

**Dominique Le Duc**

## **XX1st Century Graphic Novels**

'Help save a dying, irrelevant art today... Please donate... before it's too late!' Ware, C. 2002. *Jimmy Corrigan, The Smartest Kid on Earth* (back cover) Winner of the 2001 Guardian's First Book Award

### **Introduction**

European 'Bande dessinée', American comics, Japanese manga, have become a worldwide phenomenon in the cultural landscape. The long-standing view that held comic art as purely children's illustrated tales has changed since comics started to address a more sophisticated adult - and sexually explicit - content in the sixties. In the Hexagon, the cultural recognition - sustained by substantial state support and media coverage - during Mitterrand's presidency in the eighties imposed this art form as a 'média à part entière' (Peeters, 2003:15). Indeed, 'comics aren't just for kids anymore'. In the nineties small Francophone independent collectives (L'Association, Les Requins Marteaux, Ego comme X, Amok, Cornélius, Atrabile, Bamboo) or American comics publishers (Kitchen Sink, Fantagraphics, Drawn & Quarterly, Top Shelf, Highwater) promoted strong editorial lines. Seminal to the production of graphic literature alongside the mainstream, the latter have pioneered innovative shifting graphic styles and controversial content. Thus, with their own stylisation and narrational specificities, a handful of ambitious idiosyncratic authors have revolutionised the comics' discipline, profoundly reshaping and bringing new inspiration to the field of comic art. Just as new wave used cinema as a political weapon, the independent graphic literature has become a springboard for social (homosexuality, Aids...) and political comments (war-torn countries). Together, comic creators are engaged in addressing realism through more adult subject matter, using "all the resources of their medium to break down such preconceived ideas of what comics should do" (Cioffi, F.L. in Varnum, 2001:121). The new movement has raised interest amongst scholars with the creation of research groups<sup>1</sup>, the growing number of conferences worldwide, and landmark publication of books - i.e. McCloud's *Understanding Comics* or Groensteen's *Système de la bande dessinée*. Headlines, shelving and reviews of 'graphic novels' have become a regular feature in our mainstream bookstores, libraries, and literary reviews in the national press. Whilst it is not possible here to embrace the whole history of graphic literature, this paper looks at the characteristics that have marked the new movement, focusing on the growing interest of the media and publishing industry, and the stance of comic creators and independent publishers.

### **Graphic literature: autobiography and reportage**

'The graphic novel is not literary fiction's halfwit cousin but, more accurately, the mutant sister who can often do everything fiction can, and just as often, more.' Dave Eggers, *New York Times* (in *The Observer*, David Thompson, Sunday June 22, 2003)

The nineties are marked by the exploration of innovative stylistic features, i.e. non-conventional formats and monochromatic techniques. Along with documentaries and literary adaptations, innovative narrative features include autobiography and reportage. Even though autobiography has been an integrated part of emerging American Underground creations since the sixties, it is more recent in the Francophone field. The first autobiographical novel *Passe le temps* is credited to Edmond Baudoin, the spiritual father of contemporary Bande Dessinée, in 1982. Autobiographical comics like French mangaka Frederic Boilet's *L'Épinard de Yukiko* or American Craig Thompson's *Blankets* (*Times* magazine's graphic novel of the year and Harveys Award winner 2004) address serious subject matter, from alienation to child abuse, including intimate relationships. Interestingly a number of manga are gradually made available in their translated form to a Western readership - in their original reading format (from right to left). Indeed in Japan, a specific term equivalent to 'graphic novel' ('gekiga') was initiated as early as the fifties by mangaka Yoshihiro Tatsumi (in 1957) (Asakawa: 2004:63). The term refers to darker, more realistic themes to differentiate it from manga, and means 'dramatic pictures' (Schodt, 1996:34). Leading figures of watakushi manga ('comics about me') and jiden manga (autobiography), i.e. Tatsumi, Tsuge Yoshiharu<sup>2</sup>, Kazuichi Hanawa, Jiro Taniguchi... Another worldwide phenomenon is the exploration of the comic art form by cartoonist/reporters as a 'graphic memoir' with accounts on political and armed conflicts. The medium is used to convey serious subject matter through non-fictional characters who express themselves through speech bubbles and narratives are expressed in moving and realistic black and white panels. For American cartoonist Art Spiegelman, 'pictures like that are a kind of language, and they function as a form of carrying ideas' and 'many images will continue lingering in the reader's consciousness'<sup>3</sup>. Thus, a number of comic creators provide first-hand visual accounts of the reality of conflict (in Rwanda, Afghanistan, Romania, Burma, Iraq, Iran, China, North Korea...) putting their cartooning skills at the service of political reportage. While Art Spiegelman delivers a powerful account of the Holocaust in *Maus*, cutting-edge journalist Joe Sacco gives intimate testimonies of the lives of war-trapped civilians in the Occupied Territories in his work *Palestine*. Sacco also documents the Balkan war-zone in *Safe area Gorazde* and the aftermath of the Bosnian war in *The Fixer - A Story from Sarajevo*. French comic creator Philippe Squarzoni stands out in asserting a strong political engagement through both his authorial expressivity and his paratextual identity as a militant. Indeed, his commitment to document the reality of war has taken him to Croatia ("The war in Yugoslavia haunted me since 1991 and I really wanted to 'do something'") or the Occupied Territories<sup>4</sup>. Iranian Marjane Satrapi depicts in *Persepolis* an intimate account of the effects of the war on the lives of her countrymen, exploring concerns of identity and memory, alienation and the sense of belonging. It is interesting to note at this point the growing presence and true integration in this art form of female authors since the nineties. Debbie Drechsler explores recollections of moving childhood traumas/adolescence memories; Julie Doucet portrays intimate self-representation<sup>5</sup> and Phoebe Gloeckner deals with autobiographical issues of sexual child abuse.

