiddro di la televisioni?’ ‘No, chiddro veru’. A Montalbano gli vinni ’na violenta botta di nirbùso. Chiossà di ’na decina d'anni avanti aviva avuto la bella isata d'insegno di contare a ’n autore locali ’na storia che gli era capitata e quello di subito ci aviva arracamato supra un romanzo. Siccome che in Italia a leggiri sunno quattro gatti, la cosa non aviva avuto conseguenzia E accussì glia viva contato, non saperanno diri di no alla ’nsistenza di quella gran camurria d'omo [...] A ’sto punto le storie erano arrivate ’n televisioni ed avivano ottenuto un successo straordinario. E da quel momento la musica era cambiata. Ora tutti l'arriccanoscivano e sapivano chi era ma solo in quanto pirsonaggio di televisioni. ‘No scassamento di cabasisi ’nsupportabili, che pariva nisiuto paro paro da ’na commedia di ’n altro autore locali, un tali Pirandello (Camilleri 2020, 9).

In questo senso, fin dal principio dell'opera, emergono una serie di questioni di un certo rilievo: *in primis* il personaggio inizia a parlare dell'autore come se avesse avuto modo di relazionarsi direttamente con lui e, addirittura, lo avesse incontrato personalmente in alcune occasioni; in aggiunta a ciò il personaggio Montalbano definisce, di fatto, se stesso come essere reale in confronto al suo omonimo fittizio della televisione. Già solo con il breve brano riportato sopra, particolarmente esemplificativo, appare evidente come il piano della realtà e quello del mondo fittizio della letteratura inizino ad essere alterati e, in qualche misura, a intrecciarsi. Di conseguenza, diviene fin da subito possibile comprendere come l'abbattimento della barriera tra l'autore e il personaggio – ulteriormente posta in evidenza dalla citazione da parte di Camilleri di

Pirandello –⁴ e, dunque, l’interferenza tra i ruoli attanziali conducono ad una ‘personificazione’ del personaggio e a un ingresso nel mondo irreale del racconto da parte dell’autore.

In questo senso, autore e personaggio vengono posti sullo stesso piano, in una realtà che non è più del tutto reale né fittizia, che li rende capaci di dialogare tra loro: una dimensione mediana, quindi, che consente una relazione, in qualche modo, paritetica. Il personaggio si svincola, pagina dopo pagina, dal potere dell’autore che lo ha creato e, al contempo, l’autore prova ad esercitare sul personaggio un potere che, essendo divenuto lui stesso una delle sue creature, ha irrimediabilmente perso.

Il romanzo è puntellato da una serie di dialoghi diretti tra il personaggio Montalbano e l’autore Camilleri, che si sentono più volte via telefono, in particolare riguardo al dipanarsi della trama; da tali telefonate emergono questioni relative al loro reciproco ruolo:

‘Pronto?’. ‘Che fu, Salvo, dormivi?’. Arraccanoscì all’istanti la voce dell’Autore arragatata dalle sigarette. ‘No, ma stavo andando a coricarmi’. ‘Ti devo parlarti. è cosa ’mportantissi assà’. ‘Senti, sugno stanco. Se veramenti dobbiamo raggiunari supra a ’na cosa ’mportanti, scusami, ma non è il momento’ (Ibid.: 76).

e anche:

Era l’Autore che lo chiamava da Roma. Si pentì subito d’aviri isato il ricevitore. ‘Salvo, ce l’hai un po’ di tempo?’. ‘Un poco quanto?’. ‘Massimo dieci minuti’. ‘Vabbeni. Dimmi.’ ‘Così non posso più andare avanti, dovrassi cercare di darmi una mano d’aiuto’. ‘In che senso?’. ‘Come me l’hai sempre data. La storia di Riccardino, della quale ti stai occupando...’. ‘Chi te ne ha parlato?’ lo ’nterrompì Montalbano arrisintuto. L’autore tirò un sospiro funnuto. ‘Madonna, Salvo, siamo ancora a questo punto? non l’hai capito o lo fai apposta?’. ‘Voglio

⁴ La citazione di Pirandello, tra i molti autori siciliani a cui Camilleri, come è noto, si sente legato, risulta particolarmente interessante: infatti, proprio Pirandello è stato autore di molteplici opere in cui si realizza un’interferenza dei ruoli attanziali, come ad esempio i suoi racconti, all’interno dei quali il piano divisorio tra autore e personaggi appare fortemente alterato: tale è il caso di *Personaggi* (1906), *La tragedia d’un personaggio* (1911) e *Colloqui con i personaggi* (1915). Il primo è apparso sul periodico “Il Ventesimo” il 10 giugno 1906 e non venne mai più ripreso da Pirandello; il secondo fu pubblicato il 19 ottobre 1911 sul “Corriere della Sera”; ed, infine, *Colloqui con i personaggi* è comparso in due puntate, il 17-18 agosto e l’11-12 settembre 1915 sul “Giornale di Sicilia”.

sapere chi ti ha informato'. 'Salvo, la faccenna sta completamente arriversa, Sono io che informo te, e non capisco perché ti ostini a credere che sei tu a informare me. Questa storia di Riccardino io la sto scrivendo mentre tu la stai vivendo, tutto qua'. 'Quindi io sarei il pupo e tu il puparo?'. 'Ma che minchiate dici? Ora mi cadi nei luoghi comuni? Te lo sei scordato quante volte tu hai imposto a una mia storia, di tua iniziativa, autonomamente, un corso completamente diverso da quello che io avevo in testa di scrivere? [...] E so anche perché l'hai voluto fare'. 'Ah sì?'. 'Sì, In quell'ultima parte mi hai obbligato a inserire nel racconto certi tuoi monologhi interiori impossibili da sceneggiare. E tu lo sapevi benissimo' (Ibid.: 120-121).

Sono varie le problematiche che questa telefonata solleva; la prima risiede nel fatto che Camilleri sia in qualche modo indirizzato e guidato nelle sue scelte letterarie dai suoi personaggi. Ciò ovviamente pone il problema dell'autonomia dell'autore e dell'ipotetico potere che questo potrebbe esercitare sui suoi personaggi. Attraverso le telefonate inserite nel racconto, di fatto, Camilleri mira a sovvertire la consueta immagine del burattino-personaggio e del burattinaio-autore: al contrario, il personaggio sembra acquisire una sempre maggiore autonomia che l'autore perde a suo discapito. L'autore è entrato nella sua opera a tutti gli effetti come personaggio e, dunque, ne subisce in qualche modo le stesse norme: il dialogo tra autore e personaggio sembra farsi sempre più paritetico, al punto tale che è il personaggio a rovesciare il potere di creazione che precedentemente veniva di norma attribuito all'autore. Tale nuovo posizionamento autoriale, basato sulla sovversione dei ruoli attanziali e dell'abbattimento della barriera tra autore e personaggi, conduce ad una nuova tipologia di *storytelling*, in cui la dimensione narrativa appare alterata da una narrazione di tipo complesso, legata alla meta-riflessione letteraria, in quanto portatrice di strutture narrative innovative.

A ciò si aggiunge che, per altro, il personaggio letterario 'costringe' Camilleri a fare in modo che vi sia una differenza tra lui e il personaggio televisivo. Oltre al duello tra l'autore e il personaggio, un'altra questione affrontata all'interno di questo romanzo è, come detto, quella tra il personaggio letterario e quello televisivo; in questo senso, risulta particolarmente interessante un brano in cui Montalbano riflette su cosa prova in relazione al suo doppio, mentre è intento a condurre un interrogatorio:

E cioè che mentri che per doviri d'ufficio reciti un certo personaggio, per confunnirsi la testa di chi stai 'ntirroganno, tu, nello stesso tempo, ti osservi, ti consideri, ti giudichi, t'apprezzi

o no. Sei contemporaneamente attori e spettatori di quello che stai facendo. E quindi, se hai recitato bene le parti, l'autro Montalbano, quello che assisteva al teatro, ti fa i complimenti. E tu ti nni compiaci, proprio come un attore si compiace dei complimenti che il pubblico gli fa. Prima 'sta camurria di sdoppiamento non ti era mai capitata, la facenna è accomenzata quando le storie che hai contatto all'Autore sono state trasmesse in tv. Sei stato contagiatò, Montalbà. Senza volirlo, hai principiato 'na gara tra te e l'attore, ecco tutto (Ibid.: 37).

La lotta di potere che si volge all'interno del romanzo non è dunque solo quella tra l'autore e il suo personaggio, di cui si tratterà ulteriormente più avanti, ma anche quella tra il personaggio e, di fatto, il suo doppio televisivo. Certamente la questione del doppio da sempre ha interessato profondamente il mondo letterario sia a livello diatopico che diacronico, ma in questo caso ciò che la rende interessante è che il duello con il doppio ha una dimensione fortemente transmediale. Infatti, proprio la transmedialità fa sì che vengano poste problematiche specifiche che sono presenti in relazione alla caratterizzazione del *medium* stesso; il Montalbano letterario sente di partire svantaggiato nella competizione con il suo doppio televisivo, proprio a causa del mezzo cui pertiene:

Ma vedi, è 'na gara inutili e impari [quella tra Montalbano letterario e televisivo, n.d.r.], pirchè mentri che la televisioni avi milioni di spettatori, tu hai soulo a tia stisso. E l'attori sarà sempr cchiù bravo di tia per almeno dù raggiuni: la prima è chel'attori sapi quello che sta per succidiri mentre tu sei sempre costretto a 'improvisari, la secunna è che lui ha studiato da attori e tu da commissario. La vuoi saoiri qual è l'unica, Montalbà? L'unica è che quanno trasmettono il programma che porta il nome tò, tu astuti la televisioni, nesci di casa e ti nni vai al ginmatò a vidiri Paperino (Ibid.).

In un dialogo tra Montalbano e uno degli altri personaggi del racconto, sua Eccellenza Partanna, il vescovo di Montelusa, la questione viene ulteriormente sviscerata, come una sorta di monito per il lettore-spettatore: ““Volevo conoscerla di persona personalmente come direbbe Catarella’ attaccò il piscopo con un surriseddro. ‘Sa, ho letto i libri che sono stati scritti su di lei e ho visto anche qualche puntata in televisione. Non male. Ma una cosa è un personaggio e una cosa è una persona’. A Montalbano vinni l'impulso di susirisi e annare ad abbrazzarlo” (Ibid.: 65).

La stessa Livia, fidanzata storica del Commissario, durante una lite su dove trascorrere le successive vacanze, per colpire il compagno lì dove è più sensibile, torna nuovamente a parlare della questione del doppio televisivo:

“Stavo pensando che il tuo alter ego televisivo, che è più giovane di te, invece è rimasto fedele a se stesso’. ‘Na cutiddrata ’n mezzo al petto sarebbi stata meno dulurosa. ‘A proposito, Livia, ma a te non ti scoccia vedere in televisione un’attrice che ti scimmiotta’. ‘No, perché? Non mi scimmiotta per niente. E comunque ti ricordo che non sono stata io a raccontare all’Autore i fatti tuoi e miei” (Ibid.: 102). E ovviamente anche l’autore, nel corso del racconto, interviene direttamente circa il rapporto tra i due Montalbano:

‘In altre parole, hai voluto fotttere il personaggio televisivo, negandogli la possibilità di arricchirsi di certe sfumature. Non è così?’. ‘Mi hai chiamato per dirmi che hai fatto questa grande scoperta? Che io voglio differenziarmi dall’altro?’. ‘Non si tratta solo di questo, Salvo. Io in un certo senso ti capisco, tant’è vero che all’inizio di questa storia ho fedelmente riportato la tua insofferenza, il tuo disagio verso il Montalbano televisivo, mentre potevo benissimo non parlarne. Però t’ao ad avvirtirti che ti stai mittenno supra ’na mala strada’: ‘Spiegati meglio’. ‘Pagonarti a lui o, peggio, sfidarlo non è cosa’. ‘Perché?’. ‘Perché tu sei tu e lui è lui’. ‘È facili per tia che campi supra a tutti e dù! Certo che ti conveni tinirici siperati e diversi!’ (Ibid.: 121-122).

Montalbano, dunque, addebita interamente all’autore la colpa di quanto sta avvenendo: la sua difficoltà nel non avere più un baricentro e nel non sentirsi più realmente se stesso deriva dalla volontà dell’autore di creare un suo doppio, diverso eppure identico, che lui non è in grado di accettare. È proprio in questo momento che viene a crearsi una spaccatura irrimediabile tra l’autore e il personaggio, che li condurrà ad un confronto via via sempre più serrato.

Non è certo la prima volta, però, che si pone la questione relativa al rapporto tra personaggio letterario e personaggio televisivo in Camilleri, anzi, a tal proposito, risulta di un certo interesse un altro romanzo nel quale, almeno idealmente, il Montalbano della pagina scritta e il personaggio televisivo si incontrano, ovvero *Acqua in bocca* (2010), scritto a quattro mani da Camilleri e Lucarelli, che ha per protagonisti i due personaggi principali dei due autori, ovvero il Commissario Salvo Montalbano e l’Ispettrice Grazia Negro.

Tralasciando l’analisi completa dell’opera (Medaglia 2019), ciò che qui interessa è che questo romanzo è corredata da una serie di immagini, che mirano a sottolineare alcuni momenti chiave dello svolgimento della storia; in particolare i due colleghi troveranno, nel corso dell’indagine, nella borsetta di Betta, uno degli agenti segreti coinvolti nella trama, due cartelle informative con le loro foto, i cui dati sono stati raccolti dai servizi segreti deviati per ostacolarli nella risoluzione del difficile caso di cui si stanno

occupando (Camilleri, Lucarelli 2010, 64-65). *Acqua in bocca* vede, quindi, come volti dei personaggi, quelli degli attori che li hanno interpretati nelle serie televisive. È interessante notare come negli altri romanzi di Camilleri, Montalbano, rispetto all'attore che lo interpreta nella serie televisiva, sia più vecchio e con folti capelli e baffi, come si legge nell'interessante scambio di battute tra il Commissario e la fidanzata Livia in *La danza del gabbiano* (Camilleri 2008a, 6).

L'identificazione fra l'ispettore Montalbano e l'attore Luca Zingaretti, invece, in *Acqua in bocca* è totale,⁵ anche se il personaggio creato da Camilleri nella lunga serie dei suoi romanzi era inizialmente diverso, anche fisicamente, da quello televisivo. Se in *Acqua in bocca* vi è il primo incontro tra il Montalbano letterario e quello televisivo, anche se unicamente dal punto di vista dei lettori, è necessario anche sottolineare come *Riccardino* non sia la prima opera in cui si realizza un'interferenza dei ruoli attanziali per quel che concerne Camilleri e Montalbano, anche se certamente rimane quella in cui a tale questione è dedicato maggiore spazio.

In realtà, infatti, già anni prima, personaggio e autore erano entrati in diretto contatto tra loro attraverso *Montalbano si rifiuta* (1999). Per ammissione dello stesso Camilleri questo racconto breve è una sorta di manifesto:

Due parole infine per un racconto, *Montalbano si rifiuta*, che si conclude con una telefonata notturna del commissario a me, suo autore, nella quale mi comunica che si rifiuta di continuare l'indagine dentro la quale io l'ho cacciato. Era il tempo dei cosiddetti 'cannibali' e la mia narrativa era schernita perché accusata di 'buonismo', e così decisi di reagire. Ma quel racconto è, per me, ancora attualissimo, è una sorta di manifesto. Il rifiuto cioè di compiacersi, narrativamente, della violenza (Camilleri 2008b, VII).

La trama è estremamente semplice: una notte di fine aprile il Commissario Montalbano stava tornando a casa dopo una lunga e faticosa giornata lavorativa, quando assistette al rapimento di una 'picciotta' da parte di due uomini. I due la caricavano su una Nissan contro la sua volontà: vedendo quanto accadeva il Commissario saltò in macchina e iniziò a seguirli. A un certo punto, dopo averli persi nell'inseguimento varie volte, vide la Nissan parcheggiata davanti a una casa sulla collina; scese dalla macchina e si avvicinò per spiare dalla finestra

⁵ In merito all'evoluzione del Commissario Montalbano nel corso del tempo, si veda anche Calabrese 2017, 88-89.

quanto stava avvenendo. Inizialmente tutto sembrava normale: i due rapitori in pieno relax stavano preparando la cena, ma Montalbano istintivamente non si fidava di quanto stava vedendo e decise di continuare a indagare. Ciò che scoprì lo fece inorridire: la giovane era stata brutalmente uccisa e mutilata dai due rapitori, che in quello stesso momento la stavano cucinando per mangiarla. Ed è a questo punto che il personaggio Montalbano decide di telefonare al suo autore Camilleri per lamentarsi del racconto in cui, suo malgrado, è stato inserito:

Il sittantino che, nella nottata romana, stava battendo a macchina, si susì di scatto, andò al telefono preoccupato. Chi poteva essere a quell'ora? 'Pronto! Chi è?'. 'Montalbano sono. Che fai?'. 'Non lo sai che faccio? Sto scrivendo il racconto di cui tu sei protagonista. Sono arrivato al punto in cui tu sei dintra la macchina e hai messo il colpo in canna. Da dove telefoni?'. 'Da una cabina'. 'E come ci sei arrivato?'. 'Non t'interessa'. 'Perché mi hai telefonato?'. 'Perché non mi piace questo racconto. Non voglio entrarci, non è cosa mia. La storia poi degli occhi fritti e del polpaccio in umido è assolutamente ridicola, una vera e propria stronzata, scusa se te lo dico'. 'Salvo, sono d'accordo con te'. 'E allora perché la scrivi?'. 'Figlio mio, cerca di capirmi. Certuni scrivono che io sono un buonista, uno che conta storie mielate e rassicuranti; certaltri dicono invece che il successo che ho grazie a te non mi ha fatto bene, che sono diventato ripetitivo, con l'occhio solo ai diritti d'autore... Sostengono che sono uno scrittore facile, macari se poi s'addannano a capire come scrivo. Sto cercando d'aggiornarmi, Salvo. Tanticchia di sangue sulla carta non fa male a nessuno. Che fai, vuoi metterti a sottilizzare? E poi, lo domando a tua che sei veramente un buongustaio: l'hai mai provato un piatto d'occhi umani fritti, macari con un soffritto di cipolla?'. 'Non fare lo spiritoso. Stammi a sentire, ti dico una cosa che non ti ripeterò più. Per me, Salvo Montalbano, una storia così non è cosa. Padronissimo tu di scriverne altre, ma allora t'inventi un altro protagonista. Sono stato chiaro?'. 'Chiarissimo. Ma intanto questa storia come la finisco?'. 'Così' disse il commissario. E riattaccò (Ibid.: 391).

