

The Language of Images

Hazlett Henderson

A. Edward Newton Book Collection Competition

March 3, 2016

The Language of Images: Essay

I first came across graphic novels, or comics, or *bandes dessinées*, with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. My mother is a librarian, and an avid reader besides, and so rarely failed to recommend to my adolescent self the popular, worthwhile books of the last decade; among them was *Persepolis*. I imagine that many people in my milieu made a similar discovery at about the same time, but where some of my peers may have veered into the world of superheroes, I have since taken a different path. For a genre that sometimes seems to be nearly dominated by men, it is ironically women who have compelled me to continue reading graphic novels and even collecting them in their various manifestations: Professor Gueydan-Turek's class on *bandes dessinées*, my study abroad advisor Souad Eddouada, and, of course, my mother all contributed to this collection, in influence, support, or casual recommendation.

"The Language of Images" is a collection of stories told in both words and imagery. Though the subject of cultural conflict and commentary connects many of these stories, it is the tone and style of the graphic novel that renders them a collection. The nature of graphic novels -- the limited space for text and devotion of space to the image -- means that the novel's textual narrative often takes a certain tone: terse, action-oriented, to the point. Because the graphic novels contained within my collection deal almost exclusively with issues of dislocation, this tone lends them an air of abbreviated sentimentality: as Vladek Spiegelman, the author's father, says at the end of *Maus*, "I'm *tired* from talking, Richieu, and it's *enough* stories for now..." (296).

And thanks to this tone, the visual style of the graphic novels in my collection also share similarities: the limited space available to the deployment of emotion means that every inch of every page must be utilized, including, of course, the images themselves. The expressions of characters' faces, alternately light and dark backgrounds, and the use of color itself in novels that strike a more jovial tone than others all serve to reinforce the tone of the novel and, equally significantly for the sake of this essay, can be seen across the collection. You could compose many book collections, and sub-book collections, based solely on the theme of cultural conflict, but these qualities, the tone and style inherent to the integration of text and image, unite this particular collection.

Though I wish it were, this book collection is not complete.¹ What I have gained in the geographic scope of the stories contained in my novels, I have lost in depth of tone and style in a single area. Several novels, for example, tell perspectives of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (among them are Joe Sacco's *Palestine: A Nation Occupied*, Guy Delisle's *Jerusalem*, and Seth Tobocman's *Israelies & Palestinians*), but I don't own any of them! I divided the bibliography of my collection into five distinct regions (with a sixth two-entry, catch-all category) in order to show one of its major strengths and weaknesses: you can examine representations of different countries' physical landscapes and atmospheres by looking at these books, but you cannot compare representations of a single country. With the exception of France, arguably a home of the *bande dessinée*, these novels do not talk to each other at the level of specifics. Instead, for now, I am content that they can cross broader borders: the "state" of transnationality, the ennui and adventure of changing places, and how to represent the most intimate of experiences through both image and text.

¹ In fact, it's a great compliment to this outdated idea of "collecting books" that their cost is not prohibitive for college students choosing whether to buy alcohol or reading material (!).

The Language of Images: Annotated Bibliography

(Much of the expanse of) Asia

Guibert, Emmanuel, Didier Lefèvre, et Frédéric Lemerrier. *Le photographe. Vol. 1*. Dupuis, 2003. Print. Aire Libre.

I first found *Le photographe* in the Institut français of Rabat during a semester abroad while I worked on a project about transnationality in graphic novels. Lefèvre's three volumes tell the story of his first trip accompanying Doctors Without Borders to Afghanistan in 1986. In an interesting complement to image-based narratives, Lefèvre not only writes the story of these volumes, but also contributes many of the film negatives he took while recording the efforts of Doctors Without Borders. Thus, the story is told through three lenses: pictures of the actual events (taken nearly fifteen years before the writing of *Le photographe*), Lefèvre's written account of the events, often based on his negatives, and the created images based on both Lefèvre's written account and his negatives.

Guibert, Emmanuel, Didier Lefèvre, et Frédéric Lemerrier. *Le photographe. Vol. 2*. Dupuis, 2004. Print. Aire Libre.

See *Le photographe, vol. 1*.