## Format

In France, thanks to the publishing house Futuropolis and the monthly magazine (*A Suivre*)<sup>6</sup> issued by *Casterman*, cartoonists were able to break away from the

limitations of the mainstream format and produce longer narratives. Thus, between 1972 and 1994, *Futuropolis* brought a number of cartoonists (Enki Bilal, Edmond Baudoin, Jacques Tardi ...) to a wider audience. American cartoonist Craig Thompson noted an 'obvious reaction to the "slow-poke" style'<sup>7</sup> as, freed from editorial and commercial constraints, cartoonists went 'through a much more dramatic overhaul from the traditional approach of spending a year on a meticulously rendered, 48-page album to the Trondheim revolution of churning out over 500 pages in a year'.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a format relevant to each individual project is a necessity for the graphic novelist's 'intent' (Campbell, 2004:169). Baudoin used an oversized format for *Le Chemin de St-Jean*, Vanoli opted for a thin one for his *Contes de la désolation*. Others like Neaud or Thompson adopt a heavy-weighted format, as shown in their respective 800-page *Journal* and 600-page *Blankets*. The constraining format is a thread in *Le Journal d'un Album* (1994: 69)<sup>9</sup>, an autobiographical account of the making of volume 4 of their *Monsieur Jean* series. Cartoonists Dupuy & Berberian<sup>10</sup> depict their concern at having to comply with the rigid 48-page format - indeed with six volumes to-date; the narrative had grown in complexity.

## Intertextuality and screen adaptations

The independent Bande dessinée production of the nineties underpinned the emergence of new narrative and stylistic features, all the while clearly mandating references beyond the world of comics itself. The seventies had generated a more eclectic approach to the comic art form with works including Moebius (*Fer de Lance*), Tardi (*Ici-même*) or J-C Forest (*Barbarella*). Since the nineties, references from the world of literature (Stevenson, Schwob, Georges Arnaud, Pierre Mac Orlan, Max Jacob, Joyce, Beckett, Boulgakov) or from painting (Dufy and Matisse, expressionists Pascin, Otto Dix, Grosz and Kokoschka) can be found in the works of cartoonists David B., Nicolas de Crécy, Pascal Rabaté or Edmond Baudoin... Comics are one of the most popular forms of our increasingly visual age. The need for more realism is also apparent in other art spheres, including cinema with the new documentary genre and true-life stories including Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, Nicolas Philibert's *Etre et Avoir* or Kevin McDonald's *Touching the Void*... As comic creators like Frederic Boilet draw references from the world of cinema (new wave film directors Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard), live action adaptations on screen - i.e. *Ghost World* by American graphic novelist Daniel Clowes - bring the comic art form to the attention of a larger public. The success of the award winning film *American Splendor*<sup>11</sup>, based on the autobiographical cult comic book, rests upon creating interplay between fantasy and reality, portraying an underground comic book writer both as a real person and as a cartoon character. Successful adaptations on screen that rely on a dialogue between the cinematographic image and the original comic book also include Raymond Briggs's bestselling graphic novel *When The Wind Blows*. Briggs turned this satire about the nuclear holocaust first into a screenplay and later into an animated feature. With *Immortal Ad Vitam*, European cartoonist Enki Bilal directed a motion-capture animation of his award-winning trilogy *Nikopol*. Following adaptations of Batman, Spider-man, Superman, X-Men..., cinema directors are now turning to independent houses to find inspiration from more realistic subject matter, i.e. the script currently being written on *Frédéric Peeters's* graphic novel *Pilules bleues*. Manga from Japan also infiltrate the West through cinema production. Film-makers' growing fascination