La descrizione che l'autore Camilleri fa del personaggio Camilleri rispecchia esattamente l'immagine di sé che negli anni ha lasciato al pubblico: uno scrittore, di circa settant'anni che ancora usa la macchina da scrivere al posto del computer. L'autore, dunque, entra nel suo testo descrivendosi per ciò che è o anche con le caratteristiche con cui negli anni è apparso al pubblico dei lettori. Il Commissario è esattamente come viene descritto negli altri racconti: un uomo testardo, coraggioso, intuitivo e ironico al tempo stesso. E i due dialogano in maniera confidenziale, senza peli sulla lingua o mezzi termini. Ciò che emerge è una scrittura che autonomizza il protagonista: Montalbano, infatti, seppur

sia stato posto da Camilleri all'interno di una storia che non gradisce, è libero, durante la scrittura stessa del racconto – Camilleri afferma che sta scrivendolo in quel momento esatto – di ribellarsi al suo autore: trova un telefono e lo chiama. Qui risiede il primo dato di autonomia: infatti lo stesso Camilleri domanda al suo Commissario come abbia fatto a trovare il modo di mettersi in contatto con lui e Salvo non gli risponde. L'ipotesi che si può muovere è che la spiegazione non possa essere fornita se a scriverla deve essere l'autore, perché questi ne è all'oscuro. Il protagonista Montalbano – che condivide il palco, per la prima volta, in maniera palese ed evidente con il suo scrittore – risulta essere piuttosto netto in ciò che ritiene opportuno o meno: non vuole essere parte di una storia così cruenta e avvisa il suo autore che, se vuole iniziare a scrivere racconti come questi, dovrà trovare un altro personaggio con cui collaborare.

Emerge, dunque, un dato di particolare importanza: Camilleri non è il Dio dei suoi personaggi, ma collabora con loro sullo stesso livello. In questo caso, autore e personaggi sono legati l'uno all'altro per la buona riuscita dell'opera, tanto che Camilleri si giustifica con il suo personaggio, scusandosi in un certo modo e spiegandogli che questo racconto nasce dalla necessità di rispondere a certi critici che lo accusano di appartenere alla linea buonista della narrativa poliziesca.⁶ Ovviamente quella di Camilleri e di Montalbano è una risposta ironica ai loro detrattori: i due, che recitano una parte in perfetto accordo, non sono realmente disposti a cambiare per i loro denigratori. È da notare che proprio questa dichiarazione di poetica Camilleri la affida a un dialogo tra lui e il suo personaggio principale, sovvertendo la struttura narrativa abituale dei suoi racconti: in *Montalbano si rifiuta* Camilleri e il Commissario, legati tra loro da un lungo e fruttifero rapporto, appaiono per la prima volta sullo stesso piano del racconto, a cavallo tra realtà e mondo fittizio. E sempre per la prima volta viene messo in luce il loro rapporto di interdipendenza: Montalbano esiste perché Camilleri lo ha creato, ma al contempo Camilleri è ciò che è per il grande pubblico, perché Montalbano glielo ha consentito.

Tornando a *Riccardino*, si può constatare come quanto evidenziato per *Montalbano si rifiuta* sia valido anche per tale opera, anzi sembra che nell'ultimo romanzo di Camilleri questi nodi relativi all'autorialità e all'ipotetico potere dell'autore nei confronti dei suoi personaggi siano addirittura amplificati.

6 Per una trattazione sulla narrativa dagli anni Novanta in poi e sulla linea buonista (*Forrest Gump*) o cattivista (*Pulp Fiction*) si veda: Mondello 2007, 65-89.

Da un lato, Montalbano, sempre più attraverso il dipanarsi della trama, tenta di uscire dalla pagina del libro di cui è il protagonista, come in una sorta di mistica ribellione nei confronti del Dio che l'ha creato; dall'altro è il Dio-creatore, l'autore dell'opera e conseguentemente della vita delle sue creature-personaggi, che cerca di entrare nel mondo della finzione da lui stesso costruito, domandandosi – e facendo domandare al lettore – se la realtà che lo circonda sia poi così “reale”: così facendo, l'abbattimento della barriera autoriale conduce a riflettere sul fatto che la vita stessa può essere considerata una forma narrativa complessa. L'autore, dunque, da che era il Dio della narrazione diviene esso stesso una delle sue creature e, di conseguenza, smette di essere immortale e può essere abbandonato dai suoi personaggi, che non accettano più il potere che lui prova ad esercitare su di loro.

A tale proposito, risulta interessante un dialogo tra Camilleri e Montalbano, che si trova a circa metà del romanzo, nel quale i due iniziano il gioco di potere tra l'autore che vuole decidere in quanto creatore e il personaggio che vuole acquisire autonomia; tale scontro si protrarrà fino alla fine del racconto:

‘Se io dico che questo vicolo esiste, ed è lì, non c’è nessuno che possa smentirmi, né tu né quelli della televisione. Vigàta l’ho inventata io. Ora, per favore, lasciami andare avanti’ [...] ‘In parte hai ragione ma io voglio concluderla questa storia. Perché c’è anche un altro problema che tu devi considerare. La mia età’. ‘Embè?’. ‘Montalbà, tu stai a ripistare tutto ’u jorno ca ti senti vecchio, mentri che io vecchio lo sugno per davero. E sugno macari tanticchia stanco’ [...] ‘Che scrivere comincia a stancarmi. E che voglio trovare subito una soluzione a questa indagine’ [...] No, l’Autore aveva torto [...] Il signor Autore gli proponiva ’na conclusione alla sanfasò, alla comoveniveni pirchè dici che si sintiva stanco. E lui, Montalbano, non era forsi stanco? Non si era abbuttato? Non si era scassato i cabasisi di tutto? [...] ’Na cosa è scriviri un romanzo, ’n’altra cosa è mannare ’n omo ’nnuccenti ’n galera (Camilleri 2020, 210-212).

Da questo brano risulta evidente che i piani di realtà e finzione sono sempre più mescolati tra loro: se Camilleri entra nel mondo della letteratura come personaggio, Montalbano ne esce, arrivando in qualche modo ad essere così reale da poter riflettere sul senso stesso della scrittura.

La riflessione metaletteraria pone, dunque l'autore e il personaggio, nella loro inversione di ruoli, sullo stesso piano. Infatti, il loro rapporto sembra essere così paritetico che Camilleri propone una trama al suo personaggio, che si adira quando ha l'impressione che l'autore gliela voglia imporre, tanto che l'autore si trova a giustificarsi con Montalbano:

‘L’hai già scritta?! Hai già scritto il finale? Tu scrivi il finale di una mia indagine? Ma come ti sei permesso?’. ‘Montalbà, non ti fari pigliai dal nirbùso e arrifletti. L’ho scritto per comodità, perché una cosa è ragionare su una pagina pensata parola appresso parola e una cosa è discutere su parole dette a voce che magari sul momento non vengono giuste, non sono quelle che avrebbero dovuto essere. E poi, in fin dei conti, la mia è solo una proposta’. ‘Sì, ma intanto il finale te lo sei cucinato’. ‘Montalbà, la mia parola d’onore. L’ho cucinato, va bene, ma non l’ho servito a tavola. Decideremo ’nzemmula se si po’ utilizzari o no. Non capisco pirchè t’incazzi’ (Ibid.: 241-242).

Durante tutta la lunghezza del romanzo, Montalbano si rifiuta caparbiamente di sottostare alle indicazioni dell’autore, che prova, in qualche modo, a manovrarlo in più occasioni; tanto che Camilleri, ad un certo punto, si trova ‘costretto’, al fine di fare seguire le sue direttive, a mandare le indicazioni relative alla trama a un altro dei suoi personaggi e a far rimuovere il Commissario dal suo incarico:

‘Lei, caro Montalbano, forse è troppo stanco, troppo affaticato. E così ho deciso di riaffidare l’indagine al dottor Toti.’ [...] ‘Le aggiungo, Montalbano, e non so quanto la cosa possa farle piacere, che ho telefonato poca fa al dottor Toti dicendogli di seguire le indicazioni contenute nel fax che gli ho fatto recapitare’. ‘Quale fax mi scusi?’. ‘Ma quello che l’Autore ha già inviato a lei! Me ne ha mandato copia’. ‘L’Autore?! A lei?!’. ‘Sì, a me. Perché si meraviglia tanto? Ha dimenticato che anch’io sono uno dei suoi personaggi?’ (Ibid.: 271).

Camilleri ha, dunque, rimosso l’ostacolo di un personaggio che non voleva sottostare al suo “potere autoriale” rivolgendosi, in qualità di personaggio e non più di autore, ad altri personaggi ancora. Sembra quasi che l’autore voglia far comprendere a Montalbano che può essere esautorato in qualsiasi momento dal suo ruolo, rimarcando un’ipotetica scala gerarchica, che vede al suo sommo capo la volontà dell’autore. In quel momento, allora, Montalbano pensa di essere stato sconfitto dall’autore in una battaglia per il potere, che sembra essere irrimediabilmente persa: “‘Forsi è chisto il satori della sconfitta’. A malgrado che era ’na notti fridda, friddo non nni pativa, troppo era càvudo il sangue che gli curriva nelle vini” (Ibid.: 272). Ed è a questo punto che Montalbano opta per la ribellione completa e totale rispetto al suo autore: decide di diventare così autonomo da poter sparire. Ciò è quanto sembra intendere Camilleri sul termine del romanzo, quando assistiamo alla volontaria sparizione di Montalbano, che chiama il suo autore nuovamente al telefono e, di fatto, sovverte ancora una volta la barriera tra realtà e finzione:

Montalbano sono. Visto e considerato che la nostra più che decennale collaborazione è andata a farsi fottere, si è deteriorata al punto tale che tu hai condizionato un altro personaggio, il questore, per non farmi risolvere il caso a modo mio, ho preso una decisione. Se tu ti sostituisci a me nelle mie indagini, viene a dire che io sto diventando un peso morto. E allora me ne vado. Di mia spontanea volontà. Non ti darò la soddisfazione di eliminami in un modo o nell'altro. Da questo momento principio a cancellarmi. Basta un attimo. Sto già cominciando a non esserci più [...] (Ibid.: 272-273).

Montalbano diviene, dunque, così reale da ribellarsi al Dio-autore decidendo di sparire, mostrando la stessa rabbia che il personaggio Augusto aveva mostrato, molti anni prima, al suo autore Miguel de Unamuno in *Niebla* (1914).

3. Unamuno vs. Augusto

Alla luce di quanto fin qui affermato, sembra che Camilleri abbia, in qualche modo, guardato agli esempi letterari a lui precedenti per la costruzione della sua ultima opera *Riccardino*; se da un lato, come già affermato, vi sono richiami diretti a Pirandello, dall'altro *Niebla* sembra aver posto, in maniera per certi versi simile, la stessa questione dell'alterazione della linea divisoria tra realtà e finzione: un ulteriore caso in cui l'autore diviene personaggio della sua stessa opera.

Il romanzo non è una ‘novela’, bensì una ‘nivola’ –⁷ termine che compare fin dal Prologo dell’opera (de Unamuno 2015, 18) – ovvero una ‘novellona/nuvolona’ (Ibid.: 9), anche in relazione alla nebbia da cui ogni essere umano è circondato. Al centro del racconto vi è Augusto Pérez, definito non come protagonista della ‘nivola’, ma come ‘agonista’, ossia un essere in agonia, che lotta contro la propria esistenza. In tal modo, Augusto incarna le debolezze dell’essere umano: quel senso di non appartenenza al mondo nel quale vive, frutto della trasformazione e della crisi della società positivista che comporta la perdita di sicurezze, generando il senso di angoscia e di dolore nel quale vive il personaggio. Il lettore conosce Augusto come un uomo “ingenuo e lirico-sentimentale oltre misura” (Ibid.), la cui vita è, per l’appunto, avvolta in una sorta di nebbia. Nella fase di presentazione, viene definito come un essere riflessivo, difensore della vita contemplativa, lontano, quindi, dalla pragma-

⁷ Sono quattro in tutto le ‘nivole’ di Unamuno: per l’appunto *Niebla*, ma anche *Amor y pedagogía* (1902), *Abel Sánchez* (1917) e *La tía Tula* (1921).

ticità che caratterizza l'essere umano. Augusto non prende decisioni: si lascia trasportare da quel fascio nebuloso che è la vita, è un essere senza volontà, incapace di prendere decisioni vivendo, pertanto, nell'incertezza e nell'instabilità più assoluta. Nel primo capitolo, infatti, viene definito non come “*caminante, sino paseante de la vida*”: “Così si disse, e si chinò per arrotolarsi i pantaloni. Poi, finalmente, aprì l'ombrelllo e restò un momento assorto, pensando: ‘E adesso, dove vado? Giro a destra o a sinistra?’ Perché Augusto, per le strade della vita, più che camminare passeggiava. Aspetterò il primo cane che passa, si disse, e andrò nella sua stessa direzione” (Ibid.: 29-30). Una persona, quindi, che sembra essere priva di interesse e di volontà partecipativa alla vita.

Augusto, in compagnia di Orfeo, il fidato cane, e sostenuto dai costanti dialoghi con l'amico Víctor, per tutto il romanzo continuerà a interrogarsi su se stesso e sulla sua vita, in particolare, amorosa: si innamora, infatti, di Eugenia Domingo del Arco e ciò innesca una serie di meccanismi, che culmineranno con il suicidio/omicidio del protagonista.

Un giorno, mentre è in giro, Augusto vede Eugenia attraversare la strada e, innamoratosene, decide di corteggiarla: la giovane è, in realtà, già impegnata con Mauricio, un ragazzo che certamente non può essere definito un buon partito. I membri della famiglia di lei – e, in particolare, la zia – parteggiano, data l'inadeguatezza del fidanzato, per Augusto e sperano che tra i due nasca una relazione, che possa peraltro risolvere i problemi economici di Eugenia. La ragazza, però, continua a rifiutare Augusto e la sua corte, nonostante questo, a un certo punto, decida di prendersi addirittura in carico l'ipoteca della casa della giovane: anzi, questo gesto generoso inizialmente scatena le furie di Eugenia, che lo percepisce come una sorta di ricatto e si offende profondamente. Augusto sembra aver capito che il suo sentimento non è corrisposto, pertanto dirige la sua attenzione verso un'altra giovane, Rosario. Non completamente convinto di ciò che prova per questa seconda donna – da cui è attratto, più che altro, dal punto di vista puramente erotico – e ancora turbato dall'immagine di Eugenia, Augusto prende la decisione di chiedere in moglie ugualmente quest'ultima e con sua grande sorpresa Eugenia accetta. Qualche giorno prima del matrimonio, però, Augusto riceve una lettera da Eugenia, nella quale ella gli rivela di essere scappata con Mauricio e di aver solamente ‘giocato’ con lui.

A questo punto, una trama apparentemente semplice si complica e si approfondisce: infatti, Augusto, profondamente scosso da quanto gli è appena accaduto, decide di interrompere la sua inutile esistenza, ma prima di

commettere tale atto, prende la decisione di recarsi a Salamanca per incontrare di persona Miguel de Unamuno – l'autore del romanzo di cui è protagonista – spinto dalla curiosità per un articolo che questo aveva scritto: così facendo Augusto vorrebbe liberarsi da quella nebbia che avvolge la sua vita (Olson 1982, 332), ma invece finirà per morire. Il racconto termina, infatti, con un monologo del fedele cane Orfeo, devastato dalla morte del padrone, che si commuove di fronte alla precarietà degli esseri umani, concetto su cui si tornerà più avanti e che rappresenta anche la conclusione ideologica del racconto.

Il momento in cui Augusto e l'autore si incontrano nello studio di Unamuno presso l'Università di Salamanca rappresenta l'acme del romanzo; ciò che emerge da questo confronto è la verità: ovvero che Augusto è il personaggio di un romanzo di Unamuno e che, in quanto tale, non può autonomamente decidere di suicidarsi – decisione che nel frattempo ha maturato.

Inizia una lunga discussione tra l'autore e il personaggio, sempre più concitata, in cui Augusto afferma con crescente fermezza e potenza di essere una creatura esistente e indipendente a tutti gli effetti e che Unamuno non è così reale come crede di essere. Risulta interessante notare che Augusto conosce Unamuno ben prima dell'incontro tra i due 'di persona', attraverso i suoi scritti e proprio a tal proposito, Berns sostiene che: "The author-character is, of course, flattered to learn that Augusto is so well acquainted with the Miguel de Unamuno who existed prior to this present moment when an unusual relationship is about to be established between two fictional characters trying to convince each other that they are made of flesh and blood. Augusto Pérez has known Miguel de Unamuno previous to this meeting with him, but he knows him in a particular way – through his writings" (Berns 1969, 26). Unamuno viene, dunque, accusato dal suo personaggio di non essere più indipendente e reale di quanto lo sia lui, anche in relazione al fatto che la sua esistenza e la sua immortalità sono connesse con la letteratura, ovvero con un mondo di per sé fittizio: se Augusto non esiste nella realtà in quanto personaggio, ciò vale anche per Unamuno come autore, che è una creatura dei suoi personaggi, i quali sono la sua linfa vitale.

Unamuno è profondamente alterato e, al contempo, scosso da quello che sente e, come reazione, minaccia di uccidere Augusto nel romanzo per dimostrare chi dei due è davvero reale: ciò, in effetti, è quanto si verificherà, poiché Unamuno, come autore, ucciderà il suo personaggio Augusto.

Ciò che realmente si realizza durante questo dialogo tra autore-personaggio e protagonista della 'nivola' è la scoperta del dato ontologico relativo alla

creazione romanzesca: “They talked about writing novels and imagining creatures, about the ultimate nature of the imagined creatures and what precise type of existence they could enjoy. They talked about letting these creatures die or keeping them alive. It is in this way that, among other things, Augusto Pérez learns from Miguel de Unamuno the unbearable truth that his ultimate ontological make-up is of such a nature that he cannot even...commit suicide” (Bradatan 2004, 4548-459).

La ‘nivola’ è tutta incentrata sulla questione dell’esistenza in relazione all’arte e, in particolare, alla sfera romanzesca e tre sono i punti cardine attorno ai quali si dipana la riflessione: il Prologo, il Post-prologo e il capitolo XXXI.

Infatti, il libro si apre con il Prologo a opera di Víctor Goti, il quale afferma di conoscere sia Unamuno che Augusto e così facendo li mette sullo stesso piano della realtà/irrealtà:

Don Miguel de Unamuno ha insistito affinché scrivessi un prologo a questo suo libro, in cui si narra la triste storia del mio buon amico Augusto Pérez e della sua morte misteriosa; e io non posso rifiutarmi, perché i desideri del signor Unamuno sono per me ordini, nell’accezione più autentica del termine. Pur senza aver raggiunto l’apice di scetticismo amletico del mio povero amico Pérez, che arrivò a dubitare perfino della propria esistenza, sono fermamente persuaso di essere privo di quel dono che gli psicologi definiscono libero arbitrio, ma mi consola il fatto che probabilmente non può avvalersene neppure don Miguel (de Unamuno 2015, 17).

Già dall’*incipit* del racconto personaggi e autore vengono posti sullo stesso piano e nessuno dei tre sembra avere propriamente libero arbitrio; lo stesso Víctor anzi fa notare ironicamente che lui stesso è soggetto completamente ai desideri di Unamuno: ed essendo un suo personaggio, in effetti, non potrebbe essere altrimenti.