Guibert, Emmanuel, Didier Lefèvre, et Frédéric Lemerrier. *Le photographe. Vol. 3*. Dupuis, 2006. Print. Aire Libre.

See *Le photographe, vol. 1*.

Lin, Li-Chin. *Formose*. Éditions ça et là, 2011. Print.

I also found *Formose* at Rabat's Institut français while researching transnationality, and bought it once I was at home and with regular and quick access to Amazon's delivery services. In *Formose*, Li-Chin Lin discusses the competing cultural influences she experienced as a child in Taiwan. In one memorable scene, she gives voice to her various history books, which tell her versions of "History" that she has not learned in school.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Embroideries*. Trans. Anjali Singh. New York: Pantheon, 2005. Print.

Though the scope of *Embroideries* is much smaller than that of *Persepolis*, *Embroideries* is an equally revealing and sometimes delightful read that I stumbled upon in a bookstore in Washington D.C. last month. Satrapi poses thought-provoking questions about gender, sexuality, and beauty in light anecdotes from her female family members about marriage practices in Iran. With less levity, she portrays women discussing the title practice, which allows all parties involved in a marriage to suspend their disbelief and uphold virginity as a necessary condition of unmarried women.

Satrapi, Marjane. *Persepolis*. Paris: L'association, 2008. Print.

The more famous *Persepolis* hardly needs a description: it is Satrapi's *bildungsroman*, accounting for her childhood and adolescence stretched between Iran and Austria. As mentioned above, *Persepolis* served as my introduction to graphic novels. The copy my mother bought for me when the English translation was first released is long gone, but, happily, I bought a new, complete and French copy in Professor Gueydan-Turek's class. Even in its transition from page to screen, the 2007 film, also made by Satrapi, exemplifies well the tone that graphic novels often capture: meditative, slow, and terse, with quick moments of action.

Europe

B., David. *L'ascension du haut mal*. Paris: L'association, 2011. Print.

L'ascension du haut mal is a second novel that I bought in anticipation of Professor Gueydan-Turek's class, though at the time I only purchased the first volume of the six-volume series. On a study abroad program last summer in Avignon, I located with great delight the complete series contained in one book. Once I had flown home, I slipped the first volume and a note into my high school French teacher's car.

L'ascension is rare in this collection because, though it forms a major narrative structure, David B. does not explore border-crossing as his primary theme. Instead, B. focuses on illness, and the many voyages made by his family in efforts to find effective treatment for B.'s brother's epilepsy. This search takes his family across the ideological world, and B.'s images are stirring in their stark contrast and strange depictions of the body's hidden processes.

De Pierpont, Philippe, et Éric Lambé. *Un voyage*. Futuropolis Gallisol éditions, 2008.

Un voyage comes again from Rabat's Institut français. Philippe de Pierpont and Éric Lambé collaborated to create a stark, eerie story that follows a young man close to death as he crosses into France to reconcile a long-past conflict. Interestingly, these creators reject the use of expressions to stir emotions. Instead, their characters are almost always faceless, and the few times the reader sees a face, it is a caricatured deformation designed to startle.

Pralong, Isabelle. *L'éléphant*. Paris: Vertige graphic, 2007. Print.

L'éléphant came from a rejected-books sale at a *médiathèque* in Avignon in the summer of 2015. Because the only "migratory" voyages in Pralong's novel occur between the dream and waking worlds, I have the chance to discuss a second layer of the cultural exchange in my theme: not only do the characters themselves recount their tales of border-crossing, but my very reading of these novels as an American with no migrants in my family's recent past is an example of literary border-crossing. Though *L'éléphant* is, on the surface, about only a French woman in France, I include it in this collection as an example of the cultural dialogue between reader and author.

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. UK: Penguin, 2003. Print.

During my semester in Morocco, I searched rather extensively for a copy of *L'arabe du futur* (see below). This extended to my program's trip to Amsterdam, during which time I found *L'arabe du futur* in Dutch (not helpful) and my copy of Spiegelman's *The Complete Maus*. *Maus* is one of the first graphic novels to be recognized as serious--even academic--literary material; in 1992, Spiegelman won the first Pulitzer Prize awarded to a graphic novel for it. Spiegelman recounts in *Maus* his father's experience as a Polish Jew during World War II, with a narrative that intersperses his father's episodes and Spiegelman's own interactions with his father during the process of storytelling. Whereas many of these novels portray anecdotal cultural conflict (what do you do when you cannot understand another language? Etc.), *Maus* is on the other end of the "casual" spectrum entirely.