for manga includes an anime sequence - on hired assassin O-Ren Ishi's violent past and tragic childhood - in Quentin Tarantino's graphically violent movie *Kill Bill*, Volume One. This growing interest in the Japanese culture is also echoed in Sofia Coppola's Oscar-winning *Lost in Translation* (2003), where Tokyo is presented in an enticing light. Sue Brooks rekindles with Alain Resnais' s *Hiroshima mon amour*'s inter-racial romance in *Japanese Story*. Within the 9th art and the 7th art, comics creator and film directors bear witness to their times.

## The Media, the Publishers, and the Readership

Graphic novels have shaken off their image of comics for grown-up "anoraks" and have entered the mainstream and literary markets' (Kean, 2003:22).

### Editorial Reviews

'It's not that comics have 'grown up' but '[...] the journals which are looking at comics have grown up, actually' (Leith, 2003:1).

As the number of publications by cartoonists concerned with the reality of life and contemporary issues has risen considerably over the last decade, so has the media coverage of their works. Enthusiastic and perceptive pieces of criticism are devoted to graphic novels by the literary press. 'Further evidence of the new found status of graphic novels comes from *the Guardian* and *Independent*, which now review them alongside mainstream hardbacks and paperbacks' (Kean, 2003:22). A testimony to the interest amongst intellectual critics, these reviews also contribute to alter the public's appreciation. Thus, no longer considered a subordinate and withering art form, comics are seen as being assimilated to high culture by the *Wall Street Journal*. The latter describes Chris Ware's style as one which '[...] may make the strip a daunting read for newcomers to the comics medium, much the way the dense language of Ulysses challenged readers. The joys of the two works are the same however: of being swept away by the dense poetry of an exciting and powerful work of art' (Ware, 2003:3). This respectful, critical 'voice' is very different from the view that held comics as '[...] a marginal, cretinised form of entertainment suitable only for the children or for the arrested adolescent [...]' (Leith, 2003:1). Thus, along mainstream recognition through editorial reviews on cartoon journalism or Holocaust history in the British national press (*The Guardian*, 18.10.2003), television broadcast coverage includes interviews of cartoonists, i.e. Joe Sacco on Channel 4 news. Festivals and exhibitions also feature in the press, i.e. COMICA<sup>12</sup>, with some 'of the most highly regarded figures currently working in the form' (*The Observer*, 22.06. 2003) or the Belgian exhibition of British graphic novelist Alan Moore (*The Independent*, 15.03.04). Excerpts of Posy Simmonds's *Literary Life* are serialized in the *Saturday Guardian Review*. In France, with the recent development of specialised francophone magazines (*série Ego comme X...*) and press (*BANG*, *Revue 9ème Art*) the independent Bande dessinée has opened an area of discussion amongst intellectuals and critics. Thus, regular press coverage of best-selling graphic novels, including the American *Ghost World*, *Palestine*, *Jimmy Corrigan* or European *Persepolis* and *Epileptic* should in turn benefit other less-known titles.

### A wider readership

Marketing influences have undoubtedly helped to promote the importance of comics in our post-literary culture. Until recently, the small scale of publication of graphic novels targeted a selected audience and was available in specialised comics' bookshops. Graphic novels have developed their own cult following amongst readers acquainted with art-house cinema and controversial novels. Indeed, regarded as a 'cultural product' reserved to small elite', they are aimed at 'adults with refined taste' (*Drawn & Quarterly*, 2004:1). Graphic novels have become more widely available in mainstream bookstores in the wake of the recent launch of Chris Ware's masterpiece *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* in 2000, along with Spiegelman's landmark biography *Maus* or Sacco's *Palestine*. A democratisation is taking place. Described as 'objet d'art', with 'verbal inventiveness and graphic beauty' (Leith, 2003:1), these works have contributed to the appraisal of the comics genre as an adult art form, inviting readers to take the plunge and read the very best of comics: 'Read Art Spiegelman. Read Chris Ware. Read Joe Sacco...' (Leith, 2003:2). It is interesting to note how this new generation of comic readers is also faced with learning a new language, and needs 'to become acquainted with the codes of the comic art form'. Likewise, reviewers also '[...] maybe need lessons in how to read books like this', as novelist Nick Hornby<sup>13</sup> contended in *the Sunday New York Times Book Review* (December 21st, 2002). Thus, librarians, booksellers and the publishing industry are dedicating more time and space in their collections to graphic novels. Providing eye-catching displays, single-volume collections of several hundred pages deluxe hardcover editions (i.e. Jaime Hernandez's critically acclaimed *Locas* stories or the 360-page volume David B.'s *Epileptic*) are increasingly popular.