Unamuno gioca con il lettore, confondendo i piani del reale; come sostiene anche Ribbans, l’intento dell’autore è: “to confuse systematically the planes of reality of author and character” (Ribbans 1966, 403); in tal senso, il capitolo XXXI è il luogo in cui le convenzioni romanzesche e letterarie e quelle relative all’esistenza vengono rotte.

A questo Prologo segue immediatamente un Post-prologo a opera di Unamuno, in cui l’autore si dice in disaccordo rispetto ad alcune affermazioni di Víctor – in particolare quelle relative al suicidio/omicidio di Augusto – e gli attribuisce, così facendo, una certa autonomia:

Discuterei molto volentieri alcune delle affermazioni del mio prologista, Víctor Goti, ma conoscendo il segreto della sua esistenza – quella di Goti – preferisco lasciargli tutta la responsabilità di ciò che dice in questo suo prologo. Inoltre, essendo stato io stesso a pregarlo di scriverlo, impegnandomi in anticipo – ossia a priori – ad accettarlo come me l'avrebbe dato, non è il caso che lo rifiuti, e neppure che mi metta a correggerlo e rettificarlo dopo tutto questo tempo – ossia a posteriori (de Unamuno 2015, 27).

L'autonomia di Goti è, però, parziale, in quanto proprio Unamuno, conoscendo il “segreto della sua esistenza”, finge solo, in un certo senso, di lasciarlo ‘libero’ di esprimersi: siamo nel campo della finzione più completa, in cui uno specchio rimanda a un altro.

Víctor, un personaggio, finge di conoscere parimenti Augusto Pérez – il protagonista del racconto, un altro personaggio dunque – e Miguel de Unamuno, un autore realmente esistente e un personaggio della sua stessa opera; sempre Víctor, ironicamente, afferma che i desideri di Unamuno sono per lui ordini – rendendo la sua volontà di personaggio subordinata a quella dell'autore; Unamuno, al contempo, finge di aver lasciato una certa autonomia a Víctor Goti nel Prologo, ma ci svela anche di conoscere il segreto della sua esistenza e il fatto che l'autonomia di Goti sia del tutto fittizia.

Il lettore viene posto davanti ad un sapiente gioco di specchi, che infrange la barriera tra autore e personaggi e rimescola i livelli della narrazione, estendendosi in un luogo non completamente ascrivibile né alla realtà né alla finzione letteraria.⁸

Unamuno, nella sua ambiguità, mostra di poter dominare i suoi personaggi, sul termine del Post-prologo, anche se allo stesso tempo parla di loro come creature del tutto reali e, almeno in parte, autonome (Ibid.: 27-28).

Verso la metà dell'opera una parte della narrazione viene esplicitamente dedicata alla questione dell'autore e del personaggio dal punto di vista teorico in modalità metanarrativa; qui Víctor spiega proprio ad Augusto che vuole scrivere una ‘nivola’:

– E soprattutto sembra che non sia l'autore a parlare: lo scrittore non ci disturba con la sua personalità, con il suo io satanico. Anche se, naturalmente, tutto quello che dicono i miei

8 In tal senso, l'identificazione tra lettore e personaggio, dovuta alla passione con cui viene letta una narrazione, è consentita dalla possibilità di dimenticare la natura finzionale dell'individuo con cui ci si identifica (Bottiroli 2008, 41-58).

personaggi lo dico io... – Fino a un certo punto, però... – Come fino a un certo punto? – Sì, perché comincerai col credere che sei tu a condurli, con la tua mano, ed è facile che finirai col convincerti che invece sono loro a condurre te. È molto facile che un autore finisca col diventare un giocattolo nelle mani delle sue invenzioni... – Forse, ma il fatto è che in questo romanzo penso di mettere tutto quello che mi passa per la testa, così come viene. – Ma così non sarà un romanzo. – Be', allora sarà una novella lunga. Anzi... sarà una nivola [...] – E quando un personaggio rimane da solo? – Allora... un monologo. E perché possa sembrare una specie di dialogo mi invento un cane a cui il personaggio si rivolge quando parla. – Sai, Víctor, che ho l'impressione che tu stia inventando me?... – Può essere!. Quando si separarono, Augusto cominciò a dirsi: “La mia vita è un romanzo, una novella, una nivola, o che altro ancora? Tutto quello che succede a me, e a quelli che mi stanno intorno, è realtà o finzione? Non sarà forse un sogno di Dio o di chissà chi, che svanirà nel nulla quando Lui si sveglierà? E non sarà per questo che Gli dedichiamo cantici e preghiere, per continuare a farlo dormire, per conciliargli il sonno? E se tutte le liturgie, di tutte le religioni, non fossero che un modo di cullare Dio mentre dorme, perché non possa mai svegliarsi e smettere di sognare? (Ibid.: 131-132).

Víctor da personaggio diventa, in questo momento, un autore e Augusto diventa il suo lettore: il gioco dei ruoli continua a tal punto che Goti è al contempo autore e personaggio, Augusto è personaggio e lettore e Unamuno è autore e personaggio. Non solo questa parte è dedicata ad affrontare la tematica attorno alla quale il romanzo è costruito – quella dell'autore e della sua relazione con i personaggi – ma ulteriori sezioni del testo si occupano di chiarire e definire i personaggi e il loro livello di esistenza; ciò al fine di preparare, probabilmente, il lettore all'incontro di Augusto e Unamuno che occupa il racconto dal capitolo XXXI in poi:

– E l'immaginazione? – Sì, lì per qualche dubbio c'è posto. Ho spesso dei dubbi su quello che devo far dire o fare ai personaggi della mia nivola, e anche dopo che gli ho fatto dire o fare qualcosa mi viene il dubbio di non aver scelto la cosa più giusta, quella che davvero corrisponde al loro carattere. Ma...che posso farci? Sì, sì, c'è posto per il dubbio nell'immaginazione, che in fondo è una forma di pensiero. Mentre Augusto e Víctor sostenevano questa nivolesca conversazione, io, l'autore della presente nivola, che tu, lettore, hai tra le mani, e stai leggendo adesso, sorridevo enigmaticamente vedendo che i miei nivoleschi personaggi prendevano le mie difese e giustificavano i miei procedimenti, e dicevo a me stesso: ‘Quanto lontani sono dal pensare, questi poveri infelici, che non stanno facendo altro che giustificare quello che io sto facendo a loro! Allo stesso modo, quando qualcuno cerca argomenti per giustificarsi, non fa nient'altro che giustificare Dio. Io sono il Dio di questi due poveri diavoli nivoleschi’ (Ibid.: 190-191).

Nell'equazione autore e personaggi, ovviamente, non può mancare il lettore, che viene richiamato più volte nel testo e il cui ruolo simbolico viene assunto da Augusto nel corso del racconto; proprio al lettore sono dedicati alcuni passaggi specifici:

Fare.. fare, fare!... Bah, ti stai già immedesimando in qualche personaggio da teatro o da novella! Accontentiamoci di stare in una...nivola! Fare...fare...fare!...Ti sembra che facciamo poco, solo parlando di queste cose? È la solita mania dell'azione, cioè, della pantomima. Si dice che succedono molte cose in un dramma quando gli attori possono fare molti gesti e attraversare la scena con ampie falcate e fingere chissà quali dolori, e saltare, e...Pantomima! Pantomima! Parlano troppo!, si dice altre volte. Come se parlare non significasse agire. In principio fu il Verbo e tutto è disceso dal Verbo. Se adesso, per esempio, un qualche...nivolista occulto, nascosto lì, dietro l'armadio, stesse prendendo nota di quello che stiamo dicendo per poi farne letteratura, è più probabile che i suoi lettori direbbero che non succede nulla: e tuttavia...– Oh, se potessero guardami dentro, Víctor, ti assicuro che non direbbero mai una cosa simile. – Dentro? Dentro di chi? Di te? Di me? Noi non abbiamo un dentro. Quando quei lettori la smetteranno di dire che qui non succede nulla, vorrà dire che saranno riusciti a guardare dentro se stessi: sono loro, quelli che leggono, che devono guardarsi dentro. L'anima di un personaggio di un dramma, di un romanzo, o di una nivola, ha dentro di sé solo quello che ci mette il... – Il suo autore, certo. – No, il suo lettore (Ibid.: 215).

In *Niebla* i ruoli sembrano essere attribuiti di volta in volta e mai in maniera assoluta: infatti, quando Goti diventa da personaggio autore, crea un'interferenza di posizionamento, che fa slittare Augusto da personaggio a lettore della 'nivola'. A ragione, dunque, alcuni critici sembrano sostenere che come Unamuno rappresenta da un lato l'autore e dall'altro un personaggio, parimenti Augusto sia al contempo un personaggio e la rappresentazione di un lettore (Berns 1969, 28-29).

Il destino di Augusto, in effetti, non è nelle mani dell'autore, bensì in questo caso del lettore e della sua capacità di attribuire una vita ai personaggi (Vento 1966, 428). Come sostiene giustamente Blanco Aguinaga, "the most important thing about this chapter, the most obvious and surely the least observed, is not that Augusto tries to escape the world of Fiction, but that, in it, a new character finally leaves his mist and enters the novel: a character by the name of Miguel de Unamuno" (Blanco Aguinaga 1964, 197). Un ulteriore passo nell'analisi dell'incontro tra Unamuno e Augusto è compiuto da Bradatan quando afferma: "From a philosophical point of view, I would say that the

most significant thing about this chapter is not that, in it, Miguel de Unamuno comes to be a mere literary character, but that life itself becomes a narrative, a story with an Author who “tells” it, a narrative with a specific plot and specific characters” (Bradatan 2004, 460).

Augusto afferma la sua esistenza per tutto lo svolgimento del racconto, tanto che il romanzo è in parte un’affermazione di se stesso come essere vivente: “Yo veo la inspiración de Augusto Pérez, protagonista o agonista de *Niebla*, como principalmente cartesiana – eso es, como una representación artística del ser que vive de la idea y no del cuerpo” (Johnson 1989, 303).

Dunque, ciò che è realmente al centro dell’opera è quanto avviene durante l’incontro tra Unamuno e Augusto, in quanto da un lato Augusto tenta di uscire dalla pagina del libro di cui è il protagonista, come in una sorta di mistica ribellione nei confronti del Dio che l’ha creato; dall’altro è il Dio-creatore, l’autore dell’opera e conseguentemente della vita delle sue creature-personaggi, che cerca di entrare nel mondo della finzione da lui stesso costruito, domandandosi se la realtà che lo circonda sia poi così ‘reale’: così facendo, l’abbattimento della barriera autoriale, conduce a riflettere sul fatto che la vita stessa può essere considerata una forma narrativa complessa.

L’autore da che era il Dio della narrazione diviene esso stesso una delle sue creature e, di conseguenza, smette di essere immortale; questo è ciò che sembra intendere Augusto sul finire del dialogo con Unamuno, quando afferma che anche lui non esiste al di fuori dei suoi personaggi e che può morire o essere addirittura ucciso da uno di loro: “Si sieda, mantenga la calma. O forse lei crede davvero, mio caro don Miguel, che sarebbe il primo caso in cui un’entità immaginaria, come lei mi chiama, uccide colui che si è illuso di darle un’esistenza...immaginaria?” (Ibid.: 224-225).

Unamuno e la sua esistenza vengono messi in dubbio profondamente da qualcuno che, in teoria, non esiste, tanto che l’autore mal reagisce al tentativo di sparizione che il personaggio da lui creato opera su di lui:

E tu ti sei permesso di insinuare l’idea di uccidermi. Uccidermi? Tu, uccidere me? E io dovrei morire per mano di una mia creatura? Questo è troppo. E per punire la tua tracotanza e queste tue teorie nichiliste, stravaganti, anarchiche, che sei venuto a riferirmi, decido adesso e una volta per tutte che tu morirai. Appena rimetterai piede a casa tua, morirai. Morirai, ti dico, morirai! [...] Non importa: so quello che dico. E temo, in effetti, che se non mi sbrigo a ucciderti, andrà a finire che mi ucciderai tu (Ibid.: 225-226).

È Augusto a porre fine a questo dialogo serrato fatto anche di minacce, di timori e di dubbi, con un ulteriore avvertimento:

Niente da fare! Proprio non vuole permettermi di essere me stesso, di uscire dalla nebbia, di vivere, vivere, vivere, di vedermi, di toccarmi, di sentirmi, di dolermi, di essermi. Sicché proprio non vuole, eh! Sicché devo morire da entità immaginaria! Va bene, caro il mio signor creatore don Miguel, allora anche lei morirà, anche lei, e precipiterà di nuovo nel nulla da cui è uscito... Dio smetterà di sognarla! Lei morirà, sì, morirà, anche se non vuole! Lei morirà, e con lei anche tutti quelli che leggeranno la mia storia, tutti, tutti, tutti, nessuno escluso! Entità immaginarie come me; proprio come me! Moriranno tutti, tutti, tutti. Ve lo dico io, Augusto Pérez, entità immaginaria come voi, creatura nivolesca, proprio come voi. Perché lei, il mio creatore, don Miguel, è solo un'altra creatura nivolesca, e nivoleschi sono tutti i suoi lettori, proprio come me, Augusto Pérez, la sua vittima... (Ibid.: 227).

È solo in questo momento che Unamuno diviene completamente un personaggio della sua opera e, per questo, perde quell'immortalità, che inizialmente, in qualità di autore, si attribuiva e dava per scontata per se stesso: il nuovo personaggio Unamuno non è più il Dio dell'opera, ma è semplicemente un altro attore-personaggio della vicenda narrata che agisce al di fuori del suo ruolo autoriale; giunti a questo punto del racconto, all'interno dell'universo narrativo, non vi è più alcuna differenza tra i due personaggi, Augusto e Unamuno: segno che la barriera tra i diversi ruoli è stata definitivamente abbattuta.

La situazione viene nuovamente rovesciata e Unamuno, con la morte di Augusto, sembra riacquistare il suo “potere”, smentendo di fatto la possibilità della sua fallacia (Blanco Aguinaga 1964, 198).

L'ambiguità e i paradossi presenti in *Niebla* sono, dunque, molteplici; si è di fronte a una narrazione strutturalmente complessa, che gioca a confondere i ruoli dei diversi attanti per ribaltare i piani del reale e dell'irreale, attraverso la frantumazione del posizionamento autoriale e facendo della finzione narrativa la realtà stessa: sia l'autore che il personaggio creano parimenti una realtà altra, che si pone a metà strada tra finzione ed esistenza (Weber 1973, 209).

Il profondo tasso di ambiguità della ‘nivola’ permea tutto il testo: Augusto e Unamuno hanno in comune la volontà di dimostrare la propria reale esistenza e l'idea che il mondo immaginario possa essere percepito, in un certo senso, come più reale della stessa realtà; di conseguenza è per tale ragione che ciò su cui viene focalizzata l'attenzione da parte di autore e personaggi è proprio la natura della produzione artistica (Marcone 1989, II).

4. Conclusioni

Alla luce delle analisi fin qui esposte, per quel che concerne la poetica di Camilleri, la riflessione sul ruolo dei personaggi in relazione all'autore è stata un punto nodale, tanto che aveva già ampiamente affrontato l'argomento in *Conversazione su Tiresia* (2018), nel quale trattava della trasposizione da persona a personaggio e viceversa (Camilleri 2019, 10, 25, 33, 37) – già lì Camilleri, mentre interpretava Tiresia, si intrometteva come personaggio della rappresentazione nella sua veste reale di uomo (Ibid.: 38, 41, 8, 53).⁹

All'interno di *Riccardino*, dunque, da un lato Camilleri diviene da autore uno dei suoi personaggi, perdendo così la sua immortalità e il suo potere; dall'altro il suo protagonista, che nel corso del racconto tenta di ribellarsi più volte rispetto al potere oppressivo dell'autore cercando una certa dose di indipendenza, sentitosi tradito da questo, sceglie in modo autonomo di svanire, eliminando di fatto il potere decisionale che caratterizza solitamente l'autorialità: al centro della narrazione, dunque, il duello tra il personaggio e il suo autore.

In tal senso, è Montalbano ad abbandonare volontariamente Camilleri o è Camilleri che, tradendo la fiducia del protagonista nel momento in cui condivide le informazioni riguardo alla trama con altri personaggi, lo costringe alla sparizione? Potrebbe anche darsi che Camilleri abbia fatto svanire Montalbano come reazione alla volontà del personaggio di diventare indipendente da lui. Ovviamente, cercando di ragionare al di fuori del gioco sapientemente costruito dall'autore, nonostante l'intersecarsi del piano della realtà con quello della finzione letteraria, è pur sempre Camilleri ad aver deciso la sparizione di Montalbano, nonostante in apparenza non sia stato così. L'autore, dunque, sembrerebbe aver vinto il duello tra lui e il suo personaggio, nel momento in cui ha deciso di legare la morte di questo alla sua – è bene ricordare, infatti, che Camilleri aveva dato indicazioni precise in merito: solo alla sua morte si sarebbe potuto pubblicare il romanzo, in modo tale che anche Montalbano sparisse con lui. Oppure, forse, questo romanzo può essere considerato un pareggio? L'autore e il personaggio scompaiono insieme, di una morte che è

⁹ Ritornano qui, infatti, alcuni elementi della vita reale passata di Camilleri, già presenti in Sorgi 2020.

sullo stesso piano,¹⁰ completamente alterato dall'abbattimento della barriera tra autore e personaggio.

Anche nel caso di *Niebla*, l'autore e il personaggio concorrono alla comprensione di un'importante questione, quella relativa alla relazione tra l'arte e la vita:

The author-creator or Unamuno confronts the author-actor or Augusto, but together they address a common problem: the problem of the writer as he considers the relationship of art to life. If their discussion does not lead to a solution, it concludes with their realization that no writer can objectify his creation nor impose his fiction on physical reality. He can transform reality only through idea but not in fact. Neither Augusto as creator of his existence nor Unamuno as creator of Augusto can sustain his creation outside the confines of fiction. Unamuno's debate with Augusto may represent his refusal, like that of Augusto, to accept this truth (Marcone, 1989, 13).

In questo senso, al fine di risolvere questo dilemma, Unamuno e Augusto, per tutto il corso del racconto, non hanno fatto altro che coinvolgere nella loro dialogicità la figura del lettore, il quale con la sua presenza porta alla luce i contenuti dell'arte.

Al termine del racconto, la chiave che svela il mistero della natura artistica e che definisce la realtà, è affidata alle parole del cane Orfeo che compatisce la morte del suo padrone e che, dopo averlo fatto, muore:¹¹

Che strano animale è l'uomo! Cerca sempre quello che non ha [...] Sembra sempre che pensi a qualcos'altro, e che non veda quello che ha davanti a sé. È come se per lui ci fosse un altro mondo. Ed è chiaro che se c'è un altro mondo, questo mondo invece non c'è (de Unamuno 2015, 242).

Viene svelata, dunque, la condizione radicalmente trascendentale dell'uomo, con la sua costante ricerca di un indefinibile altrove (Olson 1982, 334): ed è proprio in tale modo che la struttura di una narrazione complessa, in cui è presente una interferenza tra i ruoli di autore e personaggio, influenza il modo stesso in cui la 'nivola' viene raccontata.