Thompson, Craig. *Un américain en balade*. Trans. Hélène Dauniol-Remaud. Casterman, 2005. Print.

Un américain en balade is the translated version of Thompson's original *Carnet de voyage*, published in 2004 and written in English. I first read *Un américain en balade* because, though my advisor in Morocco spoke perfect English, he preferred to read in French, and therefore the copy of Thompson's novel he lent me was French. Again, this is fitting for a study of cultural exchange. *Un américain en balade* chronicles Thompson's book tour for *Blankets*; the *carnet* he publishes is, in fact, the journal he drew in while traveling through France, Spain, Morocco, and Belgium.

The Middle East

Abdelrazaq, Leila. *Baddawi*. Charlottesville, VA: Just World Books, 2015. Print.

Like Spiegelman's *Maus*, *Baddawi* is not the story of the author, but a retelling of a parent's story. Abdelrazaq explained to a small group of Swarthmore students in the spring of 2015 the process she undertook to publish this story of her father's childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp in northern Lebanon. I remember most specifically her descriptions of visiting the refugee camp in which some of her family still lives and the stress of managing work on the manuscript while still a student at DePaul University; she also talked about the influence of other graphic novelists on her work. She sold copies of her book after answering our many questions.

Abirached, Zeina. *Je me souviens Beyrouth*. Paris: Cambourakis, 2008. Print.

Abirached has published a number of small *bandes dessinées* about her adolescence in Lebanon, nearly all of which I read in Professor Gueydan-Turek's class; *Je me souviens Beyrouth* happens to be the one she asked her students to buy. Until Abirached's departure for Paris in 2006, *Je me souviens Beyrouth* portrays the lives of her neighbors and community as they struggle to continue living in spite of the war. One notable spread of pages shows the path that Abirached knew she should travel between two streets in her neighborhood as well as the invisible boundaries of her neighborhood; beyond lay the "no-man's land." Abirached's distinctive style is also worth mentioning: like Satrapi, David B., and several others, she uses strictly black and white cutout-style shapes to fashion her characters. She often portrays her hair,

for example, as a sheep because of its unruly curls, with curlicues of black cascading around her face.

North Africa

Khélif, Kamel. *Ce pays qui est le vôtre : À la jeunesse perdue de la cité*. Anderlecht: FRMK, 2003. Print.

Ce pays qui est le vôtre is a second novel lent to me by my advisor in Morocco; unfortunately, he had torn out some of its pages, so I lost some of its story while writing my final paper. I am happy to now own a copy with all pages intact. Khélif recounts in *Ce pays* a semi-autobiographical story of an apprehension in France. After a North African man tried to steal the purse of a woman, she is asked to identify the culprit; Khélif's character is mistakenly pulled off the street and the woman identifies him as the thief. These scenes constitute flashbacks in Khélif's novel; the other half of the book takes place in Algeria as the main character returns to Algeria to visit his family and reflect on his trial. Khélif depicts these scenes with heavy charcoal marks; *Ce pays* is one of the only novels in this collection in which the characters' expressions are obscured in order to secure a bleak atmosphere of anonymity.

Sattouf, Riad. *L'arabe du futur: Une jeunesse au Moyen-Orient (1978-1984)*. Paris: Allary Éditions, 2014. Print.

Riad Sattouf's *L'arabe du futur* is one of my favorites in the collection. When I was in Avignon in the summer of 2015, the release of Sattouf's sequel to *L'arabe* was imminent, and so posters featuring his characters were plastered across the city. When buying *L'ascension du haut mal* at a bookstore, I recognized *L'arabe* from the posters and bought it in the spur of the moment. Though I appreciate much about *L'arabe*, I'll limit my writing here to one element: Sattouf poignantly uses a toy bull that his father bought when he was first in France to represent materially the character of his father and the symbol of France as a destination. Additionally, we can see the use of color in *L'arabe* as a different style of invoking emotion: where the strict use of black and white invites a serious atmosphere, Sattouf's colorful pages are well-suited to his light stories about childhood.