### **Publishers and readers take risks**

The reader of these comics is 'someone who is willing to take certain risks - as they themselves have taken risks - for a view of the human condition that is all the more upsetting of equanimity since it is something encountered within the pages of comics' (Cioffi, F. L., 2002:122). Likewise, the role of independent publishers is paramount. In the Times Saturday book review on Satrapi's *Persepolis* ('Darkness risible', Oct. 23rd, 2004) Peter Millar praised publisher Jonathan Cape for producing 'several graphic novels that vividly delve into the darker side of the genre'. The 9eme Art comics journal demonstrates the revolution that has taken place within the comic art form since the nineties. Indeed, 'L'irrésistible ascension de l'édition indépendante' (1996) looked at how graphic literature, marginally positioned in the nineties, was beginning to attract the interest of the mainstream. By 2004, a follow-up article bears witness to the new editorial strategies by mainstream publishers to encompass the new movement within specific editorial lines, like for example *Écritures* (Casterman) or *Carrément BD* (Glénat). Thus, French mainstream publishing house Dargaud, with around sixty titles to-date under his editorial line *Poisson Pilote*, rekindles the pioneering approach of the original *Pilote* comic magazine (Martin, 2004:35-39). Along with the benefit of a widening readership, one might ponder on the risks for the independent creations of losing their very essence in the grips of mass publishing.

### **Shelving and classification**

Booksellers are aware of the importance of not relegating literary comics to the science fiction section. Some argue for a dual classification, i.e. shelving *Palestine* in

both the comics and politics sections, enabling readers to identify a space for graphic literature in a mainstream bookshop or library. Others adhere to Art Spiegelman's suggestion of creating a 'major category for Graphic novel/Comics, with sub-headings for fiction, non-fiction, anthologies, and comics technique'<sup>14</sup>. Reviews debating cataloguing and shelving issues and specifically aimed at librarians (i.e. in *Publishers Weekly*) are flourishing as libraries host an ever-growing selection of graphic novels. Graphic novels sales are up in comic book stores (*Publishers Weekly*, Dec 22nd, 2003) and sales in mainstream chains are equally boosted.

## Debate around the term graphic novel

American critic Richard Kyle first coined the term 'graphic novel' in 1964. Will Eisner, unaware of this, used the same term at the time of the publication of *A Contract with God*, in 1978. The latter paved the way to the publication of post-modern superhero graphic novels in the mid eighties, like Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight*. These and subsequent publications were indeed to garner the medium the respect it had long deserved. Gradually, it became apparent that the term 'comic book' was no longer reflecting the serious content and the length of these pioneering works. The term 'graphic novel' was adopted<sup>15</sup> universally in Europe and America alongside with the terms 'comics', 'comic book' or even 'image book' (Kean, 2003:25), although it is not to everybody's taste as well as overused by the media. Cartoonists question the term: "we are saddled with the term 'graphic novel'" (Joe Sacco in Campbell, 2003:6). One editorial collective, Canadian publishing house Drawn & Quarterly proposed 'graphica' for this 'whole new art movement' in a Manifesto (Campbell, 2004:169). 'Graphica', of course, has its limitations (sounds too much like erotica, is an unidentifiable new word, etc) but it was the best option'. Thus, aiming at pioneering literary graphic novels in the book trade, D & Q's Manifesto is inviting bookstores to create specific sections and subsections for graphic novels<sup>16</sup>. The latter concern is developed similarly in Chris Ware's opus *Jimmy Corrigan*. Indeed, finding the right term for sequential picture-panels referring to serious subject matter is proving a challenging task. Groensteen (2000:11) recalls that there was a need for a generic term to differentiate the independent production (with roots dating back to the seventies), from the mainstream. Groensteen looked at the origins of the term in France and noted that 'novel' (roman) is attached to the eighties series "romans (A Suivre)". French journalist Hughes Dayes, inspired by the term 'new wave', flagged a new title: 'The New Bande Dessinée' (Niffle, 2002). In interviews to leading figures in the alternative comics field, comics are often seen as being assimilated to high culture: 'Let's not talk about comics, frames, panels any more but about books'. British journalist Peter Millar (2003:13) echoes the same thoughts: 'we call them "comics". But, with the current crop in particular, it is hard to imagine a more inappropriate term'. However, comic creators adopt a different stance as Sacco clearly states; 'I don't do graphic novels; I do comics' (Campbell, 2003:6). Indeed, Thierry Groensteen (interviewed by Dialogue avec Laurent Gerbier - in 9e Art n° 5 on his book *Système de la bande dessinée*), believes that 'comic creators (or at least some of them), as all artists, need their work to find an outlet other than just in the sheer enthusiasm of the comic fan or in the literary reviews'.