In conclusione, in entrambe le opere indagate la lotta presente tra autore-

io A tal proposito di veda la questione relativa alla prospettive proprietaria e modale della teoria del personaggio e alla differenza ontologica tra essere ed ente, cfr. Bottioli 2008, 41-45.

ii Per una trattazione sui significati possibili della morte di Orfeo, cfr. Vento 1966, 433.

creatore e personaggio-creatura conduce ad un abbattimento della barriera tra autore e personaggio. Tale alterazione dei ruoli attanziali produce una riflessione metaletteraria circa la possibile esistenza di una realtà differente, che si pone a metà strada tra finzione ed esistenza. L'arte diviene allora il campo che consente di vivere ed indagare questo nuovo spazio attraverso la costruzione di nuovi meccanismi narrativi, che caratterizzano la modernità e contemporaneità letteraria.

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Languaging and Translating Personality in Video Games: A Lexical Approach to *The Sims 4* Psychological Simulation

Abstract

From the perspective of Game Localization (Bernal-Merino 2015, O'Hagan and Mangiron 2013), this paper presents a descriptive corpus-assisted study on the language of personality in *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts 2014), as the psychological dimension of this real-life simulation game represents its distinctive feature (Franklin 2014, Electronic Arts 2014a). The elaborate nature of *The Sims 4* personality trait system has received academic attention, since its mechanics seem to be based on trait theory (Sloan 2015, 209), “a major approach to the study [and assessment] of human personality” in psychology (Villanueva 2010, vii). Accordingly, this paper analyzes how psychological simulation is worded in game texts and examines the features of *The Sims 4* cross-linguistic personality lexicon. The original English trait system is thus compared with the Italian translation in order to explore the linguistic challenges and issues psychological customization poses to localization professionals.

1. Introduction

With many people globally at home and unable to work due to the Covid-19 pandemic, gaming, particularly online gaming, has recorded a massive increase in engagement and revenues during lockdown, as video games have become an invaluable way to safely connect while staying apart (Romano 2020). In order to encourage people to entertain themselves while practicing physical distancing, as Snider (2020) reports, many game companies launched an initiative titled #PlayApartTogether, which was even praised and supported by the World Health Organization.

As psychology professor at Stetson University Chris Ferguson explains (cit. in Stieg 2020), there are psychological reasons, besides the entertainment

factor, why people have drawn their interest to video games in the pandemic: given the difficulty in meeting certain needs in real life, people turn to virtual worlds, and life simulation games like *The Sims* series (Electronic Arts 2000 - Present) prove to be extremely therapeutic. According to Ferguson (Ibid.), these games help people to feel in control over their decisions and goals, they keep people social, since not only players can communicate with other fictional characters within the game world, but they can also connect to other players online. Thus, these simulation games represent a form of escapism, based on the very ordinary lives people can play in the fictional world, which offer them a sense of normality in a real world turned upside down (Ibid.).

As argued by Jane McGonigal (cit. in Owens 2020, online), director of game research and development at the Institute for the Future, “gaming is an incredible act of self-care” because games give players “a sense of agency at a time when most people don’t have any”, they represent “a safe space” because “for many people now, the fantasy is just ordinary life”.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise to learn that the latest episode of the franchise, *The Sims 4* (Electronic Arts, 2014) “has had its biggest year since launch in terms of revenue and engagement,” according to the game’s publisher (cit. in Wilson 2020, online). Moreover, as Wilson relates (Ibid.), some players in *The Sims* YouTube community have started to share gameplay videos reflecting the new reality of the pandemic: they have roleplayed out the pandemic, with Sims following the medical advice of health authorities around the world, being socially distant, wearing masks and undergoing quarantine. After all, comedy and laughter are a great form of stress relief, and that is no joke.

The increase in player engagement recorded by *The Sims 4*, which testifies to the cultural relevance of life simulation in the present day, is not the only achievement to be celebrated in the year of the pandemic. Indeed, 2020 also represents the 20th anniversary of *The Sims* franchise.¹ More relevantly for the purposes of this paper, these games have been distributed in dozens of countries worldwide and translated into just as many languages.² The process

¹ Since its launch in 2000, this franchise has sold around 200 million copies globally, generated more than 5 billion US dollars in revenue, and a total population of over 1.6 billion Sims has been created (see Bhavani 2020, Roberts 2020). As regards *The Sims 4*, this episode alone has recorded more than US\$1 billion in revenue and has recently passed 20 million players around the world (Ibid.).

² *The Sims 4*, for example, is available in 18 different languages.

of game localization, of which translation is a fundamental phase (see Maxwell-Chandler and O’Malley-Deming 2012), has played a major role in the cultural and commercial success of *The Sims* series at global level.

Based on these premises, this paper aims to present the first results of a research project on the localization challenges of life simulation from the perspective of Game Localization.³ However, given the complexity of this franchise, this paper is based on a descriptive corpus-assisted study which focuses on some of the linguistic and translational aspects of *The Sims 4* personality customization, because the psychological dimension of simulation represents the special characteristic of this episode (Franklin 2014, Electronic Arts 2014a).

Section 2 presents *The Sims 4*, with special attention to its complex personality customization system. Section 3 contains background information regarding the psycholexical approach in personality psychology (Ashton 2018, 124-126), which represents a relevant developmental perspective into the language of personality.⁴

Section 4 describes how the personality trait system is worded in game texts and explores the linguistic features of *The Sims 4* personality lexicon in the English source language. Section 5 examines the transfer of personality trait names from English into Italian, offers an overview of the lexical phenomena and challenges they present, and discusses some semantic features of the solutions provided by Italian localization professionals. Finally, some conclusions are drawn in Section 6, while offering potential avenues for further research.

³ In Game Localization scientific literature, little attention has been paid to this franchise. To my knowledge, except for some references in handbooks (Bernal-Merino 2015, O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013) and papers (Fernández-Costales 2011) and a few unpublished theses at university level (Davidson 2011, Dodaro 2014, Eerio 2014), no studies on *The Sims* have been published so far.

⁴ In this regard, it is worth underlining that this paper does not aim to examine the verisimilitude of personality psychology in the game mechanics or of personality traits in *The Sims 4* system. For these purposes, collaboration with psychology experts is necessary, but beyond the scope of this pilot research. Nevertheless, as will emerge in Sections 4 and 5, given the possibility of making parallels between the ‘lexical approach’ used in psychology and the lexical approach adopted as a working methodology in this paper, Section 3 aims to provide the reader with a general summary of the context in which trait theory has developed, which draws on the most relevant works on the topic. Indeed, the emphasis placed by psychologists on natural languages and dictionaries in developing personality traits prompted the researcher to analyze data from a lexical and metalexicographic perspective.

2. *The Sims 4* personality system

The Sims series, originally created by designer and auteur Will Wright, is an extremely popular game franchise which, over its four main titles and numerous expansions and spin-offs, has become a cultural phenomenon by simply replacing monsters with plain humans and proving that ‘real’ life can be simulated by interactive entertainment (Chan 2003, Frasca 2001, Sihvonen 2011). In this sense, *The Sims* is considered as “a landmark in videogame history” (Frasca 2001, online), since it has “proven that the mainstream game market could enthusiastically embrace a game based on the simulation of emotions and people over guns and fighting” (Chan 2003, 1). In other words, millions of players worldwide have fun by creating and managing the everyday lives of simulated people known as Sims and, given the series’ open-endedness, the gaming experiences players co-author may be uniquely personal.

The Sims 4 is the fourth major title in *The Sims* series. It was published by Electronic Arts (EA hereafter) in 2014 and developed by Maxis together with EA in-house *The Sims* Studio as a multiplatform title.⁵ The game has the same fun factor as its predecessors: players create and interact with a series of characters in order to simulate everyday life experiences (Bittanti and Flanagan 2003). Indeed, as Nutt and Railton (2003) remark, this franchise has established real life as a game genre, in the sense that players understand and enjoy the game through their notion of real life, and on this basis they can use the game as a sort of life laboratory to play “with ‘like real life’ narratives” in either realistic or very creative ways (Ibid., 589). In the words of writer Liv Siddall (2019, online), *The Sims* games’ “appeal lies in its close-to-real-life-ness. You pay bills. You load the dishwasher. You make beds. You clean stuff”. The healthier and happier the Sims become, the more enjoyable the game, but players “cannot ‘win’ – there is no credit roll. Your Sims might reach the top of their career ladders, retire with a healthy pension, and die, but the game goes on” (Ibid.).

As already mentioned, the added value of this fourth episode is the psychological dimension of life simulation. As the game’s executive producer Rachel Franklin (2014) explains, while in previous games you controlled the

⁵ *The Sims 4* was initially released for PC and Mac, later including versions for consoles. Since its launch, dozens of expansions and additional downloadable content have been released, but this paper focuses on the base game for PC.

mind and body of your Sims, in *The Sims 4*, for the first time, you “control their hearts”, you decide “who they are. You define your Sim personality” and “this is when the power of our simulation comes into play: personality drives behavior, creating richer stories and the possibilities when you play with life are simply endless”. This is also the main theme of *The Sims 4* player’s guide (Electronic Arts 2014a, 1, emphasis in the original):

The Sims 4 is all about the big personalities and individuality of every Sim [...]. Who they are and how they behave changes the way you play, and changes the lives of your Sims [...]. In *The Sims 4*, it’s not just about WHAT your Sims look like, it’s about WHO they are on the inside that really counts. And all of it is in your hands.

Moreover, Electronic Arts (2014b) offers players the possibility of taking a personality diagnostic to discover which personality matches them best in *The Sims 4*.

In-game, this dimension of personality customization is translated into new options within the ‘Create a Sim’ mechanic: players co-design their Sims by choosing a number of attributes, such as name, gender, age, physical appearance and clothes, voice, walkstyles, etc., and, as regards personality, one aspiration and three traits.

Aspirations are lifelong goals for the Sims and there are ten broad aspiration tracks, namely Athletic, Creativity, Deviance, Family, Food, Fortune, Knowledge, Love, Nature, and Popularity, each branching into further categories. For example, by selecting Creativity as his/her aspiration, the player may be a ‘painter extraordinaire’, a ‘musical genius’ or a ‘bestselling author’. More importantly, personality traits give Sims unique interactions and preferences throughout their life because they define their actions, desires, whims, and emotions. They represent a personality system including 101 traits which, in the mechanics of the game, are divided into three types: customizable traits proper (39), bonus traits (10), and reward traits (52), whose difference lies in the way they can be acquired.

Customizable traits are the traits players can choose from when creating their avatars in order to define what their Sims do or do not enjoy doing, like ‘foodie’, ‘lazy’ and ‘geek’, or how they interact with each other, thus influencing the way they create and maintain social interactions and relationships, like ‘bro’, ‘evil’, and ‘loner’.

Bonus traits are associated with aspirations, meaning that players are assigned bonus traits to fulfil aspiration goals more easily. For example, if the player selects ‘bodybuilder’ as his/her Athletic aspiration, s/he will acquire ‘high metabolism’ as a bonus trait.

Lastly, reward traits can be either acquired by completing aspirations or purchased with satisfaction points. The latter can be earned by either fulfilling whims or achieving aspirations’ single milestones. Examples of reward traits include ‘long-lived’ or ‘gym rat’ for the Athletic aspiration, ‘speed reader’ for Knowledge, ‘great kisser’ for Love, and ‘super green thumb’ for Nature, among many others.

The complex nature of *The Sims 4* personality system has attracted academic attention. As Game Art and Design scholar Robin Sloan (2015, 209) explains, although “the simulation of human personalities is arguably the most interesting quality of the characters” in the whole series, in the sense that all games “have an explicit focus on character behaviors and personalities” (Ibid., 208), *The Sims 4* “introduced the most advanced set of behavioral variables to date” which allow players to design “a complex personality for their characters” (Ibid., 209).

According to Sloan (Ibid.), “we can recognize personality theories” in the customization system of *The Sims 4*, which seems to be informed on those psychological principles of personality which make game characters more realistic and believable, so that players can relate to, empathize and identify with them more easily (Ibid., 81). Sloan refers to personality psychology and trait theory, a very large area within the science of psychology, aimed at investigating such a complex psychological entity like personality on the basis of traits. The latter are “consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, or actions” which, “*by definition*, describe how we differ from one another, and the sum of these differences define our uniqueness” (Johnson 1997, 87, emphasis in the original). In other words, traits “can be defined as habitual patterns of behavior, thought, and emotion”, which “are relatively stable over time, differ among individuals, and influence behavior” (Villanueva 2010, vii).

3. The psycholexical approach to personality

According to Matthews *et al.* (2009, 3) “the idea of personality traits may be as old as human language itself” and “the language of personality description permeates our everyday conversation and discourse”, which explains why “contemporary

English is replete with terms used to describe personal qualities". As Goldie (2004, 1-2) puts it, "we call people kindhearted, generous, fair-minded, witty, flaky, charming, mean-spirited, [...]. Aspects of personality such as these," also known as traits, "are constantly being appealed to in our everyday descriptions of ourselves and of others". "Personality discourse is everywhere", that is wherever people think, talk, and write about themselves or other people (Ibid., 1).

In the field of psychology, "trait theory is a major approach to the study [and assessment] of human personality" (Villanueva 2010, vii). For these purposes, as Ashton (2018, 111-148) explains, psychologists used a methodology which has presumably been a source of inspiration for *The Sims 4* game designers and which serves as the background for the analysis presented in Section 5. Indeed, in order to classify traits, psychologists adopted the so-called "lexical approach" (Ashton 2018, 124-126): they compiled full lists of personality-descriptive attributes that can be found in the dictionaries of a language and created "a language's personality lexicon". "The psycholexical approach is typically associated historically with Allport and Odber (1936), Cattell (1943), and Goldberg (1981). Characteristic of that approach is the systematic use of tangible repositories of the lexicon of a language", most often dictionaries, "in order to arrive at full and comprehensive tabulations of all lingual expressions that can be used to describe personality" (De Raad and Mlačić 2017, 162).

As regards the linguistic nature of traits, as Saucier and Goldberg (1996, 30) seminally explained, personality description in language translates into adjectival concepts and works "primarily through the adjective function", which "in some languages, [...] is carried out entirely through adjectives, whereas in others, the function may be carried out mostly through nouns or verbs". In particular, "English, like other Indo-European languages, appears to fall between these extremes; it has a very large adjective class, but the adjective function is sometimes carried out through nouns or verbs" (Ibid.).

The foundation or rationale of this approach is the "lexical hypothesis" (Goldberg 1981), in turn based on two assumptions: first, all attributes worth selecting for psychologists are encoded in everyday words, representing the wisdom of natural languages;⁶ second, the degree of crosslinguistic lexical rep-

6 Indeed, the "plausibility" of the lexical hypothesis (Allport and Odber 1936) implies that traits or individual differences found important by people must be or will be represented in language and, thus, will be recorded in dictionaries.

resentation of an attribute indicates its importance. “Thus, the most important personality attributes should have a corresponding term in virtually every language” (Saucier and Goldberg 1996, 26) because, as De Raad and Mlačić argue (2017, 162), “individual differences observed in a culture are studied bottom-up by exploiting the lexicon of the language of that culture and by organizing the culture-specific language of personality in a comprehensive way”. Since its development, “the psycholexical approach has been applied in many languages, each [...] resulting in a trait structure that is assumed to capture the most important trait dimensions of that language” (De Raad and Mlačić 2017, 163). These dimensions took the shape of the “Five-Factor Model of Personality”, also known as the “Big Five”, formulated by Costa and McCrae (1992) and based on five factors (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability, and Intellect or Openness to Experience),⁷ which are “hypothesized to cover the most important semantics of individual differences across languages” (De Raad and Mlačić 2017, 163).

A more in-depth discussion about this reference model of personality assessment, and of its development due to the intense debate surrounding it (see Widiger 2017), is beyond the scope of this paper, whose objective is to explore the linguistic and translational challenges of personality customization in *The Sims 4* and not to evaluate whether and how the game’s personality traits correspond to real personality traits. However, in this regard, it is worth specifying that the notion of a crosscultural or universal nature of personality characteristics and descriptors heavily relied on the practice of translation, aimed at replicating the English Big Five model, and subsequent versions, in each and every language and culture of the world.⁸

4. Languaging personality traits

The psychological dimension of simulation in *The Sims 4* English original texts is worded in a contemporary and playful set of personality lexicon. In the game’s

⁷ An introduction to the Big Five constructs is provided by De Raad and Perugini (2002).

⁸ Church (2017) has edited a comprehensive three-volume work concerning the language of personality across cultures. As regards the use of the psycholexical approach in the Italian language, see Caprara and Perugini (1991, 1994), Di Blas and Perugini (2002), Ubbiali *et al.* (2013), among others.

glossary,⁹ it means 101 trait names which, from the linguistic point of view, in line with the lexical approach used in psychology, are encoded into a variety of single and multi-word expressions with an attributive and descriptive function.

As regards this point, although word class assignment is quite difficult out of context and context, and although the phenomenon of conversion or zero derivation allows words to serve different word classes in English, on the basis of dictionary definitions (Oxford Dictionary of English, online), as Figure 4.1 illustrates, traits are mostly adjectives (54%) and nouns (44%), in turn subdivided into simple or derived adjectives (42%) and compound adjectives (12%), i.e. an adjective plus a noun or an adverb, and simple or derived nouns (12%), compound nouns (16%) and agent nouns (16%), but there are also two instances of descriptive subjectless clauses (2%) in the source text, namely 'hates children' and 'loves outdoors'.

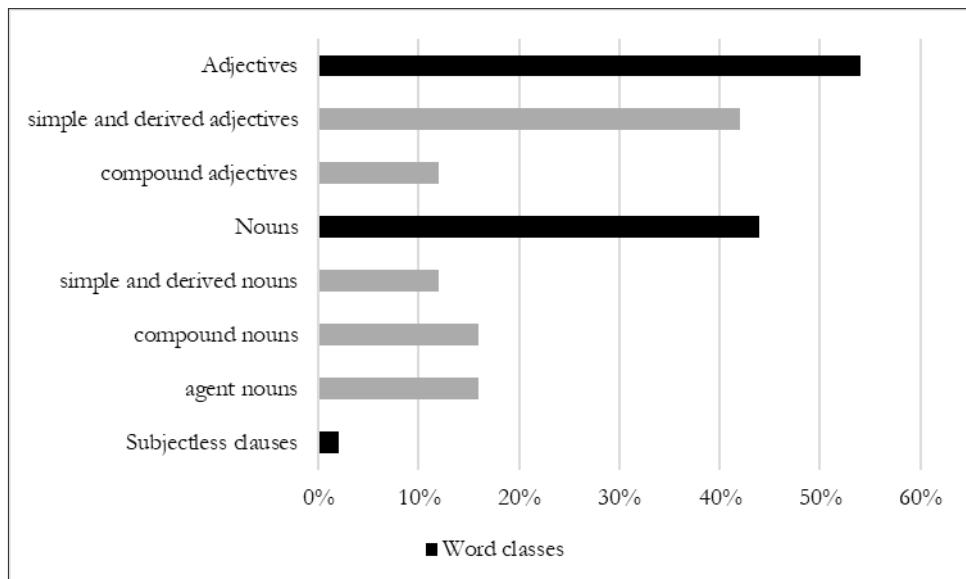


Figure 4.1 Word classes of *The Sims 4* English personality traits

For example, adjectives include trait names worded in either simple and derived forms like 'active', 'dastardly', 'independent' and 'noncommittal', and compound attributes like 'family-oriented', 'hardly hungry' and 'never weary'. Examples of

⁹ The glossary of a video game or of a game franchise is an official terminology database which contains the body of terms belonging to the game world in different languages. Compiled and updated by localization professionals, it represents an invaluable reference material for translators for the purposes of terminological consistency (see Pettini 2016).

nouns used to name personality traits comprise simple and derived forms like ‘companion’, ‘foodie’ and ‘genius’, compound nouns like ‘bookworm’ and ‘mastermind’, and also agent nouns like ‘appraiser’ or ‘tormentor’, sometimes in combination with other adjectives or nouns, as in ‘great kisser’ and ‘music lover’.