Thompson, Craig. *Habibi*. 4th ed. New York: Pantheon, 2011. Print.

After reading Thompson's *Un américain en balade*, I found *Habibi* at a bookstore in Kansas City a few months ago. I was surprised that Thompson created such a huge volume in what seems to be Morocco; in *Un américain en balade*, he couldn't get away from Morocco quickly enough. Regardless, *Habibi* is certainly rife with cultural conflict. The book is filled with religious stories narrated between characters, for example, in a comparison made by Thompson between Christianity and Islam.

West Africa

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrerie. *Aya de Yopougon: tome 1*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005. Print.

Aya de Yopougon is yet another book read in Professor Gueydan-Turek's class; she asked that her students buy only the first volume in class, and I bought the rest at the end of the semester in order to write my final paper on *Aya*. Aboutet and Oubrerie's six volumes about *Aya de Yopougon* are loosely based on the author's own life in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1970s. In the fourth volume of the series, Aboutet follows the story of Inno, a hairstylist, who migrates to France in search of a less discriminatory environment. While this is one of the only stories to literally constitute border-crossing, Côte d'Ivoire won its independence only a decade before the time period of *Aya*. The changing post-colonial environment, as well as the influence still exerted by France, make cultural commentary a prominent theme of *Aya*.

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrerie. *Aya de Yopougon: tome 2*. Paris: Gallimard, 2006. Print.

See *Aya de Yopougon: tome 1*.

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrerie. *Aya de Yopougon: tome 3*. Paris: Gallimard, 2007. Print.

See *Aya de Yopougon: tome 1*.

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrerie. *Aya de Yopougon: tome 4*. Paris: Gallimard, 2008. Print.

See *Aya de Yopougon: tome 1*.

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrerie. *Aya de Yopougon: tome 5*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009. Print.

See *Aya de Yopougon: tome 1*.

Aboutet, Marguerite, and Clément Oubrerie. *Aya de Yopougon: tome 6*. Paris: Gallimard, 2010. Print.

See *Aya de Yopougon: tome 1*.

With exception: the USA and Réunion Island

Trondheim, Lewis, and Appollo. *Île bourbon, 1730*. Paris: Delcourt, 2007. Print.

The last novel of the collection that Professor Gueydan-Turek features in her class, *Île bourbon, 1730* is the story of the end of pirating on the island of La Réunion, as well as the search for the nearly-extinct dodo by a scientist and his student. Just as Spiegelman anthropomorphizes his characters in *Maus*, Trondheim and Appollo turn their characters into birds and dogs to depict different races, and use exclusively black and white in their images. As the only novel set centuries ago, the cultural conflict in this story is evident: not only do

European scientific values conflict with the culture of pirating on La Réunion, but escaped slaves and former pirates also engage in conflict over the fate of the last pirate, finally captured by authorities of the island.

Wilson, G. Willow, Adrian Alphona, and Ian Herring. "Side Entrance." *Marvel*. Vol. 3. New York: Marvel, 2014. Print.

An outlier in this collection, "Side Entrance" is the only entry in this collection that is actually a *comic*. I'm not sure exactly how it ended up in my room, but know my mother started encouraging me to read it sometime in the summer of 2015; it was likely her who stuck it on my bookshelf in the first place. As someone who does not know much about comics, I also don't know how much of an outlier "Side Entrance" is compared to run-of-the-mill Marvel stock, but it seems pretty extraordinary. This volume of "Side Entrance" tells the story of an adolescent Muslim girl who one day becomes a superhero (!). Featuring young Arab men speaking a mix of Arabic and English, all in anglicized letters, and a visit to the heroine's mosque, "Side Entrance" also contains all of the standard bam-pow-crunch motifs that I associate with the comic. As I only have volume three, I think I've missed the biggest climax of the series, but the story is beside the point: who could have predicted that Marvel comics was so liberal? Or that their fan base would consume stories about a Muslim heroine?