## Conclusion

'In forging a whole new art' (Campbell, 2004:169), cutting-edge authors have brought comic books onto the literature shelves, garnering the medium the respect it deserves. Featuring in literary reviews in the national press, graphic literature has imposed itself within the book industry. There is a growing awareness amongst publishers that these books are not simply to be shelved under the science fiction label. The pioneering approach of independent collectives, as in the case of Canadian publishing house Drawn & Quarterly's Manifesto, invites mainstream publishers to create a new space and classification for these books. Whilst the media and the publishers tend to qualify these works under the umbrella term 'graphic novel' to widen their readership, comic creators adopt a different stance. For Joe Sacco, 'comics is comics. I don't [...] need another couple of words to make me feel like I'm doing something worthwhile' (Leith, 2003:2). This viewpoint is echoed by cartoonist Eddie Campbell<sup>17</sup> ('A Graphic Novelist's Manifesto', Campbell, 2004:169) who contended: 'there is so much disagreement (among ourselves) and misunderstanding (on the part of the public) around the subject of the graphic novel that it's high time a set of principles were laid down'. How to address the shelving, classifying, and reviewing of graphic literature is part of an ongoing process as new works continue to revolutionize the discipline. Comic creators question whether the term 'graphic novel', adopted by the media and mainstream book industry to target a new readership, is justified as a necessity to rid comic art of its childish roots. Nevertheless, there is a societal shift towards a greater acceptance of the comic art form, alongside others- film, music, painting, literature. Indeed, representing a significant cultural event of our times, and transcending national identity, Japanese, American, and European graphic literature forms a gestalt based on universal values. The whole new art movement is in its early days still and the current debate amongst the media, the publishing industry and comic creators - whether or not to promote it as different from the past production of comics - attests to its growing presence outside the sole field of comics.

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## Notes

- 1  i.e. the IBDS 'International bande dessinée Society' created in 1999, the ABDS 'the American bande dessinée Society' created in 2004
- 2  'In Japan, terms such as Ishoku ('unique') or 'Kisai' ('exceptional genius') are regularly used by the media to portray TSUGE' in French in [http://www.ego-comme-x.com/auteur.php3?id\\_auteur=31](http://www.ego-comme-x.com/auteur.php3?id_auteur=31)
- 3  'Comix 101', "The Abramowitz Memorial Lecture", Sunday, March 16, 2003. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- 4  'Torture Blanche' Les Requins Marteaux, 2004
- 5  Merino, Ana. *The Comics Journal* "'Women in Comics: a Space for Recognizing Other Voices'" in [http://www.tcj.com/237/e\\_merino.html](http://www.tcj.com/237/e_merino.html)
- 6  "'symbole de la BD d'auteurs'" (Corto Maltese, Jacques Tardi, Didier Comès...) - 1978-97 - in <http://bd.casterman.com/isbn/2-203-37005-X>
- 7  Thompson, Craig et al in [http://www.tcj.com/237/e\\_merino.html](http://www.tcj.com/237/e_merino.html), excerpted from *The Comics Journal* #258
- 8  Lewis Trondheim is the cartoonist and European Comics industry star who won the VPRO Grand Prix 2004 in Haarlem in 2004.
- 9  Forthcoming version in English from Highwater Books
- 10  In conversation with Charles Berberian at the COMICA Festival, London, June 2004 - a Festival lead by curator and comics writer Paul Gravett
- 11  Springer , S. et al, 2003. Winner of the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival
- 12  at the ICA, 'London's temple to cutting-edge culture' (Kean, 2003:22)
- 13  Nick Hornby was asked by *The New York Times* to review half a dozen graphic novels and quoted here Eric Drooker's startlingly beautiful 'Blood Song' in <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CEFDE133AF931A15751C1A9649C8B63>

- 14  "The Pulse", January 2002: New Codes for Graphic Novels in *The Comics Journal*
- 16  In page 3 written by bookseller Paul Constant. "'Selling Graphic Novels in the book trade'" pamphlet by Drawn & Quarterly, 2004
- 17  Co--creator (with Alan Moore) of the book *From Hell*