In Italian, word class assignment is equally complex because many trait names can be interpreted as both adjective and noun out of context. Nevertheless, according to Treccani dictionary definitions (Vocabolario Treccani, online), even if word classes proportions are quite similar to the English ones, with adjectives and nouns representing 51% and 47% of the instances respectively, this does not mean that they necessarily correspond to the same word classes of the source language, because adjectives and nouns are not always translated into equivalent adjectives and nouns. On the contrary, there are 11 instances of nouns in Italian which are adjectives in English, and this mostly depends on the strategy used in translation to deal with compound adjectives, as will be illustrated in Section 5.2. As regards the two instances of subjectless clauses, they are kept unaltered in Italian and translated into calqued subjectless clauses: *odia i bambini* for ‘hates children’ and *ama l’aria aperta* for ‘loves outdoors’.

5. Translating personality traits

The Sims 4 personality trait system presents translators with different challenges to deal with, some of which are specific to game localization, in the sense that they depend on the particular characteristics of this translation realm, while other phenomena depend on the lexical nature of the items in the source language. In detail, gender issues, space constraints and the lack of context and context, which clearly exemplify the specificities of game translation, combine with other potential difficulties due to formal and semantic features typical of the English vocabulary expressing adjectival concepts and languaging personality traits.

5.1 Game localization challenges

Given the gender-customizable nature of *The Sims 4*, which allows players to choose their avatar’s gender, and given the types of word classes used to name

traits, mainly adjectives and nouns, the transfer from English into Italian, that is to say translating from a language with a mainly semantic gender system into a Romance language with both a semantic and a grammatical gender system, requires translators to use the so-called “variables” (see Bernal-Merino 2015, 147-152, Díaz-Montón 2007, Heimburg 2006, O’Hagan and Mangiron 2013, 132-133; Pettini 2018). Variables belong to programming metalanguage and include a “set of codes and characters that mark gender-variable strings with tags, generally ‘M’ for male and ‘F’ for female in brackets, serving as computing instructions that allow the game engine to display gender-specific strings correctly” (Pettini 2020, 446), that is according to the gender selected by the player for his/her avatar.

For example, in (1) the reward trait associated to Popularity aspiration ‘perfect host’ becomes either *perfetto padrone di casa*, if male, or *perfetta padrona di casa*, if female, in Italian, because both the noun and the adjective must agree with one another and with the gender of the player’s avatar. As the string below shows, the gender variable part is the one contained within braces and following the variable M or F plus o, which indicates Sim o, the one controlled by the player.

(1)	Perfect host	{Mo.Perfetto padrone}{Fo.Perfetta padrona} di casa
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Even if potentially all traits may be translated into gender-variable equivalents, not all the strings are gender-marked because there may be gender-neutral alternatives, i.e. one single and invariable form for both male and female, such as *collezionista* for ‘collector’, *infantile* for ‘childish’, *snob* for ‘snob’. However, a more in-depth analysis of trait names shows that, unfortunately, gender-biased solutions can be observed in terms of male-specificity only, such as *benvenuto perenne* for ‘always welcome’ and *sim mattiniero* for ‘morning sim’, where *benvenuto* and *mattiniero* might be female-specific as well, by simply changing the word ending letter from ‘o’ into ‘a’. Also the reasons behind the choice of some neutral solutions and therefore the lack of gender-variable tags are not immediately clear, as will emerge in Section 5.2.1.

Since traits belong to the category of in-game or on-screen text and, in particular, they appear in the user interface as isolated and decontextualized linguistic items, they are potentially subject to space limitations. However, as linguistic tester Dodaro (2013, 112) explains, “*The Sims 4* makes large use of tooltips and other flexible windows to show text on screen” and, in more detail, as opposed

to what one might expect, the number of characters allowed per string, which varies depending on the trait type, ranging from twenty for traits proper to thirty for reward traits, proves to be large enough to not constrain translators' decisions.

The lack of co-text and context, which is characteristic to game localization, represents another challenge for *The Sims 4* translators. Except for in-game descriptions to be retrieved in the game database and some pieces of information to be inferred by reading the identifier column of both the glossary and the game database spreadsheets,¹⁰ when translating personality traits, professionals are presented with a mere list of adjectival expressions to be rendered into equivalent personality traits. In this respect, an interesting example is that of 'player', a very common English word whose polysemy might make its translation challenging with little or no co-text and context. In detail, 'player' is a reward trait from completing the Love aspiration category named 'serial romantic'. In-game, this trait is defined as follows: "Players will never cause other Sims to get jealous, no matter what they do". In English, the only meaning relatable to this description is that of 'player' as a US English-specific informal or slang noun referring to "a confident, successful man with many sexual partners" (Oxford Dictionary of English, online) or "a person and especially a man who has many lovers" (Merriam Webster Dictionary of English, online). In this light, two linguistic features emerge: the very informal nature in terms of register and its semantic male-specificity in terms of referent. Equivalent expressions exist in Italian and all revolve around the meaning of player as lady-killer, philanderer, womanizer, skirt-chaser, among others, each presenting different register and semantic nuances. However, it is possible to speculate that in order to comply with the gender-customizable nature of *The Sims 4* and, especially, with its age-rating,¹¹

¹⁰ In game localization, language professionals work on Excel spreadsheets which organize texts in typical table style format, with several columns (usually one per language) and hundreds of thousands of rows or strings. The latter are assigned tags which allow developers to identify strings and integrate translated ones into the game engine files, thus avoiding dangerous cutting and pasting (Maxwell-Chandler and O'Malley-Deming 2012, 200).

¹¹ According to PEGI (Pan European Game Information) age rating system, *The Sims 4* is labelled '12'. Age ratings can vary according to the target locale and are particularly relevant for translation because they outline the prospective target audience, and consequently influence translators' overall approach or single strategies, especially as regards bad language (see Bernal-Merino 2015, 182-187).

translators appropriately provided a gender-variable and neutral solution like *seduttore*, if male, and *seduttrice*, if female [seducer], thus deviating from the original colloquial and androcentric value.

5.2 Language-specific challenges

As previously mentioned, translating *The Sims 4* trait system also means dealing with challenges which are not specific to game localization. Though they are inevitably connected with the constraints discussed so far, they depend on the nature of the original items in terms of the formal, functional, and semantic features that are typical of *The Sims 4* English personality lexicon. Indeed, by focusing on the characteristics of the source text, trait names represent various lexical phenomena with different types and degrees of linguistic complexity and interlinguistic difficulty, which can be broadly grouped into the following working definitions: (a) conciseness and semantic density, (b) cognate words, (c) figurative and idiomatic language, (d) informal language and slang, illustrated in Figure 5.1.

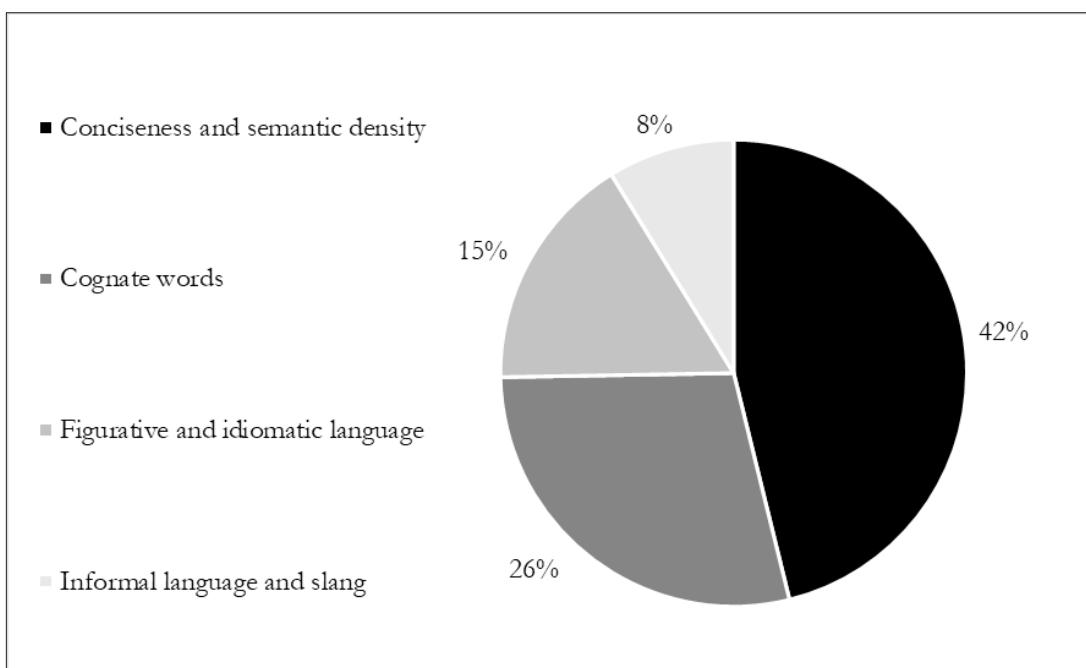


Figure 5.1 Linguistic categories of *The Sims 4* English personality lexicon

5.2.1 Conciseness and semantic density

This working lexical category (42%) refers to the general shortness of English words, when compared to Romance languages like Italian, and the natural ability of English to create meaning-packed constructions or to express a complex meaning with one single word. The difficulty may be also connected to length and to differences in language use as regards some constructions. In linguistic terms, this group includes derived adjectives (15 instances), compound adjectives (12 instances), agent nouns (11 instances) and a few compound nouns (4 instances).

Derived adjectives, which are formed from other word classes by the addition of affixes, are mostly directly translated into one-word or derived equivalent adjectives, like *folle* for ‘insane’, *parsimonioso* or *parsimoniosa* for ‘thrifty’. However, in some cases the semantic value of the original adjective, especially when deriving from a verb, is toned-down. For example, ‘alluring’ is a bonus trait awarded to a Sim for choosing one Love aspiration because, as described in-game, “alluring Sims are more successful at romance than others”, so being alluring help players to achieve their aspiration more easily. In English ‘alluring’ means “powerfully and mysteriously attractive or fascinating; seductive” (Oxford Dictionary of English, online) and in Italian it is translated into the semantically superordinate *attraente* [attractive]. Other translations in the group of derived adjectives include *senza preoccupazioni* [without worries] for ‘carefree’ and *senza vergogna* [without shame] for ‘shameless’, both longer prepositional phrases which might have been rendered into gender-variable adjectives like *spensierato/a* for ‘carefree’ and *spudorato/a*, *sfacciato/a*, *svergognato/a*, *sfrontato/a* for ‘shameless’.

Compound adjectives (12 instances) are another group of concise and semantically dense trait names. In the Italian translation, they tend to be either paraphrased into nouns or directly translated into simple or derived adjectives. Paraphrase and nominalization include, for example, *amante della famiglia* [family lover] for ‘family-oriented’, *doti sociali* [social gifts] for ‘socially-gifted’ and *sapienza affaristica* [business wisdom] for ‘business-savvy’. Direct translation is used to render ‘long-lived’ into the gender-variable *longevo/a*, and ‘never weary’ into *instancabile* [indefatigable]. This category also comprises two instances of calque: the gender-variable *poco famelico/a* for ‘hardly hungry’ and the masculine-generic *benvenuto perenne* for ‘always welcome’, although

the selection of adjectives belonging to a more formal register, namely *famelico* [ravenous] instead of *affamato* [hungry] and *perenne* [perennial] instead of the adverb *sempre* [always] has a playful effect. Moreover, the witty nature of *benvenguto perenne* also depends on the violation of selectional restrictions, since *perenne* does not collocate with *benvenguto* in Italian.

Conciseness also relates to agent nouns (11 instances) which may be difficult in translation because in Italian they don't sound natural, since they are rarely, if ever, used. This seems to be the reason why most agent nouns are paraphrased, as in *abile a baciare* [good at kissing] for 'great kisser', *veloce a imparare* [quick at learning] for 'quick learner', and *riflessivo/a* [reflective] for 'muser'. Indeed, the equivalent agent nouns in Italian, namely *baciatore* for 'kisser', or *meditatore* for 'muser' are labelled "rare" in their dictionary entries (Vocabolario Treccani, online). However, some agent nouns are calqued into more common but still unusual solutions like *pulitore* or *pulitrice* *veloce* for 'speed cleaner', *tormentatore* or *tormentatrice* for 'tormentor', which replicate the derivational pattern by adding the suffixes -tore, if male, and -trice, if female.

5.2.2 Cognate words

The lexical category of cognate words (26%) includes traits which are mostly translated into very straightforward solutions due to the phenomenon of cross-linguistic lexical similarity, meaning the presence of cognate words across the two languages (Pierini 2012, 211-214). This is the case of *ambizioso/a* for 'ambitious', *indipendente* for 'independent', *romantico/a* for 'romantic' and many other traits, like 'active', 'creative', 'materialistic', 'poetic', 'sincere', among others, which, thanks to the common Latin origin, allow professionals to simply use the formally and semantically similar word in their target language.

However, in the relationship between English and Italian, this category also includes a few instances of false or deceptive cognates which are all properly interpreted by translators. For example, 'gregarious' means "(of a person) fond of company; sociable" (Oxford Dictionary of English, online) and is correctly rendered into *socievole* and not into *gregario* which in Italian refers to a private soldier or a subordinate and, by extension, a submissive person (Vocabolario Treccani, online). Another example is 'observant', whose meaning is both (1) "quick to notice or perceive things" and (2) "adhering strictly to the rules of

a particular religion” (Oxford Dictionary of English, online), and is correctly translated into *sguardo acuto* [sharp-eyed] meaning (1) and not *osservante* meaning (2) in Italian. Nevertheless, it must be specified that cognate words may present different degrees of lexical similarity and some asymmetries may emerge with respect to language use in terms of frequency, selectional restrictions, register, etc. For example, in Italian *memorabile* for ‘memorable’ tends to collocate with nouns referring to events, time periods or words worth remembering, and more rarely with words related to people (Vocabolario Treccani, online). Taken in context, based on the in-game description of this reward trait, memorable Sims are those whose “relationships decay more slowly”. This unusual association has a humorous effect which is perfectly in line with the game’s fun factor.

Another interesting example of cognate words used to name personality traits is ‘companion’, a reward trait from completing the Love aspiration category named ‘soulmate’. In-game, the related text string reads as “Relationships take hard work and dedication. With a dash of both of those, and a lot of love, {o.SimFirstName} has achieved {Mo.his}{Fo.her}¹² dream of becoming the perfect spouse! Trait Earned: Companion”. According to relatable dictionary definitions (Oxford Dictionary of English, online), a companion is a person (1) “with whom one spends a lot of time or with whom one travels”, (2) “who shares the experiences of another, especially when these are unpleasant or unwelcome”, (3) “a person’s long-term sexual partner outside marriage”. The Italian cognate word is *compagno*, if male, and *compagna*, if female, which presents two senses (Vocabolario Treccani, online), one of which is equivalent to the English senses (1) and (2) above, while the second sense explicitly refers to a partner in a romantic or sexual relationship and also, in politics, to the way communist and socialist activists usually address each other. This might be the reason why Italian translators felt the need to expand the trait name into *compagno di vita* [lifelong companion], to make it clear the meaning of ‘soulmate’ as one Love aspiration.

¹² As discussed in Section 5.1, the text contained within braces exemplifies the game’s variables and changes depending on the player’s choices: {o.SimFirstName} stands for and displays the name the player has selected for his/her Sim, while either ‘his’ or ‘her’ will be displayed accordingly, depending on the Sim’s gender.

5.2.3 Figurative and idiomatic language

This lexical group (15%) refers to the use of figurative or idiomatic expressions and also of evocative or image-provoking words. The difficulty in translating these traits may depend on the possibility of using equivalent figurative expressions which already exist in the target language or to reproduce the figurative value by using different strategies.

In Italian, equivalent idiomatic expressions which have been directly translated are *topo di biblioteca* for ‘bookworm’, *testa calda* for ‘hot-headed’, *animale notturno* for ‘night owl’ and *pollice verdissimo* for ‘super green thumb’. Other figurative traits are more or less literally calqued into figuratively equivalent expressions such as *vescica d'acciaio* for ‘steel bladder’, *chef della freschezza* for ‘fresh chef’, *tranquillità del pescatore* for ‘angler’s tranquility’ or somehow paraphrased, such as *mania ginnica* [gym mania] for ‘gym rat’.

In terms of creativity and playfulness, another interesting example is ‘antiseptic’, which formally represents a cognate word. ‘Antiseptic’ is a purchasable reward trait implying that “antiseptic Sims’ hygiene need decays much slower”, according to in-game description. In English, ‘antiseptic’ is a medicine-related term which refers to any physical and chemical substances (1) “preventing the growth of disease-causing microorganisms” and, by extension, (2) “scrupulously clean or pure, especially so as to be bland or characterless” (Oxford Dictionary of English, online). In-game, playfulness seems to depend on the mixture of the two senses based on a hyperbole, i.e. the uncontaminated or germ-free quality of a person. In Italian, ‘antiseptic’ is translated into *antisettico/a* which, confined within the medical field and meaning only (1), keeps the bizarre association unaltered, by figuratively using a specialized word to describe a personality trait.

5.2.4 Informal language or slang

This working category, which represents 8% of instances, refers to the use of informal or (US English) slang expressions whose difficulty in translation may depend exactly on their semantic value within a language-specific informal or slang register and, consequently, on the possibility of achieving equivalence at both levels, in terms of meaning and register. Ideally, translators should

offer equivalent informal and semantic values. When it is not possible, one of the two must be sacrificed: they may convey the same or similar degree of informality by generalizing or specifying the meaning or they may tone the register down and opt for a neutral but semantically equivalent solution.

Direct translation includes, for example, *amicone* and *amicona* for ‘bro’¹³ and *scansafatiche professionista* for ‘professional slacker’. *Sciatto/a* exemplifies generalization because it represents a hypernym of ‘slob’, meaning “a person who is lazy and has low standards of cleanliness” (Oxford Dictionary of English, online), since in Italian it usually refers to the physical and style-related characteristics of a person and does not necessarily convey the idea of being dirty (Vocabolario Treccani, online). On the contrary, an example of specification is *smanettone* or *smanettona* for ‘geek’. While the latter means “an unfashionable or socially inept person” and, only with a modifier, “a knowledgeable and obsessive enthusiast” (Oxford Dictionary of English, online), in Italian *smanettone* is an informal word but it only refers to a computer geek, a person who is very knowledgeable about computers and enjoys modifying hardware and software components (Vocabolario Treccani, online). In this light, *smanettone* seems to be a hyponym of ‘geek’.

6. Conclusions and further research

The study presented in this paper, though limited in scope, serves as a starting point for future research on life simulation games, and on *The Sims* franchise in particular, especially with a view to investigating the role localization and translation play in the commercial and cultural success of this subgenre at global level.

However, the game experience players are offered is multilayered as real life itself, since it includes a variety of human and real world-like dimensions and aspects whose analysis requires an interdisciplinary perspective. This is particularly true as regards identity and the projection of personality in simulated worlds, where psychological background is key to understanding the

¹³ As regards ‘bro’, it is worth underlying that the English trait system does not present a feminine form. Conversely, Italian translators provided a gender-variable solution, despite the male-gendered nature of the original term (Oxford Dictionary of English, online).

relationship between personality simulation and its linguistic representation in game texts. In this sense, collaboration with researchers in Personality Psychology is desirable to explore the link, if any, between players' personality in real life and their Sims personality.

As regards *The Sims 4* personality trait system, preliminary findings have provided an overview of the challenges translators are presented with and the resulting skills needed to cope with them. Game localization-specific constraints highlight the importance of specialized training, but the more properly linguistic features of the source text confirm that high proficiency in both the source and the target language is paramount for translation quality. In particular, the linguistic and translational representation of gender in *The Sims 4* offers ample opportunities to comparatively examine how this game localization-specific challenge is dealt with across different languages.

Further research is thus essential in order to provide the full picture of the phenomenon under investigation, and include other personality-related or, more in general, customization-related groups of terms, such as aspiration milestones and walkstyles, and all the terminology concerning physical appearance and clothes. Other research methodologies might be added to the descriptive lexical approach: for example, questionnaires might be submitted to translators and linguistic testers, and reception studies might be performed with a sample of players.

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La linea d'ombra dell'Informale
Per una metaforologia di Francesco Arcangeli

Abstract

The essay aims to highlight the multiple branches that Francesco Arcangeli's thinking - unanimously considered one of the most important figures in the field of art history in the second half of the twentieth century - has with other fields of humanistic knowledge, such as the theory of literary style. Some key concepts of his critical lexicon, especially the category of "informal", cannot be circumscribed within the disciplinary boundaries of art history alone. In this direction, the essay aims at underlining the particularity of the category of informal, grafted by Arcangeli within a diachronic cross-section that, through a multiplicity of indispensable semantic redefinitions, starts from the early Middle Ages and arrives, as we know, in the heart of the 20th century, thus becoming what Blumenberg would define a sort of "absolute metaphor".

Come è orribile in fondo la perfezione di tutto ciò che è compiuto.
Thomas Bernhard

Esistono, talvolta, incontri fatali nella vita di un critico che trasformano le coincidenze fortuite in una occasione del destino. Si tratta di un misterioso processo alchemico capace di saldare caso e necessità nell'amalgama di una equazione esistenziale. Per Francesco Arcangeli l'anno fatidico porta la data del 1959,¹ quando un viaggio da Londra a Kassel lo spinge, come egli stesso

¹ In seguito, sarà lo stesso Arcangeli a rivelare, davanti a un pubblico di studenti, quanto fosse rimasto stupefatto dalla folgorante sincronia delle due esposizioni. "Fu evidente, nell'autunno del 1959, che una fatalità culturale legò la mostra del Romanticismo a Londra e quella dominata dall'Informale a Kassel: anche se gli organizzatori delle due mostre non si erano

ricorderà molti anni più tardi, a lasciarsi alle spalle la lezione degli antichi maestri.

La visione sincronica delle due mostre-evento, quella londinese sul Romanticismo e l'altra sull'Informale, resta talmente impressa sulla sua retina da condizionarne per sempre lo sguardo, costretto da allora in poi a vagare attorno a una rete di sovraimpressioni che costituirà il punto cieco di una visione rivoluzionaria.

Ascoltiamo le parole di alcuni testimoni che hanno registrato in presa diretta come la percezione congiunturale di quei dipinti abbia finito per trasformali – direbbe Giacomo Debenedetti – in vere e proprie immagini di destino, quelle che la sorte mette sotto gli occhi, aggredendo senza lasciare scampo:

Rammento – scrive Ezio Raimondi – ancora benissimo come Arcangeli, quando mi capitò di fare il nome di Friedrich, si accendesse di fervore e mi considerasse quasi uno della sua setta. Ma allora non intesi che cosa significasse per lui questo nome, così profondamente simbolico come molte delle sue formule che, nel loro gioco di aggettivazioni o di opposizioni, hanno spesso una sorta di forza implosiva: sono formule il cui senso si rivela lentamente dall'interno e occorre tempo per intenderle appieno, per sentire la dinamica concettuale che esse comportano. (2010, 73)

Solo con la lettura del saggio *Lo Spazio romantico*, scritto da Arcangeli nel 1972, diversi anni dopo “quel suo viaggio da Londra a Kassel,” quando, ad ascoltare l'amico inseparabile Roberto Tassi, “L'informale gli apre la comprensione dello spazio romantico” (2006, 114), Raimondi scopre il significato enigmatico degli scorci di Friderich. Ma soprattutto si accorge, attraverso una analisi dettagliata del lessico, che la definizione di Friedrich “come il dragone francese solo nella

accordati, esse funzionavano ‘in continuità’ e il corto circuito a mio avviso, scattava inevitabilmente”. A partire da quel momento un nuovo orizzonte, dapprima oscurato dall'ombra avvolgente dei padri, si schiude all'improvviso davanti ai suoi occhi: “Quanto alla mia educazione, a quella che avevo assorbita da maestri anche grandi, essa non mi aveva avvertito sulla grandezza dell'arte romantica e sulla sua importanza. Avevo appreso – prosegue Arcangeli – nemmeno tanto a travisare il vero Romanticismo in arte, quanto ad ignorarlo; e in questo senso, pur essendo inserito in una scarsa conoscenza del Romanticismo che era abbastanza generale, io facevo parte di una consuetudine tipicamente italiana. Molti italiani credono ancora, scusate se eccedo, che il Romanticismo siano le canzoni di Claudio Villa; ma il Romanticismo non è il sentimento, o non è soltanto il sentimento; è qualcosa di ben più profondo e sconvolgente. Sì da tempo avevo avuto i miei avvertimenti, ma riguardavano piuttosto la musica o la letteratura” (2020, I, 20).

“foresta nevosa” contrasta nettamente con quella del “sottile Friedrich” data da Longhi (2010, 74).

Esistono, infatti, tracce palpabili di uno strappo, di una cesura che si consuma in questi anni, provocata dal trauma visivo dell’impatto con l’Informale che porterà Arcangeli ad innestare la Padanìa di Longhi su un albero genealogico dalle radici più ampie. Così quella geologia sotterranea che aveva costituito una sorta di sottosuolo comune, o, come avrebbe detto Proust, di “giacimento mentale”, è ormai pronta a divenire il terreno di una nuova germinazione. Da qui trae origine una diversa prospettiva del tempo storico che riconfigura le faglie del passato alla luce di una discontinua e inconsapevole ripetizione dell’informe. È nei grovigli di Pollock, immensi e sfrenati, che Arcangeli trova la rappresentazione perfetta di un nuovo spazio psichico su cui trascrivere, seguendone il tracciato, un’inedita storiografia, non più coincidente con una visione immobile e lineare del tempo, ma, piuttosto, sollecita a registrare i sommovimenti, “le risorgive” e i ritorni intempestivi di situazioni esistenziali analoghe.

Il passato – dichiara Arcangeli con tono concitato e perentorio – non è uno strato fossile, ancora spontaneamente prolifera; quando naturalmente sia un “passato moderno”, [...] quando una situazione determinata lo rende più vivo di un passato prossimo già morto. (1977, II, 368)

In queste parole è possibile cogliere una sintonia con le teorie di Freud e di Warburg, entrambi attratti dalle dinamiche pulsionali della temporalità. L’idea che il passato continua ad accadere nel presente attraverso improvvise resurrezioni, talvolta cariche di angoscia e di dolore, costituisce uno dei capisaldi della psicoanalisi, fin dalle origini, ai tempi in cui Freud stava ancora lavorando al *Progetto di una psicologia* e si rivolge a Fliess in questi termini:

Come sai, sto lavorando all’ipotesi che il nostro meccanismo psichico si sia formato mediante un processo di stratificazione: il materiale di tracce mnestiche esistente è di tanto in tanto sottoposto a una risistemazione in base a nuove relazioni, a una sorta di *riscrittura*. La novità essenziale della mia teoria sta dunque nella tesi che la memoria non sia presente in forma univoca, ma molteplice, e venga fissata in diversi tipi di segni. (1986, 236)

Alla natura metamorfica del passato anche Warburg affida la sotterranea sopravvivenza delle immagini, il *Nachleben*, che si colloca, scrive Didi-Huberman, “in un punto impreciso, tra un sapere immemoriale delle cose passate e una profezia tragica delle cose future” (2006, 472).

Questa parola discontinua e inconscia del tempo che, nelle opere di Arcangeli, si traduce in spregiudicate periodizzazioni sospese nel vortice “di una gravitazione esistenziale” prende, invece, il nome di “tramando”.

In ogni caso, la periodizzazione del mio corso, i tramandi che si rinnovano attraverso i secoli nei nodi che io intendo definire, sono stati da me sollecitati anzitutto da una vicenda artistica (l’informale) di quell’oggi che appare già uno ieri; ed è ovvio perciò che la mia periodizzazione e le mie scelte sono una proposta e, come si dice, una ipotesi di lavoro che potrà essere, messa oggi e in futuro, in crisi. (2015, I, 51-52)

Dal presente al passato. Così, nel caso di Arcangeli, le sopravvivenze warburghiane sembrano procedere in senso inverso, liberate dalla rispettiva evanescenza in cui lo storicismo le aveva relegate. L’atto interpretativo, in tal modo, restituisce al passato la sua vivente plasticità, ritrovando nel singolo reperto le tracce della memoria storica sedimentata nel tempo. Difficile non ricondurre tale procedimento a una delle folgoranti ipotesi proposte da Benjamin: “La storia è oggetto di una costruzione il cui luogo non è il tempo omogeneo e vuoto ma quello pieno di ‘attualità’” (1962, 83).

Agli occhi di Arcangeli l’urgenza drammatica del presente, “il qui e ora” su cui si innesta ogni esperienza artistica, comporta che alla successione tra passato e presente si sostituisca una sequenza, virtualmente indeterminata, di presenti i quali scompaginano il ritmo rassicurante di ascendenze e genealogie scandite secondo un ordine lineare. Ciascuno di quei presenti appare autonomo, indipendente, nella propria costituzione formale, eppure parte essenziale del tramando, di un “legame nascosto – scrive Massimo Ferretti – profondo, che collega scavalcando l’apparenza dello stile, esperienze del tempo distanti, entro una sorta di cornice comune, dove la memoria, anche quando sembra meno avvertita, si è fatta luogo concreto”.²

Il tempo prende, allora, la forma dello spazio, ed è questa scoperta – in cui è possibile cogliere una interferenza con l’opera di Proust – che conduce Arcangeli a evitare ogni possibile cristallizzazione dello sguardo. Ne deriva un montaggio dialettico di immagini determinato dall’agonismo ininterrotto fra l’ordine prestabilito delle forme e “la pulsione interiore sentimentale e istintuale” che “libera la forma dalle sue codificazioni convenute per renderla

² Questa citazione che definisce, in maniera folgorante, uno dei concetti cardine attorno a cui ruota il discorso critico di Arcangeli, l’ho ricavata dal libro *Francesco Arcangeli scrittore* (Rizzi 2004, 3).

più ricca, immediata, mutevole, apparentemente non premeditata da nessun codice culturale” (Arcangeli 2020, II, 13).

In una ricostruzione retrospettiva l’informale – inteso nella sua accezione più “anarchica”,³ emancipata da regole stilistiche e da protocolli operativi che rinviano a un’intenzione evidente, calcolata, da parte del pittore – risponde a un’urgenza esistenziale dell’atto creativo che si pone come antidoto a ogni ideologia estetizzante e intellettualistica. Così il pathos-informe di Arcangeli – per ricorrere a un neologismo che costituisce il rovesciamento speculare della *Pathosformel* di Warburg – esprime le infinite potenzialità, possedute dalla materia pittorica, di esaltare le espressioni dell’“umano” fino alle sue estreme conseguenze, intrecciandole in un’osmosi tra arte e vita o, piuttosto, tra attività artistica ed esperienze vissute. La radice di questo connubio va rintracciata nella rivoluzione dello spazio romantico che, paradossalmente, appare ‘già informale’ agli occhi di chi è pronto ad afferrare le misteriose corrispondenze analogiche depositate nel fondo straniante della circolarità storica.

Attorno a un tale abisso senza margini si fissa lo sguardo spregiudicato di Arcangeli, intento a perlustrare la spazialità di ogni immagine pittorica per cercarne gli strappi, i vuoti e i cedimenti che circoscrivono il punto di emergenza in cui si incrinano le istanze rimoventi della tradizione e dove l’impulso euforico dell’esistente riesce a farsi strada solo affiorando attraverso il risvolto di una retorica negativa.

Un principio fondamentale per intendere Romanticismo e Informale è, appunto, quello di portare la nostra attenzione all’idea dello spazio. Bisogna vedere come l’immagine è spazializzata,

³ Anarchico è una parola che ricorre numerose volte negli scritti di Arcangeli, tanto da poter essere considerato come un termine cruciale della sua *koiné* critica. Si tratta di un vero e proprio connotato antropologico che sembra ritrarre precisamente la condizione esistenziale di una particolare genealogia di artisti, destinata a riprodursi in diverse epoche storiche. Il filo conduttore che li unisce è un “nuovo rapporto col naturale”, “la capacità, anzitutto di una solitudine reale, questa – dichiara Arcangeli – è anarchia per noi”. In quest’ottica anarchici sono tutti quei pittori che con le loro opere hanno scatenato un’imprevedibile reazione nei confronti della cultura dominante e hanno ricercato e ricreato un rapporto inedito con la natura riportando alla luce quella specie di radice lombarda o padana che, per tramandi successivi, sembra imporsi in determinati momenti storici con la forza di un destino ineluttabile. Così, per esempio, da Morlotti, Mandelli e Moreni, si può con un balzo arrivare a Caravaggio, discendendo addirittura a Wiligelmo, tanto per indicare una tra le tante traiettorie anarchiche della storia dell’arte (Arcangeli 1977, II, 350).

cioè in quale contesto spaziale essa rientra. Capite infatti che lo spazio è un contesto, un insieme di rapporti e non per niente l'uomo come ci ha insegnato anzitutto Erwin Panofsky, ha variamente simbolizzato nei tempi il proprio rapporto con lo spazio. Direi proprio che un modo essenziale, se non “il modo”, di cogliere ciò che i romantici hanno di più nuovo, di meno rinunciabile, è proprio la loro nuova simbolizzazione dello spazio. (Ibid., 23)

Dalla vertigine di un assoluto spaesamento emerge, dunque, il legame fra Romanticismo ed Informale, entrambi collocati nella galassia immensa dello spazio post-copernicano, che costituisce, secondo Arcangeli, la vera “ricarica” della coscienza moderna. È all'interno di una simile orbita, magmatica e incandescente, che il percorso lineare della rappresentazione umanistica viene bruscamente interrotto tra un avvicendarsi dialettico di azioni e reazioni.⁴ La prima, tra queste, consiste nel ribaltamento radicale della tradizione prospettica intesa secondo i canoni accreditati dalla sua declinazione classica, operata nel segno di un'esperienza vissuta (quella *Erlebniss* a cui aveva attinto tutta la “filosofia della vita” tardo-ottocentesca e primo-novecentesca) irriducibile a norme e forme precisamente codificate. In questa pagina delle *Lezioni* (1970-1973) di Arcangeli appena riportata sembra di ascoltare l'eco della voce perentoria, ma nello stesso tempo sofferta, di Pavel Florenskij, la cui indiscutibile autorevolezza, per lo meno in campo estetico ed artistico, dovrà attendere i primi anni settanta per risuonare finalmente anche nel nostro paese: “La prospettiva è il procedimento – osservava nel 1919, quasi in conclusione di uno tra i suoi saggi di carattere artistico più innovativi – che inevitabilmente risulta da una concezione del mondo in cui si ammette un certo tipo di soggettività, la più priva di realtà, come vera base degli oggetti-rappresentazioni semi reali” (1990, 126-27).

Siamo di fronte a un'incrinatura profonda dell'ordine spaziale che implica anche una proliferazione di reticolli temporali sconosciuti, soprattutto difformi: come quelli che, per esempio, vengono alla luce intrecciandosi fra loro attraverso – direbbe ancora una volta Proust – “il miracolo dell'analogia” che Arcangeli, nelle sue ardite cognizioni, riproduce servendosi di una sequenza “di schemi d'urto e di contrasto” (2020, I, 33). Una strategia che si consolida soprattutto a partire dagli anni Cinquanta, quando l'Informale si impone come uno strumento ermeneutico irrinunciabile per leggere l'opera d'arte.

⁴ Proprio su questa coppia di concetti cruciali nel pensiero moderno insiste a lungo Starobinski (2001).

Verso il 1955 – precisa Arcangeli nella sua autobiografia intellettuale disseminata tra le pagine delle lezioni universitarie – capii che la nostra generazione esisteva in arte con un significato diverso da quello della grande generazione precedente. E fu allora che anche l’arte del passato cominciò a colorarmisi in modo diverso, anche perché da allora cominciò a divenirmi chiaro che la storia dell’arte non è una cosa data una volta per sempre, ma è perpetua rinnovazione secondo i motivi che ci impegnano profondamente nel presente. Vi debbo aggiungere a questo punto che per me non esiste una differenza sostanziale nel metodo di approccio all’arte antica e moderna. (Ibid.)

Se il primato ottico della “pura visibilità,” rivendicato da Longhi, resta la strategia ineludibile rivolta “a spremere i significati inesauriti dell’opera d’arte” (1985, XIII, 20), il discorso critico, dall’altro canto, non può esimersi dal venire a patti con “un doppio di invisibile in senso stretto, che il visibile manifesta – suggerisce Merlau Ponty – sotto forma di una certa assenza” (1989, 58-9). È lungo questa strada che Arcangeli sembra proseguire nelle proprie esplorazioni, decidendo di imporre al nostro sguardo la presenza dell’informe.

Gli anni Cinquanta rappresentano, dunque, uno spartiacque decisivo per far esplodere in maniera irruenta e inarrestabile quella tensione vitale della materia, rimasta fino ad allora sottotraccia, che si rivela, a partire da quell’arco temporale, il punto di partenza e di approdo di ogni possibile cognizione.

Per delineare una simile parabola è necessario procedere a ritroso, ripercorrere l’onda dell’Informale a partire dalla sua ultima apparizione che risale al periodo delle lezioni universitarie (1967-1973) nelle quali traspare in maniera cristallina il marchio di fabbrica del racconto critico di Arcangeli: una sorta di infezione analogica che, da un lato, determina le valenze concettuali, dall’altro, carica il linguaggio di una metaforicità molto alta, tenendo insieme – osserva Tassi – “l’acanita ricerca filologica e la fantasia creatrice” (2006, 78) in uno straniante ossimoro.

Caliamo i riflettori nel buio di quell’aula universitaria gremita di studenti dove, nel 1970, al centro della scena, un proiettore, con ritmo vertiginoso, rovescia sullo schermo un turbine di immagini contrastanti fra di loro per creare l’effetto – spiega Arcangeli – di uno choc visivo. Una mossa preliminare che suscita fin dall’inizio una forte suggestione dettata esclusivamente dal potere intrinseco delle immagini, illuminate – avrebbe suggerito Longhi – “come cosa viva”. Al disorientamento ipnotico segue una fase di assestamento da cui prende le mosse la sollecitazione ermeneutica innescata da un simile procedimento. Dopo il prologo concitato subentra una sorta di decelerazione, di sospensione temporale, come se l’occhio di Arcangeli si trasformasse in

una specie di cinepresa mobile che si sposta al rallentatore sulla superficie dei singoli dipinti per illustrarne i punti di rottura in un confronto spietato con la tradizione umanistica o con chi non riesce del tutto a lasciarsela alle spalle.

L'esposizione diretta delle immagini fornisce, dunque, ad Arcangeli una meravigliosa scatola di arnesi che gli consente di soffermarsi su alcuni particolari, interrogarli per fissare nella mente dello spettatore fulminei confronti. Tramite questa sorta di replica, o doppio visuale, della parola penetriamo nella sua officina segreta, dove la critica d'arte appare estranea agli schemi consueti dell'*ekphrasis*, diventando, piuttosto, un costante apprendistato dello sguardo, mediato da un segno verbale che restituisce senza mai rendere allusivo, o genericamente analogico, il contatto immediato con l'immagine.

Proprio gli occhi definiscono, infatti, l'epicentro intorno al quale ruota ogni esegesi critica di Arcangeli. Le parole di Yves Bonnefoy – la cui sensibilità nel campo delle arti figurative sembra discendere immediatamente dal suo magistero poetico – illustrano con perfetta aderenza il richiamo centripeto che l'immagine innesca in uno sguardo animato da una simile voracità visiva:

Gli “occhi” sono ciò che può percepire aspetti nell'apparenza sensibile – ad esempio il colore di un frutto –, sono ciò che può isolare questi aspetti, approfondirne e differenziarne la qualità specifica proprio dove essi si situano, vale a dire alla superficie delle cose, e possono servire quindi alla causa del pensiero concettuale, aiutandolo a moltiplicarne le osservazioni, a diversificarne i puntelli. Pur potendo prestarsi a tutt'altre cose, “gli occhi”, definiti come percezione e differenziazione degli aspetti, sono sicuramente lo strumento da cui il concetto può trarre maggior profitto (Bonnefoy 2003, 9).

Dagli “occhi” al “concetto” – i due termini intorno ai quali si dispiega la riflessione di Bonnefoy – il transito, per Arcangeli, è sempre diretto, immediato. Il suo costante obiettivo sembra risiedere addirittura nel tentativo di rendere la scrittura un medium ausiliario della dimensione visiva, limitandone il più possibile l'autonomia espressiva. Lungo tale procedimento, antitetico alla fiducia riposta da Longhi nelle potenzialità transitive della parola, nella “restituzione verbale” in grado di “esprimere le sensazioni provate davanti all'opera d'arte, come suggerisce Ezio Raimondi (2010, 29),⁵ Arcangeli si inscrive pienamente nel solco

⁵ Non si può dimenticare, procedendo in questa direzione, che il riconoscimento delle inconfondibili particolarità stilistiche di Longhi ha spinto Contini, in un arco di anni compreso tra il 1949 e il 1970, ad ascrivere la sua produzione saggistica nell'ambito della più autentica esperienza

dell’empatia visiva proposta dalla critica d’arte di Baudelaire in aperta opposizione ai vetusti protocolli avallati dai metodi dell’accademia. Per rendersene conto, basta soffermarsi su questo passo tratto dal *Salon del 1846*:

Credo in coscienza che la migliore critica sia quella che riesce diletta e poetica; non una critica fredda e algebrica, che, col pretesto di tutto spiegare, non sente né odio né amore, e si spoglia deliberatamente di ogni traccia di temperamento; ma, – riflessa dall’occhio di un artista, – quella che ci farà vedere un quadro attraverso lo specchio di uno spirito intelligente e sensibile, se è vero che un bel quadro è la natura riflessa (Baudelaire, 1981, 57).

Se così stanno le cose proviamo, allora, a prelevare da un repertorio talmente suggestivo alcuni fermo-immagine per vederli da vicino, con l’aderenza visiva di Arcangeli. In assenza di un metodo di indagine programmaticamente precostituito è la lettura ravvicinata dei dettagli a orientare i passi di Arcangeli sulla superficie del quadro di Turner, *Annibale che passa le Alpi*, esposto per la prima volta a Londra nel 1812. Ascoltiamolo:

È un dipinto di dimensioni abbastanza notevoli ed è stupefacente, a mio avviso, proprio perché Turner, nello stesso momento che accetta un tema di storia classica, lo tratta in modo che, a prima vista, il tema è pressoché irriconoscibile. In realtà, anche se da una indagine più attenta scopriamo poi armati in primo piano e, sul filo dell’orizzonte, un elefante, è chiaro che il tema reale è un turbine, un nembo, una tempesta in montagna; e, subito implicito, è chiaro anche l’elemento della piccolezza dell’uomo in confronto all’immensità della natura. Anziché svolgere il tema, che si prestava benissimo, nel senso di quel Neoclassicismo che imperava almeno sulla terraferma europea, il grande inglese ne trae pretesto per creare un formidabile dramma cosmico. Vedete come allora la dimensione e il tracciato del nembo sono grandiosi, imminenti, come il sole quasi si oblitera e la sua presenza è malata di un giallastro, come l’artista che sta creando, con la sua opera, la dimensione artistica che chiamiamo romantica, si tuffa per così dire, in grembo alla natura. (2020, I, 34)

letteraria. Valga per tutti questo passaggio della commemorazione di Longhi tenuta da Contini, nel gennaio del 1973 presso l’Accademia dei Lincei: “A dirimere ogni equivoco, sarà bene precisare energicamente in *limine* che Longhi non fu un critico e storico PIÙ uno scrittore. La realtà dell’uno fu, con corrispondenza che mi atterrei a chiamare biunivoca, la realtà dell’altro” (Contini, 1988, 349; ma cfr. anche i precedenti *Contributi longhiani* compresi in Contini, 1972, 101-126). Nella oramai ampia bibliografia esistente sull’argomento cfr. soprattutto, oltre Raimondi, 2010, Previtali, 1982, Garboli, 1993, 11-78, Patrizi, 2000, 103-117, Mengaldo, 2005, 92-117. Sulle corrispondenze tra immagine e parola instaurate da Arcangeli risulta fondamentale sempre Raimondi, 2010, ma cfr. anche Rizzi, 2004, Mengaldo 2005, 9-77, Bazzocchi, 2005, 9-21, Milani, 2018.



William Turner, *Bufera di neve: Annibale e il suo esercito attraversano le Alpi*,
Londra, Tate Britain

Abolire una posizione statica di fruizione del quadro, scompaginare il dispositivo spaziale riservato dalla tradizione allo spettatore, è la mossa strategica a cui si affida Arcangeli per individuare il momento culminante dell'opera, privilegiando – direbbe Daniel Arasse – “l'esperienza fisica della materia pittorica” (2007, 236).

La composizione figurativa di Turner, dopo essere stata ricondotta all'immagine embrionale di un nembo, finisce per balzare davanti agli occhi dello spettatore con tale tensione da catapultarlo dentro l'opera, facendogli rivivere l'istante della sua genesi. In tal modo la visione prismatica di Arcangeli, mentre orienta lo sguardo su quel lembo, ripercorre la traccia del gesto di Turner in lotta con la materia vivente.

Simili radiografie riportano in superficie il *poiein* dell'opera, il suo divenire attraverso le impronte stilistiche lasciate sulla tela dal pittore. Non ci sono dubbi che una ricostruzione del genere nasca sulla scia dell'esperienza informale, di volta in volta riproposta nel segno di una “immagine-strappo”⁶

6 L'immagine-strappo è una figura concettuale ricorrente nel lessico di Didi-Huberman. Per una sua articolata definizione cfr. Didi-Huberman, 2005, 73-116; 2008, 99-113; 2016, 185-285.

attraverso cui rievocare l'estrema dilatazione dello spazio umanistico. Ha così inizio una vera e propria rivoluzione ottica che schiude prospettive inattese, suggerisce folgoranti analogie, coglie nessi segreti e trame esilissime fra pittori molto lontani nel tempo, eppure accomunati dallo stesso “sogno spaziale”.

Il tramando di Arcangeli ripristina, allora, risonanze sommerse che mandano in frantumi ogni steccato cronologico e finiscono per comporre la meno rassicurante delle genealogie, fondate su una serie di parallelismi inediti.

Passiamoli velocemente in rassegna: dalla grande stagione romantica incarnata da Turner, Friedrich e Constable, se decidiamo di andare a ritroso dopo Goya, vediamo che il nucleo della rivolta informale arriva addirittura a lambire, per esempio, anche l'opera di Ludovico Caracci che con il *Martirio di Sant'Orsola* “esplosa in un singolare capolavoro” dando forma a una composizione “quasi a costellazione sparsa” (Arcangeli 2015, I, 138).

Una composizione veramente informale: nessuna premeditazione anzi lo spazio è fatto via via da una continua fluttuazione di corpi, quasi nel ripetersi di sospiri luminosi irradiati da tutte le direzioni. Una composizione come questa è anche più libera di una composizione barocca, perché non segue più nessun tracciato, segue soltanto questa rara invenzione di spazio e di perpetuo ribollimento ombroso-luminoso disseminato in una sorta di diaspora. [...] Anche se resta *un unicun*, esiste tuttavia e non possiamo non tenerne conto, e non dobbiamo temere di affermare che, una volta tanto, Lodovico è stato, in modo tutto diverso, altrettanto moderno e ardito, quanto Caravaggio (Ibid).

Arrivato a questo punto Arcangeli chiude il cerchio ermeneutico convocando sulla scena Rubens e l'ombra ineludibile di Caravaggio che ai suoi occhi inaugura una sorta “di anno zero, di punto a capo al cominciar del secolo” (2015, II, 96). Un confronto che acquista i tratti di un corpo a corpo fra giganti in rivolta:

In ogni caso, la *Sant'Orsola* di Lodovico, nata non tanto da piena coscienza intellettuale quanto da un *naptus*⁷ sentimentale-intuitivo non incongruo col temperamento del maestro, non ha paura di confronti. Ecco una *Andata al Calvario* del Museo di Bruxelles, dipinta alcuni decenni dopo dal Rubens, il genio più alto del primo Barocco in pittura; e ripeto, in confronto al grande fiammingo e a questa sua opera così sublimemente fluida, magnil-

⁷ Il termine rivela in modo sintomatico la presenza nascosta dell'Informale, in particolare del gesto di Pollock, più volte definito da Arcangeli sfrenato e irriverente nei confronti delle ideologie precostituite. Anche per Vitale e Wiligelmo, del resto, viene adoperata la stessa connotazione.

oquente, a questa grande ondata di corpi di cui però si vede ben chiaro l'andamento, la proposta “informale” della Sant’Orsola è forse anche più moderna in quanto è meno legata con le vecchie istituzioni dell’olimpicità rinascimentale, che invece continuano a vivere, pur trasformate, nel grande Barocco cattolico di Roma e di Fiandra. D’altra parte, questo spazio moltiplicato di Ludovico non è meno moderno, neppure, di quello diversamente terribile del Caravaggio, ad esempio, in questa *Crocefissione di San Pietro* dipinta poco dopo dal Merisi per la Cappella Cerasi a Santa Maria del Popolo a Roma. Come è postcopernicano lo spazio illimitato e non centrato di Lodovico nel quadro di Imola, diversamente lo è anche quello del Caravaggio, che individua con potenza estrema alcuni brani di figura, o si direbbe meglio di materia fisica, gravitanti sul vostro occhio, e piazzati dall’altra parte su uno sfondo di tenebra per la quale non valgono più le vecchie misure rinascimentali della prospettiva. Quella tenebra non ha principio né fine, ed è un’illusione anche qui non sappiamo fino a che punto cosciente allo spazio senza limiti della scienza nuova, che già con Copernico, e poi in questo Seicento con Gallileo e con Keplero, aveva ormai sfondato le vecchie proporzioni, ancora di radice tolemaica-geocentrica, del Rinascimento (Ibid., 138-44).



Ludovico Carracci,
Martirio di Sant’Orsola,
Imola, San Domenico



Peter Paul Rubens,
Andata al Calvario, Bruxelles,
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts



Caravaggio, *Crocifisso di San Pietro*, Roma, Santa Maria del Popolo,
Cappella Cerasi

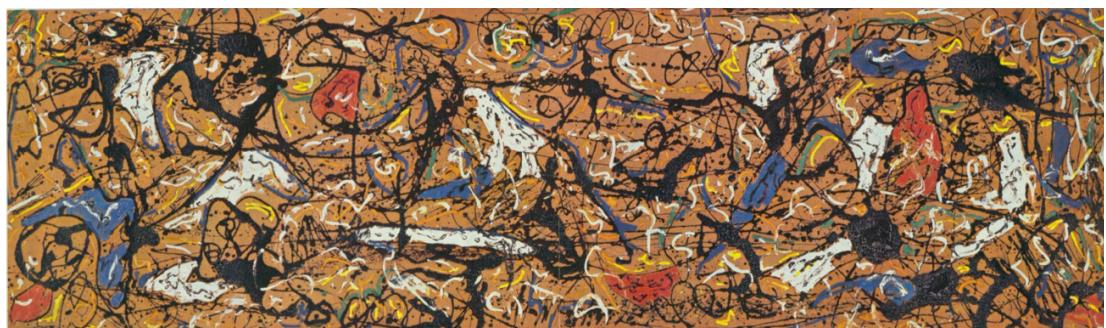
Ci troviamo di fronte a una vera e propria mutazione antropologica che prende forma attraverso una corroborante libertà associativa e spericolate acrobazie dove le somiglianze non elidono un puntiglioso inventario delle differenze che salvaguardi l'originalità e l'individualità dell'artista. Non si tratta di trovare un denominatore comune quanto, piuttosto, di

attraversare la storia dell'arte nei termini di una rivolta esistenziale che trasforma lo spazio pittorico in una “proiezione particolare di vita”. Non è un caso allora se – come ha osservato Vera Fortunati – “è l'artista informale che Arcangeli vede agire nella gestualità di Vitale, di Amico Aspertini, di Ludovico Carracci, di Giuseppe Maria Crespi, Morandi”, per citarne solo alcuni tra i molti (2015, I, 15).

Forse l'accostamento più illuminante, e anche paradossale per il suo azzardo, rimane quello fra Wiligelmo e Pollock. Un corto circuito che, ancora una volta, assume il carattere di un'epifania improvvisa dove l'emozione e l'intelligenza, sincroniche e complementari, appaiono un'endiadi irrinunciabile per la comprensione dell'opera: la prima offre la base, la materia su cui la seconda diviene possibile.⁸ In tal modo la scrittura di Arcangeli, che potremmo definire improntata all'oralità per i suoi tratti disomogenei, alterna periodi cristallini ad altri costruiti con una sintassi che talvolta procede a strappi, quasi a seguire mimeticamente le folgoranti “risorgive” ritrovate all'improvviso. A volte il filo del ragionamento sembra perdersi nei meandri di un'idea o di un collegamento quasi estemporaneo, mentre in altre circostanze è un lungo studio sedimentato nel tempo a sostenere il corso del pensiero, sebbene anch'esso attraversato da nessi inattesi, come traspare da questa sequenza:

Se guardate, ora, questo *Pappagallo bianco*, dipinto nel 1948 da Jackson Pollock, un grande pittore americano nato nel 1912 e morto dodici anni fa, vedrete come vi compaia, in tema del tutto analogo a quello di Wiligelmo alla porta del Duomo di Modena, la forma animale ruotante e imprigionata dentro a un groviglio, le cui spire non hanno, certo, lo spessore lento e densissimo proprio del grande scultore romanico, ma non son certo sfornite di vita organica. Anche la spirale di Pollock infatti, ha ben poco di decorativo, perché il suo intreccio è animato dal segreto, qui allucinato, quasi nevrotico di vita (Ibid., 88).

8 Il pathos costituisce il sostrato da cui prende le mosse la sollecitazione ermeneutica di Arcangeli che, in un saggio dedicato agli *Ultimi naturalisti*, apparso su Paragone nel 1954, scriveva a questo proposito: “Il loro quadro, si sente prima di capirlo, vi macchia l'occhio, tocca le ragioni del vostro cuore, prima di aver raggiunto il cervello che medita e seleziona: sono soprattutto dei paesaggi il cui effetto è improvviso, anche quando è stato a lungo meditato”. Ora in (Arcangeli 1977, II, 314).



Jackson Pollock, *Pappagallo Bianco*, collezione privata



Wiligelmo, *Decorazione del Portale Maggiore* (Particolare),
Modena, Duomo

Arrivati a questo punto potremmo forse spingerci ad assimilare L'informale a una specie di detonatore capace di innescare – avrebbe suggerito Šklovskij – quell’“energia dell’errore” attraverso cui l’arte diviene “un montaggio della vita” (1984, 20), intorno a una costellazione di incognite che “contraddicono ancora la riuscita di molte equazioni” (Arcangeli 2015, I, 57). Non è un caso, allora, se proprio in quello spazio “oscuro, indeciso e aformale” una generazione nata “al buio” può ritrovare lo specchio infranto di una *mimesis* esistenziale.

Siamo nel 1956 quando Arcangeli, attraverso una vorace antropologia del Noi, in un articolo pubblicato sull’*Espresso*, riconosce i debiti contratti con Pollock definendolo “uno degli artisti più importanti della nostra generazione di mezzo,” l'estrema incarnazione dell’*homme révolté* dei tempi moderni.

Pollock si buttò decisamente entro il gorgo di una pittura che si può genericamente definire aformale. Avevano istituito e difeso un rapporto di equilibrio fra sé e il mondo e un calibro dell’opera stessa: Pollock ruppe decisamente l’equilibrio in favore di un “pieno” esorbitante e sfrenato. Avevano tradotto in pittura anche i più arrischiati esperimenti (tipici i *collages* dei cubisti): Pollock volle che, a partire dal suo gesto d’artista, la tradizione si rompesse verso una nuova e arrischiata libertà di mezzi e di intenti. La pittura a olio sembrava ormai la regola eterna, necessità atavica, tradizione insormontabile: Pollock ne ha rotto perfino il gesto tecnico, istituendo l’uso della colata, sulla tela stesa a terra, di grovigli di smalti. Chi dicesse che la sua opera è casuale, che la sua pittura è arbitraria, farebbe una strana affermazione proprio degli effetti voluti dalla sua arte. Che cosa è il *caos* se non arbitrio, caso? Ora Pollock è stato uno dei maestri, forse il maggior maestro del *caos* moderno (Arcangeli 77, II, 335).

Che cosa – si chiede Arcangeli arrivato a questo punto – penserebbero della nostra epoca i posteri se

da un ipotetico naufragio, ne emergessero soltanto pitture di eredità classica, di placida visione? Che cosa potrebbero capire di questo terribile, oppresso, angosciatissimo dopoguerra? Ma le opere di quel vero, inquietissimo barometro storico che fu Pollock, da quelle, si, capirebbero che cosa fu la nostra angoscia, la nostra presenza all’angoscia, la nostra alienazione inevitabile. (Ibid., 336)

Arcangeli sa bene che la precisione di questo “inquietissimo barometro” non è ulteriormente definibile, dal momento che la sua misurazione si rivolge all’ impulso sotteso a ogni creazione artistica: ancora più sfuggente e indeterminato quando si radica in una *Stimmung* dal carattere talmente ramificato ed eterogeneo come l’“angoscia” che da Pollock arriva alla “nostra

alienazione inevitabile”. Nella cassetta degli attrezzi messi a disposizione dalla storiografia artistica lungo i secoli c’è, infatti, una “carenza logica” – così la definirebbe Blumenberg – che non consente sempre la possibilità di utilizzare soluzioni lessicali dettagliate e, soprattutto, univoche: capaci di circoscrivere con la necessaria aderenza lo spettro di concetti dotati di tale vigore semantico da oltrepassare un assetto discorsivo compiutamente organizzato. Ecco perché – spiega ancora Blumenberg – si rende a volte indispensabile il ricorso a una metafora che, destituita della funzione abituale di “enunciazione traslata”, sia in grado di racchiudere al proprio interno una pluralità di rimandi la cui estensione diacronica e densità problematica risultano sconosciuti alle declinazioni utilizzate dal linguaggio ordinario. Una tale tipologia di metafore corrisponde, sempre secondo Blumenberg, alla “metafora assoluta”, teorizzata nel 1960 tracciando una cartografia generale del suo itinerario di ricerca:

Se si potesse dimostrare che ci sono traslati tali che si potrebbero denominare *metafore assolute*, allora l'accertamento e l'analisi della loro funzione d'enunciato non risolvibile in concetti costituirebbe una parte essenziale della storia del pensiero (dei concetti intesi in senso così esteso. [...] In tal caso diventa problematica l'equiparazione di modi traslati e modi impropri del discorso: già Vico ha dichiarato la lingua della metafora altrettanto “propria” quanto il linguaggio comunemente ritenuto tale (1969, 6-7).

Arcangeli avrebbe senz’altro sottoscritto le parole di Blumenberg. Soprattutto avrebbe confermato la valorizzazione dei “modi traslati” all’interno di una genealogia concettuale, la quale può costituire un serbatoio inesauribile di intrecci e accostamenti del tutto inediti per quelli che, rimanendo nel campo della storia dell’arte, Heinrich Wölfflin, con la sua indiscutibile autorevolezza destinata a durare nel tempo, aveva definito nel 1915 come *Concetti fondamentali della storia dell’arte*. Di questi concetti Arcangeli conosce puntualmente la prepotente plasticità – anche dal punto di vista lessicale – avendoli inseguiti e ritrovati di continuo nel loro “tramando”, perciò tenta a ogni costo di sottrarli alla rigidità di una classificazione normativa che finirebbe inevitabilmente per svuotarli del loro intrinseco dinamismo. Nel tentativo di custodirlo, di riproporre a ogni passo la pulsante vitalità che anima ciascuna singola scansione del processo storico-artistico, non c’è altra possibilità che curvare il linguaggio ereditato dalla tradizione fino ai suoi limiti estremi: là dove i concetti sfuggono alla reificazione tipica del formulario ritrovando la loro originaria polisemia, diventando, appunto, “metafore assolute”. Adoperata in questa accezione di

venta del tutto plausibile, per Arcangeli, estendere la tensione creativa che ha generato l'esperienza informale lungo uno spaccato diacronico che va dal Medioevo al Novecento.

Non c'è nulla di astorico o metastorico in un'operazione del genere, poiché le "metafore assolute" sono impregnate di quella straordinaria capacità di propagazione posseduta dalla storia originaria dei concetti, dallo "strato primario" del pensiero – aggiunge Blumenberg, – che trova proprio nel linguaggio il suo nucleo genetico:

Anche le metafore assolute hanno quindi *storia*. Esse hanno storia in un senso più radicale che i concetti, poiché il processo delle mutazioni storiche di una metafora porta in primo piano la metacinetica stessa degli orizzonti di senso della storia e delle prospettive entro cui i concetti subiscono le loro modificazioni. Per questo rapporto di implicazione si precisa la relazione della metaforologia con la storia dei concetti (in senso terminologico stretto), così che l'una è in funzione dell'altra: la metaforologia cerca di riattingere la sottostruttura del pensiero, lo strato primario, la soluzione nutritizia delle cristallizzazioni sistematiche, ma vuole anche far conoscere con quale "coraggio" lo spirito si espone allo scoperto nell'arditezza delle sue immagini, e come in questo coraggio di arrischiare progetta la sua storia (Ibid., 8-9).

In altre parole, vuole dire Blumenberg, lo "strato primario" della storia viene pienamente alla luce attraverso l'"arditezza delle immagini" (un'espressione che rimanda esplicitamente a Vico, rievocato non a caso in precedenza).

Anche Arcangeli, dal canto suo, appare dotato proprio di quel "coraggio di arrischiare" che costituisce il requisito essenziale per calarsi nel sottosuolo della temporalità storica. L'operazione di sicuro più rischiosa per qualsiasi critico.

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Vanessa Pietrantonio è ricercatrice di letterature comparate presso l'università di Bologna. Ha conseguito il dottorato nella stessa materia alla City University of New York. Tra le sue pubblicazioni più recenti: *Archetipi del sottosuolo. Sogno, allucinazione e follia nella cultura francese del XIX secolo* (Franco Angeli 2012); F. Arcangeli, *Corpo, azione, sentimento e fantasia. Lezioni 1967-1970* (a cura di V. Pietrantonio, Prefazione di V. Fortunati, il Mulino, 2015, 2 voll); *Maschere grottesche. L'informe e il deforme nella letteratura dell'Ottocento* (Donzelli 2018).

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RECENSIONI

Enrico Terrinoni, *Oltre abita il silenzio. Tradurre la letteratura.*
Milano, il Saggiatore, 2019, 224 pp., € 24,00.

“Questo non è un testo di studio nel senso classico” (209), ci dice Enrico Terrinoni mentre introduce la singolare (come tutto il libro, del resto) bibliografia del suo *Oltre abita il silenzio*. Non è una premessa, un’avvertenza, non si tratta di istruzioni per l’uso, ma di una conclusione posizionata in fondo al libro, a cui probabilmente lettrici e lettori erano già arrivati dopo le prime righe. Se l’abitudine è di leggere saggi di traduttologia o testi accademici di *Translation Studies*, soprattutto se scritti in inglese da studiosi provenienti da università anglosassoni o statunitensi, *Oltre abita il silenzio* sarà, a primo impatto, uno shock. Nessuna introduzione che riassuma schematicamente i punti toccati da ordinatissimi capitoli, nessuna conclusione che faccia più o meno lo stesso, lasciando spazio a nuove prospettive di studio, niente note e una bibliografia che non si può certo definire ortodossa, ma piuttosto un “curioso e promiscuo elenco” (Ibid.), per usare le parole dell’autore. Anche il dispositivo stilistico più tipico della saggistica accademica di lingua inglese, le *linking words and phrases* – espressioni e parole che connettono il tessuto del discorso e aiutano chi legge a seguirne il flusso – è assente da questo saggio. O meglio, è presente in forma di illuminazioni e associazioni, più vicino allo stile dei grandi scrittori modernisti, Joyce per primo, che alla schematicità accademica.

Fin dall’inizio, ci si trova immersi in una corrente di citazioni e allusioni più o meno evidenti, di fittissimi giochi di parole all’interno di un unico grande gioco delle parole, che Terrinoni definisce “gioco di penne, ma soprattutto di pen-siero” (204). Uno stile che può confondere – e, a un primo contatto, anche respingere – chi legge, ma che nasce da “un desiderio forse ingenuo e fanciulesco: quello di incoraggiare un nuovo tipo di lettura dei testi critici che veda il lettore quale partecipante in prima persona, forse anche più dell’autore stesso, alla produzione di sensi e connessioni” (209). Insomma, si tratta di un saggio che si fa leggere più come un romanzo che come un testo critico, perché, di

nuovo con le parole dell'autore “la critica è narrazione, e come tale è una specie del genere *fiction*” (53), nel quale chi legge è chiamato attivamente a “proporre risposte a domande non del tutto formulate” (168).

In questo vortice di citazioni, evocazioni, prove (nel senso di esperimenti, ma anche di testimonianze) di traduzione, aforismi potenti – “la differenza fra *word* e *world* non è che una semplice «elle» [...]. Ed è la «elle» di *language*” (23), ad esempio – e riflessioni profonde, una tesi di fondo c’è. Terrinoni sostiene che l’essere umano sia dotato di una natura traduttiva, ovvero interpretante, dalla quale non sarebbe possibile sfuggire. Infatti, l’autore ci dice che

una volta venuti al mondo si viene alla parola; una volta inseriti nella dinamica eminentemente traduttiva che trasforma i nostri primi istinti in vagiti, dal labirinto della traduzione non si esce più. Poi, certo, qualcuno ne farà un mestiere, mentre per altri sarà soltanto la (s)fortuna di una vita. Ma sicuramente le dinamiche del tradurre costituiscono un dazio che non c’è modo di eludere e da cui non si può evadere. (64)

In sostanza, la tesi che tiene insieme la complessa trama di questa narrazione critica è che la traduzione sia parte integrante della natura umana, che “la traduzione interlinguistica [sia] soltanto un riflesso dell’infinito spettro di risvolti traduttivi dei fenomeni dell’esistenza in generale” (113), e che tutti siamo traduttori. O meglio, in particolare in caso di traduzione letteraria, “traduttori”. Infatti, nonostante l’invisibilità editoriale dei traduttori già sottolineata nel noto saggio di Lawrence Venuti (*The Translator’s Invisibility. A History of Translation*, London: Routledge, 1995), che Terrinoni stesso cita, i traduttori sono, a tutti gli effetti, autori dei propri testi. È semmai l’autore del testo originale che, con la traduzione, “svanisce per poi trasformarsi in spettro e rispecchiarsi nel traduttore, ovvero in una delle sue tante possibili emanazioni” (133).

Data l’autorevolezza di Terrinoni, traduttore italiano di nomi come James Joyce e Alasdair Grey, alcuni fra i punti più avvincenti di questa opera di *fiction critica* sono le già nominate prove di traduzione argomentate – fra cui Oscar Wilde (153), Bob Dylan (180) e, ovviamente, Joyce, che appare così frequentemente da rendere inutile l’indicazione di pagina, onde evitare un infinito elenco –, e anche l’analisi di traduzioni altrui, come quella di una poesia di Giovanni Papini (193).

Come è vero che “spesso i titoli dei libri tradotti non li scelgono i traduttori, ma gli editori” (112), è vero che anche la scelta della copertina spetta spesso agli editori. In questo caso, che sia dell’autore o dell’editore, o magari di entrambi,

è una scelta notevole, una efficace introduzione al saggio che si sta per leggere. Come la scrittura asemica in copertina attende che sia chi legge a riempirla di significato, *Oltre abita il silenzio* non si aspetta un lettore passivo, ma lo stimola a fare lo stesso.

Come il saggio di Terrinoni, anche questo testo si chiude con una premesa-apologia in ritardo: questa non è una recensione nel senso classico. Del resto, per un saggio singolare come *Oltre abita il silenzio*, non ci si poteva aspettare una recensione tradizionale, che collocasse il libro all'interno di uno stato della ricerca, di domande e risposte offerte da altri studiosi, con una lunga lista di riferimenti. È lo stesso saggio a chiedere un altro tipo di approccio, nel suo porsi volutamente su un altro piano del discorso, in comunicazione con un orizzonte che abbraccia testi letterari e opere musicali, più che testi critico-accademici, che comunque non sono certo assenti. In conclusione, si spera che questo saggio sia solo il primo di una lunga serie di opere di fiction critica che pongono il lettore al centro dell'universo-testo, per tornare alla questione *word-world*. Non a caso parte di una collana come *La cultura del Saggiatore* – storica collana di punta della casa editrice, ibrida dalla nascita, che accoglie narrativa e saggistica senza differenze –, ci si augura che *Oltre abita il silenzio* apra la strada a un nuovo modo di avvicinarsi al testo critico, decisamente più efficiente, se è vero che, alla fine, “l'intenzione di chi legge ha sempre la meglio su quella di chi scrive” (189).

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Clare Hunter, *I fili della vita. Una storia del mondo attraverso la cruna dell'ago*. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2020, 384 pp., € 18,50.

“Mi ci vedo proprio, andare dal mio libraio e chiedergli se ha quel bestseller sul cucito relazionale, politico ed emotivo” si sente dire scetticamente Clare Hunter a un corso di scrittura creativa. L’aneddoto rappresenta bene lo scarso rilievo attribuito al cucito e al ricamo nella società di oggi, e mette in guardia dal rischio di commettere lo stesso errore (nel libro, chi ha pronunciato il sarcastico commento poi cambia idea).

I fili della vita è suddiviso in sezioni tematiche, dedicate a macrotemi quali, per fare qualche esempio, “identità”, “viaggio”, “perdita”, attraverso cui Hunter guida il suo pubblico in un percorso ideale che va dall’arazzo di Bayeux al *Dinner Party* di Judy Chicago, procedendo per associazione. Pertanto, uno dei primi aspetti a colpire è la sua conoscenza encyclopedica della storia e cultura del cucito, in ogni tempo e geografia. Hunter sceglie esempi che vanno dalle grotte di Cro-Magnon ai corsi e alle attività da lei stessa presiedute in Scozia con l’attività *Needle Works*. Ci guida sapientemente, partendo dal ruolo del ricamo nella vita di personaggi storici di fama come Maria Stuart. Ci lascia pensare che questo sarà un libro di storia e potere, di moda e prestigio, abiti sgargianti e tessuti preziosi. Quello che non prevediamo è che questo libro sarà anche un’altra storia, di oppressione e attivismo (un aspetto difficilmente intuibile dalla copertina). Da un lato, del ricamo degli ultimi, schiavi nelle piantagioni, prigionieri di guerra (a Singapore, in Germania, in Indonesia), sopravvissuti a ghetti e deportazioni, ma anche di chi è stato oppresso dal cucito stesso, come i lavoratori in grandi fabbriche (e ricorda dunque le stragi della Triangle Shirtwaist Factory del 1911 e quella di Dacca del 2012, citando en passant *Il capitale*). Hunter pian piano ci rivela che per lei il ricamo conta in quanto arte partecipata e dal basso, che si concentra non tanto sul risultato quanto sul processo creativo. Non solo ci viene raccontato il ruolo da esso ricoperto in proteste celebri come quelle di Plaza de Mayo o

nel movimento storico delle suffragette, ma anche nelle molte proteste a cui Hunter stessa ha partecipato. Il libro passa rapidamente da quella che può sembrare aneddotica storica al saggismo politico, e si viene quindi trasportati alle lotte dei minatori inglesi degli anni Ottanta, alle occupazioni pacifiste di Greenham Common, al movimento per alloggi popolari a Leith, il porto di Edimburgo – senza sconti di sorta a Thatcher. Il libro è dunque anche un memoir personale, in cui Hunter ci lascia intravedere, con un crescendo finale, la sua vita da attivista, avventuriera e imprenditrice che si è fatta guidare dal voler vedere il mondo dalla cruna (*eye* in inglese, occhio) di un ago.

Mentre una storia della letteratura, pittura, sarebbe spesso narrata tutta al maschile con poche eccezioni, qui è il contrario. Da un lato questo libro è una storia di donne, escluse da altre arti ma che si sono impossessate di questa, un'arte che in quanto femminile è stata considerata artigianato. È di certo presente una volontà di riscatto del cucito, per cui questo è un libro il cui potenziale potere sul pubblico appare evidente: possiamo pensare di consigliarlo alle sarte e ricamatrici delle nostre vite, in segno di dovuto riconoscimento. Dall'altro, Hunter mostra anche come il cucito sia servito al tempo stesso per relegare le donne a un ruolo preciso, a disciplinarne la creatività. Con grande attenzione al ricamo come parte di un costrutto sociale di genere, Hunter è ben consapevole di come non vi sia nulla di inerentemente femminile, se non il ruolo a cui era stato confinato. Ripercorre con attenzione questo sviluppo, soffermandosi sui suoi passaggi chiave nei secoli, sul ruolo nell'istruzione, e dando attenzione anche a quei momenti in cui i ruoli tradizionali sono stati sovvertiti, grazie ad artiste quali Jessie Newbery e Margaret Macdonald, e a quando è stato il genere maschile a cucire, come tra i sopravvissuti di guerra, gli attivisti in ricordo delle vittime dell'AIDS, o artisti come John Craske o Menzies Moffat.

Per gli studiosi di letteratura, un aspetto particolarmente interessante è l'invito a riflettere su quanto spesso il ricamo abbia fatto da supporto per la parola, a quanta letteratura sia stata ricamata, a quanto di letterario ci sia nel cucito. Termini ricorrenti nel volume sono autobiografia, racconto, lettera, ricamo linguistico. Ovviamente in senso lato, metaforico, visivo, ma anche in modo più specifico: notiamo quanto il ricamo sia un supporto scrittoriale a cui non pensiamo spesso, anche per il complesso insieme di competenze richiesto per adoperarlo. Così il ricamo ha preservato storie personali, scritte, ad esempio, nelle camicie di forza (come nel caso di Agnes Richter), rimanendo anche

come codice, ultima traccia di linguaggi messi al bando, come il nü shu nella provincia cinese dello Hunan o il galleso preservato dagli imparaticci.

La traduzione di Carlo Prosperi procede sciolta, con inversioni che abbelliscono lo stile italiano e occasionali parafrasi a testo, per aiutare i lettori quando vengono preservate formule del testo inglese. È un peccato che l'edizione, si immagina per questione di costi, non contenga nessuna immagine dei ricami descritti. Per un libro che sottolinea ad ogni riga lo splendore pittorico del ricamo, e la sua dimensione fisica, tattile e spaziale, l'assenza si fa notare. Sul sito dell'autrice, per fortuna, è stato offerto un compendio visivo di alcune delle opere citate nel libro, ripartite per capitoli (<http://www.sewingmatters.co.uk/images.html>).

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